Change of Major Advising

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Key Takeaways

⇒ Effective change of major advising is important for student and institutional outcomes.

⇒ More research on changes in majors would better support advisors in understanding and meeting the needs of students who are navigating transitions in their program of study.

⇒ Academic advisors should be established as a critical point of contact for students who are changing majors and should be prepared to offer students counsel on the decision, its implications, and the process.

⇒ Advising students through a change of major may present advisors with complex ethical dilemmas.

Overview

This research brief delves into the subject of undergraduate college students changing majors, helping academic advisors identify best practices for guiding students through program of study transitions. Offering students support as they make decisions about their program of study is important; it has been observed "choosing a college major is one of the most influential, long-lasting, and complicated decisions a student makes" (Patterson et. Al, 2019, p.2). The research highlighted in this brief is relevant to both undecided and undeclared student advising; however, the focus is on advising change of major students, which the authors define as students who depart one degree-granting program to enter into a different degree-granting program (such as changing from Biology to Sociology). **For the purposes of this brief, we focus on students who spend at least some time at their institution in one major before exploring or transitioning to a new major.**

It is critical to develop effective change of major advising practices so that advisors can support students as they navigate major transitions. Changes in major occur with enough frequency to warrant research and discussion. Research indicates that 30% or more of college students change majors (Leu, 2017; Malgwi et al., 2010; Freedman, 2013) with some studies finding change of major rates higher than 50% (Ellucian, 2019). Furthermore, a change of major influences many aspects of the student experience, potentially affecting relationships, academic success, and career outcomes. Students may persist at different rates, as well, resulting in an increased graduation timeline (Moore & Cruce, 2020). Each change of major then affects institutional metrics, such as retention, graduation rates, and time to degree. Change of major advising is a typical component of academic advising responsibilities outlined by Damminger and Rakes (2017) and Leach and Patall (2016), who assert advisors should assist students through transitions, share information, and help students look ahead to develop goals. Supporting students during change of major transitions is an important responsibility for primary-role and faculty advisors and a salient topic of consideration for the advising field.

Discussion: Change of Major Advising

Complexity of the Issue

An important consideration towards clarifying change of major advising and research is differentiating between change of major (or internal transfer) students, undecided students (those who are broadly exploring majors), and undeclared students (those who have not yet declared a major but who may or may not be undecided). Making this distinction allows for research and advising approaches to be more specifically developed for the change of major student population. Though students could fall into multiple categories, further specifying the student's situation with such distinctions may lead to different strategies from advisors. Gordon and Steele (2015) outline multiple different strategies for examining best-fit majors through experiential experiences such as programs, service-learning, living-learning communities, and more. Another consideration to explore early changes in major (those occurring in the first few semesters of a student's higher education experience) versus late changes in major (changes occurring when a student is halfway or more through their program of study), as the motivation and outcomes of early changes may differ from late changes.

Of course, students may be positively motivated to change, negatively motivated, or both. This has been long observed. Decades ago, Gordon & Steele (1992) noted that students may change interests (positive motivation) or may be experiencing a lack of success (negative motivation). Switalski (2012) focused on students changing majors after academic failure. Theophilides et al. (1984) found a correlation between weak academic performance (negative motivation) and major changes, whereas Malgwi et al. (2010) concluded that positive motivation, such as interest in the major, was a more significant driver for a change in program. Cumbia and Varboncoeur (2023) discussed push (negative) and pull (positive) factors that can lead a student to change majors, including negative factors like a lack of success and lack of community as well as positive factors like new goals and interests.

Another complex aspect is the potential for positive, uplifting and/or negative, discouraging consequences, such as improving quality of life for the student but graduating later than expected. Liu et al. (2020) noted that changes in major can result in improved goodness of fit between the student and the program of study. But these decisions may also lead to costly excessive credits and increased time to degree. Foraker (2012) found that an early change in major was positively correlated with student success while a late change in major or multiple changes were associated with declined graduation rates. Relatedly, various campus stakeholders may have differing views on change in major; an advisor might view a student's departure from the program positively if the student was dissatisfied and/or unsuccessful in the major whereas an institution may record the major transition negatively, as reported by program retention metrics.

Literature and Status

Existing literature includes discussion on major selection and decision to change majors. While research on changes in major is limited (Liu et al., 2020; Malgwi et al., 2010), there is discussion on how students select an initial major (Patterson, et al., 2019, Gordon & Steele, 2015), some of which emphasize a student's willingness to accept change. Kyte (2019) concluded that students base major selection on courses, advising, goals, and their knowledge of careers. Malgwi et al. (2010) and Zafar (2013) emphasize the importance of student interest in the field and its associated careers in major selection and change. Several researchers observed students changing majors after academic failure and discouragement (Gordon & Steele, 1992; Switalski, 2012; Theophilides et al., 1984; Liu et al., 2020). Liu et al. (2020) found the following characteristics to be positively correlated with a change in major: being female; being younger; placement in remedial courses; being in-state; having low first term performance. Advisors could benefit from more research on student major exploration and motivations to change majors.

