Undecided First Year College Students' Experiences with Academic Advising at Miami University

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This dissertation titled

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ABSTRACT

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Undecided First Year Students' Experiences with Academic Advising at Miami University

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This research explored two recent models of first year academic advising used at Miami University: The Explore Miami (EXM) model and a model associated with students in its newly created University Studies major, a designation for students who formerly were classified as undeclared majors. A secondary research interest focused on student experiences with the EXM Living Learning Community (LLC), which is specifically designed to meet the needs of undecided students. It was unknown how the University Studies students would experience their academic advising as well as their EXM LLC. University Studies students received a different academic advising model than the undecided students in previous classes. The EXM LLC was specially designed for students who wanted to explore their major and career path as well as the university as a whole.

This project was conducted using a grounded theory techniques and a phenomenological perspective. Twelve students, six from each class, were interviewed via a semi-structured method. The research addressed the following research questions: (1) How did students experience being undecided first year students? (2) How did undecided students make meaning of their academic advising experiences? (2a) What were their experiences with their respective academic advising model? (2b) How, if at all,
did the students perceive their respective academic advising model meet their needs as undecided students? (2c) How, if at all, did the Explore Miami Living Learning Community aid students in their major declaration process?

Exploration around these topics provided rich data. Themes emerged from the data, categorized into one of the four S’s of Schlossberg’s transition theory. Sub themes materialized within each category. The study provided insight into how undecided students made meaning of a variety of experiences which can aid professional practice for supporting this unique population through their career and decision making process.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

“To be, or not to be, that is the question” (Shakespeare, 1996, p. 44). This famous phrase from the third act of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is one of the most recognizable quotes of all time. When considering the phrase’s applicability to first-year college students, this quote can represent a student’s process of choosing a major or career. However it also highlights the importance, depth, and context of career decisions. The foundation for career decisions begins long before a student enters college. It is influenced and even at times dictated, by family, friends, and mentors. This is interesting when juxtaposed against another quote from *Hamlet*, “To thine own self be true” (Shakespeare, 1996, p. 16). Many students arrive on college campuses without knowing who or what they will be. These students, commonly referred to as undecided students, (Gordon, 2007a) bring forth a unique set of characteristics and require special attention from their college or university as they make one of the most crucial decisions in their college career: their academic major.

First Year College Students

According to Keup and Kinzie (2007), entering college is one of the most significant developmental transitions in students’ lives. The majority of first year students at four year institutions are 18-24 year-olds. According to Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, and Renn (2010) and Upcraft and Garner (1989) this transition is particularly notable as it signifies an important phase for students’ intellectual, moral, and identity development.
Research by Kuh (1996), Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) and Terenzini, Pascarella, and Blimling (1996) stressed the importance of student learning both inside and outside the classroom to help first year students persist through this transition. Upcraft, Gardner, and Barefoot (2005) summarized this literature by stating two of the most important influences on student learning and development are: (1) meaningful interaction with a variety of campus community members and (2) effort put into academic pursuits. According to Kuh (1996), the way in which institutions can best foster these influences is by creating meaningful collaborative partnerships among professionals across campus. Kuh stressed the importance of creating a seamless learning environment for students, where in- and out-of-class experiences are intentionally connected. According to the American College Personnel Association (1994), Chickering and Gamson (1987) and Strange (1992), in a seamless learning environment, students take advantage of resources both the classroom and around campus; teaching staff are effective; and students are asked to use their experiences to make meaning of what they are learning. Learning happens in a variety of ways, such as classes, laboratories, studios, and field work. Students are asked to apply what they learn to their lives outside of the academic setting.

Approximately 75% of students attending four-year colleges will live in campus housing (Keup & Kinzie, 2007), and for many of them, this will be their first time away from home. According to Upcraft, Gardner, and Barefoot (2005), “Where first-year students live matters” (p. 410). This statement supports research by Astin (1993) and Pascarella and Terenzini (1991), which found that residence hall environments, and the
experiences student have within them, influence first year students’ learning and academic success. Blimling (1989) conducted an analysis of earlier research completed by himself as well as Pascarella and Terenzini and concluded that students who live in residence halls receive higher overall GPAs than students living in other locations, including commuting from home, fraternity or sorority housing, and off-campus housing.

Further, first year student residence hall experiences can significantly affect the quality of student overall college experience (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005). According to the authors, living on campus can affect their integration into the campus community, academic success, persistence, and overall satisfaction.

There are other transitional issues that greatly influence first year students. Factors such as financial concerns, one’s expectations of college versus the actual experience, and level of engagement all have an impact on whether or not the student persists. These factors can be affected by the institution’s ability to create the seamless learning experience described above, the residence hall environment, as well as individual student circumstances (Keup & Kinzie, 2007).

Academic Advising

According to King and Kerr (2005), “Academic advising is perhaps the most important way that first-year students interact with a representative of the institution” (p. 320). They describe academic advising as “the hub of the wheel that establishes lines to all other support services on campus” (p. 320) and view it as a key factor in aiding students’ successful transition to college, promoting a sense of connection, and achieving their educational goals. Grites and Gordon (2000) further this point by writing, “The
academic adviser’s role (whether faculty member or full-time adviser) is to facilitate student learning in three contexts . . . educational, career, and personal” (p. 13). The authors point out that advising should focus on student learning within the context of the student’s interests, values, and abilities.

The process of advising within this context is known as developmental advising. According to Crookston (2009), “Developmental . . . advising is concerned not only with a specific personal or vocational decision, but also with facilitating the student’s rationale processes, environmental and interpersonal interactions, behavioral awareness, problem-solving, decision-making, and evaluating skills” (p. 78). O’Banion (1972) described five dimensions of academic advising: exploration of life goals, exploration of program goals, program choice, course choice, and scheduling courses. Crookston (2009) also noted that the key to successful developmental academic advising is the relationship established between student and adviser. The author stressed the importance of an adviser’s demonstrated commitment to a student’s holistic development in the areas identified above.

Living Learning Communities

Many colleges and universities have implemented Learning Communities or Living Learning Communities (LLCs) to help create an experience that ties what the student is learning in the classroom to their co-curricular experiences (Tinto, 1997). LLCs connect academic experiences with other aspects of their collegiate lives, and integrate learning across the curriculum. Students that participate in LLCs pursue a
curricular or cocurricular theme as part of their residence hall experience (Inkelas, Vogt, Longerbeam, Owen, & Johnson, 2006).

Additionally, some campuses have incorporated academic advising as a component of the LLC to help merge these experiences. Literature on LLCs, academic advising, and student engagement suggests that advising provided in the communities impact student engagement more than advising provided in other locations (Arms, Cabrera, & Brower, 2008).

First year students living on campus at Miami University are academically advised in their residence hall. All students who live on campus at Miami are part of a LLC, so the residence hall and LLC experience are one and the same for on-campus students. First year students are encouraged to meet with their First Year Adviser (FYA) at least once in the fall semester. During this meeting students and advisers discuss not only students’ academic needs, but also their transition to Miami and residential experience. Many students will meet with their FYA at other times during the year for academic and other reasons. Since the FYA is an academic adviser as well as residence hall director, this person is trained to aid the student on in a variety of ways. This helps the student connect their in- and out-of-class experiences, as referenced above.

Explore Miami LLC

In the 2009 Fall Semester, Miami University Office of Residence Life (ORL) launched a new LLC program, Explore Miami (EXM) which targets undecided students. Students who have not declared a major and who self-identify as undecided about their career choice are encouraged to preference this LLC. The community provides many
experiences to help students explore and transition to college life at Miami, but the most notable is the adjusted academic advising model. In the other LLCs, formal academic advising meetings occur once during the fall semester, and typically last 45 minutes. Communities using the EXM model have a two-step process. The first meeting occurs within the first 4 weeks of the semester and provides the adviser time to get to know the student. Students are given a Student Profile and Goal Setting Sheet (Appendix A) that they must complete independently and bring to their next meeting, which typically occurs between weeks six and 10 of the semester. These second meetings are known as “academic planning meetings” and focus on the goals the student created and what steps, both academically and personally, the student needs to make in order to achieve these goals.

Approximately 500 students each year were part of the EXM LLC and received the modified academic advising model between 2009 and 2011. According to the December 2011 Assessment of Living Learning, students who experienced the EXM model showed a higher level of satisfaction with their academic advising experience than first year students in other LLCs, who received Miami’s traditional model (ORL, 2012). This reflects positively on the LLC as a whole, particularly when considering its mission to serve undecided students.

University Studies

In the 2012 Spring Semester, Miami University determined that beginning in the 2012 Fall Semester, all undecided first year students will have the official designation of a “University Studies” major within the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS). This
designation affected approximately 800 students who had previously been identified as “undecided” on university record. The mission of the University Studies major is as follows:

. . . to more seamlessly integrate and expand upon the existing support and guidance provided to undecided students by faculty, first year, divisional advisers and career specialists. Under the rubric of the University Studies Program, [the University Studies academic advisers] will introduce students to the broadest range of academic areas available at Miami University, help them determine what path is right for them, and ultimately, facilitate their declaration of a major. [The University Studies department] will accomplish [its] mission through a combination of one-on-one advising meetings and special programs that will help students develop strong academic plans as they explore majors and potential careers. (Miami University College of Arts and Sciences, 2012)

The rationale for the program is to develop a structure that utilizes both faculty and divisional advisers in students’ first year that allows CAS to focus more intentionally on undecided students.

Beginning in 2012 Fall Semester first year University Studies students’ adviser on record was a divisional adviser within CAS, not their First Year Adviser. Although the students met with their FYA for initial familiarity meetings, the formal academic advising process was done solely by CAS staff. This resulted in a substantial change for the First Year Advisers working with undecided students and contradicted both the
findings on academic advising in residence halls when compared to central advising offices and the 2011 Assessment of Living and Learning survey results noted above.

Researcher Introduction

During both the 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 academic years, I served as an Assistant Director in the Office of Residence Life. During that time, I supervised First Year Advisers working in the Explore Miami LLC, and had administrative responsibilities over the development of the community. I was curious if the two-step advising model was meeting its intended purpose for undecided college students. The implementation of the University Studies program for the 2012-2013 academic year led many professionals in our office and within Miami’s Division of Student Affairs to question how the new major would affect our advising program overall. I was particularly interested in how it would affect Explore Miami, the community with an advising model designed specifically for a population that would no longer be advised by First Year Advisers. This study was created as a result of my curiosity, and additional questions that developed throughout my process.

Theoretical Framework

This study examined undecided students’ perceptions of their first year academic advising experiences. Participants were students who received the EXM model as well as the University Studies model. The study primarily incorporated three human development theories, each set in the context of traditional first-year college student transitions. Kegan’s evolution of consciousness theory (1994) considers development as “an effort to resolve the tension between a desire for differentiation and an equally
powerful desire to be immersed in one’s surroundings” (Evans et al., 2010, p. 177). Kegan’s theory was an appropriate theoretical framework for this study, as it is a holistic theory that incorporates cognitive, intrapersonal, and relational aspects of human development. When applied to career exploration, one can find a connection to that process as it is a complex, multidimensional process of meaning making. In order to fully explore one’s career path and goals, one must consider the implications the choice will have all on areas of development.

Baxter Magolda’s theory of self-authorship (2001, 2008) builds on the work of Kegan (1994) and also explores how individuals make meaning out of their experiences. Baxter Magolda (2008) defined self-authorship as “the internal capacity to define one’s beliefs, identity and social relations” (p. 269). In her longitudinal study, Baxter Magolda (2001) highlighted several developmental tasks associated with those in their twenties. These tasks include values exploration, making sense about information gained previously, determining the path one will take, and moving along that path. According to Baxter Magolda (2001) three major questions are priority: “How do I know?”, “Who am I”, and “How do I want to construct relationships with others?” (p. 15). The author identified four phases in the journey toward self-authorship: following formulas, crossroads, becoming the author of one’s life, and internal foundation.

Schlossberg’s transition theory (Schlossberg, 2011, Anderson, Goodman, Schlossberg, 2012) discusses transition in terms of four Ss: self, situation, support, and strategies. Although these theories do not exclusively apply to college-age development, they were appropriate to this study as they are applicable when considering student
adjustment to college life, and what role academic advising and LLC experiences may play in that adjustment. The students in this study were first year students who reflected on recent experiences with academic advising, as well as second year students who reflected on their experiences from their first year. Kegan’s theory helped the researcher understand how students made meaning out of their experiences. The theory can help one recognize students’ developmental level, which can provide context for their perspectives.

Schlossberg’s theory helped the researcher understand what impact the transition of coming to college was having on the student, as well as how the student viewed the support systems that advising and LLCs aimed to provide. Both concepts served as a filter by which the researcher used during the coding process to help identify themes based on the students’ developmental levels.

Statement of the Problem

Academic advising is an important part of college student’s educational experience, and can have significant implications on major and career decision making. Gordon (2007a) stated that undecided students are those who are “unwilling, unable, or unready to make educational and/or vocational decisions” (p. x). Given this, it can be assumed that undecided students need additional support in academic advising. The processes undecided students undergo vary and often reflect transitional issues of most college students (Gordon, Habley, & Grites, 2008). Current literature on the needs of undecided students has been described as “conflicting, contradictory, and confusing”
Given that description, additional research was needed in order to determine best practices for this group.

It was unknown how the University Studies students experienced their academic advising as well as their EXM LLC. US students received a different academic advising model than the undecided students in previous classes. The EXM LLC was specially designed for students who wanted to explore their major and career path as well as the university as a whole. It was possible that University Studies students had a different EXM LLC experience than EXM students in other programs.

Additionally, little research had been conducted on the EXM LLC academic advising model, and no research had been conducted on the University Studies model on Miami’s campus. It was important to explore how students experienced each model, as it can help determine if the model is meeting their needs. Further, if undecided students are no longer academically advised by ORL staff, then it is important to determine if the EXM model is still appropriate to use within the LLC, as it was created specifically for undecided students.

**Research Questions**

In order to address the problem described above, this study explored the following research questions with participants:

1. How did students experience being undecided first year students?
2. How did undecided students make meaning of their academic advising experiences?
a. What were their experiences with their respective academic advising model?

b. How, if at all, did the students perceive their respective academic advising model meet their needs as undecided students?

c. How, if at all, did the Explore Miami Living Learning Community aid students in their major declaration process?

Significance of the Study

The choice of a major can be one of the most significant decisions a college student makes. It shapes a student’s educational experience and can be directly tied into one’s career path. This research was timely and desired by the Miami University Division of Student Affairs, as 2012-2013 was the first year of the University Studies program. Stakeholders were interested in the impact the designation had on first year students’ major and career decision making, LLC experience, and overall perception of their first year at Miami. This research allowed me to explore the relative strengths and limitations of each model, and the impact the models have on students’ LLC experiences.

If students experienced the University Studies model much differently than the EXM model, it could have significant implications for ORL’s academic advising program, FYA position, and the University Studies program. Moreover, divisional advisers in other university departments could consider using the one of the models, particularly working with students who may have selected a major, but are unsure what their career path may be. This model is not unique to the needs of Miami University
students, as academic advisers on other college campuses could also implement a similar model, particularly for undecided students.

Scope of the Study

The scope of this study was 12 students, six sophomores who received the EXM model of academic advising in the 2011 Fall Semester, and six first year students who received the University Studies model in the 2012 Fall Semester. The sophomores were officially undeclared majors prior to receiving any formal academic advising. The freshmen were designated University Studies students. The sample was demographically and culturally diverse, relative to the campus population. Although the study was specific to Miami University’s first year academic advising program, the study can be applicable for any college or universities serving undecided first year students. By exploring the strengths and limitations for the two models with this subset of a first year student population, those working with the population will have a better understanding of the merits of each, based on student perceptions of their own needs.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are used frequently throughout this dissertation and are of importance to overall understanding.

*Academic Advising*: Academic advising in context of this study referred to formal meetings during which trained academic advisers met with first year students to engage in developmental conversations around their career and major goals, discuss class planning and scheduling, as well as logistics to registering for classes for the student’s second academic term. Kuhn (2008) defined academic advising as “situations in which
an institutional representative gives insight or direction to a college student about an academic, social, or personal matter. The nature of this direction might be to inform, suggest, counsel, discipline, coach, . . . teach” (p. 3). As defined by Miami University, “Advising is a process enabling a student to gather information about University resources and program requirements, to develop competencies in course registration, to explore appropriate educational and career objectives and to identify the implications of educational choices” (Miami University, 1999, “Definition of Academic Advising,” para. 1).

Academic Adviser: An academic adviser has been defined as institutional representatives who provide academic advising to students (Kuhn, 2008). In context of this study, academic advisers refer both to First Year Advisers (see below) as well as faculty advisers in the Miami University College of Arts and Science’s University Studies major.

Explore Miami (EXM): EXM is the living learning community (see below) that all participants in this study were members of during their freshman year. It is targeted specially, but not exclusive to, first year undecided students. As defined by ORL, EXM is Miami University’s LLC which provide students the:

. . . opportunity to explore options for involvement and engagement at Miami University. Students will become acquainted with academic resources to aid in their success, reflect upon person values and explore differences within their community (Office of Residence Life, 2012a).

Explore Miami Model/Explore Miami Advising Model: These terms are used synonymously to describe the academic advising model used specifically in the EXM
halls. This model is a two-step process that takes place in the fall semester. The first step is the “get to know you meeting” where the adviser becomes acquainted with the advisee. Students are provided with a goal-setting sheet they must complete independently and bring to their second meeting. In the second meeting the adviser discusses the goal setting sheet with the student and aids them in selecting classes for the spring semester.

*First Year Advisers (FYAs)/Advisers:* These terms refers to Miami University Office of Residence Life professional staff who serve in the capacity of academic adviser for first year students and residence hall director.

*Living Learning Community(ies) [LLC(s)]:* LLCs are defined as “programs in which students live together in a discrete portion of a residence hall (or the entire hall) and participate in academic and/or cocurricular programming designed especially for them (Soldner & Szelényi, 2008, p.2). In the case of this study, all participants were members of the EXM LLC during their freshman year.

*Undecided students:* According to Gordon (2007a) undecided students are those who are not committed to an educational or career direction.

*University Studies:* Official major declaration for undecided first year students at Miami University beginning in Fall 2012. This program provides students with additional major/career decision making support as well as general academic planning.

**Delimitations**

Delimitations, or parameters that frame the study are:

- Students who received the EXM model of advising were enrolled as first time, first semester students at Miami University in 2011 Fall Semester;
• University Studies students were enrolled as first time, first semester students at Miami University in 2012 Fall Semester;
• 2011-2012 first year class consisted of less than 12% multicultural students;
• 2009 Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) data indicated incoming first year students at Miami students were much more likely to report their family income as over $250,000 than students at other highly selective public universities (20.4% vs. 11.1%) and less likely to report a family income less than $100,000 (35.8% vs. 50.3%) (Miami University, 2009). This equated to a large portion of the campus population representing a high socio-economic status;
• All students were undecided or University Studies prior to beginning the formal academic advising process;
• An equal number (12 total) of students from each class was interviewed.

Limitations

Students who are undecided about their major may have an ideal career path in mind. A student in this situation may have a different advising experience than a completely undecided student regardless of what residence hall they live in. Students’ expectations of academic advising and the adviser’s style may also influence how a student feels about the experience and their ability to choose a major. This research was qualitative and conducted via person to person interviews. The rapport between the interviewer and interviewee may influence participant answers, as the student may share more openly with someone who they develop a closer rapport with. Additionally, I, as
the researcher, was employed by ORL and worked directly with the EXM community during the duration of the study. Although I was committed to conducting an unbiased analysis of data, I had an opinion about each of the advising models, which have may shaped my perspective during the analysis.

Organization of the Study

This dissertation is organized into six chapters. Chapter one provides an overview of the influence academic advising and the LLC experience can have on student engagement, a summary of the EXM LLC and academic advising model, as well as the University Studies program. The chapter also includes the statement of the problem, explanation of the research question, significance and scope of the study, delimitations and limitations of the study, and definitions of common terms used throughout this dissertation. Chapter two provides details on the theoretical foundations for this study, transitional experiences that affect first year students, characteristics common among the population, an overview of academic advising models and program for undecided students, as well literature relevant to LLCs, particularly those targeting first year students. Chapter three describes the research methods of this qualitative study, and chapter four presents case studies of each student. Chapter five examines the intersection of the cases through a cross case analysis. Chapter six provides a summary, discussion of the research findings, implications for current practice and further research, a personal reflection, and conclusion.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides a review of relevant literature regarding traditional first year students’ characteristics, transition to college, and particularly focuses on undecided students’ academic advising and LLC experiences. For the purpose of this study, a traditional aged college student was defined as a student between the ages of 17-19 during their first academic year. Research on undecided students who are members of the EXM LLC is limited, but information regarding this population in general is ample. To best understand the specific population, one must first have foundational knowledge of transitional issues first year students have experienced throughout generations. The chapter provides an overview of today’s college student and characteristics that could most influence his or her academic advising, major and career exploration process, LLC experience and overall transition in the first year.

The chapter continues with a detailed explanation of college student major and career decisiveness as defined by Gordon (2007a). Explanation of university colleges or divisions specifically designed for undecided students is provided, as it was the academic program of record for the first year students in this study. This information provides readers a basic understanding of the developmental levels of study participants in this regard.

The chapter provides information on LLCs for undecided students not only at Miami University’s benchmarking institutions, but also at universities that according to the National Academic Advising Association, are setting the standard for merging the academic advising and residential experiences. Miami University is among those
campuses (Huff & Jordan, 2007), as first year academic advising is part of the residence life program, and the EXM LLC specifically programs to undecided students.

### Theoretical Foundations

As noted prior, this study incorporated three theories of human development: Kegan’s evolution of consciousness theory, Baxter Magolda’s theory of self-authorship, and Schlossberg’s transition theory. A detailed explanation of each framework and their applicability to this project is described below.

#### Kegan’s Evolution of Consciousness Theory

According to Kegan (1994), the evolution of consciousness is “the personal unfolding of ways of organizing experiences that are not simply replaced as we grow but subsumed into more complex systems of mind” (p. 9). This growth involves progression through five stages or “ways of knowing” which Kegan referred to as stages of developing in his original 1982 work, orders of consciousness in his 1994 publication, and finally forms of mind in 2000 (Evans et al., 2010). According to Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, and Renn (2010), “The process of growth involves an evolution of meaning that is marked by continual shifts from periods of stability to periods of instability, leading to the ongoing reconstruction of relationship of persons with their environment” (p. 177). The evolution of consciousness theory places individuals into “orders,” each consisting of cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal developmental elements (Kegan, 1994).

Kegan acknowledged that growth can be a challenging process as it involves “changing one’s way of functioning in the world” (Evans et al., 2010, p. 178). Kegan’s
1982 work introduced the concept of the “holding environment” (p. 116) to assist individuals with these changes. According to the author, the holding environment has two purposes: supporting individuals in the stage they are currently in, and encouraging them to move on to the next. He later equated a holding environment to an “evolutionary bridge, a context for crossing over” (1994, p. 43) from one order to the next.

This study focused on experiences students had with their academic advising program during their first year of college. First year college students are typically in the second order, known as the instrumental mind or third order, the socialized mind. Individuals in order two are able to construct classifications of objects, people, or concepts with specific features. As a result of this transition, they think more logically and their feelings are more stable than those in previous orders. Additionally, those in the instrumental mind order relate to others individuals and can distinguish personality traits and qualities (Kegan, 1994). Kegan, Broderick, Drago-Severson, Helsing, Popp, and Portnow (2001) noted that during this stage, “rules, sets of directions, and dualisms give shape and structure to one’s daily activities” (p. 4-5). In this order, individuals develop an idea of who they are and what they desire. A successful holding environment involves encouraging students to consider the needs, expectations, and wishes of others (Evans et al., 2010).

Order three, the socialized mind, is marked by one’s capacity to relate one category to another. Individuals in this order think more abstractly, “are aware of their feelings and the internal processes associated with them, and they can make commitments to communities of people and ideas” (Evans et al., 2010, p. 179). How the
individual is perceived by others is of high importance and peer acceptance is critical in this order. Support is found in jointly beneficial relationships and shared experiences. Challenging students in this stage consists of encouraging them to make their own decisions and establish independence.

On rare occasion, first year students may exhibit elements of order four, the self-authoring mind. This stage is signified by cross-categorical constructing, or “the ability to generalize across abstractions” (2010, p. 179). According to Kegan (1994), self-authorship is the focus of this order. In other words, self-authored individuals “have the capacity to take responsibility for and ownership of their internal authority” (Kegan et al., 2001, p. 5). They form their own sets of values and beliefs. Relationships become less important and shift from being the focal point of one’s being to simply a part of his or her world. Holding environments at this point acknowledge the individual’s interdependence and self-regulation.

**Baxter Magolda’s Theory of Self-Authorship**

As noted, Baxter Magolda’s theory of self-authorship (2001, 2008) is based on the work of Kegan (1994) and highlights significant developmental tasks of individuals in their twenties associated with values exploration, making sense of information gained previously, determining one’s path, and taking steps along that path. The three major questions of “How do I know?”, “Who am I”, and “How do I want to construct relationships with others?” (p. 15) take precedence in this developmental process.

The first question, “How do I know?” relates to the epistemological dimension of self-authorship, or “the evolution of assumptions about the nature, limits, and certainty of
knowledge” (p. 15). Question two, “Who am I?” refers to the intrapersonal development, one’s sense of who they are and what they believe in. The third question pertains to interpersonal relationships, or “how one perceives and constructs one’s relationship with others” (p. 15). Individuals will eventually realize that answers to these questions are connected, which is an indication of that individual’s path toward self-authorship.

The path to self-authorship consists of four phases that involve moving from an external definition to an internal one (2001). In phase one: following formulas “young adults follow the plans laid out for them by external authorities about how they should think and how they should accomplish their work” (Evans et al., 2010, p. 184). Individuals in this phase frame the formulas as if they were their own ideas, rather than others. Similarly, those in this stage allow others to define who they are. Attaining approval from others is a key element of building relationships for individuals in this stage. Parents, significant others, and mentors are particularly influential sources of formulas for individuals at this stage.

Phase two: crossroads occurs as individuals progress along their journey and discover that the plans they have followed are no longer working and that they need to create new plans to better suit their needs and interests. Concurrently, they become dissatisfied with others’ definitions of them and feel the need to create their own sense of self. For some, following external formulas can lead to crisis. For others, the result is a sense of unhappiness and lack of fulfillment. Regardless of how they experience the crossroads, individuals in this stage are not yet able to act on their own desires to be more autonomous, as they fear the reaction of others.
Baxter Magolda’s (2001, 2008) third stage: *becoming the author of one’s own life* is similar to Kegan’s (1994) forth order of consciousness. According to Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn (2010), “This phase is characterized by the ability to choose one’s belief and stand up for them in the fact of conflicting external viewpoints” (2010, p. 186). Once individuals decide on their beliefs, they want to “live them out” (p. 186). Self-authored individuals are also aware that their belief systems are contextual, can change, and are unclear. Those in this stage undergo intensive self-reflection, and develop a strong self-concept. A renegotiation of relationships occurs as young adults consider their needs, in conjunction with the needs of others in their lives. Individuals in this stage are careful in making relationship commitments to ensure that the commitment “honor[s] the self they [are] constructing” (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p. 140).

The fourth phase: *internal foundation* consists of one being grounded in their belief system, a sense of who they are, and the mutuality of their relationships. A “solidified and comprehensive system of belief” (2001, p. 155) now exists. Individuals in this stage are accepting of ambiguity and open to change. They feel peaceful, content, and internally strong. They are aware of external influences in their lives, but are not affected by them. Those in the internal foundation stage trust their own feels, act rationally, and make decisions based on their foundation.

