Major Adjustment: Undergraduates' Transition Experiences When Leaving Selective Degree Programs

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More than 80% of college students switch degree programs, and students in selective majors, such as business and nursing, often face complex processes with serious implications when leaving such selective degree programs. Therefore, using qualitative, exploratory research, we sought to understand the resources, including support, situation, strategies, and self, that students in selective majors use when transitioning to new degree programs. We also examined the resources students identified as most valuable and the factors most influential in their decision to persist at their current institutions. The findings can provide academic advisors with valuable insight about ways to best support students as they transition out of selective majors.

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Choosing an academic major is among the most important and difficult decisions college students make during their undergraduate careers. The National Center for Education Statistics reported that more than 80% of students at 4-year institutions changed their majors more than once (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Extensive scholarly inquiry (Allen & Robbins, 2010; Beggs, Bantham, & Taylor, 2008; Foster, 2013; Soria & Stebleton, 2013; Venit, 2016) has focused on myriad aspects of students' switching academic majors. With few exceptions (Shaw & Barbuti, 2010), nearly all research about students who leave *selective majors,* defined as degree programs with demanding GPA requirements, is at least 25 years old (Elliott & Elliott, 1985; Gordon & Steele, 1992; Steele, Kennedy, & Gordon, 1993). Selective majors, most of which are preprofessional oriented, are among the most popular majors on college campuses, with more than 40% of bachelor's degrees in 2016 awarded in business-, prehealth-, and engineering-related fields (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). For this research project, we sought to understand better the resources students used when switching out of selective majors. We explored the way students at two large public universities utilized coping resources in transitioning from selective majors to new degree programs at the same institution.

Selective Majors

For students in selective degree programs, predominantly in preprofessional areas, the decision to change majors involves particular complexities for the students and the institution. For more than 30 years, academic advisors have been concerned about the implications of limited space in oversubscribed majors. In 1985, the NACADA Task Force on Advising Students in Oversubscribed and Selective Majors recommended that policies and procedures be established to address advising issues for students in these popular majors (Gordon, Newton, & Kramer, 1985). Limited program size and competitive admission requirements for oversubscribed and selective majors mean that some students will fail to meet rigorous requirements to enter or continue in the major, whereas others leave of their own accord (Gordon & Polson, 1985; Gordon & Steele, 2015). Second and 3rd-year students opting or being mandated to leave selective majors may have earned a significant number of college credits and established GPAs such that they cannot meet the eligibility criteria for a desired degree program (Steele, 1994; Steele & McDonald, 2008).

Related research conducted in the 1980s about the broader area of major changing focused on students needing *academic alternative advising* (Gordon & Polson, 1985, p. 78) for degree programs that could not accommodate all interested students. Advising administrators at The Ohio State University, for example, created the Academic Alternatives Program (ALT) in the late 1980s to provide targeted academic and career advising for students unable to enter their first-choice majors (Gordon & Steele, 1992). Research involving program participants (Gordon & Steele, 1992; Steele et al., 1993) indicated higher student persistence and greater stability in the new major

choice for ALT participants than that experienced by nonparticipants. Despite the positive evidence-based outcomes, Ohio State dismantled both the program and its administrative home in 2001 (Gordon, 2005).

Recent research about the experiences of students who transitioned out of their preferred or selective majors is lacking. In discussing major changers in 1992, Gordon stated, "Students unable to access oversubscribed and selective majors are often left to find alternative academic and career directions on their own" (p. 82). However, the literature features little research about the way students navigate an alternative academic path. Although not addressing selective programs specifically, Allen and Robbins (2008) found that students who changed majors were more likely to take unnecessary courses, need additional time to degree, and experience challenges putting them at risk of leaving their institution. As a consequence of these findings, we consider ascertaining the ways students transition to alternative majors an imperative.

The few articles about major-changing students (Cunningham & Smothers, 2010: Firmin & MacKillop, 2008; Foster, 2013; Johnson, 2005) do not address selective majors; hence, academic advisors do not necessarily know the factors that influence the ways that students cope with the transition. The findings of the current study can be used to better understand the needs of students transitioning from a selective major to another major at the same institution.

