Major Confusion: Helping Students Navigate Through a Maze of Majors

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Presentation Overview

I. Major Confusion
II. The Students
III. Symptoms
IV. Support
V. UNCW’s Efforts
VI. Treatment and Interventions
VII. Discussion
WHAT IS MAJOR CONFUSION?
Major Confusion

A very common condition linked to student development, transitions, and personal experience.

• Three out of four students are uncertain about their career choices upon entry to college.
• Less than 10% of students who enter college with a major in mind feel they know a great deal about their intended major.
• Uncertainty among new students increases rather than decreases during their first two years of college.
• Over two-thirds of entering students change their major during their first year.
• 50-75% of all students who enter college with a declared major change their mind at least once before they graduate.
• Only one senior out of three will major in the same field they preferred as a freshman.

References are fully cited in (Cuseo, 2005)
UNDERSTANDING THE CONFUSED
# The Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Undecided</strong></th>
<th><strong>Indecisive</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student who is <strong>unwilling</strong>, <strong>unable</strong>, or <strong>unready</strong> to choose a major or career path.</td>
<td>Student who is <strong>unable to</strong> make any decisions. Chronic decisional procrastination poses retention risks.</td>
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<th><strong>Major Changers</strong></th>
<th><strong>Shadow Majors</strong></th>
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<td>Students who change their mind and major during college.</td>
<td>Students who are committed a major but are not able to pursue it for various reasons (academic limitations, denied admission, etc.)</td>
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Myths about Undecided Students

<table>
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<th>Myth</th>
<th>Reality</th>
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<td>They pose a greater risk for attrition than decided students.</td>
<td>Studies indicate that knowledge of whether students were decided or undecided did not have any significant effect on predicting or explaining their retention.</td>
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<td>Are more prone to struggle academically than decided students.</td>
<td>Some studies indicate that undecided students had higher levels of academic achievement (average GPA) and were more likely to persist to graduation than decided students.</td>
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<td>All undecided students are prone to debilitating indecisiveness that will cripple their ability to succeed in college.</td>
<td>Not true, many students are indecisive about a major for psychologically healthy reasons.</td>
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(Cuseo, 2005)
Not all Wanderers are Lost

**Development:** Temporary indecisiveness is normal, psychologically healthy, and should not always be negative or a retention challenge.

- Helping students make informed decisions, think critically, and avoid dualistic thinking. This takes time.
- Development theory --- personal adjustment.
- Transitional stage of moving in…not yet moving through.

**Personality:** They may be deliberate, reflective thinkers, who like to take time to gather information, explore their interests, and determine their game plan before making any long-term commitments.

**Critical Thinking:** Their indecisiveness may also reflect:

- “High levels of motivation for learning and active involvement in the productive process of critically evaluating and prioritizing their varied academic interests.” (Cuseo, 2005)

(Cuseo, 2005)
SUPPORT FOR THE CONFUSED
Treatment Options

Referrals:
– Career Center
– Counseling Center
– Advising Center

Programming:
– Career, advising, and other student support events.
– Collaboration across campus is key.
Treatment Options (continued)

Curricular:
  – Infusing major/career exploration into FYE and learning communities.
  – Incorporating major exploration into advising.

Gordon and Steele (2003) point out, “Exploration through coursework is perhaps the most basic and important advising tool” (p. 30).
WORKING WITH STUDENTS
AT UNCW
UNCW

- Four-year, public – 13,000 students
  - Freshmen class of about 2,000

- First-Year Students
  - Undeclared with an interest area
  - Advised in University College until declare major (eligible at 24 earned hours)
  - Mandatorily Enrolled in First Year Seminar

- Students in Transition
  - Transfers typically must declare and go to department advising, however, some in transitional status
  - Also support major changers
University College

- Advising center for all undeclared students
- Large focus on students in first-year
- Coordinate majority of first-year programming
  - First-Year Seminar
  - Learning Communities
  - Campus Common Reading Program
  - Pre-Professional Advising
  - Students in Transition
Observed Symptoms of Major Confusion

- Limited identity development
- Lack of appropriate knowledge
- Conflicting pressures (i.e. educators, parents, peers)
- Employment and financial concerns
- Academic limitations
- First choice not an option
- Major not offered
- Overly anxious
- Poor decision making skills
- Lack of confidence
- Unmotivated
- Disengaged
- Too many or no strong interests
Common Myths about Majors

• Each major leads to a specific career
  – Psychology leads to Psychologist

• Choosing major/career is a life sentence

• Few students have a problem choosing a major

• There is specific major for pre-professional programs
  – Biology for Pre-Med
  – Political Science for Law
TREATMENTS

College & Career Portfolio
Pre-Registration Assignment
Major Confusion Workshop
College & Career Portfolio

Purpose: To introduce you to the skills and resources necessary to research career opportunities.

Structure: A course-long project with five individual assignments and a final portfolio.

1. Explore clubs & organizations
2. Self assessment
3. Research a major & career
4. Conduct an informational interview
5. Create a projected résumé
6. A final portfolio

Options: Each includes the same components; however, the research focus and assignment requirements vary. All three options will provide you with similar skill development.

Option 1: Students uncertain of their major or have several areas of interest.

Option 2: Students decided on a major but want to explore career opportunities within their selected field of intent.

