

Creative Processing: Aiding the Undecided Student

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Abstract

Thirty-one total students from a private Midwestern university anonymously participated in a student-led informational advising session pertaining to topics such as majors, minors, graduate school, and career paths. All the students were enrolled in a required course for individuals who are thinking of majoring in Psychology at the university and voluntarily attended the first hour (A) or second hour (B) of the workshop that took place during their traditional class period. Workshop A (control) received advising information and completed a worksheet. Workshop B (experimental) received the same advising information and completed a creative arts activity using the undergraduate course catalogue. Results showed that there was no statistical significance between the two groups in the criteria of confidence, stress, anxiety, and positivity as far as how the workshop made them feel. Survey materials distributed included the Ten Item Personality Inventory and the primary statistical test used was a t-test.

Ellis defines the undecided student as “those who are unwilling, unable, or unready to make educational and/or vocational decisions,” (p. 42) which is consistent with the mindset of a student who does not know a path to take in their studies. However, stigma attached to the idea of entering academic institutions, such as a college or university, undeclared is laid on the shoulders of students as pressure to decide their entire future at the age of 18. Observing fellow classmates displaying enthusiasm for their future careers can be daunting in the light of a student

who does not have the ability to decide which causes unnecessary levels of stress in today's population. Quality academic advising has the ability to assist undecided students in higher education as stated by Ellis (2014), but this is not the only pathway to success nor is it the most helpful manner in which to receive information for all individuals. The use of academic or career advising, creative expression, and identifying the emotions that drive students to choose a major are all essential to the process of education.

From interviews obtained through 30-first year undecided undergraduate students Ellis evaluated that students impressions and expectations of academic advising was directly linked to the experiences that occurred in high school settings (Ellis, 2014). Some students worked with advisors who picked all the courses for them, others had less than appealing experiences where the advisor took no preference or opinion into account, and few had positive relationships with advisors (Ellis, 2014). Several cited concerns pertained to "taking longer than desired to graduate, fears over never being able to decide on a major, and not taking appropriate classes," (Ellis, p. 46) which are all common issues in the demographic of undecided students. These particular surveyed students all used the academic and career advising center during the first semester of their first year enrolled in a college setting. Because of the varied high school experiences the expectations of the university advising were also varied. One student was surprised that the advisor even discussed careers on her first visit; another student wished that the advisor would have gone more into detail about the specifics of each class to ease stress (Ellis, 2014). All students interviewed had positive overall remarks about the experience and the ability to make more informed decisions about their education (Ellis, 2014).

As a result, Osborn, Finklea, and Belle have developed a method to the most effective format for career counseling. While their format was aimed specifically at professional adults

searching for a new profession the results are directly relatable to college students searching for a major and eventually a career. The model incorporates the use of personal communication with the use of career surveys in order to provide a well-rounded look at each career option. First, the individuals participate in an interview to discuss needs and one question that must be asked inquires as to “What brings you here today?” so the practitioner has a starting point. At the end of the interview the practitioner (career counselor) has the ability to determine which of the laundry list of career tests may be *helpful* in the process of decision-making. “Suggested preliminary assessments include: Career Decision Scale, My Vocational Situation, Career Factors Inventory, and the Career Thoughts Inventory,” (Osborn, Finklea, & Belle, p. 146). More than one assessment may be chosen, however, demographic information is also important in this process to help in interpreting results. The final steps in the career search are to define problems and analyze causes of unhappiness in current environments, (for college students this relates to unhappiness with not having a major or enrollment in the wrong course of study) formulating goals, developing an individual learning plan, executing the individual learning plan, and reviewing results at a later date (Osborn, Finklea, & Belle, 2014). Note that the career assessment is only one step in the process of finding a new path in careers or education because a more informed process with open communication tends to result in more positive outcomes compared to only handing an individual a career test and no follow-up information.

