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ABSTRACT

California State Polytechnic University's continuation group of undeclared majors is a retention program that supported students who, in their first three quarters of attendance, have not yet declared a major. These students have been unable to declare majors because they were not in good academic standing; they were on probation, subject to disqualification, or even disqualified. This cohort of the continuation group was first screened at which time accepted students (n=21) were required to attend an academic counseling group and were longitudinally tracked. Students generally completed assignments promptly, adapted well to nontraditional techniques, and consulted informally with coordinators. Some students were overly optimistic about projected grade point averages, did not interact with other group members, and exhibited less than baccalaureate level writing skills. Three students remained enrolled in the institution, and maintained at least a minimum grade point average of 2.0 or "C". Eleven students were no longer enrolled. Based upon these academic performances, it appeared that the intervention had not positively affected the targeted behaviors. A larger sample is needed before conclusions can be made. (BHK)

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AN OVERVIEW OF
CALIFORNIA STATE POLYTECHNIC
UNIVERSITY, POMONA'S
"CONTINUATION GROUP"
OF
UNDECLARED MAJORS
CONDUCTED DURING FALL QUARTERS,
1989 & 1990

PRESENTED TO THE
AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR COUNSELING & DEVELOPMENT

RENO, NEVADA
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INTRODUCTION

The University Advising Centers are the University's Student Services department for Undeclared Majors. In particular, our offices support and implement the University policy that Undeclared Majors must successfully declare their majors during their first three quarters of attendance. The vast majority of our Undeclared Majors in fact comply with this requirement.

A number of Undeclared Majors do not return to the University for their fourth quarters with declared majors. Some of their reasons include:

- they have temporarily "stopped out" of the University;
- they have decided to voluntarily leave the University on a less temporary basis; or
- they have been unable to declare their majors because they are not in good academic standing -- i.e. they are on probation, subject to disqualification, or even disqualified.

It is this last group whom we had hoped to affect with this retention proposal.

In the past, the University Advising Centers recognized the fact that some Undeclared Majors were in negative standing at the end of their third quarters -- i.e. they had less than a cumulative 2.0 grade point average. It was the ad hoc practice of the University Advising Centers to informally "carry" some of these students *as individuals* beyond their third quarters. It was the individual counselor's hope that with one or two additional quarters of work on the part of the student, that student would then be able to overcome whatever academic difficulties existed and successfully declare a major.

Although this informal "carryover" approach had worked well for some Undeclared Majors, we believed that there was a better approach to the problem discussed above.

Project: "Continuation Group" Undeclared Major

We formalized the previous "carryover" practice by:

- > comprehensively planning for the program; and
- > documenting, analyzing, and accounting for its results.

There were several differences between the previous informal "carryover" practice and our more formal program:

I) Selection

This cohort of "Continuation Group" Undeclared Majors was carefully screened for continuation beyond three quarters by the entire professional staff of the University Advising Centers -- as opposed to the individual judgment of one counselor, as had been the case. Final selection of the students who comprised the academic counseling group was made by the two academic counselors responsible for this program.

II) Academic Counseling Group

Undeclared Majors who were allowed to continue beyond three quarters were expected to participate in the academic counseling group for the duration of their fourth quarters. This academic counseling group was coordinated by two academic counselors from the University Advising Centers, Dr. Marcia Albert and Daniel Aseltine. This weekly group seminar addressed issues such as study skills, academic policies and procedures, personal motivation, self-discovery exercises, academic and career goals, etc.

III) Accountability

These groups of students were "tracked" longitudinally. Our objective was to assess the value and limitations of the academic counseling intervention. Equally important, we focussed upon the individual successes and failures of each student-member of the groups. One of our means of evaluation was the case-study approach.

IV) Academic Counseling Emphasis

This Continuation Group of Undeclared Majors had its headquarters changed from University Advising Center #2 in building 95 to University Advising Center #1 in the Administration Building. We hoped that this geographical relocation and the accompanying changes in procedures would impress upon the students the seriousness of their academic situations and the intensity of our efforts to help them.

