Navigating a Sea of Choices: The Community College Student Perspective

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The Challenge of Choice

• CC students: more choices than 4-year students?
• Student-counselor ratios can exceed 1000:1
• CC students may lack social resources / “college knowledge”
• Complexity and lack of guidance may cause students to delay / feel unhappy about decisions.
• “Mistakes” can delay graduation or worse
How to **Support** Students?

- More counseling?
- Encourage self-advising?
- School unsure how/why students use technologies
- Schools unsure of students preferences for different modes of advising (i.e., online vs. face-to-face)
Data: 12 focus groups, large midwest CC

• 8 original focus groups (N = 76)

• 4 groups one year later (N = 40)
  – Assessed students’ ability to self-advice

• Also: review of catalog, academic program web pages, and other online tools
Breakdown of first 8 groups

1<sup>st</sup> Semester Entry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># of Participants</th>
<th>Decided</th>
<th>Undecided</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Older</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Younger</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
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2<sup>nd</sup> Semester Entry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># of Participants</th>
<th>Decided</th>
<th>Undecided</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Older</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Younger</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
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Coding

• Units of Thought ("snippet"): “The counselors pretty much gave me directions. I was undecided but I still had a chance to take class and get started in the direction that I learned more about how to read the catalog so when it come to registration I didn’t have a problem registering and know what class I wanted to register for.”
Coding

• Focus groups coded using Atlas.ti; 3 themes
  – **Logistical**: course selection, transfer, program completion, etc.
  – **Types of Support**: advising, articulation & transfer, websites, online degree audit, parents, etc.
  – **Preferences and Tone**: positive vs. negative, online vs. face-to-face, confusing vs. helpful

• Self-advising scenarios scored with rubric
Results Organized in Four Sections

• Student Perceptions of Advising
• Advising Systems: Online vs. Face-to-Face
• The Transfer Path
• Scenario-Based Responses
Student Perceptions of Advising
Two **Phases** of Advising

I. Developmental / Holistic

- What interests students?
- What do students want long-term?

II. Logistical

- Specific class selection and course enrollment
- Program of study academic planning
Student Perceptions of Advising

% of Total Snippets

Young | Old | Decided | Undecided | 1st Semester | 2nd Semester

- Positive
- Neutral
- Negative

Young (n=107); Old (n=79); Decided (n=107); Undecided (n=79); 1st Semester (n=100); 2nd Semester (n=86)
Diversity of Advising Needs: **Positives**

**Undecided**
- Focused on advisors who went above and beyond expectations
- “I sat down and I said I do not know where I want to go with my degree. And she said, okay, what interests you? What do you like to do? Do you like people, do you not like people…extremely helpful and extremely knowledgeable.”

**Decided**
- Meetings straightforward, efficient, and useful
- “I explained this is what I wanted to do…she was like this is what you want then…very straightforward, no problems.”
- “I just walked in and they said this is what you need to take for where you want to go and I was on my way.”
Diversity of Advising Needs: **Negatives**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Undecided</th>
<th>Decided</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Felt rushed and confused</td>
<td>• Wanted clearer pathways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “It’s like they get you in and out as fast as possible. . .they threw</td>
<td>• “I think it’s a lot easier if you had like something like what you’re</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some papers at you and then like have a good one.”</td>
<td>going into, just put a list like one way to do it…I feel like they</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “She gave me a list of general things that I can pick from…it was such</td>
<td>should put one way to do it.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>a big list that I didn’t really know where to start.”</td>
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Unmet Advising Needs

- Mostly undecided students
- Classes selected without goals in mind
- Resignation about uncertainty and implications
- “I still don’t know what I’m doing. Honestly, I’m taking classes all on my own. I have no idea what basic courses you have to take, your prerequisites, the [advisor] couldn’t tell me that because apparently they are all different for whatever you want to go.”
Advising Systems: Online vs. Face-to-Face
Comparison of Online and Face-to-Face Preferences

- **Overall** – “Like they were talking about online registration. I like that because I work so much and I don't have time to come down here and registration down here is crazy.”

- **Advising** – “Me personally, I’d rather talk to someone because...well, I’d rather talk to someone.”
Face-to-Face Preferences

• **Complexity of online tools** – “I click around to like 5 different links just trying to find it and then finally it’s just in some random place.”

• **Distrustful of own abilities** – “I’m not really good with that kind of stuff…it’s easier to go to a counselor and talk to, so you don’t mess up.”

• **Norms and habits** – “I guess I’m just old school. I like having …some in front of me to talk to.”

• **Distrust of online information** – “I feel more confident when a real person tell me it.”
Online Preferences

• **Distrust of advisors** – “I just like the website…I feel like it’s a lot better than taking someone’s word for it.”

• **Misinformation from advisors** – “I'm going to have to skip a whole semester…It wouldn’t have happened if the counselor would have got it right the first semester.”

• **Conflicting information** – “I will go to one advisor [and] they will tell me one thing’ then I go to another advisor and it’s different.”

• **Accessibility** – “Seeing how I’m a mom, I can do this at 3 [am] when it might work for my schedule.”