Theoretical Framework and Method

We created this qualitative exploratory study conducted on multiple campuses to investigate the way 2nd-, 3rd-, and 4th-year undergraduates previously enrolled in selective majors used coping resources when transferring to other academic majors at the same institution. We selected a qualitative research design and methodology as determined by the inductive nature of the study. Thus, we collected data that enhance the information offered by the simple checklist of resources described in a related older study (Elliott & Elliott, 1985), which enabled us to probe for deep meanings during individual interviews. Our goal in gathering first-hand information from students about coping resources aligns with Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) statement that "qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 6). In response to semistructured interview questions, participants used their own words and stories to describe the ways they were affected by changing majors and the processes they used to make meaning of the transition experience.

We examined students' descriptions of their transition experiences within the context of Schlossberg's 4S system: *situation, self, support,* and *strategies* (as described in Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012). The 4S system, part of the adult development theory and transition framework originally developed by Schlossberg (1981), enabled us to gain insight about factors related to the transition, the individual, and the environment (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). Using the 4S system variables through the interview protocol, we guided students through a discussion of their experiences. The *situation* variable captures the broad picture of a happening and varies by individual. It is affected by timing, previous experience, and other stresses. *Self* involves the personal resources, strengths, or weaknesses that individuals possess to manage change, including resilience and belief in the ability to affect an outcome. *Support* encompasses resources upon which people in transition can rely and includes personal support networks, such as that of family, friends, and university faculty and staff members. The fourth variable, *strategies,* accounts for approaches that individuals use to cope with change. Coping resources can change at any time and may explain the reason students in similar situations experience similar transitions differently (Anderson et al., 2012). Academic advisors working with major changers need to consider student coping strategies.

In addition to developing an interview protocol based on three research questions, the lead author (Mulhern Halasz) received permission from N. K. Schlossberg to adapt the 4S system content from *Transition Guide: A New Way to Think About Change* (see also Schlossberg & Kay, 2010) to create the qualitative study design. The generation of 27 interview questions and the use of probes based on the 4S system enabled us to acquire a more complete picture of the way major-changing students in selective majors managed the transition. Sample questions are available in the Appendix.

We used the following research questions to direct the study:

RQ1. How do undergraduates previously enrolled in selective majors describe the coping

resources involving support, situation, strategies, and self that they utilized during the transition process of leaving the former major and enrolling in a new degree program at the same institution?

RQ2. Which coping mechanisms do students formerly enrolled in selective majors identify as most valuable in navigating the transition process?

RQ3. Which coping resources do students previously enrolled in selective majors identify as most influential in their decisions to remain at the institution?

Participants

Participant selection for the study was guided by Patton's (2015) concept of purposeful sampling. We used two strategies to sample purposefully in this study. Intensity sampling was used to identify *information-rich cases* of the phenomenon of interest that are not considered extraordinary or extreme (as per Patton, 2015). We also employed a second strategy, criterion sampling, described as meeting some predetermined benchmark of importance (Patton, 2015). Participants were selected on the basis of numerous criteria, including status as (self-reported) 2nd-, 3rd-, or 4th-year students; initially enrolled at the university as a first-time, 1st-year student; of traditional age, between 18 and 24 years; previously enrolled in a selective major, defined as programs requiring a GPA of 2.6 (on a 4.0 scale) or higher; and currently enrolled in a new degree program.

The sample of 26 traditional college-aged students was drawn from two large (>15,000 undergraduate enrollments) public, state flagship universities in the southeastern United States that are identified as the University of the Deep South and the University of the Southeast. Students in traditionally underrepresented groups, including African American or Black, Asian or Pacific Islander, and Hispanic or Latino or Latina constituted 46% of the study sample. In contrast, students in underrepresented ethnic minorities at the University of the Deep South made up 17% of the general undergraduate population and 29% at the University of the Southeast, respectively (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Table 1 provides a summary of demographic information about study participants.

