Academic Advising for Exploratory Students
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1) Executive Overview

Key Observations

Develop and establish an office of academic advising for exploratory students to better serve students. When students are not allowed to enter an institution as exploratory, they select an arbitrary major which leads to longer time to graduation, more frequent changes to majors, and lower success rates in courses. Contacts see improved performance (e.g., graduation rates, GPA) in students when they select their major after an opportunity to determine it is the appropriate choice for them.

Support the student exploration through courses, workshops, and partnerships with other student services. Offer general studies courses to freshman and exploratory students to prepare them for an academic environment through an introduction to topics such as time management and how to access resources in the library. Workshops, office hours, and referrals to career centers or tutoring services from academic advising staff provide students with more streamlined service to support their academic goals.

Set policies that require students to declare a major by a certain point to force structured exploration. Students need clear expectations and structured support from advisors to explore their options and make a timely decision. If students wait too long to declare a major, it can be difficult to complete all the requirements for some majors on time. Professed institutions require students to declare a major after attempting or completing a set number of credit hours, or after completing a predetermined number of semesters.

Provide advisors for exploratory students with ongoing training and professional development opportunities to maintain quality academic advising. Professional advisors are better able to meet the needs of exploratory students than faculty advisors as they are more invested in advising without the time constraints of teaching. Contacts provide these professionals with the skills and knowledge to adequately prepare them to advise exploratory students. A designated office for exploratory students, housed within a college or the office of academic affairs reduces the burden on other advising offices that do not have the capacity to advise exploratory students.
2) Academic Advising Oversight

**Exploratory Students**

*Students Continue to Explore Academic Options, Even When Required to Declare Major Prior to Admission*

Exploratory students save time and money, as they do not spend time in a major of which they are unsure, which can lead to additional semesters required to graduate. Rather than leaving the institution when unsuccessful in an original major, an exploratory program offers students another opportunity to investigate options in at a lower risk. Students also change colleges and majors less with an exploratory option, which reduces the burden on academic advising offices in colleges as college-specific advising offices offer fewer resources to support students through the major exploration process. Contacts indicate that based on how many students enter institutions as exploratory, there will always be exploratory students even if there is no official advising structure for them at an institution. These students are less likely to be successful and graduate on time without academic support structure in place.

**Percentage of Students Who Enter as Exploratory**

![Bar chart showing percentage of students entering as exploratory by institution: 35% for Institution A, 20% for Institution B, 10% for Institution D, 30% for Institution F.]

**Academic Advising Structure**

*Provide Advising to Exploratory Students through a Dedicated Advising Center*

Professional advisors in advising centers assigned only to exploratory students have the time and resources to guide undecided students through an institution’s options and the decision to select a major. This prevents institutions from forcing students into majors that do not interest them, or for which they have little aptitude.

Institutions assign exploratory students to advisors with expertise in specific student academic backgrounds (e.g., poor grades, low SAT but high GPA). In an academic advising office dedicated to exploratory students, advisors work with fewer students, which allows for greater flexibility to provide students with better service. Contacts seek to have a ratio of one advisor to every 200-275 students.
### Structures of Academic Advising Offices at Profiled Institutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution A</th>
<th>The Academic Advisement Center employs 80 professional advisors for first-years through juniors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Six professional advisors for exploratory students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Students meet with advisors at least three times to discuss academic options</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Advisors refer students to career services when appropriate</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Students take a major matching assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Advisors do independent research (e.g., read industry publications) to remain updated on issues specific to exploratory students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution B</th>
<th>The Academic Advising Center is housed within the Academic Affairs Division</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- The Director reports directly to the Provost, rather than a dean; therefore, exploratory students receive more attention from University leadership</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution C</th>
<th>The University Studies Office functions as an academic college; the Director's peers are deans but the Office is not technically a college because it does not grant degrees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Professional advisors receive ongoing professional development and advising training</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution D</th>
<th>The Student Services Office is housed within the College of Arts and Sciences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Freshmen and exploratory students distributed between 11 professional advisors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- 2,500-3,000 exploratory students enrolled but not every one utilizes advising</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution E</th>
<th>The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences is responsible for exploratory advising</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Three professional advisors for exploratory students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- One advisor serves as liaison with the Career Resource Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Advisors have mix of experience levels, but receive no specific training to assist exploratory students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Three exploratory tracks for students to pursue:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Humanities and literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Social and behavioral sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Sciences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Academic Advising Office for Exploratory Students Work Closely with Other Student Support Offices**

The directors of academic advising for exploratory students most effectively advocate for their students through strong relationships with directors of other student services.
Examples of Collaboration Between Offices

- **Online Referral Form**: Institution A has an online student referral portal that Academic Advisement Center and career services staff complete to create seamless service for students.

- **Meetings Between Directors**: At Institution E, the directors of the academic and career advising centers both directly report to the Provost and meet regularly with him or her. The directors of academic and career advising at Institution E meet monthly.