This study focuses on the experiences of undecided students, how they make meaning of the phenomenon, their academic advising services, and living learning community experience. Baxter Magolda’s (2001, 2008) theory was appropriate for the study, and particularly helpful in examining the process students are going through to
determine their career path. It was expected that students in this study were either at phase one or two, given their age and fact that they were, either at time of interview or previously, undecided about their major or career path. Although Kegan (1994) acknowledged that on rare occasion, students at this age could be self-authored, this was untrue for the group examined. As they entered college unknowing of their major and career path, it is likely that they began in Baxter Magolda (2001) phase one and moved to phase two as a result of the self-exploration they underwent.

Schlossberg’s Transition Theory

An additional theory used to frame this study was Schlossberg’s transition theory (Schlossberg, 2011, Anderson, Goodman, Schlossberg, 2012), which focuses on individuals’ abilities to cope with transition. Schlossberg identifies four sets of factors, known as the four S’s, which influence one’s transition: situation, self, strategies, and support. Situation factors are elements such as timing, duration of transition, and one’s experience with similar transitions. Self factors are those that describe the person experiencing the transition. These can include demographic characteristics such as age, race, or gender, as well as psychological characteristics such as optimism or self-efficacy. Strategies refer to the ways in which and individual copes with the transition. Support refers to the people, organizations, or institutions the person turns to for help with the transition. Students’ experiences during their first year with the EXM LLC and academic advising could have either a positive or negative effect on their overall transition. The act of attending academic advising has been identified as a strategy the students took advantage of to aid in their transition. The relationships students developed with their
advise and members of their LLC are elements of their overall support system while navigating the transition.

Transitional Experiences of First Year Students

Upcraft, Gardner, and Barefoot have found “overwhelming evidence that student success is largely determined by student experiences in the first year” (2005, p. 1). As noted above, whether they are decided about their major and career path or not, all first year students go through transitions upon entering college (Keup & Kinzie, 2007). Major transitional experiences of traditional first year college students are highlighted below.

Integration into Campus Community

One of the most significant transitional issues for students is their ability to integrate into the campus community. Almost half of the respondents in a recent Your First College Year (YFCY) indicated that they felt lonely or homesick and 40% expressed concerns about making friends on campus (Keup & Kinzie 2007). A most concerning statistic in this survey indicated that about one-third of participants regularly felt isolated from campus life. Astin (1984), Kuh (2005), Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005), and Tinto (1993) have all stressed the importance of involvement, integration, and engagement as a critical indicator of student success.

Marginality Versus Mattering

Schlossberg (1989) also notes the importance of involvement, integration, and engagement in her concept of marginality versus mattering. The author wrote, “The polar themes of marginality and mattering connect all of us – rich and poor, young and old, male and female” (p. 6). Schlossberg defined marginality in multiple ways. In some
situations, a person can feel marginalized when he or she changes roles or experiences a transition. For others, marginality is a permanent state of being. Those from underrepresented populations can experience permanent marginality because of their lack of power. Schlossberg (1989) also noted that for bicultural individuals, “marginality is a way of life” (p. 7), as they often feel permanently locked between two worlds. When applied to college students, Schlossberg noted that first year students often feel marginal at the onset of their college experience. Some will quickly acclimate to the campus, become involved, and will actively engage in learning. Others will remain marginalized and never fully integrate into the campus community.

Schlossberg (1989) defined mattering as “the feeling that others depend on us, are interested in us, [and] are concerned with our fate” (p. 8). She pointed out that college students can be affected by feeling that they do not matter, for example not feeling missed at home, or that they are merely a number on their campus. Conversely, some students feel that they matter too much, to parents for example, and experience stress, pressure, and depression as a result.

*Expectations Versus Experiences*

There are many elements that lead to the expectations beginning college students have of their experience, both academically and socially. Media, peer, and family portrayals of college, coupled with the student’s academic performance leading up to post-secondary education, can enable a student to create unrealistic expectations for themselves and the overall collegiate experience. According to Feldman (1981) student expectations play an important role in the experience of first year students, because they
are a filter by which students make meaning out of their experiences. Keup and Kinzie (2007) furthered this notion by stating that expectations can be an indication of how a student will interact with peers, staff, and faculty. These interactions can directly affect student achievement and satisfaction with their experience.

Longitudinal data collected by recent CIRP and YFCY surveys indicated that students at four-year institutions generally reported very high expectations of college. Ninety-seven percent of students in the 2004 YFCY predicted that they would have at least “some chance” of earning a B average in college. Seventy-nine percent of students achieved this goal during their first year; the additional 18% did not meet their own standards. Other surveys such as the College Student Expectations Questionnaire and the College Student Experiences Questionnaire had similar findings. Kuh (2005) reported that there was also a gap in which students expect to participate in educationally purposeful activities and the degree to which they actually do. There may be a connection between students’ lack of educational engagement and achieved GPA during the first year.

**Academic Engagement**

Research conducted by Kuh (2005), and Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) indicated that quality classroom experiences coupled with interactions with faculty and academic peers are directly related to higher student outcomes. According to their research, quality academic experiences go beyond the classroom and extend to other aspects of college life. Time spent studying, writing paper drafts, and preparing for class during the first year are key indicators of a student’s overall quality of academic
experience, and predictors of a student’s ability to succeed. Other indicators of student success can be their use of campus resources such as academic support services, writing centers, and study-skills seminars. Many campuses have made changes to provide students more structure for academic success. The implementation of learning communities and LLCs are examples of structures in place to better ensure first year student persistence and success (Kuh, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Academic Success

Upcraft, Gardner, and Barefoot (2005) stressed that today’s first year college students present instructional challenges that are unique to their overall preparedness to learn. The authors stressed that effective instruction requires consistency in course goals, instructional activities, and evaluation processes. They stated that the traditional “research university model” (p. 249) represented by faculty who create knowledge and provide information to students through lectures does not work for this population. The authors believe that in most lecture style courses, learning does not occur, and only memorization does. They emphasized the need for first year students to think and organize their thoughts; in order to do this, they need something to “think about and think with” (p. 248). The authors viewed memorization as only one important step in the learning process. They stressed the importance of students’ abilities to establish connections, understand, think, and apply what they have learned. Upcraft, Gardner, and Barefoot (2005) believe the challenge for college instructors is to structure their classes in ways that know, understand, and think about the topics at hand.
Upcraft, Gardner and Barefoot (2005) provided several recommendations for class instructors to create situations that best foster learning in the first year. Those suggestions include strategies such as group projects, study groups, and assignments that enable students to form opinions about and apply knowledge. Additionally, case studies or problem-based learning, where groups of students solve a problem using skills and knowledge they attain, have also been deemed effective. Finally, experiential learning, such as field studies, internships, and service-learning projects are recommended as well. Although all strategies cannot be implemented into one course, the authors suggest instructors use multiple formats to engage a variety of learners.

According to Upcraft, Gardner, and Barefoot (2005), understanding generational characteristics around academic success and student learning styles can better enable faculty and staff to aid students in their transition and overall level of engagement. LLC experiences can help tie the curricular and the co-curricular aspect of a student’s experience, but if they are not satisfied academically, they will not succeed overall. Academic advisers working with unsatisfied students who, for example, are in several lecture style courses should encourage the student to take a small seminar, lab, or workshop. This may help the student refine goals, as well as determine the types of courses they enjoy and excel in most. One’s ability to succeed academically, as well as excel in the other transitional experiences described above, are key determinants of student persistence (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). Systems such as a developmental academic advising and LLCs can aid students in these transitions and help them create strategies for success.
First Year Student Characteristics

In considering data pertaining to first year college student transitions, it is important that readers have a sense of their characteristics. Research can attest to the fact that today’s college students represent a “new breed” of learner. They are racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse, have higher expectations of their own abilities and skills, and have more educated and involved parents than their predecessors (Higher Education Research Institute, 2008; Howe & Strauss, 2000). Although the population of Miami University is less diverse than the overall population of first year college students, they possess many of the characteristics described below. A knowledge base of first year student characteristics overall will help the reader understand some of the context provided by the students during interviews.

Millennial College Students

Howe and Strauss (2000) define the Millennial generation as those born between the years 1982-2002. This generation currently makes up the traditional aged first year student population. Elam, Stratton, and Gibson (2007) noted that Millennials “build upon the values instilled by the Baby Boomers while also filling the cultural void left by the departing G.I. generation” (p. 21). This generation brings forth many positive attributes, such as strong work ethic, socialization by supportive parents, participation in cocurricular activities, and a willingness to help others and create social change (Elam, Stratton, & Gibson, 2007).

There are challenges, however, to working with this population. Generally speaking, Millennial students are known to be closer to their families than past
generations, often allowing parents to drive their decisions. This group has grown up with a sense of immediacy, is highly connected to technology, frequently multi-tasks, and has a noticeably short attention span. They have grown up in the wake of the Columbine, Colorado school shootings and 9-11 attacks which has led to an inherent mistrust in authority (Elam, Stratton, & Gibson, 2007). Each of these factors could play a role in a student’s college transition without the student being aware of the influence. In particular, the more challenging generational characteristic could influence both the academic advising and living learning experiences explored in this study.

**Diversity**

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2005) data showed an increase in the racial and ethnic diversity of college students nation-wide. Although the majority of student body populations at four-year institutions are still Caucasian, recent numbers indicate that nearly 30% of undergraduates are members of racial and/or ethnic underrepresented populations. This is a substantial change from the CIRP data of the early 1970s where students of color represented less than 10% of first year students (Keup & Kinzie, 2007). Most notably, non-white Latino/a students experience the most growth among ethnic groups, while African American and Asian students experienced more modest growth. The groups represent 10%, 13%, and 7%, respectively (2007). It is important to acknowledge that these statistics vary greatly by region of the country. In the Western part of the U.S., for example, minority students are becoming the majority. Miami University is situated in rural southwest Ohio, and approximately 11% of its 2011-2012 first year cohort self-identified as students of color (Miami University, 2011).
Although the population of the campus is not as racially diverse as many other colleges or universities, Miami University students bring diversity to the campus through their socio-economic statuses, religions, political views, sexual orientation, and experiences. Undecided Miami University students share some of the same developmental needs as those on more racially diverse campus, so information attained from them can be applicable to other undecided first year students.

Financial and Cultural Capital

As stated above, college students today are entering higher education with more financial concerns than those before them. Keup and Kinzie (2007) found that many students with financial difficulties will chose to attend a community college; students with “major” financial concerns comprise nearly 15% of the baccalaureate granting institution population. The authors acknowledged that low-income students “suffer a disadvantage at every pipeline of higher education” (2007, p. 22). Further, Choy (2002) and Gladieux and Swail (1998) noted that this group of students graduates at a much lower rate than those from higher socio-economic statuses. Gladieux and Swail (1998) found that over 40% of college students from the most advantaged group receive a bachelor’s degree or higher within five years, while only 6% of students from the least advantaged group achieved the same. Further, their research indicated that Caucasian students were considerably more likely to attain a bachelor’s degree than African-American or Latino/a students. Recent Miami University CIRP data indicated that the majority of the student population is Caucasian and from middle or upper socio-economic status (Miami University, 2009). Thus, many Miami University students have more
financial capital than college students nationwide. This has implications on their level of academic preparedness, expectations, ability to succeed in the classroom, as well as many other factors.

In addition to financial capital, today’s college student is affected by the cultural capital gained from previous generations’ college attendance. This capital is an important resource to the college-attending population. 2001 NCES data showed that a growing number of undergraduate students have parents that did not go to college (Choy, 2001). These first generation students have lower expectations of their college experience overall, are generally underprepared to succeed academically, and receive less support from families in preparation for college than students whose parents attended college. These students are more likely to begin their college experience in the 2-year sector, but are continuing to increase numbers at four-year institutions as well. A large portion of Miami University students have more financial and cultural capital than first year college students nationwide. This, most likely, ties into the very high expectations Miami University students and their parents have of the overall college experience. Academic advising and the LLC experience are in no way exempt from these expectations.

First Year Student Success Strategies

As noted prior, entering college marks the beginning of the most significant developmental experiences a student will have (Keup & Kinzie, 2007). Two methods colleges and universities implement to assist students in a successful transition are first year academic advising and living learning community programs. This section provides
details on the two, particularly framed within the context of working with those who are undecided about major and career choice.

Academic Advising Models

There are currently seven common organizational models of first year academic advising programs. In the *faculty only* model, entering students are assigned a faculty adviser, generally someone from the student’s field of study. Undecided first year students on a campus using this model are typically assigned to a liberal arts or other faculty member until they declare a major. Another type of program is the *satellite model*. In this model advising offices are housed in academic subunits such as colleges or schools, and advising responsibilities shift from a staff member in the office to a faculty member in the students’ program. Campuses using a satellite model often have an advising office specifically for undecided students. A third model is known as the *self-contained model*. In this case, all advising, from orientation until graduation, is conducted in a centralized advising or counseling center. A director or dean typically oversees all advising functions.

In the fourth type, the *supplementary model*, faculty members serve as advisers for all students, but there is an advising office that manages the administrative and training aspects of the program. The fifth model is known as the *split model*, as initial advising of students is split. Undecided, part-time, or conditionally admitted students work with specialized staff in advising offices, while faculty members advise all others. The *dual model* is the sixth common structure. In this model, a student has two types of academic advisers, faculty members who guide students specifically on major related
coursework, and advising office staff who aid students with general education, registration, and academic policy. The final common model is known as the total intake model. In this model, all initial academic advising of first year students occurs through one office. Students work with an adviser until certain criteria are met, such as after one semester, or a select number of credit hours are attained (King & Kerr, 2005).

Although the types of academic advising programs vary greatly in structure and content, King and Kerr (2005) have identified four key components they deem necessary for successful first year advising programs. They first stress the importance of a clear mission or philosophy statement to guide the program. This statement should be built on defined goals and objectives that are directly connected to the institution’s mission statement. The program should be run by a dean, director, or coordinator whose primary job responsibility is the management of the program. Faculty and staff serving as academic advisers should receive on-going training and development to help them best serve their students. Finally, recognition and reward should be an element of the program. King and Kerr (2005) noted that on many campuses faculty take on advisees as an overload and are not compensated for it. This could result in faculty members not willing or able to make their advisees a priority, and in turn students not receiving the full extent of services they need. They believe that advising can be an intrinsically rewarding experience, especially when working with a student throughout his or her tenure, but other types of adviser acknowledgement, such as release time or professional travel support, can strengthen the program overall.
Developmental Academic Advising for Undecided Students

Schnell (1998), and Winston and Sandor (1994) highlighted the importance of college students developing personal relationships with faculty and staff and emphasized the connection between student and academic adviser. According to the authors, the stronger the relationship between the two, the more likely the student is to be satisfied with his or her overall academic experience, be successful, and persist throughout college.

Research (Gordon, 2007b) found that the most effective method of academic advising is one-on-one appointments. This is also the method that is most preferred by students. Gordon’s (2007b) research found this particularly effective for undecided students. She suggested that in order to best meet the unique needs of this population, advisers keep abreast of key issues, theoretical frameworks, factors influencing exploratory behavior, resources available to exploratory students, and the exploratory advising process itself. She believes undecided students generally have more developmental needs than other student populations, and notes the importance of providing them quality academic advising (2007b).

For many, student issues regarding academic indecisiveness can be tied into their developmental level. According to Gordon (2007b), “one of the oldest approaches used to understand the uniqueness of a student is to examine their personal, educational, and career development” (p. 190). This connects to the concept of developmental advising, which bases its principles on the fact that people have a unique and personal timeline in making career decisions. Academic advisers subscribing to the developmental advising
approach do not view undecided students as having a problem, but as making decisions at a later point in their developmental path, whenever they feel ready.

Super (1957) was one of the first career theorists to propose that career decision making is part of an exploration where individuals focus on clarifying interests, skills and values, and connect those things to a career field. Super stressed that undecided college students are at different phases in their ability to understand how these things may connect to each other, and to a career choice. Further, these students may not be at a developmental level to make realistic career decisions.

When considering Super’s theory, one can understand that all students fall on a spectrum of career decision, which can often tie into their level of development overall. Gordon (1998) created a status continuum for career decision making, which is often used in developmental advising. Gordon’s continuum consists of the following markers:

- **Very decided** students have control over their lives, are confident in their decision making abilities, and place value on their future.
- **Somewhat decided** students typically have higher levels of anxiety, and have some doubt, but still are decided on their career choice.
- **Unstable decided** students are certain about their career choice, but have high levels of anxiety and instable goals. Some seem ambivalent about their career choice.
- **Tentatively undecided** students have made a choice, but do not have commitment to it. Students who are deciding between two choices also fall in this area.
- *Developmentally undecided* students are working through the developmental process of making academic and career decisions. Most students will need resources and guidance through their process. This is where most categorized undecided students fall, and where development academic advising is used the most.

- *Seriously undecided* students have low levels of self-understanding and self-esteem. They also have low vocational identity, self-efficacy, and depend on others for reinforcement.

- *Chronically undecided* students have levels of anxiety that prevent them from making decisions, usually in multiple areas of their lives. They often exhibit characteristics of aimlessness and apathy, and have very low self-efficacy.

There are other factors that influence exploratory characteristics among college students besides their developmental level. Sometimes, the institution a student attends can be a factor in one’s ability to make a decision. Many institutions have policies regarding the length of a time before a student declares a major, the number of undecided students it can have on campus at any particular time, and the advising services available to them. According to Gordon (2007b), “institutions send a message about their openness to students being undecided starting with their admissions procedures” (p. 195). She asserted that most students would like the opportunity to explore various majors and the career possibilities connected to them. Services available to students who are undecided about their career choice also vary from campus to campus. An institution
with limited resources for major and career exploration may intentionally or unintentionally send a message to undecided students about its support of their process.

Academic advisers utilizing the developmental advising model with undecided students consider many factors when working one-on-one with students. Gordon (2007b) noted the importance in remembering that career decision making is a process and often consists of several steps over a considerable period of time for the student. It is important that both the student and adviser set realistic goals for one-on-one meetings, typically via conversation led by the adviser. Students, particularly in the lower levels of career decisiveness, will look to advisers to make the decisions for them. Effective developmental advisers must be willing to articulate the opposite message to students; that the purpose of the one-on-one meetings is to help the students through a developmental process, not provide them answers. Quality developmental advising utilizes a variety of strategies with the student, and helps the student connect to other resources available to them. Developmental advisers should be well versed in resources on campus such as academic departments, career centers and the services they provide, as well as self-exploration tools such as the Holland Inventory, or Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. These resources can help student build the skills they need to make a career decision, as well as aid them in other areas of their development (Gordon, 2007b).

University Colleges or Divisions

On some larger campuses there is a specific college, division, or major for undecided students. This designation is frequently called a “university college,” “university division,” or “University Studies” (Strommer, 1993, Gordon, 2007a, Miami
University, 2012). Students are typically allowed to stay in these types of programs for their first two years at the institution, and then are required to declare a major.

Programmatic focus, however, is typically targeted to first year students, as the department’s desire is to orient them to available resources (Strommer, 1993, Gordon, 2007a).

These programs provide undecided students advising services designed specifically to meet their needs and work with students on a progressive basis throughout their two years. Students can commit themselves to a general academic area, such as business or education, but their curricular focus will be general education requirements. Additionally, there is often a course associated with the programs, designed to help students transition to the campus, as well as make progress in their decision making processes (Strommer, 1993, Gordon, 2007a).

Gordon (2007a) believes that a university college system “may be the best delivery method for academic and career advising for undecided students” (p. 128). The author noted that many of the resources for major and career exploration can be provided in one physical location. Referrals for academic information can also be made in the programs, because academic advisers are often cross trained in many disciplines. Gordon (2007a) wrote, “The university college system recognizes that many freshmen need the time to explore and confirm educational and vocational decisions” (p. 129). Gordon stated that academic advisers in university colleges are trained to work specifically with undecided students and become the campus experts on working with the population. The author notes that the programs give students the opportunity to explore their interests in a
coordinated department that helps them feel connected to other undecided students while not separating them from their decided peers.

*Living Learning Community Variations*

As noted above, LLCs were developed to create continuous experience for students, as they connect academics with other parts of their collegiate lives, and integrate learning both inside and out of the classroom. Multiple studies demonstrate the substantial role living learning communities play in facilitating undergraduates’ transition to college. Inkelas and Wiseman’s 2003 study identified three types of LLCs: Transition, Academic honors, and Curriculum-based. Transition LLCs aim to help first year or transfer students with their adjustment to the campus. Academic honors LLCs support high achieving students in their academic pursuits. Curriculum-based LLCs provide students the opportunity to engage around a particular academic field of study. This research found that students participating in living learning communities experienced a smoother academic transition than their peers living in traditional settings. Initiatives that helped students transition were activities such as discussions of academic issues with faculty and study groups. An academically supportive residence hall was essential to the adjustment of students both in the transition programs and curriculum-based programs, as participants in these programs identified a strong need to connect with peers who shared their academic interests. Socially supportive communities had the most positive effect on students in the Academic honor’s programs, as students in those programs desired to engage more in the co-curricular aspects of the communities than the others. Regardless
of type, overall students in LLCs were overall more satisfied with their residence hall environment when compared to non-participants (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003).

Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt (2005) view learning communities, both those with living components and those without, as an especially useful approach to creating a learning environment that connects a students’ classroom learning to broader aspects of their lives. The authors suggested that students in learning communities engage more actively with academics and their peers. Rocconi (2011) confirmed this view and wrote, “Learning community students exert more effort in their coursework and in their interactions with faculty members and other students” (p. 188).

Additional research conducted by Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, and Brown-Leonard, found that living learning programs have also been an asset to first generation college students (2007). These students benefited from academic related faculty interactions and their use of cocurricular residence hall resources such as career development workshops and peer counselors as well as social events that gave students the opportunity to connect with each other, faculty, and staff members in a more informal way.

Curricular and Cocurricular Features of Living Learning Communities

More specific research has been conducted regarding the curricular and cocurricular aspects of LLCs. They are implemented differently from campus to campus, and from community to community within the same institution. As noted prior, some will have a direct connection to an academic program or curriculum, while others exist to aid the student in their transition process, and are usually themed or special-interest based. Those with direct academic connections typically include first year seminar and
other introductory or general education classes. Schreiner, Louis, and Nelson (2012) stressed the importance of these first year seminars in particular for improving student adjustment and performance.

It is the students’ unique experiences within their community that are believed to promote learning. How a program fuses students’ curricular and cocurricular activities is of particular importance to both the student and the institution. This can involve a number of program and features including course offerings, the use of faculty, staff, and peer leadership, required or optional activities, and the provision of residence hall resources (Soldner & Szelényi, 2008).

The manner in which programs integrate curricular elements into the living-learning experience varies widely. The 2007 National Study of Living Learning Programs (NSLLP) found that 52% of all living learning communities did not include an academic component. These communities were most likely transitional or interest based. Although they certainly can create a more engaging experience for students than non-LLC residential communities, one can argue that not having a direct curricular component is a missed opportunity for students and the institution. As noted above in Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt’s (2005) research, the curricular elements of LLCs can help students connect what they are learning in their classrooms to broader aspects of their lives.

The remaining 48% of communities in the 2007 NSLLP utilized a variety of strategies that mixed four types of courses: (1) courses designed just for the living-learning curriculum; (2) sections of introductory-level course reserved for community
members; (3) general university courses open to all students; and (4) noncredit seminars. Most common was the use of specially designed living learning courses or a combination of the three credit-baring options. LLCs with just the noncredit option were rare, with only about one percent of the communities offering that option (NSLLP, 2007).

Another element of difference among living learning communities is the level at which faculty, student affairs staff, and students participate in the fulfillment of program tasks. Twenty-three percent of programs in the 2007 NSLLP had no faculty involvement, while 64% reported collaborating with one to three faculty members. Primary uses of faculty time throughout the year included conducting workshops for students, (in 94% of the communities that incorporated faculty), faculty mentorship (92%), attendance at social events (90%), serving on advisory boards (71%), and academic advising (62%). Student affairs staff members, both in full-time positions and graduate assistantships, were highly involved with the functioning of the communities in the 2007 NSLLP. Eighty-five percent of the programs utilized student affairs staff, typically to run programs and other residence education initiatives. Most of the participating student affairs staff were in live-in positions, and also supervised resident assistants. Other uses of student affairs staff were program administrative tasks, serving on advisory boards, presenting workshops, and interacting with students in a social setting. Undergraduate students also played various significant roles in the studied communities. The vast majority of undergraduate student involvement came from those serving in resident assistant positions. Other involvement included serving on advisory boards, socializing with students, and administrative responsibilities (2007).
Living Learning Communities for Undecided Students

Several universities that are peer and/or benchmarking institutions with Miami University have a LLC for undecided students. The list of peer/benchmarking universities for Miami was provided by the Office of Institutional Research. From the list, I determined that institutions offered similar programs to EXM. Each of these programs has individual goals and learning outcomes for the experience, but a common thread of career exploration exists among all of them.

Ball State University’s Discover LLC is designed for students who are undecided about their majors. Students participating in this LLC are expected to explore majors and minors offered at the institution as well as develop study skills. The Housing and Residence Life staff members working in the LLC work closely with the university’s Career Center, Academic Advising Office, Learning Center, and academic departments to help students achieve their goals (Ball State University, 2012). This is similar to Miami University in that the EXM LLC works with comparable offices on its campus, as well as New Student Programs and Student Activities to provide transitional support to students (Miami University, 2012).

George Mason University’s Major and Career Explorers LLC is designated for undecided students. The program offers a freshman seminar class taught by academic advisers exclusively for the community, as well as resident assistant programming geared toward career and major exploration (George Mason University, 2012). Miami University currently offers an optional section of Learning Styles for College Success to
its EXM students as well as a section of *Career Development and the College Student* designed specifically for LLC participant (Miami University, 2012).

Kent State University’s Excel: Exploratory Majors LLC is open to both first year exploratory students as well as transfer students with less than 25 credit hours. The program focuses both on major and career exploration as well as student academic success. The LLC website stresses the personal attention Excel students receive that other first year students do not. Students who elect to be part of this LLC are required to attend at least two programs specifically geared for major and career selection (Kent State University, 2012). From reviewing the information on the Excel website, it appears that this LLC provides almost exclusively academic support and does not focus on the overall student transition, as the EXM LLC does.

The University of Rhode Island has a specific LLC community for students in its University College. Simply named Undecided Majors, students in this LLC will live with other students who are undecided, meet with an academic adviser in their residence hall, and have academic peer mentors living on the floor with them for career exploration guidance. Like George Mason’s Major and Career Explorers, students in this community are required to take a Freshman Seminar class geared specifically toward career exploration (University of Rhode Island, 2012).

When reviewing the LLCs mentioned above, the common thread of major and career exploration ran throughout. The LLCs differed in their requirements around academic courses and learning objectives around overall first year student transition. The other most significant difference was the one most pertinent to this study: the
incorporation of academic advising as part of the LLC experience. Miami University was the only benchmarked institution that completely merges the two.

Merging Academic Advising and LLC Experiences

Some of the LLCs explained above included an in-hall academic advising component. However, the advising is typically done via a satellite office. The academic adviser holds office hours in-hall, but also elsewhere on campus, typically in an academic advising office. In addition to Miami University, a few select campuses have truly combined the two experiences for students (Huff & Jordon, 2007).

Rowan University’s Visions of the Future: Setting Your Career Plan in Motion (VOF) is a collaborative program between the Office of the Vice President of Student Affairs and the Academic Planning Center. Primary goals for the community focus around student adjustment, refining of personal values, and overall satisfaction with their freshman year.