Data Collection

Academic advisors at the two study sites helped identify and recruit eligible participants. We used an electronic mailing list of University of the Southeast advisors to promote the research study. In addition, the business school announced the study via electronic newsletter. At the University of the Deep South, people from 30 advising offices distributed paper and electronic flyers via electronic mailing lists or online learning platform (e.g., Blackboard, Moodle). To generate additional interest and support, the lead author (Mulhern Halasz) attended on-site events for academic advisors to encourage assistance with recruiting participants.

Peer leaders in an office for major-changing students conducted a pilot test of the interview questions. We subsequently modified the interview protocol and then sent e-mails describing the eligibility criteria and asking participants' preference for a face-to-face or telephone interview to 72 potential participants. During a 5-month period, the lead author conducted 26 individual interviews (average length 18 min) to explore students' stories about their transition experiences.

Data Analysis

We identified themes related to the 4S system resources of support, situation, strategies, and self (Anderson et al., 2012) during the data analysis process by listening to interview recordings and reading transcripts multiple times. We manually coded transcripts and employed ATLAS.ti Version 7 (2013), qualitative data analysis software, to develop a codebook on the basis of the four variables and other emerging themes. We identified common threads from stories about the specific coping resources students used, resources identified as most valuable during the transitions, and support systems most influential in students' decisions to remain at their current institutions.

Results

Students demonstrated tenacity in seeking coping resources to facilitate their transitions while leaving selective majors and selecting new degree programs. They showed savviness when identifying and using personal and university resources during the transitions.

Research Question 1: Identification of Coping Resources During the Transition

Table 2 displays the frequency of coping resources as described by the 26 participants

Table 1. Summary of individual characteristics in the sample

Characteristic	Number of Participants ($N = 26$)	% Represented in Study
Institution student attended		
University of the Deep South	15	58
University of the Southeast	11	42
Gender		
Female	19	73
Male	7	27
Race/Ethnicity		
White/Caucasian	14	54
Traditionally underrepresented (combined groups)	12	46
African American or Black	8	
Asian or Pacific Islander	3	
Hispanic or Latino/Latina	1	
Classification		
Sophomore	8	31
Junior	14	54
Senior	4	15
Previous Selective Major		
Business	7	27
Education	7	27
Nursing	6	23
Social Science	3	11
Engineering	2	8
Prehealth	1	4
First-generation college/low income	8	31

Note. All demographic characteristics are self-reported.

and coded from the analysis of interview transcripts. The four categories are framed by the 4S system (Anderson et al., 2012) involving support, situation, strategies, and self.

Table 2. Frequency of 4S system of coping resource type described by participants ($N = 26$)

Coping Resource Used	Frequency	%
Support	242	39
Situation	177	29
Strategies	109	17
Self	92	15
Total	620	100

Note. The 4S System is part of the transition framework originally developed by Nancy K. Schlossberg (1981, 1984) and described in M. L. Anderson, J. Goodman, and N. K. Schlossberg, 2012, *Counseling adults in transition: Linking Schlossberg's theory with practice in a diverse world*.

Support. The students identified support from others, including family, friends, and university resources, as the most important, a finding consistent with those described by Schlossberg and Kay (2010), and involved people upon whom students depended for affection and feedback. More than one half of the students (54%) used a single resource, family or self, in navigating the transition, and 46% used multiple resources. Numerous participants discussed frequent contact with parents even though they lived away from home. A common theme encompassing the positive encouragement students received from parents and other family members emerged from the data. For example, Ann remained in close contact with her mother and talked to her "constantly about what I should do. She was the first person I told that 'I don't think nursing's what I want to do,' and she was there for me the entire time."

Students relied on their friends and peers almost as frequently as family during the

transition. Timothy, who consulted with peers when considering a switch from a selective liberal arts major to a selective major in business, reported,

> Older students generally have a greater understanding of the different professors, different courses that are required, [so I talked to them] instead of just taking the suggestions of advisors. I feel that students give a more realistic view of what the program is like.

Other students solicited feedback from peers about faculty expectations or informal program information, which academic advisors may not know or share with students.

