

## **Institutional Description**

Purdue University is a public research institution located in West Lafayette, Indiana. Purdue offers both undergraduate and graduate programs across 10 academic colleges with current student body numbering more than 41,000 (approximately 31,000 of which are undergraduates). In addition to its academic colleges, both Purdue's Honors College and Exploratory Studies Program support student academic and professional goals. Given that Purdue currently offers 220+ undergraduate majors, a number that continues to grow, the Exploratory Studies program has become an integral part of Purdue's culture and has helped thousands of undergraduate students make sound major and career decisions. Purdue's Exploratory Studies program is being nominated for NACADA's Outstanding Program Award because of its rich history, evolution and growth, and evidence of successful outcomes.

## **Program Development**

On April 25, 1995, the Purdue Educational Policy Committee presented a report to the University Senate endorsing a proposal for a three-year pilot program for undecided students. Purdue would admit academically qualified students into the program, while giving them guided opportunities to explore academic and career options. The proposal was in response to a recognized need for alternatives to requiring all first-year students to declare a major, while at the same time ensuring those students have adequate support services throughout their decision-making journey. The program initially looked to Penn State University's undecided program to address issues of program design, organizational barriers, and budgeting. Through this process, three broad goals were envisioned for the pilot term beginning in August 1996:

- To maximize students involvement in their own learning
- To reduce change of major activity

- To improve student retention

Identified as the Undergraduate Studies Program (USP), freshman enrollment during the first two years of the pilot averaged 215 students. Freshman enrollment in the third year increased 50% to 424 students, as awareness of the program grew among high school counselors and students alike.

One central focus of the program was decentralized, specialized advising for USP students. The initial proposed ratio of 100 students to 1 academic advisor was designed to ensure students received adequate support to move through the decision-making process. This goal was much lower than the typical advising ratio at that time. A second central focus of the program was the required EDPS 200U Career and Life Planning course. According to the founder of the program Professor Dick Grace,

“This course serves as the primary vehicle for actively involving USP students in learning more about themselves, the academic majors offered at Purdue, and the world of work.

Class activities include student participation in a variety of self-assessment exercises. These provide students with a comprehensive view of their interests, personalities, and values as well as information and insights that can be used in selecting an appropriate major and potential career.”

Finally, a time limit of no more than four semesters in the program was set to ensure students were making timely progress toward a decision and could not remain undecided indefinitely.

Oversight of the pilot included an advisory committee made up of faculty and academic advisors with an annual report submitted each year. After three freshman classes entered, a recommendation about the future of the program was submitted. The following results from the pilot were significant:

- The average semester index for USP beginners was above the all-campus freshman first semester index.
- Fewer students from the USP program changed their declared majors a second time as compared to the all-freshman class indicating certainly for their carefully chosen field of study.
- In all, USP retention rates were similar to the all-university averages.
- Retention rates were significantly higher than those of freshmen who had directly entered the undecided programs within specific Purdue colleges.

Given the results regarding engaged-learning in EDPS 200U, reduced major change activity, and promising retention rates, it was determined the program met its initial goals and merited continuation. Since that time, the now permanent program has seen exponential growth, a period of rebranding and relaunching, and many battles won on the behalf of students who need the time and support to explore their options.

In June 2001, the University Division of the Office of the Dean of Students was permanently merged with USP. In 2012, USP underwent a significant review process and, as a result, the program was rebranded as Exploratory Studies in 2013. The required Exploratory EDPS 200U course has also undergone significant changes over time. Currently named EDPS 105 – Academic and Career Planning – this academically rigorous, graded, three-credit course was transformed in 2012/13 from an in-person class to a hybrid in-person/online course with newly developed learning objectives, a strong focus on active learning, and a renewed dedication to challenging the students to fully participate in their exploration process. Through all its changes and adaptations, EDPS 105 remains the cornerstone of the Exploratory Studies program and a critical part of the discovery process for students.