Students in VOF work with academic advisers who work exclusively with the program. Advisers and other faculty members teach courses linked to the program curriculum. The advisers also attend community meetings, programs, and other social events. Resident assistant staff members are described as peer mentors and receive specific training on assisting students with major and career decision making. According to the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA), “The collaborative model that exists at Rowan shows that a [living] learning community can be housed in any student services office as well as in any academic major” (Huff & Jordon, 2007 p. 219).
The authors believe that Rowan’s model is a best practice for integrating academic advising and career/major exploration into a residence life program.

NACADA also identified Temple University as a best practice for merging academic advising and residence life. Although much smaller than the programs at Miami and Rowan Universities, Temple’s Deciding Student Wing is another noteworthy community. Deciding students enroll in a freshman seminar that is co-taught by their peer mentor (resident assistant) that enables them to build community among each other while undergoing the career/major exploration process (Temple University, 2012). According to NACADA, students in the program become familiar with residential living while being supported in their academic and social transition to college. The program is administered by an academic adviser and peer advisers and includes a freshman seminar class and other activities geared toward career exploration (Huff & Jordon, 2007).

Summary

This overview of first year student transitional experiences, characteristics, academic advising, and living learning communities provides readers with foundational knowledge pertinent to the study. It is evident that first year students have a variety of transitional experiences and that academic advising is an important part of that adjustment. Undecided students have specific academic advising needs that differ from those who have determined a major or career path. Academic advising resources available to this population differ from campus to campus.

This study focused specifically on two such models, one conducted through a living learning community, and the other conducted through a University Studies
program. Each model provided undecided students with different resources and methods of exploration, but shared the common goal of helping students determine their educational and career path. The review of literature indicates that very few institutions are merging the academic advising and LLC experiences. Prior to this study, no research had been conducted on how first year students subject to this combination have experienced it. This research provided context on how students experience each model of academic advising, and whether the model they received aided them in their major and career decision making process.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

In this study I sought to determine how undecided college students experienced the academic advising model used by FYAs for first year students in EXM during the 2011-2012 academic year when compared to the model used by academic advisers in the newly created University Studies department at Miami University in 2012-2013. I wanted to understand the strengths and limitations of each model, particularly when applied to this subset of the population. A related interest was to ascertain if either model aided students on their career or decision making process. This chapter details the sample selection, data collection, and analysis processes.

This study was best suited for a qualitative design for several reasons. While much has been written on academic advising for undecided students, this research is targeted for professionals whose primary responsibility is academic advising (Gordon, 2007a, 2007b; Hunter, et al., 2007; King & Kerr, 2005; Steele & McDonald, 2008). Only one study (Crouse, Foley, & Matthews, 2010) had been conducted on the EXM model of academic advising utilized with undecided students at Miami. That study employed a quantitative method and compared the EXM model to Miami’s developmental model of academic advising. The research interests of this study focus on the students’ experiences, and how they perceive their particular academic advising sessions. These perceptions can be most meaningfully assessed through qualitative data collection.

Creswell (2007) noted ten characteristics of qualitative research, many of which applied to this study. According to author, “qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems
inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (2007, p. 37). As stated, this study was framed by Kegan’s (1994) evolution of consciousness theory and Schlossberg’s transition theory (Schlossberg, 2011, Anderson, Goldman, & Schlossberg, 2012) and investigated how students made meaning of their academic advising experiences. Additionally, the researcher was the key instrument of data collection for the study. I collected data through examining documents, observing behaviors, and interviewing. Further, there were multiple sources of data, and I had the responsibility of organizing data into themes or categories.

Creswell (2007) continued his characteristics with an additional point - a qualitative researcher uses inductive data analysis. The researcher builds his or her categories and themes from the “bottom-up” (p. 38), by starting with specific concepts and then moving to more abstract ones. Specifically, I was interested in the connection the student has with his or her adviser. I believe that the connection attained served as the foundation by which the student makes meaning of the experience. Further, throughout the research process, the researcher focuses on the participants’ meaning of the situation, not his or her own. Although I had administrative and supervision responsibilities with the FYAs and the EXM academic advising program, I was aware of how those responsibilities could influence my interpretation. A qualitative researcher uses a theoretical lens to shape the study. This lens could be the concept of culture, gender, racial, or class differences, and so on. In addition to the evolution of consciousness, self-authorship, and four S theoretical frameworks, this study was shaped by Gordon’s (1998) status continuum for career decisiveness. Further, qualitative
research is a form of inquiry in which researchers make an interpretation of what they experience. This being the case, my experiences as a researcher could not be separated from my history, prior understandings, and background with the situation. Finally, qualitative research should provide a holistic account of the problem or issue being studied. This account should include multiple perspectives, identify many factors involved in the situation, and describes the big picture that is the result. As noted, I explored this phenomenon from many angles, including not only the academic advising program itself, but also the incorporation of the LLC within that advising system.

In this study I did not attempt to determine why the students were undecided about their major or career path, or which program was more beneficial to students. Rather, I explored their perceptions of what it meant to them to be undecided, and how the academic advising model they received impacts their decision making process, if at all. The findings are explained in a narrative writing style to best reflect the semi-structured interview process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

The goal of this study was to gain insight into previously used and new models of academic advising for undecided students and to determine how students experienced being advised within University Studies when compared to students who were advised by their FYA. Miami University’s ORL is one of the few residential programs in the country where residence hall directors are also academic advisers (Loyal & Penn, 2007), and learning from this specific population could be key to the university providing appropriate services to them.
Phenomenological Perspective

A phenomenological study examines individuals meaning-making around a concept or a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Phenomenological researchers focus on the commonalities of participants as they experience the situation. The purpose of this type research is to minimize individual experiences with the phenomenon to find a description of the “universal essence” (p. 58). A qualitative researcher identifies the object of human experience, and then collects data from persons who experience it. The interviewer seeks to determine what the participants experience and how they experience it. The research questions for this study are based around student experiences with academic advising and their LLC, and how the participants make meaning of these experiences. Through this study, I seek to determine the phenomenon of the experience and whether there is a substantial difference amongst participants who received two different academic advising models.

Grounded Theory Technique

According to Charmaz, (2006) grounded theory methods developed from sociologists Glaser and Strauss in the late 1960s during their research of patients dying in hospitals. Prior to their work, hospital staff rarely acknowledged dying and death with terminally ill patients. Glaser and Strauss’s (1965, 1967) research team studied how patients die in various hospital environments and examined how and when both the staff and patients handled the situation. Charmaz wrote that Glaser and Strauss:

Gave their data explicit analytical treatment and produced theoretical analyses . . . explored analytic ideas in long conversations and exchanged preliminary notes
analyzing observations in the field. As they constructed their analyses of dying, they developed systematic methodological strategies that social scientists could adopt for studying many topics (p.4).

Charmaz (2006) indicated that Glaser and Strauss (1967; Glaser, 1978; Strauss, 1987) believed that systematic qualitative inquiry could generate its own theory. She described the key components of Glaser and Strauss’s grounded theory methodology, which includes:

- simultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis;
- constructing analytic codes and categories from data, not from preconceived logically deduced hypotheses;
- using the constant comparative method, which involves making comparisons during each stage of the analysis;
- advancing theory development during each step of data collection and analysis;
- memo-writing to elaborate categories, specify their properties, define relationships between categories, and identify gaps;
- sampling aimed toward theory construction, not for population representativeness;
- and conducting the literature review after developing an independent analysis (pp. 5-6).

According to Charmaz (2006), a completed grounded theory fits with the data, is useful and detailed, durable over time, can be modified, and can be explained to others.
She added that numerous scholars, including herself, have moved away from the early, positivist version established by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and developed a more constructivist version. She outlined how grounded theory combines two contrasting traditions in sociology, positivism with pragmatism and field research.

Over time, Glaser’s and Strauss’s (1967) concept and practice of grounded theory separated. Charmaz (2006) wrote that Glaser (1978), continued his early explanation of the method and defined grounded theory as “a method of discovery, treated categories as emergent from data, relied on direct and, often, narrow empiricism, and analyzed a basic social process” (p.8). Strauss (1987), however, stressed the importance of verification and grouping data into categories. Charmaz suggested that the work of Strauss and colleague Julius Corbin (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998) shifted the methodology to be even more pragmatic. Charmaz acknowledged that the original design of grounded theory was more flexible than the originators sanctioned. She wrote:

In their original statement of the method, Glaser and Strauss (1967) invited their readers to use grounded theory strategies flexibly in their own way. I accept their invitation and return to past grounded theory emphases on examining processes, making the study of action central, and creating abstract interpretive understandings of the data (p. 9).

Charmaz described her approach as an “interpretive portrayal of the studies world, not an exact picture of it” (p. 10). According to her, the approach researches the way participants make meaning as well as their experiential views on the subject. From that data, the researcher creates grounded theories that are constructions of reality. This study
explored the way students make meaning around their academic advising and LLC experiences through a phenomenological perspective, as I sought to determine the “universal essence” (Creswell, 2007, p. 58) of the experience. The method was appropriate as I utilized multiple theories to develop themes that emerged during the research. A deductive approach using grounded theory techniques enabled me to examine the data using multiple lenses, and ultimately understand the universal essence I sought.

Participants

Twelve undergraduate students from Miami University participated in the study. Six of those students were sophomores who were officially undeclared majors at the beginning of their freshman year (2011-2012). These students were members of the EXM LLC that year, and received the EXM academic advising model. The other six students were (2012-2013) first year students who were part of the University Studies major, which was the new designation for undeclared students. These students were also members of the EXM LLC. My goal was to determine how students make decisions about their major, and how those two models support or shape those decisions.

It was important to note that the current sophomore students received their first year advising approximately a year prior to when this study was conducted, and the current first year students received it only weeks prior, at the most. Ideally, the interviews for each group would have been at similar intervals from their academic advising experiences, but since the EXM model was not used with undecided first year
students in 2012-2013, it was necessary to interview students from the previous year’s cohort to understand their experiences with that model.

Purposeful sampling was used to identify potential students who met the following characteristics. As mentioned, all students were or are members of the EXM LLC. Students are placed in their LLC based on their preferences when completing a housing application. All students receive their first or second LLC preference. Hence, the participants in this student were attracted to the LLC at the time of application. Since the objectives of the EXM LLC are connected directly towards major and career exploration, students who choose EXM are interested in this process. Although the LLC targets undecided students, it is not exclusive to them.

Homogenous sampling was also used in identifying this population, in order to reduce variation among participants. Participants were identified through Miami University’s MyCard system as to what their official university major was or is in the fall of their freshman year, and to ensure that they were or are members of EXM. An equal number of men and women were interviewed in this study. All students were traditional college age students and lived on campus during their first year. Additionally, students who were on academic probation or who had extensive conduct concerns did not participate, as those concerns could skew their perceptions of their first year academic adviser and advising experience.
Instrumentation

Interviews were semi-structured (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) as it is a priority to create a conversational rapport with the student. By building this connection, I believe the participants felt more relaxed and willing to give me honest feedback about their experiences. I realize students may have divulged some negative feedback about their experiences, and I wanted them to feel safe in doing so. I believe the semi-structured format helped the students feel at ease during the interview, and from that I attained the most accurate information.

Questions were formed more as conversational prompts, and were highly influenced by the direction of conversation. Students were at different stages of major and career development (Gordon, 2007b), and this led to completely different conversations. For students in the lower levels of decisiveness, I asked them more about their perceptions of their life path. Interviews for students who were closer to making a decision received more questions around their expectations of their academic advising experiences. These factors influenced how effective each academic advising model is on the sample. Table 1 illustrates how the conversational prompts connect to the research questions.
### Table 1

**Research Questions and Post-Academic Advising Interview Conversation Prompts**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Conversational Prompts</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• How did students experience being undecided first year students?</td>
<td>• Why did you choose to attend Miami University?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Have you ever considered a major/career choice?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>If so, what?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Has anyone in your life, such as family, guidance counselors, or others, ever</td>
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<td></td>
<td>recommended you major in something or chose a particular career?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• What did you think of his/her/their recommendation?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Did you have reservations about coming to Miami without a specific major?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How did students make meaning of their academic advising experiences?</td>
<td>• What was your first experience with academic advising at Miami?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o What were their experiences with their respective academic advising model?</td>
<td>• Do you feel that the academic advising you received was beneficial to you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o How, if at all, did the students perceive their respective academic advising</td>
<td>• Did your academic adviser talk to you solely about academics or did you talk about</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>model meet their needs as undecided students?</td>
<td>other topics? If so, what did you talk about?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o How, if at all, did the Explore Miami Living Learning Community aid students</td>
<td>• Do you feel as a result of your academic advising experience you are able to more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in their major declaration process?</td>
<td>confidently declare a major?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• (For students who were still officially undeclared at time of interview) Do you have</td>
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<td></td>
<td>a goal as to when you plan on declaring a major? If so, when?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• If you do not yet have an idea of what you want to major it, what are your next</td>
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<td></td>
<td>steps in order to help you make that determination?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Did you attend any events in your hall or across campus to learn about major or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>career choices? Did you find it/them helpful? Why or why not?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These prompts, along with other means of data collection, such as attendance at academic advising related programs, best enabled me to make an accurate assessment of the students’ experiences.

Data Analysis

As this study was qualitative, data analysis took place in conjunction with data collection. This allowed me to make adjustments to the conversation prompts as themes emerge (Creswell, 2007). The progressive nature of qualitative research allowed me the flexibility to shape my prompts by what I discovered in previous interviews and through other data collection methods. Creswell (2007) presented a method of analyzing phenomenological studies based on the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method. This method was also outlined in more detail by Moustakas (1994). According to the author, the researcher should complete the following steps:

1. Write a full description of his or her experiences of the phenomenon. This aids the researcher in setting aside personal experiences so that he or she can focus on participants’ experiences.

2. Develop a list of significant statements. The researcher then finds information through data collection procedures about how participants are experiencing the topic, lists these statements, and works to develop a list of non-repetitive, non-overlapping statements.

3. Group significant statements into “meaning units” (p.159) or themes.
4. Describe how the experience happened for the participants. This is known as “textural description” (p. 159) of the experience, or simply what happened.

5. Describe how the experience happened. This is called “structural description” (p. 159). The researcher reflects on the setting and the context in which the participants experienced the phenomenon.

6. Write a composite description of the phenomenon which incorporates the textural and structural descriptions. This is the crux of the experiences and represents “the culminating aspect of the phenomenological study” (p. 159).

Establishing Trustworthiness

The process of analysis is also key to the trustworthiness of the data. Guba and Lincoln (1985) provide four measures of validity for qualitative data analysis: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility refers to maintaining that the findings are credible or believable from the participants’ perspectives. Credibility was established by steps appropriate to this study, which included observation, engaging with the participant through semi-structured interviewing, member checks, and triangulation. Transferability refers to the extent the results of the research can be generalized to other settings or contexts. It involves purposeful sampling to best ensure “the widest possible range of information for inclusion in the thick description” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316). The students in this study were a purposeful sample. They all were undecided students during the fall semester of their freshman year and were members of the EXM LLC. Additionally, I was aware of research bias, given my work responsibilities. I was cognizant of this fact throughout the study and attempted to
minimize its affect through the various steps taken to establish credibility. Dependability stresses the need for the researcher to explain the changing context in which the research occurs. The researcher must describe the changes and how they affect the results. In order to remain dependable in this research I maintained all notes, audio recordings, transcripts, and other materials. Confirmability refers to the degree to which others could attain the same results as the researcher and the extent to which the data supports the conclusions drawn. In order to ensure confirmability, the researcher should document methods for checking data. I maintained confirmability by giving participants access to their interview transcripts to ensure accuracy, as was as had a colleague not affiliated with Miami University review the results.

Verification

I verified the study results using several strategies, as suggested by Creswell (2007). One of the roles of the researcher is to become familiar with the setting and develop trust with the participant. Since the research was conducted in the context of my work, I felt comfortable in the setting. The semi-structured interview process aided participants’ level of comfort with the situation, and ideally helped them develop trust. Triangulation occurred as multiple forms of data collection and analysis was conducted. Guba and Lincoln (1985) suggest that a peer reviews data with an unbiased lens. As noted prior, this was completed by a colleague not associated with Miami University. This step is particularly important given my connection to the phenomenon. Member checking was conducted as participants were given the opportunity to review their interview transcripts. Guba and Lincoln (1985) consider this to be the “most critical
technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314). Additionally “rich, thick description” (Creswell, 2007) was used as it enable readers to determine if the data is transferrable to their contexts. Utilizing these multiple measures of validity has best enabled me to ensure that data is accurate and applicable to other settings.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

As noted, Keup and Kinzie (2007) wrote that beginning college is one of the most significant developmental transitions a student will experience. Some students will enter college fully aware of what their major and career path will be, while many others will not. Undecided students are faced not only with the challenges of transitioning to college, but also with making academic decisions that will not only shape their college experience, but also the rest of their lives.

Colleges and universities have many systems in place to help first year students with the transition to college and guide both decided and undecided students down appropriate academic pathways to success. One such system is the institution’s academic advising program. Academic advisers on many campuses provide multiple levels of support for students. One common approach, referred to as developmental advising, addresses students’ academic and transitional needs, while helping the student develop problem-solving, decision-making, and evaluating skills (Crookston, 2009).

Miami University’s first year advising program is designed around a developmental academic advising approach. This study examined two academic advising models used with undecided first year students: the Explore Miami (EXM) model, used prior to the 2012-2013 academic year, and the newly created University Studies (US) model, implemented in summer, 2012, for the incoming first year class. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How did students experience being undecided first year students?
2. How did undecided students make meaning of their academic advising experiences?
   
a. What were their experiences with their respective academic advising model?

b. How, if at all, did the students perceive their respective academic advising model meet their needs as undecided students?

c. How, if at all, did the Explore Miami Living Learning Community aid students in their major declaration process?

The questions led to discussion not only on students’ perceptions of the research interests, but also helped to determine the effectiveness the academic advising models and LLC program in helping this group of students make decisions regarding their major and career path.

Each of the 12 participants shared their perceptions regarding the topics addressed in the research questions above. Six freshman and six sophomores were interviewed. Each group consisted of three men and three women. Eleven of the students were Caucasian, and one student was African American. The individual cases below provide a holistic perspective of each participant in the study.

Laura: Looking for “The Sweet Spot”

Laura is the daughter of two Miami alums whose aunt, uncle, and grandma also graduated from the institution. She frequently visited Miami as a child, as her family members are large supporters of the college’s hockey team. Laura’s mind was made up at an early age that Miami was the college for her and that she “fell in love with it from
Laura is an athlete; she was on the golf team in high school and continued to play golf through Miami’s club team. She built a mentoring relationship with her high school golf coach that continues to be important to her today.

Laura mentioned that in her first year at Miami, she was not very involved on campus. She struggled to make friends, and this was not something she had experienced before. She said she participated in the adopt-a-school program and went to a local elementary school twice a week. She enjoyed serving her community, but did not find friends through the program. This year, Laura feels that she has made more of a social connection on campus. Laura identifies as a Christian and has recently joined a Christian sorority. She describes being part of the group as “amazing” and said, “I didn’t find myself in a regular affiliated sorority, so this has been great, and I love the girls.” Laura spoke avidly and smiled when she discussed her sorority membership. It was clear that she found a group of women on campus that she connected with, which was important to her.

Laura described her family as always being supportive of her, but never pushing her in one career direction over another. She indicated that they were a significant support system to her over the most recent summer, when she decided to declare a marketing major. Laura shared that her parents’ connections helped her acquire a summer internship at an insurance company where she worked specifically with marketing.

Additionally, Laura noted that a former drawing teacher, golf coach, and mentor of hers was another huge influence. She originally started college considering
architecture or graphic design, to tap into her self-identified “creative side,” but he had encouraged her to consider business at least as a second major to make her more marketable. During this summer she was doing her internship, Laura reflected a lot on her career interests, consulted with her family and mentor and determined that marketing was the place she could find her “sweet spot,” the place where both her creative talents and business education could be combined.

Laura had considered many options before determining marketing was the major for her. Civil engineering, graphic design, education, and business where all fields Laura thought may suit her well. She had strong interest in architecture and drawing, particularly early in high school. As she progressed, Laura developed a stronger interest in “the drawing and art aspect” and began to feel a strong affinity towards her creative side.

Additionally, Laura noted that she was hesitant about education and said, “Maybe it’s just a stereotype that an education major isn’t as likely to get a job and the statistics you hear of people that are graduated for a year or two and haven’t found anything yet.” She continued, “When I was thinking about my future, I didn’t necessarily want to put up with trying to find a job, and I wanted something a little more secure financially.” She laughed a little at herself and seemed slightly embarrassed when she talked about the financial security. This could indicate that she may be uncomfortable stating she values money, even though the comfort it can provide appears to be of importance to her.

Overall, Laura had a positive experience with her First Year Adviser (FYA) Eve. Laura experienced an issue with the advising she received during new student orientation,
as she was advised to take two chemistry classes for which she had already received advance placement credit. Eve discovered this issue during Laura’s academic advising meeting and helped her drop the classes before they would show up on her transcript. Although this was helpful to Laura overall, it put her behind in terms of credit hours. As a result, she had to take two physical education electives to make up the credit hours. Laura describes these as “a waste of my time” and knew that her energy could have been spent on classes that counted towards her Miami Plan (general education requirements). Laura also noted that despite the fact that she was ahead in terms of credit hours, she felt behind overall because she declared her major in the summer prior to her sophomore year, and had not taken any business core classes.

Laura also remembered that Eve talked to her about more than just academics. They discussed her interests and Eve encouraged her to “try to explore . . . and research different majors that would interest [her].” Even when asked, Laura did not mention conversations about her transition to Miami, getting involved on campus, etc . . . and looped back to the chemistry class issue. Based on this, one could infer that even if those conversations did occur, they were not memorable for Laura. She focused much more on academic interests than personal, which was likely more important to her at time of advising. Further, Laura stated that she only met with Eve once, and could not distinguish her “get-to-know-you” meeting from her formal academic advising appointment. Although the meetings were separate and occurred several weeks apart, they seemed to blend into one in Laura’s memory.
When asked about what experiences have been the most influential in her major decision process, Laura said that her “outside the classroom” experiences have been most influential. She furthered, “I would say probably family and friends influenced me, and talking it out over this past summer. I did talk to [her golf coach mentor] about it and keeping in touch with those people . . . people that really care about you and want the best.” It is clear by these statements that her personal relationships had the most influence on her and that academic advising at most has solidified what her family and mentors encouraged.

The EXM LLC did not seem to have a great impact on Laura’s experiences at Miami. When asked to talk a little bit about her residence hall and being part of that community, Laura said:

I don’t necessarily remember anything that was geared to the Explore Miami LLC. We had programs and such geared towards meeting each other and having fun which I guess is Explore Miami but there weren’t any things that were about exploring majors or anything, because I probably would have gone to it.

It seemed that Laura had a basic understanding of EXM’s learning objectives connected to career and major exploration. By stating “I probably would have gone to it,” it seems that was something she was looking for in the LLC. Even if those programs did exist, they did not reach Laura, which speaks to the ineffectiveness of the LLC in meeting those objectives, at least for this student.

Laura’s experiences with her FYA, academic advising, and the EXM community were clearly not the most influential factors in her career decision making, although
working with Eve did help Laura streamline her schedule. Laura seemed much more influenced by her parents and mentor, and by the opportunities they have provided her. Laura had a mission to find “the sweet spot” where she could use her creative talents in a lucrative way. For her, marketing seems to be that option. Her dreams of working for the PGA could be a reality for her, given that she has a friend who could provide her egress into the organization. Laura truly enjoys golfing and clearly would love to do marketing for the organization. If that ultimate goal is not attained it would not be surprising if Laura becomes involved in another area of sports marketing, as her identity as an athlete seems to be one she will not lose.

Erin: A Path to Speech Pathology

Erin is a local student whose father teaches science at Miami. In high school she was interested in English and journalism but also had some interest in the sciences. She connected particularly well with an AP English teacher about whom she stated, “She was there on an academic level, but she was also there on a personal level.” Erin worked with this teacher for two years both in class and as the coach for the academic team she participated in. Erin spoke very fondly of this teacher, and elaborated on how she supported students on a personal level. Erin shared:

It didn’t matter who you were, [the teacher] could find something positive to say. Honestly it could be who we might think as the biggest bum in school and she’d say, “You know, I really like this point you made about whatever in your writing.” She would encourage students with whatever she could find. She just had this positive outlook. Some people would say, “Oh she’s just on happy pills
all the time.” Honestly she was a breath of fresh air because going through high school it just seems really mundane going from class to class and then I always felt excited going to her class. It was something that I had never really experienced before.

She describes her community as small, and smiled as she shared that she would see teachers in the grocery store. Her description of the teacher as “a breath of fresh air” led me to believe that all her teachers were not as supportive as this particular one. It was clear that the relationship they had was significant and that Erin considered her a role model.

Erin also spoke of her family and how they supported her decision to choose Miami. Her parents were supportive of her attending any college “if [she] could score a scholarship,” but she chose to come to Miami because of its reputation and the financial value. Erin had been to campus several times prior to a formal admissions visit. She reflected on her admissions tour and said, “I looked around and it seemed pretty nice, so I said, ‘I could see myself living here’.”

Erin was considered several academic options when she decided to attend Miami. She considered journalism or “something to do with English” because she knew that subject was an area of strength, and was encouraged by her AP English teacher. Having grown up with a father who teaches science, she also developed an interest and strength in that as well. Erin said, “I didn’t really know what major would constitute both of those. I just decided to be undecided and take some classes to see what I liked and what I disliked.”
Erin has gotten involved at Miami and in the Oxford, Ohio community through student organizations and the church she attends. Erin’s identity as a Christian and her commitment to helping others seemed to be very important to her. She spoke emphatically about attending church, campus ministry, and To Write Love on Her Arms, a service-based organization which she describes as “kind of like a safe place for people. It’s a support for whoever may have addictions or depressions, suicide prevention. We support that and bring about awareness.” She was also involved in the campus’s optimist club, of which she said the following:

That is where, it’s not a bunch of happy people but we do try to be pretty upbeat. We’re called Friends of Youth and we help, it’s also a volunteer organization, and I’ve found that when I give my time, that’s probably the best thing to me.

Erin clearly found a lot of fulfillment in the different activities. She smiled shyly when she spoke of the optimist club, possibly a little embarrassed by the name, and felt she needed to explain it further. All and all, it was clear organizations had helped Erin feel connected at Miami.

When asked about her first experiences with academic advising at Miami, Erin talked about New Student Orientation advising. She said she met with an adviser who encouraged her to take EDL 100: Career Development and the College Student, a class targeted for undecided first and second year students. Erin said “that [class] really helped” and “it was really a determining factor of who, where I am now.” Erin furthered by saying the course curriculum helped her solidify her major of speech pathology, which she has recently declared as her pre-major. When reflecting on the decision, Erin said,
I had never even thought about speech pathology. It hadn’t crossed my mind.
Yes, you always hear about speech teachers and stuff but I never actually thought
about being one. That I found out encompassed my love of language, my love of
science and it was just kind of that happy medium where could have both of my
passions and interests.

Erin seemed very excited about this option. She shared that part of the *EDL 100*
curriculum required her to interview a faculty member who teaches in a potential area of
interest for her. Erin chose to interview someone in the zoology department, and said of
the experience:

> It showed me what I didn’t want . . . I don’t enjoy being in the lab all the time. I
like to socialize and interact. I felt like it didn’t have that component of language.
Yes, you could do technical writing, but that not exactly what I was wanting.

She then furthered by saying,

> It’s different with speech pathology. It’s all based on human interaction. There
are probably some times where you are alone but I feel like I would make more of
a difference in someone’s life if I was to directly talk to them instead of being
behind the scenes in a lab.

