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Exploring Living Learning Community: Aiding Undecided Students' Decision Making or Simply a Residence Hall Option?

Abstract

This research explored first year undecided college student experiences with a Living Learning Community (LLC) designed to aid them in major and career decision making process. The study took place at a public high research Midwestern university. Twelve students who were undeclared majors when they began college participated in the study. The LLC's provides specific programming and academic advising for undecided students. The study examined student experiences with both the programmatic and advising components of the LLC.

The project was conducted using grounded theory techniques, phenomenological perspective, and semi-structured interviewing technique. At the time of interview, some students had declared majors, while others had not. Themes emerged from the data, categorized into one of the four S's of Schlossberg's transition theory. The study provided insight into how students made meaning of their experiences which can aid professional practice for supporting this unique populations and creating effective Living Learning Communities with similar learning outcomes.

Keywords

Living Learning Community, Exploratory College Students, Schlossberg's Transition Theory

Introduction

Many students arrive on college campuses without knowing their major or career path. These students, referred to as undecided (Gordon, 2007a) or exploratory (Carduner, Padak, & Reynolds, 2011), evince a distinctive set of characteristics and require special institutional attention as they make one of the most crucial decisions in their college career: their academic major. College campuses nationwide have developed a variety of programs to support exploratory college students. One current practice is the development of Living Learning Communities (LLCs) designed specifically to meet the needs of this population.

LLCs help create an experience that ties a student's classroom learning to co-curricular experiences (Tinto, 1997). LLCs connect students' academic experiences with other aspects of their collegiate lives and integrate learning across the curriculum. Students who participate in LLCs pursue a curricular or co-curricular theme as part of their residence hall experience (Inkelas, Vogt, Longerbeam, Owen, & Johnson, 2006).

Select campuses incorporate academic advising as an LLC component to help merge these experiences. Literature on LLCs, academic advising, and student engagement suggests that advising provided in the communities impact student engagement more than advising provided in other locations (Arms, Cabrera, & Brower, 2008).

Theoretical Framework

This qualitative study examined how exploratory students perceive their first year LLC experiences by incorporating two human development theories as a foundation: Gordon's (2007a) levels of career decisiveness and Schlossberg's (2011) transition theory.

Gordon (2007a) divides levels of career decision into seven categories, ranging from "very decided" to "chronically undecided" (p. 12). She describes characteristics of individuals within each level and outlines ways career counselors and other administrators can support them. Methods of support vary from level to level, with high intervention and support for those in the lower levels of decision and less support for those in higher levels of decision.

Schlossberg's (2011) transition theory explains transition in terms of four *S's*: *situation*, *self*, *strategy* and *support*. *Situation* factors are elements such as timing, duration of transition, and one's experience with similar transitions. *Self* factors describe the person experiencing the transition. These can include demographic characteristics such as age, race, or gender as well as psychological characteristics such as optimism or self-efficacy. *Strategy* refers to the ways in

which individuals cope with the transition. *Support* refers to the people, organizations, or institutions the person turns to for help with the transition.

Although these theories do not exclusively apply to college-age development, they shaped this study's approach to how students adjust to college life and what role the LLC may play in that adjustment. Gordon's theory provided context on the types of student who may be in the Exploring LLC and what strategies would help them succeed in their career and major decision-making processes. Schlossberg's theory helped the researcher understand what impact the college transition had on the student and how the student viewed advising as a support system. The concept served as a filter during the coding process to help identify themes based on students' developmental levels.

Summary of Methods

This study focused on an LLC offered at a public, high research activity university in the Midwest. The university provides first year academic advising as part of the LLC experience; academic advisors are also residence hall directors. Advisors working with the Exploring community receive special training on the needs of undecided students and utilize a modified version of the institution's model of developmental and appreciative advising with the population. The model consists of two meetings, an initial "Get-to-Know-You" meeting early in the semester, which focuses on transition, and a course planning meeting that takes place several weeks later. Students complete a goal-setting sheet for the second meeting to help them focus on academic and co-curricular goals. The exploratory model provides students with time and guidance as they decide on majors and careers.