Students also utilized university resources, identified as academic advisors, online and print information, and professionals in student support offices such as career services and university advising offices. One third of respondents sought guidance from academic advisors, and several relied on advisors in the previous and new departments for information and assistance. Participants discussed the importance of information sources, including academic bulletins, departmental web sites, and degree-planning tools. They also reviewed printed materials from academic departments.

Although they characterized support from family, friends, and individual university employees as positive, study participants perceived academic departments and the university as negative and unsupportive. A majority (84%) cited the major-changing process as a barrier or obstacle during the program transition. Participants expressed frustration with being shuffled between multiple offices, as described by Lexie, who was told that advisors in her new major could not help her, but "I just thought, well someone has to be able to help me … [I] knew I had an advisor somewhere." Participants also perceived a lack of support when they were unable to access the new major they wanted. Janice became frustrated after a prehealth advisor reportedly indicated, "In your 2nd year of school, you're too old to change your mind." Despite the setback, she overcame discouragement and set a goal to meet prehealth requirements for her desired graduate degree.

Situation. Referencing the participants' views of the transition (Schlossberg & Kay, 2010), the following three situation factors were identified by more students than any others: satisfaction with the state flagship university, unexpected change of major, and significant obstacles in the major-changing process. Nearly all participants (92%) were enrolled at their first-choice university and had selected it because of the reputation of the institution or the selective major.

The main drivers for participants switching programs were a lack of interest in major-related courses (64%) and academic difficulty (46%). The interviewed students disliked the broad scope of courses, felt a disconnect between courses and the perceived career, or discovered through field experiences that they were not well-suited for the selective major. Joe gained entrepreneurial experience in high school and was certain about his selection as a business major in college. After three semesters and classes in math, accounting, and economics, Joe said, "[I] had no interest in it, and … it wasn't what I thought I would learn. … It didn't appeal to me." Like Joe, students may have difficulty connecting the way individual courses relate to a comprehensive degree program.

More than three quarters of participants (85%) described their situations as facing significant obstacles during the major change transition. Obstacles predominantly centered on the process itself, the restricted access to desirable new degree programs, and the additional courses required to catch up in the new major. Participants described the major-changing process as complex, cumbersome, and frustrating. Students at both institutions discussed the need to complete paperwork and acquire necessary signatures as hassles.

A related inconvenience for participants was described as the need to be "released" from their previous programs before being admitted to their new, desired majors. Despite encountering problems and frustrating situations, students did not consider leaving the university; instead, they changed majors to pursue their academic goals at the state flagship university, where they had already studied for one or more years.

Strategies. Almost all participants (92%) used multiple strategies in coping with the transition. Most students accessed a combination of online resources (e.g., academic bulletins, degree-planning tools, occupational resources, and professional school requirements) and cited meetings with a professional or faculty advisor in the new department. Two thirds (65%) of participants sought information from academic advisors and faculty

members in prospective or new major departments. Shantelle described cultivating a relationship with her new advisor, saying she needed somebody who "would help me and be on my side, so I developed a great relationship with her just to make sure that I was doing things right and I could get the help that I needed."

Self. Schlossberg and Kay (2010) defined self as the "inner strength that you bring to a transition" (p. 6). More than one half of the participants (54%) indicated that they had a well-developed sense of awareness about their strengths and weaknesses, a clear sense of their interests, and understanding about their own personality traits. Graciela, who switched out of nursing, expressed a clear lack of interest in her previous program. She remarked,

> My heart was not in nursing, I was judging off the wrong things, and I couldn't see myself as a nurse. . . . I love Spanish; I want to do Spanish. I don't want to be in a hospital all my life.

Participants also highlighted their resilience. Nearly one half of those interviewed (46%) discussed their successful adaptation to the transition. An ability to bounce back from disappointment proved key for students forced into the transition or who faced significant academic difficulty. For example, after being dismissed from the nursing major, Leah decided, "I would just have to move on and find something else, another degree that I would be happy with and that I could get a job in." Students like Leah demonstrate adaptability to change plans and stay on track toward the goal of graduation. Participants expressed a strong sense of self with regard to awareness, confidence, and reliance in navigating an alternative path that fit their academic interests and career plans.

