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When Two Worlds Meet: Academic Advisors' Understanding of the Exploratory Student Experience at a Hispanic-Serving Institution

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WHEN TWO WORLDS MEET: ACADEMIC ADVISORS' UNDERSTANDING OF THE EXPLORATORY STUDENT EXPERIENCE AT A HISPANIC-SERVING INSTITUTION

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by

Hazel E. Hooker

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To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

This dissertation, written by Hazel E. Hooker, and entitled When Two Worlds Meet: Academic Advisors' Understanding of the Exploratory Student Experience at a Hispanic-Serving Institution, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this dissertation and recommend that it be approved.

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Norma Goonen

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Sarah Mathews

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Rebekah Schulze

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Benjamin Baez, Major Professor

Date of Defense: October 4, 2021

The dissertation of Hazel E. Hooker is approved.

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Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

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Andrés G. Gil
Vice President for Research and Economic Development
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2021

DEDICATION

We tend to reflect on our life when we lose someone. In my case, I reflected on the life of my Tía Lillith when she passed three years ago. At the time, I identified three important points that are still relevant today.

1. Be true to yourself. Hold fast to your faith and beliefs.

   I would not be writing this if I followed the original plan and went to medical school. As a Latina, it took a lot of courage for me to tell Papi I decided to pursue academic advising/higher education as a career in my early 20s. We did not see eye to eye on my decision for many years. He eventually realized that I was committed to this calling and said he was proud of me and my work.

   Many students do not have the luxury of choosing a career/major of their choice because of financial or emotional ramifications. My hope is that they will grow to be confident in their choices and receive the support everyone deserves.

2. Say what you need to say when those you love are still alive.

   This past year has been challenging in many ways. Most importantly, Papi passed away in December, but COVID-19 had kept us physically apart since October. I was scheduled to video chat with him at 9:00am that eventful day, but he passed at 6:00am. If there was someone who wanted to know about my progress more than my major professor, it was him. He looked forward to reading my dissertation and being able to see me graduate. Though he is no longer here, I hope he has a front row to everything in heaven.

3. I come from a line of strong women and am lucky to have had them in my life.

There is a reason many cultures venerate elders. I admire my grandmother (Ita), tía abuelas, mother, and tías because they are wise, resilient, determined, strong, caring, and amazing women. Due to the circumstances of their lives, including the Nicaraguan Revolution, they found themselves having to leave everything they knew behind and move to a new country. Unfortunately, several of them are no longer with us, but their memory lives on. It is at their feet that I learned how to persevere in the face of adversity, a trait needed during this process.

Ultimately, I dedicate this dissertation to Papi, Ita, and the women of my family. Without you there is no me. I also dedicate this dissertation to exploratory students. May our choices not be governed by others' expectations.

"…Two roads diverged in a wood, and I-
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference."
- Robert Frost

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My work experience as a student assistant in Undergraduate Studies exposed me to the field of higher education as a career. Dr. Rosa Jones and Dr. William Beesting were my first supervisors and mentors. Thank you both for showing me what it means to be student-centered and a great leader as well as for caring about me and my own career development.

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When I was out of the office writing those papers or most recently, writing my dissertation, I left the department in the good hands of my staff. Thank you, Jenna Levine and Sophie Loureiro, for taking care of things while I was away. But more importantly, for being encouraging and supportive of my life goal. I also want to thank all past staff who have worked with me while I was in the doctoral program.

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Finally, thank you to the most important people in my life, my family. Papi, thank you for raising me to believe I could be and do anything. Your love and support will be with me even though you are gone. Ita, I am your namesake, and you were my first role model of a strong woman. Though you are gone, I hope I continue to make you proud. Tía Joyce, thank you for being my surrogate grandmother. You are the wisest person I know, and I hope to attain your level of faith. That would have surely helped me during this process. Tía Lillith, thank you for loving me. Even as you lost your memories, you remained proud of me and my accomplishments. Additionally, thank you to my furbabies Bernie and Beethoven for being by my side and forcing me to get outside. Again, thank you to everyone, mentioned and unmentioned, for helping me achieve this amazing milestone.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

WHEN TWO WORLDS MEET: ACADEMIC ADVISORS' UNDERSTANDING OF THE EXPLORATORY STUDENT EXPERIENCE AT A HISPANIC-SERVING INSTITUTION

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Professor Benjamin Baez, Major Professor

Academic advisors are essential to the college experience (Filson & Whittington, 2013). They serve as students' higher education guides and translators in addition to being their direct link to the institution. Given the pivotal role they serve in helping students navigate the myriad transitions encountered throughout their college career, tapping into their vast experience with students, parents, and administration provided a unique point of view that would not otherwise be possible. The purpose of this study was to explore academic advisors' understanding of the exploratory FTIC student experience at a Hispanic-Serving Institution, which was chosen because of potential unique impacts on its non-white populations (Pascarella, 2006).

In this qualitative study, 11 current and former academic advisors who worked with exploratory students at Florida International University were interviewed using a semi-structured format. Student interviews were used for triangulation purposes. Once

interviews were transcribed, thematic analysis was used to analyze the data for common themes.

The study found that participants saw a need to destigmatize the exploration process because it negatively impacts how students feel about being labeled exploratory. According to the advisors, many students are ashamed of identifying as exploratory. Advisors were vocal about their frustration with external pressures (e.g., excess credit, metrics, and department policies) affecting students' progress and by students' expression of the unfairness of being limited to 30 credits when that is not enough time to go through the exploration process. Moreover, this study revealed a lack of structured opportunities for exploratory students to meet other exploratory students. The advisors acknowledged that student-to-student connections are important to the undergraduate experience and can contribute to feeling a sense of belonging.

The findings of this study can also be used to develop training and professional development opportunities for academic advisors to enhance their knowledge of this complex student population, help students develop a positive exploratory identity, and produce resources that can improve the advising experience for exploratory students.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Approximately 59% of students enrolled in 4-year U.S. colleges and universities for the first time in fall 2009 graduated within six years (McFarland et al., 2017). Of those who dropped out, 75% did so during their first year of college, many within the first six weeks of school alone (Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000). Consequently, one of the most pressing concerns in higher education today is student retention and graduation. Institutions are feeling pressured by shrinking budgets, state accountability systems, and ranking systems that use these indicators as measures of "quality" to implement strategies that will address these concerns (Tinto, as cited by Seidman, 2005). Driven largely by financial and moral implications, institutions of higher education have placed a great deal of emphasis on first-year student success in the form of persistence rates. In fact, an overwhelming body of evidence indicates that student success is mostly determined by a student's experiences in the first year (Mayhew, Rockenbach, Bowman, Seifert, & Wolniak, 2016).

During the first year of college, learning and understanding the nuances of a new institution can be challenging to any student, regardless of their background, abilities, and interests (Hunter & Kendall, 2008). In addition to the pressures associated with the transition to a college environment (e.g., meeting different people, living on campus, and learning new study skills), students are also faced with one of the most important and difficult decisions they will make–selecting a major. It is one of the developmental tasks students will encounter in the first year, a time that is full of significant transition and change (Buyarski, 2009; Hunter & Kendall, 2008). Unfortunately, students will often

push interest in selecting a major to the bottom of their priority list (Gordon, 1995a), even though it is one of the most important economic decisions they will make (McJamerson, 1992). This important determination (Porter & Umbach, 2006) is a stressful and pressure-filled endeavor because students see this as a reflection of their core gender role identity, interests, values, and abilities, and realize the significance it will play in their futures (Galotti, 1999). Moreover, external pressures from family, friends, or society can lead to students feeling overwhelmed, scared, or anxious when selecting a major and can yield to a premature and superficial choice that is based on minimal information about academic programs or occupational fields (Berríos-Allison, 2005; Gordon & Steele, 2015; Pearson & Dellman-Jenkins, 1997). However, research has indicated that the tenuousness of this decision is consistent with normal and personal career development (Gordon & Steele, 2015; Titley & Titley, 1980).

Many college students are not developmentally prepared to choose a major because they are struggling with maturity and identity formation (Dennis, 2007; Gordon & Steele, 2015). “Encouraging and often requiring students to declare a major during the matriculation process encourages many students to make premature decisions” (Shaffer & Zalewski, 2011, p. 66) that may lead them to change their major later (Carduner, Padak, & Reynolds, 2011), suffer academic failure (Shaffer & Zalewski, 2011) or lack commitment to their program of study (Germeijs & Verschueren, 2007), all of which is associated with dropping out (Willcoxson & Wynder, 2010). Instead of having students focus on choosing a major prior to or at the beginning of their college career, higher education institutions should look toward helping them establish educational goals and achieve a sense of belonging. Their college satisfaction level, and in effect, institution’s

retention rate (e.g., connection to the institution), should increase once a feasible plan is devised to identify a major based on abilities, interests, and values congruent with the associated major (Cuseo, 2005). This is corroborated by Graunke, Woosley, and Helms (2006) who found that students who had higher institutional commitment and commitment to an educational goal were more likely to graduate as opposed to those who only had a commitment to the major. In this context, it appears that being undecided is preferable to declaring or choosing a major before having adequate information such as knowledge of self, the world of work, and/or the decision-making process (Kelly & Lee, 2002; Krieshok, 2001).

Problem Statement

Career choice and identity development are closely related constructs. Students who do not yet have a complete understanding of themselves find it difficult to make decisions regarding their majors as they begin their college career. This choice for many college students is the first step in determining who they believe they will be as an adult and may need to be constantly reevaluated until it reflects how they see themselves (Buyarski, 2009; Dennis, 2007). Consequently, most students need help with career decision-making during their college career (Gordon, 2006) regardless of their major status (e.g., undecided, decided, or major changer). In addition, the current political environment is one that measures success in numbers via accountability practices. Over the last eleven years, state policies related to excess credit hours and performance funding have augmented the pressures felt by Florida International University (FIU), a large, public, urban, Hispanic-serving, research university in the Southeastern United States. These policies, as detailed in the definition of terms, have affected institutional and

administrative priorities, specifically as it relates to major selection and retention, and may unintentionally create barriers for students or prove to be confusing.

In response to these pressures and as a way to increase student satisfaction and retention rates, FIU developed a professional academic advising model to connect students with someone at the university to help them navigate selecting a major, as well as their transition to college. Academic advisors serve as a guide and translator for students. They explain policies in addition to helping students sort through immense amounts of personal, academic, and career related information (Hughey & Hughey, 2009) that will help them develop their educational goals (Cooney, 2000) and connect them to their interests and strengths (Gordon & Steele, 2003). They ultimately become students' direct link to the institution, a relationship that provides insight into students' sense of belonging and connection to the University. Furthermore, advisors often bear the burden of parental and student expectations when it comes to conversations about majors and careers because they expect financial returns on their economic investment (McCalla-Wriggins, Hughey, Damminger, & Burton Nelson, 2009). Given the pivotal role academic advisors serve in helping students transition to college, develop career goals, and select a major, it is important to understand how advisors perceive the needs and concerns of exploratory students, as well as their support systems.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the present study was to explore academic advisors' understanding of the exploratory FTIC student experience at a Hispanic-Serving Institution. This qualitative study adds to the literature on exploratory (undecided) students and provides insight into strategies the institution can implement to help students

develop an exploratory identity and sense of belonging. In addition, this study also provides insights to academic advisors' understanding of the exploratory student experience, which can be used to develop training and professional development opportunities for advisors to enhance their knowledge of this complex student population and produce resources that can improve the advising experience for exploratory students.

The current study looked at advisors' perceptions of exploratory FTIC needs and concerns and their experiences with support systems. Through qualitative interviews with 11 current and former academic advisors, the researcher learned that academic advisors are concerned about the effect of external pressures on the major decision-making process and that by prioritizing the quick transition of exploratory students to a degree-granting major, their identity and sense of belonging were not considered.

Research Questions

The research questions that guided this study were:

- What are academic advisors' perceptions of the needs and concerns of exploratory FTIC students?
- What are academic advisors' perceptions of exploratory FTIC students' support systems?

Significance of the Study

Academic advisors are essential to the college student experience because they are their main link to the institution. Participants in this study shared insights on the exploratory student population that beg for immediate action by advisors and advising administrators. The implications of this study are ultimately tied to student success like persistence and graduation.

Academic advisors in this study indicated that many students are ashamed of identifying as exploratory. It is time to destigmatize the exploration process and build exploratory identity to address the perceived negative impacts of the exploratory label. Academic advisors should begin by meeting with advising administrators to brainstorm what an exploratory friendly environment would look like. Discuss what language or processes would need to change to be more supportive and then share that with senior leadership. In addition, foster a sense of belonging and connection to being exploratory by using something as simple as an FIU t-shirt with the term exploratory or a catchier phrase like “what’s your passion?”

The 30-credit declaration policy is a disadvantage to students according to advisors in this study. At the present time, FIU has a policy that requires students to declare a major at 30 credits, whereas that requirement used to be at 45 credits. FIU should revert to the 45-credit declaration policy to provide students with additional time to explore themselves, research potential occupations, and engage in experiential opportunities. This supportive and encouraging environment will decrease pressure and help them make their educational, career, and life decisions (Germeijs, Luyckx, Notelaers, Goossens, & Verschueren, 2012; Gordon, 1995). Finding their best fit will create more engaged students during college and once they graduate.

Student-to-student connections are important to the undergraduate experience and can contribute to feeling a sense of belonging, like they are part of a community (Montag, Campo, Weissman, Walmsley, & Snell, 2012). The academic advisors in this research study revealed a lack of structured opportunities for exploratory students to meet other exploratory students. Consequently, many feel alone, as if they are the only one going

through the exploration process. It is imperative that the University, beginning with advisors and advising administrators, develop programming for this student population that addresses both undecided and forced exploratory groups. This study's participants provided several creative ideas that can be used to get started.

FIU academic advisors are assigned to students upon matriculation. They are students' direct connection to the University, which inevitably make them hyper aware of the needs and concerns of our student body. This study's findings shed light upon the consequences of an institutional culture that is not exploratory friendly. From the stigmatization of exploratory to a 30-credit declaration policy and lack of structured exploratory opportunities, many students feel like they are alone in the exploration process. Action is required on the part of the University community to help exploratory students feel like they belong at FIU, an integral component to student persistence.

Definition of Terms

College Prep – Florida Board of Governors regulation 6.008 outlines minimum requirements for college-level reading, writing, and math courses. First-Time-in-College (FTIC) students who do not meet minimum scores upon admissions are required to complete developmental education courses in the specific area of need (State University System of Florida Board of Governors, n.d.).

Excess Credit Surcharge – Florida policy incentivizing students to complete their degree in a timely fashion. A surcharge is assessed once students have accumulated more than 120% of the credits required to graduate with their degree. The threshold has changed three times since the policy's inception in 2009 (Florida Statutes, §1009.286, 2020).

Exploratory/Undecided – traditionally, students who are "unwilling, unable, or unready to make educational or vocational decisions" (Gordon & Steele, 2015, p. viii). In this study, students may also be classified as exploratory when they do not meet the minimum entrance requirements for limited access majors or are part of an admission pathway.

First-Time in College (FTIC) – students with fewer than 12 college credit hours after high school graduation who are admitted to a university for the first time. If any of these students earned an Associate of Arts degree while in high school, they are still considered FTIC.

First to Second Year Retention – FTIC students who reenroll in the fall semester of their second year.

Florida Board of Governors – governing board that serves as governing body of the State University System of Florida, which includes its public universities.

Global First Year – alternative admissions pathway for international students who do not meet minimum English language proficiency requirements. This program combines credit-bearing courses from a student's first year with language instruction and a host of additional support services (International Admissions, 2019).

Golden Scholars bridge program – alternative admissions pathway for underrepresented students. Participants who successfully complete the six-week summer residential program are fully admitted to the fall semester (Student Access & Success, n.d.).

Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) – designation given to institutions whose student population is at least 25% Hispanic.

Performance-Based Funding Model – system of accountability adopted in 2014 by the State University System of Florida Board of Governors. It is used to assess 10 metrics related to retention rates, graduation rates (to also include bachelor's degrees without excess hours and in strategic areas), and post-graduation success (based on percent of bachelor's graduates employed or enrolled in a graduate program and median average full-time wages of undergraduates employed in the state 1 year after graduation) (Budget and Finance Committee, 2014).Institutions are at risk of losing a portion of their base funding each year depending on their successes.

Overview of the Study

Chapter One addressed the importance of career choice and identity development in the formation of major decision-making as well as the pivotal role academic advisors serve during students' transition to college. In Chapter Two I will review the key literature on exploratory majors as well as that of advisors and their role in student success. In Chapter Three I will discuss the importance of qualitative research, focusing on academic advisor interviews as the best method for gaining understanding of the exploratory FTIC student experience at a Hispanic-Serving Institution. Chapters Four and Five will present the study's two themes and six sub-themes that emerged from the interviews. The first theme, Advisors' Perspectives on Exploratory Identity had three sub-themes, 1) Working with Exploratory (Undecided) Students, 2) Advisors' Struggles with Forced Exploratory Students, and 3) Advisors Believe Students are Under Pressure. The second theme, Advisors' Perspectives on Support Systems and Influence also had three sub-themes, 1) Family Support, 2) Peer-to-Peer Connections, and 3) Institutional Personnel. Lastly, Chapter Six will summarize the study's major findings in addition to

advisors' centrality to implications for practice and policy. Recommendations for future research are also addressed.

Chapter Summary

Today's higher education climate is ever more driven by accountability practices such as performance funding. Whether for moral or financial implications, institutions emphasize metrics like persistence or graduation rates. Unfortunately, that does not necessarily lend itself to a focus on student development. FTIC students entering college experience several transitions during their first year, choosing a major among them. They may already be facing pressure from family or friends when it comes to a future major/career and find themselves with an additional pressure of having to make it "official" in college. Academic advisors are very familiar with the conundrum faced by students as they themselves are pressured by the administration to move these students along.

This research study was intended to explore academic advisors' understanding of the exploratory FTIC student experience at a Hispanic-Serving Institution. Advisors' unique place in the life of the institution offered an interesting lens by which to learn of students' needs and concerns as well as their support systems. The insights gleaned from this study provided a host of institutional strategies that could be implemented to help this complex student population develop a sense of belonging that is critical to student success.

Chapter Two reviews the literature on exploratory students, including how their various identities, the environment, and support systems may impact the selection of a major. It also looks at the essential role of academic advising and how the advisor

becomes the central figure in the life of the college student. The themes are ordered as it relates to the findings of the study.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

First-year students undergo a great deal of change when transitioning from high school to college. It is a time fraught with unease and instability, particularly for those who are undecided (Dennis, 2007; Ellis, 2010). However, the major exploration process is a transition most college students experience (Buyarski, 2009; Steele & McDonald, 2008) even though they may not like to verbalize that to someone else. Not being able to share concerns with someone can easily lead to students feeling disconnected from the institution. In the era of accountability and performance funding, it is an institutional imperative to provide them with resources that will help them persist. Of three critical retention elements, academic advising is the vital link. In fact, "very little is more connected to the academic, career, and personal success of students than academic advising" (Davis, as cited by Drake, 2011, p. 11).

The themes in this literature review are organized to reflect categories connected to the findings of this study. The first section focuses on identity and includes research on different types of undecided (i.e., exploratory) students as well as gender, race/ethnicity, and ego-identity development. The second section will look at environmental factors impacting the individual in terms of the United States' economy and accountability. The final section has themes related to support systems such as parents and academic advisors. Ultimately, this will provide more insight on existing literature impacting college students' selection of major and how academic advisors are important to their success.

Exploratory Identity

Transitions are turning points in an individual's life that require "letting go of aspects of the self, letting go of former roles, and learning new roles" (Goodman et al., 2006, p. 23). Adults in transition must cope with significant life events (e.g., loss of career aspirations) that can be confusing and may require help. However, transitions provide great opportunities for growth (Goodman et al., 2006). Selecting a major is a transition college students experience, particularly those who are at the beginning of their undergraduate career. The extent of a transition, if the person even views it as such, is based on his or her perspective. Students lie on a continuum related to major decision that can range from very decided to indecisive (Gordon, 1998).

The "Undecided" Student

Undecided students, also known as "exploratory, open-major, undeclared, general studies major, undetermined, and special major" (Lewallen, 1995, p. 22) students are those who are "unwilling, unable, or unready to make educational or vocational decisions" (Gordon & Steele, 2015, p. viii). It is difficult to ascertain the true number of undecided students because it is a heterogeneous group (Gordon & Steele, 2015) and estimates only include those who chose this classification as identified by an institution's record system (Buyarski, 2009). However, being undecided appears to be the norm rather than exception (Lewallen, 1995). Approximately 20% to 60% of entering college students identify as undecided (Hagstrom, Skovholt, & Rivers, 1997). In addition, 50% to 60% of entering decided students change their major (Lewallen, 1995). Having a declared major does not preclude students from exploring majors (Buyarski, 2009) and undecided

students actually made a decision when they opted to explore their options as they selected this major (Dennis, 2007).

One aspect of being undecided is having an information deficit. According to Gordon and Steele (2015), undecided students are generally lacking in three knowledge areas: (1) self, (2) academic programs, and (3) occupations. Students must begin the exploration process by evaluating their interests, abilities, values, and goals. They should consider their strengths and areas of needed improvement as well as their life goals (e.g., money, family, flexibility, education). Although institutions provide access to academic plans and catalogs listing requirements, students may need help interpreting educational jargon and how courses fit into the larger picture. In addition, many students are not aware of all the potential fields of study provided by their institutions. The last step involves gathering occupational information such as job outlook, salary, and working conditions. Students should also be encouraged to engage in informational interviewing, job shadowing, and attending career fairs because use of these behavioral experiences in the decision-making process allows connections to be made to the world of work (Rettew, 2012). Advisor responsibilities include degree planning, personal development, career decisions, and resource referrals for students (Mu & Fosnacht, 2019). They are aware of what students need to learn to fill the information deficit, but students are generally unaware of such things.

Decided versus Undecided Students

The undecided student population has been the target of considerable research over the years, much of it dedicated to establishing these students as dropout prone because they have unclear academic and career goals. In due course, they became labeled

attrition-prone and targeted for retention programs (Lewallen, 1993) because of the criticality placed on student attrition in the first year of college as "the most important determiner of an institution's graduation rate" (Levitz, Noel, & Richter, 1999, p. 36). Conversely, Cuseo (2005) posited that the reason undecided students are seen as an at-risk group is due to the misinterpretation of early retention studies that indicated students lacking commitment to educational or career goals are more likely to drop out.

