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First-Year Student Exploration of Career and Life Goals: An Application of O'Banion's Advising Model

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- 1 Comment

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Introduction

Choosing a major is a daunting task for college students and many are making a choice about an academic major before they are developmentally ready. Gordon (2007) indicates that "many college students are in the midst of maturational and identity struggles; choosing an academic major from a myriad of choices is a developmental task for which they are not prepared" (p. 87). Nevertheless, choosing an academic major is extremely important not only in terms of students' time and finances, but also in terms of student satisfaction, success, and retention (Dellman-Jenkins, 1997).

Terry O'Banion's (1972) model of academic advising supports Gordon's notion of students not being developmentally ready to choose a major. O'Banion's model of academic advising is a process that includes exploring life and vocational goals, choosing a program, choosing courses, and lastly scheduling courses (O'Banion, 1972). However, many academic advising offices tend to skip directly to the choice of program and courses during the first contact with students at orientation. O'Banion argues that these offices are not effective, because they assume students have already made life and career goals (O'Banion, 1972). According to O'Banion, the first question should be "How do I want to live my life?" Unfortunately, many students have not been able nor had the chance to explore the answer to this question before entering college (O'Banion, 1972). Therefore, academic advising programs need to allow room for the exploration of life and career goals before the first semester of enrollment, such as before or during summer orientation. O'Banion (1972) suggests that advisers should help students explore their goals through summer workshops.

In light of O'Banion's model, academic advising professionals need to rethink their strategies for working with students during orientation and set aside time for students to consider life and career goals before they declare a major and begin a career path. This article will first examine the reasons why students change their majors to help readers understand why delaying a declaration of an academic major to first focus on life and vocational exploration would be an effective academic advising practice. Second, this article will offer suggestions about how to implement this exploration of career and life goals in an academic advising program.

Reasons for Major Changes

Lack of Exploration

Research on major changers shows that the majority of college students lack the knowledge and experience necessary to make an informed decision about their academic major and career choice (Orndorff & Herr, 1996). Many students have a limited knowledge base of available occupations as "the potential pool of choices is enormous and it is commonly thought that the United States has more than 20,000 occupations" (Lewallen, 1993, p. 110). Most likely, students have not examined all of those choices and therefore, only choose majors that they know about or have heard about through family, friends, or community members (Lewallen, 1993). Also intimidating is the number of majors offered at colleges and universities. The number of majors at any given institution can be overwhelming—some institutions have hundreds—and the majority of incoming students know very little about their options (Lewallen, 1993). The sheer number of career and major options can be confusing, and it is unlikely that students have explored all of these options before coming to college.

Also contributing to this lack of exploration is the information presented in high school about career choices. The level of career education students receive in high school varies greatly (Lewallen, 1993). Some students get an extensive amount of career education while others receive little to none. Interestingly, Orndorff & Herr (1996) found that both declared and undeclared students professed to getting little career guidance in high school. Also impacting career guidance in high schools is the ratio of high school students to guidance counselor. The average ratio of student to guidance counselor in high schools is four hundred and fifty students to one counselor (Ronan, 2005). Therefore, counselors have neither the time nor resources to individually help students prepare to choose a major and career during their high school experience. Incoming students should not be forced to make decisions about their educational and career goals as they have not been adequately prepared in high school to do so. For this reason, academic advising programs should consider including career exploration opportunities before students come to campus.

Parental and Societal Pressure

College students can also face parental and societal pressure to choose a major upon entering college. Pearson and Dellman-Jenkins (1997) pointed out that parents have the most influence on a student's decision to choose a major; therefore, students are more likely to change majors when their initial choice is not their own. Koeppel (2004) argued that "students feel tremendous pressure over the choice of a major, which could be an important career decision, when many are just beginning to understand themselves" (¶ 2). Students are troubled about entering college without a declared major. Most likely, these students have been asked for years what they plan to major in and thereby feel pressured to choose a major before they are actually ready (College Parents, 2011).