The Exploring LLC offers specific programming to meet the needs of exploratory students. Members of the community have the opportunity to take career assessments, meet with faculty in their residence hall, and enroll in a career development course reserved specifically for the LLC. In addition to career exploration, the LLC focuses on successful academic planning, leadership, and self-exploration¹. While the first year residential academic advising program has existed for several decades, the Exploring LLC was relatively new, only in its fourth year at time of study. Prior to this research, the only quantitative study of the program had been completed at the end of its programmatic year.

The scope of this study was twelve students, six sophomores who lived in the Exploring LLC the previous year, and six first year students who were current residents. Participants were officially "undeclared" at the beginning of their freshman year. The sample consisted of six men and six women. Eleven students

¹ Information about LLC practices was obtained from the university's LLC website.

were Caucasian; one was African American. Seven students self-identified as middle class; one stated that his family is “pretty well-off,” while the others identified as upper-class. All students indicated that at least one parent, if not both, had earned a bachelor’s degree or higher. These demographics are generally representative of the campus undergraduate population. The slight exception is the absence of a first generation college student participant. A small population of first generation students exists on campus, but none of these students self-selected to participate. Although the study was specific to the university’s LLC program, it can be applicable for any campus with a learning community or LLC for exploratory students. By examining the strengths and limitations of the LLC with this subset of a first year student population, those working with exploratory students will have a better understanding of the program’s merits, based on student perceptions of their own needs.

Grounded theory techniques from a phenomenological perspective were used to gain insight on how first year students make meaning out of exploratory experiences, with particular focus on LLC initiatives. The researcher followed Charmaz’s (2006) methods of grounded theory research, which assumes that each student would experience the phenomena in a unique way and that the data gathered about individual experiences would shape theory based on participant perspective.

The researcher collected data via interviews, using a semi-structured guide. Interview lengths varied from approximately 30 minutes to close to 60 minutes. Often conversation strayed from the guide, and discussion naturally flowed from topic to topic. The natural development of topics allowed the researcher to explore areas that seemed most salient to the student. Student perspectives were further explored to uncover themes and sub-themes.

Data analysis began with coding the themes and sub-themes, and concluded with the development of theory. The researcher developed a case for each student, along with a memo that helped examine the data, develop ideas, and determine themes (Charmaz, 2006). Memo writing was a key process since it provided space to make comparisons between the data, codes, categories, and concepts. The memos created opportunity to articulate conjectures made about thematic topics (2006). Through this process, a theory about exploratory student LLC experiences emerged.

Results

In analyzing the perspectives of each case, several significant themes arose, each of which reveals aspects of how students perceive their experiences with the Exploring Living Learning Community and their role as an exploratory first year student. The researcher classified emergent themes into the four main categories

identified by Schlossberg (Schlossberg, 2011): *situation, self, strategy, and support*. Several sub-thematic experiences were determined in each category, which served to weave the students' stories together into a common web. For instance, sub-themes around the concept of *situation* related to activities the students were involved in prior to college and their perception of family influence on their decision-making process. *Self* sub-themes focused on students' experiences as undecided first year students and their desire to have financial security. *Strategy* sub-themes included the academic advising component of the LLC, as well as significant academic experiences as identified by the students. Sub-themes for *support* focused on the relationships built between student and advisor, connections between the LLC experience and the students' transitions, and acknowledgement of other support systems the students developed. When further determining the two themes that most directly tied to LLC experiences, *strategy* and *support* became paramount in understanding the impact the Exploring community had on students.

Strategy

Schlossberg (2011) suggests three main categories for coping with transition: responses that change a situation, responses that control the meaning of the problem, and responses that manage stress after the situation has occurred. There are four coping strategies: direct action, information seeking, inhibition of action, and intrapsychic behavior. For students in this first year LLC, which incorporates academic advising as part of its program, the act of attending an advising meeting is considered a *strategy* in Schlossberg's framework.