Many in the field of higher education assume that freshmen who have clear academic and career goals will be more successful than those who do not (Graunke et al., 2006), and yet some decided students may be at greater risk for attrition than those who are formally undecided because of premature, unrealistic, or uninformed decisions (Cuseo, 2005). For example, in a national sample of 18,461 first-year college students from 433 colleges and universities, Lewallen (1993) determined that "being undecided about major choice or career choice was not significantly associated with persistence" (p. 110). His analysis of CIRP freshman survey data controlled for variables known to affect student retention (e.g., socioeconomic status and high school grades). In a later study by Lewallen (1995) using Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) freshman survey data, he analyzed a national sample of 26,665 students attending 322 four-year colleges and universities representing six types of institutions. He found that undecided students were more likely to exhibit higher levels of academic achievement and were more likely to persist to graduation than those who entered college decided on a major. Similarly, in a study of 2492 first-year students at a large Midwestern university, Graunke et al. (2006) found that individuals with high levels of commitment to a specific major were less likely to graduate in six years compared to those with lower levels of

commitment. Intentionally choosing to be undecided may actually be the "healthiest approach with which to enter the complex environment of the college campus" (Grites, 1981, p. 45).

Decided and undecided students appear to be more similar than disparate. In a large-scale study of 59,618 college-bound seniors, Baird (1967) found few differences between these groups with respect to high school GPAs and tests of academic aptitude (i.e., ACT). Titley and Titley (1980) found that most freshmen, even those who were very decided, experienced tentativeness, uncertainty, or undecidedness. Like undecided students, many of those who are decided need help with career and academic planning (Gordon, 1998). It is then not surprising that in a study of 2,153 students at Brigham Young University who were administered the Goodson Career Development Survey, decided students expressed the same need for help with self-assessment, occupational information, and decision-making as those who were undecided (Goodson, 1981). Gordon (1998) proposed decided and undecided students lie on a continuum.

In a review of 15 studies on decided and undecided students, Gordon (1998) developed seven categories to describe the career decidedness subtypes of decided and undecided students. Decided students were categorized as very decided, somewhat decided, and unstable decided. Very decided students hold positive beliefs about themselves in relation to personal control, decision-making, and importance of future career. Even though these students are confident and satisfied with their major/career, most will change it in the future because of premature decision-making or being unaware they lack information to make an informed choice. Somewhat decided students have doubts about their decision, have lower self-esteem, decision-making ability, and self-

clarity. Students in this category may have made a premature decision because of external pressures (i.e., institutional, parental, or peer) and are concerned with the decision. Unstable decided students made a decision but exhibit extreme uncertainty about career choice, goals, and values as well as a lack of self-efficacy. They are controlled by external forces and are not satisfied with their career choice. Unfortunately, these students may not seek help because they are not officially undecided.

Undecided students were categorized by Gordon (1998) as tentatively undecided, developmentally undecided, seriously undecided, and chronically indecisive. Tentatively undecided students are self-confident, do not perceive barriers preventing achievement of their goals, and are much closer to deciding on a major than the others. Developmentally undecided students need to gather pertinent information about themselves and occupations. They may be interested in several majors but need reinforcement and support to decide. Seriously undecided students have low levels of self-esteem, limited knowledge about educational and occupational options, and feel their lives are controlled by others or fate. Chronically indecisive students have excessive anxiety that can interfere with general decision-making abilities. They are unclear regarding educational and occupational options and will rely on others for help and approval of decisions.

Knowledge of these subtypes is helpful in guiding the development of programs for undecided students. However, it is best to avoid assuming students match the exact description of these categories (Steele, 2003) because they have different needs (Gordon, 1995b, 1998). In fact, “the difference between decided and undecided students has less to do with the professed certainty of student choice than with students’ developmental, psychological, and sociological makeup combined with their decision-making skills and

access to information" (Steele, 2003, p. 15). Access to information is something that can be easily remedied by offering opportunities such as workshops facilitated by academic advisors to help students choose a major/career (Jaradat & Mustafa, 2017).

Major Changers

Many studies identify college students as either decided or undecided, but there is a third often unacknowledged group—the major changer. Major changers are students who enter college decided and then begin experiencing doubts over the selected major. Up to 75% of all college students change majors before they graduate (Gordon & Steele, 2015). In a study of freshmen attending an orientation program at Colorado State University, 75% indicated feeling uncertain about their choice of major (Titley & Titley, 1980). Unfortunately, this large group of masked undecided students is frequently overlooked (Gordon, 1995b). These students may experience a difficult transition period as they attempt to move from one major to another, even more so if they are a first-year student still adjusting to college (Hagstrom, Skovholt, & Rivers, 1997) at an institution without a program or department specifically equipped to help this population.

Students in transition who have completed a considerable number of college credits may feel confusion or anxiety, especially if they have been denied admission to their major of choice (Steele, Kennedy, & Gordon, 1993). When encountering such negative experiences, individuals may be faced with possessing unrealistic views and will require help with developing good decision-making and goal setting skills. In a qualitative study of 16 advanced undecided students at a Midwestern research university, Hagstrom, Skovholt, and Rivers (1997) noted that those who remained undecided after earning a substantial number of college credits exhibited feelings of isolation, shame,

frustration, and hopelessness in addition to lack of motivation and concern about what others think.

It may seem that changing majors or being undecided is negative. However, there are indications that major changers have higher graduation rates compared to non-changers. In tracking student change of major data for the University of South Florida, Micceri (2001) used the State University System of Florida 1998/99 retention database as the official method documenting change of majors and determined 6-year graduation rates for students who transferred to another university in the system. He found that 70% to 85% of students who changed their major at least once graduated, whereas only 45% to 50% of those who did not, were retained. Similarly, Murphy (1999) found that the odds of graduating increased by 40% each time a student changed his or her major. It appears that Tinto's (1993) thoughts on uncertainty prove true to form with this population. Tinto states:

> Movements from varying degrees of uncertainty and back again may in fact be quite characteristic of the longitudinal process of goal clarification which occurs during the college years. Not only should we not be surprised by such movements, we should expect, indeed hope, that they occur. (p. 41)

Good academic advising will help students develop and apply decision-making skills, set priorities, and make choices (Drake, 2011). It is actually the "most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience" (Light, 2001, p. 81). Academic advisors have the advantage of experience, experience with many different types of students and situations.

The Individual and Selection of Major

Transitions are determined by the individual's perception of change, therefore one of the factors that influences this process is self-identity (Goodman et al., 2006).

Individuals do not arrive with a clean slate to a given situation, they bring with them characteristics (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, and ego-identity development) that can affect how they cope with change. Students' ability to manage the major exploration process will depend on how these characteristics affect their interest and values. Academic advisors are aware of the effects of these characteristics on major selection. They may find themselves helping students navigate the academic and social aspects of the college environment (Kot, 2014) to fit in.

Effects of Gender on Selection of Major

The last several decades have seen a significant increase in women's enrollment and completion at postsecondary institutions in the United States. Females compose 56% of the 17 million undergraduate students enrolled in fall 2015 (McFarland et al., 2017) and now earn approximately three of every five degrees (Weaver-Hightower, 2010). And yet, parity has not occurred within college majors. Women remain overrepresented in areas such as education, humanities, and social sciences, but underrepresented in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) (Bradley, 2000; Mann & DiPrete, 2013).

Beutel, Burge, and Borden (2017) would lead us to believe that barriers to integration are partially based on cultural norms related to femininity. In a survey of 657 female students at a south-central United States public university, general conformity to feminine norms is negatively associated with choosing STEM majors and surprisingly, arts and humanities majors, whereas conformity to specific feminine norms is related to choosing a major in arts and humanities, business, and communication and journalism. Gati and Perez (2014) indicate that women and men are still being influenced by gender

stereotypes, preventing one from entering a “masculine” or “feminine” career. Men still demonstrate a greater preference for STEM related fields and women, for social and artistic fields. However, it appears that progress is being made because they found that female and male career preferences were more alike in 2010 than they were in 1990. Knowing that males and females may have preferences for one field over another is a good place to begin when working with students, but it also important to understand the reasons behind their preferences.

In a survey of 161 sophomores at Northwestern University, Zafar (2013) determined that gender differences regarding ability and future earnings were insignificant. Students chose majors for reasons such as enjoying coursework and enjoying work at potential jobs. Females favored the latter in addition to reconciling work and family over males. Similarly, Lackland and DeLisi (2001) found gender differences regarding humanitarian concerns and utility of available majors, but not perception of ability. They posit that students use their value systems to select a course of study and that experiences inherently reinforce said beliefs. Malgwi, Howe, and Burnaby (2005) describe slightly conflicting results from their survey of 788 business students. Although the participants in their study indicated subject interest as the primary factor in choosing a major, women cited ability in the subject as the secondary factor and men the major’s pecuniary potential (i.e., career advancement, job opportunities, and level of compensation). Understanding these reasons can help higher education administrators anticipate the needs of individual students, but it is also important to keep in mind that there are gender differences related to help-seeking behaviors. Women are more willing

than men to consult with others and seek help during the decision-making process. They also tend to be slower in arriving at their decision (Gadassi, Gati, & Dayan, 2012).

Effects of Race/Ethnicity on Selection of Major

The demographic landscape of the United States is rapidly changing. It is expected to become more racially and ethnically diverse in the coming decades, with more than half of all Americans belonging to a racial/ethnic minority group by 2044 (Colby & Ortman, 2014). The two largest groups, Hispanics (17%) and African Americans (13%), will increase their portion of the population by 2060 to 29% and 14%, respectively (Colby & Ortman, 2014). The National Center for Education Statistics (2017) also reported an increase in enrollment numbers for Black (14%) and Hispanic (17%) students in fall 2015. However, the same cannot be said for the representation of these groups in college majors across the board.

An analysis of U.S. Census data via the American Community Survey (ACS) revealed that African Americans with bachelor degrees are highly concentrated in health and medical administration services in addition to majors associated with serving the community (e.g., human services and community organization and social work), but underrepresented in STEM, health, and business majors. As a group, they forego the faster growing and higher paying occupations for those that are lower-paying (Carnevale, Fasules, & Landis-Santos, 2016). Hispanics with bachelor degrees find themselves in a similar situation by being underrepresented in STEM, health, consulting, marketing, and finance majors. However, they are highly concentrated in international business, multi/interdisciplinary studies, as well as industrial and manufacturing engineering (Carnevale, Fasules, & Landis-Santos, 2015). Keshishian, Brocavich, Boone, and Pal

(2010) also found African American and Hispanic students were less likely to choose a STEM major. However, other studies contradict these findings.

Using data from the National Education Longitudinal Study (1988-1994), Ma (2009) found that Black students were not underrepresented in Science & Engineering (S&E) fields as their first college major choice. He postulated that overrepresentation of racial minority students in S&E majors at the beginning of their undergraduate career, but not at the end indicates a "leak in the pipeline" (p. 229) that could be due to attrition. Likewise, in a study using 10 years' worth of administrative data from three Texan public universities, Dickson (2010) found that Black and Hispanic students make similar major choices as White students in relation to Science and Engineering (S&E) fields. She suspects that underrepresentation of Blacks and Hispanics in S&E fields may also be due to their lower graduation rates.

Major choice as it relates to racial or ethnic minority groups is a more complex process that requires one to look beyond an individual's interests or decision-making approach to his/her environment or context. Fouad and Byars-Winston (2005) conducted a meta-analysis of 16 studies that included a total of 19,611 participants. Although students had similar aspirations, the results indicated that perception of occupational opportunity and career barriers are heavily influenced by race/ethnicity. This is corroborated by Arbona (1990) who found that barriers to occupational mobility were due to socioeconomic status and lack of opportunities among Hispanic students. They demonstrated less optimism about acquiring demanding jobs in comparison to White students. However, the researcher cautioned against assuming all Hispanics are similar. This ethnic group is heterogeneous with important differences among sub-groups (i.e.,

country of origin), socioeconomic backgrounds, and regions (e.g., Mexican Americans in urban California versus Mexican Americans in rural south Texas). The concept of acculturation is also relevant to this group but is associated with anyone who operates out of more than one cultural context. Such individuals are engaged in the immediate culture of where they reside but may still adhere to norms for the culture of origin (Miller & Kerlow-Myers, 2009). More acculturated Latino Americans may have similar career behaviors as their White peers, whereas those experiencing low acculturation are more influenced by cultural values such as familismo and allocentrism (Carlstrom, Kaff, & Low, 2009).

Effects of Ego-Identity Formation on Decision-Making

Identity is a "self-constructed, dynamic organization of drives, abilities, beliefs, and individual history" (Marcia, 1980, p. 159). The more developed it is, the more cognizant individuals are about their strengths, weaknesses, and similarities and differences to others. The less developed it is, the more individuals rely on others for external validation. Identity is formed gradually as decisions are made and potentially reevaluated (Marcia, 1980). Many studies have used Erikson's theory of identity development as a theoretical framework to discuss adolescent behavior. However, its constructs are difficult to operationalize. Instead, researchers use Marcia's identity-status paradigm of identity achievement, foreclosure, identity diffusion, and moratorium to subject Erikson's theories to empirical study (Berzonsky, 1985; Marcia, 1980).

The absence or presence of crisis and commitment during development forms identity. Crisis is a decision-making period where events or information challenge a person's perspectives, values, or belief systems. Commitment occurs when there is a

personal investment by the individual to commit to a new idea or recommit to the original perspective, value, or belief (Berzonsky, 1985; Koring & Reid, 2009; Marcia, 1980). "Identity achievements" are individuals who explored or resolved a crisis before committing. "Foreclosures" commit without exploring or resolving a crisis period. "Moratoriums" are currently undergoing a crisis period and remain uncommitted. "Diffusions" are uncommitted but may or may not have undergone a crisis period (Marcia, 1980). Decided and undecided college students are at different levels of ego-identity development. Interventions will differ based on the varying levels of exploration and commitment experienced by both groups (Gordon & Kline, 1989). Although difficult to accurately determine, many new college students find themselves in "foreclosure" (Gordon, 1981) when you consider that 50% to 60% of entering decided students change their major (Lewallen, 1995).

"Foreclosures" commit to a decision without exploring their values or needs and experience no crisis period. These individuals concede to external pressures by adopting the beliefs and values of significant others, typically their parents, before going through normal developmental stages of decision-making (Berzonsky, 1985; Gordon, 1981). Adolescents usually begin identity formation in the foreclosure stage and move forward after each crisis. In some cases, they never leave foreclosure and become older versions of their 10-year-old selves by holding on to the beliefs to which they had foreclosed (Marcia, 2002).

Berzonsky (1985) also found that college students in a foreclosure status showed "significantly greater underachievement than individuals in other statuses" (p. 536). Transient foreclosures, a state induced by the college experience, were less focused and

less committed to academic pursuits, perhaps because of increased freedom from adult supervision. In effect, they did not perform at the level of which they were capable during their freshman year. Arnett (2000) provides an interesting perspective on modifications to stages of human development caused by modern society that would explain how the transition to adulthood has extended. This might provide additional insight into the disruption of identity formation in college students.

Emerging Adulthood

During the human lifespan, an individual will face and resolve crises as they progress through eight developmental stages. The crux of identity formation takes place during adolescence in the identity vs. role confusion stage. The traditional college years fall between adolescence (age 12 to 18) and young adulthood (age 19 to 40). Prohibiting students from progressing at a natural pace may result in role confusion and the inability to make decisions related to career choice, among other things (Erikson, as cited in Koring & Reid, 2009).

Social-structural and economic changes taking place in many industrialized societies have prolonged the transition to adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Côté & Bynner, 2008; Hendry & Kloep, 2007), so much so that Arnett (2000) proposed adding a new developmental stage labeled “emerging adulthood.” Emerging adulthood (age 18 to 25) would now be the stage at which the opportunity for identity exploration would take place, especially as it relates to educational paths, careers, love, and worldviews. College students will often change majors, particularly during their first two years, as they find the one that best fits their imagined future. With many choosing to attend graduate school, emerging adults are given the opportunity to switch directions from the

occupational path they chose as undergraduates. As a result, young adulthood is potentially staved off until the late twenties and thirties.

Arnett is not without opponents. Côté and Bynner (2008), along with Hendry and Kloep (2007), agree that the transition to adulthood is taking longer because young adults are staying in school longer, marrying later, and having children later compared to past generations. However, they do not view emerging adulthood as a universal stage, but one that is limiting because it depends on the cultural context to which young people are exposed. Côté & Bynner (2008) suggest that lack of financial independence until the late twenties and a breakdown in standards are instigators of pervasive identity confusion among young people. This "new normal" (p. 264) condition is misinterpreted as an official developmental stage by individuals such as Arnett.

Identity is an integral part of the major selection process. It is easy for academic advisors to provide academic information to students, but they may perceive or internalize it differently because of their gender, race/ethnicity, or ego-identity. One also needs to consider the students' environmental context and how that affects their identity. There could be extenuating circumstances such as family or peers who are encouraging them to pursue a particular goal. Advisors are in tune to what students may be experiencing.

The Environment and Selection of Major

"Adulthood is viewed primarily in relation to the context in which it occurs" (Goodman et al., 2006, p. 14). The changes individuals experience (e.g., career transitions and choices) all take place within the social context. Mayer and Schoepflin (1989) contend that the state provides legal, social, and economic order to our lives. It

establishes boundaries for personal transitions such as entry into and exit out of the educational system and occupational structure (as cited by Goodman et al., 2006). The influence of this social context can be seen as college students wrestle with the major decision-making process. They are aware that the choice of major is a critical factor in determining future earnings (Arcidiacono, Hotz, & Kang, 2012). These future graduates are under an incredible amount of parental and societal pressures (Gordon & Steele, 2015) to choose a major that will lead to future employment, especially if lucrative in nature (Leppel, 2001; Robst, 2007; Shaffer & Zalewski, 2011). Parents, as well as the federal government, state government, and higher education institutions, expect the economic investment in a college education to deliver economic returns (McCalla-Wriggins, Hughey, Damminger, & Burton Nelson, 2009). Academic advisors find themselves in a prominent position when it comes to these financial conversations.

Global Supremacy and the United States Economy

College students' values have changed over the course of the last several decades. In the 1960s, Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) surveys indicated "developing a meaningful philosophy of life" was the top reason for attending college. Since that time, values relating to economic and occupational aspirations have become more prominent. "Being well-off financially," "increasing one's earning power," and "making more money" have become more entrenched responses (Gordon & Steele, 2003). These changes are an example of how globalization has defined the new economy (Zumeta, Breneman, Callan, & Finney, 2012). This economy is characterized by competition between nations, states (specifically in the U.S.), and local communities, including higher education institutions. Higher education is experiencing increased

scrutiny and demands while receiving less funding to complete its mission of educating and preparing individuals for today's global economy. As the need to demonstrate value to society becomes more pronounced, globalization forces institutions to evolve rapidly. This open market controls performance in the public sector and is the mechanism by which institutions are being held accountable. By all accounts, students are receiving an economic return on their investment and becoming economically productive members of society. The massification of higher education has also generated a shift toward vocationalism with an emphasis on transferable skills. Universities are even being asked to make their curricula more relevant to the world of work (Olssen & Peters, 2005), which is understandable considering the push for certain fields of study.

"We want a world-class higher education system that…contributes to economic prosperity and global competitiveness…and gives Americans the workplace skills they need to adapt to a rapidly changing economy" (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p. xi). Global competition is emphasized again in a statement by Norman Augustine (2005) on behalf of the Committee on Science, Engineering, and Public Policy where he shares that Americans are in competition with their "neighbors" at home and abroad. To maintain this country's high standard of living, the quality of our workforce must be augmented "in the fields that underpin most innovation: science, mathematics, and technology" (COSEPUP, 2005, p. 5). The primary focus in recent years has been the need to produce more STEM graduates so that the United States can be number one in the world economically and in innovation. Nowhere in the rhetoric espoused by government officials do they encourage pursuit of these fields out of love or passion for the subject or suggest students take the time to find the major that best fits them. However, Soria and

Stebleton (2013) found that students benefit more from personal satisfaction and belonging when a major is selected for intrinsic reasons such as finding the field interesting, enjoying the coursework, or satisfying intellectual curiosity as opposed to extrinsic factors composed of opinions from parents or society at large. How then, do we rationalize this push for STEM majors?

The United States, as a postindustrial society, is heavily dependent on an educated workforce with postsecondary skills and credentials. It is estimated that 90% of the fastest growing jobs in this changing "world economy" will require some type of postsecondary education and that jobs that only require a high school education are on the decline. As the nation's demographics shift to include a larger percentage of ethnic and racial minorities, the United States will increasingly rely on these groups as a source of new workers (U.S. Department of Education, 2006; Perna, 2006). As a whole, individuals and the public will benefit when they become educated, as they will exhibit higher productivity and receive higher wages on which they will pay higher taxes (Doyle, 2007). Individuals with a bachelor's degree are expected to earn $2.1 million over their lifetime–almost double that of an individual with only a high school diploma (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). In the race for global supremacy, this focus on educational attainment has shifted public policy emphasis from access to completion to increasing degree production (McGuinness Jr., 2011).

Higher Education, Accountability, and the National Agenda

The shifting public policy focus to increase degree production does not necessarily mean institutions will be receiving additional funds to help them accomplish this goal. Substantial funding increases are unlikely due to "the federal deficit, competing

priorities for public funds, public anger about rising student costs, and severe competition to the continuing financial constraints" (McGuinness Jr., 2011, p. 139). These changes will require states to develop innovative ways in which to fund public higher education to increase degree production—ways that will move higher education "from a system primarily based on reputation to one based on performance" (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p. 21).

Institutions are facing increased public scrutiny and are feeling pressured by many stakeholders (e.g., students, parents, government agencies, funding agencies) to be accountable for the retention and graduation of their students (Ryan & Glenn, 2002). State legislatures across the country are implementing some type of quantitative accountability measures that would minimally include data on first year retention and 5 or 6-year graduation rates to demonstrate effectiveness (Callan, Doyle, & Finney, 2001). Although seemingly a more recent occurrence, performance funding has been an interest of many since the late 1980s (McGuinness Jr., 2011)–so much so that the majority of public education systems have implemented this type of funding mechanism (Wellman, 2013). This approach to funding is expected to create competition and improve quality through increased productivity, accountability, and control, as determined via performance indicators (Olssen & Peters, 2005); it is one method by which state funding is directly tied to the performance of public institutions (McGuinness Jr., 2011).

According to Miao (2012), policymakers developing performance indicators should take state and national higher education goals into consideration. The United States' goal is global supremacy. This would require increased degree production in STEM fields (COSEPUP, 2005), monitored by accountability measures (U.S.

Department of Education, 2006). In at least one state, the performance funding model includes a metric related to the number of bachelor's degrees within programs of strategic emphasis that includes STEM fields (Budget and Finance Committee, 2014). Including a metric that privileges certain majors over others affects the culture of an institution and has ramifications for students' major decision-making process. Colleges and universities develop frameworks within which they communicate to students how to go about choosing a major; it may or may not allow students to be undecided and/or explore various subject areas (Mullen, 2014; Stinebrickner & Stinebrickner, 2014), particularly when the focus is on specific majors.