Erin clearly values helping others. Her discussion about wanting to interact with people
and “make a difference” in their lives demonstrates a commitment to a helping profession
with a hands-on approach.

Erin also spoke highly of her assigned academic adviser, Stacy, as well as the
FYA in the residence hall that she lived, Ashley. Erin was assigned to work with Stacy
because Ashley was a graduate student and had a limited number of advisees. Stacy worked with the remainder of the students in Ashley’s building, Lyon Hall. Erin said she had a great relationship with Stacy. She was excited that they went to the same church, and was interested in what she wanted to do. Stacy helped Erin go over the pros and cons of different majors and helped with course scheduling. Erin said that she met with Stacy several times, particularly as classes that she originally planned to take filled up. Erin said that she “would freak out” close to scheduling time because she saw it as large responsibility. In reflecting on this Erin said, “There’s a lot more weight on my decisions now and I need to take what is going to get me the farthest.” Erin developed a plan A, plan B, and plan C for registration and found Stacy helpful with that process.

Erin also felt connected to the FYA in her residence hall, Ashley. She said:

More personally I connected with Ashley rather than Stacy because Ashley was right there. I would see her all the time and. And she’d stop by frequently and say, “Hey, how’s it going?” Sometimes you have crappy days and she’d be willing to set her work aside and she’d just sit there and talk and that meant a lot to me.

Erin seems to have benefited from getting to know both FYAs, which is positive considering the uniqueness of her situation. Stacy helped Erin explore different career options based on her interests, while Ashley supported Erin through her transition and seemed to be the person she went to when she needed to talk to someone. Each FYA played a different role in Erin’s adjustment, but each of those roles seemed to be equally important to her.
Erin became very involved on campus, which seemed to be a priority for her. One of the most telling comments she made was discussing some of the transitional conversations she and Stacy had. She said:

In the beginning, I did struggle a little bit because I didn’t feel like I fit in with the stereotypical Miami girl. Most of the girls here, they’ll wear the tights that aren’t actually pants and UGG Boots and a lot of them like to party and that really wasn’t my style. I felt like I was surrounded by that.

Stacy helped Erin connect with activities such as hall government, optimist club, and community volunteerism. Erin mentioned several service organizations she was involved in, and they seemed to mean a lot to her. Ultimately, Erin’s interest in helping others could tie into her goals of becoming a speech pathologist. It is also important to consider how the process Erin underwent to find a community at Miami affected her overall experience, both academic and social.

When asked about her LLC involvement Erin said the hall was not very active. She mentioned that the hall government dwindled down throughout the year and students were more interested in social activities. She referred to herself as an “explorer” and said that her RA and FYAs encouraged her to go to the career fair and student activities fair. She participated in those events, but did not seem to connect them to the LLC since they were outside of the building. I asked Erin what she thought had the most influence on her in terms of her major exploration and she mentioned the EDL 100 course again, this time going more specifically into components of the curriculum. Although Stacy provided her
a lot of guidance on planning and scheduling, it seemed that the class was the most influential thing in helping her choose speech pathology as major.

Overall, Erin’s commitment to speech pathology seemed to be a logical choice for her. Erin’s high regard for the positivity of her AP English teacher and involvement in multiple service-based organizations speak highly of her character and are a demonstration of her values. Her decision to pursue a profession where she can interact with people daily makes sense given her commitment to community service. Additionally, Erin has found a profession where she can combine her interests and talents in language arts and science. Her ability to understand how speech pathology incorporates both fields speaks to a high level of intelligence. Her acknowledgement that she needs to actively engage with others in order to feel that she is making a difference shows a high level of self-awareness and attests to a level of maturity through the major and career decision making process.

Cole: “I Still Have Questions”

Cole is a Cincinnati native and son of a Miami alum who only visited Miami and Ohio State when he was looking at colleges. He said he seriously considered the University of Massachusetts, but never visited the campus, as he eventually decided he wanted to attend college in Ohio. Cole described himself as “an average teenager” as he plays the guitar, enjoys video games, and also played on his high school rugby team. He has continued his interests while at Miami by playing on the club rugby team, taking music classes, playing guitar “for fun”, and playing video games with his friends. Cole also has recently joined the Toastmasters Club, which focuses on public speaking. This
particular group discusses lighthearted topics, and Cole has developed some good friends from participating.

Cole places high value on friendships and a sense of community. He elaborated on his campus visit to Ohio State and stated:

There was a bunch of really loud organizations but it was just . . . It seemed like there was a lot going on and I didn’t know how to choose what I liked. See it was a lot and I wasn’t necessarily overwhelmed, I was just thinking, this sounds like a lot more work than I would enjoy and also it was a part of the fact that I didn’t know if I wanted to go to such a huge school. My sister joined the sorority and that would help to narrow it down obviously but I didn’t want to have to do something like that. I wanted choices. I consider Miami a more medium-sized school. If I want the city life, I could always just go 15 minutes like everybody else.

Cole referenced wanting to be part of a smaller campus community. He elaborated by discussing how he found the connection he was looking for at Miami. He shared:

I actually was surprised at the diversity. Miami’s got a stereotype of not being super diverse but within that and while it isn’t complete, very diverse compared to we’ll say UC (University of Cincinnati) within the fact that there isn’t a ton of variety, that I feel like there is actually just a people. Because there’s also the stereotype of you’ve got to be, not rich but snobby and polos and all that but you don’t have to. I thought that was . . . I expected a lot of people to be very similar and I was okay with that demographic. That’s not necessarily me. I’ll sometimes
wear a polo or I’ll sometimes . . . right now I’m wearing my grade school physical education t-shirt . . . I found my perception was wrong in a good way . . . It’s easy to find your group; it’s not too difficult, I’d say.

Cole concluded by sharing that he was glad he found people who shared his interests. He could easily go down the hall to find someone who wanted to play video games, “as a distraction” and that there were lots of musicians on Western, the area of campus where he lived his freshman year.

Cole’s father is a Miami alum, but according to Cole, he “had no weight on my decision” to attend Miami. Cole shared a story about the day he told his father he had decided on Miami. Cole started by saying, “You’re going to be happy, Dad” and his dad knew right away what he was about to say. Cole says both of his parents are very proud of him and are not pressing him to select a major. Cole shared:

My mom is very . . . My writing skills are from her side, she’s very, I guess you could say more liberal. My dad, he is actually okay with it too but I can see that line coming up where he’s going to start pushing me a little bit, which is good because after sophomore year you’re going to really start looking for your career/major. Yes they’ve been pretty open about it.

Cole kept his tone relaxed when he spoke of his mom’s attitude, but became a little tense when he spoke about his dad. When Cole said, “pushing” he made a pushing gesture with his hand, possibly to mimic the pressure he was anticipating.
Cole has “never had ideas” on his major or career choice. He referenced his interests in music and video games by saying, “How is that going to help?.” He saw those activities only as hobbies and never considered them for career choices.

Cole is interested in the business field but has not solidified a major within the School of Business. He has considered supply chain management, but has heard that “a lot of people” switch over to management or leadership. He described the business world as “very varied, depending on the business and how much they will use that role will change how useful you are.”

When discussing his experiences as an undecided student, Cole repeatedly used phrases such as “I still have questions” or “I’m just not sure.” Cole’s reflection on the question if he had ever considered a career in the past is a good example of his indecision. He said:

Never had ideas. I’ve been thinking, not actively as in I had been researching careers and such and such. I have been like an average teenager, the basic self-searching. Like what do I like to do and how could I make that a career. I could never . . . Everyone says what do you like doing, just do that and I’m like I don’t know. I like guitar but I’m not going to be a musician, professionally. At least that’s not going to be the focus of my life but that’s a very do or die I thing. I don't know. Even early on, grade school, I liked videogames. How is that going to help? Yes I did a little bit but not a ton until more recently.

As quoted, Cole described himself as an “average teenager.” He also seemed to view his enjoyment music and video games as only hobbies rather than career options. This
description and belief are indications of Cole’s developmental capacity to connect his interests to his career path. If Cole were at a higher level of career decisiveness, he may have been able to consider options that would combine his interests and talents with career fields that were realistic options.

Cole explained on how he came to his business decision by two significant experiences: taking *EDL 100: Career Development and the College Student* and by attending a sophomore symposium. Cole did not elaborate on the symposium but he shared a story about someone he met that had declared an engineering major and then became undecided: a “blank page” as Cole referred to it. Meeting this student was significant for Cole because it helped him be comfortable with the questioning he was doing with his own major. Cole talked about the *EDL* course curriculum as being particularly helpful. He referred to tests [Strong Interest Inventory, Myers Briggs Type Indicator, and Strengths] he took in the class that he “trusted.” Cole said that one test told him a musician was a potential career for him and that made sense due to his interest in the guitar.

Cole had some telling perspectives on academic advising. When asked about the advising he received during new student orientation he said:

Most advising appointments have been pretty similar. I bring my documents in, they take me to the last page and give them back and show me what I should like and I like that; they tell me this is what you need, now let’s work with it. They give me a basic of what the institution says, like these are the requirements and
you know, so they fill me up, I guess you could say efficient schedule but efficient isn’t always best in my opinion. I would work with that, then after that.

The appointments seemed to blend together for him, and he really could not distinguish between them. Moreover, Cole indicated that his “efficient” appointment may have met his needs. He generalized by using the phrase “efficient isn’t always the best,” but most likely was referring to his expectation or need for more in-depth exploration around major and career options.

When asked more directly about his FYA, Emma, he described her as “helpful” and said, “She’s pretty good at knowing stuff right off the top of her head. I was pretty impressed.” He furthered stated that she was “right there,” and helped him split his course load into two semesters. Cole stated that Emma encouraged him to take the *EDL 100* class, which he was highly grateful for. He said, “I don’t know where’d I’d be without that class.” Without prompting, Cole remembered that Emma talked to him about his transition to college. Cole said transition “wasn’t a problem to me” so he could not provide a lot of details on that conversation, but remembered it nonetheless.

When asked about his LLC experience, Cole said the following:

Well, I don’t remember any . . . I do remember a lot of events in the basement. I actually went to the section of the basement and went to a bunch of other . . .

That’s the only one I went to. I went to a bunch of other ones but you’re asking more of the community and to be honest I think I got a couple emails, I stumbled upon one, or two, which I guess it's a good thing for them. They picked a good location and I was interested enough where I did go and talk about it.
He did not go into details about the events he attended in the basement. Since he could not specifically identify them as career or major exploration-related, one could assume they were more social in nature. In the same statement Cole went on to reiterate that the *EDL 100* course was the most helpful to him.

Cole’s repetitive use of phrases such as “I’m still asking questions” seemed indicative of his personality overall. He was relaxed and casual in his speech, only showing slight discontent when he spoke of his father beginning to push him about selecting a major. Cole did not seem concerned with the fact that he was still undeclared, possibly because he was leaning towards a business degree. Cole seemed most enthusiastic when he spoke about music, particularly playing for fun, and taking a music class as an elective. Although Cole seems to view music only has a hobby, he may see it as a career option eventually. It would not be surprising if Cole attains a business degree and uses it within the music industry.

Cole may not fully understand the impact his FYA had on his education experience. Although he described her as nice and helpful, and acknowledged that she directed him to *EDL 100*, he did not fully make the connection that suggesting that class to him was probably the best way to help him, given his high level of indecision. Cole connected with the LLC much more on a social level than on an academic interest level, given his references to hanging out with friends and attending social programs. This may be partially due to the fact that he saw his transition to the university as easy, or because he perceived his needs as an undecided student met through the *EDL 100* curriculum.
Chris: “Be Open Minded and Try to Consider Every Pathway”

Chris grew up in Cincinnati and knew that he would go to school close to home. His mother works in the medical field and his dad started his own business. Chris wanted to attend college away from home, but close enough that he could visit family and friends when he wanted to. Chris is an active athlete, having played football, volleyball, and basketball in high school, and continuing to play them via intramural sports. He has also been introduced to broomball, a popular intramural at Miami, and has played on a team every semester. Chris considered trying out for a club sports team at Miami, but decided he did not want to travel with the teams on weekends. He was glad to find intramurals as an option to remain active in sports.

Chris did not share a lot about his high school experience other than it was easy for him. At one point he said “[I]n high school you can blow it (class) off. It’s less stressful; if you do homework you don’t have to cram to study but here (Miami) it’s way more serious.” It seemed that Chris did not need to apply himself very much to be successful in high school. His description of Miami as “way more serious” could be an indication that when he began college, he found he had to work harder on academics. He also mentioned meeting with a high school guidance counselor to discuss career interests in the second semester of his senior year. Chris was trying to narrow down which college to choose, and he talked with the counselor about his options, as well as the fact that he “had no idea” what he wanted to major in. The counselor put him at ease and ensured him that many college students begin their educations as undecided, and many others
start with one major and then change. His counselor encouraged him to take his time and “be open minded and consider every pathway,” which Chris appreciated.

As mentioned, Chris looked at several Ohio schools, but said that Miami “overall kind of sold him.” As an undecided student he wanted to go to an institution that provided students with a lot of choices, and saw Miami as doing such. Chris took time during his freshman year to talk to professors and career counselors about his interests. During his freshman year, he did not feel pressure to declare a major right away, which he said was helpful to him overall. Chris is currently trying to decide between nursing and business, or possibly combining the two, which could be a direct tie in to his parents’ professions.

When asked about his first experience with academic advising at Miami, Chris said it was to schedule with his FYA, Curt. He did not have a lot to say overall. He stated, “I just remember filling out paperwork for this black folder.” When prompted a little more, Chris said that Curt helped him with his schedule and they focused on his Miami Plan general education requirements. He did not remember speaking with Curt about his transition to college, but did mention that Curt encouraged him to go to Career Services to help with major and career exploration. He appreciated that and worked with the staff in that office to talk about his options, take “career tests” (assessments) and to help transfer his interests into viable career options.

Chris was hesitant to elaborate more on his experiences with Curt. When asked about the hesitation, Chris said, “He tried to help me fulfill [general education requirements]. I think he was pretty new, so it wasn’t very detailed . . . but he tried.”
There was a substantial break in Chris’s speech before he said “but he tried” this could indicate that Chris did not want to speak poorly of Curt, because Curt was trying to help, but was not as helpful to Chris as he would have wanted.

Chris also did not speak in depth about the EXM LLC. When I asked him about his experience with the community he laughed a bit and said “I think I picked it because there wasn’t a class required.” He furthered by saying that he liked Morris Hall, but was not really looking interested in the co-curricular aspects of the community. He mentioned that he liked his RA and attended the [Exploring] Majors fair with his RA and a group of residents on the floor.

One event that stood out to Chris was an LLC sponsored study abroad informational session he attended. Chris expressed a strong interest in studying abroad, most likely on Miami’s Luxemburg campus, but did not think he would be able to make it so. Since he completed most of his general education requirements, there would be minimal classes available to him abroad, particularly if he declared nursing. Chris seemed to understand his reality, but was nonetheless disappointed in it. Although ultimately he was glad that he came to Miami as an undecided student, but knew that decision had consequences. He shared that he used his first years to “get Miami [plan] classes out of the way” and narrow down his major and career choice. Chris had scheduled his Spring, 2013 classes at the time of interview and indicated he would be complete with his Miami Plan. He saw the downfall of this in the fact that there are little to no classes he could take abroad, as the Luxemburg campus offers primarily Miami Plan and business classes, according to him.
Chris took several nursing classes in the Fall, 2012 and had a heavier business load in the Spring, 2013. Chris seemed to be leaning towards nursing, but was using business as his back-up. In reflecting on his Fall, 2012 schedule, he said:

I was considering business and I thought you could take it without being a major but I found out you have to be a pre-business major so that’s how I switched it over to that. I was thinking about pre-med at that point and they set me up with that schedule and I was looking at it and I was like, “I don’t know about this” . . . I don’t know. I think it kind of intimidated me. I didn’t know if I wanted to do eight years of school to be a doctor . . . I just wasn’t sure that’s what I wanted to do.

This may not have been a realistic goal, given the highly competitive nature of Miami’s School of Business. Chris seemed to be feeling pressure to make a decision, and did not seem particular comfortable with that. He said, “. . . I’m 19, I’m turning 20. I think it’s weird turning 20 and having to know what I want to do for the next 40 years. It’s kind of spooking me a little bit.”

Chris described his parents as supportive in his decision making, but he said:

I think they’re trying to be supportive but at the same time, they’d like to see me make a decision. I think I have it down to two paths so they’re kind of happy I have it down to that. They see I’m trying to do both and just see where it goes. I mean they’ve told me I can do nursing anywhere which is true.

Chris furthered his point by saying:
I think I do feel some pressure because it’s kind of annoying to wait because I feel like a lot of opportunities get squandered if you don’t come into school knowing what you want to do. I didn’t know that you need like three years once you get into the nursing program, there’s an additional three years. I thought as long as you completed it at your own pace. That might be the case for the business school too. You kind of find out as you go.

There was a little frustration and tension in Chris’s voice at this point. I asked him what he thought he may be missing out on and he expressed his interest in study abroad. He told me he always wanted to go abroad, but since his general education requirements would be complete at the end of the year, he would not have classes to take abroad.

Chris also seemed frustrated at the additional time it will now take to complete his degree. I asked him if he would realistically be looking at a fifth year at Miami, and he said “Yes. Obviously one more year would be worth it, but . . .” He trailed off at that point and said the statement in a slightly disappointed tone. Chris seemed to be at a crossroads where he wants to decide very soon. His goal for declaring a major is the end of the Spring, 2013 Semester. He knows the business school is very competitive and alluded to one not being successful if they were not totally committed to it, which may be the case for him.

Chris seemed to be a student who needs to experience an academic discipline before he decides if it is a realistic long-term option for him. The “be open-minded and consider every pathway” quote of Chris’s high school guidance counselor could be
somewhat of a mantra for him. Chris’s overall attitude was laid back in nature; it was obvious that he was beginning to feel at least internal pressure to make a decision. Chris referenced turning 20, and shared that making a career decision was “spooking him.” He is also actively taking classes in both nursing and business, and seemed completely unsure which direction suited him better. These are clear indicators that he is developmentally not ready to make a career decision. He may end up declaring before he is truly ready to make the appropriate choice for himself.

Caitlyn: Shaped as a Leader

Caitlyn is an Ohio native whose parents both attended Miami. She called them “Miami Mergers,” a term used on campus for couples who meet while attending Miami and eventually marry. Caitlyn did not look at many schools because she knew she wanted to attend Miami very early in her college search. In reflecting on Miami as her college choice she said, “I just really loved the campus and the atmosphere.” She has played competitive volleyball since fourth grade and also enjoys other physical activities such as working out. Caitlyn described her high school self as being “very involved,” as she was a member of the student counsel, involved in other student clubs, and was captain of the varsity girls’ volleyball team her senior year.

Caitlyn’s father practices law and her mother works part time at her father’s firm, “just to keep busy.” Caitlyn’s mother has a bachelor’s degree from Miami, but she could not recall what her mom studied. Caitlyn shared that she was mostly a “stay at home mom” and went to work only after the children began school. Caitlyn believes her parents “didn’t really influence [her] too much” regarding her decision to attend Miami.
Her family was supportive of attending college as an undeclared student. She said they preferred that she be completely committed to a program of choice before declaring.

Caitlyn originally considered English as a major, with the hopes of then going to law school, like her father. She enjoyed English in high school and remembered a mock trial project she did while reading *The Scarlet Letter*. After her first semester of college, she declared nutrition, which she described as “kind of a totally different path.” Caitlyn was interested in nutrition in high school, but was unsure if she would like the chemistry involved in it. She took an entry level chemistry class in her first semester that included a nutrition unit and said, “I ended up loving it and just decided that’s where I wanted to go.”

In reflecting on academic advising, Caitlyn briefly mentioned orientation advising, specifically working with a French professor to assist her with placement into the language. She mentioned that although she took four years of French in high school, her placement tests scores were below average, so she had be placed in a lower level course “just to refresh everything.” Caitlyn said, “It was kind of awkward. I know the subject, but I didn’t test well.” She seemed a little embarrassed to share this story, as she made a face when she said the word “awkward”, and looked down as she finished her thought. She said she did not like French at Miami and took only two classes to “get the language requirement out of the way.”

Caitlyn could not remember the name of her FYA until she was provided some options. After being provided some choices, Caitlyn remembered that she worked with Jenn. I asked Caitlyn about her experiences with Jenn and she said:
I remember not knowing what was really going on like when I met with her, I just got an email that I needed to do a meeting. I scheduled it. She was helpful with my Miami plan . . . Maybe not so much for undecided like I didn’t know where to go with that. She was helpful in the aspect that I needed to get my Miami plan done, but then she wasn’t so much helpful in guiding me anywhere like helping me. She did suggest the EDL class whatever though so I'm sure that would have been helpful.

Caitlyn remembers meeting with Jenn twice, and recalled talking about how she was adjusting and if she was getting involved. She did not differentiate the get-to-know-you meeting with her formal academic advising, even though the meetings were several weeks apart.

Similarly, Caitlyn did not have a lot to say about her experiences with EXM. When asked why she chose the LLC she said:

I just knew that I didn’t have a specific learning community since I didn’t really know my major. It was that or like RedHawk Traditions (LLC based on History, Athletics, and Traditions) that I was going for just to get away from more academic specific learning communities.

From this statement, one can infer that Caitlyn did not view EXM as a true LLC, despite its exploratory nature.

Caitlyn provided no detail on any programs or events she attended in her hall. When asked if she enjoyed the experience overall and she said, “It was just my location, but I didn’t make too many friends in my hall so it was just more of that, but the hall
itself was fine.” She talked about being on the club volleyball team and recently joining a club for dietetics and nutrition majors. At first, she struggled to get to know the other volleyball players. In elaborating whether or not she made friends with her teammates she said:

Yes, I did, but they all have their own things also. They were all older and only two or three other freshmen. Two other freshmen made it with me so it was just the three of us. The rest were sophomores and juniors and seniors who all had already figured out what they were doing and what involved in. It was nice. It definitely helped me a lot, but they had their things too.

It seemed that Caitlyn considered her teammates friends, but not a close group she may have been used to or expected. Although she described them as nice and helpful, she also referenced them having their “things” twice, a possible indicator that the relationships were somewhat superficial.

Caitlyn reflected what part of her Miami experience has been most beneficial to her major and career decision making process. After a little thought, she it was the LeaderShape Institute she participated in during summer, 2012. She was very enthusiastic about this experience and provided some great insight to how it helped her. She described LeaderShape by stating:

We had to choose we had to make a plan of action of what we wanted to do and I realized that they were basically just like sat around and we kind of brain stormed what we wanted to do. They just first started with us just making a list of our interests. Then from there you get down to more specifics and I realize that I was
really interested in childhood nutrition and I wanted to do something with that. That was kind of my deciding factor that I knew that I was leading in the right way.

When asked if she applied for the program because she thought it may help her make a career decision. Caitlyn said:

No. I just thought I mean I found . . . in high school I was like on my student counsel and stuff. I was really involved and like really active. I knew who I was in high school and then I came here last year and just kind of found myself lost in the crowd. I wanted to do something to get more involved and get myself motivated again and that definitely helped and that’s why I chose to do it and then I ended up loving it. It helped me a lot with my major.

This was very interesting considering Caitlyn really had not found a connection on her campus prior to participating in LeaderShape. Caitlyn reflected on why she felt lost when she came to Miami and said:

It was just me and another girl came from high school. I knew about two other people around, so it was just hard making friends and I'm more of the personality that people need to approach me rather than I approach them . . . It was just . . . it’s hard to meet people with big classes unless you're studying with them or something or have a group project. It’s hard to really interact with them in a lecture or anything like that.

This area of discussion was the most revelatory about Caitlyn. It is possible that without LeaderShape she may have continued to feel “lost” at Miami, both socially and
academically. We wrapped up our discussion by me asking her if Miami was doing enough for undecided students. She revisited a point she made earlier about Jenn and said:

I think as far as advising she was helpful in the sense that she got me on track but not so helpful in advice or trying to figure out my interest and things like that. I think that could have been helpful, but it’s also just about the individual to try and figure out where they’re at too. There’s only so much somebody can help with.

Caitlyn’s statement here is very telling of her own process. She came to college with the potential idea of being a lawyer, clearly because she was exposed to the profession growing up, but then chose nutrition after taking the chemistry class. Caitlyn’s goals and interests were solidified as a result participating in LeaderShape, and outcome she had not necessarily expected. Caitlyn reference to an individual “[figuring] out where they’re at” is a clear indication of her developmental capability to understand and navigate the process of major and career exploration.

Trevor: Career Services Connection

Trevor is a Christian and trumpet player from Los Angeles. He is the only student from his high school that currently attends Miami. No one in is family or immediate circle had ever attended the school and he said he found out about it via a website a high school guidance counselor gave him where he “punched in interests, clubs that [he] would like a college to have.” Trevor was involved in his church and was in the marching band in high school. When looking at college options, he considered co-curricular activities just as important as academics. As an undecided student, Trevor
wanted a school that was well known for its academics. As someone who chose a college far from home, Trevor wanted one that had activities he was interested in. When searching for the right campus, Trevor said that his top priority after academics was a school with a marching band and his second priority was that the school offered “Cru” (Campus Crusade for Crist) and other organizations for Christians. Most of Trevor’s high school friends were in band with him or involved in his church’s youth group, so Trevor felt that he would find friends at Miami through similar involvement.

Trevor attended a college preparatory high school. He described California universities as “very, very hard to get into” and said that he did not think he would get into one, which lead him to look outside the state. This was surprising, because Trevor is part of the Scholar Leader LLC currently, which has a competitive GPA requirement. Trevor provided more detail on his decision to come to Miami by stating:

One of the things that I wanted was a university that was pretty well-rounded. I mean, obviously, we have a very good business school and university that has as much as possible because I had . . . I was completely aimless. I didn’t know what I was going to end up doing. From this statement, it seemed that Trevor was looking for a place that would provide him several academic options and Miami seemed to fit.

Trevor shared his feelings regarding his transition to Miami, and initial fears he had attending college as an undecided student, particularly so far from home. He said:

I think at first it did and then I just talked about it with friends and family and they were right. I mean that’s what college is for. I didn’t feel like I was running out
of time because I was here and other places bombarded with don’t worry about it and you don’t have to declare until sophomore year at some point. No, I don’t think I was too stressed out about that. I wanted to find out as soon as possible though.

He furthered by saying that career exploration was never a priority in high school, or even when he first began Miami. He was encouraged by counselors and family to consider what interested him, but never felt pushed to make a decision.

When I asked Trevor about his experiences with first year advising, he immediately starting discussing the meetings he had with his FYA, Curt. He said:

I really liked him. He was a very cool guy, very relaxed. He assured me the same thing. Don’t worry about . . . just take your time finding out what you want to do. Mostly I came to him with just . . . when it came time to schedule for classes. I think that first semester it was all about . . . a lot of it was picking the right classes to keep it open for anything because I don’t want to take easy classes or something like that and then realize that I want to go into premed and I should already have all this, which ended up happening. He was a great help with that and making sure all my classes they took out at least two requirements, two for one. He was a big help in that.

Trevor reflected on whether he and Curt mostly talked about academic related topics, or about transitioning to Miami. He describes his transition as “easy” and said they did not go into details because “it wasn’t really a problem.” Trevor mentioned that he declared
Pre-Med during the second semester of his freshman year. I asked him what lead to that decision and he began to describe his experiences with his career adviser.

