Students Needing Academic Alternative Advising: A National Survey

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An increasing phenomenon on many campuses has been the inability of some students to continue pursuing the undergraduate academic program they initially selected. While there have always been undecided students and students who change their majors because of personal preferences, there are other students who cannot enter the program of their choice because of increasingly stringent institutional or departmental requirements. Health programs have traditionally used selective admissions, and this policy has filtered into other academic areas. Students caught in this dilemma are different from freshman major-changers in that they have made a firm commitment to the programs, have advanced hours, but found their entrance into the desired majors blocked by changing professional requirements both internal and external to their campus.

Although there has been a great deal of research concerning the undecided student,[1] and some research on major-changers,[2] few studies have examined the problem of students who

[1] J. Ashby, H. Wall, and S. Osipow, "Vocational Uncertainty and Indecision in College Freshmen," Personnel and *Guidance Journal,* 44, (1966), pp. 1037-1041.

L. Baird, The *Undecided Student - How Different is He?* ACT Research Report No. 2. (Iowa City, Iowa: American College Testing Program, 1967.)

John Crites. *Vocational Psychology.* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969.)

V.N. Gordon, The *Undecided* College *Student:* An Academic and Cureer *Advising Challenge.* (Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas Publisher, 1984.)

J.L. Holland and J.E. Holland, "Vocational Indecision: More Evidence and Speculation.'' *Journal of Counseling Psychology,* 24, (1977). pp. 404-414.

[2] B. Foote, "Determined-and-Undetermined Major Students: How Different Are They?'' Journal of College Student Personnel, 21, (1980), pp. 29-34.

L. Kojaku, "Major Field Transfer: The Self-Matching of Univrsity Undergradutes to Student Characteristic.;.''ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 062933. (Los Angeles: UCLA, 1971.)

R. Titley, B. Titley and W. Wolf. "The Major-Changers: Continuity and Discontinuity in the Carreer Process." *Journal of Vocational Behavior,* 8, (1976), pp. 105-111.

are denied admission (either directly or indirectly) into the major of their choice. Some of these rejected students may have set unrealistic goals for themselves because they lack the background or ability to pursue the academic work required for their chosen area (for example, math or science courses). Others, however, are facing increasingly difficult requirements established for high demand programs.

Students who cannot perform adequately in their proposed majors may have unrealistic aspirations.' This may suggest that their self-perceptions and academic or vocational objectives are incongruent. Inadequate performance might also indicate a lack of accurate academic or occupational information. Many students have had limited exposure to the working world and are unaware of the actual work tasks involved in certain career areas. The lack of information and exposure to work tasks create an unrealistic view of what specific skills must first be obtained, and students often lack the preparation necessary for success in a given major. Other students feel pressured to make choices based on significant other persons' (such as parents') aspiration and desires for them. Other factors such as unrealistic assessment of abilities, lack of decision making skills, or a need for job security might lead students into unrealistic, unattainable choices.

Althen and Stott describe students who have unrealistic academic objectives as rigid, inflexible, intolerant of ideas, and experiencing discomfort with indefinite answers.' Questioning by others about these unrealistic ideas often stimulates defensiveness and greater rigidity. Althen and Stott claim advisors are less effective with these students because of their own stereotyping, their use of non-directive approaches, and their lack of involvement with emotional and rational factors that led to the unrealistic decision.

Other students are now facing more stringent requirements for entering certain academic programs. Some students who easily entered business or computer science programs five years ago would not be able to do so today, because of increasing demands by students; lack of physical facilities; and, difficulty in retaining faculty in these areas has caused an overload that is irresolvable on many campuses. This has led to a tightening of entrance requirements and many capable students have been denied admission. This means that some students needing alternative advising made realistic decisions initially but supply and demand have denied them the opportunity to be admitted to their desired majors. Therefore, they should be advised into alternative majors.

The magnitude of concern surrounding the advising of students who needed to be redirected in their career choice became apparent throughout the 1983 NACADA Conference in St. Louis. To determine the awareness and scope of the problem, as well as existing services for this student population, the NACADA Research Committee decided to conduct a national survey.

