University of Cincinnati

Date: 3/23/2017

I, Brendan P McDonough, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Communication.

It is entitled:
The Personae of Students Without Majors in the State of Ohio

Student's name: Brendan P McDonough

This work and its defense approved by:

Committee chair: John Lynch, Ph.D.

Committee member: Stephen Depoe, Ph.D.

Committee member: Shaunak Sastry, Ph.D.
The Personae of Students without Majors in the State of Ohio

A thesis submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Cincinnati in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

In the Department of Communication of the College of Arts and Sciences by

Brendan P. McDonough

B.A. University of Cincinnati

May 2015

Committee chair: John Lynch, Ph.D.

Committee members: Steve Depoe, Ph.D., Shaunak Sastry, Ph.D.
Abstract

Research has shown that students in undecided student programs experience increased stress and anxiety. Some universities, like the University of Cincinnati, have created new programs in response, and labeled them “Exploratory” programs. However, very little research has been conducted as to how this labelling affects students. This mixed methods project involves two stages. The first involves a rhetorical analysis of websites from the 15 largest universities in the state of Ohio and considers the various rhetorical personae constructed by these universities through the lenses of constitutive rhetoric and the second and third persona. The second stage involves qualitative interviews with University of Cincinnati Exploratory students, exploring their experiences with being an Exploratory student and investigating their adoption of the personae found in the first stage. By combining the results of these two stages, this project argues that the Exploratory persona is a more holistic and humane rhetorical construction that alleviates some of the stress and pressure traditionally felt by undecided students.
Acknowledgements

This project would not be possible without the support of so many. A few that can be named here:

Thanks to my advisor, Dr. John Lynch, for all his advice, patience, and guidance through many drafts of writing over the last year.

Thanks to my committee, Dr. Steve Depoe and Dr. Shaunak Sastry, for their advice and input throughout the thesis process.

Thanks to my fellow graduate students, for providing constant encouragement and relief from the stress of graduate school.

And finally, thanks to my wife, Callie, who agreed to plan a wedding and marry me in the midst of this thesis writing process and support me through late nights of writing and preparing.
Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review ........................................................................... 1

Chapter 2: Rhetorical Analysis ...................................................................................................... 26

Chapter 3: Interview Analysis ................................................................................................... 44

Chapter 4: Discussion ................................................................................................................. 67

References: .................................................................................................................................. 78

Appendix: Interview Guide ......................................................................................................... 85
Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review

Choice of major is one of the defining decisions facing college students. It determines the classes they take through their college career, the minimum length it will take to complete a degree, and for many, the school they choose to attend. The amount of pressure placed on this decision is substantial; some grade schools begin asking career-related questions of their students as early as 1st grade (Pappano, 2015). Multiple statewide organizations exist to encourage students to think directly about what career options suit them in middle school and earlier (“MIDDLE SCHOOL”), and software has been developed and marketed specifically to elementary and middle school students to help them identify a major that fits them (Pappano, 2015). For many students, the significance of choosing a major has been emphasized before they have even considered applying to college.

Given this emphasis on choosing a major, it is notable that the most common “choice” across the nation for incoming college freshman is a lack of one, going into school as an “undecided” or “undeclared” student (“UCART”, 2011). While the reasons for this choice vary, these students did not select a major, leading to an initially different college experience for them when compared to their peers with majors. Students that enter college without a major face negative stigma. Reynolds et al. (2010) note the presence of a “mythology” or culture that implies a lack of success for Undecided students (p. 54). While research describes mixed outcomes for these students, this “mythology” remains and seems to impact students as much as the presence or absence of a major. Reynolds et al. discuss their impressions of how students without a major understand their experience:

These students described themselves as feeling “abnormal” and “displaced” because of being undeclared, and one student even spoke of feeling like “less of a person.” Their decision not to select a major was a concern to these students, who felt as if they were breaking a societal norm, or veering off the road of success (p. 59).
This stigmatization of undecided students has not gone unnoticed or unaddressed. Many universities have adjusted their rhetorical practices, creating new labels and language in an attempt to change student’s self-perceived stigma around the lack of a major. For example, the University of Cincinnati is a school that has made a rhetorical change to their program for students still deciding on majors. Since 2003, they have served students still choosing their major in the Center for Exploratory Studies, and designated these students as “Exploratory” majors rather than “undecided” or “undeclared” (“About Us”). The program has touted its success over that time frame through constant growth, adding advisors over the years to expand their program to “serve the growing exploratory student population” (“About Us”). This Exploratory rhetorical strategy raises interesting questions about the potential impact this language has on the students within this program and the identity they adopt as temporary members of this program, often at the very start of their college career. However, very little research has investigated the effect of labels like Exploratory compared to the traditional Undecided label. Additionally, there is little existing research that looks at the impact of either the Undecided or Exploratory label from a rhetorical theoretical perspective, suggesting a gap of knowledge that this research project will address.

This project aims to study the rhetorical impact of labels for students without a major and how students react to those labels and incorporate them into their self-identity. It examines the breadth of labels used at colleges and universities in the state of Ohio, and it will examine in depth the experience and reactions of students without a major to the newer “Exploratory” label as it is deployed at the University of Cincinnati. This project turns to rhetorical scholarship on “constitutive rhetoric” and the personae constructed in discourse to identify the entailments of the different labels used, and it is followed by qualitative interviews to identify how that constitutive rhetoric is accepted, negotiated, and refuted by students at one university. In the remainder of this chapter, we will identify the literature used to guide the project and identify our research questions.
Literature Review

The literature informing this research project can be broadly divided into two different categories: rhetorical theory that guides the methods of my analysis, and research on undecided and exploratory students. This literature comes from both communication and education fields. The first section examines the literature surrounding students without a major, starting first with a communication piece by Fasset and Warren (2004) that identifies the strategic rhetorics used in higher education to frame student success, providing a basis for critically analyzing the institution-focused, graduation-driven perspective that much of the research holds. Following that is a discussion of articles that do consider the experiences of students without a major. The second section will address the rhetorical literature on identification, constitutive rhetoric, and personae that provides a framework for examining the rhetorical function of the labels used for students without a major. This section will also discuss the qualitative methods that guided the interview portion of this project. Finally, methods for the research project and research questions will be described.

Literature on Students without Majors

By and large, students entering college are far from sure about what their academic focus will be over their collegiate career. In a widely cited study, Gordon (1995) estimated that 75% of students change their majors at least once, and that between 20-50% of students in America enter college without having declared a major. These students, usually referred to as “undecided” or “undeclared”, are tasked with deciding on a college major. Often, they take classes or participate in programs to help them identify potential skills and interests that could guide their choice of major. Considering the amount of students involved in this process, a wealth of literature exists on undecided students and the programs designed for them.

To understand undecided students and the impact of institutional rhetoric on their experiences, we need to first understand the ideologies and rhetorical strategies common in higher education.
Fassett and Warren (2004) conducted focus groups with students and faculty in various academic programs, asking them to discuss their thoughts on what constituted educational success and failure in a college setting. They identified three rhetorical strategies used to reinforce hegemonic ideas, those ideas perpetuated by those in power to reinforce their power, about success and failure at the college level. The first rhetorical strategy is individualism: framing all aspects of educational success and failure within the control of the individual student and negating any outside context. Both students and faculty primarily placed responsibility for good grades and graduation solely on the individual student. Faculty denied the power that the university has to undermine educational success. Several faculty commented on how educational success relied on whether a student wants to be there, with the authors noting how “institutional affirmation comes if one ‘chooses’ correctly” (29). They also downplayed other factors in the student’s lives outside the university. Students held similar attitudes, describing the unsuccessful student as “the student who doesn’t give a damn” (28).

Secondly, the strategy of victimization was present in much of the discussion, which involved viewing education “as a social machine that renders participants passive dupes caught in the continual processes of power” (29). In many ways, this strategy is the opposite of individualization. Success and failure are seen as completely outside of an individual’s control, rather than completely within it, yet is shown to be problematic in its own right. Rather than deny the impact of any outside system, this strategy prevents any questioning of the education system at all. Students whose goals do not match those of the system are destined to fail and have no avenue of success available to them other than to conform to the system’s goals. This played out in how students and instructors viewed institutional rules and expectations. Many of the participants discussed successful students as those who were the most obedient, or the best at tasks like tests, and acknowledged feeling like there were no other paths towards future success. A student’s individual desire and definition of success bears no importance if it is not congruent with that of the education system.
The third and final rhetorical strategy observed in these discussions is a strategy of authenticity. When these rhetorics were employed, educational success was determined by whether a student could be seen as having a “real” or “true” passion for learning. Obtaining success, then, has less to do with performance and more to do with whether they are perceived as having true passion or interest. Fassett and Warren find this to be problematic, as it may lead some students, and possibly instructors, to be privileged above others due to perceptions that may not reflect reality. This becomes even more problematic when students are held to a standard of authenticity that is not tethered to reality. Multiple instructors mentioned films like *Dead Poet’s Society* or media constructions of student performance when discussing their own perceptions of authentic students. When these are used as standards for success, all students may be found wanting and no context or excuse may suffice. Additionally, multiple participants mentioned the need for having a “real desire to be there” (33), a genuine passion for learning and for the subject of the class.

While the research does not explicitly pertain to undecided students, the connections to these educational rhetorics are clear. In the first strategy, student success comes when a student chooses a correct major and diligently pursues good grades; this cannot happen for students that haven’t yet selected a major. The second strategy takes a seemingly opposite approach by saying that the student has no input on success, but is simply matched to societal and institutional expectations. This is a strike against an undecided student again, as schools and researchers seem to feel that not having selected a major is putting a student further away from success. The third strategy looks for students to have a genuine passion for what they are learning, and for that passion to show in the classes they are taking. For students who have yet to discover what their passions really are, the disadvantage in obtaining institutional success is apparent. These rhetorics help to construct what Kroc et al. (1997) calls the “mythology” of being undecided, an ever-present assumption that undecided students are likely to face academic struggles. Undecided students are perceived as lazy and with an inauthentic desire to learn.
due to these strategic, hegemonic rhetorics, which causes people to see them as likely to encounter problems in higher education.

These rhetorical strategies in particular, and how they might apply to an undecided student population, implicitly shape the extant literature on undecided students. A large portion of educational literature examines undecided students from a prescriptive lens. Most research in education treats the speedy choice of a major as the end goal when addressing the "problem" of undecided students. One of the ways this is reflected is by questioning whether graduation rates are affected by a student’s status as undecided. Conclusions are mixed within the field. Lewallen (1993) used a longitudinal database of national student information to analyze graduation rates of students that started their collegiate career undecided. This research returned no evidence of these undecided students graduating at a different rate than those students who did pick a major immediately. This result is supported by the work of Kroc, Howard, Hull, and Woodard (1997), who showed in their own research that students who were initially undecided in their collegiate career did not graduate at a lower rate, but rather a slightly higher rate, than their declared counterparts, 56.9% to 54.8%. While the authors did not go so far as to claim that being undecided is better for one’s graduation chances, they did feel that their work seeks to counter a stereotype surrounding undecided students and their academic abilities.

On the other hand, the more recent work of Leppel (2001) paints a different picture. Using a national survey to analyze the impact of a student’s major on their likelihood or persisting to the second year of college, Leppel found that undecided students were significantly less likely to continue in school than any other category of major that could be selected. The study also found that undecided students were more likely to receive lower grades in their first year. St. John, Hu, Simmons, Carter, and Weber's (2004) quantitative study of over 8,000 students also supported concern that undecided students are less likely to continue in school. While the conclusion of St. John et. al was limited to white, Midwestern college students, their work found that being undecided at the onset of college had a negative
correlation with graduation rates, noting specifically that their work contrasts with that of Lewallen’s. Ultimately, research on the speed with which students select majors has mixed results, leaving no clear conclusion whether speed of choice improves academic outcomes.

Other scholars have sought to identify correlations between undecided students’ personality traits and the majors they eventually select, viewing success not just as graduating from college but as picking the right career. Gaffner and Hazler (2002) sought to connect Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) results with different outcomes for undecided students. The results of the study showed that lack of career readiness was far more significantly related to career and major indecision than personality types or other factors such as lacking proper information. Pulver and Kelly (2008) compared the MBTI assessment with the Strong Interest Inventory (SII), an assessment specifically designed to help students select a major in school. Their results also showed the MBTI as particularly ineffective at predicting majors, but also found that the SII assessment was ineffective in predicting certain types of majors, and ultimately did not recommend using any personality measures to identify academic majors and possible career paths. While these and other research articles do not position graduation rates as the primary success point, they emphasize a streamlined process for choosing a major as an ideal, thus reinforcing overall view of the previous articles that selecting the correct major is most important concern for students without a major.

Whether as a result of or in spite of the inconclusive research, the underlying assumption of undecided as a problem to be solved seems to be present in much of this quantitative literature. Several articles look at different types of academic interventions for undecided students. Reinheimer and McKenzie (2011) examined the effects of tutoring on undeclared students. Four hypothesis were proposed and tested for: whether undeclared students who receive tutoring were more likely to persist in college than those who did not; whether undeclared students who received tutoring were more likely to persist longer than those who did not; whether undeclared students who received tutoring earned a
higher GPA than those who did not; and whether undeclared students who received tutoring are more likely to select a major by the end of their second year than those who did not. Their research concluded that tutoring did improve retention rates for these students (the first two hypotheses) but not improve GPA or selection time (the latter two hypotheses). These results led them to conclude that tutoring was an effective solution for helping students towards “succeeding to graduation” (34), though it interestingly showed no evidence that quickly selecting a major would impact graduation rates.

Additionally, these results helped justify the author’s understanding that undeclared students may be struggling socially as well as academically, and that tutoring provided an outlet for them to solve their social issues. A continued connecting between undecided students and various problems is present through this research.

In addition to Reinheimer and McKenzie’s work, Jurgens (2000) examines whether two-step or four-step intervention programs were more effective at increasing career certainty for undecided students. Just like in the previous work, the assumption is that undecided students are inherently at a disadvantage in some way. Almost all of these articles end with prescriptions for universities to take in order to funnel their students out of the “undecided” label and into a full major as quickly as possible in order to prevent a potential lack of academic success. For these researchers, success is usually defined by student retention rates, graduation rates, choosing a major by the end of the year, and less frequently, GPA increases.

Research also looks into the impact that race has on students selecting majors. Dockery and McKelvey (2013) looked at students receiving support from high school counselors when picking a school and major. Their results found that both African-American and Latino/a students felt less supported by these counselors than their white counterparts, particularly in the areas of academic and career planning. Many of these students also shared that they expected very little help from these counselors, leading the authors to believe that a more robust support system for helping students select
majors is needed. Other research in this area includes Torres and Hernandez (2009). Their research found that Latino/a students are far more likely to receive information directly from a college when it comes to picking a major and career path, which may be connected to the fact that Latino/a students are more likely to be first generation students than white students. The authors suggest establishing strong advising and mentoring relationships for these students to help increase retention rates. However, the authors also note that, at many schools, advisors are not assigned until after a major is declared through the university. It can be deduced, then, that undecided Latino/a students may be at a further disadvantage, even when compared to Latino/a students that have already selected a major and have access to these support systems.