Institutional Response to Selecting a Major

Over time, some institutions have developed policies, made decisions, and created programs and services to improve first-year student success while others have not prioritized the first year of college, thus the extent to which first year initiatives have been implemented will vary (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005). In the 2000 National Survey of First-Year Practices, 323 institutions across all Carnegie classifications indicated that commonly adopted strategies include first-year seminars, learning communities, service-learning, supplemental instruction, and early alert systems. The same survey found that 8% of institutions require their first-year students to declare a major upon entry. The results of this institutional policy were dependent on Carnegie classification, with 36% of baccalaureate-liberal arts institutions not allowing entering first-year students to choose an official major and 54% of four-year campuses allowing them to choose, but not requiring or strongly encouraging them to do so (Upcraft et al., 2005). In 2002, a second National Survey of First-Year Practices was conducted, with

993 institutions responding across all Carnegie classifications. The survey yielded similar results, with 8% of institutions requiring first-year students to declare an official major upon entry (Barefoot, 2002).

An institution's decision to implement a policy or standard operating practice such as not allowing or requiring first-year students to declare an official major upon entry reflects its philosophy on students' major decision-making abilities. The enactment of policies can be a powerful influence on student persistence (Kuh, 2001) because they become a guide to what assumptions, values, and preferences the institution considers to be acceptable behavior that is ultimately perceived as normal by the student (Kuh & Whitt, 2000). At one extreme, the message communicated by institutions who do not allow students to officially declare a major in the first year is that this is a time for self-discovery and an opportunity to explore options. Alternatively, the message communicated by institutions who require students to declare a major upon entry is that they are fully aware adults who should know what career path to pursue. "Research on student retention creates a dilemma for educators who recognize that while commitment to a major and a career is positively correlated with persistence, many first-year students are not ready to make that commitment" (Barefoot, 2000). Institutional policies that require students to declare a major early on fail to understand the need for students to go through a decision-making process and dedicate time for self-discovery (Cuseo, 2005).

Students may not be fully aware of federal, state, or institutional policies that are affecting their choices, but they expect advisors to provide them with accurate information and guidance (Mu & Fosnacht, 2019). Advisors may also advocate for

students and help them negotiate the system in addition to being realistic about the situation (King, 1993). Unfortunately, not all students welcome realism.

Student Support Systems

Support is essential to managing transitions in life such as choosing a major. It can cushion the impact of stress and emphasize one's social connections while manifesting itself in emotional, informational, and practical ways (Rodriguez, Garbee, & Martinez-Podolsky, 2021). However, the impact on one's life depends on how said support is perceived by the affected individual. For example, students may generally welcome family support, but not if they lacked college knowledge (Rodriguez et al., 2021). In such a situation, they may seek support from an academic advisor. This section discusses support provided by parents and academic advisors.

Parental Influence on Selection of Major

Parental support is crucial to college students' success. Nichols and Islas (2016) in a qualitative study at a selective residential private university in California found that both first generation and continuing generation students felt their parents provided emotional support and instrumental support that were integral to their success in college. In a qualitative study on Millennials at a midsized private Midwestern university, Montag et al. (2012) found that students look primarily to their parents for support regarding college decisions like changing or choosing a major. These results were echoed by additional researchers that noted parents are a major influence in educational and career transitions (Tziner, Loberman, Dekel, & Sharoni, 2012) and are frequently used as a source of advice (Areces, Rodríguez Muñiz, Suárez Alvarez, de la Roca, & Cueli, 2016) about career issues and choice of vocation (Tziner et al., 2012). However, in addition to

serving as a source of emotional support, parents can exert pressure that could potentially help and/or hinder their student's decision-making process (Montag et al., 2012).

Many parents find themselves, intentionally or not, participating in the college admissions process. Their involvement can at times cause their children undue pressure (Gordon, 1995b). The increasing cost of higher education appears to be the impetus for parents to expect their children to know what major/career they plan on pursuing at the outset (Titley & Titley, 1980). "Parents are often fearful of a student losing time or 'wasting courses' if he or she does not decide upon a major immediately upon entering college" (Gordon, 1995b, p. 54). In a survey study of 161 sophomores at Northwestern University, Zafar (2012) found that gaining parents' approval is an important determining factor in students' selection of major. The students in this study believed their parents would be more likely to approve of majors related to high social status or those that would lead to a high paying job. Some students find changing majors highly stressful because they feel like they may be letting their parents down (Steele & McDonald, 2008); they experience self-conflict because the major they would like is not the one parents want for them (Dennis, 2007). Racial/ethnic minority students may also feel compelled to choose a major when entering college because their parents are not supportive of them being undecided (Gordon & Steele, 2015). Unfortunately, students who choose a major based on extrinsic (e.g., parents) as opposed to intrinsic reasons will likely switch to a different major after having invested time and money in the original choice (Dennis, 2007).

Academic Advisors and Selection of Major

"All students need career advising, even those who enter college already decided on an academic major" (Gordon, 2006, p. 5); they may become part of the 75% who later change (Hughey & Hughey, 2009). Advisors may not realize it, but helping students prepare for entry into the labor market via discussions regarding majors and career opportunities is expected by students and parents who view college as an economic investment on which returns are expected (McCalla-Wriggins, Hughey, Damminger, & Burton Nelson, 2009).

Students do not recognize the distinction between academic advising and career advising (Burton Nelson & McCalla-Wriggins, 2009); they will ask advisors to help them sort through vast amounts of complex information including factors (e.g., family, peers, the changing economy and workplace) involved in the daunting decision-making process (Hughey & Hughey, 2009). These conversations ultimately help students develop educational goals (Cooney, 2000) and connect them with their interests and strengths (Gordon & Steele, 2003). Advisors serve an important role in students' college experience because they become their link to the institution.

Benefits of Committing to an Appropriate Major

Students' majors affect student learning and satisfaction, job stability and satisfaction in addition to career opportunities and salaries (Porter & Umbach, 2006). Additionally, decided students may not be as fulfilled with their career choice as someone who is undecided and takes the time to explore and decide on an appropriate choice (Gordon, 1998). Findings from the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) survey administered to 145,150 students in Spring 2009 across six large public

universities with very high research activity suggest students benefit more from personal satisfaction and belonging when a major is selected for intrinsic reasons such as finding the field interesting, enjoying the coursework, or satisfying intellectual curiosity as opposed to extrinsic factors composed of opinions from parents or society at large (Soria & Stebleton, 2013). These results are comparable to a cross-sectional study of the ACT Alumni Outcomes Survey where researchers analyzed data from 93,229 college alumni representing approximately 300 colleges and universities of all types in 42 states. They found that individuals who enter the workforce in jobs consistent with their interests have larger salaries. The effects of job congruence on earnings are almost equal to years of education (Neumann, Olitsky, & Robbins, 2009).

Once students have gone through the exploration process and selected a major or found an academic home, they feel a sense of belonging and commitment to an educational goal. Research has shown that there is a strong relationship between belonging, student retention, and graduation (Tovar, Simon, & Lee, 2009). When there is more institutional commitment (i.e., greater sense of belonging), the student is more likely to remain in college (Campbell & Mislevy, 2012; Hausmann, Ye, Schofield, & Woods, 2009; Schlossberg, 1989), thereby achieving institutional and state goals related to retention and graduation rates. This is truly a by-product of "advisors that really care and work tirelessly to help their students to graduate" (Nicholas, 2020).

Academic Advising

Academic advising is the "cornerstone of student retention" (Crockett, as cited by King, 1993, p. 28). And yet, there are few studies related to advising effectiveness (Barbuto, Story, Fritz, & Schinstock, 2011; Mu & Fosnacht, 2019). The advisor-student

relationship is one of the few intentional connections designed for student success and meant to endure throughout the college experience (Barbuto et al., 2011). King (1993) indicated that:

> Academic advising is the only structured service on our campuses that guarantees students some kind of interaction with concerned representatives of the institutions. […]. Advisers play a key role in helping students become integrated within the academic and social systems on campus, which in turn contributes to student growth, satisfaction, and persistence. (pp. 21–22)

Indeed, from the moment a student matriculates at FIU, they are assigned to an academic advisor with access to the Panther Success Network, the communication platform where advising messages and reports are located.

During the Fall 2019 semester, undergraduate students at FIU were asked to take the Excellence in Academic Advising survey developed by the Gardner Institute as part of a self-study. The results revealed that students felt "the most important thing for advisors to do is to guide them and prepare them to successfully complete the journey to graduation and into a career" (Nicholas, 2020). This is in line with other studies. Smith and Allen (2006) found that curricular integration to academic, career, and life goals as well as information, individuation, shared responsibility, and referral were important to students. Advising also helps students with clarifying life and career goals (Filson & Whittington, 2013; Mu & Fosnacht, 2019).

In a survey of faculty/staff for the same FIU self-study mentioned above, advisors indicated the most important thing they do is "help students understand what to do and how to do it" as well as "understand students' interests, goals, and concerns" (Nicholas, 2020). Ultimately, an academic advisor has many roles. Joe Cuseo (2003) defined it best:

> An advisor is someone who…helps students become more self-aware of their distinctive interests, talents, values, and priorities; who enables students to see the

> "connection" between their present academic experience and their future life plans; who helps students discover their potential, purpose, and passion; who broadens students' perspectives with respect to their personal life choices, and sharpens their cognitive skills for making these choices, such as effective problem-solving, critical thinking, and reflective decision-making. (p. 15)

Academic advisors serve a pivotal role in the life of college students. They are integral to the educational experience (Filson & Whittington, 2013) because they help students discern why they are in college, what the curricular requirements are for their major, and what potential co-curricular opportunities exist (White, 2015).

Chapter Summary

A study that explores academic advisors' understanding of the exploratory FTIC student experience at a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) is sorely needed. Although the selection of major process is an integral transition in the college student experience, few recent studies on exploratory (i.e., undecided) students or indecision focus on diverse student populations (Gordon & Steele, 2015). Pascarella (2006) indicated there could be unique effects on populations at institutions like HSIs, so incorporating diverse perspectives will enrich the literature on academic advisors and their undecided students.

The literature review also revealed the importance of evaluating the impact that institutional policies have on major selection. Certain policies can have an opposite intended effect on students and cause long-term negative outcomes for the institution (e.g., being less likely to persist or earn fewer credits when required to declare a major after earning 45 credits) (Pringle, 2014). There are even times when "advisors bear the brunt of criticism for implementing FIU policies" (Nicholas, 2020). In this case, advisors become the de facto representative of the policy; whether that decision was made at the state or institutional level is irrelevant to the student.

Chapter Two reviewed the relevant literature and sought to demonstrate how this dissertation will add to the knowledge base. Chapter Three will outline the methodology of the study that seeks to answer two questions: (a) What are academic advisors' perceptions of the needs and concerns of exploratory FTIC students? and (b) What are advisors' perceptions of exploratory FTIC students' support systems? The results will provide information to help inform institutional policies related to retention and graduation metrics, contribute to a gap in the literature, as well as develop professional development opportunities for advisors.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

This chapter focuses on the methodology used to explore academic advisors' understanding of the exploratory FTIC student experience at a Hispanic Serving Institution. This qualitative study provides insight into strategies the institution can implement to help students develop a sense of belonging and connection to the institution, ultimately improving their success. Undecided students have been the focus of many studies since the 1920's (Lewallen, 1995), but students in the various studies are predominately White at Midwestern colleges or universities. However, experiences influencing intellectual and personal development can differ based on race/ethnicity. There may be unique effects of being undecided on non-white populations or institutions such as Hispanic-Serving Institutions (Pascarella, 2006).

The following questions frame the study: (a) What are academic advisors' perceptions of the needs and concerns of exploratory FTIC students? (b) What are advisors' perceptions of exploratory FTIC students' support systems? A review of the study's purpose and research questions are discussed as well as research design and procedures, including data analysis.

Research Design

Perceptions of a given subject vary from population to population and person to person. Qualitative research helps us to understand "how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 6). It is a descriptive endeavor, where data are words or pictures as opposed to numbers (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 5) that help to

establish patterns or themes. As Creswell (2007) notes, it "includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, and a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and it extends the literature or signals a call for action" (p. 37). This made it particularly suited for investigating academic advisors' understanding of the exploratory FTIC student experience at Florida International University, the Hispanic Serving Institution in this study.

A qualitative interview approach like that used by Gieser (2015) was an effective method by which to explore academic advisors' understanding of the exploratory FTIC student experience. It provided a space for their voice to be heard and exist as a source of data, which was integral to this process because the literature on exploratory minoritized populations is limited. Traditionally marginalized groups are often understudied, left voiceless in research (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010). This study contributed to the literature on undecided students, but more importantly, used the data to suggest institutional strategies tailored to their needs, so they are more likely to succeed (Upcraft et al., 2005).

A central tenet of qualitative research is that reality is constructed by individuals as they interact with their social worlds (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In this study, social worlds included family, friends (or peers), and institutional resources. Basic qualitative research gives one the conceptual latitude to identify patterns or themes that emerge from the data. As Percy, Kostere, and Kostere (2015) explain "...if someone reported that anger was part of the experience, we'd be interested in the *fact* that someone was angry, not in what that experience of anger ("being angry") was like" (p. 77). Being able to "uncover and interpret these meanings" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 25) helped the researcher

understand what perceptions advisors have of the needs and concerns of exploratory FTIC students and what perceptions advisors have of exploratory FTIC students' support systems. Ultimately, this information will be used to help improve retention and graduation metrics.

Role of the Researcher

One of the hallmarks of qualitative research is that the researcher is the "primary instrument for data collection and analysis…" (Merriam, 2002, p. 25). As a result, investigators need to employ reflexivity throughout the study. This critical reflection includes explaining positions on topics in addition to articulating the values or assumptions being introduced to the study that could potentially affect data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2002). Also, it is important to acknowledge that subjectivity can never completely be removed (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

I have worked at Florida International University for the past 16 years. Although my current position is Program Director of the Center for Student Engagement, I served as an academic advisor and administrator of the Undergraduate Education Academic Advising Center. The Academic Advising Center, now Exploratory Advising (EA), was the office that advised all freshmen and sophomores until they declared a major at 60 credits. Under the initial advising restructure, EA solely advised exploratory majors and students who may be thinking of changing majors and remained integral to the central administration of academic advising. Approximately three years ago, EA moved to the College of Arts, Sciences and Education (CASE), a move of which I was not particularly fond because it may ultimately be subsumed within Interdisciplinary Studies and cease to exist. Also, many exploratory students are interested in majors outside of CASE and EA

seemed to be much better connected to the other college/schools when it was centrally located. Outside of advising, I maintained administrative oversight of First Year Experience and two exploratory courses (i.e., Discover Your Major and Major & Career Exploration) for which I developed the curricula. I also taught new students for many years via First Year Experience and Introduction to Honors and Leadership. Although I am currently the Lead Instructor for Introduction to Honors and Leadership, I no longer work with the other courses.

Much of my professional life has involved freshmen and/or exploratory students. My passion lies in first-year student success, which includes helping students determine their interests and goals. Regardless of the major indicated on their admissions application, I, like Erikson and Strommer (1991), believe "[w]e would do well to treat each one of our entering freshmen as an undecided student" (p. 74). Most of them have not taken the initiative to learn about themselves, the curriculum, or career field(s) related to the declared major. Unfortunately, procedural changes (i.e., advising restructuring), along with policy implementations (i.e., excess credit surcharge, performance funding metrics, and 30-credit declaration), have impacted students' curricular flexibility and emphasized retention and graduation metrics over learning and exploration. In addition, "[p]arents are often fearful of a student losing time or 'wasting courses' if he or she does not decide upon a major immediately upon entering college" (Gordon, 1995b, p. 54). Encounters with parents and observation of students' reactions to suggesting exploratory as a major corroborate this. This experience leads me to believe that the term "exploratory" has been stigmatized and that individuals are working under mistaken assumptions (e.g., it will take students longer to graduate if they are exploratory).

More personally, I am a Hispanic female of Nicaraguan and Costa Rican origin. I was not technically an undecided student. I studied Biology and Chemistry but explored other potential minors and majors during my undergraduate career as a pre-medical student. However, it took me approximately 9 years after I completed my master's degree in Public Health to discover that I wanted to pursue a doctoral degree in Higher Education. A few years ago, one of my professors asked if I was an exploratory doctoral student. I, like many college students, experienced parental pressure to pursue a career in medicine. It took several years to realize that path was not what I wanted for myself because I did not want to disappoint my father. Ultimately, I chose what was best for me. It took him several years to come to terms with my decision, but he later told me on multiple occasions that he was proud of me and my accomplishments. I hope all students have someone who will support them in their academic and career decisions.

Removal of all biases is impossible, but I took several measures to mitigate them. To begin, I kept a reflective journal during the study into which notes and questions were recorded. Member checking allowed me to incorporate participants' review of their narratives (Tracy, 2010). And peer checks provided an opportunity for a colleague to determine if findings were plausible by 1) scanning transcripts and 2) reviewing codes/themes (Merriam, 2002).

Site and Context

The site selected for this research study was Florida International University (FIU) for two main reasons. 1) It is a Hispanic Serving Institution and 2) the institution was easily accessible to me. FIU is a large, 4-year, public, Hispanic-Serving Institution in the southeastern United States with a R1 Carnegie Classification: Doctoral Universities -

Highest Research Activity. There are 58,928 students and 8,769 employees. Over 81% of the student body identifies as an ethnic/racial minority, 65% of which are Hispanic and 12% Black or African American. Students are largely commuters with approximately 6% living on campus. The first-to-second year retention rate of full-time students is 91%. There are 196 degree programs, 68 of which are at the bachelor's level. It is first in the nation for awarding bachelor's and master's degrees to Hispanic students and is among the 10 largest public universities in the United States (Florida International University, n.d.).

History of Academic Advising at FIU

Academic advising at FIU follows a decentralized model where students are assigned to a professional academic advisor in their major upon matriculation. There are currently 119 professional advisors across the university, approximately 45 of whom are housed in the College of Arts, Sciences & Education, including five who are assigned exploratory students as a portion of their caseload. In addition, there are seven academic advising administrators with one assigned to the exploratory team. However, this was not always the case.

When FIU opened its doors in 1972, it was an upper division school. This meant that most students completed their Associate of Arts degree at the local community college and then transferred to complete their last two years at FIU. At that time, students were assigned to faculty advisors. The term faculty advisor and academic advisor were used interchangeably (Florida International University, 1973). A few years later, the School of Business and Organizational Sciences created a central undergraduate advising unit (Florida International University, 1975) that still exists today, but faculty advising remained the predominant form of advising across the University.

In 1981, FIU transitioned to a 4-year university when it admitted its first freshman class (Florida International University, 2013). The incorporation of lower division students resulted in the creation of Advising Services as part of Student Support Services (Florida International University, 1982) which later became known as the Office of Undergraduate Studies. This centralized unit was responsible for the advising of students with less than 60 credits. Upon admission, students were assigned to an advisor. Once they reached 30 credits, they could choose to intend their major and then declare after they earned 60 credits. Those who intended or declared their major were advised by the associated department (Florida International University, 1983). For the most part, students began seeing faculty advisors once they transitioned to the department. Also, academic advisors were hired as coordinators of academic support services with no direct upward mobility. Regardless of the amount of experience or number of years one may have in the field, everyone was a coordinator.

The described centralized/decentralized model was in place for approximately 30 years except students were no longer assigned to specific advisors or faculty advisors upon admission as enrollment increased from 5,667 on opening day in 1972 to 16,500 in 1986 and 34,000 in 2008 (Florida International University, n.d.). The Undergraduate Studies Academic Advising Center was tasked with a large responsibility but had a relatively small operation with only three academic advisors in 1994 as recalled by Dr. Janie Valdés (personal communication, July 9, 2021). This increased over time to six academic advisors in 2005. In 2008 you began to see the early stages of a career ladder with the addition of the senior advisor role. By 2009 Undergraduate Studies became Undergraduate Education and the central staff grew to 10 academic advisors, but it was in

2010-2011 that the office experienced its largest growth to 21 central advisors and 9 bridge advisors. Bridge advisors were hired by the central office but located in the colleges/schools. Their main role was to help sophomores transition because they tended to be overlooked without declared majors. FIU saw a need and began investing in academic advising through strategic initiatives. In addition to academic advisors, there were project leads (instead of senior advisors), and assistant directors.

The following year in 2012, FIU moved from a 2+2 model where students declared a major after the first two years or 60 credits to one in which students are admitted directly into the major upon matriculation and assigned to an advisor. Once this occurred, many central advisors were permanently moved to colleges/schools and the bridge advisor role ceased to exist. Undecided majors stayed with the central office but were now referred to as exploratory (Florida International University, 2012). The Academic Advising Center became the Exploratory Advising Center (EAC). However, in 2018 through additional organizational restructuring, the EAC moved to the College of Arts, Sciences & Education. Furthermore, the implementation of FIU's Classification and Compensation Redesign Project in 2015 provided the impetus for the more dynamic career ladder that exists today. Table 1 outlines the career ladder with the number of employees at each level. One could say the professionalization of academic advising at FIU began in 2010, but it took a number of years before certain college/departments were comfortable with faculty advisors transitioning from the formal advising role to a more informal mentor role.

Table 1

Number of Academic Advisors and Advising Administrators by Job Title

Job Group	Job Title	Number of Employees	
		N	%
Academic Advisor	Academic Advisor I	62	52
	Academic Advisor II	32	27
	Academic Advisor III	25	21
Advising Administrator	Manager, Academic Advising Services	11	46
	Assistant Director, Academic Advising Services	7	29
	Associate Director, Academic Advising Services	3	13
	Director, Academic Advising Services	3	13

Source. Analysis and Information Management, personal communication, July 7, 2021

FIU Academic Advisors Today

As the number of academic advisors increased so too did the number of advising administrators, albeit at a slower pace. It is important to note that the functional head of the advising unit in 4 of the 8 colleges/schools with undergraduate programs does not hold a director title, but one of associate director or assistant dean. Academic advisors and advising administrators fall under the administrative job family, whereas assistant deans are faculty administrators; therefore, they are not included in the data presented.

Table 2

Number of Academic Advisors and Advising Administrators by Gender

Gender	Academic Advisors		Advising Administrators	
	N	%	N	%
Female	94	79	19	79
Male	25	21	5	21

Source. Analysis and Information Management, personal communication, July 14, 2021

According to data provided by Analysis and Information Management, FIU currently employs 119 academic advisors, 79% of whom are female and 21% male (see Table 2). In comparison, 56% of the Fall 2020 undergraduate student population was female and 44% male. Table 3 displays the number of academic advisors and advising administrators by race/ethnicity. Hispanic/Latino is the predominate group among academic advisors with 64% followed by Black or African American with 23% and White with 12%. Table 4 provides a comparison between academic advisors and Fall 2020 undergraduate students by race/ethnicity.