Literature on major selection and student change in major implies that supporting students through change of major transitions is an important responsibility for academic advisors. In particular, Liu et al. (2020) advocated for institutional support through changes in major saying institutions should "reduce the penalties" of changing majors (p. 520) and "integrate [major] switching into program planning" (p. 498). Gordon and Steele (1992) asserted that change of major advising involves providing support as well as helping students make realistic plans. Relatedly, it is broadly agreed upon that students require assistance towards making informed decisions about choosing a field of study (Kyllo, 2014; Kyte, 2019; Nero Ghosal et al., 2018; Gordon & Steele, 1992; Musser & Yoder, 2013; Freedman, 2013; Beggs et al., 2008; Liu et al., 2020). Furthermore, advisors are well positioned to support students who must reimagine academic plans due to academic failure (Switalski, 2012). In summary, advisors are an important resource for students making major transitions and can establish themselves as a critical point of contact for the major change process.

Despite the fact that changes in program of study occur regularly and that changes in major have implications for student success and retention, there is limited research on the topic. Several researchers at the time of their research struggled with determining why students change majors. Astorne-Figari and Speer (2019) find "despite the huge literature on major choice, however, relatively little is known about these switching patterns and what motivates students to switch majors" (p. 75).

Discussion, cont.

Research from Malgwi et al. (2010) concluded, "No researchers to date have examined change of major and the influences that relate to that decision" (p. 276). Foraker (2012) similarly said, "rigorous quantitative studies on major changing activity are scarce" (p. 2). Liu et al. (2020) asserted a need for more studies on the outcomes of major changes, saying "rigorous studies on the impact of major switching are rare" (p. 502). Liu et al. (2020) also observed that existing studies included inconsistencies, such as excluding changes from undecided programs in change of major research and statistics. Further study and discussion is needed to add to existing literature on initial major selection, thereby strengthening effective advising practice as grounded in scholarship.

Implications for Academic Advising

Student Success and Failure

Student success is a commonly used term, but success for each student differs. Hagen (2018) suggests advisors focus on a "life-story" to empower students to choose their own path through the theory of hermeneutics rather than the traditional graduation timeline (p. VII). Consider the following questions and issues that advisors should consider about the change of major process.

Students and advisors see the major change process through unique lens.

Advising Lens:

- How does student development theory interact with the student's major selection? Change of major is a natural part of change such as Baxter Magolda's (1998) Self-Authorship, Schlossberg's 4 S's of Transition (Schlossberg, 1981).

- Academic advisors view finding the right major as a win; sometimes institutions see it as a loss due to longer graduation rates. How can advisors celebrate and embrace exploration?

- Academic advisors should consider whether their unit views it to be acceptable to have a list of alternative majors that are popular parallel (or backup) major plans. Why or why not?

- If changing majors for academic difficulty or struggling in college in general, how can advisors talk about resilience, persistence, and "fit" as a positive reason for changing to a new major?

Student Lens:

♦ Ask the student whether they define success in college as completing the major they selected when they first started college? Why or why not?

♦ Ask the student about their motivation and/or the influences for changing majors. Were the reasons based on research, courses, skills, or other reasons? What types of research or campus resources are available to push towards this new major?

♦ Ask the student how they are feeling about this major change and how their parents/families feel about the change. Some students do not share this change with their parents or family members on purpose and this is a great conversation starter.

♦ Moving to a new major is partly an identity change. Ask the student for their elevator pitch for the new major and their reasons to move in this new direction.

Ethical Issues in Advising

Changing majors can be a complicated and emotional process. Advising professionals should be cognizant that changing majors can be an emotional experience for students (Kyllo, 2014; Gordon & Steele, 1992). Reasons for changing majors vary; for example, students could be forced out of a major due to poor academic performance or changing to a new major to be similar to their roommate. Damminger and Rakes (2019) recognize that due to advising, students should push towards behavioral change, cognitive change, and affective or value-based change.

Change of major leads to ethical dilemmas for the advisor to examine with the student:

♦ If a student asks for an advisor's opinion about changing to a new major and the advisor knows the student has not been successful in introductory courses for the major, should they discourage the major change?

♦ Is an advisor a *dreamer* with the student or a *dream destroyer* (as more of a realist due to a student's poor academic performance?)

