Major Decisions: Implications for Engagement, Satisfaction, and Belonging

Krista M. Soria & Michael J. Stebleton

2012 Tate Academic Advising Conference
March 8, 2012
Overview

• Background of presenters
• Research questions
• Choosing a major
• Conceptual framework
• Results
• Discussion
Background of Presenters

• Educational backgrounds

• Professional experience

• Interest in integrating research and practice

• Mutual research interests:
  – Historically underrepresented students
  – Academic and career advising
  – Writing for practitioners
Research Questions

• Are there differences between student groups with regard to their motivations for choosing academic majors?

• Is there a relationship between students’ intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for choosing their academic majors, their satisfaction with their educational experience, their engagement, and their sense of belonging on campus?
Choosing a Major

Many scholars have noted the importance of major selection:

• Individual implications: majors are correlated with
  • job stability
  • career opportunities
  • salary
  • satisfaction

• Societal implications: disparities may be perpetuated when groups choose majors leading to differential earnings
Motivations for Selecting Majors

• Economic factors
  o earnings differentials
  o job outlook conditions
  o tradeoff between returns and risk of failure

• Demographics
  o gender
  o SES
  o minority status may reinforce traditional roles

• Mixed models
  o demographics and economic factors (e.g. differences in the impact of expected earnings varies by race/gender)
Self-Determination Theory

• Intrinsic motivation: doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable

• Extrinsic motivation: externally prompted and valued by others to whom one is connected
  
  o external extrinsic: punishments and compliance

  o internal extrinsic: self-endorsements of goals and autonomy
Self-Determination Theory

SERU Survey

• Systematic environmental scan of the undergraduate experience

• In-depth analysis of the varied types and levels of undergraduate engagement in research universities

• The survey is organized around five thematic research areas:
  – Academic engagement
  – Civic and community engagement
  – Global knowledge, skills, and awareness
  – Student life and development
  – Wildcard module for the University of Minnesota
Survey Participants

• In spring 2010, the SERU was distributed to 28,237 undergraduate students at UMNTC

• 9,651 students responded to at least one question (34.2%)
  o 59.5% female
  o 1.1% American Indian or Alaskan Native
  o 3.9% African American
  o 2.4% Hispanic
  o 9.2% Asian, Filipino, or Pacific Islander
  o 75.8% White
  o 6.2% International
Survey Measures

Students were asked to respond to the following question:

Which of the following factors do you consider to be very important to you in deciding on your major?

- Interest in subject area
- Intellectual curiosity
- Prepares me for a fulfilling career
- Prepares me for graduate/professional school
- Leads to a high paying job
- Prestige

- Provides international opportunities
- Allows time for other activities
- Complements my desire to study abroad
- Parental desires
- Easy requirements
- Could not get into my first choice of major
Survey Measures

• Sense of belonging: 4 items
  • I feel that I belong on this campus, satisfaction with overall social/academic experience, I’d return knowing what I know now, etc.

• Satisfaction: 19 items
  • Instruction, access to classes/faculty, libraries, advising, programs, etc.

• Engagement: 6 items
  • Asking questions in class, did more work than required in courses, bringing up ideas from different classes, contributing to a class discussion, etc.
Discussion Question

- What do you think are the top five reasons UMNTC students choose for selecting their majors?

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interest in Subject Area</td>
<td>8378</td>
<td>97.8</td>
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<td>Prestige</td>
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<td>Provides International Opportunities</td>
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<td>Parental Desires</td>
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<td>18.4</td>
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<td>81.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Easy Requirements</td>
<td>1046</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>7481</td>
<td>87.7</td>
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<td>Could Not Get Into My First Choice of Major</td>
<td>599</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7909</td>
<td>93</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
## Our Mapping

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intrinsic</th>
<th>Internal Extrinsic</th>
<th>External Extrinsic</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Complements my desire to study abroad</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Differences between Groups

Differences in gender:

• Leads to a high paying job (males, 58.4%; females, 45.8%)

• Complements my desire to study abroad (male, 29.2%; female, 38.8%)

• Provides international activities (male, 42%; female, 50.4%)

• Prestige (male, 53.2%; female, 43.5%)
Differences between Groups

Differences in race/ethnicity:

• Leads to a high paying job (58.9% students of color, 47.5% White students)