• **Student clarity** – “I didn’t have to meet with a counselor…I knew exactly what classes I wanted.”
Advising Systems: Online vs. Face-to-Face – Two Motivations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Success</th>
<th>Failure</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Students with positive prior counselor interactions maintain preference for them</td>
<td>• Negative experiences with online tools prefer “real person”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Student success with online tools – Why change what works?</td>
<td>• Negative counselor interactions may “drive” students online</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Advising Systems: Online vs. Face-to-Face – Either?

• Perhaps preference is for what works
• “I mean there’s tons of programs online, but figuring out which one actually does is kind of daunting sometimes, so you go to the counselor for help, but if they don’t know the programs themselves they can’t really be much help to you…that’s not really the best way to go so…I guess more information online or better educated counselors…one of the two.
• “I feel like it’s important to have a combination of both, like you should be able to talk to someone and if something’s unclear to you then you can visit the website and try and clear it up.”
The Transfer Path
Many Transfer Destinations

- Intended transfer school %
- 41% of all intended transfers at 2 schools
- 81% at 10 schools
- 90 transfer schools identified in total

Data from 2012 orientation survey (n = 1,148)
The **Complexity** of the Transfer Path

- Partial articulation agreements
- Constantly changing requirements
- Misinformation
- Multiple sources
- “I always do a double check now to make sure...I feel like I can’t trust what I’m being told. I have to double check with both, like [current school] and at [transfer school]. Like all the time I have to constantly double check.”
The Transfer Path – **Positives**

- **Advisors clear about popular transfer schools** – “For [popular transfer school], it’s a really cut and dry thing of what I can take. Either psychology 1010 or 1000. It is very straightforward. I don’t have that much room, so yeah – it’s pretty easy.”

- **Transfer destination school resources helpful** – [Transfer school] gave me a curriculum guide and it tells me exactly what classes to take at [current school], but the one that I have at [current school] for [transfer school] is kind of confusing…the one that the [transfer school] gives me is a lot easier.”
The Transfer Path – **Negatives (1 of 2)**

- **Students unhappy with level of guidance** – “They were really vague. They didn’t really give me helpful answers as to what I needed to…I intend on transferring…they just gave me a list…make it more personal, like find out why the student wants to go into, what they’re doing, because there’s a huge amount of different class that you can take to go into a major.”

- **Students frustrated about receiving accurate or conflicting information** – “Every counselor I talked to kind of sent me in a different direction, like not a straight answer from any of them. I was looking into transfer programs…and I would ask questions and they really didn’t seem to know that much.”
The Transfer Path – **Negatives** (2 of 2)

- **Online or print materials inaccurate** – “I know some of the [potential transfer classes] the transfer school gave me, some of the classes [at the current school] didn’t exist anymore. Like they were old, like older classes that had been changed.”

- **Advisors were only most familiar with popular transfer schools** – “The counselor seemed bothered…I just didn’t get the impression he felt like – he thought I was too hard, why didn’t I go away. Because it was a little trickier then most transferring students.”
Scenario-Based Responses
Scenario-Based Responses - Background

• Final 4 focus groups (n = 40)
• 13 scenarios among 4 categories
  – Choosing program of study
  – Understanding program requirements
  – Choosing transfer school
  – Selecting transfer classes
• Scored out of 100
• Scenarios and rubric created w/ CC’s advising office
Scenario-Based Example Questions (1 of 2)

• Choosing a Program of Study
• “You have never been to college…You like business and want to earn at least $50,000 when you graduate…You want to declare a major, but have no idea which you should declare and how much education you’ll need.”
  – What program should you choose?
  – Are there prerequisites?
  – Which campus for this program’s classes?
  – What type of degree will I earn?
  – What should I do after graduation? Continue school?
Scenario-Based Example Questions (2 of 2)

• Choosing a Transfer School:
  • “You want to earn a BA in Journalism…You want a school that will accept all 6 of your [current school’s] classes as counting towards your Journalism bachelor’s degree.”
    – What transfer college seems like the best option?
    – Which of the completed courses will transfer?
    – What is the maximum number of credits that will transfer?
    – Does this program require that you complete an Associate degree before you transfer?
Scenario-Based Responses - Scores

• Choosing a program of study: 73%
• Understanding program requirement: 65%
• Choosing a transfer school: 53%
• Selecting appropriate transfer classes: 45%
Variation by Programs of Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Choosing a Program of Study</th>
<th>% Correct</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Automotive</td>
<td>64%</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Understanding Program Req’ments</th>
<th>% Correct</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business Management</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal Assisting</td>
<td>67%</td>
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# Variation by Transfer Programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Choosing a Transfer School</th>
<th>% Correct</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Journalism</td>
<td>67%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Criminal Justice</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Management</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanical Engineering</td>
<td>68%</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Choosing Courses for Transfer</th>
<th>% Correct</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elementary Education</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursing</td>
<td>43%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Variation of Individual Scores – Program of Study

% Correct

Business | Health | Computer | Automotive | Management | Legal Assisting
Variation of Individual Scores – Transfer

% Correct

Journalism | Criminal Justice | Management | Engineering | Elem Education | Nursing
Conclusion and Recommendations
Conclusion and Recommendations

• Simplifying Programs
• Teaching students to self-advise
  – Integrate w/ course curricula
• Renovating Online Systems
  – Clear, consistent, useful information
  – Tracking and warning systems
• Integrating online and face-to-face
  – Triage processes
  – Integrated touch points
For more information

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