' G. Althen and F.W. Stott, ''Advising and Counseling Students Who Have Unrealistic Academic Objectives.'' *Personnel and Guidance Journal*, 61, (1983), pp. 608-611.
I.W. Brandel, ''Puzzling Your Career A Sell-Responsibility, Sell-Acceptance Approach to Career Planning.'' *Personnel and Guidance Journal*, 61, (1982), pp. 225-228.
P.R. Salome and P. McKenna, ''Difficult Career Counwling Cases: I - Unrealistic Vocalional Aspirations.'' *Personnel and Guidance Journal*, 60, (1982), pp. 283-286.

" Althen and Stott.

Procedures

A survey questionnaire was developed to study the problem of the need for alternative advising, expressed during the St. Louis meeting by the conferees. The instrument used in gathering the survey information consisted of seven general information questions and one open-ended question about the need for alternative advising on campus. It was mailed to all (700) NACADA members, an organization whose membership consists of faculty advisors, administrators, professional advisors, counselors and others in academic and student affairs concerned with the intellectual, personal and vocational needs of students. Two-hundred and fifty-one usable responses were returned. The senior author read through all returned questionnaires in an effort to determine the general categories the respondents outlined for each answer. These categories are used in the enclosed Tables. Responses were also categorized according to the type of institution in which the respondent was employed. The institutions were categorized by four types: large universities (25,000 or more students); medium-sized institutions (5,000-24,999 students); small colleges (500-4,999); and community colleges which were defined by name. Frequency counts were then performed for those categories in which a number of responses fell. A chi-square analysis was performed to determine if there was a relationship between the size of the institution and alternative advising issues and treatments.

Results

In order to determine the scope of the problem, Question One asked respondents to estimate the percentage of students needing alternative advising on their campuses. One-fourth of the community colleges reporting indicated that 50 percent of their students needed alternative advising while another fourth reported twenty-five percent of their students needed alternative advising. Thirty-eight percent of the respondents from community colleges were uncertain as to whether their student population needed alternative advising. The majority of small colleges (sixty percent) reported that less than ten percent of their student population needed alternative advising. Seventy-six percent of the respondents from medium-sized institutions indicated that twenty-five percent or less of their enrolees needed alternative advising. Although one-third of the large universities reported that less than ten percent of their students needed alternative advising, other respondents from large universities (thirty-seven percent) indicated that at least twenty-five percent of their students needed this special service. (Results of this question were significant at $p < .02$.) *How are these students identified?*

Respondents were asked if there were any established methods by which students needing alternative advising could be identified. The chi-square analysis performed to identify the relationship between those who were responsible for identifying these students and the sue of college was not significant. The most significant result was that fifty-two percent of the colleges had no office designated to identify students in this situation. The most frequently named office (seventeen percent) for identifying these students was academic affairs. Faculty advisors or college faculty committees were used in twenty-two percent of the small colleges. Less than six percent of the large institutions reported that faculty were their primary source for identifying students in need of alternative advising. ***Who is administratively responsible for these students?***

Academic affairs was the administrative unit most frequently cited as responsible for students needing alternative advising. This was followed by the student affairs unit or advising center for all institutional types except community colleges. Most community colleges (eighty-eight percent) reported student affairs offices were responsible for these students. While one-third of the respondents in small and medium-sized colleges indicated student affairs offices were responsible for alternative advising, only one-fifth of the large institutions indicated that student affairs regulated and delivered this service. College advisors and departmental faculty advisors were occasionally responsible for alternative advising in larger institutions. Other than community colleges, counseling centers and career counseling centers were rarely designated as responsible for students needing alternative advising.

Which academic majors are affected?

Table I outlines the academic areas in which alternative advising appears to be the most critical. The academic area most frequently identified, especially in medium and large institutions, was business. Other areas included the health professions, pre-professional programs, and computer science. Students in engineering, education, communications and journalism also appear to need alternative advising, although to a lesser degree. There were significant chi squares between certain academic areas and the size of the institution for business, computer science, engineering and communication/journalism. Medium and large institutions indicated more students in these majors were in need of alternative advising.