## **Goals, Objectives, and Outcome Metrics**

The vision and mission of the program have remained unchanged since the program launch, as they represent a simple, yet powerful guiding philosophy:

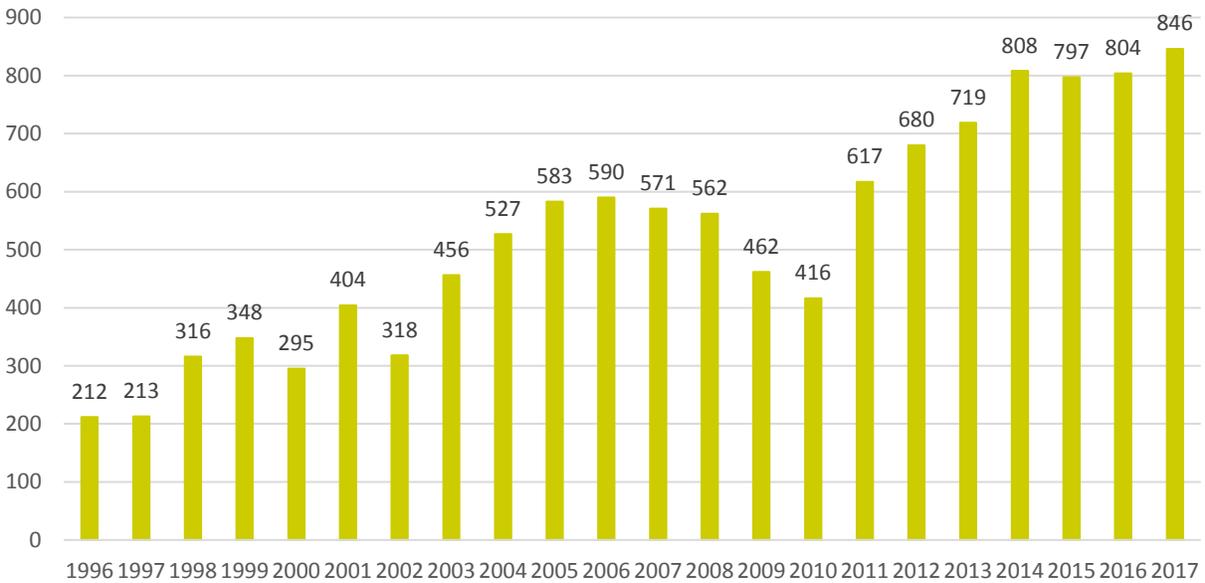
**Vision:** The Undergraduate Studies Program (now Exploratory Studies) at Purdue University will be an exemplary advising program in the nation for exploratory students.

**Mission:** The Undergraduate Studies Program (now Exploratory Studies) is to assist and empower students to develop and implement individualized plans for academic success and personal and career development and make a smooth and academically sound transition from the program to their chosen degree-granting programs.

In order to evaluate the progress toward fulfilling the mission and vision, goals and measurable objectives were set from the beginning. Exploratory Studies is deserving of the NACADA Outstanding Program Award because it has been able to demonstrably meet the original goals and objectives consistently over time, while experiencing substantial growth.

In reviewing the program's growth, it becomes clear that increasingly more students are embracing the idea that entering college undecided is wise and that guidance in examining career options before declaring a major is a smart decision. The first graph illustrates the program's growth, and the second shows that Exploratory Studies brought in the fourth largest class of any unit on campus in 2017.

### New Freshmen only - Fall Incoming Class 1996 to Present



2017 New Freshman Beginners Based on 2017 REGISTRATION as of Aug. 2				
COLLEGE	RES	DOM NON RES	INT	TOTAL
AG	451	115	24	590
EDU	99	14	5	118
ENGR	706	1058	203	1967
HHS	601	246	61	908
LA	265	132	103	500
MGMT	242	195	109	546
PHARM	179	73	16	268
SCI	482	352	199	1033
TECH	438	257	132	827
V	20	9	0	29
TEMP	1	0	0	1
<b>EXPL</b>	<b>599</b>	<b>156</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>829</b>

4<sup>th</sup> largest incoming class for Fall 2017

One common question that university administration, students, and parents alike ask is “Will starting in Exploratory Studies require students to take longer than four years to graduate?” Comparing the four- year graduation rates of Exploratory Studies students to those of the total university population enables evaluation of this question. We have found that four and six-year

graduation rates of Exploratory Studies students is within an acceptable range as compared to the overall university population.

### Purdue University's 4 and 6-Year Graduation Rates

Purdue's Total Student Population	Year	4 year Graduation	6 Year Graduation
6,353	2010	49%	77%
6,666	2011	51%	78%
6,329	2012	56%	
6,319	2013	58%	

<http://www.purdue.edu/enrollmentmanagement/researchanddata/gradretentionrates.html>

