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# Davidson Honors College Students Prematurely Declare Major Studies Prior to Entering College

By Noah Hill

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## Abstract

*Choosing a college major is one of the most important decisions a student makes during the course of his or her academic career. While local and national trends suggest that it has become popular for high school students to declare a major prior to entering college, it is unlikely that 17- and 18-year-old students are adequately prepared to make decisions that affect not only their college experience, but also their long term vocations. Data obtained from a small sample of graduating seniors at the Davidson Honors College at the University of Montana suggests students may benefit from waiting to declare their major until after matriculating in postsecondary education. Students who declared a major prior to entering college reported feeling they had declared a major that did not reflect their interests and that they lacked an understanding of which major best helped them achieve their long-term career goals.*

## Introduction

Choice of major has a greater impact on the experiences and career trajectory of college students than any other decision, except, perhaps, deciding which college or university to attend. By selecting a major, students not only establish which set of subjects and curriculum they wish to study, but also discover a community of individuals pursuing the same interests in the academic and professional world.

The concept of a major, first recorded in 1877, is not novel in academia (Guthrie, 2003). Typically requiring two

years of highly specific study geared toward building expertise in a particular area, colleges originally intended majors to compliment a prerequisite two years of education in liberal arts (Guthrie, 2003). While students in the United States generally do not have to declare a major until the end of their second year of college, national trends indicate that declaring a major prior to entering college has become the norm for most students (Venit, 2016).

Several factors drive college students to declare majors as incoming freshmen. The recession in 2008 has caused students to seek careers, and subsequently majors, that advertise job stability and a growing workforce demand (Blom, Cadena, & Keys, 2017). Many of these majors fall heavily within Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) disciplines, which can require careful academic planning as much of the coursework is sequential, with upper division courses relying on suites of prerequisites. Additionally, many students declare their majors based upon perceived interests in high school, without exposure to the diversity of career opportunities or available majors that a college education provides (Jungen & Johnson, 2008). These interests may arise as a result of familial interests (i.e. a family business), aptitude in a particular subject (i.e. math), or peer pressure (i.e. a student selects a major or other course of study to fit in with peer group).

While researchers and educators understand this data on the national scale, it is equally important that instructors and advisors also understand the same information on a local scale. Different colleges and universities target very different demographics; students at a small prestigious liberal arts college likely have somewhat different educational and career

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goals than students at large state universities or local community colleges. As such, best practices for advising should be developed based on the student demographics of a college or university, and consider the experiences and goals of unique student bodies at varying sizes and types of universities.

At the University of Montana (UM), the Davidson Honors College (DHC) houses a cohort of students uniquely engaged in their education when compared to the main UM campus. To facilitate interdisciplinary learning, the DHC highlights its similarities to a small liberal arts college within the setting of a research institution. With an average unweighted high school grade point average of 3.8 and an average ACT score of 29, students within the Davidson Honors College are indisputably high achievers. While data suggests that many DHC students may enter college with preconceived career goals, they may require even more assistance identifying career goals and planning an appropriate academic path than the average student. Thus, students may benefit from waiting at least until they begin college to declare a major.

### Methods

In order to identify trends across the academic paths of DHC students, seniors graduating from the DHC volunteered to participate in a semi-standardized in-person interview, or participate in an anonymous online survey distributed via email. Both surveys asked when students declared their major, how many times they changed majors, and a series of questions designed to gauge if students were satisfied with their academic path, or if they would have preferred to take different steps. While the online survey provided space for students to

elaborate about their answers, students who participated in the survey chose not to expand on their preferences. In the in-person interviews, student responses to standard questions often permitted follow-up questions, which enabled the identification of factors that contributed to major choice.

Twenty students volunteered for in-person interviews while 24 students completed the online survey. As there was no way to determine if students who completed the online survey were the same students interviewed, the two data sets were kept separate. Additionally, the small sample size (population size = approx. 150) obtained through volunteers prevented robust statistical analysis. Instead, national trends were used to confirm the accuracy of the data collected.

### Results

#### Perceived Pressure Influences Students to Declare a Major.

Did you enter college with a major declared, or undeclared?