- **Liaisons Between Offices**: One academic advisor at Institution D acts as liaison to the career services center to promote collaboration between offices. At Institution F, every staff member in university studies participates in a formal partnership with a staff member in career services; directors encourage these pairings to meet annually.

- **Office Hours**: A staff member from career services at Institution F hosts office hours in the university studies office to promote student awareness of services.

**Exploratory Student Policies**

**Limit Length of Time Students Remain Exploratory to Force Focused Exploration**

Offices of academic advising structure student exploration of majors to ensure students declare a major by a certain time.

**Major Declaration Timeline by Institution**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Deadline to Declare</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Institution A | - Required by end of first year  
                 - Flexible if student receives extension from advisor |
| Institution D | - Required after completion of three semesters |
| Institution C | - Suggested by end of first year  
                 - Required upon completion of 60 credit hours |
| Institution B | - Suggested upon completion of 60 credit hours  
                 - Required upon completion of 75 credit hours |
| Institution F | - Required upon completion of 60 credit hours or attempted 72 credit hours |

If students wait too long to declare, it becomes difficult to move forward in a major with many prerequisites.
Offer Exploratory Students Courses or Workshops that Explain Academic and Campus Opportunities

Contacts offer general studies courses as one-credit seminars that teach students how to engage in campus extracurricular activities, select a major and minor through exposure to different colleges and majors at the university, and develop a resume. These classes help prepare students for academic success in college and select a major.

Examples of Institutional Workshops and Advising Tools for Exploratory Students

Program for High Risk Students
- Workshops on academic skills (e.g., time management, citations) and financial literacy, taught by professional advisors

Online Tools
- Degree Works
  - Web-based academic advising and degree audit tool that helps students and advisors navigate graduation requirements
- Online Career Assessment Tools

Meet with an Exploratory Advisor
- Discuss general studies and most applicable introductory courses in majors of interest

Strategies to Establish and Maintain a Positive Reputation of Exploratory Program Caliber

| Demonstrate Leadership's Support | • Institutional leadership includes exploratory advising in the strategic plan, to emphasize support for the program  
| | • Strategic plan outlines how the institution perceives a successful exploratory program |
| Offer High Quality Advising | • An academic advising office for exploratory students better facilitates the transition of students between majors than college-specific advising offices  
| | • Faculty and peer advising supplement college-specific advising offices  
| | • With dedicated professional advisors, exploratory students receive more focused attention from advisors with smaller pools of students and expertise in advising |
| Try Innovative Courses | • Launch trial programs (e.g., general studies courses) with exploratory students to test new programs in a diverse student population and identify concerns before offering new courses to a wider audience. |
Institution F: Campaign to Promote Reputation of Exploratory Students

- The Director of University Studies consistently promotes the quality of exploratory students and supports these claims with evidence from institutional research that first-year students in university studies perform better academically than first-year students in the college of engineering.
- University Studies requires students to see advisors in three times in the first semester. The Office struggles to get students to see their new advisors once they declare a major.

3) Implementation and Resources

Process to Change Advising Models

Former Models of Academic Advising at Profiled Institutions

Institution A recently changed advising structure for exploratory students. Previously, all students entered the University as exploratory until they completed 41 credit hours. The Student Advisement Center advised all students alphabetically, divided among 12 advisors with large pools of students. In 2014, the University completed the first academic year with its current structure that lowers the number of students each advisor works with and specializes advisors by subject area or students' areas of weakness.

In contrast, Institution E allowed student to enroll as undecided until 2008. Because there were formal structures or policies for these exploratory students, to encourage major declaration, students would register for courses in their fourth year at the institution without a major. Rather than implement an advising structure to support exploratory students, leadership removed the option to enroll without a major.

Profiled Institutions Changed Advising Models to Improve Service to Students

Model changes are most successful when fully supported by leadership (e.g., president, provost, vice provost). At Institution A, there was direct pressure from the leadership to change the advising model for exploratory students. Staff stays in contact with students and encourages academic success through advising that guides them through the process to declare a major. To gather support for the creation of an exploratory option, contacts examine how many students change majors within the first term and first year.
Establish a Timeline for the Change of Advising Model

At profiled institutions, once contacts and leadership decided to admit exploratory students, the timeline to implement the new advising structure is short.