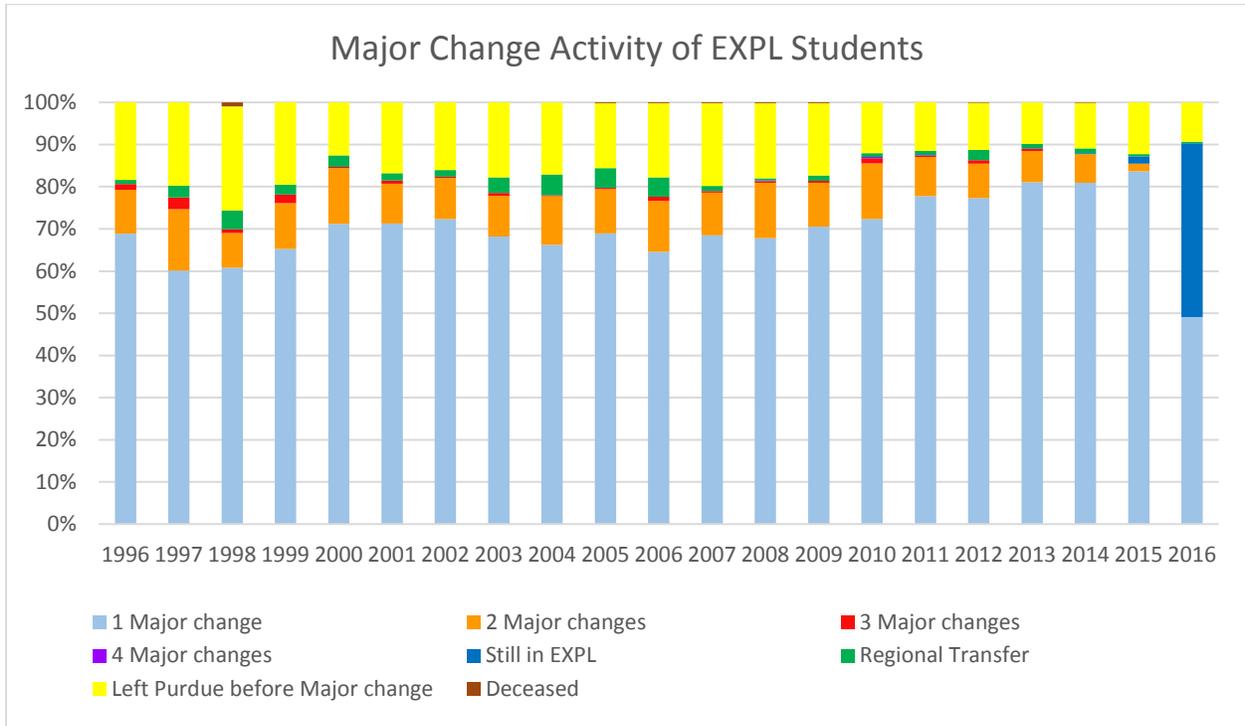
### Exploratory Studies 4 and 6-Year Graduation Rates

Exploratory Studies	Year	4 year Graduation	6 Year Graduation
185 - 4 yr & 311 - 6 yr	2010	44%	75%
273 - 4 yr & 461 - 6 yr	2011	44%	75%
342	2012	50%	
386	2013	54%	

Four and six year graduation rates for the individual colleges vary widely, some are much higher and some are much lower than the overall university rate. Exploratory Studies is in the middle of that pack. Purdue is actively working on raising its four-year graduation rates through a series of success initiatives. As the university has seen an increase in the overall four-year graduation rates in the last few years, so has Exploratory Studies.

Reducing major change activity by helping students make well-researched decisions before switching colleges was another goal of the program since its inception. In order to illustrate this

goal was reached, we can examine how often students who began in Exploratory Studies change their majors after leaving the program. Currently, 88% of the students who leave Exploratory Studies never change their major again. This is a solid indication that students are making good decisions about their future direction. The percentage continues to rise giving us indication that the program is helping students make more solid decisions each year.



All students in Exploratory Studies complete an Exit Survey upon leaving the program; this survey is the primary way we gather student feedback. Several key insights can be gleaned when assessing the program's effectiveness. The following have been identified as additional keys to success for this program:

- Assisting students in assessing their interest and abilities, examining their educational goals, making decisions, and developing short and long-term plans to meet their objectives

- Providing accurate and timely information about degree requirements and institutional policies and procedures enabling students to incorporate appropriate courses and other educational experiences into their education plans
- Empowering students to demonstrate self-direction and self-sufficiency in the achievement of their educational goals

The following Exit Survey data is from July 2016 through the beginning of March 2018 (n = 920, Purdue entry dates ranging from Fall 2012 to Fall 2017). In June 2016 there was a substantial change in the wording and content of the exit survey making previous results difficult to compare.