This literature sees being undecided as, at best, a potentially negative obstacle for students, and looks to identify potential reasons or solutions for this state within the student. For example, Leppel (2001) notes in her research that the lower persistence rate by undecided college students is suspected to be because of a “lower commitment to their education” (338). This seems to highlight some of Fassett and Warren’s strategic rhetorics, particularly those of individualization and authenticity. The perception seems to be that undecided students are less genuinely committed to their education, and if they would just own their position, put forth an effort, and genuinely care about their education, they would find a major and with it college success. Whether the proposition was tutoring, intervention, identifying the proper personality trait, or another solution, the focus of this research seems to be getting the undecided student to make the “correct” choice for their overall educational success; in this case, any choice of major at all.

This view of undecided as a negative condition requiring amelioration also colors the lived experience of students. Several authors have taken a qualitative look at the perspectives and experiences of these students. In one of the earliest qualitative studies on undecided students, Hagstrom, Skovholt, and Rivers (1997) interviewed undecided students who had begun with some form
of advanced college credit out of high school. For these students, graduating on time should not be as much of an issue as many other students, yet they still reported feeling anxiety, frustration, and hopelessness in reference to their lack of major and their academic career. Some students mentioned feeling depressed as a result of not having a major. All said they experience pressures from family and peers in some way, and dealt with the perception they were lazy because of the undecided label. One student notably commented: “I don't want to be undecided. Just give me a title or something! I hate it! I'm undecided. Everyone else is decided...” (26). All of the students that participated in the research saw being undecided as a negative, stress-inducing experience for them, and perhaps most importantly, were worried about how their classmates with majors would judge them for their undecided status.

A more recent example of this perception of undecided students comes from Reynolds, Gross, Millard, and Pattengale (2010), whose performed a longitudinal, mixed methods study of a “life-calling” class at a university that was taken by undecided students. When interviewing these undecided students about their experiences, the students talked of feeling “abnormal”, “displaced”, and even “less of a person” compared to their classmates that had selected a major already (59). Other students mentioned such feelings as panic, frustration, disappointment, and discouragement. Several students mentioned the explicit pressure placed on them by constant questions about their lack of major choice from other students, noting that for most incoming students it was the most common question asked of them by students and faculty alike, and that “…saying ‘undeclared’ lots of times, unless the people knew me, I think they kind of felt like, ‘Oh, he’s just bummimg around’” (60). This highlights the strategy of individualization identified by Fassett and Warren; the student’s lack of success in selecting a major was viewed by fellow students as an individually-located failure, and potentially by the faculty teaching their courses as well. Reynolds et al. concur with the themes of Fassett and Warren, and concluded by noting that rather than the issues for these students being their undecided status itself, the issues lied with a lack of support from the university.
Workman’s (2015) study of undecided students’ experiences with first-year academic advising support conclusions about the anxiety caused by the "undecided" label. When asked questions about their feelings about being undecided, these particular students did not mention specifically negative feelings, but the author noted that their nonverbal behaviors seemed to imply a sense of pressure or obligation to pick a major. Starling and Miller (2011) studied the negative thought patterns and processes of undecided community college students, suggesting a holistic approach to helping them deal with anxiety and career decision-making. Both of these articles suggest that these students are experiencing and living the second rhetorical strategy suggested by Fassett and Warren, that of victimization. They acknowledge and feel the societal pressure to pick a major quickly, and may have negative feelings as a result.

This pressure and anxiety associated with choosing a major does not start solely in college. Workman (2015) found that parental influence had a significant impact on students selecting majors going into college, with a mixture of both positive and negative pressure mentioned by the students being interviewed. McDaniels, Carter, Heinzen, Candrl, and Wieberg (1994) note how for many students, majors are being selected for the wrong reasons. They mentioned reasons such as parents wanting them to choose a certain major, feeling that having a major gets them certain academic privileges, or feeling that they are in a social minority if they don’t select a major. The work of Bright, Pryor, Wilkenfeld, and Earl (2005) supports this as well, where they note that parents have the largest impact of any factor when it comes to career decision for college students. It is easy to infer that, if students are experiencing pressure to pick a major even before they set foot on a college campus, that pressure still remains once they become a college student and are labeled as undecided.

As Fassett and Warren (2004) note, the rhetoric used and promoted by universities to label students can have an impact on the perceptions and realities of students in higher education. Some researchers have recognized this across the years, particularly as it relates to the labeling of undecided
students. McDaniels et al. noted the negative connotations of the undecided label. They write that the term implies it is abnormal to still be deciding on a major as a new student, and that there is a need to create a label that encourages more positivity and activity from the student and to realize that others are making decisions as well. The term that they recommended and saw coming into use at the time of publication was “deciding”. Since then, some universities have created other labels for their programs.

The attention to these labels is not limited to the academic world, either. A 2012 *New York Times* article (Simon, 2012) centered in on the topic, writing that colleges were indeed shying away from the negative perceptions of the undecided label. Writing that “‘Exploratory’ is the new undeclared”, the article looks at how colleges are becoming more interested in encouraging experimentation, relieving some of the stress experienced in selecting a major, and ultimately reminding students that selecting a major requires an active role on their part. By using a label such as Exploratory and matching it with positive language, these programs are communicating a very different meaning than the “mythology” that Kroc noted in his research (1997). These label changes coincide with changing programs for these students as well, offering increased social support in addition to a new rhetorical framing. They are the signposts of programs constituting a different rhetorical personae and the name that students use to refer to themselves, and as such represent the crux of this research project for classifying and understanding the various rhetorical practices present in the data set. In order to understand the effects of these labels further, the next section of this paper will provide a survey of the rhetorical literature that informs this project.

*Rhetorical Literature*

Kenneth Burke’s theory of identification, laid out in his 1969 book *A Rhetoric of Motives*, is key to understanding modern rhetoric, as well as the ways that naming and labeling work. Burke sought to expand the understanding and application of rhetoric, which focuses on the process of persuasion by shifting the focus of rhetorical study from "persuasion" to "identification." Burke wrote that “you
persuade a man [sic] only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his [sic] “(55). This understanding of identification as central to rhetoric changed how he understood persuasion. In his theory, persuasion is a more narrow description of how rhetoric works, falling under the larger umbrella of identification. What Burke calls identification, then, are ways that an idea becomes connected to an audience through discourse.

Besides encompassing more than persuasion, identification breaks from traditional theory in the matter of intentionality as well. One aspect of Aristotle’s understanding of rhetoric saw authors as agents fully in control of their own discourse and its effects (Aristotle, 1992). This perspective fails to acknowledge unintentional associations that can result from rhetorical discourse. Another way Burke broke from the mold was in highlighting how different words or actions can be identified with various causes and perspectives. Whenever a rhetor invokes a concept that has multiple identifications or associations, those identifications are carried forward regardless of the rhetor’s desire or intention to include those associations in their own discourse. Burke gives an example of a shepherd that “acts for the good of the sheep, to protect them from discomfiture and harm. But he may be ‘identified’ with a project that is raising the sheep for market” due to other people’s associations of the job of a shepherd (27).

When rhetorical identification occurs over time, a “body of identifications” can occur (26). In other words, when rhetoric, intentional or not, is used in reference to a certain object repeatedly, a set of identifications can occur. Burke emphasizes that the occurrence of this body of identifications is primarily due to sheer volume of usage more than the rhetorical skill of those involved. This once again ties to Burke’s notion that identification need not be intentional. Whether or not someone intends to identify one thing to another through rhetoric is irrelevant to whether a body of identifications has occurred. The impact of consistent, repeated labeling of students can be understood in the framework of a body of identifications.
The groundwork of identification explains how labeling and naming can be rhetorical, but concepts such as constitutive rhetoric further explain the impact identification can have on a population. Maurice Charland’s work on constitutive rhetoric (1987) draws heavily on Burke’s concepts to discuss a specific way that an audience can be identified. Charland was interested in how people groups came to be identified with various groups and how people participate in the rhetoric that forms their identification in the first place. His subject was the Quebec independence movement that claimed French-speaking residents of Quebec constituted a separate group or people—the peuple Quebecois. Charland analyzed the rhetoric used by the Parti Quebecois, particularly focusing on a major position paper urging people to vote yes on a proposal for independence from Canada, to see how they used rhetoric to constitute a Quebec people and argue their case. He argued that what constitutes a group of people is rhetorically situated and created. Looking at the example in Quebec, he notes that not only are the characteristics of the peuple Quebecois up for debate and rhetorical determination, but so are the boundaries of who is included and excluded in this people. These distinctions do not simply exist outside of human interaction and discourse, and therefore lie in the realm of rhetoric.

One key point of analysis for Charland was that throughout the discourse surrounding the people Quebecois, the people were not being persuaded explicitly to join the cause. Rather, the rhetoric centered around identifying them, drawing heavily on Burke’s theories, as members of the group already. These French-speaking Canadians, as they were often referred to, were not being asked to support a cause that previously did not exist. They were being told that being Quebecois was already an inherent part of who they were, and that “only a OUI [yes] vote would be in harmony with their being and their collective destiny” (146). This was an important distinction for the sovereignty movement, as their argument was not that they deserved independence from Canada but that they were never truly Canadian in the first place. Note that most of this was not explicitly stated, but rather implied through the rhetorical choices of the Parti Quebecois. While the proposal for Quebec’s sovereignty ended up
failing, a large enough population of people voted OUI [yes] to show that the rhetoric constructed and used by the party had an impact on people’s votes, and more importantly how they viewed themselves as a people.

Charland uses this example to build his concept of constitutive rhetoric. Rather than simply stop at Burke’s understanding and acknowledge the body of identifications here, Charland goes further as to name and describe how these identifications are constituting a people group. Charland describe this as occurring through what he calls interpellation, or “hailing.” The very moment that someone enters into a rhetorical situation, the moment that they allow themselves to become the audience described and constrained by the rhetoric, is achieved by the rhetoric itself hailing that person. Any response or acknowledgement on behalf of the audience in this situation is a response to that hailing, and positions them as a member of the rhetorical discourse, whether or not they are aware or intentionally entering the situation.

A critical distinction for Charland is that these created people groups exist within and because of the narratives into which they are hailed. The rhetoric that constitutes the peuple places them as characters in a story, and without that narrative they are not a people. The narrative being told about them positioned them as a sovereign people worthy of a sovereign political state, and moved them to vote in such a way politically. This narrative, when found to be both coherent as a whole and true to the feelings of the people being hailed, created identification with a whole new group that was created in the narrative, and led many to take political action.

Charland writes that there are three main ideological effects to constitutive rhetoric. The first is that constituting a collective subject is not only narrative in nature but also ideological. To tell the story of a people group like the Quebecois, one must assert that the people group exists as its own entity, a declaration of ideology. To tell a different story about this context is to share a different ideology through the narrative. Furthermore, the narrative itself identifies the past events and future actions of a
group to whatever ideology guides the narrative that the constituted group is now situated in. Kilambi, Laroche, and Richard (2013) illustrate this first effect in their analysis of constitutive marketing, where companies constitute a community for their brand through the rhetorical narratives presented to their customers. One cannot simply participate in the brand without wearing the ideological mantle of the brand, as they show in their case study of Apple and the mythology surrounding that brand community. Buying an Apple computer made you not just a customer but a “Mac person,” not just a consumer but an individual that identifies with the ideological values associated with the brand that Apple has created around their products, such as their customers being positioned as cultural rebels and technological pioneers. Goehring and Dionisopolous (2013) used constitutive rhetoric when analyzing The Turner Diaries, a white supremacist novel published in the 1970s. With a Burkean understanding of rhetoric, the authors note how the diary format of the narrative in particular allows the author to present the world from the narrator’s racist eyes, imbuing the story with a prejudiced viewpoint. To read and process the narrative was to be identified with and constituted as a member of the author’s white supremacist ideology, not just as an observer of the narrative.

Second, Charland says that subjects in a given narrative are constrained, or positioned, by the rhetoric used to tell the narrative, a condition Charland described as a transhistorical subject. For the Peuple Quebecois, the existence of their people was reliant upon their retelling of the history of French settlers in North America, their right to being a separate people depending on the timing and action of their ancestors. They are restrained by what their collective history implies they should be. Christina Morus (2007) analyzes the emergence of Serbian nationalism through a publicized memorandum that is seen as a factor in encouraging Serbian independence from the Yugoslav federation. This writing relied on a questioning of the historic and repeated suffering of the Serbian people, positioning a collective suffering by a group of people into a historical narrative. The Serbian people are defined by their unjust treatment over time, and would not be a coherent people without the existence of that treatment.
This second ideological effect can also be seen as explaining why some constitutive rhetoric fails to hold with a people. Zagacki (2008) examined the speeches that George H. W. Bush gave in regards to the United States’ involvement in Iraq. While President Bush tried to position the Iraqi people as a sovereign nation that inherently desire a democratic state, the Iraqi people primarily saw themselves in relation to Sunni and Shiite cultural backgrounds. The narrative they truly felt hailed by did not position them as a people desiring democracy, and Bush’s constitutive rhetoric failed to take hold as a result. A competing narrative interpellated them, preventing Bush’s rhetorical construction from being successful.

While Charland, Morus, and Zagacki all take a political orientation towards applying constitutive rhetoric, others have used the concept in different ways. Kilambi, Laroche, and Richard provide an example of constitutive rhetoric in marketing, while Stein (2002) critiques the famous Apple “1984” advertisement that aired during the 1984 Super Bowl as advertising that reconstructed a passive audience as consumers of personal computers. Both of these articles explicitly use constitutive rhetoric in a corporate setting, which raises questions about the notion of transhistorical subjects. While a narrative of the Quebecois or the Serbian people can be traced back to historic events, the connections from a current consumer of an Apple product to previous consumers is harder to pin down. Here, the constituted groups have not always been the groups that they are currently being constituted as—Apple customers are not Apple customers for all of their history in the same way the Quebecois have always been the Quebecois—but rather the notion is presented that there always will be these groups as they currently are being constituted. The importance to Apple’s rhetoric is not whether a person always was or is a “Mac person” but rather the notion that a “Mac person” is always a present type of person. Charland’s second ideological effect could therefore be thought of not as constraining individual subjects to a narrative but rather constraining a subject group to a narrative; the focus is not on a single member over time but the group over time. This pushes the notion of constitutive rhetoric in new
directions and allows it to be applied in situations where the membership of a constituted group changes, while the permanence of the constituted group does not.

