Practice for Life: Making Decisions in College

Trinity College
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Presentation Outline

• Background and Context
  – New England Consortium on Assessment and Student Learning (NECASL)
  – Decision-making in college

• Advice

• Academic engagement

• Concluding thoughts and discussion
  – What questions should we be asking?
Background and Context

Scope of the Research and General Themes
New England Consortium on Assessment and Student Learning

- Seven liberal arts colleges
  - Bates, Bowdoin, Colby, Middlebury, Smith, Trinity, Wellesley
- Longitudinal study of Class of 2010
- Panel interviews every semester
- Cohort surveys every year
Panel Study of the Class of 2010

- Initial sample size = 255
- Race-stratified random sample (42 African-American, 36 Asian-American, 36 Latino/a, 38 International, and 100 domestic white students)
- 66% women and 34% men, but equal numbers of women and men at coed colleges
- About 60% received financial aid
- About 33% were first-generation
Panel Study of the Class of 2010

- **Academic experiences**: Best/worst courses, choice of major, study habits, interactions with faculty, self-assessment of knowledge and skills
- **Social experiences**: Interactions with friends, residential life, extracurricular activities, social life
- **Personal experiences**: Managing time and life, being away from home, finding a sense of belonging, balancing competing demands
- **Aspirations, expectations, and self-reflection**: Definitions of success, perceptions of change, hopes and fears, self-identity
Decision-making in College

• College is experienced as a serial decision-making process punctuated by deadlines
  – Large versus small
  – Opportunities versus obstacles

• Five spheres of decision-making offers practice at becoming liberally educated
  – Time
  – Connection
  – Home
  – Advice
  – Engagement
Advice

Decisions about Asking for and Receiving Advice
"Someone that is open-minded and in tune with what you want, but also will give you guidance. And also someone that cares about what you’re doing and will use their experiences to help you with that. In terms of my advisors here, I find that in them. I haven’t spent as much time with my advisors as I should, but I think that’s on my side. They’re not supposed to be like, ‘Oh, come meet with me every day.’ I’m supposed to be the one initiating that, and I haven’t as much as I should."

--Paige (senior)
Advising Relationships

“He doesn’t really advise. I met him once at the beginning of the year and then after that I just emailed him and asked for my [registration code]. He emailed it back to me, and I can just take the classes I choose or drop the classes I choose. Which is kind of nice, because I don’t have to do anything. But, at the same time, I wish someone would tell me something, you know, like any type of guidance.”

--Sarah (first-year)
Advising Relationships

• Different from advisor in high school and inherently ambiguous
• Mismatch between student’s intended major and advisor’s department
  – Wanted a specialist but got a general practitioner
• Sam: Advising as an obstacle rather than an opportunity
Sam: Going It Alone

- Tenuous relationship with HS guidance counselors
- Stalled relationship with FY advisor
- Little connection to major advisor
- Strained communication with senior thesis advisor
Engagement

Decisions about Approaching New Ways of Thinking and Doing
Defining Academic Engagement

- When students focused on acquiring or creating new knowledge, were intrinsically motivated to learn, and derived pleasure from doing so
- Particularistic nature of engagement
  - Specific classes, assignments, professors, pedagogies, subjects, and methodologies
- Indicators of engagement
Patterns of Engagement

• Cumulative: Engaging experiences each semester that build on one another

• Episodic

• Sustained
Patterns of Engagement

• Cumulative

• Episodic: Engaging experiences occur in some semesters but not others

• Sustained
Episodic Engagement: Adam

“I like [this course] because you read different cases about murder, sex crimes, just all different kinds of cases that come from common law, from England and stuff. It’s like you go to a movie every time you go to class because he talks about the cases and how they operate and stuff. So that’s interesting—I think law is the most interesting.”
Episodic Engagement: Adam

“What they don’t tell you is that your undergraduate degree, the concentration, really has no merit whatsoever. It doesn’t matter. Most medical school students are English majors. It doesn’t matter. I probably would have majored in something like sociology or theater had I known.”
Patterns of Engagement

• Cumulative
• Episodic
• Sustained: Engaging experiences most every semester, but not always in the major field
Sustained Engagement: Dan

“I don’t really care about topics that philosophy actually covers. What I care more about is reading an argument and dissecting the argument and objecting to the argument, or proving it, or thinking of a new argument or coming up with an analogy.”

“Yes, because I know I’m interested in public policy and that is the career path I could see myself in. I have definitely started to take some classes this semester that reflect that.. If I had found out that I really didn’t like working in the legislator’s office, I might not be pursuing those classes.”
Concluding Thoughts and Discussion

What Questions Should We Be Asking?
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• Do we place too much emphasis on the major?
• If advisors asked more detailed questions about academic interests, would they get better answers?
• What additional curricular road maps might we create to increase opportunities for engagement?
• What can we do to encourage students to see the decisions they make as opportunities to “restart college”?
Commentary on *Practice for Life*