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# Undecided/Undeclared: Working with “Deciding” Students

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## Undecided/Undeclared: Working with “Deciding” Students

Nationally, it is estimated that 77 percent of all freshmen and sophomores are in the process of deciding on an academic major (Rayman, 1993). The student body at University of Missouri - Columbia (MU) is no exception. In addition, a number of students have chosen majors, but for the wrong reasons: “My parents want me to be a . . .”, “I must have a major in order to get good academic advising . . .”, “I have to choose a major or I can’t register . . .”, “Everyone else has a major . . .”, etc. These negative connotations of being “undecided” led the Career Center (CPPC) to view this population from a more positive point of view. CPPC wants students to feel that it is not only okay, but normal to be “deciding” and most importantly to realize that he/she is not alone.

The term “deciding” is now used to describe the group of students who have traditionally been labeled “undecided.” “Deciding” is perceived as a more active and positive term by both students and administrators. Typically, students are exploring a variety of avenues, and this indecisiveness relates to choosing from a multitude of career possibilities. CPPC is an information center that provides a variety of services and has always taken an active role in assisting students in choosing an academic major. The CPPC philosophy is to educate stu-

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dents about self-exploration, possible majors and careers, job search strategies, networking, resume writing, interviewing, etc. so that he/she can independently develop a career path. Recently, CPPC has developed a variety of programs/activities aimed at helping "deciding" students choose a major.

In order to develop programs to meet the needs of "deciding" students, CPPC had to first identify these needs. In order to do this, three research groups were assigned the task of gathering data about the "deciding" students. One group utilized the My Vocational Situation (MVS) assessment (Holland 1980) along with a survey that allowed 181 students to choose a variety of ways by which to become more familiar with major choices at MU and with CPPC offerings. Part of this research involved personal phone calls to the participants and thus free publicity for CPPC. Students were encouraged to stop by CPPC to pick up information about the possible major of interest. While at CPPC additional information was provided through one-on-one communication, tours, publications, etc.

The second research project involved the use of a computerized assessment known as Discover (ACT, 1992). This project brought students into CPPC and allowed them to clarify career goals through the use of modern technology. The third research project involved surveying a group of 150 "deciding" students in order to identify some characteristics used in choosing a major: helping others, impact on my future, upward mobility, security, etc. The data from these projects will be usable for further programming, education, and research purposes.

MU's new Chancellor implemented a program in which student affairs administrators contacted a random sample of first semester freshmen students to assess the MU experience following six weeks of classes. It was suggested by other departments that CPPC be mentioned to all students so that information concerning majors and careers could be explored. CPPC actively participated in this project and followed through by sending brochures to those students who had indicated needing help with or information about careers. Overall, more than 1000 students were contacted with a flier or phone call.

Last semester, two graduate assistants who expressed a strong interest in working with "deciding" students, developed a student organization known as *Career Quest*. The purpose of the group is to act as a support system through which students are able to share experiences and realize deciding is not only okay, but normal for first and second year students.

A few years ago, CPPC organized a variety of assessments into a service known as the *Explore Program*. A few examples of the assessments are: System of Integrated Guidance and Information Plus (SIGI Plus) (ETS, 1992), Federal Occupation & Career Information System (FOCIS 1991), Self Directed Search (SDS) (Holland, 1985) (computerized or paper and pencil), and Missouri Occupational Card Sort (MOCS) (Krieshok, Hansen, & Johnston, 1976). The *Explore Program* offers a variety of assessment formats to help students gather more information about themselves, interests, abilities, skills, careers, majors, etc. and the relationship between these elements. Career Specialists, who are trained undergraduates, work one-on-one with students to help them decide which assessment(s) will help clarify their goals. The students are then directed as to how to use the particular assessments, and in most cases, work independently at a personal pace to obtain more information about themselves and majors or careers. In addition, a number of the Career Specialists have been or are “deciding” on an academic major themselves. This is helpful to student customers as the Career Specialists can relate to the feelings and pressures that are associated with being a “deciding” student.

Because CPPC encourages students to explore different major and career possibilities, the Job Development Program plays a big role in helping “deciding” students focus on a career path. The Job Development Programs include: cooperative education, internships, part-time jobs, work study assignments, service-learning positions and volunteer opportunities. These programs provide students with learning and theory application outside the classroom, realistic views and advanced insight into future careers, and an increase in educational motivation through clarification of major choice.

In addition to the one-on-one kinds of activities implemented at CPPC, group programs/presentations are also available for classes, organizations, etc. For example, because MU's Health Related Professions program is so competitive (i.e., 300 students competing for 20 positions), one faculty member is adamant about helping the other 280 students find institutions that have openings in this field or applicable majors/careers. Once a year, CPPC staff members visit the class to promote CPPC services and to explain SIGI Plus to the students. The students are then required to complete SIGI Plus and share the results with the faculty member. Of course, while at the Career Center, the students often dive into files in search of additional information about newly found major/career or college possi-

bilities. Thus far, the program has been successful in increasing major/career awareness among the students. The faculty member then conducts research on the attrition rate of the students and tracks students in their chosen career paths.

MU's curriculum offers a first year experience course for new students which includes topics such as university and academic survival skills, self exploration, career/major choice, etc. Each semester, faculty members bring classes of students to the Career Center for tours, group interpretation of the SDS, Values Auction (a values clarification exercise), etc. In addition, the students are often required to write career reports and autobiographies using CPPC resources. The students often return to CPPC over the next four to five years to utilize other services.

During Summer Welcome (a sixteen session, two day University wide program for new freshmen, transfer students and their families), the Career Center presents major/career information to newly admitted MU students. The MVS is administered to all students at the first morning session on the first day. Later, during their tour of CPPC, the students receive a brief interpretation of the MVS along with an opportunity to become acquainted with other Career Center programs. "Mizzou Fair", a part of Summer Welcome, provides another opportunity for students and their families to participate in activities that promote career planning, student health, etc. Often, it is the parents who are inquisitive about the University's services and take the materials offered. At the beginning of the academic year, CPPC presents "*Choosing a Major*" workshops that are open to all MU students. These workshops provide an overview of CPPC services, John Holland's theory, other resources on campus, etc. This workshop is also offered throughout the year through the Career Center Outreach program.

When working with "deciding" students, it is very important to collaborate with academic advisors and faculty members. Often times, these professionals are the ones who have the most contact with and influence over the students who are still trying to develop an identity and discover their purpose in life. The faculty members find CPPC to be an excellent support system for assisting "deciding" students and therefore bring large groups of students to visit. Academic advisors, another essential group, often do not make an effort to work directly with CPPC. To stimulate relationships with Academic Advisors, CPPC is represented on MU's advising committee known as Advisor's Forum. This provides an opportunity for the Career Center to dissem-

inate important information to the group at monthly meetings. CPPC also provides academic advisors with referral cards to be given to “deciding” students. The students present the cards to CPPC staff members who are then able to assist the student and follow up with academic advisors regarding what steps were taken during the visit to CPPC. Students with a referral card signed by their advisor place more value on the recommendation than if it was just suggested that they visit the Career Center.

On the basis of the aforementioned activities designed to serve “deciding” students and support Enrollment Management programs, CPPC believes that the largest population on campus should be contacted through a variety of avenues at various times throughout the year. However, due to the diversity and size of the “deciding” population, one can always argue that more programming needs to be created to meet the needs of these students. This is particularly true as the group’s needs change with progression into the more focused stages of the career planning process.

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