Option 3: For those students who know what they want to major in and the career they want to pursue, but need further planning to accomplish their goals.
College & Career Portfolio

• Common assignment for all first-year seminars, UNI 101

• Designed to integrate goals of UNI
  – Critical thinking & reflection
  – Campus engagement
  – Time management
  – Self exploration
  – Written and verbal communication

• Incorporated into Career Center and Library workshops
Pre-registration Assignment

Why?
• Unable to have productive conversations
• Problem with rescheduling due to limited time and increasing student numbers
• Prolonging declaration process for the student and possible delayed graduation

Intervention
• Quick, simple, step-by-step process
• Creates forward progress
Pre-registration Assignment

Review Majors at UNCW
In most cases, there is more than one path to any given career. So, you want to choose the major that is right for you, based on personal interests, skills, abilities, career goals and life-style.

- University College web-page: [http://www.uncw.edu/uc](http://www.uncw.edu/uc)
  - Click on ‘Basic Studies, Majors & Minors’
  - Click on the term you entered UNCW,
- UNCW Catalogue: [http://www.uncw.edu/catalogue/](http://www.uncw.edu/catalogue/)

**Step 1:** Review the majors offered at UNCW.
- What majors can you rule out?
- What majors sparked your interest?
- What are your top 5 majors to explore?

**Step 2:** Determine why you ruled out particular majors.

**Step 3:** Review the course requirements for the majors of interest.
Pre-registration Assignment

Review potential careers by major
Each major at UNCW will provide you with transferable skills to prepare you for a variety of career opportunities.

- UNCW Career Center [http://www.uncw.edu/stuaff/career](http://www.uncw.edu/stuaff/career)
  - Click on ‘Explore & Research Careers’
  - Click on ‘What can I do with a major in…’

**Step 4:** Review the career possibilities for majors of interest.
- Were there any careers listed that you have considered in the past?
- Were your surprised by any of the career listed?
- Do the related skills match your natural abilities?
- Did reviewing the career information make you more or less interested in a particular major?
Major Confusion Workshop

• Why was intervention needed?
  – Undeclared students needing help navigating the process.
  – Students floundering in majors (business, nursing).
  – Transfer students that are new to UNCW policies found it difficult to determine major.
  – Tuition Surcharge: 50% tuition surcharge for any students taking more than 140 degree credit hours to complete a baccalaureate degree

• Workshop—offered every semester before pre-registration.
Major Confusion Workshop

• Offered every semester before pre-registration.

• Sponsored by the Career Center, University College, and the Office of the Registrar

• **Workshop objectives:**
  – Explain what a major is and what it is not.
  – Disarm student worries by debunking myths.
  – Detail ways students can explore majors and careers effectively.
  – Provide an overview of the declaration/change of major process.
  – Offer students one-on-one consultations with career and academic advisors.
The Declaration/Change of Major Process

Explore
• Personal Research
• Career Center
• Academic Advising

Decide
• Academic plan and timeline
• Degree Audit

Pursue Major
• Major declaration or change of major
• Move to new department
Programming (Continued)

The Declaration/Change of Major Process with Resources

- UNCW online resources
- Departmental websites
- Undergraduate catalogue

Get Advice
- Academic advisor
- Career Counselor
- Pre-professional programs
- Departmental contacts

Research

Declare/Change Major
- Major declaration or change of major
- Move to new department
- Register for class
Programming (continued)

• It is important to explore major requirements to determine the best option for you.
  • **Math:** Are higher level mathematics courses “doable”?
  • **GPA:** Do you, or can you, meet the GPA requirements?
  • **Pre-reqs:** Have you completed the necessary pre-requisites?
  • **Interest:** Are you interested in the course content the major requires you take?
  • **Time to Degree:** How long would the major/degree take to complete?
  • **Career:** Will this degree help me obtain a career I desire? Will this prepare me for grad or professional school?
Scenarios/Questions

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References


**Major Confusion Scenarios**

**Jacquie**

As a Latino and first generation college student who is pursuing a career nursing she faces some perceived uphill challenges. She knows that being a nurse would provide a good paying job and she has been told that her fluency in Spanish will be an asset when looking for employment. To be a competitive applicant to the Nursing major she must earn an average grade of B in all her science courses. During her first semester of college she earned the following grades:

- Intro to Biology, D
- Intro to Chemistry, F
- English Composition, B
- Global History, C
- First Year Seminar, B+

She knows her science grades are currently not good enough, but plans to repeat both Chem and Bio next semester. She has always had trouble with science courses and wants to know what assistance is available for next semester.

**Trenton**

In his second semester of his sophomore year and plans to major in Business Administration despite the fact that he doesn’t enjoy the pre-business courses he has taken so far. He wants to be successful in the future and has been told by his Dad that business is where is money is. He has always loved and excelled in History courses, but does not feel it would be a good major for him because he has no interest in becoming a teacher. Trenton knows he needs to declare at the end on the semester, but in order to do so he must earn at least a “C” in his Calculus course that he is enrolled in. The previous semester he failed Calculus and is currently repeating it. He fears he may not receive the C and therefore will once more have to put off declaration which will prevent him from graduating on time.

**Heather**

A sophomore who is very excited about majoring in Film Studies and it has always been her dream in life. Because the film program is very competitive, she must earn a B+ in the intro course in order to declare and continue in the major. Her final grades just posted and she learns that she only earned a B in the course. Repeating the course is not an option and this means a major in film studies is not an option for her. She is devastated.

**James**

Just recently transferred into the institution and is having a challenging time determining whether he wants to be a teacher. Since he had initially listed education on the admissions paperwork, he was labeled as a pre-education major and registered for a semester full major-specific education courses but feels it may be a bad fit. He has even considered withdrawing from classes and transferring back to his original institution.

**Deshawn**

Three years into his college experience, Deshawn has yet to decide on a major. His advisor is becoming increasingly frustrated because Deshawn has skipped appointments, avoided discussing his major options, and
seems opposed to making a decision. Every time he thinks about having to decide a major he shakes, becomes visibly upset, and feels intense anxiety.