Curt recommended that Trevor see a career adviser through Miami’s Office of Career Services. Trevor describes working with her as “enormously helpful.” He discussed his experiences taking the Strong Interest Inventory and how helpful he found that assessment to be. He said between the inventory steering him toward the medical field and discussing the results with his career adviser, he learned a lot about different opportunities within the profession.

Trevor said he felt a little behind when he declared Pre-Med because he had not taken a required “BMZ” class. However, this decision led him to pursue an internship at the University of Southern California Hospital, which he found extremely rewarding.

Through the course of his first year, Trevor acknowledged that he “changed a lot.” One of the most significant changes he identified was his decision not to join the marching band his sophomore year. Trevor discussed that even though he still enjoys playing his trumpet and has made several friends in marching band, he struggled with the time commitment it took to be in the band. Trevor continued by saying that he wanted to “catch up” with his pre-med classes in the fall, and that band members are encouraged to take a lighter class road that semester, as it is their busy season. Trevor also said that he wondered how different his freshman year would be. He liked playing and said that the band “gives you instant friends, like a fraternity.” He discussed how during the first few weeks of freshman year he “missed out on a lot of things” because he had marching band
practice. Trevor stated that he did not regret joining the band, but knew his at least his
fall semester would have evolved very differently if he had not.

Trevor also reflected on his LLC and the relationships he formed within his
residence hall. When asked about why he chose EXM, he said, “Honestly, it was just a
process of elimination. I looked at the names of the different learning communities, they
all seemed pretty specific to different majors and things like that. That’s what I chose.”
Trevor did not attend any LLC-related events to help him learn about majors and careers.
Of these experiences, he shared:

Not off the top of head no seminars or anything. I knew that they were classes out
there that I could take like one credit like once a month classes that could help
you. I guess I just didn’t feel like I had the time maybe or the career adviser was
certainly a huge help. So I don’t know if I would have needed it.

Trevor said his favorite thing about EXM was his RA, who was also a Pre-Med
major and meeting his roommate. Trevor describes the fact that he had a Pre-Med RA as
“just by luck” but he said that he was very glad to have the RA as a resource when he
declared his major. Trevor said “I talk to a lot of upperclassman, but having [his RA]
right down the hall was great when I was declaring. We just talked on occasion and he
calmed my nerves.”

Trevor also was close with his roommate. They did not know each other but “met
on Facebook” when they were assigned together. His roommate was also a Christian,
and they started a bible study in the hall together. Trevor again referred to this situation
as “lucky.” He was initially worried that he might get a roommate that was “a big
partier” and said he was pleased that the two were similar in values. Trevor and his roommate chose to live together again for their Sophomore year, and the friendship continues to be strong.

Trevor reflected on how his life had changed sophomore year, since he was no longer in the marching band. He said:

Well, I still play my trumpet, not as much as I would like, but I still play it. . . . I’m more involved in my LLC this year. [My roommate] and I really like Scholar Leaders; the class we are taking is a lot of fun. I have to study a lot more now, since I have more Pre-Med classes and not as much Miami Plan. Oh, and there’s Parkour, I can’t believe I forgot to mention that.

Parkour is a sport that Trevor describes as “free running.” He had participated in it a few times in high school, and was glad that Miami students knew about it as well. He laughed when he talked about it and said, “I thought maybe it was just a West Coast thing.”

Trevor’s acknowledgment changing since he arrived at Miami was an indication of his maturity. It seemed that a lot of his identity coming to college was centered around being in the marching band, as well as being a Christian. Trevor has held true to his Christian faith, but has shifted his affinity away from the band. Trevor seemed to see the band as taking too much time away from his academics. Trevor did not indicate when he decided not to be in the band this year, compared to when he decided on Pre-Med, but it would not be surprising if those timelines where similar. Trevor has found activities such
as the Scholar Leaders, Parkour, and his bible study group, that has provided him social, spiritual, and recreational outlets.

It is clear that Trevor’s experiences with Career Services were much more valuable to him than his freshman year LLC and academic advising. Although he described Curt has “helpful,” it seemed that Curt focused his efforts on assisting Trevor with his Miami Plan courses rather than explore interests and career options. Trevor’s easy transition to Miami may have also been an indication that he did not beckon for assistance beyond scheduling. Trevor fortunately found his way to Career Services, which he identified as the biggest help in his exploration.

Mark: “It’s Kind of Crazy What I Did”

Mark is an African American student from a wealthy suburb of Dayton. He grew up active in his church community and enjoys sailing for sport. Mark considered several Ohio and Indiana universities before selecting Miami. When asked why Miami felt like the right school for him he said, “A lot of our neighbors’ children came here as well and they . . . they’re good citizens and they all recommended Miami.” Mark’s use of the phrase “good citizens” was a telling choice of words. It was clear that he and his family respected the opinion of their neighbors, and it seems that Mark values their contributions to his community. Mark described Miami as “picturesque” and having good academics and a good reputation. This may have once again been a reference to his neighbor’s recommendation, but it made Mark sound as if he was more interested in the beauty and reputation of the campus, than he was his own experience.
Mark is a vocalist who has joined the gospel singers on campus. He spoke excitedly about the group and described it as “so fun.” Mark was active in his church growing up, but does not attend services at Miami. Mark feels connected to God through the gospel choir. He also shared that he goes home frequently, given the proximity of Miami to his hometown, and still considers himself a member of his home church community. In addition to musical worship, Mark has made many friends in the choir and feels connected to the African American community on campus through it, as almost all members are African American.

In a follow up conversation with Mark, he elaborated on his connection to the African American community. Mark shared that he has always had a “mix of friends” and planned on having the same at Miami. Mark said he always made friends easily and was not worried about finding friends at Miami. When asked what he meant by a “mix of friends,” Mark shared that some of his friends were from his school and sailing team, while some were from his primarily African American church. Overall, he said he was closest to his school friends, because they spent the most time together.

Mark did not share his parents’ socio-economic status. However, Mark’s hometown, his participation in a high school sailing team, and reference to neighbors being “good citizens” could be indicators that his family comes from a high socio-economic status. This could lend Mark to connect well with Miami’s majority population as well as the African American students he sang with in the choir.

As mentioned, Mark also is a sailor, as he participated on the sailing team in high school, and attempted to continue it at Miami. Mark said he was “still a little iffy” on
Miami’s sailing team, due to the time commitment and scheduling conflicts. He did not sound disappointed when he was discussing missing out on sailing, but more accepting that it may no longer be a high priority of his.

Mark decided on Miami as an early decision student, which means he was accepted and committed himself to the institution early in the fall semester of his senior year of high school. When asked about talking to his parents and high school guidance counselor and about potential majors, Mark said, “It’s kind of crazy what I did . . . at first I applied to the business school, but I . . . for some crazy reason, I changed my mind and changed it to undecided.” When asked why he changed his mind about the major, and he laughed, shook his head, and said, “I have no clue. I don’t know. I felt like I was going to . . . I went in as a business economics major, and I felt like that would be binding or something weird. But now I’m trying to get into the business school.” When prompted by asking about his interest in a business major and he stammered a bit and said, “Yes, so I don’t . . . I just yes . . . God, I screwed myself with that one.” He seemed embarrassed with himself for not declaring business right away. Mark has considered both accounting and marketing as potential majors, but was still unsure if he would pursue a double major, a major and minor, or chose something else entirely. He is interested in accounting because he wants to own a car dealership and feels “like to have a successful business knowing accounting is very valuable and important.”

Mark’s interest in marketing also comes from his desire to own a business. He said that if he owns a car dealership, someone else will probably be in charge of marketing, but it was important for him to understand that area to be successful.
“Ultimately,” he said, “you’re in charge of your own fate. If your marketing is poor, then the cars don’t sell, if the cars don’t sell you don’t make money.” Although this statement could relate to Mark’s desire to be wealthy, it also demonstrates an understanding of business at the most basic level, which was impressive.

Mark’s first experience with academic advising at Miami was during new student orientation the summer before he began college. He was assigned his University Studies adviser, “Dr. B.,” at that time, and would work with Dr. B. both during Orientation and through fall semester. Mark reflected on his first meeting with Dr. B. and said:

He was very, very helpful, and he walked me through all the classes that would be helpful in aligning to go back into the business school, so I met with him before scheduling for next semester as well. He helped me in that regard, too. He was very friendly and personable, and I felt comfortable talking with him and all of that.

I asked Mark a little more about the advising he from Dr. B. in the fall and he again stressed Dr. B.’s helpfulness. Mark said that they worked together to create a schedule based on his interests, that consisted primarily of Miami Plan requirements along with pre-business classes. Mark said without Dr. B.’s help, he would not have known what to take.

Mark and I also discussed working with his FYA, Eve. He described Eve as “very nice,” “friendly,” and “helpful.” Mark said that Eve was particularly helpful when he needed to drop a class. Mark was concerned about the withdrawal showing up on his transcript; Eve helped him drop before the deadline, so it would not show up on his
transcript. Eve and he also talked about his transition to Miami and what types of activities he was interested in becoming involved in. I asked him about his involvement. This is when Mark shared that he is a member of the gospel choir and is trying to join the sailing team. Eve helped Mark encouraged Mark to attend the “Megafair,” a student activities fair held in the fall semester where he learned about those activities.

Mark and I also discussed his residence hall experience as part of the EXM LLC. Although Mark had a lot of positive things to say about his RA and his floor mates, he did not have much to say about the co-curricular mission of the LLC in terms of major and career exploration. Mark said there have not been any events on those topics, but he has attended several social events such as a video game tournament and brick painting. He said, “We always just end up chilling in each other’s dorms. [The RA] is always visible, and he’ll stop by and we’ll just kind of hang out . . . our hall is pretty close.” Mark seemed to have had a positive experience with his community, he either had not been looking for, or not provided opportunities to explore major or career options.

When asked if, through academic advising and his LLC, he believed Miami was doing enough to help him determine a proper career path. Mark confidently responded that the institution was. He said his University Studies adviser encouraged him to take *EDL 110: The University and the Student*, a freshman seminar course. Mark elaborated on his belief that the institution has provided him enough resources by stating, “You kind of have to explore on your own, but there are people here to assist you if you need any help. So whether it be advisers or your RA, there’s . . . if you have questions, there is someone definitely there.”
Overall, Mark seemed highly confident about his desire to go into business. His choice to go undecided until he further determines his academic path is a good one. It seems that both Eve and Dr. B. helped Mark in different ways. Eve focused more on the adjustment to Miami and logistics of dropping a class, as is her assigned role in the University Studies advising model. Mark seems to also appreciate working with Dr. B., who has appropriately taken on the developmental academic advising role, helping Mark explore his interests. Mark seems to have connected with his LLC socially, but not with the co-curricular aspects. This may not be something he was looking for given his relationship with Dr. B. and the curriculum of the EDL: 110 course. Mark overall seemed well on the track to be a businessman, but simply needed to determine the path to get him there.

Emma: Following the Path of Women Before Her

Emma is a true Miami legacy. She grew up in the Cincinnati area and shared that “pretty much” all of the women in her family are Miami alums. Her mother, several of her aunts and cousins, and even her great-grandmother are all proud Miamians. Although Emma said visited other campuses and said that her family did not pressure to choose Miami over others, it seems unlikely that they were not factor in her decision. Emma also talked about the fact that it was close to home, has a good reputation, and that she had visited it many times while growing up for athletic games and other events. She said she felt very at home on the campus and it did not feel as “industrial” as Ohio State, her second college choice.
Emma has a deep interest in community service and has been involved in service organizations since she was young. At Miami, she is a member of the Tom’s Club, which promotes awareness around the Tom’s brand of shoes and supports their philanthropic mission. Emma said she learned about the club at the “Megafair” and thought it sounded like something she would enjoy. Emma said she owns several pairs of Tom’s shoes, appreciates the mission of donating shoes to children in need, and thought it would be something good to get involved in. Additionally, Emma is a member of UNICEF (United Children’s Charity Fund). She had not been able to do a lot with the group at the time of interview, as her schedule did not work with the meeting times, but shared that she was looking forward to getting more involved with them. Emma shared that she was attracted to both the Tom’s Club and UNICEF because they help children in need, which is very important to her.

Emma is also interested in joining a social sorority in the spring, ideally the one her mother is a member of. She is excited about this opportunity but hesitant to get involved in other aspects of campus, because she knows this will be a big time commitment. Emma had already attended several “sprite dates,” which are open houses hosted by sororities for potential new members. Emma said she attended several sprite dates hosted by different chapters, but stressed that she was really hoping to get into her mother’s sorority. She discussed that the sorority would provide her opportunities to meet people, as well as get more involved on campus. Emma felt as though she had already made a lot of friends on campus, but was really looking forward becoming close
with her sorority sisters. Many of her mother’s closest friends are from her sorority, and Emma hopes to develop the same kind of bonds.

Emma has considered education as a career choice but is uncertain if it is the right path for her. When I asked her about that consideration, she said:

I always thought I wanted to be a teacher, but then I was just like . . . I think I had thought about it so long that I got tired of the thought of that in a way. I don’t know. I was just like . . . well maybe, there are so many other things that I could do, but now I am maybe looking at that again. But I still have no clue.

Emma mentioned that her great-grandmother was a teacher and has encouraged her to pursue that career path. Emma will be taking an education class in the spring semester and hopes the class will help her make a decision on the field. She hopes to do some classroom observations so she can get a better perspective, from the teacher’s point of view. Emma also mentioned that her mom majored in communication, and said “I don’t think she ever really knew” what she wanted to do for a career. Emma’s mother worked for Cincinnati’s chamber of commerce, and is now a stay-at-home mom. Emma said her mom wants her to find something she is truly happy with.

Emma seems to have had some disconnected experiences with academic advising thus far. She met with her University Studies adviser during summer orientation. I asked her to talk about the orientation advising and she said:

Maybe at that point, too, I had no clue, and there was all the lists of all the potential classes and anything you wanted to do, so it was just more of like filling out your interests out there and so I think we just talked about a bunch of different
things and oh, if you’re interested in that you should take a class in this just to see, you know, if that sparks anything or if you could see yourself doing anything more than that. So I just kind of remember going through different things like that, and then choosing the classes based on that. Just like oh, just see if you like it and then if anything else happens then you continue that direction with these classes. Just kind of like that, which is helpful.

Emma was scheduled to meet with her University Studies adviser again in the fall, but that person was out on leave, so she met with someone else. Emma described that meeting as hard, because the substitute did not know anything about her and “didn’t know what was going on or what I was trying to figure out.” Emma said she ended up scheduling with her University Studies adviser again, because she felt like she wanted to touch base before scheduling. In that meeting, they talked about her transition and what her interests were. Emma shared that she likes her geography class, and that her adviser encouraged her to look into urban planning. The two worked to plan Emma’s schedule for Spring, which will include general education courses along with her education course.

Emma also had a brief experience with her FYA, Stacy. She did not share much about her time with Stacy, but said she was nice and talked to her about her transition, roommate relationship, and living in McKee Hall. She could not remember if Stacy talked to her about academics at all. It seemed that she was almost confused on who she discussed what with, as she had met with three advisers by the time of the interview.
Emma reflected on her experience with McKee and the EXM LLC. Emma said she did not expect to like the building because it is on Western campus, but she really likes it. I asked her why she selected EXM and she said:

I think we had [preferenced] Explore Miami and the RedHawk Traditions, because I heard those were the two most broad, so I was kind of going with that just since I didn’t know what I wanted to do. I thought that would be . . . because I feel like a lot of them are pretty specific, some of them are like . . . like whatever it is, and so I felt like Explore Miami and the Traditions one were supposed to be the most . . . And they’re kind of neutral, like trying to figure out what you want to do type of thing.

When asked about what types of events she has attended within the LLC, Emma named only social things. She mentioned a Halloween party, cookout, and game night. I asked her if there were any events in the hall to help her learn about majors or careers. She responded that she was not aware of any. From this conversation, I could not determine if Emma would have attended such events if they existed. She seemed very positive about the social aspects of the hall, but seemed to choose the LLC more for its generality than the exploratory learning objectives.

Emma still had a lot of exploring to do before she would be ready to declare a major. She used the phrase “I don’t know” several times in reference to making a decision. She seems very hesitant about education. She may be expecting the teacher education course to be a deciding factor for her, but this could be a risky expectation given the presumed nature of an entry-level course. She may not get the hands on
experience with students she is expecting, which could lead her to make a decision about
the profession too soon.

Although she may not realize it, her family may be influencing her to consider
education. Emma’s US adviser encouraged her to explore urban planning more, which
could be a good option for Emma. She seemed interested and enthusiastic when she
spoke about her geography class and what the field entails. This field may be a good way
for her to connect her community service interest with her career.

Jim: Postsecondary Perspective

Jim is a local student from Hamilton, Ohio, approximately 15 miles away from
Miami’s main campus in Oxford. When asked why he chose Miami, he said:

I have always liked Miami because I’ve always been around it, and I didn’t know
where I wanted to go and so I decided I wanted to go into business, and then I
thought clearly, that’s a good choice. It’s just a really good school. You only
hear good things about it, so I’ve always thought of myself like . . . you know
when you grow up you just think of like . . . you always picture yourself in a
certain place. This is where I pictured myself.

Jim indicated that he did not consider any other colleges, and that his back-up
plan would be to attend Miami’s Hamilton Campus (MUH) and then transfer to the main
campus. Jim’s entire senior year of high school consisted of taking postsecondary classes
at MUH. He liked attending MUH because he knew all the credits would “transfer.” He
said “You don’t have to play the game of this might go through, this could, and that
would have just been stressful.” He furthered by saying that Miami is close to home which is convenient, even though he actually lives away from home.

Jim balances his life in Oxford while keeping close connections to home. He has maintained his part time job at a nursing home in Hamilton, where he commits 10-20 hours a week, plus almost an hour round trip commute. Although he loves the job, Jim has found it difficult to balance work with his academics and other involvements. Jim shared that he “rushed” Alpha Phi Omega, a community service fraternity, but has not been able to dedicate the time he would like to the organization. Additionally, he is a member of the gerontology club and hopes to join a social fraternity in the Spring.

Jim was very excited about the social fraternity and discussed the opportunities it would provide:

That’s . . . one thing, the good thing about Miami, but it’s also a bad thing. Do you know what I mean? Because for the people that aren’t wholly interested . . . like I have a couple of friends who I graduated with, and they live in the dorms around me, so I hang out with them, and neither of them are interested in rushing, so that kind of hinders them from getting as involved as they could. That’s the one thing. Like for those that want to get involved it’s great because there’s a lot of options. But then for the ones that don’t want to be involved in Greek life, it’s like . . . there goes a lot of their social life opportunities.

Jim’s discussion of social opportunities was interested when juxtaposed with his earlier comments on service. At first, it seemed like he was looking for a way to serve the
community, but then is comment on “social life opportunities” could indicate that he ultimately was looking to make friends and enhance his social life.

Jim reflected in depth on his academic advising at MUH, which was an unexpected outcome of this conversation. He discussed these experiences in great detail during several sections of the interview. Jim had quite a negative experience with advising at MUH. The following quote speaks to his overall experience with MUH, both academic advising and in the classroom:

What I remember is that Miami Hamilton, the advisers are not anything like advising here. You . . . it’s pretty terrible. I know that’s awful. You have to make an appointment at the advising office and it’s not as broad as this year, you don’t . . . they’re really not the most friendly people, typically, and they like to make the choices for you. Like they’re all about . . . I don’t know, it’s . . . the best way to describe it . . . they’re just not as personable. You have less options, but one good thing is that the professors there, you get more personal with the professors because as far as class sizes. That’s one thing I absolutely agree with when people talk about Miami Hamilton. I don’t see anything wrong with the way they teach or anything. The advising could use some work, but the professors are really friendly and they are a lot more personable because they can be. They have that ability to be, they don’t have as much workload and as many students. But advising, that’s pretty rough.

Jim had a much more positive experience with his FYA, Heather. When about working with his FYA, Heather, his complete attitude changed. He described Heather as “pretty
great,” friendly, and sweet. He continued by saying that she was “really helpful and understanding about everything.” He furthered his reflection about working with Heather by discussing that fact that he had a smooth transition. He said:

Having the one year already under my belt, it was nice because I didn’t have to adjust as much as a lot of other people did. That’s one thing. If anybody is going to do post-secondary, you’re in this one class. You would get the feel for what college is actually like. You actually get an experience before you get tossed into it. Because high school they try to prepare you, but you can never get the preparation you need just being in a high school setting.

Jim continued by sharing that they talked about living on campus, his roommate, as well as classes for next semester. All and all, he seemed appreciative of working with her.

Jim also discussed working with his University Studies adviser, but he did not have much to say. He described the meeting as “brief” but mentioned his adviser was helpful and friendly. He referenced back to his experience at MUH by saying:

I like advising here at Miami a lot. They are really personable and they treat you less like a child. That’s one thing. Miami Hamilton treats you more like a child. [Oxford campus advisers] treat you like an adult that’s going to be making adult decisions on their own, and they look toward your interests more than the interests of what they could see you doing.

Jim said by the time he met with his University Studies adviser, he had decided that he wanted to go to the business school, and hopes to major in Management and Leadership, and minor in Gerontology. He has decided that he wants to work in a
nursing home full time after graduation, and eventually would like to run one. He enjoys the work but has many co-workers who do not. He mentioned that their negative attitudes affect everyone, patients and other workers, and this has helped him realize he needs to do something that makes him happy.

Jim also discussed living in Morris Hall and being part of the EXM LLC. Overall, he likes the hall and has been made aware of several events to help students explore majors and careers. In regards to these events, he said, “I’ve heard about people in corridor . . . going to different ones, but none that I can specifically recall. But yeah, I hear a lot about different things, exploring options and exploring this and exploring that.” He furthereby saying “I hear a lot about people going to them. People that actually don’t know what they want to do. I hear a lot more from them, too. So that’s good.” It seemed that Jim’s recent decision to go into health care management has led him to feel he does not need that aspect of the LLC. He said he knows of the resources he has on campus has he finalizes his plan, and feels he could go to an adviser or faculty member for advice, which he appreciated.

Overall, Jim did not have as much to contribute about being undecided as he has recently decided on a major and minor. It seemed as if Jim had just made his decision and no longer saw being undecided as part of his identity. He was very enthusiastic when he spoke of his work at the nursing home. Jim provided some unexpected information about academic advising on the MUH campus. Although those services were not a focus of this study, it was interesting, and a bit alarming, to hear Jim perspective. Jim had positive things to say about his FYA and LLC, and only spoke only briefly about his
University Studies adviser. It seemed that none of these experiences particularly helped Jim. It was clear that his work in the nursing home was the deciding factor for him, and he seems fortunate to have made his decision early in his college career.

Carrie: “My Interests are All Over the Place”

Carrie is from the Cincinnati area and considered several schools in Ohio and Kentucky before deciding to come to Miami. Miami was the first campus visit she attended and she shared, “I just really like the campus and it just like, stuck in my mind compared to all the other schools that I looked at.” When I asked Carrie what made Miami stand out to her, she said it was “just the college feel of it.” She liked that Miami is in a small college town, and that seemed to fit what she was looking for.

Carrie has been involved in the performing arts for a large part of her life. She sang in choir in high school and has danced ballet since she was very young. She has not auditioned for a choir at Miami, but is in the ballet corps, a group of dancers that performs in the spring. When I asked her if she was in a vocal group at Miami, she responded, “I should have, but I didn’t.” She said that she may in the future. Her voice had a disappointed tone during this statement and it was evident that she regretted not auditioning.

When asked about other activities she was interested in, Carrie enthusiastically talked about wanting to “rush” a sorority in the spring. She talked about that fact that both she and her roommate, whom she pre-selected, are both rushing, and that they hope to “get a bid” (invitation) from the same sorority. If that happens, the girls will be able to live together next year, in the Sorority LLC. When asked what attracted her to Greek
Life at Miami Carrie’s response was, “I don’t even know. It’s something to do and [my roommate and I] want to meet more people.” Developing friendships at Miami is very important to Carrie. She shared that she always had a lot of friends growing up, and thought that being a sorority would give her an opportunity to make many more friends, both within her chapter as well as the Greek system overall.

Other than joining a sorority, Carrie does not want to get involved in too in too many other organizations. She said:

I wanted to wait a while and not get involved in too much, just because school is hard for me. I have to try a lot harder than some people do, and I wanted to get adjusted first before I was involved in too many things. Because I will overlap it with myself if I do.

Carrie commented that she was over-committed in high school, involved with dance, choir, and several clubs, but knew she would have to be less involved while at Miami. She viewed herself as someone who would always take on projects when no one else would volunteer, which would result on her taking more responsibilities than she could handle. Carrie wants to do well at Miami, and knows that the sorority will take up a lot of time, so she planned on having that as her primary co-curricular activity.

Carrie continued the conversation by discussing her experiences with academic advising as an undecided student. She said:

All through high school I said I was not going to go to college undecided . . . I wanted to know what I wanted to do before I went and that’s not the case and it's
still not the case. I still have no idea. I just am a very indecisive person in
general and so not knowing what I want to do makes it kind of difficult.

Carrie also shared some information on her parents’ career paths. Her father is an
information technology specialist, and her mother majored in interior design and was a
designer for several years, but now is a receptionist. In reflecting on if she had interest in
any of those fields and Carrie said:

I do like the art stuff, but I just don’t know. Because I didn’t take any art classes
in high school because I did choir so it fulfilled my art credit. I just stuck with
that, so I don’t have a portfolio for the art school. I don’t know. That, if
anything, of those two, what my mother does.

Carrie referred to her mother’s career as an interior designer as “what she really
does,” and her work as a receptionist as “something she just does instead.” Carrie said
her mother quit interior designing to raise the family, and anticipated returning to the
profession when Carrie’s younger brother is in college.

Carrie’s first experience with academic advising was during summer orientation,
where she first met with her University Studies adviser. In reflecting on her appointment,
she said:

Yes, it was kind of brief. It wasn’t instructive. When I picked out classes, like
with my parents, it was just things that sounded interesting that fulfilled my
Miami Plan and he was like, “Okay, that sounds good.” That was about it. There
wasn’t much with it.
After being prompted, Carrie shared a little more about what they talked about, and she said they focused on Miami Plan courses. Carrie met with her University Studies adviser again in the fall semester, and he helped her with a French class she was struggling with. Carrie said:

We talked about my classes, and at the time I was really struggling with my French class and I still am. It’s just not a good situation at all because I took Spanish in high school and then I was like, “Oh, let’s take French,” because I wanted to study abroad, like in Luxembourg, and I figured I’d get around the country better with a language from that area. The teacher that I have is a TA, so she’s not a teacher. It just makes the class really hard, and he wanted me to stick it out and I did and I should have dropped it at some point, but it was too late when we got our test grade back, so I tried that. He was really helpful. He was really nice. It was good talking to him, yes.

It was evident that Carrie was very frustrated with the French class. She said she planned on continuing with the language for at least one more semester and is taking it with a “professor this time.” She laughed a little when she found herself coming back to the original question, I believe slightly embarrassed by the tangent.

Carrie spoke positively of her “get-to-know-you” advising appointment with her FYA, Heather. She said Heather was nice and they talked about “goals and things.” She said, “My interests are all over the place, so it's kind of hard to pinpoint things. She would ask what things I’ve considered, and then ask about my classes.”
When asked what she meant by her interests being “all over the place,” Carrie’s response was, “Right now I don’t even know.” I chuckled a little and asked “Everything?.” She continued:

Yes, in the past . . . I know I don’t want to do business, and I don’t want to do education or nursing. Those are the three things I know. I don’t think I can get into business school and I don’t have any interest in that in general. Education, I don’t know how I feel about it. I like graphic design, interior design, but I just know the jobs that are out there after that aren’t as good as they sound. My cousin works for a company, she’s an editor there and their graphic design person that does the book covers, it’s the same thing every time. You’re trained in a really great field and you have good talent, but then the jobs aren’t, don’t use the talent as well.