**Ready to Declare a Major:** Students are asked if they are leaving the Exploratory Studies program to declare a major or because their time in the program has expired. 98% of students reported they are going to the majors they want, while only 2% have run out of time and must leave. Similarly, students were asked if they felt prepared to declare a major and 97% said “yes” while 3% said “no”.

**Identifying interests, abilities, career and life goals:**

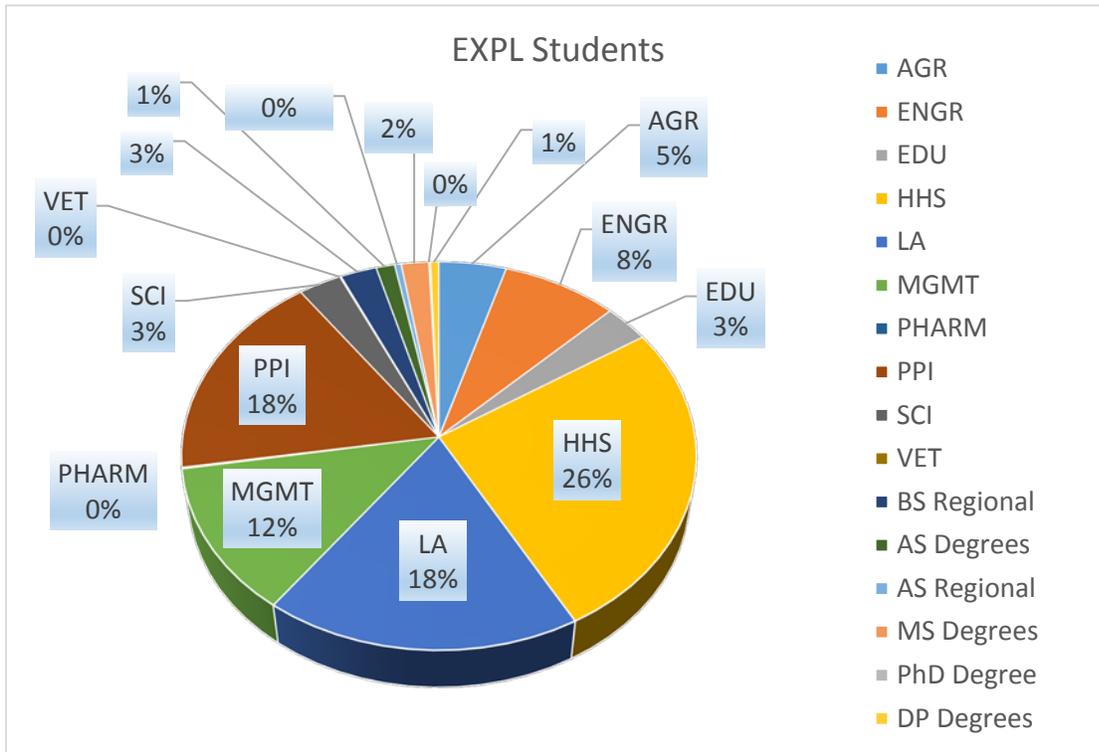
Exit Survey Question - sliding scale 0 -100	Mean	Median	Mode
I know my interests	87	90	100
I know my abilities	83	85	90
I know my career goals	80	83	100
I know my life goals	81	85	100
I can communicate with others about my interests	82	86	100
I can communicate ... my abilities	81	85	100
I can communicate ... my career goals	80	84	100
I can communicate .... my life goals	81	85	100

**Level of decidedness coming into the program and upon leaving:**

Student’s level of decidedness doubles during their experience in Exploratory Studies.

Exit Survey Question - sliding scale 0 -100	Mean	Median	Mode
What was level of decidedness on the major you want to pursue coming in?	48	50	80
What is the level of decidedness about the major you are CODDing into?	88	90	100

**Final Destination:** The fact that students are able to declare a major in any college or school on Purdue's campus is a real strength of the program and is an important goal of the founders. Illustrated below is a breakdown of the many colleges within Purdue University from which Exploratory Studies students graduate.



