

COMPASS Exploratory Advising Program

Paul Breitreutz, Katie Kerr, Joseph Lynch

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

## COMPASS Exploratory Advising Program

**Institutional Description**

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) is Nebraska's land-grant institution and public flagship serving over 21,000 undergraduate students. UNL is a research-intensive university with nine academic colleges, over 150 undergraduate majors, and 140 graduate degree programs.

In July 2012, UNL restructured its Division of General Studies (DGS), combining undeclared advising offered by DGS with pre-health and pre-law advising offered through the College of Arts and Sciences. The restructuring created a new unit called the Exploratory and Pre-Professional Advising Center (Explore Center). The Explore Center provides advising services for over 2,000 undeclared, pre-health, pre-law and pre-engineering students along with students transitioning between majors. As a result of the restructuring, a large at-risk student population was discovered in students who remained undeclared after their freshman year.

**Program Development**

As of spring 2014, there were 423 enrolled students at UNL who were at sophomore, junior, or senior standing and were undeclared in the Explore Center (undeclared upperclassmen). These students were at risk of delayed time to graduation or high attrition rates because of a number of factors:

- **Pursuing majors they were not eligible to declare.** A hand review of 173 juniors and seniors who were undeclared in fall 2013 showed that 59% were pursuing majors for which they were not eligible.
- **Slow to declare majors.** Only 32.3% of undeclared upperclassmen declared a major in fall 2013.

- **Not seeking advising.** Less than half of undeclared upperclassmen at or above the sophomore level met with an Explore Center advisor during fall 2013.
- **Wasting credit hours.** A hand-review of transcripts revealed that 28.6% of credit hours attempted by undeclared upperclassmen were repeated in a later semester and/or resulted in a failing, no-pass, or withdrawal grade. Some students with particularly high numbers of unearned credit hours were still at sophomore standing even though they had attempted over 100 credit hours at UNL.

In response, the Explore Center proposed the implementation of registration holds on all undeclared upperclassmen, requiring students to engage in a major exploration/declaration program called COMPASS. The COMPASS program went into effect fall 2014. Traditionally, UNL had not used registration holds to proactively encourage student success. Registration holds were a punitive measure due to an unpaid bill or violation of the student code of conduct. Academic advising registration holds had never been developed nor managed, so the Explore Center found itself in uncharted territory. Therefore, the Explore Center worked with the registrar's office to develop a procedure for assigning, managing, and lifting academic advising registration holds campus-wide. They collaborated with the university's Advising Coordinating Board to create university-wide buy-in for using an advising-specific registration hold and obtained approval to use the COMPASS-specific hold from associate deans across UNL's colleges.

There were several other organizational considerations that had to be weighed before the implementation of the COMPASS program. The Explore Center evaluated its advising appointment capacity prior to requiring all undeclared upperclassmen to meet with an advisor. Additional advisor lines were not needed to cover the increased advising capacity, which meant

the program was implemented without the request for additional funding. However, the Explore Center monitored ways in which it could manipulate student traffic throughout the semester in order to spread out advising contacts while still serving students at optimal moments of need. One Explore Center advisor shifted part of their work to oversee the necessary data collection for the program.

Beyond navigating the political and organizational structures of UNL, the COMPASS program also forced the Explore Center to reflect on its advising practices for undecided students and identify areas for improvement. This resulted in the Explore Center designing a wide variety of major exploration resources. Advisors were trained on foundational career development theory and how to apply it in their work with students. The program allowed for a free exchange of ideas among the advising staff, which helped the team to share ideas and support one another in their advising practices. Finally, the implementation of the advising registration hold encouraged an increase in collaboration between the Explore Center and academic advising centers across UNL in order to facilitate an understanding of the major exploration process as well as garner overall support.

### **Goals and Objectives**

Goals and objectives of the COMPASS program for undeclared upperclassmen included:

- **Increased retention and timelier graduation.** If the COMPASS program was successful in helping students declare majors more frequently and earlier in their academic careers, it was anticipated COMPASS students would be more likely to be retained to UNL and graduate in a timelier manner.
- **Increased credit hours earned per credit hours attempted.** Another goal of a required advising strategy was for students to become more efficient in their academic planning.

- **Increased Explore Center advisor/student contact.** Many undeclared students were either not seeking advising or seeking advising from unassigned advisors in other advising units across campus. Increased advising contact between COMPASS students and Explore Center advisors, should increase student engagement in major exploration.

### **Program Description**

The Explore Center's COMPASS program launched at the start of the fall 2014. At the onset of each fall/spring semester, the Explore Center worked with the registrar's office to place an advising registration hold on all undeclared students at the sophomore level or above.

