

a. Institutional Description

Founded by the Congregation of the Mission (Vincentians) in 1856, Niagara University is a private liberal arts university in the Catholic and Vincentian traditions. Consistent with its Mission statement, Niagara seeks to inspire its students to serve all members of society, especially the poor and oppressed, in local communities and in the larger world. Overall, through its curricular and extracurricular programs, Niagara University seeks to develop the whole person, mind, body, heart and soul, for the benefit of one's personal and professional life.

Located on the Niagara River overlooking the Providence of Ontario, Canada, the university is located just outside the city of Niagara Falls, New York. Approximately 3,200 and 870 graduate students are enrolled in this mid-sized university. Niagara University is accredited by the Middle States Association of Colleges. Its four academic divisions include the colleges of Arts and Sciences, Business Administration, Education and Hospitality and Tourism Management. The university also maintains the Academic Exploration Program that provides support for students who are still deciding on a major.

b. Program Development

The Academic Exploration Program (AEP) was developed in the 1980's under the leadership of Dr. Robert Huebsch, Director of General Academic Studies and a faculty member in the Religious Studies Department. He recognized the need for advisement of "undecided" students in an institution that accepted students into a major as freshmen and used only faculty advisers. Dr. Huebsch designed a systematic individual approach for undecided students that focused on discovering students' interests, developing future goals, planning their education, and choosing a major. This program began with faculty advisement but soon evolved to professional advisers to better serve students.

In 1997, the Vice President of Academic Affairs, Dr. Susan Mason, decided that AEP should be housed administratively within the College of Arts & Sciences. This arrangement allowed the program to establish more of an academic presence on campus and resulted in greater financial support and control over admissions and enrollment. With the support of the Dean at the time, Dr. Nancy McGlen and Director, Ms. Antonia Knight, the program continued to attract new students and grow. It now annually comprises 15-20% of the freshman class.

Another change to the Academic Exploration Program came in 2010 under the direction of the Executive Vice President, Dr. Bonnie Rose. It was decided the program should be highlighted as a stand-alone major reporting to Academic Affairs in the same structure as the other four Colleges on campus, and within a new department entitled: The Division of Academic Services. The purpose was twofold. First, to highlight the program for recruitment purposes as an independent major so prospective students and families would understand that all majors were available to them, not just those within Arts & Sciences. Second, to build a closer working relationship with Career Services and the Office of Academic Support.

Over the years the program has evolved to what it is today: the best place for students who are still deciding on a major in college. It has become a premier program not only at Niagara University, but also in the Western New York region.

c. Goals and Objectives

The goal of the Academic Exploration Program is to provide students with a systematic approach for discovering their interests, develop a career plan, and select a major. AEP also communicates information regarding campus programs and resources to enrich students' college experience. AEP's ultimate goal is to empower students by providing opportunities to foster independence. The student population in AEP encompasses a wide range of ethnic and social backgrounds with a variety of

academic, economic, athletic, and disability needs. In keeping with Niagara University's Vincentian Mission, the staff is committed to serving all students.

The first objective of AEP is to assist students with the development of decision-making skills. Through a series of structured activities that require them to gather and assess information, AEP students are mentored in the process of making an educated decision. This begins with Summer Orientation and continues for every semester the student is in AEP. These activities are outlined on the website:

www.niagara.edu/aep.

A second objective of AEP is to provide students with the advice and support required to help them navigate the transition from being a high school student deciding on a major to a student satisfied with their chosen major and an understanding of connected careers. To achieve this objective, students are assigned one adviser who regularly meets with them throughout their participation in the program.

In an effort to meet both objectives, AEP staff are continuously researching and developing new exploration activities and working with Career Services for current information on trends in the job market. The Executive Director of Academic Services consistently meets with the Deans of all four colleges to provide AEP staff with updates of developments happening on campus. Additionally, AEP meets with Assistant Deans and Chairs of departments to keep abreast of the ever changing academic requirements across campus.

d. Program Description

Students have the opportunity to meet with their professional adviser as often as needed. During these appointments the adviser and student explore the student's strengths and passions, in addition to their volunteer and work experiences. Together they select courses that allow the student to research areas of interest while fulfilling university requirements.