TABLE I
Academic Areas Needing Alternative Advising

	COLLEGES (in percentages)						
Academic Areas	Small (N = 60)	Comm. Coll. (N = 8)	Medium (N = 68)	Large (N = 86)	x^2	DF	P
Business	48	38	74	70	12.75	3	.0052
Health Professions	47	63	54	41	3.63	3	.3037
Pre-Professional	33	25	46	43	3.03	3	.3865
Computer Sciences	32	38	56	52	9.07	3	.0284
Engineering	12	25	21	34	8.10	3	.0439
Education	12	— —	13	8	2.09	3	.5526
Communication/Journalism	3	— —	4	14	8.06	3	.0443

What reasons are given for needing alternative advising?

Although many reasons were given for students needing alternative advising, the largest number of respondents listed the following:

Poor academic performance in their chosen area. 88%
Tightening of requirements for entrance into the major 54%
Students with advanced hours changing their minds 48%
Rejection from traditionally selective admissions 29%
     (e.g. nursing, pre-med, pre-law)

Other reasons given included poor high school preparation and family pressures to select a major for which the student was ill-prepared or not interested. Table II outlines this in more detail.

The tightening of academic program standards was the only variable which produced a significant chi-square related to institutional type. Respondents from medium and large schools saw this as a major barrier to their students. Changing career goals was cited a major barrier for students in community colleges. Rejection by selective admissions was a barrier across all types of colleges.

TABLE II

Barriers Preventing Chosen Academic Field

	COLLEGES (in percentages)						
Barriers	Small (N = 60)	Comm. Coll. (N = 8)	Medium (N = 85)	Large (N = 85)	**X²**	**DF**	**P**
Poor academic performance	97	75	85	87	6.29	3	.0982
Tightening requirements of academic programs	30	— —	60	71	34.31	3	.0000
Rejection by selective admissions programs	22	25	35	29	2.94	3	.4002
Changed career goals	48	75	53	42	4.29	3	.2310
Poor high school preparation	3	— —	4	2	.81	3	.8465
Family pressures	2	— —	3	2	.42	3	.9347
Other	8	— —	18	20	5.30	3	.1510

How are these students helped?

It appears that the most prevalent mode by which students needing alternative advising are currently served is through individual referral to a preexisting resource such as, an established major without entrance requirements (see Table III). The significant chi-square on this item was due largely to the reluctance of respondents at larger institutions who were less inclined to use individual referral. The next most utilized service was special academic information sessions designed to provide an opportunity for students to explore other career options. This method was frequently used in large colleges and community colleges and to a lesser extent in small and medium sized instituitions. Twenty-seven percent of the respondents indicated that special advisors had been identified and trained to perform alternative advising. Such advisors are utilized most frequently by large institutions and were never reported as a source of alternative advising by community college respondents. Credit courses designed for this population were used by approximately twenty percent of all institutional types except community colleges where this method was used twice as much as other institutions.

It is important to note that twelve percent reported that no special services existed on their campuses for these types of students. Seven percent of the respondents indicated they were aware of the problem on their campuses and planned to initiate special programs in the near future. Overall, thirty-seven percent reported they had special programs for this population.

TABLE III

Existing Programs and Services for Students Needing Alternative Advising

Programs and Services	Small (N = 60)	Comm. Coll. (N = 8)	Medium (N = 88)	Large (N = 86)	X²	DF	P
Individual referral to preexisting resource	93	88	94	78	11.73	3	.0084
Special advisors assigned and trained to do alternative advising	20	— —	29	33	5.99	3	.1118
Special academic information sessions to provide exploration of other options	22	38	32	40	5.24	3	.1546
Credit course designed for this student population	17	38	21	19	2.06	3	.5598
No services exist	10	— —	13	14	1.70	3	.6365
Other	5	13	16	16	4.80	3	.1870

COLLEGES (in percentages) spans the data columns.