Table 3

Number of Academic Advisors and Advising Administrators by Race/Ethnicity

Race/Ethnicity	Academic Advisors		Advising Administrators	
	N	%	N	%
Hispanic/Latino	76	64	16	67
Black or African American	27	23	5	21
White	14	12	2	8
Asian	1	1	0	0
Two or More Races	0	0	1	4
Nonresident Alien	1	1	0	0

Source. Analysis and Information Management, personal communication, July 14, 2021

Participants

"Sample selection in qualitative research is usually nonrandom, purposeful, and small…" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 18). Purposeful sampling was utilized in this study because this technique allowed the researcher to select participants who would be in the best position to contribute to the understanding of the research problem and questions (Creswell, 2014). These "information-rich cases" helped to inform the central condition of the study (Patton, 2002, p. 230) and were chosen based on similar criteria

Table 4

Comparison of Academic Advisors and Fall 2020 Undergraduate Students by Race/Ethnicity

Race/Ethnicity	Academic Advisors	Undergraduate Students*
	%	%
Hispanic/Latino	64	68
Black or African American	23	11
White	12	9
Asian	1	2
Two or More Races	0	2
Nonresident Alien	1	7

*Source. Analysis and Information Management Intranet Site, https://accountability.fiu.edu/intranet-reports.html

(Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006 p. 79). In this case, participants needed to be current or former academic advisors who worked with exploratory FTIC students at FIU because they can speak to the challenges and experiences of this population.

Once approval was granted by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), eligible individuals were contacted directly by me via their university e-mail address. The message included information on the study and my request to interview them via Zoom. Those who replied in the affirmative received a follow-up e-mail thanking them and asking them to schedule an interview via Doodle, an online meeting scheduling tool. Their names were hidden from everyone but the researcher. Prior to the interview, I sent a message regarding confidentiality and informed consent, indicating they may withdraw from the study at any time. I also provided them the link to the online consent form in Qualtrics to review and prompted them to think of a pseudonym they would like to use for the study. When we met for the interview, I asked if they had any questions regarding the online consent form and requested they sign it if they had not already done so. Most

academic advisors immediately provided me with their pseudonym; I gave the others a few minutes to think of one.

Although sample size for qualitative research is generally small and purposeful (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), there is no ideal sample size (Patton, 2002). Instead, the basic qualitative approach looks for representative samples that can provide a broader view of their experiences (Percy et al., 2015). Braun and Clarke (2013) indicate that 6-10 interviews would be sufficient for a small project when using thematic analysis. Several basic qualitative dissertations using thematic analysis corroborated the use of that recommendation by using between 10 and 11 participants (Enzor, 2017; McCutcheon, 2016; Paz-y-Mino, 2015; Welcome, 2014). The sample of this study was 11 current and former academic advisors.

The academic advisors interviewed in this study all worked with exploratory students at Florida International University. To protect their identity, a description is provided of the participants as a whole. The group had a combined 100 years of advising experience, but it ranged from three to eighteen years on an individual basis. Table 5 provides an overview of the academic advising community's years of service to FIU. Sixty-seven percent of academic advisors have been at FIU for five or fewer years and 24% between six and ten years. However, that does not necessarily mean it is years actually advising. Individuals may have been advisors prior to coming to FIU or they moved into advising while at FIU. The information in Table 6 indicates that approximately 52% are entering advising early in their careers if you consider that graduate school is a necessary requirement at FIU to become an advisor, as detailed below.

Table 5

Number of Academic Advisors and Advising Administrators by Years of Service to FIU

Years of Service	Academic Advisors		Advising Administrators	
	N	%	N	%
0-5	80	67	2	8
6-10	28	24	14	58
11-15	8	7	6	25
16-20	2	2	0	0
21-25	1	1	2	8

Source. Analysis and Information Management, personal communication, July 14, 2021

Table 6

Number of Academic Advisors and Advising Administrators by Age Group

Age Group	Academic Advisors		Advising Administrators	
	N	%	N	%
24 and under	2	2	0	0
25-34	59	50	8	33
35-44	39	33	10	42
45-54	12	10	3	13
55-64	5	4	2	8
65 and over	2	2	1	4

Source. Analysis and Information Management, personal communication, July 14, 2021

At minimum, participants all had a master's degree because that is a requirement to be hired as an academic advisor at FIU and is a current standard of practice for entry level positions (White, 2015). The individuals in Table 7 with a bachelor's degree were more than likely departmental advisors exempted from this requirement when the University transitioned to the professional advising model. Eight of the participants had degrees in education which is typical for individuals who aspire to work at a college/university. However, their undergraduate degrees represent the humanities, social

Table 7

Number of Academic Advisors and Advising Administrators by Highest Educational Level

Educational Level	Academic Advisors		Advising Administrators	
	N	%	N	%
Bachelor	5	4	1	4
Master	111	93	22	92
Doctorate	3	3	1	4

Source. Analysis and Information Management, personal communication, July 14, 2021

sciences, and STEM. None of the participants indicated academic advising as an initial career choice. It was introduced to them by a mentor, or via a work/involvement experience. Four advisors were pursuing doctoral degrees in education fields. It is important to note that 18% of participants were male. This is on par with the percentage of male advisors at FIU (21%). A brief profile for each participant can be found in Table 8 below.

Table 8

Participant Profiles

Name	Gender	Advisor Status
Amber	Female	Former
Cecilia	Female	Former
Fabi	Female	Current
Frances	Female	Former
Gigi	Female	Current
Heidi	Female	Current
Jack	Male	Former
Jose	Male	Former
Nina	Female	Former
Tutina	Female	Current
Victoria	Female	Former

Data Collection

Participants were selected from a small group of eligible individuals—current or former academic advisors who worked with exploratory students at Florida International University. I was able to easily make direct contact because of my knowledge of their current position at FIU and their connection to this population over time. Our prior work relationship helped to secure participants and quickly establish rapport. However, institutional restructuring extensively separated our areas such that there were no concerns of direct supervisory relationships.

The 11 academic advisors who agreed to participate were interviewed for up to 90 minutes using a semi-structured format. This format used prepared questions (see Appendix A) to guide the interview but provided the researcher with flexibility to modify or add clarifying questions as necessary (Merriam, 2002). For example, some of the participants discussed activities or events for exploratory students within the context of resources so there was no need for me to specifically ask that question.

"The ideal interview location is a place where both conversational partners are comfortable, where there are few interruptions, and where the conversation is not likely to be overheard" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 172). Participants were interviewed via Zoom using a personalized meeting link because of safety measures due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this allowed them to choose a preferred location with which they were familiar. When I conducted the interviews in October 2020, FIU employees had been working from home for approximately seven months. Prior to recording each interview, I took the time to develop rapport by catching up with each person and further explaining this study.

Zoom recordings were initially transcribed via Zoom. These transcriptions were not completely representative of the conversation because that platform could not understand certain words, particularly for individuals who had a stronger accent. Words such as FIU and exploratory, which were key to the study, were almost always something else so I made sure to repeatedly listen to the recording and manually correct each transcript. As each transcript was completed, it was sent to the individual for review. I asked clarifying questions as needed. Slight edits were made to a few transcripts, but there were no major changes overall. All recordings and transcripts were saved to the researcher's OneDrive, cloud storage password protected system.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is flexible and compatible with many qualitative approaches (Percy et al., 2015). It "involves the searching across a data set–be that a number of interviews or focus groups, or a range of texts–to find repeated patterns of meanings" (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 86). Braun and Clarke's (2012) 6-phase approach to thematic analysis was used to analyze the data collected for this study in conjunction with NVivo, a computer-aided qualitative data analysis software.

The first phase required familiarization of the data. This called for listening to audio/video recordings and rereading interview transcripts. During this process, observational and casual notes were taken of overall impressions of the data or conceptual ideas about the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). For example, I noted that there were conflicting views amongst advisors when it came to exploratory being a major. I also wondered if "exploratory term" might be a code when Tutina shared that it confused students or if "relationships" could be an overarching theme considering that most

participants indicated encouraging students to participate in activities and network with others.

Initial coding began with the second phase. A mix of relevant broad descriptive and interpretive codes were generated that helped answer the research questions. Codes were created for small and large chunks of data, but each data item (i.e., transcript) had to be coded before moving on to the next. There was no limit to the number of codes generated so this phase ended when the data was fully coded (Braun & Clarke, 2012) using thirty-two codes. Table 9 identifies the number of times a code was used and the number of participants who mentioned the code.

Theme and sub-theme construction took place during phase 3. A theme "captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Codes were reviewed for similarities and overlap so they could be collapsed or clustered into a unifying theme. Again, there was no limit to the number of themes that could be constructed, but they had to have depth and detail. This phase ended once data extracts were collated for each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Three candidate themes were generated after reviewing the data: Identity, Student Engagement, and Support Systems & Influence. Identity referred to advisors' perspectives on what it means to be an exploratory major. Student Engagement connected to codes that involved advisors' views on students' general integration/sense of belonging at the institution. Support Systems & Influence are linked to advisors' thoughts on what assistance is available for students to select a major or what influences their major decision-making process. After

further review, sub-themes were generated for Identity and Support Systems & Influence. All candidate themes and sub-themes are outlined with associated codes in Table 10.

Table 9

Frequency Distribution of Codes among Participants

Code	Number of Participants Mentioning Code	Frequency
Resources to help students choose a major	11	24
Influences on major decision making	11	22
Students placed in exploratory	11	22
Pressure to select a major	8	16
Lack of exploratory peer-to-peer connection	11	15
Self-accountability of major selection	9	12
Suggested student event ideas	9	11
Exploratory students feel embarrassed (stigma)	7	9
Reasons students selected exploratory major	3	9
Student resistance to commit to alternate plan	5	9
Developing the exploratory student identity	7	8
Lack of college engagement (missing sense of belonging)	4	7
What advisors help exploratory students figure out	3	7
Student information gap	5	6
Encourage student campus engagement	4	5
Advisor does not like undecided term	4	4
Advisor met mentor	4	4
Exploratory major declaration policy	3	4
Faculty as resource for students	2	4
How advisors explain exploratory	4	4
Pressures on Limited Access Programs students	3	4
Special population impacts	2	4
Advisor's undergraduate years (importance of involvement)	3	3
Exploratory is not a major	2	3
Advisor in touch with potential job opportunity	2	2
Confusion about exploratory as a major	2	2
Exploratory advisor = First year advisor	2	2
Type of exploratory advisors	2	2
Exploratory students needed me	1	2
Advisor did internships as a student	1	1
Advisor's crummy first undergraduate year (not involved)	1	1
Lack of student initiative to attend events and workshops	1	1

Table 10

Candidate Themes and Sub-Themes with Associated Codes

Theme	Sub-theme	Code
Identity	Being Exploratory	Self-accountability of major selection
		Reasons students selected exploratory major
		Developing the exploratory student identity
		Student information gap
		Exploratory major declaration policy
		How advisors explain exploratory
	Forced Exploratory	Students placed in exploratory
		Student resistance to commit to alternate plan
		Special population impacts
		Exploratory is not a major
	Living Under Pressure	Pressure to select major
		Exploratory students feel embarrassed (stigma)
		Pressures on Limited Access Programs students
Student Engagement		Lack of exploratory peer-to-peer connection
		Suggested student event ideas
		Lack of college engagement (missing sense of belonging)
		Encourage student campus engagement
		Advisor's undergraduate years (importance of involvement)
		Advisor's crummy first undergraduate year (not involved)
Support Systems & Influence	Institutional Resources	Resources to help students choose a major
		What advisors help exploratory students figure out
		Faculty as resource for students
		Type of exploratory advisors
	External Influences	Influences on major decision making

Prior to moving forward with phase 4, I met with my expert peer reviewer, a senior enrollment services administrator and former academic advisor (see Appendix B) to discuss codes and candidate themes. The assessment was that it was plausible and logical. I later sent three uncoded transcripts and asked my peer reviewer to review them and provide feedback. The comments and key themes provided were insightful and although expressed differently, corroborated those identified.

Reviewing themes occurred in a 2-stage process in phase 4. The first stage required themes to be compared to collated data extracts to see if they make sense and consider whether the theme could potentially be a code or if there is enough meaningful data to create a thick description. The second stage involved comparing the remaining themes to the entire data set and consider whether the themes capture the most important aspects of and overall tone of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The essential component to phase 4 was determining if there was enough meaningful data. The most helpful tool to visually determine this was NVivo's running tally of participants mentioning codes and the frequency with which they are mentioned (see Table 11). It became apparent that Student Engagement would not stand alone as a theme. It was only referred to 42 times compared to 110 for Identity and 60 for Support Systems & Influence. However, it could work as a sub-theme. After further review of its collated extracts, I realized Peer-to-Peer Connections was a more apropos description and moved it to Support Systems & Influence. External Influences also was renamed based on its collated extracts to Family Support. All other themes and sub-themes remained the same and captured the essence of advisors' perspectives on the exploratory student experience.

Phase 5, defining and naming themes, is the most crucial step in thematic analysis. Each theme must have a clear focus, scope, and purpose that can be vividly elucidated by supporting extracts. The interpreted data should be connected to the research questions and scholarly literature. The line between phases 5 and 6, producing Table 11

Candidate Themes and Sub-Themes with Frequency Distribution of Codes

Theme	Sub-theme	Number of Participants Mentioning Code	Frequency of Code
Identity		11	110
	Being Exploratory	11	43
	Forced Exploratory	11	38
	Living Under Pressure	11	29
Student Engagement		11	42
Support Systems & Influence		11	60
	Institutional Resources	11	38
	External Influences	11	22

the report, can be blurred because writing takes place throughout the study (Braun & Clarke, 2012). My dissertation chair and participants were valuable in helping me to revise and clarify the themes and sub-themes for this study to make sure that they could stand alone and attend to the advisors' voice. Table 12 provides their definitions. The data extracts can be found in the next two chapters where I used them to create a compelling story, the main product of phase 6.

Data Integrity

Lincoln & Guba identify credibility, transferability, consistency/dependability, and confirmability as criteria for trustworthiness (as cited by Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). It is important to note that if one produces a credible study, it is not necessary to separately

show dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Trustworthiness also attends to ethical research conduct (Merriam, 2002). This study was conducted in an ethical manner following IRB regulations which included protecting study participants.

Table 12

Theme and Sub-Theme Definitions

Theme and Sub-theme	Definition
Advisors' Perspectives on Exploratory Identity	Participants' understanding of being an FIU exploratory student
Working with Exploratory (Undecided) Students	Advisors' reflections on interactions with students who choose to be an exploratory major and concerns over current policies
Advisors' Struggles with Forced Exploratory Students	Advisors' challenges working with students who selected a limited access program or are in a special population, but are forced to be an exploratory major
Advisors Believe Students are Under Pressure	Advisors' frustrations and concerns with external pressures affecting student progress in selecting a major
Advisors' Perspectives on Support Systems and Influence	Participants' observations on assistance or influence exploratory students receive when choosing a major
Family Support	Advisors' thoughts on the importance of family and their helping or influencing students' choice of major
Peer-to-Peer Connections	Advisors' views on the absence of community among exploratory students
Institutional Personnel	The importance of academic advisors and faculty as resources in the exploratory student experience

Credibility refers to the authenticity of research findings and can be achieved through thick description and multivocality which attends to participants' voices and the use of thick description to describe their viewpoints, even if it deviates from others' (Tracy, 2010). The researcher made every attempt to provide context, thick description, and include conflicting viewpoints throughout the two results chapters knowing that thick description also enhances transferability, the extent to which one can apply findings to another situation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). If enough detail is included, thick

descriptions help readers come to their own conclusions about how the findings could apply to their context (Tracy, 2010). Triangulation, in this case, using different data sources, also adds to credibility. In addition to the literature, I interviewed two exploratory students, Elizabeth and Joseph, to provide a counterpoint to the advisors in my study.

Member checks provided participants with an additional opportunity to engage in the study. In addition to transcript accuracy confirmation, participants were asked to review the researcher's findings to see if they had a similar understanding of the data which enhanced multivocality (Tracy, 2010). Merriam (2002) also suggests asking colleagues who may be familiar with or new to the topic "to scan some of the raw data and assess whether the findings are plausible based on the data" (p. 26). An expert peer reviewer whose dissertation was a qualitative study and has a background in academic advising coded three transcripts and reviewed my findings. The study's findings were assessed as plausible and logical.

Confirmability is the ability to connect data to one's findings using reflexivity and a confirmability audit. Reflexivity involves the use of a journal to help one uncover "implicit assumptions, biases, or prejudices" (Guba & Lincoln, 1982, p. 248) about the study. The confirmability audit acts like a bookkeeping journal in that one can trace findings to original data and codes (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). Reflexivity and the confirmability audit almost went hand in hand during the study. The largest portion of my journal is dedicated to the study's data and the decisions I made when it came to coding and theme development, but it also included personal sentiments and insights, such as

how I felt after each interview. Some of these comments helped me relive that experience, especially if it was positive.

Chapter Summary

This qualitative study explored academic advisors' understanding of the exploratory FTIC student experience at a Hispanic-Serving Institution, an institution type chosen because of potential unique impacts due to its non-white populations (Pascarella, 2006). The study sought to learn what perceptions academic advisors have of the needs and concerns of exploratory FTIC students and what perceptions academic advisors' have of exploratory FTIC students' support systems. The data were collected from 11 participants using semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2012) 6-phase approach to thematic analysis.

The current and former academic advisors who participated in this study provided insight into strategies that can be implemented to help students develop a sense of belonging and connection to the institution. The two themes and six sub-themes that emerged from the thematic analysis offered a framework with which to build interventions that will lead to increased retention and graduation, ultimately improving student success. Chapters Four and Five will present the findings using thick description.

CHAPTER IV

PERSPECTIVES ON EXPLORATORY IDENTITY

The purpose of this study was to explore academic advisors' understanding of the exploratory FTIC student experience. More specifically, (a) What are academic advisors' perceptions of the needs and concerns of exploratory FTIC students? and (b) What are advisors' perceptions of exploratory FTIC students' support systems? This chapter will focus on the first theme and three sub-themes that emerged from the 11 participant interviews. Advisors' Perspectives on Exploratory Identity, 1) Working with Exploratory (Undecided) Students, 2) Advisors' Struggles with Forced Exploratory Students, and 3) Advisors Believe Students are Under Pressure. The second theme and its sub-themes will be addressed in the next chapter. All findings are described including supporting literature and student interviews (i.e., Elizabeth and Joseph) with advisor interview data for triangulation purposes.

Advisor interviews revealed that being exploratory at FIU is not solely what one traditionally defines as undecided. This is a result of institutional practices that affect how exploratory advisors work with their students. This challenging climate fosters frustration between many groups including students and advisors, advisors and advising administrators, and advisors/advising administrators and FIU/SUS Board of Governors. Advisors proved to be very vocal in their support of students' best interests, which could mean disagreeing with existing policies and procedures. This chapter will go on to discuss the different types of exploratory students and stressors they experience as observed by advisors.

Advisors' Perspectives on Exploratory Identity

Exploratory majors are a complex phenomenon at FIU. Not all exploratory majors consider themselves undecided; those who are undecided may choose to be an exploratory major, but not all who are undecided are labeled exploratory. Cecilia, a former advisor, indicated, "they're in exploratory for many different reasons." Aside from being undecided, Fabi, a current advisor, explained it could mean they want a particular major:

> [They] probably want nursing, [engineering], or a limited access program that [they] need to apply or audition for.

In addition to the majors and programs discussed by Fabi, Heidi, a current advisor, pointed out that certain groups of students were required to be exploratory:

> [S]pecial populations like Golden Scholars, College Prep, and Global First Year [also] have to be in exploratory.

Because there are different types and reasons for being an exploratory student, the development of an exploratory identity needs to be intentional as opposed to something that might occur organically.

Advisors in this study were open about exploratory being a transient stage in a student's undergraduate college career. It was seen like a barrier that they needed to quickly move past. Cecilia explained:

> I think that we've been really focused on getting them to their majors and getting them to understand prospective majors and prospective careers. We haven't focused enough on what it means to be an exploratory student. So, that is something that we're working on.

Not focusing on "what it means to be an exploratory student" has resulted in routinely explaining this for students, many of whom are not happy being forced into this major. When asked how students feel being exploratory, Fabi responded:

> Some of them embrace it. Some of them don't. Some of them will tell you, "I don't know why I'm exploratory" even though you know why. Even sometimes when you explain why they still [ask], "why?" I'm like, "exploratory is not a bad thing. it just means that you probably want nursing or a limited access program that you need to apply or audition for. This is why you're exploratory."

Students who are forced into exploratory tend to question their placement and ask questions about how soon they can declare their major. Part of the desire to leave exploratory is the stigma associated with it. If they have been redirected to another major, it could be the "[loss] of a sense of [their] identity as a student" (Gigi, current advisor).

Being exploratory or undecided has been associated with wasting time and money or not knowing what one will do with their life. These characteristics are not very positive. Not all students believe this, but someone in their circle most likely does. Jack, a former advisor, described what stigma may look like for students:

> I think, for all students, whether they had chosen or were placed, there is a stigma. [They may think,] "look at me I can't even decide on a major." …they may view it as a badge of dishonor that, "I can't select a major." …[I have seen students] internally beat themselves up about the need to pick a major to the point where [they would ask], "can you just pick one for me?" They would legitimately ask an advisor to just help them pick one so they could…escape this shame of being labeled exploratory… I think students oftentimes feel like if I don't hurry up and do this, it's gonna impact my future because I'm not gonna get anywhere.

Selecting a major is a difficult decision, this stigma adds an additional layer of pressure students may experience. Although Jack associated stigma to all exploratory students, Cecilia indicated those placed in exploratory experienced a little. She stated:

> I think those that are placed [in exploratory] may find a little bit of a stigma attached to it. They often don't identify as exploratory majors; they identify as the major that they originally selected or the major that they're working towards. So, it's rare to actually find a student that says, "I'm an exploratory administration and management major." They're going to say, "I'm a business major." And it's not until you pull up their account in PantherSoft that you see they're actually exploratory.

Many, if not most, exploratory students identify as their chosen major when directly asked.