When developing the COMPASS program, the Explore Center wanted to ensure that the program was not just about forcing students to meet with their advisor. Instead, the objective was to use the advising registration hold as a means to proactively engage students in their career, academic, and personal development. This was accomplished by working with students to create individualized action steps that addressed their major exploration. These action steps included but were not limited to visiting with a career advisor, completing a career assessment, attending an Explore Center event, job shadowing, and/or visiting with a major-specific advisor. Students met with an Explore Center advisor to reflect on their major exploration before their advisor lifted the registration hold. Students had the opportunity to work with the Explore Center for two semesters on their individualized COMPASS major exploration plan and could declare their major at any point during this time. During a student's third and final semester in the COMPASS program the student was required to declare a major before enrolling in future classes.

The Explore Center monitored and kept notes about the progress of COMPASS students by utilizing Starfish Retention solutions. This software allowed the creation of "to-do" items in a student's electronic file which were accessible to both the student and advisor. The Explore

Center was the first advising unit to use “to-dos” in this way, and it has influenced university-wide advising practices with other student populations outside the Explore Center. Using the “to-do” function also allowed the Explore Center to send large-scale targeted communication to students depending on their progress in the COMPASS program.

### **Procedures Used in Program Evaluation**

The Explore Center relied on quantitative data from both advising software and UNL’s student information system in the program evaluation.

### **Increased Retention and Timelier Graduation**

There are not enough cohorts of graduation data available to determine if the graduation rate has increased. However, timeliness of student major declaration was measured. Enrollment data from UNL’s student information system was examined to see what percentage of undeclared upperclassmen in fall terms declared a major and/or graduated by the following fall term. There were three student cohorts before COMPASS for comparison data from 2011 to 2013 and four student cohorts impacted by the COMPASS program from 2014 to 2017. Evaluation data is shown in the results section below. Retention of students to the majors they declared during the COMPASS program was examined by reviewing how many of the students who declared in a given semester were still in that same college and major three terms later.

### **Increased Credit Hours Earned per Credit Hours Attempted**

To evaluate student course performance before and after the COMPASS program began, data was pulled from UNL’s student information system. Grades in courses in fall semesters from 2011 to 2017 were examined to find what percentage of credit hours attempted resulted in a C grade or higher. Most majors at UNL require C grades or higher to count for degree requirements in major-specific courses. A hand-review of transcripts in March 2014 showed

students who struggled academically were most likely to do so in courses for majors they were not eligible to declare because of GPA reasons. In some cases, students repeated classes as many as nine times trying to get a C grade and improve their GPA to declare their desired, but too often unattainable, major.

### **Increased Explore Center Advisor/Student Contact**

To assess advising contact with students, the Explore Center looked at the percentage of undeclared upperclassmen who met with an Explore Center advisor in the fall semesters from 2012 to 2017. Prior to fall 2012, undeclared students received advising through DGS, so only two years of comparison data were available. Data extracted from Starfish, where most advising appointments were scheduled were collected. Beginning fall 2015, all students declaring a major were required to meet with an advisor to reflect upon their decision making.

### **Results/Outcome**

The COMPASS program produced several positive outcomes for undeclared upperclassmen, including timelier major declaration, high retention to majors declared, an increase in credit hours earned per credit hours attempted, and an increase in advising contact. Most data are reported fall-to-fall for ease of comparison.

### **Timelier Major Declaration**

Undeclared upperclassmen declared majors in a much timelier fashion than they did prior to COMPASS. The percentage of undeclared sophomore students declaring majors rose to well over 50% each fall semester, compared to 32% in the two years before COMPASS (see Table 1). This decreased the number of junior and senior undeclared students from an average of 202 students to 115 since the beginning of COMPASS (see Table 2). The rate at which junior and senior students declared majors also rose. In the two years prior to COMPASS, only about a

quarter of seniors declared a major before the start of the following spring term. That rate increased to nearly 50% (see Table 1).

Table 1

## Percentage of Undeclared Upperclassmen Who Declared a Major as of Spring Census Date

	Sophomores	Juniors	Seniors	Total
Fall 2012	32.0%	29.6%	27.0%	30.6%
Fall 2013	37.1%	33.1%	23.3%	34.2%
<b>2012-13 Average</b>	<b>34.5%</b>	<b>31.4%</b>	<b>25.0%</b>	<b>32.3%</b>
Fall 2014	65.1%	56.0%	57.5%	61.9%
Fall 2015	57.6%	42.0%	43.5%	52.2%
Fall 2016	57.3%	51.8%	37.5%	54.5%
Fall 2017	55.6%	45.7%	56.5%	53.0%
<b>2014-17 Average</b>	<b>58.9%</b>	<b>48.9%</b>	<b>48.8%</b>	<b>55.5%</b>

Table 2

## Number of Undeclared Upperclassmen as of Fall Census Date

	Sophomores	Juniors	Seniors	Total
Fall 2011	291	156	70	517
Fall 2012	272	135	63	470
Fall 2013	264	120	61	445
<b>2011-13 Average</b>	<b>276</b>	<b>137</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>477</b>
Fall 2014	226	87	34	347
Fall 2015	200	83	43	326
Fall 2016	256	76	29	361
Fall 2017	223	85	21	329
<b>2014-17 Average</b>	<b>226</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>341</b>

**Retention to Majors Declared**

COMPASS students were retained to their new majors at a high rate. Of students who declared majors and were retained to the university three terms later, 93.3% were in the same college they originally declared and 82.9% were in the same major they declared (see Table 3).