Adding to this pressure is the rise in tuition costs and the instability of the economy. Koeppel (2004) maintained that students and parents are now viewing higher education as an investment and desire "the best return on that investment, which is often financed with a student loan" (¶ 3). However, making a decision based on money alone can result in dismal consequences. One student argued that "with education so expensive, many in my generation are mired in debt. Some people choose to sacrifice personal happiness to make money" (Koeppel, 2004, ¶ 14). Students are feeling pressure now more than ever to make the "right" decisions about majors. As a result, academic advisers need to guide students in discovering their life and career goals before they declare majors to alleviate the pressure and demands placed on the students by their parents and society.

Summer Career and Advising Workshops and Mandatory Exploration

Because of parental and societal pressures and the lack of exploration in high school, it is vitally necessary that colleges and universities provide students with opportunities to explore majors and careers without the stigma associated with being undecided. The implementation of summer career and advising workshops or the requirement of a period of exploration would lessen these pressures and allow students to investigate majors and careers without fearing negative consequences. Two methods of career exploration that have been tried in the past are pre-orientation workshops and summer career programs.

Pre-orientation workshops occur before advising students into programs and courses during summer orientation. In these workshops, career and academic information is provided as well as an opportunity for self-assessment (Gordon, 2007). Gordon pointed out that while this method might offer "a very superficial exposure to majors and requirements, it helps to take the mystery out of what appears to be a complicated and confusing body of information (2007, p. 135). As a result, pre-orientation workshops can provide students with a brief overview of available majors and may lead them on the road to discovering their interests, personalities, values, and skills.

Another method of exploring careers is through a summer workshop program. One such successful summer program is the Brooklyn Opportunities in Science and Careers (BOSC). BOSC was created for undecided first-year students who had high scores in math in high school and was designed to increase participation in science majors (Miele et al., 2011). Activities during this summer program included informal lectures, interviews of current professionals, field trips, and workshops (Miele et al., 2011). This program was extremely successful as indicated by significant increases in science majors—most notably in science teaching with a 733 percent increase and physics with a 314 percent increase (Miele et al., 2011). Students not only gained information about these careers, they also acclimated to the collegiate environment. Ninety percent of students who participated in BOSC stated it helped them adjust to the college environment (Miele et al., 2011). Therefore, summer workshops can not only aid in major selection but also in student adjustment.

Conclusion and Suggestions for Implementation

Based on this literature, suggestions for implementing career and major exploration in academic advising include summer workshops, extended orientation, a one- or two-week bridge program, and/or a semester-long first-year seminar. Recommendations for the summer workshops include having students explore major interests, values, and goals in multiple career workshops throughout the summer. These could be made mandatory and offered online before orientation. Another suggestion is to extend summer orientation. Students can be required to take career assessments before they arrive for summer orientation and then can have a meaningful discussion with their advisers during orientation.

Two other suggestions include creating a summer bridge program or a semester-long first-year seminar focused on major exploration. Instead of participating in summer orientation, first-year students could be required to attend a one- or two-week summer bridge program in which they arrive one to two weeks early to campus. During this time, students can evaluate their interests, values, and goals with the help of an academic adviser or career counselor. At the end of the program, they could then choose a program and plan for classes as O'Banion's model suggests. Another recommendation is the use of a semester-long first-year seminar. In this method, students would not declare a major when they apply to the college or university. Instead, students spend the first semester learning about their values, personalities, goals, and interests in a semester-long first-year seminar course and take general education courses that will apply to a multitude of majors. After the first semester is complete, students are permitted to select a major.

Whatever method is chosen, academic advising professionals must begin to consider the possibility of a workshop/program in which students can freely explore majors and careers before making firm decisions. Seventy-five percent of students change their majors during their college careers due to societal and parental pressures and the lack of knowledge about themselves and the career options available to them (Lewallen, 1993; Gordon, 2007; Orndorff & Herr, 1996). Academic advising for first-year students typically begins in the third step

of O'Banion's model (program selection); but as this article discussed, that is not developmentally appropriate for incoming first-year students (O'Banion, 1972). For that reason, it is necessary for academic advising programs to rethink their strategies of major selection and orientation practices so that students may select a major that is fully based on their unique life and career goals.

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Comments

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Ciara

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Great points. This is a very insightful article. I agree that career exploration programs for students before they begin their freshmen year is the way to go.

Reply

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