What does it mean to be exploratory at FIU? Technically speaking, students are exploratory once they are coded as such in the institution's record system. That is self-evident. However, whether advisors realize it or not, they are guides to what the institution considers acceptable behavior and what they want students to perceive as normal (Kuh & Whitt, 2000). Although Tutina, Heidi, and Jose told us what they tell students in terms of the process, their approach is different. Tutina, a current advisor, for example, indicated that you need to be upfront with them about the exploratory reality:

> You have to explain to them what exploratory is in reality. That it's only for two semesters, then they need to do something else beyond just taking random courses. That they need to do some research, choose three majors, and then compare the courses one major to another to see what is best for them.

Tutina's quote indicated that students have a time limit in which to research and decide on a major. Heidi similarly discussed selecting a major within a time limit:

> We tell them what exploratory is and we tell them it is the first or second semester. You need to take classes, meet with us, do some research, interview professionals, reflect on what you like, and then commit. Select one major or create that plan if it's a major with a minor and a certificate or if it's two majors then you know we can do that plan, but it is a time that you have without having to stay or be in a major already that you may not feel one hundred percent sure about.

Heidi also pointed out that students should interview professionals during the research process as well as letting them know that exploratory is a safe space because it allows them to delay declaring a major.

Jose, a former advisor, took things one step further by noting that there is nothing wrong with being exploratory:

> It's okay to be exploratory. I know people think that it's a negative thing. I think at one point they wanted all students to declare a major into a field, but that's not even realistic. It's okay to be exploratory, not for too long, but it's okay, to test the waters and find things that you may like until you discover what it is that you're going to like because you may be doing it for a long time, maybe not forever, but maybe for a career…make sure that you're okay with what you're going to pick and that you're going to be happy with that and you're going to be passionate about it. Money is important, but it's not everything. Make sure [to] align [your] values and [your] interests into what career [you] want to go into.

Although Jose acknowledged a time limit exists, he focuses on helping the student find a major/career that aligns with their values and interests—one that makes them happy.

As one might expect, even though Tutina, Heidi, and Jose shared some thoughts about what it means to be exploratory, they also expressed their unique perspectives on the subject. Along those lines, Victoria, a former advisor, explained:

> If you look at the personalities and the kind of people we had as advisors, I think they were reflective of exploratory and our students [because] there was no one type of person or advisor in our office.

Certain personalities resonate better with others and one way to elucidate that is by messaging. That is apparent in the way Tutina, Heidi, and Jose explained what it means to be exploratory. Some students will gravitate toward Tutina's realism, Heidi's structured plan, or Jose's assurance. Ultimately, all three address a time limit on being exploratory which alludes to the 30-credit declaration policy which requires exploratory students to declare a major by the end of their first year.

During their time in exploratory, Tutina and Heidi explicitly mentioned that students need to do research. However, Tutina focused on the academic side in choosing potential majors while Heidi also encouraged engaging in experiential opportunities like interviewing professionals. After taking classes, researching, and interviewing, students will need to reflect on what they like, but Jose went on to say, "make sure that

you're…going to be happy…and…passionate about it." This can be mind-blowing for students. They might know certain things that interest them, but they have not spent time reflecting on those experiences to know they can bring happiness or that they are passionate about them.

Working with Exploratory (Undecided) Students

According to the advisors in my study, students choose to be exploratory for a number of reasons. This can range from being completely undecided to confirming the major they selected is 100% for them; they just need time, occupational knowledge, and experiential opportunities. There are also those who may be feeling the same way but are sitting in a declared major because of internal or external pressures. Regardless, the need to normalize or destigmatize the exploration process was evident to advisors.

The exploratory process begins with a choice—the decision by undecided students to choose to explore their options (Dennis, 2007) and be exploratory. When I asked Heidi how often she thought students chose to be exploratory, she indicated:

> Approximately 60% select exploratory during orientation or when they apply to FIU. Because I asked them, "so why exploratory?" And they tell me [that it's] "because I just want to have this time to make sure that I'm in the right major". Or they are not 100% sure to commit to that major, that will in their minds dictate their career forever…They feel relief in a way that they were not forced to select a major and seeing that they can change their majors later on.

Through advisors' experience, the vast majority of FIU's exploratory FTIC population begin as 17- to 19-year-olds right out of high school. These students feel that this decision will affect their lives *forever* and are hesitant to commit to something about which they are not completely certain.

Amber, a former advisor, shared an example of an uncertain student as well as provided other reasons as to why students may choose to be exploratory:

> When we go through the change of major process for orientation and they choose to be exploratory, sometimes I'll reach out to exploratory admin management and say, “you meet the requirements for business, do you want to change?” And they're like, “Oh, but you know, I'm not sure if I want business or something in this field.” So, they're making that choice consciously, but I feel like a lot of [students] are exploratory and just don't have the title…I do think there are…students who have no idea and just don't want to make a decision…some students choose exploratory because they don't know what direction they want to go in.

Amber is correct. There are indeed different types of undecided students, some closer to deciding than others. Gordon (1998) developed career decidedness subtypes of decided and undecided students to help practitioners in program development for this population. It is important to note, however, that one should not assume a student is an exact match for a particular category. They have different needs that may be more about their decision-making skills, access to information, and developmental/psychological/sociological makeup as opposed to certainty of choice (Steele, 2003).

According to Elizabeth, an exploratory Golden Scholar, “some people didn’t have the opportunity to really explore in high school…[and] were very boxed in their one little environment.” Consequently, it is not surprising that they need to learn more about themselves (Gordon & Steele, 2015) and the world of work via research on occupational knowledge (Gordon, 1995), behavioral experiences (Rettew, 2012), and introductory coursework (Pringle, 2014) to make an informed decision. The specific reason(s) students choose to be exploratory may differ, but they all appreciate the additional time they get by not having to immediately declare a major, something reiterated by the advisors in the study.

There are times when parents understand the need for students to take their time when choosing a major. Nina, a former advisor, discussed one particular experience that she had with a parent and her students who saw being exploratory as an advantage to the FIU experience:

> For some students and some parents who were happy to have that option, it was like an opportunity to make sure that you didn't get into something that you didn't like. I had that conversation during orientation many times with parents…[They would] rather have them figure it out. Some parents were professionals themselves and they knew that it is not easy to know what you want at 17 or 18 years of age, so they saw that as an advantage…I have an example that comes to mind. Three sons of one school counselor that I know…are very smart in math and science and everything, but they didn't know… One of them knew that he would be something in engineering, but he didn't know what type of engineering. The other one was between business, engineering, or maybe medicine so he had no clue because there is nothing in common at the beginning in these three fields. So those students were, I guess, encouraged by the mother, who is a school counselor. [She said,] "you know what, if FIU offers that, enter as exploratory."

Exploratory students must choose one of six tracks when they select it as their major, administration and management, biological and environmental sciences, global and social sciences, health sciences, humanities and arts, and physical sciences and engineering. This helps to narrow down options for students as advisors can guide them toward the majors that fall within those associated tracks. The student who is interested in business, engineering, and medicine in Nina's example above would have to choose between three potential tracks. However, that would not limit him. He could choose administration and management, but then choose a major outside of that track (e.g., biological sciences) later on. Unfortunately, there is an administrative challenge that Fabi described:

> I have students coded as administration and management that told me they want nursing...You have to have that conversation…if I don't have a conversation with the students, how would I know what they want?

Although one might like to assume that all students of a particular track are interested in a specific major, that is not the case.

Having that conversation is an important aspect of the advisor-student relationship. Steele and McDonald (2008) note:

> Spending time getting to know our students not only in terms of their academic and career interests, but also in terms of their backgrounds and personal experiences is a key component to working with students as they move through the college experience. (p. 157)

If their intended major is not associated with the specific track, make note of it in such a way that an advisor or administrator can query the information.

As mentioned earlier, advisors are the guide to what FIU students perceive as normal. For example, most exploratory advisors expected students to tell them they are an exploratory major when asked. Nina indicated that does not always occur:

> Many students [lied] about [their major] when they introduced themselves. [When asked] what's your major, they will tell you, x. And I say, “well, but you are not yet there. You are exploratory now.” [They will say,] “yeah, yeah but that's my major.”

Nina pointed out that students are exploratory majors. Yet, other advisors, like Tutina and Heidi shared that exploratory is not a major. Tutina said:

> For [exploratory students] that don't know what they want to do, they think that they are in a major. That is when you explain to them that exploratory…is not a major; you have to make a decision.

Tutina was explicit in saying that exploratory is not a major. Heidi supported and expanded upon this statement:

> During my first meeting with them, I ask them, “what is your major?” And they tell me “exploratory administration and management.” And I tell them, “well, that’s not a major.” And then they kind of realize, oh, it's not a major. Then in our future meetings they say my intended major is finance or economics. So, I think at that first meeting they understand what exploratory is and that it is not a major and they need to disclose one of the majors. I show them the exploratory track

> sheet, which has all the majors within the tracks, so it makes sense when they see it.

Like Tutina, Heidi explained that exploratory is not a major, but she also asked them to identify with a major during future advising sessions. Exploratory students may be receiving mixed messages depending on the advisor with whom they interact.

This dichotomy gets at the heart of the challenge with exploratory student identity. Because being exploratory is a temporary state, something they want students to power through, the priority was given to declaring a major and not helping students come to terms with their identity as an exploratory major. Nina went on to discuss missed opportunities:

> We never had anything to develop an identity of being exploratory. It was always something transient that you need to transition through as soon as possible and find the major, like a stage in your life that you need to overcome and move forward to something attainable…So, we never stopped and developed this is your identity embrace it, celebrate it…We missed opportunities of doing that, but I don't remember ever having that approach. It was always let's help you get to where you need to go, and we've never stopped…Oh, gosh. That identity. We didn't explore that identity. Many things could have been done, but it was always make sure you transition this person. We missed this aspect of developing them, embracing it, and celebrating any of that.

Through Nina's answer, we can see that the institution values transitioning the student out of exploratory as soon as possible. This is largely driven by the performance funding environment that we find ourselves.

Although this pressure driven climate makes it difficult for exploratory students, Jack, a former advisor, did not see it as completely negative. He said:

> I love those…things out there about trying to match the famous person with what major they had in college. They're surprising in helping to normalize that exploration is a normal part of the process. So, I think anything we can do to normalize exploration, which is difficult because we have a climate right now of graduate in four years and hurry up and get out and go make money and reduce your debt and all that which is not negative, but it doesn't really lend itself very

> easily and nicely to take time to explore and exploration is okay. We have sort of competing messages there. But, you know, I think that's probably the thing we could do the most is to try to help those students who are experiencing that, help them normalize that exploration is at least part of their process.

Jack sees normalizing exploration, particularly the process, as the most helpful way we can impact students. Similarly, Amber stated:

> Don't compare yourself to your friend who has the 15-year plan. The one who knows that they're gonna be done with medical school and doing their residency and living in wherever because that's not you. That's not your journey. Enjoy the process of exploration and finding out what your journey is.

Amber, like most exploratory advisors, understands that students are on their own journeys and need time to explore. However, “the reality of a state institution is that you're gonna be fighting metrics” (Victoria).

The metrics and policies like excess credit can be challenging for advisors to balance with students. Advisors are the ones who ultimately are responsible for monitoring progress and making sure their students graduate. Tutina described what exploration means to her:

> The word exploration is not really to explore. They’re there because gen ed is missing, but within the first two semesters, or a year, they have to declare a major or they don't graduate in four years.

Tutina understands exploration as not a way to explore, but a placeholder for students. Within this type of climate, advisors need to find ways to normalize exploration, help students grapple with this aspect of their identity, and destigmatize being exploratory. Embracing and celebrating the notion of being exploratory would be new, but is something that students such as Elizabeth would agree with:

> Yes, I'm an exploratory student, but it doesn't mean that I can't figure myself out. It doesn't mean that I straight up don't know what I'm doing. It's that I could be conflicted between three different things that I want to do or it's that I'm not a hundred percent sure where to get my resources so I can't make a great decision based on knowledge that I don't really have. I think people should be more

> confident and prouder of who and where they're coming from and just really be genuine. And the fact that maybe I don't know where I'm going has to be okay. The stigma that it's not okay that you don't know where you're going has to break off. It's perfectly fine [if you don't] because that's what all of this is based on.

Exploratory students may be experiencing low self-esteem, excessive anxiety, and extreme uncertainty (Gordon, 1998). No two students are exactly the same; each enters with varying levels of undecidedness (Slowinski & Hammock, 2003). They should be able to depend on their advisor's support and reinforcement that it is okay to be exploratory providing they are working toward established research or experiential goals.

Summary

Participants indicated there were a number of reasons students chose to be exploratory. Regardless of the reason, it is important to normalize the exploration process so that students feel more comfortable selecting or being an exploratory student. Students right out of high school find it difficult to select a major they see as connecting to their *forever* career and need time to develop occupational knowledge and participate in experiential opportunities. However, policies such as performance funding and excess credit create a challenging climate in which to advise. It is important to note that students could be receiving mixed messages from advisors when it comes to conversations about exploratory being a major.

Advisors' Struggles with Forced Exploratory Students

Although students are in exploratory for many different reasons according to advisors, there are two basic groups at FIU, those who choose exploratory (i.e., undecided) and those who are forced into exploratory. Those forced into exploratory typically have a major in mind but have been prevented from officially declaring it because it is a limited access program (e.g., nursing, business, or engineering) or they are

the member of a special population (e.g., College Prep, Global First Year, and Golden Scholars). “The majority of the exploratory population we always had were because they applied to limited access majors like nursing or engineering” (Nina). However, that was not always the case. Jack explained how exploratory began:

> At the beginning, pretty much all of them that were exploratory were choosing that. But in time, FIU was utilizing exploratory as a placeholder for students who weren't eligible for the major that they actually wanted to declare.

According to Jack, most exploratory students chose to be there until FIU began using it as a placeholder for ineligible students.

Ineligible students, like those who do not meet nursing and engineering requirements, acquire that status for various reasons. Jack shared more specific reasons why a nursing or engineering major might not be directly admitted.

> For example, engineering, maybe they didn't have the math background or nursing, maybe they didn't have a high school GPA or SAT/MPS score that kind of made that as viable…Once we started doing that, more than 50% of the exploratory students were students who actually chose something else but weren't eligible, at least at that point for that major.

Jack emphasized that over 50% of the exploratory population was composed of ineligible students once exploratory became a placeholder. Cecilia more specifically cited admissions decision-making as the main reason for exploratory numbers:

> I think admissions decision-making highly impacts exploratory numbers… generally speaking, there's probably a disproportionate number of students who are being placed in exploratory…We're learning more as time goes on, but these things happen. For example, an administration and management [student] may have selected business but just missed the cut off deadline.

Cecilia noted that admissions decision-making is an ongoing concern because of its effect on numbers. High school GPAs and SAT or MPS results have long been used to determine placement in exploratory based on analytics from the Office of Retention and

Graduation Success. The addition of a missed deadline as impacting placement is fairly new.

Telling students they were not admitted to their selected major was always a challenge for advisors. Heidi shared how students reacted:

> They are the ones who oftentimes are always asking, when can I declare, when can I get into my major because they know what they want to do, but they can't be in those programs.

Heidi pointed out that advisors are routinely questioned by forced exploratory students because they already know what major they want to pursue. In the past, they could always reference back to objective cut off scores or GPAs. Adding a missed deadline to the list of reasons is incomparable. Cecilia continued with her thoughts on the exploratory administration management student:

> So, there was nothing wrong with that student…On surface level he or she and another business major look, no different. It's just that they didn't make that timeline. And so, they're coded exploratory administration management and we may advise them and treat them as if somehow, they're different. When really, they're not.

This quote exemplified some of Cecilia's frustration related to admissions decision-making because there is no academic deficit on the student's end. The logic behind students' future success in a major and being placed in exploratory was one primarily based on high school GPA and highest math taken. There is reasoning there you can use when discussing such placement with students and their families. Jack explained the rationale:

> So, we were putting them in exploratory with the thought at one point that if things weren't going well exploratory advisors could help them choose a different option. But that was a very different dynamic/scenario than working with a student who coming out of high school says, "I'm undecided, I don't know what I want to major in." Those advising interactions were very different.

Jack pointed out the different dynamic involved when working with a student who chose to be exploratory versus the one forced to be exploratory.

Advisors indicated that when students enter as exploratory (undecided), they know they are undecided. The others are entering with the frame of mind that they are majoring in a specific field of study; many have actually taken on that identity (e.g., I'm a civil engineering major.). Being told they are in fact an exploratory major can be a blow to their self-esteem or at least knock them back a step or two. Heidi noted "they feel left out." Joseph, an aspiring civil engineering student, remembered when he found out he was exploratory like it was yesterday:

> I remember when I found out that exploratory was a thing. The first thing that came to my mind was like, "okay, so how soon can I get out of it. Like, when can I say that I'm in the College of Engineering? When can I wear my College of Engineering t-shirt and mean it?"...I guess since I had already decided what it is that I wanted to do, I never really saw it as really exploring but rather [being] stuck or just waiting to declare my actual major.

Joseph's quote is very similar to how Heidi indicated forced exploratory students react. He wanted to know how soon he could declare his major and felt stuck in exploratory.

"When can I wear my College of Engineering t-shirt and mean it?" Joseph had already begun to take on the identity of a civil engineering student and reached his first barrier before he even began taking classes. Imagine wearing a symbol of something with which you are not affiliated. According to advisors, many of these students do not identify as exploratory and yet, they cannot say they are a student of a specific college or major. Not feeling like they fit on campus can lead to feelings of marginalization which can lead to self-consciousness and depression (Schlossberg, 1989) and ultimately doubting if they matter (Kittendorf, 2012). It is a difficult situation to be in and one that seems to catch them off guard.

Joseph remembered when he "found out exploratory was a thing." That would indicate he was unaware that it even existed. How would a student begin college without knowing their major? Apparently, this was a common occurrence according to advisors. When asked how aware students were of their placement in exploratory, Nina's response highlighted an issue with their admission letter:

> I had different scenarios with that. There were students who apparently never read their admission letter or did not understand the wording of the admission letter.

Based on Nina's account, students could be unaware because of miscommunication or lack of reading. Unfortunately, being uninformed impacts the student's and advisor's Orientation experience, as explained by Fabi.

> They're not aware of that at all. They're not, because that's an everyday song, "Why am I exploratory?", even at Orientation…When they meet with you one-on-one, they will ask…those questions a lot.

Students are experiencing information overload at Orientation, not to mention the adjustment to a new environment. Being taken by surprise during the college presentation with parents or family members in the audience can be an uneasy feeling.

On the other hand, three advisors indicated that students are aware of being exploratory because they tell them at Orientation. "We actually have that as the first slide. Welcome to Exploratory. This is not a major" (Heidi). Both Elizabeth and Joseph concurred that they were told at Orientation. Elizabeth described when she was told at Orientation:

> I actually had no idea [that I was placed in exploratory]. It was kind of just like during Orientation that they put Golden Scholars as exploratory, and we were all a little bit confused. So, we did ask, and they told us, oh, it's because of this, this, and this…So then we kind of just followed the route, what everybody was telling us.

It seems like being placed in exploratory was confusing to Elizabeth and her Golden Scholar cohort, but they just followed what they were told. Joseph found himself in a similar situation:

> At Orientation they told us that our major would not be civil engineering until we had passed calculus two or so and that they would place us in exploratory, but they didn't really tell us what it was. They just said, "this is where you'll be until you can change, and your advisor will just be an overall exploratory advisor." …The most important thing they told me all day was to not screw [math] up.

Joseph and his exploratory engineering group were told they were exploratory, but not what it meant to be exploratory. Although both students were now aware of being exploratory, they were still confused as to what it meant.

At the point a student is admitted to FIU, their welcome letter will indicate the major into which they have been accepted along with a great deal of information. Exploratory majors will also have one of the six tracks listed. Nina explained how the letter affected students interested in nursing:

> The admission letter has evolved over the years. The portion indicating where you are admitted has been reworded several times. I think it's a lot better now. It was very ambiguous at the beginning when I started doing exploratory. So, at some point students pretended they didn't know or assumed "yeah, I'm in nursing." They were not sure…until we had that eye opening conversation that no, you are working on the prerequisites. You are competing with others to enter at the end of your second year.

Nina noted how the admissions letter itself could prove confusing to students. Nursing is the most competitive undergraduate major at FIU. Although a portion of entering FTIC may be coded as nursing, students will not be officially accepted until they apply and are admitted at the end of their sophomore year. Many good students will find themselves needing to make alternate plans (i.e., pursue a different major or leave FIU to pursue nursing) once decisions are made.

Advisors indicated that a large number of students will attend Freshman Orientation, their first official FIU event, and be confused regarding their major. Fabi shared her thoughts on what many students told her during Orientation, “during the presentation they said I’m exploratory. Why am I exploratory and what is exploratory?” For a program that “strive[s] to integrate the institutional mission and the personal growth of entering students” (Smith & Brackin, 1993, p. 35), this is not the best foot forward. The most important thing Joseph remembered from his Orientation was “not to screw [math] up.” Admissions decision-making impacts numbers, but it also can affect how the student ultimately feels about the institution. Unfortunately, the admissions process “is spiraling into a barely recognizable business, instead of a welcoming academic environment” (Hecklau, 2017, p. 82).

Once students are admitted, they are figuratively turned over to support services like orientation and academic advising as their next step (Office of Admissions, 2020). Curriculum requirements and course registration are at the forefront of most new students’ and parents’ minds. This is one of the main reasons for attending Orientation which is why they are taken aback when they discover they are not in their major of choice. For some, their stay in exploratory may only last one semester, while others the full two semesters, according to advisors. It is during that time that exploratory advisors will monitor course progress to make sure their advisees are passing those that are integral to admission in their major of choice. If they are not doing well, they will begin redirection conversations about alternate plans. Frances, a former advisor, discussed one of her first students in this situation:

> [S]o many of the students I think were forced to be exploratory…because of SAT scores, because of math placement, they’re forced to be here…which isn't a bad

> thing sometimes in the long run, but then it's hard because they have this idea set in their head that's like, “No, I’m going to be in engineering.” …And I'm like, Okay, let's talk through it. I remember one of my very first students, he had taken MAC 1105 – College Algebra five times, and he had failed all five times, and he wanted to go towards engineering. And I was like, “I don't know who the hell your advisor was beforehand, but this is a challenge.” One time, two times, I struggle with it. But, you know, maybe something happened, you're waiting for an appeal, whatever. But five times?! This is a pattern. There's no way about it. So, yeah, it definitely has its challenges.

Having redirection conversations with students can be challenging, especially when they have their heart set on a specific major. Students like Joseph already identify with a field of study (i.e., he purchased a College of Engineering t-shirt.) so it can feel like the advisor is attempting to strip them of a piece of their identity.