Research Question 2: Coping Mechanisms for Navigating the Transition Process

Respondents evenly split into two groups: those who used a single resource and those who accessed multiple resources. Among students identifying a single most-valuable resource, approximately 75% specified a university-affiliated person or office. Timothy, a student at University of the Southeast, explained the reasons he valued most highly the help from others, specifically advisors: "They'll know how to dot your *i*'s and cross your *t*'s. It's very easy to make a mistake and then realize that you are not on the path to graduation in 4 years." Other participants identified academic support, academic advising, and career services offices as most valuable in navigating the transition process.

Participants who reported using multiple resources cited a combination of support and self as the most valuable coping mechanism during the transition. Students relied primarily on external support but indicated that they frequently coupled this assistance with their own positive attitude and deliberate actions. They relied upon support from others, most often family and friends, and considered support the most valuable coping resource. Janice described the value of external support in terms of an ability to "talk it out and hear perspectives from other people because sometimes you can get tunnel vision. . . . So it's nice to be able to take into account what everyone else thinks and then come back to yourself."

Other students described support of academic advisors and peer networks, reliance on online program information, and contact with faculty members in prospective degree programs among the resources upon which they relied during the transition. Students researched options from a variety of sources and selected new majors on the basis of the extensive information they had gathered.

Research Question 3: Coping Resources Most Influential for Remaining at the Institution

Of the 26 students, three self-reported being dismissed from their selective majors. Of the remaining 23 participants, approximately one half identified significant academic distress as a reason for switching majors. Voluntary major change may positively influence students' decisions to stay at the same institution in a way that differs from those dismissed from a selective major, but our study did not control for the factor of voluntary or mandatory release.

In an unexpected finding, 80% of participants reported that they did not consider leaving their current university. Approximately three quarters of participants (73%) specified the situation as influencing their decision to stay at the same institution. In interviews, students described a comfortable environment and the reputation of the institution as the most common factors related to their decisions to remain. More than three quarters (79%) of students cited a comfortable situation, specifying friends, knowing their way

around, or liking their life at the institution. Monica had been at the University of the Southeast for two years when she left sociology, and she explained, "It would be too much of a hassle to try to move because I was already in my junior year, and also I just love the [university]. I didn't feel like I needed to change to another school."

Approximately 40% of respondents cited university reputation and status as flagship university as influencing their decisions to continue at the same institution. Samantha wanted to stay at University of the Southeast, the best university in the state, in her opinion:

> The first reaction was "I want to graduate as a [team name]," that was definitely the first reaction. … Also, I felt the education program here is one of the top ones in the state, as well as in the country. … I wanted to stay here. I was comfortable.

Samantha initially expressed her loyalty to the institution in the context of an athletic team before adding a description about the reputation of her specific academic program. Although athletic team affiliation was not investigated in this study, several students discussed school loyalty in terms of an athletic team.

Other participants described their university as "a good school" when explaining their reasons for staying. Students specifically mentioned their high level of satisfaction, quality of the facilities, and the specialized degree programs not being widely available elsewhere. Approximately 20% of participants did not provide any further explanation for their retention decision, including Audrey: "I didn't [consider leaving]. That didn't cross my mind at all."

Discussion and Recommendations for Practice

Four key findings emerged from the data analysis. First, although they relied upon multiple resources during their transition, the study participants most frequently described support, primarily from family. Second, they expressed a perceived lack of support from the university during the major-changing process. Third, they reported that the most valuable coping resource during the transition was support from others. Fourth, situation, described as contentment at their university, was most influential in students' decisions to persist at their institution. Also in a common theme, participants referred to a high level of tenacity when in search of coping resources. They researched online information, talked with peers in potential new majors, and met with academic advisors. When the major-changing process presented obstacles, students devised strategies to navigate around the barriers and get on track with their new degree programs. Implications for policy and practice from the results of the study include the following: strategize major retention, develop and strengthen family partnerships, improve the major-changing process, increase personal attention during the major-changing process, and centralize advising for students in transition.

