Major Decisions: Empowering College Students to Make Timely and More Informed Decisions in Choosing Their Major and/or Path to Careers – A Campus-wide Approach

A Mini-White Paper Introducing a Quality Enhancement Plan Topic

Respectfully Submitted by Pam Laughlin, M.Ed.
Director of Career Services
Box 2238
936-294-3514
plaughlin@shsu.edu

Overview of Topic

Today’s colleges and universities are facing a multitude of challenges including those associated with student recruitment and retention, reduced state funding, increased concerns and scrutiny of the public and legislators, and demands for accountability regarding student academic and career outcomes. The choice of a major early in college students’ academic careers is a frequent topic of research literature and often credited for improving retention rates at colleges and universities.

Conversely, there also are opposing views among academic scholars concerning the relationship between early choice of a major and a student’s academic success and a timely graduation date. It has been my experience over the course of my nearly 24 years as a career services professional that there is a relationship between a student’s well-informed choice of a major and academic persistence. Equally important I discovered, is the student’s ability to recognize their career path options and to create career goals for themselves while in college. The QEP topic I propose suggests taking a campus-wide approach to empowering college students to make both timely and more informed decisions in choosing their major and/or path to careers. This can be achieved through “career path” programming and advising, faculty assisting students in making the connection between their courses and potential careers, and increasing the prevalence of student success and capstone classes. The outcomes will be: more of our students persisting, graduating without unnecessary classes, expenses, student debt, and with greater likelihood of job prospects that ultimately will bring them career success and satisfaction.

Recent Research

Research conducted over time has suggested that one key to the retention of university students is their choice of a major early in their academic career. (Rafes, Richard S., Malta, Shauna L., Siniscarco, Mary T., 2013). Undergraduate students also are considered to be "at risk" for lower academic performance when compared to their
peers with declared majors (Anderson, E., 1985). Other literature suggests opposing views.

Graunke, Woosley, and Helms (2006) posited, “commitment to a specific major or career is not related to degree completion” (p. 17). Cuseo (2005) even noted that decided students who made their choice of a major based upon insufficient information, lack of planning, and unrealistic assessment of their skills, abilities and interests might be at a greater risk than undecided students for unsatisfactory academic progress and for eventually dropping out of college.

A comprehensive institution-wide program is proposed that will provide early engagement with incoming freshmen and transfer students, and continuing academic, advising and career development assistance to these students as they progress through their academic programs. This QEP initiative can serve to assist both the undecided student and the student who has made an uninformed major and or career choice before they are at risk of possibly: a) poor academic performance; b) changing their major too frequently costing them and their family’s time and money; c) not persisting to obtain their degree and/or d) graduating without clear career goals leading to underemployment or delayed employment.

**Institutional Data Support**

- National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)
- Institutional Fact Book Fall 2016
- Automated Student and Adult Learner Follow-Up System (ASALFS)
- Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board ASALFS Data
- GradLeaders “The Outcomes Survey”™ (first destination survey for SHSU graduates, first implemented at May 2017 graduation).
- EAB reports

These sources of institutional data support will provide information instrumental in noting changes/improvements in student outcomes should this QEP be accepted and implemented.

**Resources Needed for Implementation**

- Administrators, faculty and staff to form an Implementation Committee responsible for incorporating best practices for program development
- Marketing and promotional outreach materials
- Additional academic and career advisors as the scope of the program dictates
- A “One-Stop” Academic and Career Advising and Support Services Center (if funding can be secured)
- Additional First Year Experience and Senior Capstone courses (if funding can be secured)
Institutional Participants

- University Upper Administration
- Faculty
- Academic Advisors and Mentors
- Career Services Staff
- Academic Support Center Staff
- Enrollment Management Offices (Admissions, Financial Aid)
- Student Support Center Staff (TRIO, ELITE, McNair Scholars)
- Student Affairs Offices (Partners in promoting program as they reach a large portion of the student body)

Possible Outcomes and Challenges

Possible outcomes include higher retention and graduation rates; Higher student satisfaction with their university experience; Higher placement rates; Increased relevance of graduate’s major to their chosen career and greater career satisfaction; Potentially less student tuition expenses, time to graduate and student debt.

Possible Challenges include getting university-wide “buy-in” and support; Adequate funding to provide space and staff to provide increased academic and career advising services.

References