IMPRESSIONISTIC INTERPRETATIONS

The coordinators agreed that the group developed a relative sense of cohesion, based upon some observed outcomes:

- a pervasive sense of optimism about their academic futures;
- a greater sense of the value of time management;
- a more realistic perspective on the amount of personal effort required to overcome their academic weaknesses;
- a renewed commitment to academic success at the University;
- a greater sense of sophistication in dealing with University's bureaucratic procedures; and,
- an interest in maintaining contact with one another after the end of the program.

The coordinators were pleasantly surprised by several attributes of the group:

First, the students tended to follow through on assignments completely and punctually.

Second, the students responded well to some non-traditional techniques (e.g., audio-taping their responses to exercises, Dr. Richard DeNovellis' Personality Type Preference Indicator, Dr. Joseph Hart's psychological overview of goal-setting, and Dr. Don Morris' presentation regarding self-esteem).

Third, there was no need to threaten any student with administrative disqualification from the University based on non-attendance or low productivity.

Fourth, there was a great deal of informal consultation with us after the workshop sessions.

However, we agreed that there were some disappointments:

First, we observed that the students were universally overly-optimistic about their projected grade point averages and their projected lengths of time before graduation.

Second, as a group, we found them to be less than forthcoming in their interactions with one another; their level of participation was lower than we expected.

Third, the quality of their written work was less than baccalaureate level.

SELECTIONS FROM STUDENTS' FINAL EVALUATIONS

Respondent #1

The group helped me with my study habits. At times I was not really into going but I did and the subjects discussed were interesting & sometimes fun so it was worthwhile to go. Thanks for your help.

At the beginning, I found some of the work to be boring, it did get better as the quarter went on.

Respondent #2

The Continuation Group helped towards the type of strategies to use to get classes, PTPI evaluation, test strategies, & not to be afraid to ask questions in class.

Respondent #3

Very helpful in explaining and clarifying things.

Could go a little more in detail about what certain majors have to offer - How to get into certain majors. What kind of jobs are related.

Respondent #4

Very helpful, the book "Becoming a Master Student" is an excellent choice.

Need more lab assignments and also more field work assignments. E.G., researching a major assignment, SIGI, & etc.

Respondent #5

This group gave me a second chance which I appreciated. Without the group many students wouldn't have been able to continue at this University.

Respondent #6

I really enjoyed the Continuation Group. It really helped me see what my problems with school were and how I could overcome them and do much better in school. I think that this continuation group should be continued as a program, or even start a program like this during the Winter quarter to help freshmen in bad academic standing so at least they will have time before the three quarter deadline to improve themselves.

Start a program like this during 2nd quarter in attendance.

Respondent #7

It was very nice to learn about time management. I know time management is really important but I didn't know how to start. Thanks for showing us how to start.

I wish we had more time with groups members and get to know each other.

Respondent #8 no comments

Respondent #9

Helped me to continue Cal Poly and decide which route to take in continuing school (transferring to FJC). Taught me how to study properly, and avoid procrastination. I feel that if there was no Continuation Group, I would have not known what to do regarding my attendance at Cal Poly or any other school.

Give more information on how the school deals with change of major, and transfer.

Respondent #10

I was very happy to get the opportunity to stay in school because of this group. This group really made me do better to bring my grades up, because it made me realize that if I did not, I would be booted out of school.

One suggestion that I would give is to do more of the different activities (maybe on tape with feedback from you) from the "Becoming a Master Student" book; and stress its important ideas to be put to use.

Respondent #11

I found that the Continuation Group was very helpful. Everything was well organized.

In terms of my plans, I am withdrawing from the University. After that, I might be going to MSAC. But for sure I am leaving Cal Poly.

good that we have Continuation Group. I think it should be continue for other student. We need help.

Respondent #12

The Continuation Group has help me alot through out the quarter. It has help me to get my motivation up, self-esteem and time management together. It is good that we have Continuation Group. I think It should be continue for other student. We need help.

Respondent #13

Everything was very straight-forward and I really have no negative thoughts about the group.

The group, and primarily Dan, was able to add the element of stress that I needed to improve my grades.