• Parental desires (27.9% students of color, 14.7% White students)

• Allows time for other activities (42.7% students of color, 33.6% White students)
Differences between Groups

Differences in race/ethnicity, continued:

- Provides international opportunities (55.1% students of color, White students, 43.4%)
- Couldn’t get into my first choice of major (11.7% students of color, 5% White students)
- Prepares me for graduate/professional school (71.1% students of color, 60.8% White students)
Differences between Groups

Differences in colleges:

• Intellectual curiosity
  – CBS, 97%
  – CSE, 95%
  – CLA, 94%

• Leads to a high paying job
  – CSOM, 79.2%
  – CSE, 73%
  – CBS, 54%

• Prepares me for a fulfilling career
  – CDES, 98%
  – CFANS, 96%
  – CEHD, 97%
Differences between Groups

Differences in colleges:
• Couldn’t get into my first major
  – CEHD, 14%
  – CLA, 9%
  – CFANS, 9%
• Interest in subject area
  – CDES, 100%
  – CFANS/CEHD/CBS/CLA, 98%
  – CSE, 97%
  – CSOM, 96%
• Prepares me for graduate/professional school
  – CBS, 91%
  – CEHD, 68%
  – CLA, 64%
Differences between Groups

Differences in colleges:
• Complements desire to study abroad
  – CDES, 55%
  – CLA, 42%
  – CSOM, 41%
• Parental desires
  – CSOM, 25%
  – CSE, 21%
  – CEHD, 21%
• Easy requirements
  – CEHD, 21%
  – CLA, 16%
  – CFANS, 12%
Differences between Groups

Differences in colleges:
• Allows time for other activities
  – CEHD, 55%
  – CSOM, 41%
  – CLA, 40%
• Provides international opportunities
  – CDES, 62%
  – CSOM, 58%
  – CLA, 53%
• Prestige
  – CSOM, 65%
  – CSE, 62%
  – CBS, 59%
Discussion Question

• How do you think the reasons for choosing a major, as understood in self-determination theory, will be associated with students’ satisfaction, sense of belonging, and engagement?
### Sense of Belonging

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Motivation Type</th>
<th>Relationship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interest in subject area</td>
<td>Intrinsic</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepares me for a fulfilling career</td>
<td>Internal Extrinsic</td>
<td>+</td>
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<td>Allows time for other activities</td>
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<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides international opportunities</td>
<td>Internal Extrinsic</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepares me for graduate school</td>
<td>Internal Extrinsic</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prestige</td>
<td>External Extrinsic</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leads to a high paying job</td>
<td>Internal Extrinsic</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental desires</td>
<td>External Extrinsic</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easy requirements</td>
<td>External Extrinsic</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couldn’t get into choice of first major</td>
<td>External Extrinsic</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Satisfaction

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<tr>
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<tr>
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## Engagement

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interest in subject area</td>
<td>Intrinsic</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual curiosity</td>
<td>Intrinsic</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepares me for a fulfilling career</td>
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<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides international opportunities</td>
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<td>+</td>
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Implications

• Satisfaction, sense of belonging, and engagement are all related to internal motivators; encourage students to hold more intrinsic viewpoints regarding major selection.

• Helping students "unpack" the socially-driven messages about major/career choice.

• Advisors can encourage students to consider benefits of selecting major based on internal motivators.
Implications

• Risks of selecting high paying careers that are competitive.

• Role of "Plan B" academic planning and advising.

• Helping students to seek out structured and reflective strategies to engage in the life-career planning process (e.g., career exploration classes).
Implications

• Role and trends in exploring issues of spiritual development; impact of internal factors.

• Students looking to make a difference (high income/high high impact).

• Advisors focus on strong developmental advising approaches; holistic academic advising.
Other Factors to Consider

• Issues working with students from historically and underrepresented populations.

• Example: parental desires from students from collective cultures.

• Solid understanding of diverse cultures; ecological approach.
Questions to Consider

• What do students expect from academic advisors? How might we best meet these expectations?

• Given heavy case loads, how do we as advisors have the time to develop longer-term relationships with students?

• How might we reach more students about these messages via cost-efficient strategies? (e.g., group advising; workshops).

• How do we continue to make a difference where a difference matters?
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