Given the retention to majors declared and earlier major declaration rates, the Explore Center anticipates seeing timelier graduation rates once more data is available.

Table 3

Retention to College and Major Declared of Undeclared Upperclassmen after Three Academic Terms (Fall 2014-Fall 2016)

	Number who Declared	Retained to the University (% of those Declared)	Retained to the Same College (% of those Retained)	Retained to the Same Major (% of those Retained)
Fall 2014	193	173 (89.6%)	163 (94.2%)	144 (83.2%)
Spring 2015	150	131 (87.3%)	127 (96.9%)	106 (80.9%)
Fall 2015	156	140 (89.7%)	126 (90.0%)	116 (82.9%)
Spring 2016	183	165 (90.2%)	157 (95.2%)	142 (86.1%)
Fall 2016	188	168 (89.4%)	152 (90.5%)	136 (81.0%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>870</b>	<b>777 (89.3%)</b>	<b>725 (93.3%)</b>	<b>644 (82.9%)</b>

### Increase in Credit Hours Earned per Credit Hours Attempted

Undeclared upperclassmen increased their percentage of attempted credit hours resulting in C or higher grades. In the three fall semesters before COMPASS started, students only earned 70.7% of their attempted hours with a C or higher. That rate has risen nearly five percent to 75.4% in the four fall semesters since the beginning of the COMPASS program (see Table 4).

Table 4

Percentage of Attempted Credit Hours Resulting in a C or Higher Grade for Undeclared Upperclassmen

Term	Earned	Attempted	Percentage
Fall 2011	4798	6778	70.8%
Fall 2012	4297	6090	70.6%
Fall 2013	4025	5688	70.8%
<b>2011-13 Subtotal</b>	<b>13120</b>	<b>18556</b>	<b>70.7%</b>
Fall 2014	3493	4450	78.5%
Fall 2015	3026	4175	72.5%
Fall 2016	3574	4822	74.1%

Fall 2017	3321	4347	76.4%
<b>2014-17 Subtotal</b>	<b>13414</b>	<b>17794</b>	<b>75.4%</b>

### Increase in Explore Center Advising Contact Students Receive

In the first semester of the COMPASS program, the number of undeclared upperclassmen who met with an Explore Center advisor nearly doubled, with rates going from 44.3% in the two years prior to COMPASS to 78.8% in its first year. Since requirements were made to have students meet with an academic advisor when they declared a major, the rate rose to over 94% in the last two fall semesters (see Table 5).

Table 5

Percentage of Undeclared Upperclassmen that Met With the Explore Center during Fall Semesters

	Sophomores	Juniors	Seniors	Total
Fall 2012	57.4%	41.5%	25.4%	42.8%
Fall 2013	51.5%	43.0%	26.7%	45.8%
<b>2012-13 Average</b>	<b>53.7%</b>	<b>42.4%</b>	<b>25.8%</b>	<b>44.3%</b>
Fall 2014	80.0%	82.9%	59.4%	78.8%
Fall 2015	93.7%	90.9%	86.7%	92.1%
Fall 2016	96.4%	90.4%	90.6%	94.6%
Fall 2017	95.7%	93.6%	91.3%	94.8%
<b>2014-17 Average</b>	<b>91.3%</b>	<b>89.4%</b>	<b>80.3%</b>	<b>90.0%</b>

### Other Outcomes

The program produced additional interesting outcomes. In each of the seven semesters of the program, at least one student declared into each of the academic colleges at UNL. The diversity of majors declared each semester is something highlighted to colleges and helps build continued support from the campus community. The research, professional development training, and resource generation that it took to create the COMPASS program capitalized on

staff talents from within the Explore Center and helped lead to multiple staff members being promoted to new roles on campus. Building skillsets within staff helped with other initiatives, including a proactive advising model for students with poor admissions profiles and a proposal to require advising for all students in the Explore Center starting fall 2018.

### **Potential for Adaptations by Other Institutions**

Components of the COMPASS program can be used at institutions desiring to:

- Shift advising models from prescriptive to developmental models that cater to individual students' specific needs
- Move from reactive to proactive advising cultures
- Adopt mandatory major declaration policies
- Implement required advising programs and policies
- Create new major exploration materials

All of these practices can be adapted to institutions with various sizes of advising caseloads. The small financial investment needed to implement this program makes it feasible for advising centers with constrained budgets.