The advising model used in the Exploring community is modified from the institution's standard first year advising model. Exploring students have the opportunity to meet with their advisor more frequently and are provided with a structured goal-setting program to aid them in career and major decision-making processes. Students believed the Exploring advising structure met their needs more than the traditional model would. Students appreciated the additional face-to-face time they received with their advisors, particularly when they were experiencing transitional challenges.

In cases in which students struggled, advisors assisted them through the transition. One student, Erin, felt that she did not fit in with the institution's stereotypical student and was having difficulty making friends at first. Her advisor encouraged her to get involved in church and other community activities. Another participant, Trevor, worried about being undecided and discussed his concern with his advisor. Trevor's advisor encouraged him to not worry, take the time he needed to make an informed decision, and meet with a career counselor.

Support

According to Schlossberg, *support* can include intimate relationships, family units, networks of friends, and institutions and communities. Schlossberg suggested that “social support can be measured identifying the individual’s stable supports, supports that are to some degree role dependent, and supports that are most likely to change” (2010, p. 217). Other areas listed above, such as family support or relationships with advisors, can provide elements of *support* for students. In conducting the cross-case analysis, however, substantial information was shared regarding support systems and, in many cases, the desire to assimilate into one’s community. This phenomenon directly ties into the topic examined in this study: students’ experiences with Exploring LLC.

Although the intent of the Exploring LLC is academic in nature, students seemed to connect to the social aspects of residence hall environment. For students, the residence hall itself and LLC seem to be one in the same, as students did not distinguish between the two. Most students spoke highly of their residence hall experience. Caitlyn, the only student who did not, discussed how she had trouble making friends in her hall.

Students connected to the social aspects of the residence hall more than to the major and career exploration learning outcomes of the LLC. When asked what type of LLC events they attended, students responded that they were almost exclusively social. Laura described the programs by saying, “The programs were geared towards meeting each other and having fun which I guess is [Exploring] but there weren’t anything about exploring majors or anything. I probably would have gone to it.” Similarly, when asked what type of things Mark did as part of Exploring, he said, “We had a [video game] tournament, that was fun. We painted bricks. We just always end up kind of chilling in each other’s dorms. [The RA] is always visible, he’ll stop by and we’ll just kind of hang out. So that kind of stuff. Our hall is pretty close.”

Erin was a member of her hall’s community council, a group that works with the hall staff on LLC programs and addresses community issues. When asked about her LLC experiences, her tone became negative, and she said, “The problem with [hall name] is that we really didn’t put on anything. The community council dwindled down to where it was just me and another person. When you don’t have much support, it was hard to do anything.”

Only one student, Chris, mentioned activities related to career exploration. He said his RA took a group from his floor to an exploring majors fair, and Chris went with the group. Chris also talked about attending an interest session for study abroad, which is something he’d like to do. Despite this, he shared that he did not think the LLC had a big impact on him.

When asked about their motivation for choosing Exploring, most students said that it was one of the “default” or “broad” choices. Many of them stated that they considered both Exploring and an athletics-based LLC, because neither had a required class component. Carrie also mentioned that the LLC worked best for her and her pre-selected roommate, who was a speech pathology major, because she was undecided and her roommate was declared.

Only two of the students mentioned choosing Exploring specifically because of its mission to assist undecided students. Rich, one of the people interested in both Exploring and an LLC based on athletics and university traditions stated:

It was between [Exploring] and, I also wanted the [LLC name] because I’m all into sports and also since I was coming in undecided, I was like, “Maybe I’ll meet other people undecided, they don’t know what they want to do, and maybe some other opportunities will come from that.”

When asked if he had met many undecided students in his hall, Rich laughed and said that there were a lot of business majors on his floor, but he had met a lot of students who are undecided and also taking the career decision making course.

Trina had similar thoughts about the LLC: “Instead of an exact thing, I thought it’s more broad, so I get to meet a bunch of different people and I have met a lot of different majors. It’s been interesting.” Trina enjoyed getting to know the residents in her small hall and was exposed to several majors, such as computer engineering, math and statistics, and education.