Respondent #14

I truly learned alot about myself and the goals I want to obtain with the help of the Continuation Group and its staff. I learned that there are ways out even when I felt I had tried them all. I couldn't have really made it without all your help, because I wasn't sure of the next step. Now I've found it and am looking on towards the future. Thanking you for helping and caring and I hope that many others may come to know that there are always ways out.

Respondent #15

Work & go to J.C. Declare major & go back (eventually).

Respondent #16

Excellent, this program was well thought out and implemented. I think everyone got a great deal out of the presentations and instruction.

Respondent #17

The Continuation Group all in all was very helpful. It not only help me in my academics, but it taught me a little something about myself as well.

Respondent #18

I'm proud of my hard work in my classes with the help of the Con. Group. But I have an ulcer now with the stress it promotes on me. I'm not sure on my plans till I receive my report card.

Respondent #20 no comments

Respondent #21 no comments

COORDINATORS' REACTIONS TO STUDENTS' EVALUATIONS

The coordinators perceive several common threads running through the students' comments:

1. There seemed to be a strong consensus that the meetings should be longer than one hour per week. In fact, that recommendation was followed for the 1990 Continuation Group.

2. Students seemed to indicate that *Becoming a Master Student* was underutilized. We interpreted this suggestion as being linked to the first and followed up accordingly in 1990.

3. Some students indicated an interest in a fuller treatment of these topics--

- time management/procrastination
- declaring a major
- test anxiety
- career opportunities.

We concurred that these would be valuable topics to discuss, and did so in 1990.

4. A few students expressed a desire to increase the opportunities for --

- group interaction/cohesion
- outside activities (i.e. labs, field assignments)

We believed that these could have been implemented under the two-hour format, but for logistical reasons we were unable to do so.

CONCLUSIONS

We began this retention effort with high hopes. We honestly felt that given sufficiently intensive intervention on the part of the coordinators, and sufficiently high motivation on the part of the students, that we would be able to "turn around" our clients.

Our observations are, to this point, summed up in one word: **FAILURE.**

Eleven students enrolled in the 1989 Continuation Group; ten enrolled in the 1990 version. Of these 21, only three meet our operational definition of success, i.e.:

- the student is [reasonably] currently enrolled at this institution; and
- has maintained at least a minimum grade point average of 2.0, or "C".

Fifteen of the remaining 18 students have grade point averages below 2.0. Their grade point averages range from a low of 0.93 to a high of 1.95.

Out of this same group of 18, eleven are no longer enrolled at the institution.

Despite this poor overall showing, it is interesting to note that five out of the 21 students earned their highest term grade point averages during the period in which they were involved with the Continuation Group.

Based upon these academic performances, we observe that this limited number of students who were targeted for the intervention have, for one reason or another, not changed their academic behaviors.

Given our small n , it is hard to generalize about why these academically destructive patterns persist. Based upon our experiences, we might offer these possible explanations:

- the students were academically underprepared/undermotivated at the outset for such an undertaking;
- the University's environment of covert hostility toward the concept of an Undeclared Major is so inimical to their success that the students simply could not overcome the institutional barriers to success;
- students' main interests lay outside the University--e.g. work, social life, etc.
- our attempted intervention came too late in their freshman year to be of much impact.

RECOMMENDATIONS

At this point, we believe it is foolish to continue with the pilot effort, as presently constructed. Our poor results within the context of the deepening fiscal crisis facing California higher education do not justify further efforts along this same path. Our strategy must change, or we should give up the idea altogether.

We have resolved to continue the program by altering its timeline. We plan to suggest that the intervention be undertaken at a much earlier date. Specifically, we will urge that instead of waiting until the students have completed their freshman year before constituting the Continuation Group, we should start the Group in the students' third [i.e. Spring] Quarter. This will allow us to:

- provide advance warning to the students before they add another potentially disastrous term to their already-dismal records;
- impress upon the students that they have a real opportunity to resolve their academic situations during their freshman year;
- maintain consistency with the University's policy of a three-quarter limit for Undeclared Majors.