Victoria’s redirection conversation with a student went on for two years. She goes on to detail how it was resolved:

> I have a student [who was] placed into exploratory because he wanted to do engineering. For two years he fought me…I would tell him, “This isn't working. This isn't working.” He would say, “No, don't worry, I will study hard and I'm gonna do this.” “Okay, but what are you going to do differently because every semester we're in the same place?” It was just one thing after the other after the other. And then finally, at the end of his sophomore year, I remember one day he came in and was like, “alright.” He was on probation, and he was like, “Okay, I'm ready. I'm gonna switch” and so he switched to business. He obviously got excess credit and graduated super late… (*Reminiscing and laughing*) I would tell [the student], “there needs to be an asterisk at the bottom of your degree with my name on it. This only happened because you finally listened to me! Can you imagine how much easier your life would have been?” And he was like, “Yeah, but I had to know, you know, it had to be me. I had to be the one to mess up and to finally decide, you know, fine. I'm done.” …He was killing himself and then in business he flourished and now he's a stockbroker.

In the way advisors are trained to do, Victoria attempted to redirect her student from engineering to another major over a prolonged period of time. However, he “need[ed] to grieve for the loss experienced in giving up the roads not taken… [or] all the other selves [he was] not going to be” (Perry, as cited in Evans et al., 2010, p. 271). There is no time

limit on coming to terms with such loss. Some students may take a few weeks or one semester, while this student took two years. There were consequences he had to face (i.e., excess credit and delayed graduation), but he found that acceptable. Victoria reflected further on this student's case:

> We don't think about that sometimes because we know, and we see the future. I see excess credit. I see this in your future so I'm trying to save you from that. But some people need to get to that before they're ready to do the next thing. That's not in a training manual. You're told warn the student, put a hold on their account, force them to change their major, force them to do this, when the reality is there are exceptions to every rule. He was a BIG exception.

Advisors are trained to follow specific policies and procedures. To what extent would they be able to work outside of these parameters if it is to help a student?

Victoria's student was a BIG exception, but his case also took place several years ago. Today's 30-credit policy would prevent him from staying in exploratory two years. Would he have been successful in business, or would he have kept thinking he could have been an engineer? Nina remembered having these painful conversations with students:

> In that moment you saw frustration and disappointment in their faces. Having to go with a lesser degree in their minds, not realizing maybe at that moment that the lesser degree had more potential for them and more chances for them to be successful because they were showing talent and potential to do well in that as well. So that very moment of accepting "okay, I cannot be a nurse. Let me just go with x, y, z." I think it's very difficult at that age, like a defeat. A moment of defeat.

Over time students may find that plan B was a good decision, but in that moment, they are grieving for a dream crushed before it even saw the light. They may be disappointed in themselves for letting down their parents or families and vice versa. Advisors often find themselves in the middle trying to grapple with what is in the best interest of the student institutionally and personally.

Summary

Advisors struggle to work with students who are forced into exploratory. These students typically have a limited access major in mind but have been thwarted by the admissions decision-making process. They may also be part of a special population. Combined, they represent most of the exploratory student population. Over the years, forced exploratory students have indicated being unaware of their status as exploratory majors until they are told at Orientation. At which point, students become confused and question advisors about the purpose and reason for being exploratory. Ultimately, many of these students will be unhappily redirected to a major that best fits their academic potential.

Advisors' Believe Students are Under Pressure

Advisors understand that college students face difficult decisions throughout their time in school, foremost among them choosing a major and setting career goals (Korschgen & Hageseth, 1997). This important choice (Porter & Umbach, 2006) is a stressful and pressure-filled endeavor because students see this as a reflection of themselves and they realize the future significance it will play (Galotti, 1999). "It's like I was having a whole freak out for the past, two months. I'm just like, I don't know what I'm doing with my life" (Elizabeth).

At FIU, the type of pressure students live with may depend on whether they chose or were forced to be an exploratory major. When I asked participants, what has been the most difficult decision students have faced in college, all but one connected it to selection of major. Jose, Jack, and Cecilia provided varying perspectives on this topic. Jose focused on the student coming to FIU right out of high school:

> You’re asking too much from a student in their first year, you know, right out of high school to decide on a major to pursue right away. I think a lot of students are still in that self-discovery phase.

In this quote, Jose demonstrated concern for students in the self-discovery phase being asked to choose a major in their first year. Jack, however, felt concern for the forced exploratory student:

> I think for those that had an idea in mind but [found] that wasn't working out…I think finding something that's gonna take the place of what I thought I was gonna do is daunting for a lot of those students.

The students Jack discussed have to resolve a broken dream in order to move on and pursue their next option. This can be difficult for students. Regardless, both types have a time barrier. This is what Cecilia believed causes the most pressure:

> I think probably the most difficult decision is not so much the decision. I think it's the timeline, the pressure of selecting a major within your first year, because ultimately that is our goal.

Cecilia alludes to the University’s goal of having students select a major in their first year as the source of pressure. The difficulty of choosing a major can be seen from multiple angles, the undecided FTIC student in the self-discovery phase, the forced exploratory student with a specific major in mind who needs to recalculate, and time being a barrier. These concepts are not necessarily mutually exclusive because time would affect all students but were the foci advisors took in their conversations with me.

According to advisors, time is a running thread when it comes to the pressure students are feeling. This is a result of the College of Arts, Sciences and Education (CASE) creating a stricter declaration policy for exploratory students. Heidi explained the details:

> When we merged with CASE, they made it clear…and actually created a policy that students in exploratory are required to declare their majors within 30 credits…so within the first year.

CASE requires exploratory students to declare their major within 30 credits when they used to have 45 credits to do so. Several advisors expressed their concern over this policy, particularly the one size fits all mentality. Fabi shared how her students felt:

> I have a lot of students personally disclose to me that "they don't think it's fair for them to be pushed out and declare within their first year." In the summer you give them SLS, ENC and another UCC course, and then they have to take their first math in the fall, but some of them are not even sure what they want at that point. Then by spring you tell them, "Hey, you need to find out what you want because by the end, you need to declare." That's kind of a little rushed. I, personally, do not think that's fair to them because they are exploratory for a reason. Yes, some students are exploratory because they don't meet program requirements. We can agree to move those students faster, but the one that's like, "I don't know what I want, I really want to do that career exploration." …I wish that we had a better approach…they are at a disadvantage. They say, "exploratory means they need to explore," which they're right!

Students are admitted to the 6-week Summer B term when they do not meet the fall cut off requirements. The particular GPA and SAT/ACT score will change from year to year as will specifics on the various pathways under which first year students are admitted. Because they enter in the summer, they spring ahead of their fall counterparts by 6 or 7 credits that count toward the 30-credit policy. The courses Fabi referred to are First Year Experience (SLS), Writing (ENC 1930, ENC 1101, or ENC 1102), and the University Core Curriculum (general education). The actual enrolled courses depend on accelerated credits and placement scores so they may be well into the general education curriculum once they begin at FIU. The student will more than likely be focused on the 2 or 3 courses they are taking during the summer term as they transition to the University's academic life in addition to personal commitments (e.g., work and childcare). Because of the short duration of their first semester, they may not have the opportunity to explore.

Time is also important in the formation of one's identity. As experiences occur and decisions are made and potentially reevaluated, it gradually develops (Marcia, 1980). Most advisors are aware of student development theory and the need to nurture and encourage students' development. Victoria discussed the pressure on identity development:

> I think picking a major on a deadline where it's not about take your time. It's not about take a couple of classes and see what you like. It's now very clear that if you take too many classes that you don't need for a major, you'll be fined and penalized…not today, not tomorrow, it's going to sneak up on you when you forget about it in three years. You can explore, but not too much. You can make a decision, but it needs to be quick. I think that deadline and that pressure during the most rapid time of development in every other sense of the word and of their identities and all of them kind of crashing down on them like, "who am I?"…Now they're being forced to make another decision that for them is going to affect the rest of their life…I think that deadline is a tough decision to make within that confinement of your first year…when they're dealing with a million other things…so it's not fair to put that pressure on an 18-year-old because it means you make another $18,000, $5 million, or $18 million from the state.

This passage outlined the educational constraints students experience as well as one advisor's frustration with the metrics. Exploration via coursework is not encouraged because of excess credit and majors must be declared within 30 credits regardless of other pressures that may be present.

Through experience, advisors know there is no other college decision that generates a host of emotions as does choosing a major. Hagstrom et al. (1997) noted that undecided students expressed hopelessness, anxiety, frustration, and a sense of feeling overwhelmed. In addition, Gordon (1995) indicated that undecided students can feel scared, anxious, apologetic, or very negative. However, others indicated being open, flexible, and curious. Gigi stated:

> I think students interested in limited access programs are stressed because they know that these programs have requirements that they may or may not meet. So, I

> do sense a level of anxiety or [fear] that they might not get the grades they need. And then other students might feel embarrassed because we're human, so we naturally compare ourselves to other people sometimes. If their friend was directly admitted into engineering and they're in exploratory, they know that they didn't have the GPA or math placement score to be placed into calculus…I feel like some are a little nervous or anxious to make sure they make it into engineering. Also, I don't sense that pride that other students have when they're in a declared major.

Students interested in nursing find themselves in a similar, but even more high stakes situation because that program is the most competitive undergraduate degree at the institution. If their passion is nursing, their alternative plan may include attending another institution. Heidi explained:

> They have to wait two years to find out if they are accepted or not. And those two years are a lot of hard work, dedication, and commitment to the requirements. But even if they are good students, some of them are not good enough. So, I do feel the pressure, stress, and anxiety that they experience.

Students in limited access programs (i.e., forced exploratory) may find themselves waiting for up to two years to determine if they can move forward in their chosen field of study. During that time advisors will continually check student progress to determine if they should be redirected to another major (e.g., low grades in math or science courses), perhaps one that does not require as much math or science. However, those can be "very stressful conversations" (Nina).

At times, it is not external pressures that can cause a student to stumble. Oftentimes, it is internal pressure from self-doubt that can cause delays in the selection of a major. Hagstrom et al. (1997) found that students felt choosing a major closed off options, limited opportunities to use their talents, or restricted access to a few careers. Sometimes it was about making the "right" decision they could feel certain about. Frances discussed the case of a student who could not settle on one major:

> I feel like so many students are hesitant about even signing that piece of paper because they feel like it's a sealed deal. They feel like that one decision is gonna affect everything else. And I mean in some ways it can, but in a lot of ways it doesn't. I just see so many students put so much pressure on themselves, because of that… I have a student who is thinking about switching from biomedical to mechanical engineering. She literally keeps submitting the change of major form and then telling the advising office to retract it and then submits it again and then tells them to retract it and she keeps doing that. The advising office is like, "listen, you have to make a decision. You can't keep doing this. It's at a point where you have to make a decision."

When working with students, advisors find themselves also having to help them work through or assuage their self-doubt. Encouragement and empowerment can go a long way, but sometimes they need to face the reality of committing to a decision.

Summary

Participants were most vocal about external pressures (e.g., excess credit, metrics, and department policies) affecting student progress, especially as it related to time barriers. Selecting a major is a difficult enough decision without forcing students to do it within a 2 or 3 semester time frame in the midst of identity development and other personal issues. Several advisors were demonstrably frustrated on students' behalf because they are kept from exploring options when actively pushed from exploratory into a degree-granting major.

Chapter Summary

The participants in this study were very forthcoming when it came to their thoughts on exploratory students, particularly as it related to exploratory identity. Their thoughts were organized into the main theme Advisors' Perspectives on Exploratory Identity and its three sub-themes, 1) Working with Exploratory (Undecided) Students, 2) Advisors' Struggles with Forced Exploratory Students, and 3) Advisors Believe Students are Under Pressure.

Throughout the study, it became clear that exploratory majors are a complex population composed predominately of students who did not meet program requirements and to a much lesser extent undecided students, your traditional exploratory student. This dynamic is caused by admissions decision-making and remains an ongoing concern because new guidelines can easily be adopted from year to year. Serving as the "placeholder" major is challenging for advisors because students are forced to be in exploratory when they already identify with a major. Moreover, many of these students are not aware of their placement in exploratory until their arrival at Orientation, making an uncomfortable experience even more awkward for new students and advisors.

Unfortunately, being exploratory is not seen as a favorable state by many (e.g., society and parents) so there is hesitation by students in choosing and being forced into it. Advisors strongly felt that there is a need to normalize the exploration process and wanted to let students know that it is okay to be exploratory. However, there are external forces such as the 30-credit major declaration policy that limit the amount of time they have to learn more about themselves and the world of work by researching and taking advantage of experiential opportunities. Advisors indicated that students are at a disadvantage because priority is given to declaring a major and not helping them come to terms with their identity as an exploratory major. Exploratory students experience varying levels of support. The next chapter will discuss advisors' perspectives on their support systems.

CHAPTER V

PERSPECTIVES ON SUPPORT SYSTEMS

This chapter continues to explore academic advisors' understanding of the exploratory student experience as it relates to Advisors' Perspectives on Support Systems and Influence and its three sub-themes, 1) Family Support, 2) Peer-to-Peer Connections, and 3) Institutional Personnel. As mentioned in Chapter Four, all findings are described including supporting literature and student interviews (i.e., Elizabeth and Joseph) with advisor interview data for triangulation purposes. The findings discussed in Chapters Four and Five will be used in the following chapter to answer the study's research questions. (a) What are academic advisors' perceptions of the needs and concerns of exploratory FTIC students? and (b) What are advisors' perceptions of exploratory FTIC students' support systems?

Support systems are important to student success. Advisors in this study shared their views on the type of support, if any, available to exploratory students from family, peers, and institutional personnel (i.e., academic advisors and faculty). The strongest support system is family, although at times their misguided advice placed pressure on students. This is followed by academic advising because students are assigned an advisor from the outset and are considered their main contact at FIU. Faculty and peer support need assistance to strengthen their ties to exploratory students. This chapter goes on to discuss each of these areas in detail and includes potential ideas FIU can implement as suggested by participants.

Advisors' Perspectives on Support Systems and Influence

According to Schlossberg, transition or change is influenced by the situation, self, support, and strategies. However, "[a] transition is not so much a matter of change as of the individual's own *perception* [emphasis added] of the change" (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006, p. 33). The *support* variable is the key to dealing with transition. It is comprised of resources individuals can depend on such as family, friends (peers), or institutions to which they belong. I will discuss these in turn as separate subthemes.

Family Support

According to advisors, family members are crucial to college students' success. Their "support is positively associated with personal and social adjustment for students of color" (Kenny, 1994, p. 3). Advisors also indicated that college students seek parental support when changing or choosing a major (Montag et al., 2012) and choice of vocation (Tziner et al., 2012). In addition to parents, Awang et al. (2014) found that students look to their siblings as role models and for help in forming social networks. This was particularly helpful if the sibling was a college student or had graduated and was successful in their career. Participant interviews corroborated the research regarding family.

Advisors felt family was the primary influencer of students' major decision-making process. Cecilia, a former advisor, pointed to college education as a way students give back to their family:

> Family is a huge factor in the decision-making process for our students. So many students are coming from a background where the family sees a college education as a way of social mobility, a way of improving their socio-economic status, of

> giving back to their community and their family. So, what I find is that a lot of their decision-making is based on maybe the influence of family or community.

Cecilia felt family has a large influence on students' decision-making abilities. A sentiment shared by Gigi, a current advisor:

> In my experience, the population we serve is very family oriented. I've heard students tell me, "My dad won't let me study anything else, my mom wants me to become a doctor, or I can't study that because my mom says it's not going to make enough money." I'm Hispanic so I feel like it's doctor, business, lawyer, engineer, or nurse and they're not aware of everything else that they can do and study. They come to us and have conversations with us where we try to empower them as much as we can, but a lot of them are like, "well, my dad's paying for school because of this or my mom's helping me out with school, so I need to do this for my mom or for my family."

Gigi highlighted specific fields of study that students feel pressured to pursue because of a family connection. According to Frances, a former advisor, that type of connection is difficult to manage:

> Sometimes they're not willing to have [that conversation] so they're willing to put themselves through more pain. And I'm like, "listen, these grades or whatever the issue, are going to keep happening. You're not going to love this one day you know." There's a lot of influences, but I think some of the hardest ones for people to manage or overcome are the family ones.

As much as students may dislike the major they are pursuing or failing grades they are earning, Frances said many students tend to be conflict averse and will refrain from having this difficult conversation with their family.

The majority of the FIU student population is of Latino American descent which results in a family centric environment. This sentiment was echoed repeatedly by the advisors in this study because it can be seen in day-to-day student interactions. Elizabeth, an exploratory Golden Scholar, also concurred:

> My family is definitely one of my biggest supporters. My mom especially. [She] drives me crazy sometimes, but I know it's from love. I know it's definitely just

> her wanting us to do more than what she has been able to do since she moved here from [Bolivia]. It's been a struggle for her.

As Cecilia noted, many of our students are looking to improve their socio-economic status and give back to their family. Elizabeth grew up as the youngest with several siblings and a single mother who struggled to provide for them. Her older brothers questioned why she would want to pursue social work "because they were concerned with the fact that [she] might not get paid enough to have a comfortable living environment here in Miami."

Family can both be the "biggest influence and pressure because they're pushing education… [they're pushing] them to go and be better" (Victoria, a former advisor), but not always on students' terms. Montag et al. (2012) found that parental pressure placed on a student could help and/or hinder their decision-making process. As Gigi mentioned earlier, advisors "try to empower them as much as [they] can," but that only goes so far in a situation involving family. Many times, the advisor will put on their advocacy cape. Cecilia brought up advocacy as one of her top goals for this student group:

> My top goal with exploratory students is to advocate for them and to give them a voice…I want to dispel any myths or misconceptions that people might have…I don't know if [advocacy] is good enough. If that's the answer, but I think it begins with advocacy.

Being an advocate and giving someone the space for their voice to be heard can be empowering for that individual.

Advocacy can be as simple as physically being there for a student. Victoria described an advising session with a student and mother:

> We had a student who hadn't told her mom she was failing, and she let her come to the [advising] session. It was one of those days that a colleague and I were advising together…When we pulled up the transcript the mom was just floored…The girl had been Photoshopping her grades and showing her different

> grades. I still get goosebumps because the girl was just bawling her eyes out crying. In her head she had decided this is how I'm gonna tell my mom and didn't tell me or my colleague. She came clean. “Mami, I'm struggling. I can't do it. These are my grades. I've been trying so hard, but I need to change [majors] and these are my advisors…These are the conversations I've had with them, and they've told me that these are other options, other things that I can do. But I just can't do this.” I think she was an engineering major. The mom was just stoic. She didn't want to talk…The bravery. I mean, she set us up, but the poor girl needed to be in front of two other people, professionals to try and tell her mom. “Mom, I'm not doing well in school.”

Although Victoria’s student did not forewarn her of the plan, she still empathized with her situation and considered her brave. Surprisingly, this student tactic is not unusual. It demonstrates how much pressure students feel to follow the path set or strongly encouraged by their parents.

When an advisor feels they need to intervene, advocacy may involve a direct conversation with parents. Parents, for many reasons, may not understand the consequences of pushing students to follow a specific career path. Amber, a former advisor, recalled meeting with a student who was not being successful in a STEM major and truly desired a major in the social sciences. Unfortunately, the parent insisted that the student would become a medical doctor. She stated:

> In a tactful manner, the conversation with the parent basically [provided two options]. You can support your student in changing their major and pursuing something that they're passionate and excited about and still have opportunities for graduate programs or you can continue along this path of telling them they have to retake classes they failed twice and then being unhappy and perhaps not completing college at all because that's oftentimes what happens if a student’s parents will only pay for their education with the desired major. Some students’ interests and skills don’t lie in this area and to say that is very limiting to the student because they can't be successful. And then they end up without a college degree at all. And they've destroyed their academic record in the process, so their career and even graduate program opportunities are incredibly limited because their GPA was not in a good place.

Amber was looking out for the best interest of the student in terms of long-range career goals. The potential consequences she mentioned are based on actual FIU student cases, but this is also supported by research studies. Tovar, Simon, and Lee (2009) found a strong relationship between belonging, student retention, and graduation. Also, students are more likely to remain in college when there is a greater sense of belonging (Campbell & Mislevy, 2012; Hausmann, Ye, Schofield, & Woods, 2009; Schlossberg, 1989).

Parents and family in general can be our students' biggest supporters. If they know their student well enough, they themselves can become an advocate. Fabi, a current advisor, discussed the case of a student who had to be redirected because he was not being successful in math. His mother was present during the advising session. She said:

> The mom wanted him to change majors because he was not doing well. So, the mom's like, "I know my son and I don't think this field that he's choosing is working." And I'm like, "okay, why?" And then he talks a lot too and he was telling me, "Ms. Fabi, to tell you the truth I love the field, but I don't think the field likes me." "Ok, let's talk about a field that you actually enjoy and likes you." Most likely, it's the math that doesn't like them, but they think it's the whole field in general.

Both the advisor and parent were on the same page. Fortuitously, this is a case where the parent is helping the student in the decision-making process. Students are adults, but advisors realize the importance of having families understand academic processes and what it means to be an FIU student so they can better support them.

Summary

Not all advisor-parent interactions are negative. Advisors encounter many thankful parents during Orientation and other times of the year. However, the topic of a major/career can be a volatile one because of present or future financial considerations. When it comes to choosing a major, students are heavily influenced by their families.

They often encounter this as an obstacle in the decision-making process and advisors try to empower them to take ownership and have those difficult conversations. Unfortunately, family dynamics typically discourage students from forging their own path.

Peer-to-Peer Connections

Advisors recognize that the student-to-student connection is a potent institutional relationship. The quality of these connections is related to persistence and gains in intellectual and personal development (Calder & Gordon, 1999). Gigi explained the importance of student engagement:

> We all know that when a student is involved on campus that helps with retention because they feel more of a sense of community, and they do better in school and stuff like that.

When students get involved, they begin to make connections with like-minded individuals. The bond that develops generates a sense of belonging which leads to persistence. The level of involvement and specific opportunity of interest depends on the student's goals, but it can range from community service to undergraduate research to student organizations among other things. However, many will choose not to be involved, especially in their first year.

During the interview, advisors would oftentimes reflect on their own undergraduate experience. Frances described her disappointing freshman year:

> My first year was very crummy because my idea of college was very much one of going out and meeting people, but…I literally just went to class, in between classes I would grab something to eat, and then go to the library and do my homework. That's all I did, especially for my first semester. I was like, this is horrible, this is not what college should be like, this sucks. And then my freshman seminar instructor was talking about getting involved and I remembered that my peer leader had also mentioned getting involved. And I was like, "ugh, okay let me see how I can get involved."

Most FIU students would more than likely describe a similar experience of going to class, potentially the library, and then heading home. Reasons for not getting involved could include being unaware of opportunities, lack of time or interest, family responsibilities, and work. Ultimately, one hopes that learning about an opportunity from a professor or social network like Frances did would be the impetus to overcome any reticence (Nicholas, 2018). The advantage in these situations is that advisors were once students too. They can easily relate and speak to the experience.