♦ When a student fails a course multiple times, does that mean they should no longer pursue that field or career (e.g., a student who wants to be a pharmacist fails introductory chemistry three times)? At what point should that challenging conversation take place (Streufert & Ross, 2021)?

- If advising in a decentralized model, when students discuss changing majors to a major in which the advisor is no longer knowledgeable, should the program's major advisor continue to help or refer the student to other resources immediately?

- Advisors may experience an ethical tension over a student changing majors when an institution or enrollment model supports more money to students remaining in the department or major. Which is the priority for the advisor to keep a student in their original department or major versus what is best for the student?

- If a student discusses changing majors to a major not offered at an advisor's institution, should they convince the student to stay or to suggest they transfer to another institution?

- Advisors should consider whether their institutions are tracking graduation timeline and discouraging changes of major.

- How does technology or language within the technology at the institution encourage or prevent change of major? Are there institutional websites that address the idea of exploring majors as an acceptable or normalized process?

Institutional Policies and Procedures

Finally, to clarify student changes in major and inform change of major advising, institutions should assess how program of study transitions are monitored. "An institutional focus on specific aspects of student thriving can enable students to move through the change process in positive ways and emerge more confident and equipped for the future" (Schreiner, 2020, p. 24). Tracking major changes varies by institution and is dependent on their technological infrastructure and institutional policies. Institutions should articulate who is responsible for tracking major changes and who needs to be informed. Possible stakeholders include, but are not limited to: advisors, administrators, enrollment managers, records offices, financial aid offices, recruiters, and career advisors, among others. Institutions should also assess the advising support available to change of major students.

Consider the following questions to examine support and resources:

- Who advises students in transition (officially or unofficially) as they are changing majors?

- How do students identify and access appropriate advising resources during a program transition?

- What resources are available to students who want to explore majors? Are these resources available to specific majors, populations, or institutional-wide?

Implications for Academic Advising, cont.

- Is exploration of different majors encouraged at an institutional level? Why or why not?

- Which advising practitioners should be identified as specialists (dedicated to specific programs) and which should be generalists (dedicated to providing a broad scope of information across various programs and departments).

- What are the processes for handoffs or transitions? If working from a centralized advising model for first- and second-year students, how does the handoff occur to advisors at the junior level?

- How does the process for changing majors look for students and is the language written from a student perspective or administrator perspective?

- How do technologies such as Student Information Systems (SIS) get updated to reflect this change? Is all the change of major information updated at the same time or over a period of time within the technology?

- How is the change of major window communicated to students?

Institutional restrictions regarding changing majors complicates research on student changes in major, adding complexity to the process for students and advisors. Institutions may have limitations on when students can change majors and criteria for being able to make a change or switch to a certain program. Cumbia and Varboncoeur (2023) described such restrictions at their institution with a limited change of major period and some programs having entry qualifications to change. Beggs et al. (2008) questioned whether more students would change majors if universities and programs placed fewer restrictions on doing so.

Major change restrictions may present complications for advisors as they discern who is supporting a student during a major transition. Additionally, advisors must be cognizant of such restrictions when working with students who are interested in changing their program of study. This further links advisors to the change of major process; as Wei (2022) observed, "academic advisors play a prominent role in helping students understand and navigate institutional rules and regulations" (p. 53). Advisors are situated to act as guides through the change of major process both before and after the change.

Examine the following questions to determine major change processes for students:

- Are there technologies to track major changes and change of major over time?

- Is changing majors a paper or technology-based process?

- Is the process to change a secondary major different from the process to change a primary major? If so, why?

Implications for Academic Advising, cont.

- If a student is changing to a major that puts them behind for graduating in an efficient time, is the student and/or the advisor alerted in some way?

- How is the advisor alerted or informed about major changes?

- Is there an office, individual, or group tracking migration of major change?

- When and how often can students change major? Why?

- Are there certain restrictions for specifically high-enrolled or popular majors? Why or why not?

- Is there a temporary major or undecided option for students who are in between majors (exploring programs or waiting to make a change)?

- If students are disenrolled from a major due to academic standing or status, is there outreach for exploratory advising from advising or other campus resources?

- What does the process of officially changing majors, and being notified of this change, "look like" for the student and/or advisor? Is the process overly complicated?

- Do students need to meet certain academic requirements to be eligible to change majors (e.g., be in good academic standing with a 2.0 GPA or to reach the requirements for highly selective majors)?

Reflective Opportunities

With the many complexities surrounding changing major, different stakeholders require different reflective questions. Finding the why or motivation behind a student who wants to change majors can influence campus referrals, career trajectories, or inspire developmental inquiry with the student. Advisors working with students who change majors will need to grow confident in their institution's change of major processes and procedures. Helping students navigate the change of major process is a first step towards improving student success.