Students select AEP as their major upon application to the university. Individuals who have selected a major and have the required grade point average may transfer into their desired major at any time during the first two years. Students may also transfer into AEP from another major within the University or from another institution if they have less than forty-five credit hours.

Once a student enrolls, they are sent a link from Admissions to access the New Student Portal (Appendix A) and register for the Summer Orientation program. The portal includes an academic section to gather information about incoming credit in addition to AEP students completing a supplemental form (Appendix B). At Summer Orientation, students attend a welcome meeting giving them valuable information and are then escorted to their individual advisement appointments with staff from AEP and Academic Support. Students register via the online registration system, with the help of current Niagara students serving as Orientation Leaders who were trained by the Director of AEP.

When Summer Orientation concludes, students leave with AEP contact information in addition to instructions on how to complete the career assessment MyPlan, to be reviewed with their advisor in the fall. AEP staff then assign advisers based on whom they met with during Summer Orientation or other relationships that were established (such as an Admissions visit) and students work with the same advisor the entire time they are in AEP. Prior to coming to campus, students receive an email from their adviser so they have someone to contact if they have questions or need to make schedule adjustments. Students also receive a follow-up email two weeks prior to the start of the semester re-introducing the adviser and informing them of their first pre-scheduled appointment.

Freshmen at Niagara also participate in New Student Orientation (NSO) the weekend preceding the first day of classes. This includes a formal Convocation where AEP students process as a group during the ceremony and it is emphasized that the choice to participate in AEP is celebrated at Niagara. Over the years some AEP students had expressed embarrassment about not having a major so the university now

communicates that they made a wise decision, including the Provost's statement in this regard.

Additionally during NSO, students attend a meeting with the AEP Director and staff to receive updates about the program and ask questions about starting classes. Students are divided into smaller groups based on their NU Beginnings (NUB) section, are given their class schedules, and taken on an academic building tour with the Peer Mentor assigned to their class. This tour was originally piloted by AEP years prior and because it was so successful, adopted by the rest of the university at NSO for all majors.

An additional layer of support for AEP students is within Niagara University Beginnings (NUB), a required seminar course for all first-year students introducing them to the academic culture of Niagara University. This course exemplifies George Kuh's notion of "High-Impact Educational Practices" (Kuh, 2008) due to its emphasis on critical inquiry, discussion of applying ideas across the general education curriculum, collaborative assignments and project, encouraging global learning, and taking advantage of service learning, study abroad, internships, and undergraduate research prior to graduation.

In 2009 AEP piloted the first majors-only sections of NUB to allow for specific common programming for students. Due to its success, this led to the adoption of majors-only sections for all departments at Niagara. Since students in AEP are still exploring majors, they are introduced to additional resources to research potential majors, how courses can be applied to potential majors and/or utilized for double majors and minors. Career Services also presents in all sections about the students' opportunities to enhance their resumes including a lesson on creating a LinkedIn Profile. In addition, they are shown the Mentoring NU site within LinkedIn, which is a resource current NU students can use to interview and network with Niagara Alumni, created by AEP staff in collaboration with Career Services and Alumni Relations in 2013.

All AEP students are asked to meet with their assigned adviser three times for approximately 45 minute appointments each semester. The results of the MyPlan assessments students completed in the summer

are reviewed in the first appointment. Additional topics of discussion include: identifying careers, selecting majors, setting goals, navigating the university system, developing study skills, and solving personal/social problems. Referrals to appropriate offices are also provided, including contacting faculty or staff on the student's behalf if appropriate. Students can declare their major at any time within the first two years at Niagara, but are expected to declare no later than the second semester of their sophomore year. A sample path of an AEP student is provided in Appendix C.