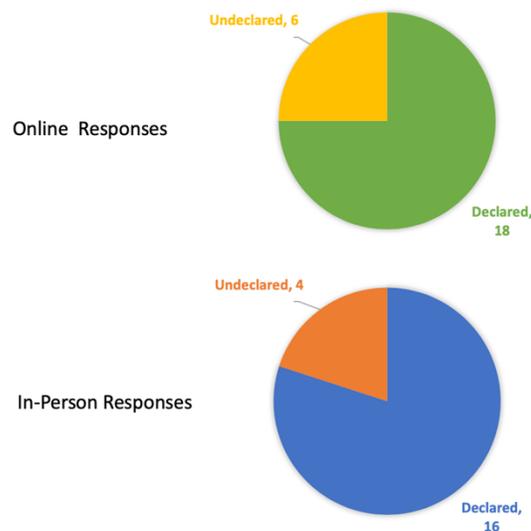


Figure 1: Students elect to enter college with a declared major.

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DHC students overwhelmingly elected to select a major prior to entering college. Seventy-five percent of students from the online survey and 80 percent of students from the in-person survey reported selecting a major prior to beginning college (Figure 1). These statistics aligned with national statistics obtained by the Educational Advisory Board in 2016 (Venit, 2016), and thus likely represent an accurate cross-section of DHC students.

Many students interviewed in-person expressed that they felt external pressure to declare a major prior to entering college. This correlated with the number of students who eventually entered college with a major declared (Figure 2). Fifteen out of 16 students who reported feeling pressure to declare a major did so, while only one out of four students who did not feel pressure to declare a major did select a course of study prior to entering college.

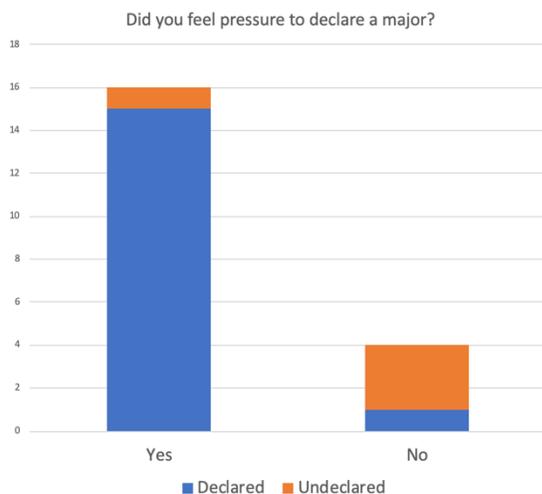


Figure 2: Students who felt pressure to declare a major entered college with a major declared.

Students who reported feeling external pressure to declare their major identified the most significant source of pressure. More than half of participants

reported that the decisions their high school peers led them to declare a major. The remaining students cited college advisors, teachers, family, scholarships, and admissions applications as sources of pressure to declare a major. These results suggest that, in general, students feel significantly more pressure to declare a major in the school environment than they do in the home environment.

### Students Who Declare Their Major Prior to Entering College Often Switch Majors.

Students who entered college with a declared major were much more likely to end up changing their major (Figure 3). Seventy-five percent of students who entered college with a declared major went on to change their major at least once. In comparison, only 25 percent of the students who waited to declare their major ended up changing their major at least once later in their college career.

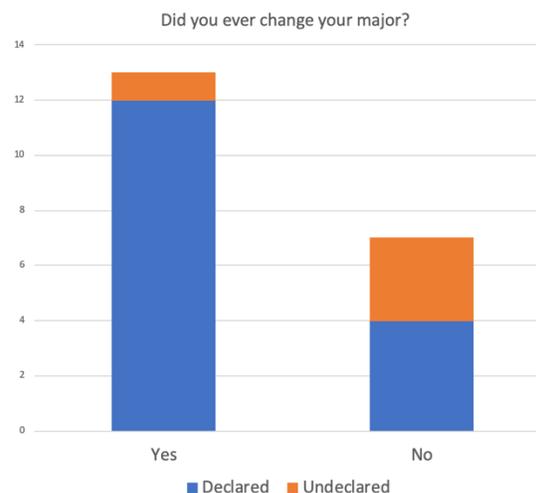


Figure 3: Students who declare their major prior to beginning college change their major more often than students who wait to declare their major.

As a result, most students reflecting over the course of their college career

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reported that waiting to declare their major could have been a beneficial decision for their academic career (Figure 4).