The benefits of campus engagement are numerous, including leadership development, increased social network, and sense of belonging. Both Frances and Gigi shared their thoughts on personally getting involved. Frances' involvement as a peer leader made a big difference:

> [The peer leader] position challenged me so much. It was the first time that I lived on campus, so I wasn't at home during the summers and, I don't know, it just pushed me in so many ways that I really felt like I was growing in a lot of different ways.

Gigi highlighted the importance of the relationships she made once she got involved:

> I don't know if it's because it changed my undergrad experience when I got involved, but I've met beautiful people. I don't know where I'd be without those people. So, get to know people, talk to people, share your passions, your interests, [and] immerse yourself at FIU and what it has to offer.

Gigi focused on what students should do to meet people as that is how relationships develop. Regardless of the specific engagement opportunity, getting involved completely changed Frances' and Gigi's undergraduate experience. Frances went from her horrible experience and thinking of transferring to loving her institution and welcoming hundreds of new students through the peer leader role. Gigi found her major through community

service. And both felt that sense of belonging and eventually found the career field of higher education through their mentors and involvement opportunities.

Whether through their own undergraduate experience or interactions with students, advisors conveyed students want to belong, a notion supported by Montag et al. (2012). Connecting with others in the major is one method of fostering commitment to a major. However, participants overwhelmingly indicated that they were not aware of a structured experience specifically for exploratory students to meet other exploratory students. And yet, they thought it "would be a great idea" (Tutina, a current advisor) and could see a need for it. Frances explained why:

> I think so many times students would mention, "I can't believe I don't know what I'm supposed to be majoring in! All my friends know." I'm like… "There's a lot of you. And there are others in majors that aren't even assigned to us. It's weird because while you're going through it, it feels like a very individual experience, but it's not. I can guarantee you like 60% of your college algebra class is doubting themselves right now." It's so hard. It's such a vulnerable thing to talk about and express at times. So, it's "I know what I'm doing. Of course, I know what I'm doing."

In this quote, Frances discussed how exploratory students think they are the only one in their situation when that is not the case. Heidi, a current advisor, shared a few ideas as to why they may feel this way:

> We have no workshops, events, or involvement opportunities [for exploratory students]. I would be very interested in helping create that for our students because they are pretty much on their own. They do major exploration on their own, which I think having then other students share their insight, their perspectives, and their goals may help them put that into perspective also.

Exploratory students feel like they are alone. For some reason, it does not occur to them that others could be experiencing similar trials and tribulations. "I think we have to create a space for exploratory students, and we haven't yet" (Cecilia). That space would allow

for groups of exploratory students to come together, help each other, and realize they are not alone in this process, a concept corroborated by Gordon and Steele (2015).

There are two exceptions when it comes to special populations. According to Fabi, exploratory students in College Prep and Golden Scholars connect with each other outside of the existing advising structure. She stated:

> College Prep students end up taking a class together so that's how they meet and know each other. But besides that, they don't know each other that well whereas Golden Scholars most likely know each other. They are recruited for the program and then meet each other as they go through orientation and complete program requirements like attending certain workshops and tutoring; some of them go to tutoring together. Over time they build a relationship.

It is important to note that Golden Scholars is coordinated by Student Access and Success out of the Division of Academic and Student Affairs. Recruitment, program requirements, workshops, and mentors are managed through that office. They monitor their students closely because it is a conditional admissions program. Regardless, this program provides opportunities for its students to interact with staff and one another, something Elizabeth was able to confirm.

> We have to live on campus, so we get…RAs. Then we have our peer advisors, we have our mentors that are inside the Success office…we have so many people being able to look out for us and being able to ask questions to if we're really not sure of something.

Many resources go into Golden Scholars to make sure that their students are successful. As mentioned earlier, most exploratory students do not have that opportunity. Nonetheless, participants were able to mention current and potential events/locations where exploratory students would be able to meet each other.

In addition to meeting with each other, interactions between upper-division and first-year students would add to that sense of community (Montag et al., 2012). This

particular connection helps to familiarize first-year students with the university system and generate confidence in their abilities. Interacting with someone who is going through the same experiences is extremely beneficial (Awang, Kutty, & Ahmad, 2014).

When I asked what opportunities exploratory students have to meet other exploratory students, participants identified four examples: Freshman Orientation, Love Your Major Fair, Panther Connections Panels, and SLS 1402 - Discover Your Major. Freshman Orientation is required of all first-year students. Jack, a former advisor, mentioned:

> During Orientation they're often grouped together [by major] so maybe there are opportunities for them during Orientation, which is a nice kind of start. I don't think that we're probably leveraging that very much at the moment or taking advantage.

Joseph, an aspiring civil engineering student, keeps in contact with someone he met in the same dorm at Orientation. Students typically stay overnight in the residential halls during the 2-day orientation. Keep in mind that he transferred after his first year and returned for his junior year.

> I still know him, and he was doing the same major as me and he was with me in exploratory as well. So, I think maybe just that initial orientation. I don't recall any other opportunities that were exclusively exploratory students.

Joseph spent his sophomore year at an out-of-state university. The connection he formed with that individual at Orientation was very solid to still be in contact with him today.

The Love Your Major Fair and Panther Connections Panels were once required of students taking Discover Your Major. Approximately two years ago, organizational restructuring changed the administration of that course. The events still exist and are open to all FIU students. Victoria explained why she felt they were beneficial for exploratory students, beginning with the Love Your Major Fair as a good introduction:

> The Love Your Major Fair was really cool. In person they're walking up and interacting with all these departments. I think the majority of students who go are exploratory or [are thinking of changing]. So, I think just attending that is a hint that there are other people here who aren't sure or are interested in learning a little bit more about what this has to offer, or that major or that college.

In the quote, Victoria noted that the Fair is a good venue for exploratory students to see others who were in a similar situation as themselves. It would help them realize they are not alone. The Panther Connection Panels served a similar purpose:

> I really liked the professional panels that we used to do. [Students] could sit and listen to somebody who's actually doing this…It gave them a place on campus where they knew in walking in there's other students here. "If I really want to ask a question, I can, but it's not required." …These professionals would come and have conversations about their journey and how they ended up there. And I remember how exciting it was when they would sometimes have majors that had nothing to do with what they were doing in their career, and they were all successful and they're here talking to you about how successful they are. So, for us it would really help drive that point home at the end of the panel to say your major doesn't always equal a career.

The Panels provided students with the opportunity to listen to those with experience in their field of interest. It was especially helpful when their major was not directly connected to their career. Although these are great opportunities for exploratory students, they do not really provide a space for them to have individual conversations with each other. However, the Love Your Major Fair does allow for interactions with upper division students as representatives from their majors. The Discover Your Major course used to have a peer mentor similar to the First Year Experience course that would allow for more prolonged interaction with an upper division student throughout the course of the semester.

Cecilia believes, as do all the advisors, that "we have to create a space for exploratory students." Those spaces may not physically exist yet, but they do in the creative minds of said participants. Ideas range from the fun celebration to social media

and more intimate gatherings. Being able to appeal to student interests and modality preferences is important to consider. Nina, a former advisor, is interested in encouraging students to embrace their exploratory student identity:

> I will start with Halloween. Let's dress up as what you want to be, [your potential career]. Let's have some fun with a party, a celebration to start embracing the identity of a young person who is exploring what to do next.

This event is something that can potentially happen in partnership with departments in student affairs. Gordon and Steele (2015) point out that "a unified effort is essential" to advise undecided students (p. 171). It takes a village, so to speak. Jose, a former advisor, suggested creating an exploratory student organization which can also be part of the above partnership. He stated:

> I don't know if an organization will be too much to ask, but you can also even have a club for exploratory students where they get to do different things together [like] targeting [exploratory] interest areas so they get exposed to resources.

Typically, higher education professionals develop events for students to attend. Although they may seek student feedback, it is still the "adultier adult" who is hosting the event. An exploratory student club would put the onus on the students themselves for creating what they think their members need. Foubert and Urbanksi (2006) found that students' involvement in organizations has a strong association with establishing and clarifying purpose, educational involvement, and career planning, all of which are areas of psychosocial development that would be beneficial for exploratory students. This would also fulfill advisors' requests to participate in experiential activities that would help them choose a major.

In addition to collaborations between academic and student services, community resources such as field experience sites and career based social media are important in

advising undecided students (Gordon & Steele, 2015). Many of our programs went virtual in the past year because of the pandemic. Amber pointed out that Instagram Live is popular now and recommended the following:

> Maybe it's [asking them to] join us to talk about what it means to be exploratory. I don't know if other students could tune into that and talk, but I think it would have to be something facilitated by someone who is able to articulate and help students understand what it means to be exploratory and how to use that to their advantage to help them find out what a good path will be.

Of note is this generation's propensity to use social media to build trust and generate community (Smith & Cawthon, 2017). Additional benefits of having a show via Instagram Live is that it can be recorded for later viewing if someone has a time conflict as well as serve as a springboard for future involvement if someone is reticent about joining a more elaborate event.

The aforementioned ideas (i.e., Halloween party, student organization, and Instagram Live) would more than likely be open to exploratory students at large. However, if you recall, the exploration population at FIU is composed of those who chose to be exploratory (i.e., undecided) and those who were forced to be exploratory (e.g., limited access programs). These are two very different dynamics where students' experiences may not be at all similar. Frances and Gigi described smaller group events, the former introducing the concept of a series like a non-credit bearing course:

> A smaller intimate event with six to eight students sharing and trying to relate…It's the type of experience where you're going to get information from a peer, someone else who's feeling similar ways that you're feeling. It helps you realize you're not alone. I think we can attract different audiences. You have someone facilitate the redirection conversation in a structured manner (e.g., this week we're going to do this and next week we're going to do that) …It's like a Discover Your Major class, but instead of a credit bearing class with assignments you spend one hour every two weeks doing a specific activity.

Frances provided a structured approach to the small group setting, suggesting students work on an activity every two weeks. Similarly, Gigi recommended a small group setting composed of advisees:

> Sometimes I feel we're very transactional and I try to remind myself that's a human being, they have a life, and I want to make sure that they're happy right now. But sometimes, especially during peak, you get lost in one [student] after the other. And so maybe taking the time to do something in addition to advising that's outside and separate as a group to focus on maybe having those career discussions [where] the students can obviously learn from each other.

Gigi's idea is focused more on spending time together having career conversations. Whether the experience is more structured like Frances described or conversational like Gigi described, Buyarski (2009) recommends being intentional about grouping students for resource relevancy, effectiveness, and efficiency. One could potentially use Gordon's (1998) career decidedness subtypes along with other factors such as class standing and ability (e.g., math level) to develop intervention strategies. Ultimately, these groupings allow one to strategically provide relevant career decision-making strategies.

Summary

The student-to-student connection is an extremely important aspect of the undergraduate experience. Advisors are aware and yet, the focus has remained on transitioning students from exploratory to a degree-seeking major because of the metrics. Providing that the appropriate individuals are involved in "creating a space for exploratory students," the institution can begin implementing any number of the suggested recommendations provided by advisors to help students begin feeling a connection to their major and FIU.

Institutional Personnel

The most prevalent of institutional relationships is that of faculty-to-student. Much of an institution's existence is tied to this connection as certain methods (e.g., academic advising) are used to improve retention (Calder & Gordon, 1999). The underlying reason is that students who make a connection with at least one adult on campus are more satisfied and are retained at higher rates than those who do not (Dennis, 2007). I include academic advising under the faculty umbrella because the ethos of the academic advising profession is "Advising is Teaching." At one time, advisors all also taught the Discover Your Major course.

Academic advising has a direct impact on students' college experiences. This method of teaching can provide undecided students with essential information regarding majors and that can be used to develop educational goals (Cooney, 2000). Helping students see the connection between curricula and occupations as well as how their interests and strengths connect is at the core of advising (Gordon & Steele, 2003). Gigi explained the impact her advisor had on her when she was an undergraduate student:

> If I could pick a population, it would be exploratory. So, when I heard that there was a job opening, I was like, "Oh my gosh, please." The reason for that is because you're working with freshmen who don't know what's going on and in my first few years my advisor was everything…those genuine exploratory students just don't know what to do. I like having those conversations with them to kind of figure out what would be a good major, what's a good match, what aligns with their interest, and resources for them to use. I feel like I communicate well with students and have an openness, where they feel comfortable talking to me.

As an undergraduate, Gigi was an exploratory student interested in nursing, but over time realized that field was not for her. It was through her advisor's assistance inside and outside the advisor-student relationship that she was able to decide on her career path. They remain close today. Gigi, like "a lot of [exploratory] advisors, kind of bounced

around and explored majors" (Amber) themselves. The Academic and Career Success training team tries to incorporate more about the exploratory population in new advisor training, but having that background provides an empathetic context that allows students to feel more of a connection.

That connection was further enhanced if a student had the advisor as an instructor for Discover Your Major. This 1-credit course was developed to provide a structured process in which to help students choose their major. It was targeted to exploratory students, but any first-year student who needed assistance could take it. Although it was not required because of excess credit, Jose "wished it could be highly encouraged for undecided students somehow." He went on to describe what he liked about the course:

> One thing I liked about the Discover Your Major course is that those who took it were introduced to resources more than those who only came to the office where we were limited to a 20 to 30-minute conversation. When they're in your class, you talk more about it, you show them how to access them, and they have to not only attend the panels [and Love Your Major Fair], but also shadow somebody in the field and things like that. So those are very helpful for exploratory students; I will say for any student whether they're exploratory or not.

It has been approximately two years since an advisor has taught the course. The change in administration also brought a change in curriculum that removed the experiential opportunities (i.e., Panther Connections Panels, Love Your Major Fair, and shadow or interview someone in the field). Almost all advisors mentioned encouraging their students to take on an internship, shadow, or interview someone. Fabi suggested having an experiential type of program in the first year:

> The shadowing and internship part is really big. For exploratory, there should be some type of program in that regards for the first year…I feel like that should be something for them to do, especially when the student is undecided…us advisors can tell them everything, but by the time they finish with us in 30 minutes they go on with their life and they forget about it.

Advisors have a short amount of time in which to discuss major selection and coursework. They will recommend students participate in an internship or shadow someone, but they ignore or forget to act on that advice even though these types of behavioral experiences allow students to make connections to the world of work (Rettew, 2012).

In a study of high impact practices at FIU, Nicholas (2018) found that students would participate in an activity if it were required or suggested by a current professor for extra credit or if they learned about it through a social network like a student organization. This scenario corroborates what Jose shared about students:

> As an advisor, you can say, "oh, by the way, why don't you look at this? Why don't you take MyMajorMatch?" But in the class, they were required to do it. You can tell and guide students to do something, but it doesn't necessarily mean that they will…honestly, for the many years I was there, I could probably count on my two hands how many students followed up themselves…sometimes they didn't even do what they said they would.

When advisors tell students to research potential major/career options and suggest they visit certain departments, attend events, or conduct informational interviews, it is quite possible they will not complete the task under their own motivation. Unfortunately, this occurs often, and some may not be motivated until they find the selection of major hold on their account which prevents them from registering for the following semester. That being said, we can see that faculty play an important role in student engagement.

If there is one resource that advisors feel students should take advantage of, it is faculty. "The relationships that faculty and students develop outside the classroom may well be the part of teaching which has the greatest impact on students" (Wilson et al., as cited by Cuseo, 2018, p. 107). Although extensive research has shown the benefits of

student-faculty engagement, it also shows that interactions between student and faculty is consistently low (Cuseo, 2018). That is no different at FIU. Cecilia stated:

> I think one underutilized resource is their professors because immersive experiences are probably the most meaningful experiences that help create these aha moments for students and oftentimes can happen by working with a professor on research that they're doing, via an independent study, or working in a lab. Those kinds of things that are a little bit more hands on and immersive can help steer them.

"Hands on and immersive" opportunities as Cecilia described are wonderful ways for students to learn more about their field of interest. "Engaging with students in experiential learning activities" and "participating with students on faculty-student research teams" (Cuseo, 2018, p. 91) are practices that will increase contact outside the classroom. However, even beginning with something as simple as office hours can be beneficial. Fabi discussed how she encourages students to speak with their professors:

> Your professor is a good resource, believe it or not. They're like "how?" and I'm like, "if your professor is in that field it's because they're an expert. Pick their brain. They love talking to students." I'm a big advocate when it comes to office hours.

Encouraging students to visit faculty during office hours is a common suggestion for advisors, but students are not always comfortable doing so. Cuseo (2018) suggests faculty emphasize availability outside of class while being explicit in encouraging office visits, including potentially having students sign up in class.

Regardless of the activity, students see the importance of engaging with faculty. Joseph stated:

> I think probably the best resource FIU has to offer would be to go speak to the advisors or professors in the engineering building…because they're probably best suited to help you figure it out. Speaking to my professors about what it was that they did on a daily basis outside of teaching…in the field [was helpful]. It narrowed down between what subcategory of civil engineering it is that I wanted to do. I actually recall FIU posting about it and holding seminars all my freshman

> year that I attended of panels of engineers working in like six or seven different professions within civil engineering so that students could show up, listen, and figure out what it was that they wanted to do within civil engineering. I remember attending those.

Joseph felt "stuck" when he started his freshman year because he was forced to be in exploratory. "It was when I finally got my first engineering professor that I felt like I had someone I could just straight up, ask questions and stuff." At that point, he felt more optimistic and realized how beneficial it was to speak with faculty about their careers and attend panels to help him learn more about civil engineering. This was so much so, that he recommended students attend a required meeting facilitated by faculty from their major:

> I feel like maybe a required meeting held by faculty of that area would be helpful to talk about things, particularly because in Orientation you never learned about your major, you just learned about the entire university. So, I feel maybe it's good for students to have faculty from their eventual college give them a meeting on overall information.

Many first-year students do not meet faculty from their major until one or two years into their degree program because of the nature of general education requirements, pre-requisites, and/or electives. Joseph indicated that meeting with faculty at a point after Orientation would be helpful and perhaps provide insight into the major. Joseph's story is a prime example of reasons advisors would like students to interact with faculty; in this case, he learned more about his field of interest, but he also felt a sense of belonging.

Summary

The responsibility for developing ways for students to bond with the institution lies with both the university and the student. The institution must engage students in the participation or utilization of on-campus activities and resources that will promote success (Dennis, 2007). FIU provides resources exploratory students can use to help with

their career decision-making process, namely academic advisors and faculty. However, participants felt there was a disconnect between advice provided by advisors and students' follow through as well as faculty engagement with students.

Chapter Summary

This chapter focused on Advisors' Perspectives on Support Systems and Influence and its three sub-themes, 1) Family Support, 2) Peer-to-Peer Connections, and 3) Institutional Personnel. Support is key during any transition and exploratory FTIC students are experiencing two transitions simultaneously, being new to FIU and finding a major.

Advisors felt that family was the primary influencer of students' major decision-making process and the biggest source of pressure. This is due to the family centric environment of the largely Latino American student population. Unfortunately, many students will avoid having the difficult conversation with their family when they dislike their major or are earning failing grades because they are conflict averse and/or feel they owe it to their family.

The next best thing to family is friends or peers. These are individuals one can count on even when things are not going well with one's family. They understand what you are going through. The student-to-student connection is an important part of the undergraduate experience, something that can contribute to students' sense of belonging. However, advisors reported that students feel alone, like they are the only one experiencing their situation. This could be due to the lack of structured opportunities for exploratory students to meet other exploratory students. Although current opportunities

do not exist, participants were able to provide ideas that ranged from a fun celebration and student organization to social media and more intimate gatherings.

Academic advising has a direct impact on students' college experiences, especially that of exploratory students. Although career related resources are available, advisors are the main institutional resource provided for this population. At one time, they even used to teach Discover Your Major, a 1-credit course that structured activities advisors highly recommended as part of the course (e.g., internship, shadow, and information interview). Unfortunately, those experiential opportunities were removed from the curriculum under the new administration. Advisors have been encouraging students to visit faculty because they can provide valuable insight into their fields of study and hands on opportunities of their own. Chapter Six will use these findings to answer the study's research questions as well as explain implications and offer recommendations.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Academic advisors serve as the vital link between the institution and its students. In this metrics driven environment, they may often find themselves under pressure and tasked to focus on students who count toward the metrics versus those who do not. They may believe certain processes are archaic (Nicholas, 2020) or disagree with existing policies. When advisors are key in providing students with relevancy or rationales (King, 1993), this can be challenging.

Participants in this study care about student success. They are advocates, authentic, and empathetic. They want to help students navigate the vagaries of a bureaucracy, but also the intricacies of their family dynamics. King (1993) describes them as “the hub of the student services wheel” (p. 22) because they are knowledgeable and can refer them to any number of support services like student engagement, career services, or financial wellness. Their stories demonstrate the importance of academic advising to student success.

This chapter continues with a summary of the study followed by a discussion of the findings as they relate to each research question. Implications for practice, research, and policy are also addressed. Finally, this chapter concludes with recommendations for future research.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore academic advisors' understanding of the exploratory FTIC student experience at a Hispanic Serving Institution. Participants in this study agreed to participate in a 60 to 90-minute interview and had been advising anywhere between three and eighteen years. The insight gleaned from these 11 interviews

are meant to contribute to student success by creating strategies FIU can implement to help them develop a sense of belonging and connection to the institution.

Two major themes and six sub-themes emerged during the coding process. The first theme, Advisors' Perspectives on Exploratory Identity had three sub-themes, 1) Working with Exploratory (Undecided) Students, 2) Advisors' Struggles with Forced Exploratory Students, and 3) Advisors Believe Students are Under Pressure. The second theme, Advisors' Perspectives on Support Systems and Influence also had three sub-themes, 1) Family Support, 2) Peer-to-Peer Connections, and 3) Institutional Personnel.

The exploratory population at FIU is not composed of your traditional exploratory (undecided) student. Although it began that way, it largely serves as a "placeholder" major for those who are interested in limited access programs. Advisors indicated that these students are challenging to work with because they identify with the initial major of choice and are averse to changing it. Over time, admissions decision-making has caused this problematic dynamic to grow.

Societal norms work against those who are unsure what their major or career path maybe. Many students are hesitant to choose the exploratory major and those who are forced into it are quite unhappy. Participants felt that it is important to destigmatize exploratory and normalize the process. However, certain policies unwittingly introduce time as an obstacle to the exploration process. Instead of encouraging students to own their exploratory identity, these policies privilege declaring their major and force students to make a choice before they are ready to do so. This leads to student frustration and advisors' frustration on students' behalf because it places them at a disadvantage, one that occurs during a major transition in their life–beginning college.