The third ideological effect discussed by Charland is that the subject only experiences an illusion of freedom and agency. The rhetor controls the narrative, creates the personas for themselves and the audience, and positions the subjects not just for their current state but for their movement towards the future. With the people Quebecois, an illusion of freedom is presented, but if the narrative is accepted by the group, the only logical choice the narrative affords them is to seek independence; any other choice would be a rejection of the constitution of a people group. The effects of this are seen one again in Zagacki’s analysis of the Bush speeches. His constitutive rhetoric presented an illusion of a free people, but that the only true course of action for that people was to seek democracy under the guidance of the United States. The only way to become the people of Bush’s narrative was to take that action, and their indifference towards that action only furthers Zagacki’s case that the constitutive rhetoric itself failed. Stein’s analysis of the 1984 Mac commercial highlights this effect as well. The commercial constitutes its audience not just as a people group but one with a goal. To be interpellated by the commercial’s constitutive rhetoric, and to respond to the rebellious ideology of its narrative, is to purchase a Macintosh computer.

A complementary concept to constitutive rhetoric, and one that also relies on the groundwork of identification, is Edwin Black’s theory of the second persona (1970). Black writes that, by its very nature, rhetoric lends itself to being judged on a moral spectrum, but critics are often hesitant to judge speech on moral grounds. He notes that, at the time he was writing, rhetoric was often treated like an inanimate object that requires no such moral attachment or evaluation. He felt that finding a method for morally evaluating rhetorical discourses was necessary for the field’s progression. Condit (2013) writes about this perceived need from Black, saying that “to the extent that rhetorical critics wish to do
more than merely act as technical coaches, but instead to play a role in history, then broad judgments are necessary” (8).

Black’s understanding of rhetorical personae is his solution to this issue. A critic should attend to the depictions of the author and the audience created in the discourse. The image of the rhetor that is being displayed through the discourse is the “first persona.” Perhaps even more important for Black is the characterization of the audience that is offered by the text. Black refers to this implied audience as the “second persona”. This concept is more than just understanding what audience the discourse is expecting to be delivered to. Rather than helping a reader understand who the audience might be, studying the second persona helps a reader understand what the discourse wants the audience to be. Black writes that we can identify what this desired audience is through the identification of ideological “tokens,” metaphors and phrases present throughout the discourse that allude to the rhetor’s mindset and projections for the audience. This agrees with Charland’s description of constitutive narratives being inherently ideological. Black describes an audience’s persona that is constrained by the ideologies presented by the rhetor and motivated to act in the way that the rhetor constructs them, tying in all three ideological effects of constitutive rhetoric.

Black gives the example of referring to communism as a cancer: In the mid-twentieth century, this was a common metaphor used almost exclusively by conservative politicians. Black identifies several implications of the metaphor for the audience and the role it must play in responding to this cancer. Cancer is a disease that causes death; it was nigh incurable or treatable at the time; it is an organism that spreads and invades the body; and finally, it requires immediate treatment in order to have a chance of surviving it. All of these different aspects of cancer can be associated with communism through this token, painting a very negative picture of communism.

When audiences encounter these tokens, the associated ideologies can become present in the minds of the audience, even if the discourse does not explicitly engage with them. George Cheney
(1983) examines how Black’s tokens indirectly create identification in organizations’ internal publications, furthering some of Black’s original claims. When discussing the names and titles of different aspects of corporate life, Cheney writes that these labels become subtle vehicles of the organization’s identity and present to the audience “identifying ‘baggage’ in the form of values, interests, and the like” whether or not the audience is fully aware or not (146). Cheney’s understanding of corporate naming supports Black’s notion that ideological tokens are the vehicle of identification, and these tokens can influence the audience to adopt, in part or whole, that worldview. In short, they too begin to identify with the perspective of the rhetor. Combined with Burke’s notion of a body of identifications, the repetition of these labels can have a profound impact on students. The analysis of the names and labels for a group of people by an institution can be insightful towards understanding their effects on a group.

While some audiences identify with the tokens constituting the second persona, some audiences find themselves explicitly excluded by a rhetor. Philip Wander (1984) describes these audiences as a third persona: those “audiences not present, audiences rejected or negated through the speech and/or the speaking situation” (209). In a discourse where the rhetor is “I” and the second persona is “you”, the third persona constitutes negated or excluded “they.” This excluded “they” is constituted by absence. Wander notes that “just as the discourse may be understood to affirm certain characteristics” of a second persona, “it may also be understood to imply other characteristics, roles, actions, or ways of seeing things to be avoided. What is negated through the Second Persona forms the silhouette of a Third Persona…” (209). For Wander, this construction of a third persona is inherently negative and limiting, with “the potential to spell out being unacceptable, undesirable, insignificant” (209). Furthermore, its construction is intertwined with the second persona hailed by the rhetor, causing the third persona to be “measured against an ideal” in such a way that will always leave the third persona wanting (211). While much university rhetoric around major choice constructs a second
persona for students, some rhetorical practices might downplay or denigrate certain qualities, thus reinforcing the negative perceptions commonly held about not having a major.

Another author to expand and challenge the limits of Black’s writings on persona is Celeste Condit (2013). She analyzes Black’s original essay and argues that his ideological criticism does not take into account the emotions present in a given discourse. Black’s understanding of ideologies is based on the notion that humans are constructed around their ideas and world views. With this understanding, Condit writes, “People...are not constituted through their habits, or their feelings, or their relationship with others” (8), which misses out on key contexts that help to understand human discourse and action. She critiques his reading of the “communism-as-cancer,” arguing that the effectiveness of this metaphor must be understood through the frame of pathos. The metaphor has an emotional appeal to a certain set of audiences that helps its effectiveness, which Condit argues is indicative of affect and emotion, not ideology. The second persona does not solely tell an audience what to think or believe; it tells an audience what to feel and how those feelings should impact actions.

If Condit is correct, then discovering how rhetoric is impacting an audience involves understanding the perceptions of an audience as much as analyzing the tokens of meaning within the discourse. To assess audience perceptions requires talking to audience members and use qualitative methods to draw out how participants experience the undecided rhetoric. Lindlof and Taylor (2010) argue that qualitative methods, especially qualitative interviews, allow researchers to understand the experiences and perspectives of individuals as they present in the individual's own terms. Tracy (2012) agrees, offering that qualitative research provides a researcher “a peek into regularly guarded worlds, and an opportunity to tell a story that few know about” (5).

A good interview should empower the interviewee in such a way that they want to share their own opinions rather than what they think the researcher might want to hear. This is often accomplished by establishing common ground and rapport with the interviewee. It is important for the interviewer to
make the move towards establishing rapport, often through self-disclosures that are relatable to the
to the interviewee. A variety of other aspects should be considered when designing an interview experience. A
dislocation should be selected that offers the interviewee a level of anonymity and security, possibly a
neutral location that allows the interviewee to feel like the interviewer is not controlling the
evironment in any way. Time considerations are also important for both parties. The interview should
take place at a time where the interviewee is not distracted or stressed, both to ensure accuracy in
responses as well as to provide safety for rapport-building.

Lindlof and Taylor note that there are three types of responses that an interviewee can give to a
researcher about their own experience. The first is a story, generally the most artistic and personal of
the three responses. Secondly, an interviewee may give an account, usually a more defensive and
perhaps more excusing detail of events. Finally, an explanation may be given as well, where biases are
more or less neutral and the tone is logical and factual. Not all of these responses are the same, but all
can be helpful in determining not only what a respondent has experienced, but their personal reactions.
It is important for the interviewer to understand what response an interviewee is giving and interpreting
it accordingly.

The type of question asked of the interviewee is also important. For this reason, it is important
for the researcher to develop an interview protocol that provides some sort of guide for conducting the
interview. Lindlof and Taylor offer two forms: an interview schedule, which consists of a formal order of
questions to ask a participant, and an interview guide, which gives a less formal thematic order and
more freedom to the researcher for contextual probing. The types of questions asked, regardless of the
interview format, are also of importance. The authors recommend starting with a broad question about
the topic, allowing the interviewee to get comfortable with the topic in general. From there, the
questions in the interview can get progressively more specific about certain details of interest to the
researcher. Designing most questions as non-directive and non-leading is important, putting the
interviewee in a position to answer questions in their own voice rather than forcing their answer into a specific format or trying to give the answer they think the researcher desires.

In total, these various theories allow me to investigate the rhetoric being used by universities. By looking at constitutive aspects of university rhetoric about undecided students, and by investigating what personae and narratives they create, this project has a lens with which to analyze this rhetoric and a ground from which to understand the information that will be drawn out of interviews with participants.

**Methods and Research Questions**

The project involves a multi-step analysis: a rhetorical analysis of university websites and a set of qualitative interviews, examining both the breadth of labeling practices used by universities to name these students as well as a depth of understanding for specific students at one university. The first part of the project, discussed in Chapter 2, analyzes the rhetoric of the fifteen largest universities in the state of Ohio and how they label and describe students still deciding on a major. In order to get a broad sense of the different ways that universities describe undecided students, I examine the public-facing websites for the 15 highest-attended four-year universities in the state of Ohio. For both potential college students and parents, as well as current students looking to enter a program, these websites are a primary method of obtaining information. These schools offer a variety of different rhetorical labeling schemes which creates a diverse rhetorical ecology, where students encounter and are hailed by multiple and competing personae. Within this ecology of personae, students make sense of their major or lack thereof. In order of enrollment size, these schools are: The Ohio State University, the University of Cincinnati, Kent State University, Ohio University, the University of Akron, the University of Toledo, Cleveland State University, Miami University, Wright State University, Bowling Green State University, Youngstown State University, the University of Dayton, Case Western Reserve University, Ashland University, and Xavier University.
In total, 97 pages of text were collected from the various web pages of the different institutions. Pages include the general admissions page for each university, internal website search engines, any specific pages referring to the school’s program for students still deciding on majors, and any ancillary pages that reference the program or provide further information about it, such as career service center webpages. A rhetorical analysis through the lens of constitutive rhetoric and the second and third personae was then performed, looking first at themes common among schools that share the same program label and then looking for themes across different labels, in order to understand the different constructions that are hailing students and parents that visit these sites.

The second stage of analysis, covered in Chapter 3, uses qualitative interview analysis at the University of Cincinnati. Ten students that were currently enrolled in the university’s Exploratory Studies program participated in the study. Participants for the project were collected via convenience sampling during the Fall Semester of 2016 by the author, through visiting classes and learning communities and providing contact information to sign up for the project. From those initial encounters, a few other participants were acquired via snowball sampling. The University of Cincinnati, and by extension the Center for Exploratory Studies, did not play any role in promoting the study or acquiring participants for the project. Interviews for each student were 15-25 minutes long and were performed in the fall semester of the 2016-2017 academic calendar year. A single interviewer, the author of this thesis project, used a semi-structured interview guide that asked questions centering on a student’s journey into the Exploratory program, their perceptions of both the program and its rhetoric, and the various forms of social support or stigmatization they encountered along the way.\(^1\) Responses from the interviews were transcribed and kept with the research team, with identifiers scrubbed and pseudonyms given to each participant to maintain anonymity. The results of the interviews were then analyzed individually by the author of the thesis through the lens of the first stage of analysis, taking

\(^1\) The interview guide used to conduct these interviews is included in the Appendix.
special note of how the student’s perceptions of the Exploratory label as well as interactions with social support impacted the constitution of the Exploratory persona present at the University.

Guided by the discussed literature and methods, the following research questions were pursued in this research project:

**RQ1:** What rhetorical practices are employed on the websites of various universities in the state of Ohio?

- **RQ1a:** What labels are present on the websites of universities in the State of Ohio?
- **RQ1b:** What language accompanies these labels on the websites of universities in the state of Ohio?
- **RQ1c:** What personae are constructed on the websites of universities in the state of Ohio?

**RQ2:** What factors impact the constitution of a student by the Exploratory persona at the University of Cincinnati?

*Chapter Preview*

Subsequent pages of this thesis will be divided into chapters. Chapter 2 involves the first stage of analysis, looking at the rhetorical practices of the 15 largest 4-year institutions in the state of Ohio. By analyzing the rhetoric in use on their websites, the various labeling practices will be identified and described and the rhetorical personae constructed for students are discussed. Chapter 3 is the second stage of analysis, using qualitative research methods to interview students in the Exploratory program at the University of Cincinnati. Questions about their perceptions of, and experiences in, the Exploratory program help to parse out how these students interact with the constructed personae of the University of Cincinnati, as well as the other personae for students without majors that they regularly encounter. Finally, Chapter 4 looks at conclusions and limitations of the project along with discussing future directions leading from this research.
Chapter 2: Rhetorical Analysis

Student identity, vis a vis their major and educational outcomes, is shaped by the rhetoric employed at their university. For many students and their families, a university’s public-facing website is the first, and primary, method of receiving information on a school. Student identity is therefore impacted by the rhetoric that universities use on their websites. This chapter analyzes the rhetoric used at schools in the state of Ohio to label students without majors and the programs dedicated to them.

Across the 15 schools analyzed, at least 10 different labels were used on their websites. These included Deciding Student, Discover, Exploration, Exploratory, Exploratory Studies, Pre-Major, QUEST, Undecided, Undeclared, University Studies, but the most common labels were Exploratory and Undecided.

Furthermore, many schools had supplemental programs run by smaller units (i.e., colleges and departments) that employed their own labels.2

This range of labels and language practices construct different personas for the student without a major, but these personas and their rhetorical functions can be organized on a continuum (Figure 1).

On one end of the continuum are schools that employ the Exploratory label, which constitutes students using a second persona emphasizing a positive and meaningful collegiate journey of personal discovery.

On the other end of the continuum are schools that employ the Undecided label, which constitutes students using a third persona characterized by minimal language that reinforces commonplace negative assumptions about the lack of a major. Between these two extremes are several schools that employ the two constitutive strategies and their attendant personae to varying degrees. I will start by

2 Even at schools with comprehensive programs for students still deciding on a major, there are usually options for selecting to be “undecided” within a certain college at the school. The most common example of this is to be undecided within a university’s College of Business. These programs appear to operate independently of the broader university-wide programs and use language at odds with the labels employed by the university as a whole. For example, the University of Cincinnati as a whole uses the label “Exploratory,” but it also has an “Undecided (Undeclared) Business” label. The existence of different labels within the same university complicates in some ways the personas created at each school; however, these side or secondary programs are not easily accessed (i.e., it requires navigating online through multiple webpages). As a result of this, I have set aside these secondary programs and focused on the major university-wide programs and they labels they employ.
describing each pole of the continuum, where schools emphasize one of the polar terms, then examine
the schools that operate in the middle of the continuum with an inclination towards one rhetorical
construction or the other.