See the next page for questions advisors might ask of their students and themselves:

Questions for Change of Major Students

♦ Why do you want to change majors?

♦ What experiences in your past influenced your decision?

♦ How does this major align with your values or beliefs?

♦ How can you learn more about this new major, including meeting with a representative in that new major?

♦ How does changing your major affect your future plans of a career and/or education past your current degree plan?

♦ Is the new major or a similar major offered at this institution?

♦ How long will this new major take for you to graduate? Is graduating on a particular timeline important? Why or why not?

♦ If needed, are you willing to take additional semesters or summer or winter sessions (if applicable) for your new major? Why or why not?

Questions for Advisors Working with Change of Major Students

♦ What restrictions does your institution place around changing majors?

♦ Does your institution offer transitional advising for students exploring the possibility of changing majors?

♦ How can advisors balance the goals of being enthusiastic and positive with prospective students as well as realistic and accurate?

♦ What differences and similarities exist between the way your institution views changes in major and the way advisors at your institution view changes in major?

♦ How might advising a change of major student who is positively motivated to change (e.g., new awareness of interests) differ from advising a student who is negatively motivated to transition (e.g., ineligibility to continue in current program)?

♦ Schreiner et al. (2020) found that students who felt more certain about their major had more faculty interactions. How can advisors help students become engaged with faculty members earlier or more often?

♦ Gordon and Steele (2015) observed that sometimes students are uncertain about their choice of major by the required timeline to declare. How can deadlines be communicated more effectively or frequently to overcome this obstacle?

Scenarios

Read the following scenarios and consider the advising ethics and approaches applicable to each:

1) Cameron is beginning his fourth semester in the biology major. He entered college with the goal of going to medical school and selected biology as the program that most closely aligned with that ambition. However, Cameron has experienced consistent challenges with the math and science requirements for the biology major. Cameron's highest grades are in writing and humanities courses; his lowest grades are in chemistry and calculus. Cameron comes to his academic advisor and expresses an interest in retaking classes to meet minimum grade requirements. Cameron does not express an interest in changing majors or exploring other careers.

2) Amanda is an academic advisor in the Environmental Science Department. Recently, her department has become very concerned about retaining students in their program. One of Amanda's advisees meets with her to express an interest in changing majors to something outside of natural sciences and more focused on sociology and human development. The advisee is doing well in classes but expresses a lack of interest; the student has been exploring majors and careers related to this goal and wants Amanda to explain the next steps in the process to change majors.

3) Terence was not making satisfactory progress in his engineering major and received a notification that he was ineligible to continue in the program. He comes to Laurie, the advisor for the Data Science major, to talk about entering the program. Terence's highest priority is graduating on time, and he wants Laurie to help him make a graduation plan that applies as much of his completed coursework as possible to the Data Science major requirements. Terence will be forced to graduate at least a year late due to changing majors.

4) Corey is in the spring of his junior year when he schedules an appointment with Jeff, the history major advisor. Corey says he has no passion for his current major, even though he is on track to graduate next year, and that he wants to change to the history program. Jeff knows that a change in major will delay graduation and that Corey may be impacted by the university's surcharge for excessive credit policy as well as federal financial aid satisfactory progress policies.

Recommendations for Future Study

Possible areas of future study include qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research opportunities:

♦ Distinction of students and their experiences after changing major early (first two years) versus later (last two years)

♦ Identifying when students start shopping for new majors by their original major (examining correlations of grades and/or experiences in intro courses versus changing majors)

♦ Examining specific reasons why students change. Could there be a question on change of major applications or surveys asking why they want that major or why they want to change?

♦ For juniors or seniors, qualitative research examining positives and negatives of changing majors as well as satisfaction (post-graduation or looking back, fear of missing out (fomo) and/or regret)

♦ Examining the idea of internal (informal) versus external (formal) process of changing majors

♦ Change of major may not be evident from application process alone, researchers could track students' mental major changes along a particular time frame

♦ Satisfaction in major versus number of major changes per a particular department or major at an institution

Final Thoughts

Students who change majors can encounter many obstacles. "Good advising systems can help close equity gaps, ensure students effectively navigate complex structures and systems, clear obstacles along the path to a degree" (McMurtrie & Supiano, 2022, p. 4). Today's academic advisors must be the bridge for students from one major decision to another. Acknowledging students who change majors and bringing more awareness to this population is needed. By proactively examining the major change system, advisors are agents of change in a time when students are at their most vulnerable point academically.

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