When asked she had any ideas about what may help her make decisions about her major or career, Carrie said she took *EDL 100: Career Development and the College Student* but the class did not help her. This was surprising, as Carrie was the first study participant who took the class and did not find it helpful. In reflecting on the class, she said, “I’m still very confused and don’t know what I want to do at all. I took it seriously to a point where I was like, ‘I want to figure it out.’ I still don’t know.” Carrie was frustrated about the fact that she did not know. She rolled her eyes and shook her head when she was saying this, a clear indication of her frustration.

Carrie did not have a lot to say about her LLC Experiences. Since she pre-selected her roommate, they looked for something that could work for both of them. Her
roommate is a speech pathology major, and they said that they choose the “random.” LLCs, meaning the ones that were not directly connected to an academic program. Carrie gets along well with her RA and floor mates, but did not speak about attending events geared to major or career selection. She said there were several “fun” things at the beginning of the year that her RA took the floor to, such as a concert during the first weekend. Carrie also said that the RAs “have a lot of events on Thursdays, and sometimes the weekends, if people didn’t want to go out or whatever.” Carrie’s brief description of her LLC experiences was an indicator that Carrie and her roommate enjoyed the social aspect of the residence hall, but were not really engaged in the LLC.

Overall, Carrie seemed to not fully know how to cope with being an undecided student. Her use of phrases such as “I’m just a very indecisive person in general” could be a way for Carrie to make excuses for herself and cope with the fact that she has not come to a decision. In some ways, Carrie did not seem serious about her major or career decision making. For example, she seemed much more interested in joining a sorority and making friends than getting involved in her LLC, designed to help her with this process. Carrie showed frustration when EDL 100 did not help her, and regrets that she did not join a choir, something that had always been of strong interest to her. Carrie’s interest in the graphic design and other arts seems to be something she is not fully comfortable pursuing as a career. Her acknowledgement that artists do not always get to fully use their talents in the workplace may be true, but it also seems like she may sacrifice doing something she really enjoys, for something that may be more stable or that uses a degree more directly.
Rich: A RedHawk with Buckeye Blood

Rich grew up surrounded by sports. He’s an Ohio native, whose entire family went to Ohio State University (OSU). He grew describes his family as “real Buckeyes”, and shared that as a child, his family would frequently attend OSU football and hockey games. Rich also played sports as a child, playing soccer since he was very young, and running track in junior high and high school. Most of Rich’s friends were other athletes, and Rich said they all spent most of their free time either playing or watching sports.

Rich is the son of a physical therapist mother and analytical chemist father, whom he describes as “a computer-ish kind of guy.” When deciding on colleges, Rich was looking for “more of a bigger kind of school.” Rich only seriously considered going to OSU or Miami, knowing that he wanted to stay in state. Rich was not accepted to OSU, so Miami became the logical choice for him. He shared that he was “unsure” about Miami when he started, but in the short time he has been attending, he really has come to find Miami as his home. When reflecting on the two institutions, Rich said:

I was all about the giant school atmosphere. Really when I got here, I’m . . . my friends I hang out with are in my dorm and sometimes we don’t even go to the other side. Really, when you think about it, you don’t really need that giant school.

When asked if Miami felt like a small school to him, Rich responded, “No, I don’t think so. You still get a, not small-school feeling, but everybody is friendly and not just a number, like everyone says. You still have a bunch of opportunities and a bunch of resources.”
Rich provided some interesting reflection on being an undecided student. Rich talked about his sister, who will soon graduate pre-law and journalism from OSU in a semester. In discussing her situation, he said, “She barely knows what she wants to do with her life, whether she wants to do more school or work a little bit, so it's kind of good that I have a path and she’s still like, ‘Uhh’.” He said she is unsure if she will go to law school, but their parents have been supportive of both of their decision making processes. He elaborated:

They were fine with it. My sister was the same way; she came in undecided at OSU. You always hear that’s the best way to do it because you end up switching it most of the time anyway, so they aren’t really concerned as long as I find something I like and don’t waste too much time.

Rich seems to have transitioned to Miami well. He has continued his involvement in sports by playing intermural soccer and flag football. He also tried out for the club soccer team, but was cut. He did not seem bothered by the fact that he did not make the team, but more pleased that he had the opportunity to play through intramurals.

When asked if he had considered a major a career path before coming to college, Rich said:

I really had no idea. I was thinking something science-y coming in and all through high school, but, really, I don’t have any super-focused interests besides sports, so I was thinking like sports and science, somehow I could relate those.

Coming in I had no idea.
Rich participated in a program called College in the Classroom that allowed him to take classes at the college level as a senior in high school. The credit he received has put him at sophomore level. Rich appreciated this and said, “I also get a little breathing room, being undecided, not really knowing what I want to do, which is really cool.” This “breathing room” allowed Rich the flexibility to explore his academic and professional interests. He recently completed *EDL 100: Career Development and the College Student*. Of this class, he said:

I’m actually taking, or I just got done with, *EDL 100*, the Career Development class, and that really helped me out, doing the majors paper and the career paper, so I found out stuff that had to do with science and I think I’m going to . . . Well, I have to declare at the end of the semester because technically I’m a sophomore credit-wise, so I’m going to declare myself Kinesiology, and then do Physical Therapy, I think. That class really helped me find that . . . I kind of knew I was always interested in sciences and had that interest, but then when you get those results back and they articulate it really well for you. It’s just awesome.

When asked about the academic advising he received from his University Studies adviser, Rich said:

He was really helpful. When I walked in, he already had my thing (Degree Audit Report) pulled up and had already been looking through the paper that says and was writing stuff down. I kind of knew what I wanted to do going in, so it was like, “Yes, you have breathing room. You can do some of this and some of that.” I thought he was really helpful.
Rich and his US adviser also discussed what classes he should take in the Spring semester. When asked about this, Rich said:

Yes, since I’m undecided, you know, he was like, “You know if you stay in the Bachelor of Arts and science, this would be good, but otherwise you might want to think about this. Yes, we talked about it, but not necessarily what I want to do, but as far as options.

In the spring semester, Rich will be taking chemistry, psychology, philosophy, and a social dance class “just to round out my schedule.” He also mentioned that he wanted to get into a particular history class that meets multiple requirements, which he called a “triple-dip,” but he said it was currently full. He planned to watch for seats to open up in the course.

Rich said that his University Studies adviser asked him about his transition and if he was doing well. Rich said that he was, and that he likes the university overall. When asked about meeting with his FYA, and he said, “I was supposed to, but I actually ended up accidentally missing it and I wasn’t able to reschedule.” He did not seem concerned about the fact that he missed the meeting. It seemed that he did not see the value in it, given his positive experience with his University Studies adviser.

Rich’s seems to enjoy this LLC. He elaborated on why he chose EXM by saying the following:

It was between that and, I also wanted the Miami Traditions because I’m all into sports and also since I was coming in undecided . . . maybe I’ll meet other people
undecided, they don’t know what they want to do, and maybe some other opportunities will come from that.

When asked if there were other people on his floor who were also undecided, Rich laughed a little and said:

I’m living next to a lot of business majors, which is normal coming here, but actually taking that EDL class. Some of the people in Morris, I’ll be talking about and they’re like, “I’m in that too.” I’m like, “Really?” and they’re like, “Yes, I’m undecided.” You kind of meet people like that.

This statement is an indication that Rich appreciated having others in the hall who were undecided like him, and who were also taking EDL 100. He had not attended any co-curricular events to help him with his major decision, but again referred to the class. He said, “I think after taking that EDL class you don’t really need anything else.” Rich furthered by discussing that he enjoys living in Morris hall, likes his RA, and overall is happy that he is in the community.

Overall, Rich seemed satisfied with the experiences he had with his US adviser, and unconcerned with not meeting his FYA. EDL: 100 seemed to be the most helpful experience he had in terms of making a major and career decision. Ultimately, he may have always known he would end up in a sports-related profession, but may have needed the class to solidify his decision. His personal interests in athletics, coupled with his interests in sciences make him well suited for the kinesiology major and physical therapy profession.
Trina: “Honestly, I Don’t Know”

Trina is the daughter of two Miami alums who was born in Ohio, but moved to Massachusetts when she was young. When considering colleges, Trina looked at both Miami as well as the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. Trina’s response to the question of why she chose Miami over the other was, “Miami’s definitely a lot prettier, but U-Mass is a lot bigger, and my friend goes there and their class sizes are way bigger than what they are here. I like having smaller classes, it's a lot easier.”

Trina ran track in high school. She originally had hopes of continuing track in college, but broke her foot during her senior year. She is unable to play varsity or club sports now, but has kept up her interest in fitness through exercising at the campus recreation center as well as taking a broomball class. In a follow up conversation, Trina shared that the injury was hard to handle. She struggled with missing part of her senior year season, not being able to compete in regionals, and ultimately learning she would not be able to play in college. Trina said that she always saw herself on a collegiate track team, and that adjustment was difficult for her to make. She described her current physical activities as “fun, but just not the same.”

Additionally, Trina has joined the Tom's Club service organization. Trina was involved in her church’s youth group in high school, and did a lot of community service projects through the group. She found that Tom’s Club was a good way to get involved in community service, while not taking a lot of time out her schedule. Trina shared that the group just completed Thanksgiving shoe drive, which she helped organize. Trina said the project was a success, which she was pleased in. She felt that many Miami students,
including herself, had a lot of shoes they never wear, so the drive was an easy way to clean out their closets.

Trina discussed her family, and how she had adjusted to being so far from them. Her father has earned his MBA and is the regional director of a school. Her mom went back to school after graduating from Miami to become an aesthetician and also takes care of her three younger siblings. Trina did not know what her mom studied originally. Overall, being far from home has not bothered Trina. She shared that the adjustment was a little difficult at first, but she adjusted fairly quickly. Her parents visited her for family weekend, and she was able to travel home for Thanksgiving. Trina said that the adjustment probably would have been harder if her parents could not have visited, or she could not have come home for the break, so she felt lucky to have those opportunities.

When asked if she ever considered a major before coming to college, Trina said, "Yes, me and my guidance counselor, we talked a little bit, but I don't know. I never really have known exactly what I want to do.” She also talked to her parents about it and they told her to "just keep thinking and narrow down what I like and what I don't like.” Trina has begun the narrowing process, but only slightly. She said, "I know I don't like math,” but did not elaborate further on her interests.

Trina's first experience with academic advising was when she came for late summer orientation in August. When I asked her about her experience she said, "It was just a quick thing to figure out scheduling. Because it wasn't the adviser that I have now. I don't really remember that.”
Trina lives in a small residence hall that is run by a graduate student. Some of the residents in the building are assigned to a full time FYA who works in the building next door. Trina is one of them. When I ask her about working with her assigned FYA, Stacy, Trina said:

She's really nice and easy to get to . . . The first meeting she just asked how school was and how I was liking classing and thinking about stuff for next semester, and then I also went and asked her questions when I was scheduling.

She helped me figure stuff out, like English and stuff. Trina also talked a little about the classes she was currently taking. She mostly is taking her Miami Plan requirements as well as a course called Self and Place is which is a philosophy class through Miami's interdisciplinary program. Trina said she unexpectedly likes the class and described it as "a lot of deeper thinking.” She said there is a lot of reading and discussion, but no tests, which she appreciated.

Stacy also spoke with Trina about her transition. Trina told her that coming from Massachusetts was hard at the beginning, but she has grown to love the campus. Trina noted that Stacy took a genuine interest in her, which she seemed to appreciate. At this point, she spoke briefly of George, the graduate student who runs the residence hall she lives in. Trina shared that many of her friends are assigned to him have said he is does not respond to their emails and is “never around.” She said she was happy that she was assigned to Stacy, because even though her office is in another building, Trina has not had difficulty connecting with her.
Trina also discussed her experiences with her University Studies adviser. She stated:

She was more helping me with my schedule for next semester. She told me I should start my language credit and told me to take some, I forgot what's it called, the class where you are trying to figure out what your major is.

I asked Trina if she was referring to *EDL 100: Career Development and the College Student*. She affirmed she was and indicated she was currently taking it, as it was a “second sprint” (second half of the semester) class that she added to her schedule. Trina also said that her University Studies adviser suggested she take another psychology class, as she enjoys her class this semester. Similarly, she advised Trina to take an environmental sciences class, which is something else Trina expressed interest in. I asked Trina if she had any idea what major or career direction she may go. She shook her head, smiled a little, and said "Honestly, I don't know."

Trina continued the conversation by talking about her experiences in the EXM LLC. I asked her why she chose that community and she shared:

I thought it was instead of an exact thing, it's more broad so I get to meet a bunch of different people and I have met a lot of different people, a lot of different majors. It's been interesting.

Trina said she has talked with them about their majors and has found that there are a lot of teachers (education majors) on her floor, her roommate is a math and statistics major, and she has a close friend who is studying computer education. She described the latter two as "really tough majors." Trina continued to say that she liked living in her
residence hall, because there is a "little bit of everything." She did not speak of any co-curricular events she has attended related to career decision making, but spoke more of social connections such as going to the "Rec" (Recreation Center) and hanging out with her RA and floor mates.

Overall, Trina has a low level of career decisiveness. Her comments such as “Honestly, I don’t know” and the fact she has only narrowed her decision by knowing she does not like Math, are indicators of her development in this area. Trina has not seemed to benefit from her FYA or US adviser in terms of major or career decision making. She seemed to enjoy meeting with Stacy, but the US advising model dictates that Stacy does not do a lot of major or career advising, as that is the responsibility of the US adviser. Trina’s US adviser seemed to assist her in course selection, but focused more on Miami Plan requirements than major exploration. Trina has been exposed to students from a variety of majors through her LLC, which may be helpful to her. She had not attended any co-curricular activities in the LLC, but it is unknown whether those activities occurred and she chose not to attend, or if they had yet to take place.

Summary

Each of the twelve students provided their unique perspective on not only the researched areas, but also what brought them to Miami University and how they perceived their overall transition. First Year Advisers and University Studies Advisers assisted the students in a myriad of ways, both academically and personally. Student experiences as undecided students varied, and was affected by their level of career decisiveness. The following chapter provides an in-depth cross case analysis.
highlighting common themes among participants as well as sub-themes shaped by Schlossberg’s four S’s (Evans et al., 2010, Schlossberg, 2011).
CHAPTER FIVE: CROSS CASE ANALYSIS

In analyzing the perspectives of each case, several significant themes arose. Each theme provides perspective on students’ perceptions of the focal points of this study: experiences with academic advising, the EXM LLC, and overall as an undecided first year student. The emergent themes can be classified into the four main categories identified by Schlossberg (Evans et al., 2010; Schlossberg, 2011): situation, self, support, and strategies. Within each category lie several sub-thematic experiences, weaving the students’ stories together into a common web. Sub-themes around the concept of situation relate to activities the student was involved in prior to college and the students’ perception of family members’ influence on their decision making process. Self sub-themes focused on students’ experiences as undecided first year students and their desire to have financial security. Strategy sub-themes discussed academic advising appointments both within the EXM and US models, as well as significant academic experiences as identified by the students. Sub-themes around support focused on the relationships built between student and adviser, connected the LLC experience to the students’ transitions, and acknowledged other support systems the students developed.

Situation

Schlossberg (2011) noted that situation refers to the “person’s situation at the time of transition” (p. 160). The individual considers six major factors when assessing their situation: trigger, timing, control, role change, duration, stress, and experiences with a similar situation. The primary focus of this study is students’ experiences as undecided
students. This topic can be identified as a key situation the students face during their time of transition to college.

*Involvement and Connection to Career*

All of the students shared something about their involvement in high school, and some even went further back into their childhood. Several of the students were able to make the connection to their involvement and interests to a potential career. Additionally, most of the students could quickly identify something they did not want to do, usually connected to an academic discipline that they had already determined was not an area of strength or enjoyment for them.

*Athletics.*

Most of the students were involved in athletics growing up; they have all continued to be physically fit by either participating in club sports, intramurals, or exercising at the campus recreation center. Three of the students, Laura, Caitlyn, and Rich have all found a connection between their enjoyment in sports and a potential career.

Laura has dreams of working for the Professional Golfers’ Association (PGA), and has declared a major in marketing with hopes of gaining an internship with their online marketing department in the summer. Laura has a creative side as well, and told me, “I would absolutely love to . . . get involved [with the PGA] and combine my creativity with the golf field, because it’s been a passion of mine forever.”

Caitlyn is a volleyball player who has been active with the sport for several years, and now plays on Miami’s club volleyball team. As an athlete, Caitlyn has always made
health and nutrition a priority. She indicated that she had considered majoring in nutrition in high school, but was unsure because of “the amount of chemistry” she would need. When she came to Miami, Caitlyn knew she wanted to continue with her sport, and not let her healthy lifestyle slip. She also took a chemistry class in her first semester that included a nutrition unit. The class revealed that childhood nutrition was something that she wanted to pursue. One can also assume that her identity as an athlete tied into this passion, and that without her personal commitment to fitness, she may not have come to this conclusion.

Rich played soccer and ran track in high school. As mentioned, he tried out for the club soccer team at Miami, but did not make the cut. He has continued his involvement in sports through intramurals. Rich also mentioned an interest in the sciences as he is strong in that area. He plans to declare a major in kinesiology and will pursue physical therapy as a career, probably in sports medicine. Rich spoke very proudly of his decision. He connected it with completing \textit{EDL 100: Career Development and the College Student}, and taking the career assessments that are part of the course curriculum. One can infer that Rich’s assessments pointed him in the direction of kinesiology and physical therapy because of his own athleticism.

\textit{Service}.

Two of the students, Erin and Jim, are heavily involved in service and have chosen to pursue careers in helping professions. Erin is involved in multiple service organizations both on campus and within her church community, while Jim is in a service-based fraternity and has continued his part time work at a local nursing home.
Service seems to be of high value to each of these students. Erin has decided to go into speech pathology. She attributed her decision to taking EDL 100, but the connection to service based activities and a helping profession is evident. Jim has decided to pursue a degree in management and leadership, with a minor in gerontology, so he can run an assisted living center. Many consider geriatrics a selfless profession, and Jim’s attraction to this field could be a direct connection to his commitment to giving to others.

*Family Influence*

All of the students discussed their family and the role they have played in the students’ decisions to attend Miami. A substantial occurrence in this area was the number of students who had at least one, if not multiple, parents or other family members attend Miami. Additionally, some students saw their family members as large support systems in their major and career decision making process, while others were beginning to feel pressure from family to make decisions. Still other students seem to view their family as neutral partners in the process. These students feel that their parents are supportive, but do not see them as a large influence. Ultimately, the influence parents and other family members is complex, varying from student to student, and having at times contradictory effects on them.

*Parental support.*

As mentioned, several of the students saw their parents as being positive influences in their major and career decision making processes. Laura described her family, friends, and golf coach mentor as the:
most influential people in your life and they’re the ones that you look up to and respect their advice. It’s important that you have those people in your life to weigh things off of and that they’re going to give you a nonbiased opinion. They have been the biggest influence on her decision to pursue marketing, in hopes to ultimately work with the PGA. During the summer between her freshman and sophomore year, Laura spent a lot of time talking with her parents and weighing her options with them. This was obviously helpful to her.

Erin’s father is a Miami alum and also on faculty in the College of Arts and Sciences. Erin talked a lot about her parents encouraging her to attend Miami, because of the close proximity to her hometown, and the tuition waiver she receives as a child of a faculty member. Erin said that her parents told her she could go to any college, if she got a scholarship. Erin was a high achieving student in high school and received some merit scholarships from other institutions, but decided Miami was the place for her regardless. She respects her father’s department and the university as a whole, and is aware that her exposure to the campus at a very young age is part of the reason why she chose the school.

Like Erin, Caitlyn became familiar with the campus at a young age. Both of her parents are alums and took Caitlyn to campus many times for football games and other events. Caitlyn could not pinpoint why she chose Miami. When asked she said, “I was kinda always around it from the beginning. I don’t know, I just really love the campus and the atmosphere.” Caitlyn said that her parents did not influence her to come to Miami. In considering that statement, I think Caitlyn meant that they did not push or
force her. It is unlikely that Caitlyn was not positively influence by her successful parents who both attended the institution.

As mentioned, Emma comes from a family where almost all the women are Miami alumnae. Emma talked quite a bit about her great-grandmother’s encouragement for her to attend the college, and also pursue a career in education, as she did. Emma looked at several other institutions, but it seems that Miami was the natural choice for her. She talked both about her family’s influence, as well as the fact that it was in-state, and “cheap.” Emma seemed very proud to follow in the footsteps of other women in her family. Even though she is unsure of what her major and career will be, she already seems very proud to be from a Miami family and a future alumna.

Trina is also the daughter of two Miami alums. She her parents were supportive of her attending the out-of-state school even though she is undecided. This, once again, could be tied into their respect for the institution, and Trina’s respect for her parents. Trina said that her parents are overall very supportive of her decision making process; she said that they “have always been really relaxed with me.” She said that she frequently talks to her parents about her options and they “keep telling me to keep thinking and narrow down what I like and what I don’t like.” Trina also discussed the upcoming Winter Break and how she was looking forward to seeing her family again and talking more with them about this matter.

Conversely, Rich is the only member of his family not to attend Ohio State. This is interesting as well. Rich was not accepted to OSU, and selected Miami as a second choice, but is happy that he came. Rich’s family has been supportive of him being
undecided. They told him that most students change majors at some point, and told him that being undecided is “the best way to do it (enter college) because you end up switching most of the time anyway.” Rich’s sister is a journalism and pre-law major who will soon graduate from OSU, but is unsure of her next step. It is possible that Rich’s parents have been supportive of his indecision because they have worked through a similar plight with his sister.

Children of alumni.

Laura, Erin, Caitlyn, Emma, and Trina all have at least one parent who attended Miami. Laura and Emma both have extended family who are alums, with Emma stating that “pretty much all the women in my family went to Miami,” including her great-grandmother. Miami is known for a large amount of “legacy” students, so this fact may not be surprising. This may attribute to the support the women are receiving to attend Miami as an undecided student. Alumni parents take pride in their alma mater, and may acknowledge that their student is receiving a quality education, even if she has not made a major or career decision.

Some of the women expanded on their parents’ feelings toward them attending Miami. All of their parents were supportive of their daughters’ choices to attend Miami, regardless of major. Laura commented on her parents’ support by saying, “They have always been like, do what makes you happy and I mean they would be happy with me if I was in dental hygienist school or salon school.” Caitlyn believes her parents “didn’t really . . . influence me too much” regarding her decision to come to Miami, but said that she knew they were very pleased when she made her decision. Several of the women in
Emma’s extended family are Miami alumnae. Emma said, “There’s like a whole line, and then a lot of my aunts went here so . . . that’s not like the reason I chose it, but it definitely was just like . . . I was just so familiar with it.” She later talked about her great-grandmother, also a Miami alumna, who was a teacher. Emma said her great-grandma would have been very happy if she also would choose education, but was happy that she was a Miamian regardless. Trina talked about deciding between Miami and the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. While U-Mass would be in-state for her and allow her the ability to come home more often, Trina knew her parents were ultimately pleased that she decided on the same institution they had.

*Family pressure.*

Despite the majority of students seeing their family members as positive influences, some were beginning to feel some pressure to make major and career decisions. Cole is a current sophomore and was still very indecisive about what he wants to do. When I asked Cole about how his parents were feeling about him being an undecided student, he started to say that they were supportive, but stopped mid-sentence. Cole then changed his thought and discussed that he gets his writing skills from his mom, whom he describes as “more liberal.” Of his father, Cole said, “My dad, he’s actually ok with it (Cole’s indecision) too, but I can see the line coming up where he’s going to start pushing me a little bit, which is good because after Sophomore year, you’re going to really start looking for your career and major.” Cole finished the thought by saying, “Yes, they’ve both been pretty supportive of it.” The way Cole changed direction mid-thought during this question led me to believe that he either had not considered his
parents’ feelings before or that he just realized they are not as supportive as he originally thought.

Chris, another sophomore, was also experiencing similar pressures from family. He is trying to determine if business or nursing is the right choice for him. Chris mentioned his parents paying for him to go to school, and the fact that he may have to do a fifth year. Chris did not directly say that they were concerned about the money, but his tone indicated that he was frustrated or disappointed with himself, and may have thought his parents were as well. Chris’s comments about his parents, noted above in his case study, led me to believe he is beginning to feel from pressure from both them and internally as well.

*Lack of family influence.*

Additionally, two students, Jim and Carrie, did not seem to see their family as being either a positive or negative influence on them. Jim did not talk about his family very much at all. He only brought them up in the context of his home in Hamilton, Ohio, and how he appreciated attending college close to home. Carrie talked a little more about her family, but in the sense that she knew her career path would not mirror theirs. Carrie’s dad works in IT and her mom is a receptionist; neither career was appealing to Carrie. She spoke positively of her relationship with her parents, but did not see them as being a large influence, either positive or negative, in her decision making.

Neither student came across as particularly concerned with the lack of family support; it just did not seem to be a big factor in their lives. As mentioned, Jim appreciated being close to home, but discussed it more in terms of being able to keep his
high school job and the nursing home, having several students from his high school attend Miami, and being close to visiting other friends who remained in Hamilton. Carrie is also relatively close to home, as she grew up in Cincinnati. She did not share whether she visited home or if her parents came to visit her. Her focus seemed to be more on the relationships she was building at Miami, rather than maintaining family relationships and other friendships.

**Self**

Schlossberg’s (Evans et al., 2010) defined the concept of self as personal and demographic characteristics that affect “how an individual views life” (p. 217). This includes “socioeconomic status, gender, age…stage of life, state of health…ethnicity/culture,” (p.217) as well as psychological resources including “ego development, outlook…commitment, and values” (p. 217). For the participants, characteristics of self were primarily focuses around childhood and high school involvement and family influence.

**Feelings About Being Undecided**

Cross case examination revealed similarities in how students felt about being undecided. Naturally, the sophomores as a whole were farther along in their decision making process than the freshman, with four out of the six sophomores already, or very close to officially declaring. Jim is one of two first year students who is confident in his career decision and will declare a major at the completion of his first semester. Mark knows that he will go into business and wants to own a car dealership, but seems uncertain in exactly what academic path he will pursue. From the interviews, I did not
get a sense that students were overly apprehensive about declaration, either currently, or in the past. Chris’s comments regarding his age and the pressure he is beginning to feel from his parents are an indication of slight apprehension, but are not indicative of someone who is panicking about the situation.

Common phrases regarding major and career indecision were used by many students. Statements such as “I don’t know” or “I have no idea” were used by multiple students. Frequently students shook their heads, and smiled or laughed nervously when they used these types of phrases. Although it did not seem as if any students were ashamed that are or were undecided, one could infer that their verbal and non-verbal responses could mean that they thought they should at least declare a major.

Many of the students are considering common career areas. The most common interest was some form of business, which is a dominate field of study at Miami University. Laura, Cole, Mark, Jim all are interested in business. One of Chris’s two areas of interest is the business school as well. An additional prevalent field is health care, in some form or another. Erin, Caitlyn, Rich, Jim’s minor, and Chris other area of interest all fall in the health care realm.

A second notable phenomenon among the students was the concern for financial stability, and how career choice can affect it. As noted in the literature review, Miami students are more likely to come from higher socio-economic status than many other students. Several students in this study discussed concerns for the financial security associated with some professions over others. In multiple cases, students seemed to
make decisions based on what they perceived being the more stable or lucrative profession.