As Osborn, Finklea, and Belle published a career-counseling format, Yarbrough (2002) developed a plan for advising called the Engagement Model; this approach “allows both students and advisors to develop a heightened personal investment in the success of the individual academic program, the supporting academic unit and the overall university,” (p. 61) The program includes preliminary steps for students to complete as well as guidelines for the manner in which

academic advisors are assumed to help for the most effective results. This model is based off of the concept that the student has placed time and effort into their own college process of deciding on a major and now is looking for additional assistance from a staff member of higher education. Advising steps for the professional individual are: “identify the assumptions that can be clearly articulated by the student, assist the student to clarify those assumptions, clarify the personal, professional, and education goals of the student and finally guide the student as he or she navigates through specific curriculum,” (Yarbrough, 2002, p. 65). Nowhere in the processes has Yarbrough included the use of a career assessment tool such as the Career Decision Scale used by Osborn, Finklea, and Belle (2014). The Engagement Model emphasizes the importance of the student having spent time in their own search as well as the manner in which a professional advisor must assist in the process. Communication, again, is emphasized rather than the use of a test.

In an experimental notion, Chiteng (2014) evaluated the difference in grade point averages in undergraduate undecided college students of students who did or did not use the campus-advising center. Students were surveyed from a public research university and data was collected from 2,745 respondents about demographics, GPA, and use of the centralized advising center (all faculty advisors located in one building), (Chiteng, 2014). Results found that students who used the advising center had a higher GPA compared to students who did not use the advising center (Chiteng, 2014). This data displayed that assistance is much more than taking a career test to gain information and the ability to talk to a faculty member can impact the course of a student’s education directly.

The concept of direct communication impacting the course of education has significance as shown by Chiteng (2014), and this contact can be taken further by allowing students to have

mentors on college campuses in a formal or informal manner. While investigating school systems Bynum (2015) discovered that 84% of the educational work force was made of women while only 24% of superintendents were women. The connection was made that mentoring could have made a difference in these statistics by having allowed women a skilled and more “knowledgeable professional serving as a supportive and guiding example for another,” (Bynum, 2015, p. 70). With a mentor as someone to lean on and look to for guidance in a less structured manner the student or employee felt less pressure to find success and had the opportunity to express themselves more openly (Bynum, 2015). This relationship was helpful in college settings where students have varying exposure to the intensity of academic course loads and the personal responsibility of independence.

Another concept being evaluated is the specific reason behind major choice. Chen & Simpson (2015) found that personality plays a part in the academic decision based on Holland’s personality classifications. The six listed types of personality as described by Holland’s theory were: realistic, investigative, artistic social, enterprising, and conventional each based on the idea that experience of culture, preference, and values make a personality (Chen & Simpson, 2015). In their research Chen & Simpson (2015) surveyed students who entered a STEM (science, technology, engineering, or mathematics) program to see if a match existed to their personality style. Personality has an absolute impact on major and career choice based on background information, preferences, and values as well. Data showed that an assessment of personality may be helpful in a student understanding the subject to study in a collegiate education, however, as previously mentioned a test with no other guidance is not the recommended form of advising. In a study of Asian students at a university in Taiwan, Liao & Ji (2015) found that career preference and personal interest and abilities are more powerful factors in major choice rather than the

opinions of parents, teachers, and peers. This data expressed the importance of knowing the strengths, weaknesses and preferences of a student. If an individual knows he or she has a weakness in academic writing or calculation than majors involving English or Mathematics may not be the best choice for that particular student.

Evaluating noncognitive aspects of individuals may lead to the reveal of a student's passion which is defined by Luh & Lu (2012) as "a strong inclination toward an activity that people like, that they found important and in which they invest time and energy," (p. 282). Cited research also showed "evidence of a relationship between passion and positive emotion, between positive emotion and creativity, and between personality and passion," (Luh & Lu, 2012, p. 282). Because all these aspects of individuals are connected it is simple to see that the concept of choosing a major for a career is specifically complicated. Students who are undecided academically would benefit, as previously mentioned, from several kinds of assistance, such as creation, in choosing a major early in their collegiate education.