**Exploratory-heavy Schools**

At one end of the continuum there are schools that emphasize the label and associated
language Exploratory to describe students still deciding on their majors. This group includes the
University of Cincinnati, The Ohio State University, Kent State University, and Xavier University. Each
school uses slight variation on the label: The University of Cincinnati uses “Exploratory Studies”; The
Ohio State University uses “Exploration”; while Kent State University and Xavier University both use
“Exploratory.” In addition to the broader label of Exploratory, Kent State and Ohio State allow students
within the program to select a more narrow focus. For example, Ohio State has an “Art, Innovation, and
Design Exploration”, a program that allows students to explore majors related to that theme, like “arts
management” or “fashion and retail studies” (“Arts, Innovation, and Design”). Kent State has its
“Exploratory (Human Services and Social Sciences)” program, where students explore majors within the
social sciences. All four programs offer courses, programming, and advisors that are dedicated specifically to serving Exploratory students.

These four universities construct similar personae for their Exploratory students through the rhetorical practices on their websites, not the least of which is the ease of access to the Exploratory programs on the universities’ webpages. All four of the universities have web pages dedicated to their Exploratory program, and these pages are easily accessible through the internal site search engine. Both The Ohio State University and Xavier University’s search engines redirect any visitor who searches for “undecided” to their Exploratory/Exploration page\(^3\), while the University of Cincinnati and Kent State University have sections on their main Admissions pages that promote and link to their Exploratory pages. This placement of links on the website and direction of website search queries help promote the Exploratory programs. The universities further promote these programs by prominently featuring the awards the programs have received from national organizations.

The way that the Exploratory web pages are constructed and incorporated into the main website further promote credibility and value of the label and the program to any student or parent seeking out information. For all four institutions on this end of the continuum, Exploratory is listed in the schools’ directory of majors. While most of the sites note on these lists that Exploratory programs do not grant degrees, placing them in the same list as majors like engineering or education gives them credibility as a choice, and highlights their value for parents and students that may be looking through lists for potential choices of major.

Not only does the website redirect searches for “undecided” into the Exploratory pages, but the label Undecided is redefined and subordinated to the Exploratory label and language. All four schools contain a usage of “undecided” or “undeclared” to refer to students without majors at multiple points

\(^3\) However, a search for “undeclared” on either of these sites will bring up information about the secondary programs housed within different colleges.
on their website, though Xavier University’s references come primarily through student quotations in the articles promoted on their web page. Many of these usages are explanatory, helping to inform readers of the nature of the Exploratory program if they are unfamiliar with it, and they help to transition readers to Exploratory language. The University of Cincinnati’s webpage illustrates this in a page for prospective students:

The word "exploratory" is used to describe a student who has yet to declare a major in a baccalaureate program. In the past, the term that was used to describe such students was "undecided," which is somewhat misleading. The term "exploratory" truly captures the essence of those students who want to explore their many options for a baccalaureate program.

(Prospective Students)

These schools repurpose the Undecided label, simultaneously combating the negative stigma associated with it while positively positioning their own students for success.

Some of the usages of labels like undecided serve less of this purpose and instead seem to be additional labels to the typical Exploratory language. For example, if a student does not select a more narrow focus at The Ohio State University within the Exploration program, they are called “Exploration, Undecided” (“Exploration, Undecided”). Kent State University consistently refers to their program as the Exploratory program on their web pages, but has numerous references to their students as being undecided students. These usages complicate the rhetorical construction of the Exploratory student. If, as the literature suggests, Exploratory is being used to construct a more positive tone for students than the traditional usage of undecided, a student at The Ohio State University that is labeled “Exploration, Undecided” is experiencing both labels simultaneously. Similarly, if Kent State University consistently refers to the students in their Exploratory program as undecided students, students may not fully be hailed into the positive, discovery-based persona into which the Exploratory language would construct
them on its own. However, as a whole, the usage of the undecided and undeclared language within these websites is dwarfed by the number of times language like Exploratory or discovery is used.

Alongside the name for students without a major, the webpages emphasize narratives of “discovery.” Xavier University’s Exploratory page features stories of successful students who began their academic careers in the Exploratory program. While some of the articles describes the eventual careers of these students, the importance of “personal discovery” is emphasized. For example, one article notes, “True success comes from discovering what your passions and talents are” (Barker, n.d.). The University of Cincinnati describes college as “a time for self-discovery” that gives students an “opportunity to explore their strengths, academic interests and talents” (“Exploratory”). In an article entitled “The Exploratory Major was the Right Choice for Me”, one student described the program as one that “shaped us into the people we are today—confident, experienced and ready to take on the world.” The webpage also uses a logo declaring “EXPLORE...DISCOVER...DECLIDE...DECLARE” (“Center for Exploratory Studies”). In a similar fashion, Kent State University describes the mission of their Exploration program as “empowering students through purposeful self-discovery” (“Exploratory Advising Center”). The Ohio State University describes their own program as a way to “explore academic possibilities” numerous times on its website (“The Ohio State University”). These students are positioned as learning about themselves and reaching a happy conclusion to their academic journey, not in spite of being in the Exploratory program but nearly because of being in the program.

Not all of the descriptions deal with personal interests and self-discovery. The student’s eventual choice of major and career is discussed, but this rhetoric is often framed within the broader narrative of self-discovery and exploration. Kent State University offers a learning community program for their Exploratory students known as “EXCEL (Explore, Career, Education, and Leadership)”. The stated mission of these communities on the website is “To create a community atmosphere fostering immediate friendships and connections among diverse exploratory students, peer mentors, faculty
members, and staff members”; while careers and the steps to identifying them are still discussed, those issues are positioned as secondary to community and self-discovery (“Goals”). Ohio State describes their University Exploration program as a way to “engage in a series of intentional experiences designed to help you create a unique and meaningful undergraduate experience and choose a major that will lead to a satisfying and rewarding degree” (“University Exploration”). Degrees are discussed as part of an overall process of self-discovery and the crafting of meaningful college experiences, rather than in the context of finishing a deadline or graduating on time. This highlights a key feature of schools located at this end of the continuum: the construction of the “ideal” college experience. Being in the Exploratory program is described as a valuable part of the college experience, which provides the time and space for students to discover themselves as part of attending college. The college experience is constructed as being the appropriate time to discover yourself and your passions and the rhetoric employed by these schools conveys a commitment by the university to help make that happen.

Another way the Exploratory persona is constructed is in the way that universities use this personal discovery rhetoric to position students as being in a normal in their academic career and on the track to future success, largely through the use of statistics. The Ohio State University dedicates an entire page to addressing misconceptions about students still deciding on a major, entitled “Undeclared: Myths Debunked”. Here, the university highlights statistics that frame indecision about a major as a common occurrence for college students. It includes statistics indicating that 15-20% of Ohio State students start in Exploration, as well as a nationwide study showing 75% of students changing their major at least once highlighted (“Undeclared: Myths Debunked”, see also “Prospective Students”, “What are the Advantages”). These schools are not just defending Exploratory programs against negative stigma associated with being “Undecided”. They also frame the programs as smart and sensible tools to help students find a “best-fit” major (“Center for Exploratory Studies”). The way the schools frame statistics on changing majors helps to make this case. On the University of Cincinnati’s website,
the statistic that 75% of students change majors at least once is listed, as it was on Xavier University’s website, but UC pairs that statistic with the observation, “Most students who take advantage of our services originally declared a major and then determined that it was the wrong fit” (“Prospective Students”). When the statistic is framed this way, a student unsure of their major is in good company. Being an Exploratory student is positioned as a safeguard against wasting time, given the number of students that originally picked a major and end up in Exploratory anyway.

These statistics enact the second ideological effect of constitutive rhetoric, the creation of a transhistorical subject. These statistics position Exploratory students as a part of a larger group of students across time. The narrative positions the exploratory student persona as a natural condition for many incoming students in any given year, even as the individual students themselves enter and exit the constructed persona during their time in college. The transhistorical positioning of “the Exploratory student” as a group is used to rally against the negative connotations of being without a major, making students feel their experience is normal and, in fact, valuable. Rather than being a single student who is lost and indecisive, the Exploratory student could be understood through these statistics as following a path well worn by students before them, progressing onwards towards a productive and fulfilling ending. On the other hand, this can be read as a fulfillment of Charland’s third ideological effect, the illusion of freedom for the constituted people group. In this case, these students are positioned to only have one real option as an Exploratory student: to pursue an understanding of personal interests and explore meaningful life callings. They are not free to pursue a major by other criteria, such as what makes the most money or where they think they are most likely to find employment upon graduation. Perhaps, however, this language of discovery and exploration provides a more real freedom than constitutive rhetoric typically calls for; after all, the rhetoric of the program literally encourages a freedom to choose a major. This more positive reading shows the Exploratory rhetoric of these schools
creating a space for students to experience a freedom to pursue a major, a positive outcome for the students and for the universities themselves.

Undecided-heavy Schools

On the other end of the continuum is a group of schools that use the label and language of “undecided” to describe students without majors. This is the largest category of schools, consisting of Ohio University, Wright State University, the University of Akron, Case Western Reserve University, Ashland University, and Youngstown State University. All six of these schools feature the label Undecided at various points across their website and use it as their primary label for students without majors. In contrast to constitution of students by the Exploratory-label universities, the schools in this group maintain the negative connotations typically associated with students lacking a major. The explicit discourse, the strategic absences, and relative placements of both construct undecided students as not being worthy of attention.

One strategic absence is the lack of information or the difficulty in finding information pertinent to undecided students. For many of these schools, the website does not provide clear public information on what a student might be called when entering without a major. Unlike the schools in the Exploratory category, many of the schools do not have an official page describing their undecided or undeclared programs. Case Western Reserve University has a collection of videos giving information for incoming students in certain majors. One of these videos is labeled “Undecided” for students without majors. With the exception of this video, the website gives no other name to students without a major (“Exploration Videos”). At Youngstown State University, a staff directory lists a single advisor as the “Undecided/Undeclared” advisor; the only other references to “undecided” appear in a career planning survey (“Contact Us”). Ohio University also uses the “Undecided/Undeclared” label on their website on a

---

4 While references to “undeclared” students are occasionally made at three of the schools, “undecided” is the term most commonly used. When the label of “undeclared” is employed, it is treated as a synonym for “undecided.”
page describing the college that houses their Undecided program (“What is University College?”).

Wright State University’s online labeling presence references “Undecided/Exploratory” on the college home page (“Requirements for Entering”), but uses “Undecided” on their career center website (“Career Center”). While these schools may have a label or system for describing students still deciding on a major, it is not made publicly available on their website, a primary mode of information for the incoming student or parent. Just as the Exploratory universities’ websites constructed a sense of value and credibility for their programs, the difficulty a visitor would have finding information on these universities’ pages contributes to the apparent lack of value in being undecided. If this construction serves to discourage students who may be entering an undecided program at the university, this very lack of presence may contribute to a self-fulfilling prophecy. These schools seem to dedicate less resources towards how they publicize their undecided programs, which communicates to a future undecided student a lack of value, and may even contribute to the negative stereotypes associated with undecided students (Leppel, 2001).

The differences between schools on the Exploratory-heavy and Undecided-heavy ends of the continuum extend beyond the primary labels and into the secondary and surrounding language that is found on the websites. Unlike the Exploratory-heavy schools, being undecided at these schools is described primarily as a temporary status rather than an identifiable program. An example of this comes from the University of Akron’s website, where honors students are told that they will be “classified as ‘Undecided’ in the college of your choice” (“Majors”). Rather than selecting the program, the emphasis for the student is placed on choosing a college, while the language of being “classified” implies a more temporary and less distinct nature to the program than that of the Exploratory-heavy schools. There are no associated programs to structure the experience of being “undecided.” Instead, these schools tend to have information for these programs housed underneath their career services center, which further downplays the importance of the programs at these schools. For example, the only section of Ashland
University’s website that directly addresses undecided is a section of their website entitled “Major and Career Exploration.” It is found in a drop chart underneath the “Career Resources” tab of the “Career Services” page, and is placed in a list of other tools such as “Graduate School”, “Resumes and Cover Letters”, and “The Job/Internship Search” (“Career Resources”).

By placing information about being undecided into these larger websites dedicated to careers, graduate school, and job searches, these universities construct undecided students in a fashion more like a third, rather than a second, persona. In other words, the audience is negated and avoided in the text. These portions of the websites deal with an idealized college student seeking career information. The undecided student, then, comes to this website as that inadvertent audience member, one who is out of step with the expectations for “normal” students. Wander (1984)’s assertion that these third personas are viewed as “unacceptable, undesirable, insignificant” (pg. 209) becomes these students’ identity, so long as they are undecided students. Unlike exploratory schools that recognizes the search for a major as a normal part of the university experience, these sites constitute the undecided student as an individual in an untenable position that must be vacated quickly. Only by leaving this position as quickly as possible by choosing a major, can a student then be constituted by the second persona of the larger undergraduate student body.

Another aspect of the rhetoric employed by Undecided-heavy universities that further constructs this third persona comes when considering the language commonly found at the Exploratory-label schools. While “discover” language is almost non-existent on the websites of undecided-label universities, “explore” and “exploration” do get used a fair amount. However, this language is applied quite differently than at the Exploratory-heavy universities. Rather than an emphasis on self-exploration or finding personal desires and interests, exploration language is directed at students with majors who are exploring career opportunities through the university’s career center. For example, Ashland
University makes many references to “exploration” in reference to their Eagle Exploration program, a career services program named after their school mascot:

Do you know what you can do for a living with your major? The research features in Eagle Exploration can help you tie a major to certain career options. Once you find that out, you might want to learn about what job titles mean, working conditions in that job, required skills and experience or future job prospects in that area. (“Major and Career Exploration”)

This language is employed and directed primarily towards students that already have majors, rather than students still searching for one. The third persona of the undecided student is evident here again; a student without a major is the absent, irrelevant audience. Furthermore, by directly addressing students with majors, the rhetoric sets up the student with a major as the ideal against which the third persona is measured. The negative connotations of the undecided label, including the way that undecided students describe feeling like “less of a person” (Reynolds, Gross, Millard, and Pattengale, 2010), are exacerbated by their concentration into this third persona.

Finally, the entire process of deciding on a major is framed differently here than at Exploratory-heavy schools. Rather than being an important time to learn and understand things about yourself in the present, the time spent being undecided is time trying to figure out what one might want to do in the future. There is no implied value in the time spent as an undecided student except for the ultimate selection of a major that will lead to a job. This is emphasized by one of the few references to the program on Youngstown State University’s website. In a “Career Survey” on the Career Services webpage, a student is asked “If undecided, what kind of help would benefit you the most in deciding on a major or occupation?” Options to select in response to the question are: “Tests to help me find out my interests”, “Information sessions on employment opportunities”, “Talking with a career counselor”, “Actual field experiences in a career area”, and “Other (please specify)” (“Career Survey”). This contrasts
with the personal exploration language found at Exploratory-heavy schools, and highlights the very different persona constructed at the different ends of the continuum.