Support is key during any transition in a person's life and is composed of resources that they can depend on (i.e., family or friends) or of which they are a part (i.e., institutions). FIU is largely composed of students of Latino American descent which means they exist in family centric environments. Advisors felt that students' families were their biggest source of support and pressure, hence why they are the primary influencer of the major decision-making process. As entering first-year students, many 18 and 19-year-olds are uncomfortable standing up for themselves and will go along with what their parents have planned out for them even in the face of misery and failing grades. They have at times enlisted advisors' help in speaking with parents; the results are variable.

In addition to family, friends or peers are another key group of individuals on whom students can depend. Advisors encourage students to get involved in student organizations among other engagement opportunities because the student-to-student connection is an important part of the undergraduate experience. That connection to students' sense of belonging is important to their success. However, all participants reported that there are no specific opportunities for exploratory students to meet with other exploratory students and that their students feel alone. Many think they are the only one who may be undecided or between majors. That may be due in part to few if any interactions with other exploratory students. Advisors see the need to develop structured opportunities for this population and provided ideas that can be used as a starting point for programming coordinators.

Ultimately, it is the participants themselves who are the main institutional resource for exploratory students. They have a direct impact on their students' college

experiences and are seen as the main conduit of information via their one-on-one advising sessions or institutional messaging system. These individuals are expected to know the appropriate resources and where to direct students. This is but one of the reasons why they were selected to teach Discover Your Major. That course allowed them a structured avenue by which to require students to complete specific tasks that were normally suggestions in an advising appointment. It also provided students with highly recommended experiential opportunities that helped connect what they were learning to the world of work. Although these are no longer required as part of the curriculum, advisors continue to recommend students participate in them in addition to visiting faculty, a major underutilized resource.

Findings and Interpretations

This qualitative study addressed a gap in the literature by gaining insight into the exploratory student experience via academic advisors at a Hispanic Serving Institution. The following research questions guided this study: (a) What are academic advisors' perceptions of the needs and concerns of exploratory FTIC students? (b) What are academic advisors' perceptions of exploratory FTIC students' support systems? Each question will be addressed separately.

Advisors' Perspectives on Exploratory Identity

The first research question was: What are academic advisors' perceptions of the needs and concerns of exploratory FTIC students? The extensive body of literature on exploratory (undecided) students defines them as those who are "unwilling, unable, or unready to make educational or vocational decisions" (Gordon & Steele, 2015, p. viii). According to the advisors in this study, that is true for a portion of the exploratory

population at FIU, but the majority are what I referred to as forced exploratory. As discussed by participants, these students at FIU are decided. They know what major they want to pursue but have been waylaid in exploratory because of admissions decision-making. The program they are interested in is limited access (e.g., engineering, nursing, and business) or they are part of a special population (e.g., Golden Scholars, Global First Year, and College Prep). As a result, exploratory students feel differently about being exploratory, which affects their interactions with advisors and their college experience.

Regardless of the reason, advisors expressed that students who choose to be exploratory are grateful to have bought themselves time, limited though it is, in the selection of major process. Lewallen (1995) indicated that being undecided is the norm rather than exception, but officially undecided students are in the minority at FIU. Participants indicated a need to destigmatize the exploration process because that impacts how students feel about being exploratory. Many students are ashamed of identifying as exploratory, particularly to the wider world (e.g., parents and friends). However, one wonders if advisors' mixed messaging concerning exploratory's status as a major confuses students. Considering that advisors are the guide to what the institution considers acceptable, and the student perceives as normal (Kuh & Whitt, 2000), it is fitting that they see an urgency in normalizing being exploratory.

Advisors expressed forced exploratory students as a group are a challenge because the major they desire is being kept from them and they may ultimately need redirection. Most have already taken on that identity (e.g., I'm a civil engineering major.) and feel at a loss when they are told their high school GPA or test scores do not meet the minimum requirements. Advisors indicated students feel left out, stuck, or experienced a

blow to their self-esteem. Many appeared to be confused at Orientation because they were unaware of their placement in exploratory. In the experience of participants, these students do not identify as exploratory and have not been admitted to the chosen major. According to Gordon (1981), many new college students find themselves in Marcia's "foreclosure" stage because they committed to a decision without exploring their values or needs and typically adopt those of their parents. The family environment of "foreclosure" students may encourage dependency on parents for decision-making and be conducive to premature decision-making (Berríos-Allison, 2005), both of which are detrimental to student success. Lack of fit can lead to feelings of marginalization, self-consciousness, depression (Schlossberg, 1989), and doubting if they matter (Kittendorf, 2012). Moreover, when advisors redirected students for lack of progress, they understood their need to grieve for the loss of that major and all the potential plans associated with it (Perry, as cited in Evans et al., 2010).

Both types of exploratory students feel pressure to choose a major, the most difficult decision they face in college according to participants. This is corroborated by Korschgen and Hageseth (1997). However, the rationale is a little more nuanced than expected. Participants noted it is not only choosing a major but doing so in a limited time frame of 30 credits regardless of your reason for being exploratory. Advisors were vocal about their frustration with external pressures (e.g., excess credit, metrics, and department policies) affecting students' progress, but also students' expression of the unfairness of being limited to 30 credits when that is not enough time to go through the exploration process. It is no wonder this process generates a host of emotions including fear, anxiety, frustration, and overwhelm (Hagstrom et al., 1997; Gordon, 1995).

Through participant interviews, it became apparent that being exploratory is a transitory phase at FIU. The focus has always been to get students to declare their major and move on. Time was not taken to encourage students to embrace their exploratory identity and interact with others who are also exploratory, an opportunity to build community and develop a sense of belonging. The next question looks at this and other support systems in-depth.

Advisors' Perspectives on Support Systems and Influence

The second question was: What are academic advisors' perceptions of exploratory FTIC students' support systems? Choosing a major is a significant life event that may be confusing and require help. This transition or change is influenced by one's perception of situation, self, support, and strategies (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006). However, it is the support variable that is crucial to managing transition because it consists of resources that one can depend on. This study focused on family support, peer-to-peer connections, and institutional personnel.

As indicated by participants, the majority of FIU's student population is of Latino American descent which, as a culture, is very family oriented. Participants identified family as the primary influencer of students' major decision-making process—a finding corroborated by Montag et al. (2012) and Tziner et al. (2012). Although they could be students' biggest supporters according to advisors, this could also result in extensive amounts of parental pressure that Montag et al. (2012) found could help or hinder the decision-making process. Fewer parents have expressed support for declaring exploratory. At times, advisors reported students feeling duty bound to follow a particular major/career path because parents were paying for their education, or it was a way for

them to give back to their family. Many-a-time students would refrain from expressing their true thoughts regarding their dislike of a major or coming clean about failing grades. Advisors tried to empower them to have these difficult conversations, but they are truly a conflict averse group. Instead, participants found themselves advocating on behalf of their students in person or via the phone with family, to mixed results.

Advisors understand that the student-to-student connection is a potent institutional relationship that is related to persistence and gains in intellectual and personal development (Calder & Gordon, 1999). And yet, it is the largest gap currently being experienced by exploratory students based on this study's findings. Participants encouraged students to get involved on campus and participate in activities where they could meet others like clubs, organizations, community service, and events. However, there was no follow-up tracking or structured experiences specifically for exploratory students where they could potentially develop relationships and build community.

Participants intimated that students want to belong; they want a sense of community. The greater the level, the more likely they will be retained (Campbell & Mislevy, 2012; Hausmann, Ye, Schofield, & Woods, 2009; Schlossberg, 1989). Advisors shared that exploratory students feel like they are alone; they each feel like the only one currently experiencing this state when the reality is there are several hundred of them. Creating spaces, opportunities for them to interact and help each other will let them realize they are not alone in this process (Gordon and Steele, 2015). Participant ideas included ways to leverage existing programs (e.g., Freshman Orientation), but were primarily composed of new events/programs (e.g., Halloween party, Instagram Live program, and small group gatherings) that can be implemented for exploratory students.

The very existence of the FIU academic advisor caseload is that students who connect with at least one adult on campus are more satisfied and are retained at higher rates (Dennis, 2007). Although faculty do not have an assigned caseload so to speak, they are essential to the retention of FIU students and have a direct impact on students' college experiences like advisors, but for different reasons. Advisors help undecided students develop educational goals by providing them with important information regarding majors (Cooney, 2000) and showing them how those goals connect with their interests and strengths (Gordon & Steele, 2003). Participants discussed what it was like teaching Discover Your Major and the importance of exploratory students participating in experiential opportunities (e.g., internship, shadow, or information interview). It was frustrating for them to have students disregard their recommendations unless it was a required task for class when they were teaching the course. This is corroborated by Nicholas (2018) who found that students participated in activities when required or suggested by a current professor for extra credit.

Advisors intimated that faculty play an important role in student engagement, the greatest impact of which may be felt outside the classroom in faculty-student relationships (Wilson et al., as cited by Cuseo, 2018). The advisors in the study felt faculty were an underutilized resource and encourage students to visit them during office hours and participate in experiential opportunities with them to learn more about their field of interest. Because student-faculty interactions are consistently low, Cuseo (2018) suggests ways they can promote office visits and make it easier for students to sign up in class. Faculty are hidden gems that exploratory students would benefit from greatly, a fact not gone unnoticed by advisors.

According to participants, exploratory students are experiencing a tumultuous beginning at FIU as they undergo two simultaneous transitions, moving from high school to college and choosing a major. A support system perceived as strong is important for them to manage the changes they are experiencing. Based on advisors' perspectives, family support is the strongest of the three resources at hand, followed partially by institutional personnel. Although exploratory students have assigned academic advisors, external pressures (e.g., excess credit, metrics, and department policies) are potentially affecting how students perceive the strength of that resource. Faculty are a wonderful resource that advisors encourage students to visit, but the number of interactions is still low. Peer-to-Peer Connections is lacking. Advisors were very clear that there are no structured experiences for exploratory students, leading many students to feel alone in their exploratory world.

Implications for Practice

Academic advisors are critical to the student experience and serve as the link or liaison, if you will, to the institution. Being able to understand the student perspective as well as that of the administration provides them with a unique point of view that would not otherwise be possible. Participants were able to share challenges that exploratory students face and highlight specific policies and the consequences that directly impact them, something that students would more than likely not be able to do through no fault of their own. Although students are not typically privy to performance funding data and decision-making, they are cognizant of how it makes them feel and that is something of which advisors are aware. Advisors' ability to see both sides was integral to this study's implications.

Normalizing Exploratory and Building Community

It was apparent throughout the study that the stigma associated with being exploratory is pervasive. Advisors indicated students are embarrassed to be undecided. Many students who are undecided refuse to declare exploratory because they do not want to identify as such. Those who have the gumption to choose exploratory may feel relieved in not committing to a specific major, but that does not mean that they are secure in their exploratory identity. Forced exploratory students identify with another major entirely and are not pleased to find themselves "stuck" with this label. However, it is best to "treat each one of our entering freshmen as an undecided student" (Erikson & Strommer, 1991, p. 74) and normalize the exploration process. Let them know that it is okay to explore, learn more about themselves, research occupational information, and participate in experiential opportunities connected to this process.

Normalizing the exploration process would need to begin with changing the language used by academic advisors, advising administrators, and those who oversee these areas. Exploratory is currently seen as a short-term placeholder, a transitory phase that students need to quickly move through without stopping to embrace their shared identity. This communicates to students that they are not part of a community; they are alone in limbo. Building an exploratory identity could begin with something as simple as an FIU t-shirt with the term exploratory or a catchier phrase like "what's your passion?" This begins fostering a sense of belonging. However, a longer lasting expression of that would be developing opportunities for exploratory students to experience community.

This study's findings unmasked the lack of structured opportunities dedicated to exploratory students meeting other exploratory students. Advisors were aware of the

importance of student engagement to persistence and encouraged their students to get involved on campus. However, they also expressed that exploratory students felt they were alone in this process. Everyone they knew had already figured it out, so to speak, when that was clearly not the case. One solution to such a situation is creating opportunities for these students to intentionally interact with one another or with a past exploratory student, particularly by exploratory type because they would better understand the experience.

Leveraging existing programming like Freshman Orientation to provide more intentional opportunities for exploratory students to interact was suggested by participants because they are already grouped by majors. In addition, they provided creative ideas that ranged from a fun celebratory Halloween party and student organization to more structured intimate gatherings that would allow for targeted conversation and sharing. An Instagram Live show was also suggested which addresses this generation's tendency to generate community via social media. All these ideas have merit and individuals or departments at FIU with whom advisors or advising administrators can partner. It takes a village; the University must be united in its efforts to advise exploratory students (Gordon & Steele, 2015).

Faculty

The most common institutional relationship is that of faculty-student and yet, they are an underutilized resource at FIU according to advisors. These individuals are experts in their fields and have extensive knowledge and resources that remains untapped by students. Nicholas (2018) also indicated that they are crucial to engagement because students would participate in activities if it were required or suggested by faculty for

extra credit. Because advisors have challenges with students completing suggested tasks, it would be beneficial to partner with individual faculty or departments who are able to require or suggest students complete them. Although participants encouraged their students to visit faculty, discussing a more intentional collaboration, whether it be receiving direct information on experiential opportunities students may participate in or soliciting their willingness to participate in organized activities (e.g., Cafecito chat or required faculty-new student networking event), would be a better course of action. Furthermore, administrators should be intentional about developing collaborative opportunities between advisors and faculty to improve students' experience (Mu & Fosnacht, 2019).

Academic Advisors

Academic advisors have a direct impact on college students' experiences. Every undergraduate student at FIU is assigned an advisor in their major upon matriculation. From that point on, advisors will serve as a guide to what the institution considers normal acceptable behavior (Kuh & Whitt, 2000). Professional development provides advisors with the opportunity to enhance their skills and knowledge of what students need to know. FIU has been a leader in the advising world when it comes to training and allocation of funds for external opportunities. As a neophyte, advisors begin with two days of New Advisor Training/Advising Essentials by Academic and Career Success which is followed over the course of the next several weeks with individual workshops facilitated by departments like Financial Aid/Scholarships, Career & Talent Development, Center for Student Engagement, and College Life Coaching, among others.

The advising community at large can take advantage of the many different webinars, workshops, and conferences that are scheduled.

Advisors in this study provided conflicting messages when it came to exploratory being a major. Several told students “exploratory is not a major,” while others indicated that they were exploratory and not in the desired major yet. Advisors are also expected to be aware of resources on campus so that they can refer students appropriately and yet, some were not aware of two main events for exploratory students, the Love Your Major Fair and Panther Connections Panels, both of which have been in existence for years. Perhaps the fact that advisors have not taught Discover Your Major (DYM) in two years has contributed to this. Students taking DYM were required to attend both events and that is no longer the case. It would be beneficial for advising administrators and advisors to address this mixed messaging and lack of information through training and ongoing communication to alleviate confusion.

Family

Advisors indicated that family is the biggest supporter of students and primary influencer of major decision-making, particularly because FIU is a Hispanic-Serving Institution. Students and parents tend to believe there are five career paths: doctor, lawyer, engineer, nurse, and “businessist,” the lighthearted term given by the prior director of advising to those in the business field. Much of that is influenced by their countries of origin, lack of knowledge regarding the United States education system, and societal expectations. Advisors can empower students to make decisions and encourage them to speak with their families about the exploration process, but many are afraid to. Exploratory is not something easily understood; participants expressed confusion by

students. In addition to academic or college presentations currently given at Freshman Orientation, perhaps there is another opportunity or way to explain this process to family members.

Implications for Policy

Advisors in this study were quite vocal about the 30-credit declaration policy being time limiting, a disadvantage to students, and a large source of pressure. Students are experiencing many transitions during their first year and are doing what they can to manage them. However, they can quite easily accumulate these credits over a few short months before they begin getting a "selection of major hold" placed on their account. FIU's Exploratory Program was modeled after Arizona State University (ASU). It included exploratory tracks like ASU's meta-majors and instituted the same 45-credit declaration policy. Students in ASU's meta-majors take a one credit career and exploration course each semester for potentially three semesters (Wright, 2018). Discover Your Major (DYM) is FIU's version of the career and exploration course, but it is not required of exploratory students. The Ohio State University's exemplar exploratory program assigns students to advisors who also teach the University Survey course that is mandatory for students and covers major exploration (Wright, 2018).

This study's findings support increasing the declaration policy from 30 to 45 credits and suggest that having exploratory advisors teach DYM is beneficial because of the additional contact time outside of advising sessions and ability to require students to complete assigned tasks that are largely ignored otherwise. Providing students with additional time and structure allows them to go through this developmental process in a less pressured setting with a supportive and encouraging environment, one that will help

them make their educational, career, and life decisions (Germeijs, Luyckx, Notelaers, Goossens, & Verschueren, 2012; Gordon, 1995). Ultimately, this will help students find their best fit and lead to increased retention and graduation rates.

Forced exploratory students are not undecided and therein lies the crux of the matter. Advisors know these students do not identify as exploratory and are not allowed to be in their selected major because they fall short of the required GPA and test scores. Preventing them from finding their fit can lead to feelings of marginalization and depression (Schlossberg, 1989). In the last two years or so, the College of Engineering at FIU created a general engineering major that many of these students were able to declare as incoming freshmen. One would consider that a pre-major. Although they were not able to declare a specific engineering major until they achieved the minimum requirements, they were able to identify as an engineering student and be assigned to an engineering advisor. This study's findings would recommend reviewing data from that policy change. If it proves to be positive, creating similar pre-major designations connected to other limited access programs is highly recommended. Advisors and students would benefit from that move.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study explored academic advisors' understanding of the exploratory FTIC student experience. It provided insight on the struggles students experience and concerns advisors have for this student population. However, the next step would be to interview exploratory FTIC students for a firsthand account of their experiences; looking at exploratory type, gender, and race/ethnicity would enhance findings. Will they identify

the same struggles and concerns that emerged in this study, or might they pinpoint others?

Much of the literature identifies students as decided or undecided and to a lesser extent, major changers. Studies on major choice focus on the action as an individual decision without considering the effect institutions have on students' choice via policies and practices. To what extent are forced exploratory students considered decided if they are labeled exploratory (undecided) and will ultimately change their major? Advisors found this segment of the exploratory population very challenging because of the emotions associated with perceived attempts at stripping them of their major identity. A good number of these students left the University, according to participants. Would building community have worked for these individuals or would it have required a change in administrative processes? Should advisors be trained differently to work with this group? The idea of the forced exploratory student as a separate segment was unexpected but provides insight into differences in behavior.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore academic advisors' understanding of the exploratory FTIC student experience at a Hispanic Serving Institution. This chapter focused on the interpretation and discussion of this study's findings. Implications for practice and policy as well as recommendations for future research were presented.

The researcher found that advisors are concerned about the effect of external pressures (e.g., metrics, excess credit, and 30-credit declaration policy) on students' lives and the major decision-making process. They are students' direct connection to the institution and may be challenged to enforce policies with which they do not agree.

Advising administrators would do well to assist advisors in developing a more consistent and developmental approach when expressing the meaning behind these policies that would help in normalizing exploratory.

Building community is essential to sense of belonging and ultimately student success. The aforementioned pressures have affected advisors' priorities to largely transition students quickly to a degree-granting major without helping students develop their exploratory identity or interact with other exploratory students. In addition to adjusting the declaration policy to 45 credits it is urgent that programming be developed for exploratory students and a more systematic approach be used in tracking their engagement.

This research adds to the literature a deeper understanding of the exploratory major at a Hispanic-Serving Institution. Including diverse voices allows for a broader grasp of the undecided student experience—one that due to institutional policies includes a segment of students who are not actually undecided. Policies at times are barriers to student success. My hope is that this study's findings contribute to institutional practices that support exploratory identity and success.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Appendix B: Peer Reviewer Information

Appendix A

Interview Protocol

- Tell me a little about yourself. Where are you from? Where did you study? What did you study? How did you get into advising? How many years have you been in advising? Why did you choose to work at FIU?

- How prepared did you feel to be an advisor? An advisor for exploratory students? *What resources would have been beneficial for you?*

- How do you feel about the move from the centralized Exploratory Advising Center to CASE? *Has that impacted Exploratory students?*

- How often do students choose to be Exploratory?
    - How aware are students of their placement in Exploratory?

- Who or what influences their decision-making process the most?
    - In what ways?

- How do they define the term Exploratory?
    - Have you ever heard them suggest a different term to use?
    - What would you call an Exploratory major if you could rename it?

- How do they feel about being an Exploratory major?
    - What experiences have led you to feel this way?
    - Give me an example of a time…

- What effects do they think being an Exploratory major has on their life?
    - How do they think it will affect their academic progress?

- What resources do you think are available to help students choose a major?

- What opportunities do they have to meet other Exploratory students?

- What type of activities or events do you think could promote positive energy among Exploratory majors?
    - What do you think is missing?

- What would you say has been the most difficult decision they have been faced with in college?
    - Why do you think that?

- In what ways do you feel we support Exploratory majors at FIU?
    - What can be done to help them have a more positive experience?

Appendix B

Peer Reviewer Information

Peer Reviewer:

Dr. Janie Valdés, Florida International University

Janie Valdés is Assistant Vice President for Enrollment Management and Services at Florida International University (FIU). In this role, Janie develops and champions strategies that positively influence transfer student enrollment and outcomes, and improves the student experience, end to end. This highly collaborative work has resulted in significant improvements in AA Transfer-In rates, retention and completion rates, and the percentage of transfer students graduating without excess credits.

In 2005, Janie founded Transfer and Transition Services, a unit that today serves the second largest transfer student enrollment in the nation, with nearly 10,000 new transfers annually (U.S. News & World Report Short List, January 12, 2021). Together with a dedicated team of passionate professionals, Janie implemented best practices in transfer credit evaluations and shaped some of the earliest supports for transfer students, including for special student populations such as veterans and adult learners.

Janie also evolved FIU Connect4Success (C4S) into a nationally recognized guided transfer pathway for state/community college students. Under the C4S umbrella, she leads/co-leads grant-funded projects to improve STEM, humanities, and AS degree pathways. Janie has always considered the student voice as a driver for continuous improvement, supplementing quantitative data with qualitative interviews and focus groups.

Janie's lifelong career in higher education blends her passion for students with her training and experience in organizational development to positively impact student success. In fact, she began her career in the mid 1990's as an academic advisor redesigning a growing summer bridge program. During her tenure, she has seen the advising role evolve into one of the most critical on college campuses, one that she is all too happy to take on when she meets students at events or when they visit her office.

Janie is a two-time alumna of FIU, having earned her Bachelor of Arts in Psychology and Master of Science in Industrial/Organizational Psychology from the institution. She earned her Doctor of Education in Human and Organizational Learning from the George Washington University. Janie is part of the 2021-22 class of American Council on Education (ACE) Fellows.

VITA

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2010	FIU Torch Award
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