Strategize for Major Persistence

Departments and students both benefit from stability in academic majors. Departments can predict instructional needs and resources when enrollment remains steady. Variables related to major retention complicate the goal for all stakeholders; that is, many students choose their degree programs according to factors difficult to predict or control, such as family influence, rather than simple personal interest. Many also matriculate with limited information because many college academic disciplines are not offered at the high school level (Cuseo, 2003). Program-specific 1st-year seminars provide an ideal forum to communicate information, present a realistic picture of the selective major, and offer strategies to navigate the degree program successfully. In addition, experiential learning experiences (job shadowing and skills practice) presented early in the curricula enable students to assess their career interests and fit.

Although students may not stay in their initial majors, by establishing baseline connections with incoming students, advisors can maintain visibility and thereby increase the likelihood that students will speak with advisors when considering other majors. Through this initial connection, students may acquire an advising home, which might minimize perceptions of being shuffled among multiple offices during a move to a new department. An established advising relationship also provides advisors an opportunity to influence students' early transitions to college such that students are encouraged to persist.

As students earn additional credits, the conditions for changing majors becomes increasingly complex. Resources such as online degree-planning tools help students see a 4-year graduation plan in other programs; however,

students need to use such technology in conjunction with the personal assistance available from academic advisors and professionals in related offices, such as career services.

Develop and Strengthen Family Partnerships

The results of this study support previous research (Berríos-Allison, 2005; Howe & Strauss, 2007; Simmons, 2008) that students rely on their parents for support. Advisors can help parents and family members to know the resources available to students as they change majors. Collaborations between people in advising and family-program units can identify and promote resources on their web sites for academic support, academic advising, major-changing processes, and other concerns. Straightforward online information may facilitate family members' ability to provide effective support for students and alleviate negative perceptions about university resources.

Improve the Major-Changing Process

Participants described the program-changing process as complex, cumbersome, and frustrating. Advisors must be sensitive to concerns about the process involving multiple departments and possibly students' temporary status without an academic home when they are dropped by one program before being accepted into their desired majors.

Advising units can improve the transition process by using standardized communication templates to summarize key facts such as prerequisites, degree requirements, and eligibility for potential major changers. In addition, advisors should ensure resources for major-changing students are available on web sites, on social media, and in print sources. Students commonly seek information about change of major forms and links to the career center or the central advising office along with departmental advising office locations, phone numbers, and web site addresses.

Advisors can creatively incorporate approaches that increase students' perceptions of university support and that offer more personal attention during the program transfer process. Students' experiences during the transition and suggestions for improving the process can be assessed by inviting them to participate in focus groups, individual interviews, or surveys.

Increase Personal Attention in the Major-Changing Process

Advising administrators can adopt a strengths-based approach in the training and continued professional development of academic advisors. For example, appreciative advising promotes a deep personal relationship between advisors and students by valuing individuals and assisting them in optimizing their educational experiences (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008). Study participant Clyde identified his most valuable resource as an academic support coach who had extensive training in appreciative advising. Clyde's comments capture the description from students seeking a more personalized major-changing process:

> I think the main thing was the help from the [academic support] coach. It was really personal. … They made me feel not that I was failing at business but that some people aren't meant for certain things, and I could have more potential elsewhere. They did a really good job at making me feel not like a failure; they made me feel like I could actually succeed. And that's what I think was the most important resource in my transition.

Professional development in appreciative advising or a similar strengths-based advising approach may assist advisors in assessing individual student needs that can be used to help change students' negative perceptions about the major-changing process.

Centralize Advising for Students in Major Transition

Lexie's comment that she "knew I had an advisor somewhere" illustrates the difficulty for students trying to navigate a program change. Institutional leaders should consider formalizing responsibilities for existing offices or establishing a campuswide advising unit for students considering or forced into a change of major. A centralized unit also could partner with career services to provide targeted academic and career advising for students unable to enter their first-choice major; the blueprint from The Ohio State University ALT program may prove useful in this effort. The key to a successful centralized advising office is intentional fostering of partnerships with other resource offices, including career

services, academic support, and academic college or department advising units.