**Academic Advising:** As noted earlier, decentralized, specialized, and low student to advisor ratios was predicted to be a key to success. Therefore, the maximum number of students any one academic advisor in Exploratory Studies will advise is 150. Purdue's current student to advisor ratio goal for all other units on campus is 250:1, with actual ratios being much higher. Despite the university's advising model which requires that students change advisors once they declare a major, many Exploratory Studies students keep in contact with their original EXPL advisor. In addition, birthday and graduation emails are sent to former students each year. Overall, the exit survey results reflect solid advising practices over the last three years:

Exit Survey Questions	
0 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree	Mean
My advisor was knowledgeable about Purdue	4.6
...Was easy to communicate with	4.7
...Helped me make a decision about my major	4.3
...Someone I could go to when I needed help	4.4
...Provided timely information about resources	4.6

Another important goal for the program is that its academic advisors be actively involved in leadership and professional development. Exploratory Studies staff members are some of the most involved on campus with leadership roles in PACADA (NACADA allied organization), yearly presentations at NACADA conferences, and consistent award winners. Quality academic advising can be measured by tracking the number of NACADA awards resources and staff have earned:

Name	Year	Award Earned
Alan Welch	1992	Outstanding Advisor
Academic Advisor Resource Guide	2001	Advising Technology Innovation Award
Rita Baker	2002	Outstanding Advisor
Sue Aufderheide	2004	Outstanding Advising Administration
Mary Beth Lencke	2011	Outstanding Advisor (Certificate of Merit)
Cara Wetzel	2013	Outstanding Advisor
Colleen Brown	2015	Outstanding New Advisor

<https://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Programs/Awards.aspx>

Exploratory Studies also engages in the high-impact practices of hosting Learning Communities for students. Over the last five years, the program has offered on average seven different Learning Communities yearly, with an optional live-in component. This successful model helps new freshmen develop even closer relationships with their advisors (who are also their instructors for EDPS 105) and helps a large university like Purdue feel smaller. Learning Community programming varies but has included options such as Honors College students, Scholars (high-ability, non-Honors College), Global (½ international and ½ domestic students with a cultural

competency focus), Service-oriented, and Business-focused. The learning communities have earned many campus awards including the Student Impact Award and the Momentum Keepers Award.

**Teaching and Learning in EDPS 105:** To ensure a quality experience in the exploring class, the founders set several goals: that the class remain small regardless of program growth, that advisors teach the class, that the course be based on the most current research on major/career decision-making, and that the course to be required regardless of level of decidedness. Through the tremendous growth, the program has stayed true to its goals – in fall of 2017, classes were still capped at 25 students. To accommodate, 37 sections of the class were offered with 23 instructors teaching 1 – 2 sections each. The course is coordinated through one person (Assistant Director of Exploratory Studies) while a team of staff work each year to develop and edit curriculum to be in line with student feedback. All advisors teach the class and graduate students from Purdue’s Educational Psychology Department are utilized as well. To ensure curriculum is consistent across all sections, instructors are given a course manual and meet weekly to guide their teaching. This results in a similar experience for all Explorers in this critical class. Student feedback for the class is strong and over the last three years has progressively improved.

Student Course Evaluation Question Fall 2017	Average/5.0 Scale
Course overall	4.0
Instructor overall	4.4
Helped me identify my interests, personality characteristics, and educational and life goals	4.3
Helped me identify my major field of study and career path	4.3
Helped me understand degree requirements associated with my major	4.1

The content of this course is relevant to my needs.	4.0
The course appears to be well organized.	4.3

## **Potential for Adaptation/Challenges Faced**

Given that exploring/undecided students are a present and critical population on every campus, a program to help students find their way is needed. Purdue's program is deserving of recognition due to its longevity and successful outcomes; however, this does not mean it has been an easy accomplishment. Some of the same challenges identified in the early years still exist today. This program is certainly adaptable for other institutions, but for it to be replicated elsewhere, there are several important questions that must be asked and addressed:

- 1) Will Explorers have equitable and fair access to all academic programs on campus?
- 2) How do you (or do you) avoid becoming a pre-program for students hoping to get into competitive programs they were not admitted to initially, rather than a place for truly exploring students?
- 3) How will the campus culture receive such a program?
- 4) Is there ample higher administration support for staffing and budgeting through inception and future growth?
- 5) Will other colleges be willing to share incoming students if it means their numbers decrease as your program increases?
- 6) How big is too big?
- 7) Can Explorers get spaces in introductory courses?
- 8) Can advising ratios be kept adequately low to support Explorers?

- 9) How will you ensure students are engaged in the exploration process? Will you have a required class? Who will teach it? Who will design it? Who will oversee it?
- 10) What will be the maximum amount of time that students can remain in the program? How will you support students who time out but have not yet qualified for their destination?
- 11) Will Explorers have the same access to scholarships as declared students do?
- 12) What units on campus must you forge a close working relationship with in order to increase success (i.e. Registrar's Office, Deans/Associate Deans, Admissions etc.)?

The questions and challenges above have been addressed in one way or another through Exploratory Studies' 22-year history. While some challenges remain, one thing is certain – the program sees many successful student outcomes and is deserving of recognition as an exemplary program for undecided students.