**Exploratory-Light Schools**

In between the two poles of the continuum lie several schools that contain a mix of rhetorical practices and language sets associated with the exploratory and undecided labels. Some of these schools, which I will refer to as Exploratory-light schools, have more similarities with the Exploratory-heavy schools than those on the other end of the continuum, even if they do not use the Exploratory label explicitly. Schools in this category include Bowling Green State University, the University of Toledo, and the University of Dayton.

The schools in this category do not refer to their students without majors as Exploratory. Rather, they use labels, or combinations of labels, not found at other institutions in the data set, yet they still manage to create a similar positive effect as those on the Exploratory-heavy end of the continuum. Students still deciding on a major at Bowling Green State University are called “Pre-Major” students and are placed in the “Deciding Student” program (“Pre-Major and Academic”). At the University of Toledo, the students are referred to as “undecided” throughout their website, but places them into what is called the “Undecided QUEST Program” or simply QUEST program (“UNDECIDED QUEST PROGRAM”), while Dayton’s students are placed in “Discover” programs (“Program Listings”). Both of these labels have an inherent message of action and discovery that is similar to the Exploratory label; “deciding” on a major or being on a “quest” for a major constitutes a persona of discovery in the same way as “exploration” does, and is contrary to the negative connotations present of being “undecided.”

This positive persona is further constructed by the language accompanying these labels and programs. At Bowling Green State University, for example, all Pre-Major students take a class at Bowling Green State University entitled “Career and Life Planning,” which is described as a course that “helps students analyze interests, skills, personal traits, and desired life style to promote an awareness of the
The interrelationship between self-knowledge and career choice” (“Frequently Asked Questions”). This language connects self-discovery and eventual choice of profession. A similar class at the University of Toledo is described as “provid[ing] students with opportunities for self-discovery”. The program itself is positioned as “a chance to explore yourself,” and is also housed inside of the University of Toledo’s Department of Exploratory Studies5 (“Department of Exploratory Studies”). This personal discovery language plays an important role in defining and framing the labels of these schools. For example, the “Pre” in Bowling Green State University’s “Pre-Major” could imply a narrative positioning similar to undecided, where the student hasn’t yet started making meaningful contributions to their education. However, it avoids the negative connotations of Undecided because of the accompanying language.

The structure of the websites themselves parallels that of the Exploratory-heavy schools as well. All three of the schools have fully-defined programs that exclusively serve students without majors, with web pages explicitly delivering information about the programs. Much like the Exploratory programs of other schools, all three schools list their respective programs in the same list as other majors students can select from. Other factors, such as Dayton’s “Major Myths and Major Realities” section, bear similarity to the Exploratory-heavy schools. All of these factors contribute to the construction of a positive second persona. These students are directly addressed and constructed with a sense of value and worth.

Despite all these similarities, these schools have enough differences from the Exploratory-heavy schools to warrant a more central location on the continuum. One of these reasons is the presence of the undecided label, creating conflict in the construction of a positive persona. Though the QUEST label is highly visible at the University of Toledo, students are consistently referred to as being “undecided” students, and only once referred to as a “QUEST” student. In the Department of Exploratory Studies, a

---

5 The University of Toledo is the only school in this area of the continuum to directly label anything as Exploratory. The other two schools did not employ “explore” as a label. Instead, it is part of the accompanying language, like the use of “discover”.
section of information for students in their QUEST program is entitled “Undecided Students” (“Department of Exploratory Studies”). Even the name of the program itself is the “Undecided QUEST program”, a combination of labels that brings to light the conflicting negative connotations of Undecided next to the way that the QUEST label is framed elsewhere on the site. While the label is less prominent at Bowling Green State University and not used to label a program, the word “undecided” is present in the surrounding language for their program as well (see “Frequently Asked Questions”). The presence of this term, given the negative connotations inherent within it, complicate the persona that these schools create.

The University of Dayton’s program differentiates itself in a way different than the other two schools. Much like The Ohio State University’s Exploration programs, students in the University of Dayton’s Discover program pick a specific category to focus in, either “Discover Arts”, “Science”, “Business”, “Engineering”, “Engineering Technology”, or “Teacher Education” (“Program Listing”). Unlike The Ohio State University’s program, however, there is no option listed for being a general “Discover” student; all students must select one of the colleges to belong to. A section of their Career Services website tackles “Major Myths” and “Major Realities”. Under the “realities” section, viewers are told that “For first year students, choosing the correct school is more important than choosing a major”, that “Determining the right school for you is the first step in deciding on a major” and that “Your major is the ‘icing on the cake’” (“Issues to Consider”). This emphasis on choosing one of a few divisions is different and perhaps less daunting for students than selecting a major right away. Additionally, being able to make one sort of decision, even if they are not able to decide on a specific major, may help to alleviate some of the stress observed in the literature about purely undecided students. However, a decision is, in fact, pressed upon students right away, and while it is not the full decision of a major, this is a notable departure from the way the programs universally operate on the Exploratory-heavy end of the continuum.
Another difference between Dayton’s “Discover” program and the programs at other Exploratory schools like The Ohio State University is the lack of centrality to the program. While each Discover program can be found under the Program listings on the main Academic section, the information for each program is housed within the individual college’s website, and there is no umbrella webpage or online presence for a broad Discover program, though similar language and descriptions are used by each college on their website. This further contributes to the notion that at the University of Dayton, the decision on a college is given greater emphasis than other schools. Interestingly, the only other source of information about selecting a major that can be found on Dayton’s website comes from their career services website, a common feature of the Undecided-label schools. Because of this, the persona constructed by Dayton’s program is not quite the same as the Exploratory-heavy programs. Student identity seems to be more heavily tied into their individual college rather than exclusively the program itself. However, its usage of a positively-constructed second persona, rather than an excluding third persona, keeps on the Exploratory end of the continuum and most similar to the Exploratory-light schools, despite its significant differences in program structure.

*Undecided-Light Programs*

Finally, two of the universities used a rhetorical scheme that is more similar to the undecided-heavy schools, while still maintaining a few practices akin to the Exploratory end of the continuum that pull them away from the Undecided-heavy pole. The schools positioned here are Cleveland State University and Miami University. Both of these institutions are notable for the way that multiple labels appear on their website. Students still deciding on their major at Cleveland State University are referred to as “Undecided students” or “Undecided majors” throughout most of the website, but are directed to the Exploratory Advising Office. At various points within that portion of the website, they are referred to as “undecided Exploratory students” as well as “Exploratory students” and “undecided students” (“Advising”). At Miami, these students are put into a program labelled “University Studies”. However, a
great deal of the website does not refer to students as University Studies, instead calling them “Undeclared” students. For example, when looking at the “Majors and Minors” section of Miami University’s main website, viewers are told that “If you haven't decided on a major, learn more about the Undeclared option”, with “Undeclared” serving as a hyperlink to a further page (“Majors and Minors”).

Initially, the combination of labels here may seem similar to schools in the Exploratory-light section of the continuum, such as the University of Toledo and their “Undecided QUEST Program”. However, the surrounding language positions both of these schools in a way much more akin to the Undecided-heavy institutions. When Cleveland State University employs “explore” and “exploration” language outside of their program label, it is often connected with their career center and professional development. In a manner similar to the Undecided-heavy schools, this language becomes connected to students who have already selected majors, rather than explicitly those who are still deciding on one. Some of the information provided for Cleveland State University’s undecided students directs them to the Career Center proper (“Exploratory Academic Advising”), further striking a connection with the Undecided-heavy end of the continuum. Miami University also carries with it a heavy focus on career-related language. They offer a course entitled Career Development and the College Student that is geared towards their Undeclared students. The description of the class reads: “Explore your interests and examine career trends. Use the computerized career-guidance programs, career development books, and other resources at Miami’s Career Exploration and Testing Center. Learn about employment trends and opportunities from Career Services” (“Undeclared”). The majority of this description is focused on career planning, rather than personal discovery.

Despite this career focus, the persona that both of these schools employ is ultimately a second persona. The students at these schools have explicit programming in a way not at all present at the undecided-heavy schools. Creating a specific program like Cleveland State University’s Exploratory
Advising Center or Miami University’s University Studies program shows some sense of commitment to the student, and directly addresses them as an audience; this is the second persona at work. However, the actual persona constructed does not share a great deal in common with that of the schools on the Exploratory end of the spectrum. While acknowledged for not having a major and given a place and person to be, the career-focused language and relative difficulty of accessing information give the student at these schools does not communicate the same value shown in the personae created by the Exploratory schools. Furthermore, these programs do nothing to address the negative connotations associated with being undecided, nor do they spend much time or space presenting their program as a smart decision to make. While addressed as an audience, this persona is less of self-discovery and more of necessity; these schools recognize these students are here, but do not value them in the same way as the Exploratory schools. This difference in persona clearly separates these schools from the Exploratory-light schools, yet warrants their distinction from the third personae constructed by the Undecided-heavy schools.

Conclusions

The rhetoric employed by the 15 institutions in the data set exist on a continuum. The schools towards the Exploratory-heavy end of that continuum utilize language of personal discovery and construct a positive and fulfilling college journey for the student still deciding on a major. The Undecided-heavy end of the continuum highlights the opposite: a career-focused perspective that only references the student still deciding on a major in a sea of other students looking for career fulfillment, and positions them as behind the curve in their journey, in line with the negative connotations of the Undecided label. The second persona directly addresses these students on the Exploratory-heavy end, while the third persona references a negated audience on the Undecided-heavy end. Meanwhile, five schools employ rhetoric that positions them closer towards the middle of the continuum, using a
combination of rhetorical implications that bears a light resemblance to either the Exploratory persona or the Undecided persona.

The variety of practices amongst schools give us insight as to how the connotations of being without a major are rhetorically constructed. Referring to undecided students with the third persona, rather than a direct second persona, contributes to the negative connotations previous research has discovered around the undecided label. Conversely, schools fighting these connotations directly reference these students with the second persona, creating an explicit and positive identity into which these students can step. To avoid these students feeling like “less of a person” (Reynolds, Gross, Millard, and Pattengale, 2010), the Exploratory schools give them a person to be, rather than no person at all.
Chapter 3: Interview Analysis

The broad range of labels for students without degrees identified in this project exist on a continuum of personae they produce. One question to consider is the degree to which students’ identities are constituted by the labels’ personae. Here, we focus on the Exploratory label and discuss an in-depth qualitative study of students exposed to it. The rhetoric observed on the University of Cincinnati’s website is a pure form of the Exploratory persona, but students exist in a rhetorical ecology where students are in the presence of multiple competing personae. The Undecided label and its persona is a substantial force on students, even at schools like the University of Cincinnati that emphasize the Exploratory label. Ten students⁶ participated in the interviews about their experience as students without a major and their reactions to the Exploratory label and related programs. Some of these students adopt the persona of the Exploratory student as prescribed by the University. Others find themselves constituted by the third persona of the Undecided student, while a third set appeared conflicted as they are partially constituted by both personae. This chapter will look first at those who fully identify as the Exploratory persona, talking about their experiences choosing a major and their time since then, before looking at students who identify with the Undecided persona and finally ending with those conflicted and in-between personae.

Adopting the Exploratory Persona

The persona constructed by the University of Cincinnati fell on the Exploratory-heavy end of the continuum, building up a second persona of being valued that is accompanied by a program to help students navigate college and identify the interests that might lead to a major. Unsurprisingly, several the participants wholly subscribed to this identity, adopting the mantle of the Exploratory student as the

---

⁶ Three students were men, and seven participants were women. Nine participants identified as white/Caucasian, and one participant identified as black.
rhetoric of the University would have them and espousing similar themes. The program for them was a necessary step in their college career.

Like most students, their journey to decide on a major often started prior to college. Kayla was torn between multiple majors when applying to college. She wanted to do “either education or business, so I originally applied and I was in… the business college, but last minute I decided not to do that just ‘cause… I still had feelings about education. So I switched out and that’s when I went into Exploratory.” Lauren, a second year student interested in international business, also found herself unexpectedly in the program. She had originally majored in interior design when she “had a setback… [that] prevented me from getting into [the design school]. So they kinda kept me in Exploratory”. When Jacob started college as a freshman, he picked the journalism major without much interest in actually pursuing journalism as a career: “I didn’t want to do journalism, and I knew that, but I, for my reasons couldn’t go into what I wanted to do, so it was that middle ground that I needed.” That “middle ground” was the Exploratory program, which helped lead him to an interest in business. None of these students had planned to be in the position they are in, yet found themselves Exploratory students nonetheless. In a similar vein, Olivia, a first year college student, realized during her senior year of high school that she was no longer interested in nursing, and decided to enter college without a planned major. She described her first encounter with the Exploratory program at orientation:

I was put in the group called ‘Exploratory’, and that was the first time I had hear the word…. I was like, “Oh, so they have a different name…other than undecided.” I was kind of like, “Oh, that’s interesting. I wonder what that means.”

While she entered college in the Exploratory program, Olivia’s experience is similar to the others: Initial plans for a major did not work. This reflects Gordon’s 1995 study showing that 75% of undergraduate students change majors at least once.

---

7 All names for participants in the study are replaced with pseudonyms.
Brandon, a first year student, did not have to wonder what the program’s meaning was, as he came to the University of Cincinnati partially because of the program. He noted:

I probably wouldn’t have come here if it didn’t have it, but like I said, it was promoted in large part that, this is a big part of [the University of Cincinnati], where you can go into this program and learn about all the majors at [the university] and figure out which one you want to do, so the fact that [the university] had it was definitely a big draw for me.

Unlike some of his peers, Brandon already knew he wanted to be a part of the Exploratory program; he felt empowered to learn about majors and decide his career. This empowerment was a common theme among the students who were successfully constituted by the persona. According to Olivia,

“[Exploratory] puts more of, like a title to it rather than just [an] unknown kind of thing.” At a basic level, Olivia highlights the labels capacity to give her and other students a positive identity, a sense of being known. Jacob, a third year student interested in business, described the positivity of this label more poignantly: “The label itself is positive. ‘Cause I mean they could just call us a group of undecideds, you know what I mean? ‘Don’t knows’. “ Lauren goes further in her description and explicates the positive connotations of the label:

I think it’s positive because...it sounds like I get a lot of different choices, so I think it’d be positive, I mean, some people would probably see it as negative because I didn’t make up my mind yet, but I think its positive because it gives me the opportunity to make up my mind.

When asked to describe what Exploratory meant to her, Kayla, a first year student, said: “You’re exploring all the majors you may wanna be, instead of just completely undecided, ‘Oh like I have no clue,’ that’s what I think of when I hear undecided.” For her, Exploratory had a positive connotation that was not present in the Undecided label. This recognition helped her overcome her initial distaste for the program:
Before college, I thought, again, I thought that was bad, I kinda didn’t want, that’s why I went the business route I think, I didn’t want to be undecided, I didn’t wanna like, go to this expensive college if I was just, oh, undecided. But now, it doesn’t really bother me because I know the actual meaning.