Creation has the ability to bring people out of their heads and into the mind and personality. Using art as a method of conversation and discovery has the potential to be used in college settings as a way to counsel students in the process of choosing a major or career when the issue is more than picking a subject in a catalogue. Choosing a major is the first step in knowing what students wants to do for the rest of their lives. In 2014 Sanders-Bustle presented case studies of students working toward a degree or certification in art education and their time spent creating art through service learning. Four women took part in interviews, journal entries, and art creation as responses to their time spent in service to others as required in their education (Sanders-Bustle, 2014). "Artmaking can inspire creative responses that raise awareness and serve as agents of change," (p. 59) social and personal change are referred to in this quotation from the

cited research and propose the idea that art had the ability to assist the women in learning about themselves (Sanders-Bustle, 2014). In a similar experience Potash & Chen (2014) took medical students in Japan to a hospital and asked them to create art based on their experiences. Students were given time for guided visualization, to write a poem about a patient they met or an experience at the hospital, to create a painting or drawing based on the poem, and then a period of display and discussion with classmates (Potash & Chen, 2014). This period given to students to process their experience in the hospital allowed them to connect with other classmates about their feelings and importance of expression. “The arts become a structure for continuous dialogue,” (Potash & Chen, 2014, p. 331) which is a concept that reaches through medical students to all types of students in all program of study.

In making connection to others individuals learned the idea of empathy. Empathy can be developed through the creation of art, music, or a simple conversation. In fact, there are several kinds of empathy that can be developed over the course of a relationship. Laird (2015) explained three types of empathy as cognitive, emotional, and compassionate. Cognitive empathy involves knowing what other people feel and what they may be thinking, emotional empathy is when you feel along with others as if their emotions are contagious, and compassionate empathy is when we understand other people, feel with them and are moved to help if needed (Laird, 2015). While the time in which a student is undecided in their career path has the potential to be stressful the ability to connect with others is essential to survival and music involves “connection between perception and production” then has the “ability to communicate meaning and emotion,” (Laird, 2015, n.p.). Laird attributes mirror neurons to the ability to have these emotional connections to sound and other people, which influences relationships (2015). Also found in research was the idea that “factors of imitation, synchronization, and shared experience were the most effecting at

influencing empathetic behaviors,” (Laird, 2015, n.p.). Creation connecting individuals is the summary of the human experiences and allowing students the opportunity to create together and form bonds is a way to successfully facilitate empathy. The possibility of having a creative arts group as a method of de-stressing on college campuses is a new idea to counseling emerging adults. Boldt & Paul (2011) reviewed the use of this group type in collegiate study for an “unplugged experience in which members related by painting and talking, not texting,” (p. 51). Students voluntarily enter the group and use a combination of verbal processing and art making...and engaged them in the process of change,” (Boldt & Laird, 2011, p. 51). One student who participated in this creative arts group stated “my issues are still there, but I don’t feel so alone with them and I can tolerate them better,” (p. 49) due to the presence of communication and social support these students specifically was able to receive understanding from fellow classmates making daily life easier (Bold & Laird, 2011). The idea that students are able to receive help with issues from mood disorders to academic difficulties and support each other through communication and artistic expression in college settings shows potential for several new kinds of therapeutic techniques to offer emerging adults. It is hypothesized in the current study that time spent in creation during a student-led academic advising workshop will increase confidence in exploring majors for undecided students more than a traditional advising student-led experience.

Method

Participants

Thirty-one total students from a private Midwestern university participated in a student-led informational advising session pertaining to topics such as majors, minors, graduate school, and career paths. All the students were enrolled in a required course for individuals who are

thinking of majoring in Psychology at the university and voluntarily signed up to attend the first hour (A) or second hour (B) of the workshop that took place during their traditional class period. Overall data showed that of the 31 students that participated, 24 were female and 7 were male. Class distribution showed 42% were first-years, 39% were sophomores, 16% were juniors, and 3% were senior students. Workshop A contained 19 students while Workshop B contained 12 students.

Materials

Students in both Workshop A and B completed a survey that asked questions pertaining to how the workshop made them feel. These students were surveyed during registration week at their university and were asked if the event impacted their levels of confidence, stress, anxiety, and positivity. The scale asked about feeling post-workshop and stated “please circle the number that represents how you feel after the time spent in the workshop on a scale of 1 (*I feel much worse*) to 7 (*I feel much better*). Students also provided demographic information including their gender identification and class. In addition, students were asked several open ended questions pertaining to logistics of the workshop such as: “what was most helpful about the workshop?” and “what would you change about the workshop to improve your experience?”.