Institution A Implementation Timeline for Academic Advisement Center

Implementation Timeline: 3 Years

- University administrators start discussions to change advising structure
- Academic Affairs receives funding from Board of Regents within one year
- Contacts hire new advisors within six months of receiving funding

Provide Exploratory Advising Offices with Funds to Educate and Prepare Students for Academic Success

The Board of Regents at Institution A funds the Academic Advisement Center because the President included advising as a top priority in the University's strategic plan. At Institution B, general funds support the Academic Advising Center. This ensures funding is not based on number of students so the Office is unbiased in advising students; it neither keeps students as exploratory nor urges them to declare a major before they are ready based on funding. Institution C and Institution D both house exploratory students within the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and the academic advising offices within those colleges fund exploratory advising. Institution F funds the university studies program based on number of students, but at a lower rate than academic colleges.¹

Institution A Strategic Plan initiative Two: Establish a Student Success Center (SSC)

"To ensure the success of our students, Institution A will establish a SSC as the campus location for a complete range of student academic support programs. As part of its commitment to student success, Institution A will commit to lowering the student/advisor ratio to the national standard of 300 to 1 and establish a new advisement program that will track each student's academic progress and create mandatory points of advisement and interventions at key academic junctures.²"

¹) Institution A Strategic Plan 2011-2016

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4) Assessment and Outcomes

Results of Academic Advising for Exploratory Students

Survey Exploratory Students Regularly to Gauge Satisfaction with Advising

Profiled institutions see high rates of response to surveys when administered immediately after an advising session.

- **Institution A** surveys exploratory students after sessions on iPads kept in the Center office on an ongoing basis
- **Institution B** surveys exploratory students in person after advising appointments for one month each year, in 2013 the Office:
  - Received no less than 4.5 out of 5 for student satisfaction with advising
  - 381 of 400 exploratory students took the survey
- **Institution E** surveys all students after each advising appointment via email
- **Institution F** conducts a survey of exploratory student satisfaction with advising every three years
  - University Studies (which houses exploratory students) receives the highest rating of all advising units because the advisors are professional and do not have the demands of teaching (unlike faculty advisors in academic colleges)

Sample Academic Advising Feedback Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey of Academic Advising</th>
<th>Very Poor</th>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. General quality of academic advising that you have received</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Information about courses, programs, and requirements through academic advising</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Information about deadlines related to institutional policies and procedures</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Availability of academic advising</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Amount of time in each advising session</td>
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<td>6. My advisor was prepared for my appointment</td>
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<td>7. My advisor listened to my concerns</td>
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<td>8. My advisor seemed genuinely interested in me</td>
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<td>9. My advisor referred me to appropriate campus resources as needed</td>
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<td>10. My advisor clearly communicates what is my responsibility and what she can do for me</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. My advisor is helpful in discussing my career plans and goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>12. My advisor helped me select the right major based on my goals and interests</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. I feel confident that my advisor will follow up on any unresolved issues</td>
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Institutions Have Improved Retention and Students Have Improved Performance Since Allowing Exploratory Students

Institution B has increased retention and graduation rates since implementation of the Academic Advising Center. The freshman GPA rose by 0.5 since the Academic Advising Center took over advising for exploratory students. Freshmen students in university studies at Institution F perform better academically than freshmen engineering students.

5) Research Methodology

Project Challenge

Leadership at a member institution approached the Forum with the following questions:

- What percentage of profiled institutions’ incoming first-year class chooses to be undecided or exploratory?
- If undecided students are housed in a unit other than a traditional college, to whom does that unit report?
- What structures and staff provide academic advising to undecided students? What structures and staff provide career advising to undecided students?
- What is the student to advisor ratio for undecided students?
- What connections do these advising units maintain with the career center, tutoring services, or other student support units on campus?
- When did contacts’ institutions implement the current model for undeclared student advising? What was the structure before? What motivated the change?
- How long are students permitted to remain undecided? When do policies require they select a major?
- What is the timeline for implementation for new advising structures?
- What targeted courses, workshops, or other programs do contacts offer undecided students are required to complete?
- How did profiled institutions fund the creation of the university college, and how do they fund ongoing costs? If undeclared advising happens outside of a university college, how is this paid for?
- What concerns do undecided or exploratory students create? Are the students in the unit perceived as inferior? How do contacts resolve these issues?
- What metrics do contacts collect to gauge exploratory students’ satisfaction with advising? What services or programs do undecided students benefit most from?
- What differences do contacts see in retention and graduation rates since allowing undecided students to enroll or changing advising structures?
- What challenges and recommendations do contacts have for other institutions allowing undeclared students to enroll or changing undeclared advising structures?
Project Sources

The Forum consulted the following sources for this report:

- EAB's internal and online research libraries (eab.com)
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (http://nces.ed.gov)
- Institution websites:

Research Parameters

The Forum interviewed directors of academic advising at southern, 4-year public institutions.

A Guide to Institutions Profiled in this Brief

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Approximate Institutional Enrollment (Undergraduate/Total)</th>
<th>Classification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institution A</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>24,700/32,000</td>
<td>Research Universities (very high research activity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution B</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>16,400/20,400</td>
<td>Research Universities (very high research activity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution C</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>28,000/33,500</td>
<td>Research Universities (high research activity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution D</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>32,800/49,900</td>
<td>Research Universities (very high research activity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution E</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>23,400/31,300</td>
<td>Research Universities (very high research activity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution F</td>
<td>Mid-Atlantic</td>
<td>23,900/31,100</td>
<td>Research Universities (very high research activity)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>