Kayla recognized the overlap between Exploratory and Undecided—that they both refer to students without majors. She chose a major because of the negative connotations of being majorless, but she now has a positive reaction to the Exploratory label. Brandon, a first year student interested in philosophy, emphasized the sense that being Exploratory gave him time to make a good decision about his major: “I still have all this time to decide whether I like it [the Philosophy major] or not. And students who maybe go into the major first don’t do that.”

Not only did these students feel that the Exploratory term communicated a positive identity to them, but Jacob’s comment equating the term Undecided to “Don’t knows” is a blunt example of how they preferred the Exploratory term to its common alternative. He was not alone in this assessment. Kayla discussed how her perceptions of how the Exploratory and Undecided labels were different:

I know some colleges are called undecided, and I feel like Exploratory’s...a better term, I guess. Like I dunno, I like exploratory more than undecided....it’s like you’re exploring all the majors you may wanna be, instead of just completely undecided, “Oh like I have no clue”, that’s what I think of when I hear undecided.

These students often compared the Undecided and Exploratory labels (and corresponding personae) unprompted. They were aware of the presence of both labels, and despite living in a rhetorical ecology where both terms operated, they had been successfully constituted into the Exploratory persona.

While the student perceptions of the label are important towards how they are constituted by the persona, another important aspect is the amount of social support these students receive as
Exploratory students. A primary source of this support for these students came from their parents. Olivia shared a story of her mom encouraging her to join the Exploratory program:

If she had been like, “Oh, you should probably go in with a major and decide something,” I probably would’ve decided something and gone in, and then not been in Exploratory, but she was more like, “Well, I just want you to make the best decision that you can, so if that means going in as Exploratory, that’s great.”

Lauren’s mom was hesitant at first, but grew to support the program as well:

...she was kinda confused because she didn’t know what Exploratory was, and she was just trying to figure out, “well, why weren’t you in [a major]?” But after I explained it to her she saw it as a positive experience for me, being a newcomer to college, and I can explore my options. Because you never know, I could love interior design but I could love physics as well...

The parents of these students were generally supportive of the decision to join the program. More importantly, they are supportive in a way that matches the construction of the Exploratory persona. These parents are encouraging exploration and personal discovery, reinforcing not just the decision to join but also the rhetoric that the program employs.

The advisors provided by the Exploratory program were another key element of the social support needed to constitute the Exploratory persona. Jacob noted that he “was just really stressed and wasn’t sure” about his major despite thinking “that I had set the whole thing out in front of me and knew what the options were.” He describes how the advisor “just threw all that off the table and made real options and real things happen, and it was just awesome. He hooked it up.” Besides “hooking it up” and helping these students choose a major, these advisors were also described as patient, supportive, and committed to helping students figure things out. Brandon noted that “the advisors in particular were really helpful.” Lauren described her advisor as someone that “helps me through everything...she’s
a great person. She’s great.” Olivia was frustrated with her lack of major when entering college, and she describes her advisor as the primary reason she moved past that frustration:

[My advisor has] been really encouraging. I went in there, and instead of saying “Oh, you need to decide right now what you wanna do”, she was like “oh, well, we’ll look into this, and if something else comes up we’ll look into that as well.” And so I think overall…it’s been positive and helpful and encouraging.

Students emphasize that advisors do more than facilitate the student’s choice of major. They highlight moments where advisors validate their current position as an Exploratory student. This highlights the interplay between the Exploratory persona and the social support provided to these students through the program. The rhetoric of the program, buttressed by a variety of social support, offers the students agency for make meaningful steps in their college career. Furthermore, the descriptions of advisors throughout the interviews show the advisors as the primary medium of receiving this social support that helps to construct the rhetoric of the Exploratory student.

Another area where students described receiving this support from the program is through the classes that the program offers. These classes had names like “Discovering UC” that reflect the personal discovery language found on the University of Cincinnati’s website. As they were not a required aspect of the program, not every student had experiences with the Exploratory courses, even amongst the group that had fully adopted the Exploratory persona. Those that did, however, described an experience that further connects them to the university’s rhetoric. Brandon said the Discovering UC course was one of the most important things about the program, and described it in a way that matches the personal discovery language of the Exploratory-heavy persona: “they promote students to go into what they’re interested in, not necessarily something that they’ll find a job in…it doesn’t focus on careers, it’s much more on personal interests of students.” Furthermore, Brandon noted that his Exploratory advisor also teaches his Discovering UC class, which helped build the trust he had for both aspects of the program.
Lauren took a different Exploratory class, one guided specifically to people interested in business like herself. She described the course as “a great experience because, it helps me gather my thoughts about my success and what I wanna do....I guess [the instructor]’s teaching me to be more fluent with business, and myself...” Olivia described how the class she took through the Exploratory program helped her feel like she was not alone:

They put me in a student success class where...the whole goal is to help you find a major, and you’re put in a group with other kids who don’t know what their major is yet either, and so that was kind of reassuring. I wasn’t just by myself, not really sure what I was doing, I had help.

For Olivia, the “Student Success” Exploratory class she took helped solidify the positive experience she was having as an Exploratory student:

...over the course of this semester and the class I’ve taken, I’ve had more of a positive outlook on it, as exciting, more exciting and, to discover new things about myself, learn what I like, it’s kind of been fun to have a semester where I, just, consider the future and the different options rather than feeling locked into something.

These participants described the courses not just as boxes to check off but as helpful in discovering their personal interests and passions, a reification of the Exploratory persona. These classes offered more social support to encourage these students to be further constituted as Exploratory students.

The other primary institutional facet of the Exploratory program comes from learning communities. At the University of Cincinnati, many students of all majors participate in learning communities during their freshman year, where they take several classes together with the same students and have a weekly meeting led by an upperclassmen student. The Exploratory program at the University of Cincinnati offers learning communities just for students in their program. However, of the
five participants described here, none described any experiences that were important from their learning communities, if they were a part of one at all.8

While students identified a variety of positive experiences that came from being constituted as Exploratory students and supported through a variety of means, this identification was not unchallenged. These students encountered both the Exploratory and the Undecided labels at the University of Cincinnati. Several of these students mentioned switching labels depending on the conversational situation. Olivia noted that with most other students “I use undecided, I think, because when I say Exploratory only faculty and staff really know what that means.” Rather than confuse people she was talking with, she would switch to Undecided, but when she did, she felt people responded differently to her:

It depends on the person. Cause some people are very, “oh yeah, everybody has to decide what they wanna do.” Other people, who maybe are a little more, think that life should go a certain way, are like, you know, “Oh, you’re undecided? You should already know what you’re doing by now.” You can be one step behind, kind of thing, is the attitude that it gives off.

Using the Undecided persona seemed to change people’s perception of her, and Olivia noted that she preferred to call herself Exploratory because of that shift in perception.

Despite some of these negative interactions at first, the students’ perceptions of the program only grew more positive over time. Kayla talked about how she became more comfortable as time went on in the program: “when I first did it [chose Exploratory], still kind of worried, but now I’m like completely normal, and especially now that I know what I’m doing second semester, I’m a lot more confident, like, at this time.” Olivia mentioned similar ideas: “I didn’t really know what it entailed, and so it was really unknown, like, oh, I kinda wish I knew what I was doing, but, over the course of this

8 Jacob was in an Exploratory learning community, but said that he didn’t remember anything from it. Kayla mentioned being assigned to a learning community, only for it to be cancelled on the first day of classes. The other three students were not in learning communities at all.
semester and the class I’ve taken, I’ve had more of a positive outlook on it, as exciting.” The persona of
the Exploratory student successfully constituted these students, overcoming the stigma they
encountered and giving them a positive identity. It provides the students the agency to withstand the
negative criticism they encountered and embrace their identity as Exploratory students.

When asked to summarize his experience and if he would change anything about the program, Brandon offered these thoughts:

You know, [the program is] described very well, they’re very clear about what it is, about...why it exists, the whole students changing majors halfway through college thing is pretty much what they always say, and I wouldn’t change that, you know, most students change their majors halfway through. And if you don’t want to be one of those students, take Exploratory Studies.

This statement perhaps best sums up how these students seem to feel about their time in the
Exploratory Studies program. It is not time wasted, a place for unmotivated people with no vision
towards what they want to do, but rather a necessary step they took towards discovering themselves
and their interests. Each of these students expressed a major they were interested in and a plan towards
getting there, and credited the program in some way towards helping them achieve these goals.

Through a mixture of positively receiving the rhetoric of the university as well as experiencing positive
social support that reinforced the university’s construction, these students were successfully constituted
by the Exploratory persona.

**Pushed by the Undecided Persona**

Not all students constitute their identities within the Exploratory persona. Even at a university
that exclusively uses the Exploratory language, students encounter the Undecided label and its limiting
third persona. Two students in the study, despite being in the Exploratory program, identified with the
Undecided persona. Madison is a first year student who uses the Undecided label to describe herself.

Unlike the students who identify as Exploratory students, Madison struggled to find a major to focus in:
Basically I had no idea because I’m pretty overall pretty good at everything, the only thing I hate really is nursing because I get queasy about that stuff, but I’m interested in music, I paint, I draw, I love to write...I love science, science and math and everything, and it’s just like, hard to pick when your, when you don’t, I don’t know if I have a passion yet.

Throughout the interview, Madison expressed feeling lost and directionless about college, and specifically about her major, a stark contrast from her Exploratory counterparts. This indecision extended to her perceptions of the Exploratory label. She said that she was confused by it when first applying to the University of Cincinnati, and preferred the undecided label for herself. She also is skeptical of the Exploratory program and its offerings, as evidenced by this exchange:

Madison: “I like undecided, cause that just best describes me. Undecided and uncertain. I don’t know, Exploratory sounds weird.”

Interviewer: “Can you say more about that?”

Madison: “I don’t know, it’s, I feel like the Exploratory program wants you to take, like, a couple of each class and be like, “oh, this is what I like and this is what I don’t like”, but...I don’t know, I don’t know that much about college yet, so it’s like frustrating but, if Exploratory wants you to pick things to explore, but if I’m undecided how can I pick things to explore?”

Madison feels lost. She believes she has aptitude for a range of different academic areas, except nursing, but she feels incapable of exploring those majors. She thinks of herself as undecided, and she does not feel able to begin the process of exploring.

The persona the University of Cincinnati constructs is one that uses the language of personal discovery and exploration to highlight the benefits of being in the program, but Madison seems to feel too lost to do even that. Throughout the interview, she stated numerous different majors she was investigating without much clarity or direction: “I feel kinda lost, I feel like everyone knows what they wanna do, and they’ve known since birth, but I have no idea, honestly, what I’m doing.” Her preference
towards Undecided as a label over Exploratory, saying “that just best describes me. Undecided and uncertain” is an acknowledgement that she identifies much more strongly with the third persona than the more positive construction of the second persona. Her perception that other students have always known their life calling is the third persona at work, causing her to measure herself against an idealized student, one that likely does not exist in reality but nevertheless impacts the devaluing this participant is applying to herself.

Madison was not the only student to be constituted by the third persona of the undecided student. While Madison identified explicitly with the Undecided label, another student’s resistance to the Exploratory and Undecided labels illustrate ways students respond to the negative entailments of being constituted as Undecided. Emily, a first year student, also talked in a way that showed the impact of the undecided label, but instead of assuming the label, Emily emphasized that she was “really” a business student, a fact she stated right at the beginning of her interview: “I already know what my intended major is going to be...the only reason I’m exploratory is because the business school is full. I decided too late that I didn’t want to do engineering, I decided in June, and it [the business school] was cram-packed...” Throughout her interview, Emily continually pointed out that she was on the business track, and rarely referred to herself as an Exploratory student. Also different from both the Exploratory persona students and Madison was the way Emily perceived the Exploratory label: “I feel like they are trying to make it sound better, because undecided kinda sounds negative. So, I like the name, I like what they are trying to do, but I see right through it.” Emily felt the program was trying to outsmart her, trying to convince her to buy in to a persona that she was choosing not to identify as. She seems to be addressing the issue of Charland’s third ideological effect, the illusion of freedom. Emily reads the Exploratory rhetoric as presenting that illusion, and attempts to fight against it by rejecting their rhetoric entirely rather than be constrained to its vision, no matter how ‘positive’ it may seem.
This rejection of the Exploratory rhetoric ties neatly into Emily’s identification as a “business major,” which was so strong for her that she would refuse to use the Exploratory label:

I usually don’t tell anyone I’m Exploratory, because I know what I want to major in. So, I think that if I told them that I wasn’t actually in the business school...well, sometimes I do, but then they would just assume that I’m undecided as of now. But I don’t think anyone would call it Exploratory...I always follow it, I say “Right now I’m Exploratory, technically, but...” and then I follow it with [business] cause I don’t want them to think that I’m indecisive and not driven.

Emily has rejected the Exploratory persona because she does not see it as fundamentally different from the Undecided persona; the freedom that the Exploratory persona offers is simply an illusion. Emily perceives undecided students as unmotivated and lost, reflecting the negative perception of being undecided that manifests in the Undecided third persona. While Madison appears to be stuck in the quagmire of the negated undecided student, Emily has been propelled forward by the same persona. She views Exploratory as another name for Undecided, and the negative entailments of that persona motivate her to identify as a future business student.

Madison and Emily expressed similar themes in regards to the social support they experienced. Unlike the Exploratory students, who by and large expressed positive support from their parents, Emily mentioned a slightly more negative interaction:

I don’t know if it was necessarily that I was Exploratory or that I had switched out of engineering...everybody was supportive, my mom didn’t really care one way or another. My dad, I think, was kind of, like, not disappointed, but a little bit disappointed that I wasn’t going to be doing the same thing as him, not disappointed that I changed my mind.

Though she expressed that her parents were “supportive”, Emily did not give a rousing endorsement through the rest of her language. Her father’s disappointment, on the other hand, came up multiple times during the interview, though she was always quick to clarify that his disappointment was related
to her no longer pursuing engineering. While this disappointment does not stem from the rhetoric of the university, it nonetheless had implications on her adoption of the rhetorical persona that the University of Cincinnati presents.

Madison shared even more direct conflict that occurred with her parents over the decision to start college in the Exploratory program. In an off-handed manner, she commented that “adults look at it [Exploratory] as dumb.” When asked directly about this and her parent’s role in the decision, Madison opened up:

They started suggesting things right away. Like, why don’t you do this or that? And like, anything that I’ve wanted to do, I remember my first dream job, in like 3rd grade, was to be a meteorologist, and my dad’s like, “You have to be really smart.” And I was like, oh shoot. Anything my parents say obviously has a big impact, but like, they just, they’re trying to help me, but like, I don’t think they realize the inner conflict of choosing what I wanna do for the rest of my life.