Ten Item Personality Inventory. The TIPI is a ten question personality test looking at the five dimensions: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness to experience. This test was published by Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, in 2003 and asked students to read a pair of words and rate on a scale of 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 7 (*agree strongly*) how well the personality traits applied to them. Examples of pairs included: calm/emotionally stable, anxious/easily upset, open to new experiences/complex, and conventional/uncreative.

Procedure

The experimenter gave the same presentation pertaining to information about the university's psychology, occupational therapy, and biopsychology majors, minors offered that complement the majors, possible career paths after an undergraduate degree, and graduate school paths. After the presentation in Workshop A the 19 students were each given a course catalogue for the undergraduate programs and asked to complete a worksheet. The activity asked questions pertaining to paths that they have considered based on past classes or courses they will be enrolled in the following semesters. Workshop A's goal was to place students in a traditional advising setting and allow them to explore the supplementary documents on their own. Once all students finished the worksheet they were given the survey created by the experimenter which included the TIPI. Students were then debriefed as to the purpose of the experiment.

After receiving the same presentation in Workshop B the 12 students were each given a course catalogue and also introduced to the artistic and craft materials that were placed at the front of the classroom. Materials included: glitter, markers, crayons, string, construction paper, scissors, glue stick, hot glue gun, clothespins, and foam stickers in various shapes and colors. Participants were posed the idea: show me how the catalogue makes you feel about advising, registration, your major, or your future. The only limitation that was placed on the students was that they were not allowed to do any damage to the room they were inside in the process of creating their expressive project. Once all students finished with their catalogue each completed the same survey as Workshop A. Students were then debriefed as to the purpose of the experiment.

Results

Several t-test were conducted and each found that there was no significant difference between Workshop A and Workshop B. When asked: “did the workshop impact the amount of confidence you feel toward choosing a major, career, graduate school track, or minor?” results for both workshops stated that results were non-significant Workshop A ($M = 5.42, SD = 0.61$) and Workshop B ($M = 5.25, SD = 1.36$), $t(31) = .482, p = .634$. Stress responses reflected similar results: Workshop A ($M = 4.79, SD = 1.40$) and Workshop B ($M = 4.75, SD = 0.97$), $t(31) = .086, p = .932$. Results for the anxiety criteria were also non-significant with Workshop A ($M = 4.47, SD = 1.31$) and Workshop B ($M = 4.50, SD = 1.31$), $t(31) = -.054, p = .975$. The positivity criteria, again, displayed non-significance when comparing the two groups: Workshop A ($M = 5.84, SD = 1.07$) and Workshop B ($M = 5.75, SD = 1.14$) $t(31) = .228, p = .821$. Personality information that displayed significance comparing the two groups: students in Workshop A were significantly more extraverted than those in Workshop B $t(31) = 2.290, p = .046$. Open ended responses to the question “What part of the workshop helped you the most?” from students in Workshop A were: the biopsychology planning sheet, career options after getting a bachelor’s degree, graduate school options, advice on classes, exploring minors, and how to use the catalogue. Responses about what was most helpful from students in Workshop B were: “tearing up the catalogue,” “it was a good way to destress,” “defacing the general education requirements,” “the craft activity and being able to express how happy my major makes me feel,” and “it helped get rid of some stress.”

Discussion

Results showed that there was no statistical significance between the two groups in the criteria of confidence, stress, anxiety, and positivity as far as how the workshop made them feel. While statistical evidence helps back hypothesis on a daily basis there were several changes that

could have been made to the study to improve statistical results. However, the researcher was not only looking for numbers as results. The most important part of the research was seeing the process for students and receiving feedback about what they needed from advising. One change to make to future research is having a larger pool of students to work with as well as asking for students from several different disciplines. The goal of the researcher was to show that students benefit more from a creative environment when confronted with the need to make a large decision such as major, career, graduate school track, or minors to add to their education. While additional changes can be made to the experimental process to show more significant statistical results the open ended answers reflect the importance of the interaction with the catalogue in an expressive manner to the advising process for undergraduate students.

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