Discussion

Overall, most students viewed the academic advising services they received through the LLC as positive. Only one student had a negative experience with his advisor, which he attributed to the advisor’s newness in the position rather than to his overall ability. Another student did not attend his “Get-to-Know-You” meeting with his advisor but was not concerned with missing out on the opportunity. Student expectations around academic advising seemed focused on academics and scheduling as opposed to discussing transition and goal-setting.

Students frequently described their advisors with positive descriptors, for instance, “friendly” or “helpful,” and indicated that their advisor helped them organize schedules and pick out classes that would meet general education and, in some cases, other requirements. Although no students expressed concern over their advisor discussing transition with them, those discussions did not seem expected or meaningful to the student. It is possible that the students took the title of “academic advisor” quite literally and only expected to discuss course scheduling and other academic matters with their advisor.

Students seemed to understand the role of the advisor and were able to articulate other ways the advisor could assist them, for example if they had a roommate conflict. Although not stated directly, students seemed to appreciate the multiple roles the advisor played for them. One student commented on his advisor's proximity and accessibility. He appreciated that her office was "right there" and that he would see her around his hall and at meetings or LLC events. It seemed that, as a whole, this group viewed their advisors as a resource for them in multiple facets, even if they did not take advantage of that resource.

Programmatic aspects of Exploring LLC had minimal impact on participants. Students were attracted to the community because it is not associated with a specific major, allowed them to select a roommate who had a different major, or, in one case, did not have an academic course requirement. Only one student mentioned choosing Exploring because he wanted to connect with other undecided students and participate in activities that would help him refine major and career goals, which he did through both the hall and his career development course. Given this, it seems that Exploring students may not be choosing the community for its programmatic functions or may not understand their own developmental needs for such programs.

A few of the sophomores attended career or major exploratory programming while in the LLC, but at the time of interview, none of the first year students had. When asked about LLC events they had participated in, students were much more likely to mention social activities, such as holiday parties or playing video games. One sophomore stated that there was no programming around major or career exploration. She said that she "probably would have gone" to programs of that nature if they occurred. Those programs did exist, but this student was unaware. It seems that the method of advertising or making students aware of such activities may not have been effective. One could assume that other students missed out on the programs because they did not realize the events happened, and so, for those students, the programs did not exist.

Implications for Living Learning Community Practice

When considering methods to best serve the exploratory student population, Gordon (2007b) noted the importance of remembering that major and career decision making is a complex process and can consist of several steps over a considerable period of time for the student. Elam, Stratton, and Gibson (2007) discussed today's Millennial student population growing up with a sense of immediacy. Because it is in no way immediate, the process of making major and career decisions can be challenging for the Millennial generation. . Students who are at lower developmental and career decisiveness levels could experience

dissonance with the process itself or with the fact that they are unsure of their path.

Advisors and other professionals who guide students through critical decisions about majors and careers must understand that the process will be shaped by the students' overall developmental capacity. Advisors need to understand where a student lies within each of the above identity developmental frameworks and what mechanisms students have in place to work through their transitions (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, and Renn, 2010; Schlossberg, 2011). Only then will it be clear whether a student is truly ready to make an appropriate decision. For those students who may not be ready, administrators should be available to help them understand this process, and, to the best of their ability, ease student tension around the process.

According to Upcraft, Gardner, and Barefoot (2005), there is “overwhelming evidence that student success is largely determined by student experiences in the first year” (p. 1). In this study, the LLC program was designed to help undecided students cope with their transition to college and to ground them as they established majors and careers paths. By framing themes around Schlossberg's four S's, the researcher was able to examine not only how students navigated their transition, but also the systems, both internal and external, that were in place to support them through this process.