Her comments about the impact of her parents did not end there, and continued to highlight the incredible stress and anxiety she experienced throughout the process of choosing a major:

They don’t understand [why] I can’t just...pick something. But I freak out about choosing anything, I looked in a pet store for an hour and a half to pick out a beta fish. Which is not that serious, but it took me an hour and a half to pick out a fish, how am I supposed to choose, in a year or two, what I’m going to be doing for the rest of my life until I retire?

Though their parents acted differently, both Emily and Madison’s parents have left an impact on how they are pursuing majors in their college career. For Madison, the lack of support seems to have exacerbated the indecision she was already experiencing. In Emily’s case, the disappointment from her father, even if not directly related to the Exploratory program, may have impacted her quick shift into a business major. For both, a parental emphasis on choosing seems to have placed a high value on the end
goal, rather than the journey of finding a major. This can only encourage a student to adopt the career-focused undecided persona, rather than the personal discovery of the Exploratory persona.

On-campus support also played a role in the constitution of the undecided persona. Madison felt that people had mixed reactions to her major and program: “Some people are like, ‘Oh, that’s a waste of time’, but sometimes it’s, ‘Oh, at least you’re knowing what’s out there.’” When asked what she thought of the undecided term, Emily gave a longer answer:

Undecided, indecisive, kinda synonymous. Someone that’s indecisive isn’t someone reliable or driven. So you kinda make assumptions before you really talk to them, someone that doesn’t know what they are going to college for. I guess it kind of gives them an image of like, they just don’t have their life together or, I don’t know, it causes pre-judgment.

Even though neither student mentioned a specific scenario where a negative judgment or interaction occurred, both expressed that they felt like it was happening. This seems to be the hidden presence of the third persona once again, creating a sense of inadequacy and judgment from an “other” that do not necessarily match their experiences.

Another interesting comparison between these two students is the interactions they both had with the Exploratory program on campus. Compared to the Exploratory persona students, these students were only lightly involved with the structured portions of the program, exposing them to very little social support for the Exploratory persona. For Emily, all of her interaction seemed to be based around her future business aspirations, and she felt like she was taking all of the initiative:

I somehow had it in my head that I somehow invented Exploratory Studies on the business track, because I kind of suggested it to my counselor, she didn’t suggest it to me. So, I was like, “Hey, I think I should do Exploratory, but I want to take the exact same classes, is that possible?” And she was like, “Yeah, sure!”
Emily also was in a learning community of all Exploratory students interested in business. This raises interesting questions about the role the Exploratory program played in enabling and encouraging Emily’s adoption of the Undecided persona. From Emily’s descriptions, it seems that the Exploratory program will place you in learning communities, and therefore several classes, with other Exploratory students interested in the same track as you. This is most certainly helpful from the perspective of helping students find their majors, but may also have played a role in encouraging Emily to relinquish any identity as an Exploratory student. In short, her on campus experiences were primarily as a future business student, rather than engaging in much of the exploring and discovery that seemed typical of the students who adopted the Exploratory persona.

Madison’s interactions with the social support of the program were almost non-existent. She noted during the interview that she was not in a learning community nor had she taken any classes in the program. In fact, the only time Madison had interacted with an Exploratory advisor was during the mandatory student orientation, and she seemed to recognize during the interview the lack of impact that meeting had on her: “the only thing that I’ve gotten information on is from like, an advisor in orientation, and he just suggested taking all of these intro classes, and I didn’t do that...I don’t think I’m like exploring anything right now, which I should be.” Though she had been given the Exploratory label, she had not truly done anything that would be typical of the Exploratory student experience. Much like the third persona of the undecided student implies, she had be given a title but experienced no additional support or commitment from the University, instead floating on next to other students who were pursuing their own majors, almost exclusively of her own doing. Even during her application process, she described a lack of interaction or knowledge with the program. As a result, the only other persona she knew regarding her status became real to her. It is no surprise that she took on the identity of the undecided student, as she did not experience any of the embodiment of that persona throughout her college experience, and always expressed feeling more comfortable with the undecided label.
These two students both highlight the importance of social support in the constitution of the Exploratory persona. These two students seemed far less engaged with the program itself than with their parents or, in Emily’s case, the program she was already pushing herself towards. Given the importance that social support plays in the experiences of students that did adopt the Exploratory persona, this lack of engagement must similarly play a role in the constitution of the Undecided persona.

It could be argued that the Exploratory persona is irrelevant in some situations. Emily’s situation of quickly transferring to business could be framed as a successful one, as she will be moving forward to a new major soon; after all, the goal of the program has to be finding a major eventually, or else the student cannot graduate. However, if a great deal of stress and negative self-evaluation comes as a result of deciding on this major, then the shift to an Exploratory rhetoric has not fully alleviated the negative stigma surrounding undecided students and programs. If institutions, students, and parents value the removal of these negative consequences of the Undecided label, then the constitution of the Undecided persona of these students must be further addressed.

**Students Still Conflicted**

While some students were clearly constituted by the Exploratory persona or by the Undecided persona, some of the students in the Exploratory program were conflicted about the labels and related personae. These students expressed elements of both the Exploratory and Undecided personae, highlighting parts of the experiences found in the groups fully constituted by the Exploratory and Undecided personae. Though these students arrived at the Exploratory program in various ways, they shared common perceptions of the Exploratory label. When asked his preference of labels, Nicholas, a first year student, said he preferred undecided, but offered a contradictory response:

Nicholas: “Personally I like Undecided but I could definitely see how people wanna like, go with Exploratory cause if you say ‘oh I'm Undecided’ it kinda sounds like ‘oh, you're going to college for nothing’ but...
Interviewer: “Ok, so why would you prefer Undecided then...”

Nicholas: “Because, I'm undecided what I want to do...some people I know in the Exploratory program are like looking, like they haven't really...looked into things they wanted to do, they're just don't know any majors, I'm more like trying to decide from like a wide variety of majors where more people are like looking into like things that might interest them, I guess.”

Later in the interview, Nicholas noted, “I’ll even switch between them in midsentence. I don't really discriminate between them.” Nicholas intuitively understands the connotations surrounding the undecided label, but sees the same stigma attached to the Exploratory label. In some ways, he seeks to reject the Undecided label in his assertion that being undecided is a waste of his college experience. He also makes some statements that reflect the Exploratory persona, such as his description of how students in the Exploratory program seem confident in what they are doing, but “just don't wanna like, commit to [a major] yet cause they could still see themselves like doing something else, that's kinda where I am.” On the other hand, his assertion that Exploratory students are focused on interests rather than majors was said with some derision and explained further when he described Exploratory as “kind of a fancy word for ‘I don't know what I'm doing.’” Nicholas is conflicted, which is evidenced by his expressing qualities of both personae.

Victoria, another first year student, also expressed conflict in her understanding of the Exploratory label. When asked if she felt the label was positive or negative, her response highlighted this conflict:

A little bit of both, so positively because you aren’t shoved into something you aren’t ready for, and then you can kinda feel out what you want to be in. And negatively just because, not from what I feel about myself being in it but from what other people perceive me as, which doesn’t really matter but just, kind of, you know what I mean?
Unlike the previous two groups of students, these students are actively negotiating between the Exploratory and Undecided personae. They cannot seem to decide whether the term Exploratory is good or bad, better or worse than Undecided.

Just like their perceptions of the Exploratory label, these students experienced social support in a similarly conflicted manner. Alexis, a third year student, described her parents’ support in changing into the Exploratory major from her previous arts major:

They were fine with the idea of me not knowing what I wanted to do right away. Um, and so, I think they had a relatively positive opinion of it, but, it’s been a couple years. They may have also been a little bit wary of, like, how it would all pan out...

While Alexis framed her parents’ response as positive, the final comment about her parents’ wariness alludes to some hesitation to fully endorse her decision, even as Alexis framed their opinion as “relatively positive.” Additionally, the parental support stems from choosing a major, rather than an endorsement of personal discovery; this type of support shares more in common with the Undecided persona than the Exploratory persona. The same can be said of Victoria’s description of her parents and their involvement in the process to join the Exploratory program:

They really liked the idea. Because they know how indecisive I am, so they’re like, I’ll be saving some money if I need to...you know what I mean? Yeah, they just thought that, cause I would change my major every day, and then for a while it was nutrition, and then, they’re like, maybe that’s it, but then I’m like “mmm.....” So, I think...they felt positively about it.

Once again, the parental support that Victoria experiences is centered around the ability to choose a major. Her parents see the Exploratory program as a safeguard against losing money due to a delay in selecting a major. These conflicted students received a different type of social support than the students who were successfully constituted by the Exploratory persona. Rather than emphasize the personal
discovery, this social support is centered on the issues shaping the rhetoric of the Undecided persona, and leads to the conflict these students are experiencing.

All three of these students described their experiences in the Exploratory program overall as positive, yet expressed feeling defensive about their status at the same time, further highlighting the conflicting personae at work. Victoria at times used language congruent with the Exploratory persona. When comparing Exploratory and Undecided, she noted that “undecided can go for a lot of different things, but exploratory you’re actively searching for something.” Later in the interview, she mentioned inviting her friends to see her experiences in the program:

I have friends that I’ve met here, and they’ve come up to me and been like, “I hate my major. I hate it.” And I’m like, “well, you can come to my class and listen, there’s a bunch of different majors presenting.” I’ve come to appreciate it [the Exploratory program] more. I appreciate the opportunity that comes with it.

However, talking about describing her program to other students on campus brought out a side far less confident in the Exploratory program:

I feel the constant need to back myself up. Like, oh, but I have, I’m hoping to do this, I’m hoping to do this....sometimes I’m even like, let me just say I’m a major. At one point, at the beginning of the year, I was like, okay, let me just say...I’m just gonna start picking a major, randomly, being like “I’m in, whatever.” Instead of [other students] being like, “What is that, what is that, like, what do you do in it, do you have actual classes”, so...

Much like Emily, who was constituted as Undecided and would tell others she was a business student, Victoria also has resorted to lying about being in a major. While at times she seems to buy in to the personal discovery rhetoric of the Exploratory persona, she does not seem confident in it to the point of being her defining persona.
Alexis similarly expressed moments of connection with the program along with moments of disconnection. The switch to Exploratory made her feel “a bit more relaxed about what I was learning…it freed me of the obligation to be doing something art-related,” and she described the Exploratory label as having a tangible difference on the program:

I think it at least makes it seem like the school cares about the students in the program, because they have gone to the extent of being more than just typical undecided...calling it Exploratory makes it feel like more of an official thing, instead of like, that group where they put all the leftovers where they don’t know what they are doing.

However, her experiences were marked with clear conflict about what it meant to be in Exploratory, particularly as a third year student. When asked if her feelings about the program had changed over time, Alexis noted:

I wasn’t expecting to be in it for quite this long, I guess. Um, and so, I’ve got a bit more anxiety toward it I guess, now, then when I switched...like I had tentative things lined up, but still not anything decisive. Um, makes me feel a bit insecure about where I’m at, generally, not just like with major but in life.

This is a different experience from the students who were successfully constituted into the Exploratory persona; they generally did not share any examples of growing anxiety over time, instead sharing constant positive feelings about their experiences. Alexis seemed to be more confident in her Exploratory identity early on, but as time dragged on without concluding on a major, the persona seemed to appeal less and less to her. This feeling by Alexis may have been exasperated by her encounters with the negative stigma of being without a major. She shared a moment where she was looked down upon as a result of being in the program when asked how she had experienced negativity in relation to Exploratory: “I took a [theater class] last spring...and like, it’s a big time commitment, and
so I felt disrespected in that class, at least initially, because they assumed that I was gonna drop the class.”

Victoria also mentioned feeling stigmatized by fellow students, saying: “Just generally... that’s just the feeling I get when I tell people I’m in Exploratory. I feel the constant need to back myself up.”

Moments like this may have led Alexis’s more positive outlook on the program to turn negative, and for the appeal of the Exploratory persona to be replaced as the stigmatized undecided program becomes the reality around her. Perhaps she was initially constituted by the Exploratory persona, but the lack of social support and the mounting pressure as time passed by have made that construction more conflicted for her.

**Conclusions**

Some of the students that participated in the research had adopted the Exploratory persona, embracing an identity that values personal discovery and testing ideas. Others were constituted by the Undecided persona, either causing them to be feel lost as they struggled to find a major or pushed to pick a major and feel purpose only at that point. Finally, some other students felt conflicted between the personae, seeing the positives of Exploratory but for differing reasons being unable to fully take on the persona for themselves. A couple of factors could help explain why these students were able or unable, willing or unwilling to buy in to the University of Cincinnati’s Exploratory rhetoric. The influence of parents came through clearly in this study; those students that most accepted the Exploratory rhetoric felt supported or even encouraged to join the program by their family. More importantly, these parents were described as encouraging them for the same reasons the University would encourage them to join: to learn more about themselves and find a major they truly care about, with the occasional message of financial practicality on the side. For the Undecided persona students, on the other hand, parental pressure to choose a major was described, a far cry from the support that the Exploratory persona students received. The students that experienced conflict framed their parents as supportive, but
conflicted in various ways. In short, the attitude of the parents often reflected the attitude of the students in this study.

Another aspect that has yet to be touched upon is how close the student perceived themselves to be in regards to choosing a major. While the Exploratory rhetoric encourages learning about yourself, the program’s goal is ultimately still to help students select a major of study. All of the students that had adopted the Exploratory persona were able to mention either what specific major they hoped to transfer into in the future, or what major they were currently trying to learn more about. The Exploratory rhetoric for them had encouraged them to discover majors, and they had taken up that opportunity, with interests and potential directions to talk about as a result. This was not always the case with the other students in the study. Madison, the student who expressed feeling the most confusion surrounding her major, was squarely in the Undecided persona. In many ways, she could not connect with the Exploratory persona because she had not found any success exploring yet. This factor further helps to understand the students in conflict. Alexis seemed to have more confidence in the Exploratory persona when she initially joined it, but after being in the program for multiple semesters, was started to grow frustrated with not having found a major. Her lack of success discovering a major was impacting her willingness to embrace the Exploratory persona. Nicholas, too, expressed a variety of majors from very different interests he was still looking into, which may relate to feeling a lack of success thus far with exploring.

If anything is to be drawn from these interviews, it is that the success of a university’s constitutive rhetoric is not a given. The University of Cincinnati cannot eliminate the presence of the Undecided persona; they can only present their own version and try to hail students into it with programming and personnel that embody the rhetoric they choose to use. However, it should also be noted that some students are adopting the Exploratory persona in lieu of the Undecided one. For these
students, the stigmatization of the Undecided student has been weakened, if not completely eliminated, by a more encouraging association that can make the time they spend in the program feel worthwhile.
Chapter 4: Discussion

Summary and Discussion of Findings

This project engaged in a two-part study into the rhetoric surrounding student still deciding on a major in higher education. The first section was a rhetorical analysis of the 15 largest four year universities in the state of Ohio, looking at the rhetoric used on universities’ websites to understand the personae that were being crafted for students entering their college career having yet to decide on a major.