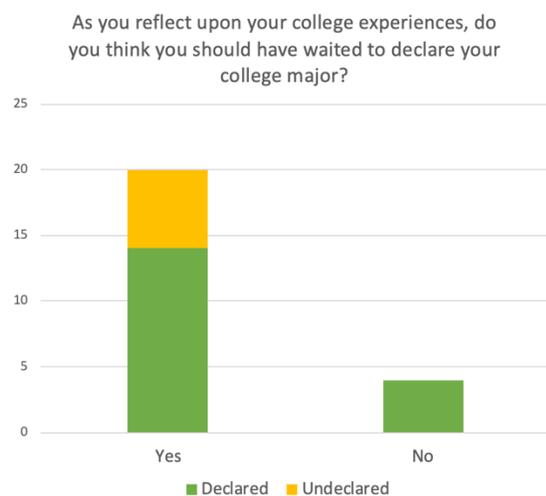


Figure 4: Students view waiting to declare a major as a beneficial decision.

Academic experiences in early stages of college were highly formative for students. Of the students who changed majors, 75 percent cited classes they took in college as the primary impetus for the switch. Additionally, many students switched majors in search of diverse career fields. Fifty percent of students reported that their academic advisors did not expose them to diverse career opportunities, either within or beyond the scope of their major.

Compounding this problem is that students only have limited exposure to a variety of career opportunities prior to entering college. More than half of the students surveyed reported that their most current career plans did not reflect the path they had envisioned for themselves in high school. Of the students who did report meeting their high school career goals, 80 percent still had to change their major in order to achieve the desired outcome.

Taken together, these results indicate that only two students out of the 20 surveyed in-person were confident in both their choice of major and how it would help them achieve their long term career goals prior to entering college.

### Discussion

Student experiences at the DHC indicate that a majority of students feel that waiting to declare a major could have positive impact on a student's college experience. Waiting to declare majors permits students to explore diverse subject areas, interact with faculty and students with unique research and career interests, and better identify a specific academic path that will facilitate their own success.

Indeed, research indicates that students who eagerly declare a major prior to beginning college may possibly be more at risk for attrition than students who wait to declare their major (Cuseo, 2005). For the most part, students fall into three categories. Most commonly, students make a decision about their major prematurely and without careful planning and foresight that most majors require. Other students may have unrealistic expectations about their preferred major, and make decisions without self-knowledge of their own strengths and weaknesses. Yet another group of students selects a major without a thorough understanding of the correlation between their desired major and career. All three of these student groupings result in nearly inevitable major changes that could potentially postpone students' expected graduation, and possibly even discourage students from continuing their studies.

Moreover, the issues identified by students, including pressure to prematurely declare a major and lack of established

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career goals, reflect nationwide difficulties for prospective college students. Many students across the country report that entering college “undecided” can cause significant anxiety. Additionally, only 10 percent of students with a declared major nationally reported feeling that they knew a “great deal” about their chosen course of study (Erickson & Strommer, 1991).

Even more significantly, however, is that waiting to declare a major correlates with higher academic achievement. National samples of over 20,000 college students revealed that undecided students generally demonstrate higher levels of academic success as measured by grade point average (GPA) and persistence to graduation (Lewallen, 2013). Steps can be taken at several levels to ensure that students make informed decisions as they select their majors. In high schools, teachers, advisors and counselors can expose students to wide arrays of careers available to students in each subject. Additionally, educators can help inform students that colleges do not require students to declare a major before they begin their post-secondary education.

At the collegiate level, colleges could create experiential learning opportunities for first- and second-year students to promote exposure to career realities. Similarly, intentionally designed interventions at regular intervals would likely improve the effectiveness of first-year students’ academic decision-making and career planning (Furco, 2002).

High transfer credit loads from AP and IB courses could place additional pressure on students to prematurely declare a major, as many students may have certain completed general education requirements prior to entering college. While this factor necessitates further investigation, the effects of excess credit could be offset by

integrating interventional career counseling and college advising into traditional college preparation programs at the high school level. Alternatively, colleges and universities could increase the number of prerequisite credits required to declare a major to ensure that students gain adequate exposure to a variety of classes prior in order to make an informed decision regarding their both their major and their career.

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