Schlossberg (1989) wrote about importance of involvement, integration, and engagement in her concept of marginality versus mattering. This concept seemed of high importance to participants in this study. As is evident from the cross case analysis and findings, many themes emerged around the areas of support systems and students' priorities of creating social networks. The priority to create social support systems was also supported by Astin (1984), Kuh (2005), Pascarella and Terenzini (1991; 2005), and Tinto (1993), who stressed the importance of involvement, integration, and engagement as critical indicators of student success. Students in this study found these support systems formally through engaging in conversations with their advisors, participating in Exploring LLC, or taking courses—either the career development course designed specifically for Exploring members or other courses that helped them narrow interests and decide about majors and careers. Students developed support systems informally as well by joining student organizations, playing intramural or club sports, and developing friendship networks. While interventions that focus specifically on career decisions are important, it is also evident that for this group of students, making social connections on campus was a priority. In the future, an important foundation for this work will be helping students learn to navigate social systems. While this does not directly address issues of major and career choice, the students' emphasis on the social aspects of their experience may be of utmost importance to learning communities or living learning communities like

Exploring, where it seems that student focus was not naturally tied to the programmatic aspects of the LLC.

Participation in the Exploring LLC benefited the students by providing them opportunity to meet with advisors more frequently than most first year students would and gained them access to a specially designed career decision-making class. However, students did not fully use all of the resources that the community offered. In many cases, students were more focused on social connections than on career and major exploration. Exploring LLC provided avenues for these connections, but students often found them elsewhere.

The Exploring community could improve practice in several ways. For instance, students should be aware not only of advising but also of other programmatic elements of the community. In some cases participants were unaware of all the services Exploring offered and missed out on opportunities that could have benefited their decision making. Students referenced Exploring as their LLC of choice because it worked for their roommate preference or it did not have a required class component. The placement of students who do not truly need the Exploring program dilutes the experience for those who do. A more intentional placement process would help the community focus on its target population and attain a group of students who are more apt to actively participate in major and career exploration.

Implications for Future Research

The services that colleges and universities offer to exploratory students will be influenced by further study of how students perceived their experiences in living learning Community designed specifically to meet their needs as they transition toward majors and careers. The findings from this study could also inform studies on academic advising and LLCs for declared students, the transitional needs of students, and the major and career decision-making processes for other student populations.

As a result of the interviews, major themes were created around Schlossberg's four *S*'s, and sub-themes were determined for each area. While sub-themes were categorized into one of the four *S*'s, because each assisted the students in multiple ways, there was much overlap. Nevertheless, strategy and support emerged as the most relevant to the areas examined in this study. *Strategy* themes evolved from student's choice to attend academic advising appointments, as well as other academic experiences that sparked potential career interests. *Support* themes centered on the experiences they had with academic advising, Exploring LLC, and additional support systems the students created for themselves, primarily through social involvement. Each of these themes, as well

as sub-themes that emerged, could provide a lens for which further research is conducted.

Additionally, this research was limited to a relatively homogenous sample of 12 exploratory students at one midwestern university. The homogeneity of the sample is a notable limitation to this study. Given that current research on undecided students has been described as “conflicting, contradictory, and confusing” (Gordon, Habley, & Grites, 2008, p. 162), much more research is necessary in order to determine best practices with this population as they undergo such a crucial decision-making process. Future studies with different and more diverse populations will better identify how to serve this population. Although the themes were common to the students in this study, additional themes may emerge from the inspection of a more diverse population of students. Future research on LLCs for undecided students could also help define best practices. As was determined by this study, students found other ways to engage in major and career exploration, most commonly through a course or working with the career center. Additional research on how communities like Exploring could partner with these resources would be beneficial in creating a stronger LLC program and ideally further meet student needs. Research on similar programs and other resources available to exploratory students could strengthen not only the Exploring community, but also others that have a similar mission.

Conclusion

Exploratory students experience the phenomena of being undecided and participating in an LLC in their own way. The population of students in this study appreciated Exploring for the modified academic advising model, the career development course, and the social connections it provided. Students seemed less interested in major and career exploration programs, which is a programmatic focus in Exploring. Although the community met student needs in some ways, it fell short in others. Implications for future practice with this and similar programs focus on placing students in the community who may not truly be undecided and raising student awareness regarding all events with major and career decision-making goals. The Exploring Living Learning Community is one method of supporting undecided students. Although it may not be ideal for all, it provides the opportunity for students undergoing similar developmental processes the opportunity to discover their paths in a supportive environment.

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