Where are services located?

Table IV exhibits where special programs and/or services designed to assist students needing alternative advising are located. These special programs appear to be found predominantly in Advising Centers or Offices of Academic Advising, except in community colleges where counseling centers are most frequently cited. Other locations mentioned by reporting institutions included career service offices, academic affairs, student affairs, learning assistance centers and continuing education.

TABLE IV

Location of Special Programs and Services for Alternative Advising

Location	Small (N = 60)	Comm. Coll. (N = 8)	Medium (N = 88)	Large (N = 86)	X²	DF	P
Advising Center and Office of Advising	43	13	43	36	3.52	3	.3180
Career Services	17	13	16	20	.55	3	.9069
Student Affairs	8	13	10	7	.69	3	.8734
Counseling Center	23	25	24	30	1.23	3	.7442
Continuing Education	3	— —	3	2	.37	3	.9455
Academic Affairs/Academic Departments	13	— —	12	20	3.65	3	.3009
Learning Assistance Center	5	— —	4	5	.41	3	.9367

COLLEGES (in percentages) spans the data columns.

Descriptions of special advising services

The types of programs and services reported by respondents included the following:

- special credit courses;
- group sessions following rejection letters;
- advisors with special training in academic and occupational alternatives;
- notification of students with advanced hours to take part in individual conferences;
- special workshops for students in academic difficulty in certain selective admissions areas; and,
- establishing early warning methods to identify these students before they progress too far in unrealistic majors.

Type of survey respondent

The greatest number of respondents were from large colleges. Many of these respondents were directors of university advising centers, directors of college advising units and departmental advising coordinators. Respondents from medium and small institutions also tended to be responsible for some type of advising unit on their campus. Many others were in vice-president or academic dean positions. The smallest return was from community colleges. These respondents were either advising center directors, counseling center directors, or deans of students.

There were multiple responses from sixteen large institutions. When these were analyzed for answer consistency among respondents from one institution, there was majority agreement on the need for such a service. There were differences in program availability on some campuses, however. Two respondents from one institution did not know where help was available while two others did. Respondents from individual colleges within large universities defined the need for alternative advising in their own terms (for example, health sciences and business programs dealt with higher numbers of these students). Specialized programs were not publicized in some large institutions so some respondents were uninformed about programs on their campus which were described by their colleagues. Respondents from advising centers had a better grasp of the total campus situation than respondents in individual departments or colleges.

Discussion

All of the personnel at institutions responding to the alternative advising questionnaire acknowledged a need for advising students who are being turned away from the majors of their choice. Large universities seem to be most affected by this problem because of their variety of curricular choices. Respondents at institutions of all sizes reported they are seeing students who are unable to complete certain majors on their campuses. While this problem is universal, few institutions have established or increased services for this student population.

Although there appears to be a cluster of majors throughout all types and sizes of institutions whose tightened and restricted admissions policies have had an impact on the flexibility of students' major choices, many are specific to each campus. While business

seems to be the most critical area of the majority of institutions responding, other areas such as architecture, journalism, communication, criminal justice and education were also named by colleges as denying students admission.

Those responsible for identifying and assisting these students are as varied as the campuses themselves. There seem to be no organized way to identify and serve these students. A few large institutions have established interventions at critical points in the students' academic progress. These include trying to intercede before they apply for an unrealistic program or providing programs directed at choosing alternative majors upon being rejected from their initial major choice.

Some institutions have implemented a variety of special services for this population, but none has established a well thought-out, systematic, coordinated plan to approach the problem at every level. Students who are rejected from high-demand programs must fend for themselves in many institutions. These students are often unidentified and therefore unserved. However, the health areas have established a variety of interventions, because they have been faced with this problem for many years.

The increasing numbers of students needing alternative advising may be cyclical and may fade as trends change. But as long as this problem exists, many institutions will eventually have to acknowledge the dilemma that the students face, and will need to establish programs to meet the advising and counseling challenge of this important and growing group.