Another retention effort spearheaded by the Academic Exploration Program was the creation of the Nursing Wait List, in response to the high demand on the Nursing program. The waitlist is housed in AEP and capped at ten students each year. The Director works with the Dean of Arts & Sciences to enroll waitlisted students in Nursing-only courses so they remain on track for graduation if space becomes available in the Nursing major due to attrition (which is currently 10%). Students are advised of the academic and GPA requirements, provided with resources for tutoring and support, and informed of alternate majors should they not be admitted into the program. After one year on the waitlist, students are notified if they are accepted. The outcomes for the 2013-14 academic year were: three students took themselves off the list due to a desire to pursue other majors and for the remaining seven students – 100% were retained at the university and accepted into the Nursing major for the fall of 2014.

AEP helps students make life changing decisions and affirms their individual talents. It is a great way to sample the rich variety of academic life before declaring a major. Students receive support, resources, and guidance from professional advisers throughout their time in the program.

E. Procedures used in program evaluation (quantitative and/or qualitative)

The Academic Exploration Program assesses the quality of its services, program offerings, student engagement, and advisor to student interaction in a quantitative and qualitative fashion through an

online survey (Appendix D). Students are given the exit survey when they declare their major. Quantitatively, students are asked to report their level of engagement in the Academic Exploration Program. They are also asked to assess the experience with their advisor and rate their preferred activity for career and major research. Each section provides an opportunity for the students to give an open-ended response. Additionally, students are asked specific qualitative questions to measure whether they are able to relate what they learned in Academic Exploration to their major and career development.

The exit survey results are reviewed at the conclusion of each academic year. These are shared with the advisement team and administrators in the department's Annual Report. The data is used to improve services within and outside of the program. For example, over the last twenty years feedback from surveys prompted changing the major and career assessment students completed from Career Zone, to Discover, to the Strong Interest Inventory, to MyPlan, which is currently completed by all freshmen in their first semester. In addition, Career Services also adopted the use of the Strong Interest Inventory and MyPlan into their practices as a result of positive student and advisor feedback.

f. Results/Outcome

AEP's credibility for being a program that helps students is evidenced by both quantitative and qualitative data. Overall, student responses in the exit survey validate that AEP is holistically supportive of students. The results of the 2013-14 survey (Appendix E) showed that 100% of responding students "strongly agree" that their advisor "shows concern for my personal and academic well-being" and 93.3% of responding students "strongly agree" that their advisor "helps me to connect with resources on campus." In addition, students indicate that AEP advisors are knowledgeable and available to students. A resounding 97.8% of responding students "strongly agree" that their advisor "is easy to get in touch with" and 93.3% of responding students "strongly agree" that their advisor "is knowledgeable about my

academic major/minor curriculum requirements.” Furthermore, AEP achieves the goal of helping students select majors since 93.3% of responding students “strongly agree” that their advisor “helps me make important educational decisions.” Finally, AEP encourages students to engage in opportunities outside the classroom as 100% of students detailed plans for experiential learning. Further evidence of student satisfaction is detailed in an interview with an Alum (Appendix F) and letters of support from faculty.

g. Potential for adaptation by other institutions

According to a recent longitudinal study on attrition from STEM and non-STEM major fields conducted by the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2013/2013152.pdf>), for students beginning a bachelor’s degree in 2003-04, between 28 and 42% changed their major prior to graduation. This evidence reinforces the ideal that all institutions would benefit from supporting students throughout their choices of majors. Initially working with undecided students to explore potential interests helps to increase the stability of the “final” choice, strengthening retention and graduation rates of students. This notion is supported by recent institutional data indicating 94% of AEP students graduate with the major they declare upon exiting the program. These students gain the benefits of intentional advisement from the very beginning with additional achievement of one or more minors, double-majors, study abroad experiences, and various experiential learning opportunities – closely planned with the goal of a four-year graduation rate. Adaptation of the program by other institutions would require the following key components: Academic Affairs support, advisors familiar with all offered degree programs, connections to career opportunities, and effective collaboration with various campus departments.