Limitations

Although the findings from this study provide valuable insights about the transition experiences of students who left selective majors, limitations to the study mean that caution should be exercised in interpreting the results. We did not assess students' levels of preparedness for their selective majors nor their baseline knowledge of campus resources. Students' positive feelings about the state flagship university may have contributed to their reported satisfaction with their situations and their decisions to persist. Furthermore, 92% of participants had enrolled at their first-choice institution. Students who declined to participate or transferred to another institution after leaving a selective major may have relied on different coping and support mechanisms than students who chose to remain.

Summary, Future Research, and Implications

For this study, we investigated the transition experiences of 26 students previously enrolled in selective majors. The findings suggest the critical role that support from others played in students' transition experiences, but they also highlight that students use a combination of coping resources during the major-changing process.

We encourage other scholars to focus on students from different institution types or academic majors, traditionally underrepresented groups, first-generation status, or students forced into a major transition. Inquiries about students' commitments to an institution, in particular, differences between loyalty toward a college or university and that toward an academic major, might yield interesting findings.

As more students pursue selective majors, advisors will encounter some who voluntarily leave and others forced into major transitions. Our findings contribute to the body of evidence that college students rely upon family and friends for support. They also indicate that students rely upon university officials, such as academic advisors, during their major transitions. By establishing an advising relationship early during the enrollment and matriculation processes, advisors can establish themselves as knowledgeable resources upon whom students can rely should they pursue major changes. Advisors attuned to the concerns and experiences of students leaving selective majors can effectively support advisees as they strategize and navigate an alternative academic path to graduation.

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Appendix. Interview protocol excerpt: selective majors study

Below are sample questions that have been edited for brevity. The complete interview protocol is available by contacting the lead author, Dr. Helen Mulhern Halasz.

- Why did you choose to attend this university? Was it your first choice?
- Did you expect to change your major? Why or why not?
- When did you declare your selective major? How many semesters were you in the major?
- How did you decide on the selective major? Which people or experiences, if any, influenced your decision to choose that particular major?
- Did you have any difficulties in courses required for the selective major? What assistance from the university, if any, did you seek to help you with difficulties (meetings with academic advisors and/or instructors, peer leaders, etc.)?
- What were the reasons you decided to leave the selective major?
- What else was going on in your life?
- How did you identify the choices you had for a new major? Which people or what information did you use, if any, in selecting your new major?
- Which university offices, staff, or faculty members did you consult with during the transition process?
- Who was the first person(s) you told after you decided to change your major? How did you tell him or her?
- Which resources would you say were *most valuable* during the time you were first dealing with leaving the selective major? Resources might include the help you had from others, your inner strength, how you viewed the situation, and the actions you initially took to deal with the change of major.
- When you decided to leave the major, did you consider transferring to another university? Why or why not?
- If you did consider transferring elsewhere, did you plan to pursue the same selective major at the new university?
- Which resources, if any, did you use in making the decision to remain here rather than transfer elsewhere**?**
- Which resources would you say were *most valuable* during the time you were dealing with immediate decisions you had to make after leaving the selective major?
- Did you run into barriers or obstacles during the transition of leaving the previous major and choosing a new major? How did you navigate those barriers or obstacles?
- Who did you lean on for support? How did they support you during this time?
- Which resources did the university offer you during the transition? Which university resources did you use?
- What, if anything, could the university have done differently to support you in the transition of leaving your previous major and selecting and enrolling in a new major? What, if anything, could your previous department/college have done differently to support you in the transition?
- What advice would you give to students who are leaving a selective major and are facing the same transition that you experienced?
- Overall, which resources would you say are *most valuable* during the transition of leaving a selective major and selecting and enrolling in a new major?
- Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about your transition experience of leaving a selective major and selecting and enrolling in a new major that I didn't ask?