Lauren discussed an interest in education, but was concerned about job stability. She shared a statistic she had heard about 700 teachers getting laid off in Cleveland, and that made her anxious. Cole talked about being a musician, as well as enjoying video games, does not view either as a viable career path. A quote specific to his interests in that area is noted in his case study above. Cole’s thoughts that neither option could be a stable career led me to believe he knows that the music and video gaming industries can be a gamble that he does not want to take. Chris reflected on the competitiveness of Miami’s nursing program, and the possibility that he may not be admitted. Chris is using Miami’s competitive business school as his back-up. It seemed that he wanted to make sure he is employed after graduation, even if it may not be in a field that he is interested in working.

Mark seemed to come from a higher socio-economic status than other participants. He talked a lot about his neighbors, many of whom had children who attended Miami, and referred to them as “good citizens.” He was on the sailing team in high school, which led me to believe he attended a wealthier school district. Mark originally wanted to go into the business school, but then came to Miami as a University Studies major, and is now trying to get admitted to the business school. Mark wants to run a car dealership and talked about how he has “always had a thing for cars.” He believes the owner of a car dealership could be financial successful, and that seemed of great importance to him.
Carrie, although still very undecided, has expressed interest in graphic design or interior design, but seems very hesitant to do so. She talked about a cousin who works for a design company, but is not really getting to use her degree. She described her cousin’s job as “not that good.” Carrie knows that business, education, and some other fields may not be for her, but she seemed hesitant to pursue something in design because it may not be as stable as what she needs.

Each of these students expressed interest in one field, but hesitated towards pursuing it because of perceived financial security, or attaining a job that is “not that good.” This may be an indicator that these students not only come from higher socio-economic status than the general college population, but also that they hope to achieve the same social class they were raised in. These perceptions could lead the students away from true areas of interest and professional fulfillment and direct them towards something that would provide financial stability, but little in terms of career satisfaction.

Strategies

Schlossberg (Evans et al., 2010, Schlossberg, 2011) suggested three main categories for coping with transition: responses that change a situation, responses that control the meaning of the problem, and responses that manage stress after the situation has occurred. There are four coping strategies: direct action, information seeking, inhibition of action, and intrapsychic behavior. This study focuses on first year academic advising and the experiences students had with two separate advising models. The cross case analysis revealed additional academic experience that provided valuable insight into students’ major and career decision making process.
Academic Advising Appointments

Ultimately, most students have a choice whether or not they attend any or all of their academic advising appointments. Unless a student has a registration hold for financial, conduct, or another reason, the student can register for classes without first meeting with an adviser. The choice to attend academic advising is a strategy the students elect to assist their process of class selection, and in some cases, major and career exploration. While the assistance the FYA or US advisers provide the students is identified as a support in Schlossberg’s framework, the act of attending an academic advising appointment is a direct action the student makes, and therefore strategy the students utilize to aid their transition and decision making process.

As noted, all sophomores attended their first year advising appointments. Five out of the six freshmen did the same, and all six of them met with their US adviser. For many of the sophomores, there was little to no distinction between their first “get-to-know-you” meetings and the formal academic advising appointments, even though they occurred several weeks apart. The freshman made this distinction with ease, because the appointments were with two different people, and they occurred only weeks before the interview. The 11 students who attended their “get-to-know-you” meetings seemed to appreciate their FYAs taking interest in their adjustment, even though no one in the group seemed to view their transition to college as difficult.

A couple of students experienced some transition difficulties, however. In each case, the FYAs assisted them through the transition. Erin felt that she did not fit in with the Miami stereotypical student and was having trouble making friends at first; her FYA
encouraged her to get involved in church and other community activities. Trevor worried about being undecided, and discussed his concern with his FYA. Trevor’s advisor encouraged him to not worry, take the time he needed to make an informed decision, and encouraged him to meet with a career counselor.

Overall, students seemed more reflective on actual academic advising services they received than the transitional support. When asked about their experiences with advisers, whether FYA or US, students consistently discussed academic components of meetings, such as Miami Plan requirements, reviewing their DAR, or scheduling for classes. Students only reflected on adjustment conversations when directly asked if their occurred. This phenomenon may be a characteristic of what students expected from the appointment, what they found most helpful, or a combination of the two.

Key Academic Experiences

In addition to academic advising appointments, many participants found classroom experiences to be beneficial to their major and career decision making. Some of these courses were directly recommended by academic advisers, while some were Miami Plan general education or elective courses that the students decided to take on their own. One course, *EDL 100*, was taken by several of the students and was found to be enlightening for all but one who took it.

*EDL 100: Career Development and the College Student.*

Erin, Cole, Rich, and Trina had taken or were taking the course at the time of interview. They all spoke highly of the course, particularly the assessments that are built into the course curriculum. The Strong Interest Inventory seemed to be the most helpful
assessment, as it provided students with specific jobs and careers that they would most likely enjoy and be successful at. It seemed as if the students appreciated the directness of the inventory, which told them what careers they should, and should not do. For some, the inventory solidified what they were already considering, but for others, careers that they never previously considered were brought to their attention. Erin in particular was affected this way. Her inventory, along with other class projects, pointed her in the direction of speech pathology, which is a way that she could combine her interest in science and English, along with her desire to be in a helping profession.

Carrie took EDL 100, but did not have as positive experience with it as the other students. In Carrie’s words the class, “really didn’t lead me to anything . . . it was helpful in some senses, but I’m still very confused and I don’t know what I want to do at all. It took it seriously to the point where I was like, ‘I want to figure it out.’ I still don’t know.” Carrie seemed frustrated when she talked of the class. It was clear that she tried hard, and wanted to make a decision, but had not come to one yet. It seemed as if she went into the class assuming she would come out with the answer, and was discouraged by the fact that she has not.

Courses connected to career interests.

In addition to EDL 100 many students took other classes that helped them solidify major and career choices. Caitlyn’s chemistry class’s nutrition unit helped her decide that childhood nutrition was something she wanted to study further. Chris is bouncing between nursing and business courses to help him make his decision. Trevor took an infectious disease class that sparked his interest in medicine. Emma will be taking an
education class in the spring, and hopes it will help her find out if teaching is a viable option for her. Although the courses themselves are quite different, they all share in that help helped, or hopefully will help the students make the academic choices they need to.

Support

According to Schlossberg, support can include: intimate relationships, family units, networks of friends, and institutions and communities. Schlossberg suggested that “social support can be measured identifying the individual’s stable supports, supports that are to some degree role dependent, and supports that are most likely to change” (2010, p. 217). Other areas listed above, such as family support or relationship with academic advisers, can provide elements of support for students. In conducting the cross-case analysis however, substantial information was shared regarding support systems and in many cases, the desire to assimilate into one’s community. This phenomenon ties into a secondary topic examined in this study: students’ experiences with the EXM LLC.

Academic Advising Experiences

The primary focus of this study was undecided students’ experiences with first year academic advising. As mentioned, 2012-2013 first year undecided students were part of the new University Studies program at Miami University and received a different academic advising model than undecided students previously. Participants in the study were freshman as well as sophomores, the most recent cohort to receive the previous EXM academic advising model. Below are relevant findings from the cross case analysis of all students, particularly comparing one group to the other.
Experiences with First Year Advisers.

All six of the sophomores met with their FYA during the Fall, 2011 Semester. Although all received the two-meeting model, many of the students could not distinguish between the two meetings, as they seemed to blend into one experience for the students. When asked about the appointments, some students recalled going back to their FYA just prior or right after registration if they had questions. They saw this as their second meeting, when in actuality; it was most likely a third.

Five out of six of the first year students met with their FYA for their “get-to-know-you meeting” in addition to the meeting they had with their University Studies adviser. Rich did not attend his FYA meeting. When asked about it, he said, “I was supposed to, but I actually ended up missing it and I wasn’t able to reschedule.” Rich spoke casually when he made that statement and did not seem concerned that he missed. This led me to believe he did not see it as a top priority. In further exploring this with Rich, he agreed with my belief. Rich said he contacted his FYA when he first missed the meeting. He was given a list of times that the FYA could reschedule, but he never followed up with this FYA after that. Rich knew the responsibility was on his part, but did not see the point of rescheduling after he met with his US adviser, and his schedule for Spring, 2013 was set after that meeting. Rich shared that he would contact his FYA if he has any more questions, but did not intend to formally meet with her at the point of our discussion. When I asked Rich if he felt the need for his adviser to discuss his transition with him, Rich said “No.” He said that he would most likely discuss any
problems he had with his RA before his FYA, but overall was having a positive experience at Miami and did not feel the need to discuss his adjustment.

In general, students in both classes spoke positively about their FYAs. Comments such as “she was very nice,” “he was very helpful,” and “I was surprised about how much [the FYA] knew” were indicative of the positive experiences students had. Only one student, Chris, did not see his FYA as very helpful. He said “I just remember filling out paperwork for this black folder . . . trying to go over courses for the next semester because I was just filling my Miami plan and I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do yet. He tried to help me fulfill it. I think he was pretty new, so it wasn’t very detailed.” I asked Chris if his FYA, Curt, offered any resources or suggestions to help him make major or career decisions, and he shook his head and shortly said, “No.” Chris’s non-verbal and verbal response was an indication that Chris would have appreciated those resources.

FYAs helped students in a variety a ways. Students mentioned that their FYA helped them with selecting classes for the upcoming semester, helped them read their DAR, and discussed Miami Plan requirements with them. Cole and Trevor indicated that their FYA encouraged them to meet with the staff in Career Services to help them narrow down academic interests. Trevor particularly found Career Services helpful and said that the career “testing” (assessments) he took were “a giant help.” Trevor noted that his FYA assured him that it was okay that he was undecided and said “take your time finding out what you want to do.” Trevor referred to his FYA as “a very cool guy, very relaxed” and emphasized that he was very glad the FYA told him about Career Services.
Caitlyn, Carrie, and Trina specifically mentioned that their FYA encouraged them to take *EDL 100*. Carrie took the class and did not find it helpful, Trina was taking the class at the time of interview, and Caitlyn did not take the class at all. I asked Caitlyn why she did not take the class, and she did not give me a clear answer. She said she could not remember, but thought that it did not work with her schedule. She seemed disinterested in the class, which led me to consider how serious she was, at the time, about making major or career decisions.

Students were asked specifically if their FYA talked with them about their transition to Miami. When prompted, all students indicated that they had. Students seemed to appreciate the fact that the FYAs discussed this with them. Erin, in particular, talked in detail about the conversation her FYA, Stacy, had with her. Erin said:

She would say, “How do you feel about being here at Miami besides academic work?” In the beginning, I did struggle a little bit because I didn’t feel like I fit in with the stereotypical Miami girl. Most of the girls here, they’ll wear the tights that aren’t actually pants and UGG Boots and a lot of them like to party and that really wasn’t my style. I felt like I was surrounded by that. She would suggest, “How about you go to these events? Definitely get involved in the church events.” And I took her advice and I’ve met some of my closest friends.

Other students did not go into as much detail as Erin. Some of this may be because the students viewed themselves as having an easy transition, and did not feel the need to discuss the topic in detail. One of those students, Chris, said: “Yes she (the FYA) talked about the transition from high school to college. I didn’t have a huge . . . It wasn’t
that big a deal for me, so I honestly I don’t remember at this point.” Similarly, Jim said, “We talked about . . . just like everything, living situations, classes, classes for next semester . . . how things are going with my roommate, that’s probably about it.” Overall, the group was somewhat passive in their approaches to taking advantage of support systems that were in place for them. While the group as a whole seemed to have a positive experience, it seems that they were missing out on part of the experience in itself. The students’ priorities seemed to center around social aspects of getting along with their roommates and making friends. This group had made strides in this area, but did not necessarily understand how discussing transition with their first year adviser, be it positive or negative, could assist in their overall success as a student.

As mentioned, FYA meetings with University Studies students are designed simply for the FYA to get to know the student. Formal academic advising is expected to be completed by the University Studies adviser. However, multiple University Studies students made reference to FYAs assisting with elements of formal academic advising. Mark mentioned that his FYA helped him drop a class, Jim and Carrie both discussed class planning for next semester with their FYA, and Trina’s FYA encouraged her to take EDL 100. The fact that four out of the five University Studies students who met with their FYA received elements of academic advising during their “get-to-know-you” meetings, is most likely an indication that this is occurring system-wide for University Studies students.
Experiences with University Studies Advisers.

All six of the University Studies (US) students had met with their US advisers at the time of interview. Students who participated in new student orientation during June met with the academic adviser they would be assigned to for fall. Trina attended late orientation in August, and met with a different US adviser than her assigned.

Comments about US advisers were mixed; some found them to be helpful, while others commented on the brevity of their appointments. Mark was a student who spoke positively about his US adviser. He said:

He was very, very helpful, and he walked me thorough all the classes that would be helpful in aligning to get back into the business school, so I met with him before scheduling for next semester as well. He helped me in that regard too. He was very friendly and personable, and I felt comfortable talking with him and all of that . . . he told me to take a management classes, which accounts for business 101 and 102, which I’m in right now, so I’m glad he, without him I wouldn’t have known.

Similarly, Emma found her US adviser helpful in narrowing down her choices. She said:

We talked about my classes and I told her how they all kind of connect in different ways, so I liked that. Then I think we were just talking about just next semester and how I still don’t really know, and so that’s why I . . . she said maybe take an education class, so you could see that, and then everything else was just kind of more basic classes, which I think she thought was fine, because I’m still
trying to figure it out, I don’t know. So we just talked about the classes that I’m taking then if I decided to go with . . . because I really like the geography class. She would talk to me about urban planning, and so it was doing things like that, which is good because I didn’t know everything about urban planning. I thought it was more like art-related, but then she was explaining it’s not like that. You can do your whole . . . there are lots of things. So we just kind of went more in-depth about certain majors like that.

Other students did not seem to have as positive an experience with the US advisers. James provided detailed descriptions of the advising he received at Miami University’s Hamilton Campus during his year of post-secondary education while in high school, as well as his time with his FYA, Heather. He did not have much to say about his US adviser, however. He said, “. . . we looked at my DAR when I met with her. I already had my schedule planned out, so it was pretty brief. But she’s really friendly. She was really, really nice and understanding about everything.” Although James referred to her as friendly and nice, his lack of detail in this part of our conversation led me to believe the adviser did not have much of an impact on him.

Trina also had a similar experience. In regards to her US adviser she said, “She was more helping me with my schedule for next semester. She told me I should start my language credit and take, I forgot what they’re called, general classes.” Trina did not go into any more detail about her US adviser.

Overall, no student had completely negative experiences with either of their advisers. All found their advisers helpful in some way or another, with the slight
exception being Chris. Students seemed to find all advisers personable and easy to talk to, with words such as “friendly” and “nice” commonly used. Students discussed ways the different advisers explored their personal interests and in some cases were able to identify ways the adviser helped them with major and career decision making, such as encouraging them to take *EDL 100* or referring them to Career Services.

*Explore Miami Living Learning Community*

Although the intent of the EXM LLC is academic in nature, students seem to connect to the social aspects of residence hall environment. For students, the residence hall itself and LLC seem to be one in the same, as students did not distinguish between the two. Most students spoke highly of their first year residence hall experience. Caitlyn was the only student who did not, and discussed how she had trouble making friends in her hall.

Students connected highly to the social aspects of the residence hall, rather than the major and career exploration learning outcomes. When asked what type of events students attended in their hall, responses were almost exclusively social. Laura described the programs in the hall by saying, “The programs were geared towards meeting each other and having fun which I guess is exploring Miami but there weren’t anything about exploring majors or anything. I probably would have gone to it.” Similarly, when asked what type of things Mark did as part of EXM, he said, “We had a [video game] tournament, that was fun. We painted bricks. We just always end up kind of chilling in each other’s dorms. [The RA] is always visible, he’ll stop by and we’ll just kind of hang out. So that kind of stuff. Our hall is pretty close.”
Erin was a member of her hall’s community council, a group that works with the hall staff on hall program and addresses community issues. When asked about her LLC experiences, her tone became negative and she said, “The problem with Mary Lyon Hall is that we really didn’t put on anything. The community council dwindled down to where it was just me and another person. When you don’t have much support, it was hard to do anything.”

Only one student, Chris, mentioned activities related to career exploration. He said his RA took a group from his floor to the Exploring Majors fair, and Chris went with the group. Chris also talked about attending an interest session for study abroad, which is something he’d like to do. Despite this, he shared that he did not think the LLC had a big impact on him.

When asked about their motivation for choosing EXM, most students said that it was one of the “default” or “broad” choices. Many of them stated that they considered both EXM and RedHawk traditions, because neither LLC had a required class component. Carrie also mentioned that the LLC worked best for her and her pre-selected roommate, who was a speech pathology major. Carrie said that EXM worked well for them, because of she was undecided and her roommate was declared.

Only two of the students mentioned choosing EXM specifically because of its mission to assist undecided students. Rich was one of the people who was interested in both EXM and RedHawk Traditions. He shared:

It was between [EXM] and, I also wanted the Miami traditions because I’m all into sports and also since I was coming in undecided, I was like, “Maybe I’ll meet
other people undecided, they don’t know what they want to do, and maybe some
other opportunities will come from that.”

I asked Rich if he had met a lot of undecided students in his hall. He laughed and said
that there were a lot of business majors on his floor, but he had met a lot of students who
are undecided and also taking EDL 100.

Trina had similar thoughts about the LLC, she said, “Instead of an exact thing, I
thought it’s more broad, so I get to meet a bunch of different people and I have met a lot
of different majors. It’s been interesting.” Trina has enjoyed getting to know the
residents in her small hall and has been exposed to several majors such as computer
engineering, math and statistics, and education.

Additional Support Systems

In addition to their academic advising and LLCs, students sought out a wide
variety of activities to help them connect and transition to Miami. Every student
interviewed was involved in at least one student organization or sport, with most students
involved in multiple. Activities broadly included such things as community service
organizations, choir, intramural sporting teams, and major-related clubs.

Students who were involved in service related activities growing up, such as Erin
and Jim, continued to find similar outlets at Miami. Erin’s involvement with her church,
To Write Love on Her Arms and other organizations at Miami are particularly notable
due to her deep level of involvement. Her extended discussion of involvement is a key
indicator that they are a salient part of her identity and that the friendships she has made
within the groups are a significant support system to her.
As mentioned, several students also stayed involved in athletics and other physical activities while at Miami. Many of them play or have played on intramural sports teams, with the most prevalent being broomball. Some students have taken physical education classes as electives. Laura took a broomball class, which she enjoyed, even though she took it as an elective to fill her schedule. Rich took a social dance class in the Fall 2012, “to round out my schedule.” As noted prior, Laura, Caitlyn and Rich’s interests in sports have led them to pursue a career related to health and wellness. Additionally, each student mentioned that playing on sports teams, whether a club team or intramural provided a chance to get to know people, or enhance pre-existing friendships.

Furthermore, two of the first year students, Jim and Carrie, expressed interest in joining a fraternity or sorority in the spring, which would be the first time they are eligible to do so. Each student spoke enthusiastically about the opportunity to get involved in “Greek Life”, both discussing opportunities to make friends and engage socially. Carrie in particular was very excited to go through the recruitment process, which at the time of interview, was only a few weeks away. As mentioned, both she and her roommate were participating in recruitment and according to Carrie, “It’s something we want to do to meet more people.” Carrie said she had gotten to know a lot of the residents in her corridor and people in her classes, but not many other students beyond that. She saw joining a sorority as an opportunity to expand her social circle, which seemed to be a primary goal at the time.
Summary

Each of the twelve participates shared their unique experiences with their respective academic advising model, the EXM LLC, and overall as an undecided first year student. While each story is distinctive to the student’s perceptions, many commonalities were found in the cross case analysis. When categorized using the framework of Schlossberg’s four S’s, even more of a connection between the students made.

Students’ situations were shape by their involvements prior to coming to Miami, as well as their levels of support provided by parents and other family members. The concept of self was addressed in this study was their overall experiences as undecided students and their desire to attain financial security. Participants’ comfort level with these areas varied depending on their year in school, and their level of major and career decisiveness. Some strategies addressed in this study were those implemented by the University, such as the first year academic advising models. Other strategies were those the student chose to implement, such as taking a career development class, or other academic class that sparked their interest. Support systems were a final key element of transition explored in this study. Each participant chose to be a part of the EXM LLC, and it was found that they benefited from it in varying degrees. Students also sought out their own support systems such as participation in sports and student or community organizations. All and all, the creation of each student’s story and the cross examination of each story with the others provided an in-depth understanding of each student, and analysis of their perspectives on the study’s focus of research.
CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION

As an Assistant Director in the Office of Residence Life at Miami University, I have administrative oversight of the Explore Miami Living Learning Community, and supervise the First Year Advisers who work in that LLC. Additionally, I have taught several sections of *EDL 100: Career Development and the College Student* throughout my time in this position. The marriage of these responsibilities led me to a curiosity about the undecided first year student experience, and whether or not the university was meeting student needs.

The implementation of the University Studies (US) program for the 2012-2013 academic year presented a level of complexity to my inquisitiveness. While the Office of Residence Life spent several years creating a LLC and refining an academic advising model for undecided students, decision makers determined that those specific students were best served by divisional advisers in the College of Arts and Sciences and the US program was created. This new program provided opportunity for me to do comparative analysis of students’ perceptions of the academic advising model they received, as well as gain insight on the EXM LLC, and their overall experiences as undecided students.

Summary

This project studied the experiences of twelve Miami University students who were undecided when they came to college. Particularly, it examined their perceptions of their experiences as undecided students, as well with first year academic advising they received. Six of the students, sophomores at the time of research, received what is known as the EXM model of academic advising. The other six, freshmen at the time of research,
were part of a new major designation on campus, University Studies, and received the academic advising model associated with that program. The research was timely and desired by the Division of Student Affairs, as prior to the creation of University Studies, FYA staff had almost sole responsibility for first year academic advising. University Studies is part of the College of Arts and Sciences and the Division of Academic Affairs. This has resulted in a significant change for the role FYAs play in academic advising first year students.

This study primarily examined students’ perceptions of their experiences with first year advising as undecided students, and how, if at all, the advising they received aided them in major or career development. The sophomores were asked to reflect back approximately one year, when they entered college. The freshmen were asked about experiences they were currently having, or had very recently. Overall the sophomore group provided much more depth to their answers, resulting in richer data. This attests to not only their developmental level, but also to the fact that five out of six sophomores had since made decisions about their major and in some cases career, while only one freshman had.

A secondary research interest of this study was student experiences with the EXM LLC, which all participants were members of during their freshman year. This LLC targets undecided students and aims to expose them to university resources that will help them make major and career decisions. Although the LLC is not exclusive to undecided students, it is the hope of the Office of Residence Life that all undecided students will be members. Prior to the creation of University Studies, FYAs working in the EXM halls
used a specific academic advising model, designed also to help students with major and career decision making. This was adjusted with the creation of the US program. Thus, the effectiveness of EXM for University Studies students was questioned, and therefore researched.

This study was approached using qualitative methods. Although research does exists on undecided college students (Gordon, 1998, Grites & Gordon, 2007, Gordon, 2007a, 2007b, Gordon, Habley, & Grites, 2008), only one study (Crouse, Foley, Matthews, 2010) had examined the EXM LLC. This study was the first to research from the perspective of undecided students within the LLC, and the first to research the University Studies program. The approach was appropriate as I sought to determine how the phenomena of academic advising and the EXM LLC influenced the students’ experience.

The study utilized grounded theory techniques. Charmaz described grounded theory as an “interpretive portrayal of the studies world, not an exact picture of it” (p. 10). According to her, the approach researches the way participants make meaning as well as their experiential views on the subject. From that data, the researcher creates grounded theories that are constructions of reality. This study explored the way students made meaning around their academic advising and LLC experiences through a phenomenological perspective, as I sought to determine their holistic experience as undecided students. The method was appropriate as I developed theory based on themes that emerged during the research.
Student narratives provided the context and in-depth perspectives into their perceptions on the areas being researched. All students who met the study criteria were contacted initially via email, and in some cases secondarily via phone call. The target number for this student was 12, and I ceased outreach to students once that number was obtained.

Interviews took place in October, November, and December, 2012. All six of the sophomores were interviewed prior to any of the first year students. Their interviews were also transcribed and initial data coding took place before I began first year student interviews. This allowed me to focus attention on one group of students at a time, while providing time to pass between first year students’ academic advising appointments and their interviews. This strategy proved to be successful, as rich data was acquired from each cohort.

All of the interviews were conducted one-on-one. Although students were given the option to interview at the time and location of their choosing, all students chose to interview in my office during regular business hours. The research plan, outlined in chapter three of this dissertation, was followed. I conducted interviews in a professional and confidential manner. Students were informed that their interviews were being recorded, but pseudonyms would be used in the final study. All narratives, quotes, and references to the participants would be associated with their pseudonyms. I made effort to ensure that participants were comfortable and relaxed. I implemented semi-structured interviewing as the method of data collection, and as recommended by Patton (2002), interview questions were open-ended, neutral, singular, and clear.
Restatement of the Problem and Research Questions

Academic advising is a key aspect of college students’ educational experience, and can have significant implications on major and career decision making. Gordon (2007a) defined undecided students as those who are “unwilling, unable, or unready to make educational and/or vocational decisions” (p. x). Given this, the undecided student population needs additional support in academic advising, and their major and career decision making process. Gordon (2007a) described current literature on the needs of undecided students as “conflicting, contradictory, and confusing” (p.162). Given that description, additional research was needed to learn more about how academic advising programs can meet the unique needs of this population.

Prior to this study, it was unknown how University Studies students experienced their academic advising as well as their LLC. US students received a different academic advising model than the undecided students in previous classes. The EXM LLC was specially designed for students who wanted to explore their major and career path as well as the university as a whole. With the changes in the academic advising model, it was possible that the US students experienced EXM differently than was intended, or the classes before them had.

Additionally, little research had been conducted on the EXM academic advising model, and no research had been conducted on the University Studies model on Miami’s campus. It was important to explore how students experienced each model, as it can help determine if the model is meeting their needs. Further, if undecided students were no longer academically advised by ORL staff, then it was important to determine if the EXM
model is still appropriate to use within the LLC, as it was created specifically for undecided students.

In order to address the problem described above, this study explored the following research questions with participants:

1. How did students experience being undecided first year students?
2. How did undecided students make meaning of their academic advising experiences?
   a. What were their experiences with their respective academic advising model?
   b. How, if at all, did the students perceive their respective academic advising model meet their needs as undecided students?
   c. How, if at all, did the Explore Miami Living Learning Community aid students in their major declaration process?

These questions addressed the main areas of inquiry I had, based on my interest in the topic as well as the programmatic changes that occurred.

Summary of Methods

Grounded theory techniques from a phenomenological perspective was used to gain insight on how students made meaning of their experiences as undecided first year students, with particular focus on their academic advising and EXM LLC. I followed Charmaz’s (2006) methods of grounded theory research, which assumes that each student would experience the phenomena in her or her own unique way; that I, as the researcher,
would examine the data; and that I would create the theory based on what participants shared.

Interviews were the primary form of data collection and were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide. Often conversation strayed from the guide and I allowed discussion to naturally flow from topic to topic. The organic development of topics allow me explore with the students areas that seemed most salient to them. Student perspectives were explored further to uncover themes and sub-themes based on what was discovered.

Data analysis began with coding the data and concluded with the development of theory. I developed a case for each student, along with a memo that helped me engage in the data, develop ideas, and determine themes and sub-themes (Charmaz, 2006). Memo writing was central to my process as it provided me space to make comparisons between the data, between the data and codes, between the codes and categories, and categories and concepts. These memos provided opportunity for me to articulate the conjectures I was making about the comparisons (2006). Through this process, theory around undecided student experiences with the studied areas emerged.

Findings

*Students’ Experiences as Undecided First Year Students*

Each student experienced the phenomenon of being an undecided student in his or her own unique way. Most students were comfortable with the fact that they were undecided, whether at the time of interview, or prior. Several students made reference to
the common occurrence of their peers changing majors; it seemed that the undecided option was better for these students than changing majors.

Four out of the six sophomores had declared their major, or would declare at the end of the semester. Of the two that were still undecided, one did not seem concerned, while the other seemed to be experiencing pressure both internally as well as externally, from parents. Cole, the sophomore who seemed comfortable with being undecided, frequently used phrases such as “I’m still asking questions.” He also discussed determining “what I like to do and how I could make a career of it.” In utilizing Kegan’s evolution of conscious theory, a foundational theory for this study, Cole could be placed in the lower level of order two: the instrumental mind. Although Cole was able to think logically about what he likes and dislikes, he had yet to figure out a sense of who his is, and what he wants to become, a key indicator for individuals in this order (Evans et al., 2010). Both Kegan and Baxter-Magolda (2001, 2008) focus student development in terms of developing self-authorship. Through Baxter-Magolda’s model, Cole was assessed in her first phase, following formulas. As noted prior, Cole did not view his love for playing the guitar or video games as viable career options, most likely because external influences, such as parents, led him to believe those are things that he “should not” do.

The other undecided sophomore, Chris, was also in Kegan’s (Evans et al., 2010) instrumental mind, but was further along in his level of career decisiveness than Cole. Chris had narrowed his career choices to nursing or business, and seemed to be leaning towards nursing, if he could get accepted to Miami’s competitive program. When
reflecting on Baxter Magolda’s (2001, 2008) model, Chris placed in her second phase, crossroads. The crossroads can be signified by the occurrence of a crisis. In Chris’s case, the crisis was trying to decide between the two professions while balancing the competitiveness of each program and the additional time to degree necessary at this point in his career.

All of the freshmen were official University Studies undeclared students at the time of interview. Only two of the students had made determinations on career paths. Jim decided to pursue business with a minor in gerontology and planned to declare at the end of the semester. Mark knows he wants to own a car dealership, but was unclear on which academic path would help him attain that goal.

The remaining first year students were at low levels of career decisiveness. These students were able to articulate career areas they did not want to pursue, but were not at a point where they could identify areas they wanted to study. One of these students, Carrie, was indicative of her undecided peers. Carrie described herself as a “very indecisive person in general,” and connected that belief to her major and career, which she described as “difficult.” Carrie, like her peers, was in Kegan’s (Evans et al., 2010) instrumental mind, as she thought dualistically and looked for external validation. Carrie expressed interest in the arts, but did not seem to think they were viable career options for her. Her thoughts that her cousin’s graphic design job did not embrace her talents were an indicator that Carrie had a dualistic concept of what a successful career could be. Carrie’s extensive discussion of her desire to join a sorority was both an indicator of the validation from others she sought as well as the external formulas she followed.
Like Carrie, multiple other students expressed a desire to have financial stability in their career. Several students were attracted to Miami’s business school, because of its reputation and job placement rates. While many of these students referenced other interests, the perceived earning potential of the business degree was a prominent reason for considering various majors within the college of business. More than one student referenced education as a potential career but coupled those interests with concerns about job placement and salaries. Similarly, several students have artistic talents, but only one student, Lauren, found a way to use her talents. Lauren also discussed her concern with the stability of an arts career. Her decision to pursue marketing is an indicator that she has moved toward Baxter Magolda’s (2001, 2008) self-authorship phase. She is able to identify her interests, values, and talents, and is pursuing a career that will allow her to combine the three.

*Meaning Making Around Academic Advising Experiences*

Overall, most students viewed the academic advising services they received as positive. Only one student, Chris, had a negative experience with his FYA, Curt, which he connected to Curt’s newness in the position, rather than Curt’s overall ability. As noted, Rich did not attend his “get-to-know-you” meeting with his FYA, but was not concerned with missing out on the opportunity. Of the six first year students who also met with a US adviser, most of them had an equally positive experience with that person. Emma had some difficulties with her US adviser, because that individual was out on medical leave for a period of time. Emma met with a substitute, but then had to do follow up with her US adviser upon that person’s return, as she had unanswered
questions. Although Emma did not seem particularly irritated by this, the process could have been smoother for her. Student expectations around academic advising seemed focused on academics and scheduling as opposed to discussing transition and goal-setting. Students frequently described their advisers as “helpful” and indicated that their adviser helped them organize their schedule and pick out classes that would meet general education, and in some cases, other requirements. Although no student expressed concern over their adviser discussing transition with them, those discussions did not seem expected or meaningful to the student. It is possible that the students took the title of “academic adviser” quite literally and only expected to discuss course scheduling and other academic matters with their adviser.

Students seemed to appreciate the kind nature of their advisers. Students commonly referred to their adviser as “nice” or “friendly.” It was unclear if this opinion was attained because the conversation surpassed academics, or because the student was surprised by their advisers’ personable demeanor. Although some students described their appointments as brief, no comments were made regarding an adviser being short or unprofessional with the student. More so, the brief appointments were viewed as concise or to-the-point.

Explore Miami Model

As mentioned, all six of the sophomores met with their first year adviser during the 2011-2012 year. Records indicate that all participants attended both their “get-to-know-you” and formal academic advising meetings. For most students, these two experiences seemed to blend into one. When I asked the students how many times they
met with their advisers, many of them would say more than once, but would often refer to a drop in meeting that occurred just before or during scheduling, or at another time if the student needed assistance dropping a class.

After prompting, students recalled discussing transition and goal setting with their adviser, but not necessarily at a different time than they discussed scheduling and other formal academic advising topics. Part of this could be attributed to the fact that this cohort’s first year advising took place approximately one year prior to the interviews. It could also be a characteristic of the adviser creating a seamless experience for students. The two meetings flowed together naturally, and the students could no longer make distinction between the two.

Sophomore students seemed to understand the role of the first year adviser and were able to articulate other ways the adviser could assist them, for example if they had a roommate conflict. Although not stated directly, students seemed to appreciate the multiple roles the adviser played for them. Cole commented on his adviser’s proximity and accessibility. He appreciated that her office was “right there” and that he would see her around his hall and at meetings or events. It seemed that as a whole, this group viewed their first year adviser as a resource for them in multiple facets, even if they did not take advantage of that resource.

*University Studies Model*

Each of the six first year students had met with their US adviser at the time of interview. Five of the six students also attended their “get-to-know-you” meeting with their FYA. These first year students were less reflective than their sophomore peers
overall. As noted, students viewed their experience with their US adviser as positive. Despite their assessment, I was able to identify areas where I believe the US adviser could have served the students better. Emma’s experience with multiple advisers may not have been preventable, given her adviser’s medical leave, but it seems that her substitute US adviser provided her substandard services. This resulted in Emma needing to schedule again, which is not an efficient use of her time and the university’s resources. Due to her participation in August orientation, Trina also met with two different US advisers. This is contradictory to the program structure, as the students are supposed to have the same US adviser during summer orientation and their fall advising. Although Trina did not indicate this was a problem, she is an example of how the program may not be functional for certain student circumstances. Although Jim was much more negative about the advising he received at Miami’s Hamilton campus than in the US program, he did mention the advising he received through US was “brief.” The brevity could be an indication that the adviser did not go into a lot of depth with Jim, and therefore the meeting was not very impactful for Jim.

All of the US students who met with their First Year Adviser spoke positively about the “get-to-know-you” meetings. They viewed the meetings as an opportunity to meet their head of hall and to talk to that person about their in hall experience, roommate, or other prevalent issues. No one in this group viewed themselves as having difficulty adjusting, so they did not go into great detail about the meetings, but simply seemed appreciative to talk with their FYA and meet someone else who could help them, if needed. Rich’s lack of attendance at his “get-to-know-you” meeting could be not only an
indication of Rich not viewing the meeting as a priority, but also as the FYA not viewing meeting Rich as a priority either. The FYAs were instructed to follow up via email with all students who miss meetings. Rich said the FYA followed up with him once, but he did not respond to her email. Although responsibility lies on Rich to attend his meetings, I did not get a sense that the FYA reached out to Rich beyond the initial email follow up. Although Rich views his transition as easy, like all students, he could benefit from connecting with an additional resource.

Student Perceptions of Services

Based on the information above, one could assess that students’ needs were not fully met, although participants may not realize it. Miami University (1999) defines academic advising as “a process enabling a student to gather information about University resources and program requirements, to develop competencies in course registration, to explore appropriate educational and career objectives and to identify the implications of educational choices” (“Definition of Academic Advising”, para. 1). The university’s College of Arts and Sciences, which houses US program, states the following on its website:

The University Studies program is designed to introduce you to the broadest range of academic areas offered by Miami University. The support and guidance you receive from academic advisers in the College of Arts and Science, as well as from faculty advisers and career specialists, will also help you:

- Develop a sense of your interests and aptitudes;

- Create a strong academic plan;
• Declare a major by end of first semester, sophomore year;
• Identify and access available resources;
• Comprehend basic university policies (Miami University, 2012, “University Studies,” para. 1).

The sophomore students who received the EXM model were farther along in their career decision making development. Some of this can be attributed to age and time spent in college, but some could also be credited to the depth of exploration FYAs underwent by using the reflective EXM model. The US model provided little opportunity for reflection. Although several students noted that US advisers asked them about their interests, they did not indicate the processes the US advisers were taking with the students to connect those interests to majors or careers. The freshman cohort may not be at a developmental level where they realize they need this. So, the perception of needs met may be there, even if the exploration may not occur to the fullest extent.

The Explore Miami Living Learning Community

The EXM LLC had minimal impact on students in both groups. Students were attracted to the community because it is not associated with a specific major, allowed them to select a roommate who had a different major, or in Chris’s case, did not have an academic course requirement. Only Rich mentioned choosing the LLC because he wanted to connect with other undecided students, which he did through both the hall and his EDL 100 course.

A few of the sophomores attended career or major exploratory programming while in the LLC, but at the time of interview, none of the first year students had. When
asked about hall events they had participated in, students were much more likely to mention social activities, such as holiday parties or playing video games. One sophomore, Laura, stated that there was no programming around major or career exploration. She said that she “probably would have gone” to programs of that nature if they occurred. Those programs did exist, but Laura was unaware. It seems that the method of advertising or making students aware of such activities may not have been effective. One could assume that other students missed out on the programs because they did not realize the events happened, and so for those students, the programs did not exist.

Some students did find avenues to explore their major and career interests outside of the LLC. Career Services, *EDL 100*, and other academic courses were all identified as resources for student development in this area. Trevor explicitly stated that he did not attend any EXM programming because of his work with a career counselor in Career Services. This could be true for other students. Particularly, those who took *EDL 100* or another class they connected with may have felt that they “figured it out” in terms of major or career, and did not feel the need for further exploration. The fact that those students had made decisions based on non-LLC experiences is positive for their own development, but could be an indicator that the LLC may not be fulfilling its purpose of aiding students in this process. If students are finding those resources elsewhere, then the niche of the LLC may now be lost.

**Discussion and Implications for Practice**

This study provided perspective on how first year undecided students at Miami University made meaning of their experiences as undecided students, with the academic
advising services they received, and with the EXM LLC, of which they were all members. Upon conducting interviews and analyzing data, I have determined implications for both current practice and future research.

**Implications for Current Practice**

As noted, most students were comfortable with the fact that they were at one point undecided students. While some students, particularly Trevor and Chris, referenced nervousness or frustration with being undecided, the other students did not express concern about it. All students in the group could be placed in Kegan’s (Evans et al., 2010) second or third order and Baxter Magolda’s (2001, 2008) first or second phase. No student was at the level of self-authorship, as defined by either theorist. Some students, such as Chris, were at a crossroads (2001, 2008) and were beginning to feel the discord associated with making major and career decisions. All participants used strategies to help them make decisions, such as meeting with their academic adviser or taking the EDL 100 class. However, it seemed, particularly in the first year group, as if determining a major or career was not at top priority. Making friends and developing social networks seemed of high importance to many. This is a key indicator to students’ external foundation.

When examining students’ career identity through the lenses of Kegan and Baxter-Magolda, it is interesting to consider where these students lie in relation to foundational theorists Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) seven vectors. In relation to the researched areas, elements of vector 5: establishing identity and vector 6: developing purpose are most relevant. According to Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, and Renn,
“Identity includes . . . a clear self-concept and comfort with one’s roles and lifestyle . . . self-acceptance and self-esteem, and personal stability and integration” (2010, p. 58).

Additionally, the authors wrote the following of vector 6, “This vector consists of developing clear vocational goals, making meaningful commitments to specific personal interest and activities and establishing strong interpersonal commitments” (p. 58).

Overall, students in this group were closer to establishing their identity than developing purpose, although elements of the latter vector were beginning to surface.

This is also consistent with Gordon’s (2007b) work. She wrote that undecided students typically have more developmental needs than other students. Super (1957) stressed that undecided students are at different levels of ability to understand how interests, skills, and values can connect to each other and a career choice. When considering these two statements together, it is understandable that the participants could not effectively articulate their needs.

When considering methods to best serve this population, Gordon (2007b) noted the importance of remembering that major and career decision making is a process and can consist of several steps over a considerable period of time for the student. Elam, Stratton, and Gibson (2007) discussed today’s Millennial student population growing up with a sense of immediacy. The process of major and career decision making can be challenging for the Millennial generation, as it is in no way immediate. Students who are at lower developmental and career decisiveness levels could experience dissonance with the process itself or the fact that they are unsure of their path to begin with.
Advisers and other professionals who guide students through critical decisions such as major and career decision making must understand that the process will be shaped by the students overall developmental capacity. Understanding where a student lies within each of the above identity developmental frameworks, as well as the mechanisms students have in place to work through their transitions (Evans et. al, 2010, Schlossberg, 2011) will indicate if a student is truly ready to make an appropriate major and career decision.

Students in this group found their advisers “friendly” and “helpful”, but overall seemed to find other resources, such as EDL 100 or other relevant classes, more helpful to their process. This is an indication that the group learned more from actively exploring (i.e. taking career assessments as part of EDL 100) than from discussing interests and options with advisers. From this, an implication could be that advisers implement more “active” methods of major and career exploration, rather that purely discussion based searching and developing relationships with students. This will provide an opportunity to develop the student and adviser relationship, while also meeting the students’ needs, as both the relationship developed between the two and the active method of exploration can assist undecided students in this process.

Further, according to Upcraft, Gardner, and Barefoot (2005), there is “overwhelming evidence that student success is largely determined by student experiences in the first year” (p. 1). The topics researched in this study ultimately focused on how students coped with their transition to college as someone who was undecided about their major and career path. By framing themes around Schlossberg’s
four S’s, I was able to examine not only students’ ability to navigate their transition, but also systems, both internal and external, that were in place to support them through this process.

Schlossberg (1989) wrote about importance of involvement, integration, and engagement in her concept of marginality versus mattering. This concept seemed of high importance to participants in this study. As is evident from the cross case analysis and findings, many themes emerged around the areas of support systems and students’ priorities of creating social networks. The priority to create social support systems was also supported by Astin (1984), Kuh (2005), Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005), and Tinto (1993), who all stressed the importance of involvement, integration, and engagement as a critical indicator of student success. Students in this study found these support systems formally through engaging in conversations with their FYAs and US advisers, participating in the LLC, and taking EDL 100 or other courses that helped them narrow interests and make major and career decisions. Students developed support systems informally as well by joining student organizations, playing intramural or club sports, and developing friendship networks. While interventions that focus specifically on career decisions are important, it is also evident that for this group of students, making social connections on campus was a priority. Helping students learn to navigate social systems, while not directly addressing issues of major and career choice, may provide an important foundation for this work in the future.

Gordon (2007b) believed the most effective method of academic advising is one-on-one appointments, and that this model is particularly effective for undecided students.
Both the EXM and US model provided advising to students on an individual basis. Sophomore students who received the EXM model experienced two individual appointments, intentionally spaced one to two months apart, with reflection and goal setting ideally occurring between the two appointments. First year US students receive one formal appointment with their assigned US adviser, as well as an informal meeting with their FYA. No student who met with a US adviser mentioned goal setting or time for personal reflection. Although the US advisers generally explored interests with students, all the reflection seemed to take place during the formal appointment.

It seems that the reflection and goal setting period could be helpful for students and should be implemented any into academic advising model used with undecided students. This helps students understand and become comfortable with the process of career and major decision making, and is consistent with their tendency to learn by more “active” methods. One-on-one sessions seemed effective for this group, and are consistent with Gordon’s (2007b) research. Meeting with advisers individually and on two separate occurrences with reflection time in between could also help to alleviate students’ natural senses of urgency in bringing closure to this process. Based on the findings of this study and preceding research, it is recommended that advisers meet with the students initially at the beginning of the semester, and then again just prior to registration. By using this format, students may be able to go through the decision making process more intentionally. Tools like the goal setting sheet can help the student think through their interests, skills, and values, and make connections to career fields. Providing students a period of time not only to reflect on the elements addressed in the
goal sheet but also begin to make process towards some of the goals is a strategy that seemed helpful for the sophomore students in this study. This is directly in line with Super’s (1957) theory.

Additionally, courses such as *EDL 100: Career Development and the College Student* seem to be helpful to several students. Of the participants in this study who took the course, all except for one found that it moved them further in their decision making process. One student, Trevor, did not take the class, but received similar services through meeting with a career counselor. An additional recommendation for practice is that all undecided students take a course equivalent to *EDL 100*, or they meet one on one with career counselors. Campuses that do not currently have a career center or course built around major and career development should consider implementing one, if not both of these resources, as each proved to be helpful to all but one of the students who partook in either. As mentioned, students who actively engaged in their major and career decision making, through goal setting or career assessments, seemed to benefit more than those who simply met with academic advisers. It is advised that active reflection through goal setting, assessments, or similar means be built into the career development course and career adviser practice.

Parents also seemed to be a large, mostly positive, influence for participants in this study. High levels of parental involvement is indicative of the current generation (Elam, Stratton, & Gibson, 2007), and this group was no exception. Given that fact, advisers and other professionals working with undecided students need to understand the role the parent plays in the student’s life and learn how that parent may be influencing the
student’s decisions. By and large, the participants in this study had parents who were supportive of their career indecisiveness, with only two students experiencing pressure from parents to declare a major. This, however, is not the case for many students. Some students feel an obligation to pursue the career paths of their parents or other family members, while some are completely disconnected from their family. Advisers who understand this dynamic will be able to determine when and if the student should discuss this process with their family members.

As noted, in addition to parents, many students discussed additional support systems they created. Each student discussed how they were involved on campus as well as their future plans for involvement. Some students, like Erin, were able to articulate how their involvements assisted them in their transition to Miami. Other students, like Carrie, could not fully articulate the importance of involvement to their transition, but knew that the activities would provide social networks. Advisers who spend time discussing personal interests with student could form a deeper connection with the student and be better able to serve them. Some students may not realize that their choices of activities can be a key indicator of appropriate career fields. Exploring these topics with students is directly in line with Super’s (1957) suggestions for working with undecided students. However, this strategy presents a challenge for students’ whose priorities may be elsewhere, for example those who place high priority on socialization. This presents a challenge for the adviser, as he or she can only assist a student who is willing and developmentally ready to undergo the decision making process. For students who are lower on the career decision making continuum (Gordon, 1998) and who seem to
not place priority on major and career development, it is suggested that advisers explore
the nature of their priorities with them, and why they are of importance to the student.
This provides the student the opportunity to reflect on not only their priorities, but also
values and goals, which could better prepare the student for the process of major and
career exploration.

Implications for Future Research

The study of the experiences of undecided students, their perceptions of different
academic advising models, and Living Learning Community has the potential to inform
future studies on undecided college students major and career decision making processes,
and services colleges and universities to aid student in those processes. The findings
from this study could also inform studies on academic advising and LLCs for declared
students, transitional needs of students, as well the major and career decision making
processes for other student populations.

As a result of the interviews, major themes were created around Schlossberg’s
four S’s, and sub-themes were determined for each area. While sub-themes were
categorized into one of the four S’s, there was much overlap between each of them as the
sub-thematic entities assisted the students in multiple ways. Significant themes around
the area of situation revolved around involvement and connection to career, particularly
through athletics or community service and family influence, either positive or negative.
Themes around the area of self focused on students’ experiences as undecided students.
Strategy themes evolved from student’s choice to attend academic advising
appointments, as well as other academic experiences students had that sparked potential
career interests. Support themes centered around the experiences they had with academic advising, the EXM LLC, and additional support systems the students created for themselves, primarily through social involvement. Each of these themes, as well as sub-themes that emerged could provide a lens for which further research is conducted.

Additionally, this research was limited to 12 undecided students at one university. As current research on undecided students has been described as “conflicting, contradictory, and confusing” (Gordon, Habley, & Grites, 2008, p. 162) much more research is necessarily in order to determine best practices with this population as they undergo such a crucial decision making process. Future studies with different and more diverse populations will better determine how to serve this population. Although the themes were common to the students in this study, additional themes may emerge from the inspection of a more diverse population of students.

Further implications for research could focus on different academic advising models. Although both the EXM and US advising models proved to be meeting students’ perceived needs overall, neither model worked for all students who received it. Additional examination of the models, along with others, could help strengthen the advising programs overall.

Future research on LLCs for undecided students could also help determine best practices. This study highlighted several of Miami’s benchmark institutions that have similar living learning communities as well as schools that are merging academic advising with LLCs. Research on those, or other similar programs, could strengthen not only the EXM community, but others that have a similar mission.
Several participants in this study referred to their peers changing their major, and how that practice is quite common with today’s college students. In considering that, I have developed an interest in students who change their major and how that decision influences their overall career development processes. Those who change their major share many of the qualities that undecided students have. Some would consider this population to be “undecided” as well, because these students fall within Gordon’s (1998) status continuum for career decisiveness. Future research with those who change major or career paths interests me. This study has provided a solid understanding of one type of undecided student, and has left me curious about another.

**Personal Reflection**

As a student affairs practitioner who had supervisory responsibilities over First Year Advisers and administrative responsibilities over the Explore Miami Living Learning Community, the idea of exploring the experiences of undecided students with academic advising services and the LLC fascinated me. The study grew to examine the overall essence of what it meant to these students to be undecided and how their career and major decision making processes affected their overall decisions. The implementation of the University Studies program in the Fall, 2012 Semester provided an unprecedented opportunity to study the new program. The determination to interview both first year students in the US program and sophomores who received the EXM model the year prior provided rich data and an opportunity to compare the overall developmental levels of first and second year students.
This study was extremely rewarding to me both as a practitioner and as a researcher. As a student affairs professional I have gained a better understanding of the developmental levels and needs of first and second year students, particularly those who are undecided about their major or career path. To date, I have already engaged in conversations with First Year Advisers about the effectiveness of their academic advising, the US program, and how, if at all, either of these is helping students make career decisions. I am currently spearheading a project within the EXM advisory council to revisit the learning outcomes of the LLC, assess how the group is and is not meeting its intended outcomes, and determine changes necessary to serve its population of undecided first year students.

As a researcher, I have developed more of a curiosity around the experiences of undecided students and the processes they undergo to make decisions. I intend to expand my research to include a more diverse population of students. I realize that this study was limited to a fairly homogeneous population, and that additional themes may arise from more diverse samples, such as more students from underrepresented populations, community college students, or nontraditionally aged students. Further, this study examined two primary student success strategies: academic advising and living learning community experiences. I am curious to explore other strategies such as course curriculum similar to EDL 100 or working with a career counselor. Finally, as mentioned, several of my participants discussed the common occurrence of students changing their major. From discussing this with students, I am curious to examine that phenomenon as well. The process of changing my major was one that I personally never
did, but now realize that I possibly should have. I am fortunate to have found my way from an undergraduate elementary education major to a student affairs professional. I am eager to explore the reasons why students change their major, and the developmental processes the go through before and during this decision.

Conclusion

Undecided college students each experience the phenomenon of being undecided in their own unique way. Some believe that today’s college students feel pressure to come to college with a declared major, and that students who do not experience high levels of stress while making a decision. This is not necessarily the case for the students in this study. For this sample population, most students were comfortable with the fact that were, previously if not at time of interview, undecided, while only a couple were beginning to feel either internal or external pressure to make a decision. While the topic of study began with a the desire to examine two academic advising models and a living learning community, the project evolved to explore the students’ identity and how that identity will affect their decision making processes and eventual choice.

A case was created for each student, providing the reader an understanding of the overall persona of the student. Particular focus of the interviews revolved around the interests and values of the student, academic advising they received, and their experiences with the EXM LLC. From the twelve cases, a cross case analysis was created with themes built upon Schlossberg’s four S’s. Sub-themes emerged within each of the S’s, identifying commonalities among the group.
This study provided rich data and insight into a population where research had once been described as “conflicting, contradictory, and confusing” (Gordon, Habley, & Grites, 2008, p. 162). The goal of the research was not to determine the effectiveness of one model over the other, but to try to determine the overall essence of what it meant to students to be undecided on the Miami University campus, and how the services the university provided is affecting their career and major decision making. It was my hope that this research begins to provide some consistency in a body of knowledge that has been described in a negative way. Although there is ample opportunity for further examination of the population, this study provided key insight on not only the undecided student population, but also two programs that had little to no assessment associated with them prior.
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APPENDIX A: EXPLORE MIAMI STUDENT PROFILE AN GOAL SETTING SHEET

Explore Miami Student Profile and Goal Setting Worksheet

Name: 
Hall and Room Number: 
Cell Number: 

College Expectations
In addition to receiving a degree, which of the following appeal to you? (Check all that apply)
- Meeting people, enjoying myself
- Being in a place where I can reflect on my individuality
- Discovering and developing my own talents
- Defining and preparing for a career
- Continuing to mature and prepare for adulthood
- Participating in campus activities
- Pursuing scholarly activities and intellectual development
- Other

What challenges might you face this year (e.g. procrastination, being in a new place, making friends, attendance, meeting expectations of family members, etc…)?

Your Academic Plan
Current major(s)
Other majors or minors you may be considering:

In high school:
The subject(s) you enjoyed the most:
The subject(s) you enjoyed the least:

List some things you see yourself doing when you graduate (both academic and life aspirations):

Other Interests
Besides school, work or academic enhancements, what other activities do you plan on participating in this year? (i.e. intramurals, community council, fraternity or sorority, spiritual group):
What kinds of activities would help you achieve those goals? (check all that apply):
☐ Volunteer group ☐ Internships ☐ Leadership opportunities ☐ Service learning ☐ Study Abroad ☐ Foreign languages ☐ Student government/community council ☐ Professional clubs/organizations ☐ Faculty interaction ☐ Social clubs ☐ Research opportunities ☐ Career exploration opportunities ☐ Second major/minor ☐ Learning about majors
☐ Other

**Goal Setting**

This semester, you will meet with your academic adviser twice and s/he is going to help you achieve your goals.

When reflecting on the questions below, make sure you are making a “SMART” goal, which is one that is Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Timely.

What are three personal life goals you have for yourself?

1. 
2. 
3. 

Why are these goals important to you?

What are three academic and career goals you have for yourself for this year?

1. 
2. 
3. 

Why are these goals important to you?

What steps will you take to achieve these goals?

Are there any academic areas you wish to strengthen during your first year of college?

☐ Preparing for tests ☐ Study strategies ☐ Math skills ☐ Learning style techniques
☐ Research skills ☐ Effective note taking ☐ Understanding class lectures
☐ College level writing ☐ Organization and Time Management ☐ Presentations and public speaking
☐ Reading compression ☐ Class attendance ☐ Other