The research led us to understand the different personae presented by these universities as on a continuum, pictured in Figure 1. At one pole of the continuum lie schools that are referred to as Exploratory-heavy, characterized by labeling their students as Exploratory students. This represents an intentional shift away from the negative connotations surrounding the traditional “undecided” student as shown in the research, and the accompanying language is reflective of this intention, helping to craft a positive identity for them through the second persona. Rhetoric of personal discovery and finding life passions is present in the rhetoric of these schools, along with an implicit assurance that Exploratory students are valued by their universities through the creation of programs specifically for Exploratory students. On the other end of the continuum lie schools that utilize the more traditional undecided label for their students. Rather than have programs specifically for their students, or even webpages with easy to access information, a visitor to the websites of these universities would often find information about undecided students grouped in with career center information. These programs were characterized by a usage of the third persona, negating their presence by grouping information for them in with students who already had a major. These programs lacked the positive construction of the Exploratory programs and appeared to reinforce the negative stigma present in the literature.

Not all of the schools existed at the poles of the continuum, however, but rather incorporated a mixture of both rhetorical styles. Some of these schools were referred to as Exploratory-light schools, as
they held more resemblance to the Exploratory end of the continuum with specific programs for their students and a generally positive persona construction. However, these schools tended to incorporate the Undecided label at various points on their website, complicating the construction of the persona in a way not present at the Exploratory schools. Inversely, some of the schools were referred to as Undecided-light schools. These schools mixed the Undecided label with other labels, and engaged in a great deal of career-based rhetoric rather than the personal discovery rhetoric that characterized the Exploratory end of the continuum. However, though the value shown to the students is far less than the Exploratory schools, the second persona is still employed rhetorically, separating them from the Undecided-heavy schools.

After exploring the rhetorical ecology surrounding students still deciding on majors in the state of Ohio, the second half of the project looks qualitatively at the thoughts and experiences of ten Exploratory students at the University of Cincinnati. Just as the universities across the state had personae with different effects, these students adopted different personae in relation to being in the Exploratory program at their school. Five of the students accepted the Exploratory rhetoric that the University of Cincinnati presented them; they saw their time in the Exploratory program as positive, engaged with the various types of programming available to them through the program, and had found some sort of direction to pursue for a major going forward. They experienced a great deal of social support from advisors, parents, and other students that encouraged their participation in the program and constitution by the Exploratory persona. They generally seemed to avoid some of the negative stress and anxiety that characterized students in their position in the literature.

Two of the students, on the other hand, identified much more with the undecided persona seen in the Undecided-heavy schools of the rhetorical analysis. One of these students expressed feeling lost and directionless, with no idea of a major to pursue, and expressed a great deal of anxiety about decision-making in general. She compared herself to students whom she thought all had clear goals
about their life, and embodied the third persona of the undecided student, negated and compared to an idealized other. A second student was motivated by the third persona of the Undecided student in a quite different way. Once she realized she would be in the program, she seemed to drive herself to make a quick career decision to remove herself from the program as quickly as possible. She described lying about being in the program and viewed the aspects of the program skeptically and with little engagement. She had been driven away by the third persona into her new major, motivated to avoid its stigmatization. Both shared a lack of social support, through a lack of engagement with the program’s advisors and offerings as well as a lack of positive encouragement from their parents. This struck a contrast with the experiences of students who were successfully constituted by the Exploratory persona.

Still other students were conflicted in which persona they were adopting, expressing hesitation throughout their descriptions of the labels and occasionally giving conflicting messages. They tended to express positive experiences and engagement with the program, but were still experiencing some negative stigma in their interactions outside of the program. Some of these students had mixed feelings about the Exploratory label itself, or had their positive feelings about the program change over time. They were not defined by one persona or the other, but rather seemed constituted by both. They also experienced mixed reactions from others, which reflected their overall perceptions of the Exploratory persona. Overall, the collection of students highlight the notion that, though the University of Cincinnati created a version of the Exploratory persona mostly free of the negative connotations typically associated with the absence of a major, a student experiences an ecology of rhetoric that makes the adoption of the persona a complex process engaged differently by various students. In particular, social support factors such as parental involvement, as well as the level of engagement a student has with the program and how long they stay in the program, may play significant roles in the process of adopting the persona presented by the university as opposed to other personae encountered while they are in college.
From a broader perspective, some conclusions may be drawn from this project as a whole. This research supports the notion that the rhetorical practice of Exploratory programs is perceived positively by most students and helps to combat the negative stigmatization associated with Undecided student programs. Both the language found on university websites as well as the accounts of participants from the interviews conducted at the University of Cincinnati show a student experience that is valuable and encouraged as a viable path for success, rather than one that will cause additional anxiety and should be avoided. This also serves the purpose of verifying that the rhetoric being constructed by the University of Cincinnati (and similar Exploratory-heavy institutions) is having some effect with students on their campus, countering some of the negative stigma typically surrounding these students. While universities that adopt this rhetoric have assumed a positive change on the student experience, little research has examined Exploratory programs at universities to support this claim, and no research has examined this issue through a communicative lens. While the qualitative aspects of this research are limited in scope due to the small number of interview participants, this project represent a meaningful first step towards a more holistic understanding of the impact this rhetorical style has in a college setting.

Conversely, this project also reveals that, from the perspective of the University of Cincinnati, the rhetorical work done by the Exploratory Program, and potentially other Exploratory-heavy and Exploratory-light universities, is not fully penetrating the student body, or even the Exploratory program. Students are always presented with a rhetorical ecology and are being hailed into various different competing personae; Exploratory students are no exception. Stories of perceived judgment from the participants in the study show that Exploratory students still experience stigmatization from parents and peers who view them through the lens of the Undecided persona. Furthermore, even the Exploratory students themselves do not universally adopt the rhetoric of the university. Lest institutions think that a change in rhetorical style fixes all issues, this project highlights how the deployment of this rhetoric is a much muddier process than the creation of the rhetoric. Adoption by the entire student
body, both students in the program and out of it, is a pipe dream that will never be achieved, but more work can be done by these institutions to increase the level of adoption, particularly among students in the Exploratory programs.

The social support that students encounter on campus may play a vital role in the constitution of personae. For the participants of this study, the success of constituting the Exploratory persona directly matched the level of social support they received. Students that received positive social support adopted the Exploratory persona, those that encountered no social support for the program were constituted by the Undecided persona, and those that received conflicting social support were conflicted about their persona. Universities should then seek to emphasize and increase the social support that students without majors receive, both before they reach campus and once they arrive, in order to increase the success of their constructed personae. Increased social support on campus can be accomplished by raising levels of engagement with existing programming, getting students to meet more quickly and more frequently with Exploratory staff and increase the penetration of classes and learning communities. Additionally, constructing more rhetoric that is hailing the parents of these students, constituting them as Exploratory parents, may provide them the agency to give additional social support that can further encourage the Exploratory persona among potential students.

A potential criticism of this project also leads to another conclusion that can be drawn of this research in support of the Exploratory label. Emily, one of the participants in the study, presents an argument in favor of the traditional Undecided label. Ultimately, her experiences (involving both membership in the Exploratory program but a hailing into the limiting third persona of the Undecided) led her to quickly make a decision on a business major. Furthermore, her comments on being able to “see right through” the Exploratory rhetoric alludes to Charland’s third ideological effect of the illusion of freedom. Her perception of seeing through this illusion leads her to distrust the entire rhetorical construction, and it leads to her being constituted by the Undecided label.
On many levels, a university could consider this an effective usage Undecided label. Students cannot graduate in an Exploratory program or with an Undecided status at any of the schools in the data set; they must eventually choose a major as Emily did. This aspect of the Exploratory or Undecided student experience cannot be easily ignored. A university must consider how any program they engage in impacts their graduation rate, as statistics on whether these students graduate are arguably more important to a university’s bottom line than reports on the level of anxiety they experience in the process of graduating. This emphasis appears to be reflected in the literature, given the amount of focus scholars have put on graduation and retention rates amongst undecided students compared to looking at how they experience the program. From the student and parents’ perspective, a timely graduation is also an important consideration to avoid paying for extra semesters or racking up more student loans. If students are to justify joining an Exploratory program, they must justify the financial incentive for doing so as well as the experiential. Perhaps more importantly, if parents are to encourage their children to enter these programs, something this project has shown may be of great importance, they will likely consider the financial implications of the program. If an Undecided program works just as well in encouraging these timely decisions, does this research on student experience matter at all?

In fact, it is the author’s belief that this research shows how the Exploratory label is successful in this area as well, supported by a few factors of the research. First, all five of the students that fully adopted the Exploratory persona expressed a direction for the major they were going to transfer into, many as early as the following semester. While the sample size prevents this from being generalizable in any real sense, it supports the impact of the rhetoric and opportunities provided by the Exploratory program, highlighting a potential strength of the program when it works as intended. The student who showed the most indecision, on the other hand, was one that identified most with the Undecided rhetoric, and similarly was one that showed the least engagement with Exploratory programming and faculty. Second, this author believes that this rhetorical construction provides a more humane and
holistic method of encouraging students to find a major that they can be successful in. It is a given that a school like the University of Cincinnati must balance a positive student experience with the financial incentive to graduate students on time, and that parents and future students will make decisions with both fiscal and experiential reasons in mind. The rhetoric of an Exploratory program may provide a way to do both of these at once, offering a sound financial decision with a process that provides more support to the students that previous Undecided programs at other universities.

The findings of this research project may provide other pieces of useful information to institutions like the University of Cincinnati. Brandon, one of the participants who was categorized as adopting the Exploratory persona, mentioned that the Exploratory program “was a big draw” for him when considering schools to attend. While this was not a theme mentioned by all of the students, even among the students who adopted the Exploratory persona, this is a notable comment for the University of Cincinnati and institutions with similar rhetorical strategies. If students are starting to look for a program that not only allows but encourages them to explore and find out their major while attending their school, then the Exploratory program and similar programs at other institutions across the state become valuable recruiting tools. This further supports the notion that universities are wise to invest in and employ the Exploratory-heavy rhetorical construction, not only to promote a positive student experience and to combat the existing negative stigmatization, but also to attract more students to their university.

Limitations

This project has several limitations that must be discussed. One of these is the sample size of the data collection for both sections of the analysis. The rhetorical analysis was limited to only 15 institutions in the state of Ohio that primarily offer 4 year degrees. By process of elimination, this allows that a variety of other higher education options are left out of the data set for this study. Two year institutions and community colleges were not included, though some may have Exploratory or
Undecided student programs and several rank among the top ten institutions in the state with the highest enrollment. These institutions may have different labeling practices or different connotations surrounding programs for students without majors that would require further research to unearth. Primarily online institutions were also excluded from this data set. This type of institution in particular may have interesting implications on Exploratory programs and communities.

One of the implications of this research project is the impact of social support that students experience when engaging with Exploratory programming on campus. Participants in the study specifically mentioned interactions with advisors and classes as being impactful. Interactions with either of these facets of an Exploratory program would be fundamentally different for an online institution than for an in-person institution, and could have a noticeable impact on the adoption of a rhetorical construction, potentially limiting the impact that the Exploratory construction could have on a given student. Further research would be needed to investigate and clarify the differences and unique circumstances of these online institutions compared to the institutions in this data set.

This project does not control for the type of university studied within the data set. Though all the institutions studied are among the largest four year institutions in the state of Ohio, the difference between Xavier University’s enrollment and The Ohio State University’s enrollment is vast. With these schools as an example, the difference between a private institution such as Xavier University and a public institution like The Ohio State University must also be mentioned. These are differences that are not accounted for in this current project, but may make a significant impact in the culture of a university which could influence how students process rhetoric surrounding Exploratory students.

Several limitations can also be seen when examining the qualitative interview side of this research project. Foremost is the number of interviews collected; a data set of 10 interviews amongst a student body of several thousand students prevents any true generalizability of the conclusions of this research to other students at the University of Cincinnati. Additional research that includes a much
larger pool of interview participants will increase the generalizability of any conclusions across the student body of that university. The demographic characteristics of the interview participants in this research project also represent a major limitation of the study. Of the ten students interviewed, only three males were present in the data set, and very little ethnic or racial diversity was present as well. These breakdowns do not represent the demographics of the University of Cincinnati student body, and create a potential blind spot in the conclusions that can only be addressed with future research that includes a much more diverse data set.

A further limitation of the data set collected by this research comes from the analysis itself. The students revealed that only one of the ten students participated in an Exploratory learning community, a major way that the program reaches out to its students and both embodies and perpetuates its rhetorical constructions. While the students that did participate in the research showed a strong level of engagement with their Exploratory advisors, the low engagement with these learning communities prevents many conclusions from being drawn about their effectiveness or impact on the adoption of the Exploratory persona on the University of Cincinnati’s campus.

**Future Directions**

The conclusions drawn from this research could be taken in several different directions. While the rhetorical analysis provided a breadth of information about the rhetorical constructions a student in Ohio may be presented with when applying to college, a depth of information was achieved with the qualitative analysis of students at the University of Cincinnati. Interview analysis at other Exploratory-heavy universities could help to validate some of the conclusions drawn from this project across the spectrum of similar universities, particularly since there is a lack of research concerning Exploratory rhetoric and universities that employ it. Conversely, interviewing students at Undecided-heavy universities may reveal some results similar to the literature referenced in this study from a qualitative
perspective, but can further expand the corpus of literature looking at the rhetoric of undecided students from a communicative lens.

Some of the conclusions from this research project warrant additional attention. Chief among these is the impact that parents have on student’s adoption of the constructed persona employed by the university. While some literature does exist that addresses the impact of parents on a student’s decision to join an undecided program, no research has been performed investigating how a parent impacts their perception of a university’s rhetoric or their potential adoption of a constructed persona. This research project supports the conclusion that the perception of the parent has a significant impact on how a student will perceive a university’s rhetoric, and warrants additional research that specifically investigates this relationship. The student-advisor relationship also emerged as important to the participants of this research. While a great deal of literature examines the student-advisor relationship, far less literature investigates the rhetorical impact, particularly when considering students in Exploratory programs. Further research in this area can shed more light on how student experiences affect adoption of constructed personae from a university.

From a theoretical perspective, this project expands the lens of the second persona and constitutive rhetoric in meaningful ways. This study is perhaps the first to apply the work of the second persona to the rhetoric and labels of higher education programming, allowing communication theory to be studied and operated in new areas of knowledge. Additionally, this project provides an expansion of the theory of constitutive rhetoric. As noted in Chapter 2, the transhistorical aspect of a constituted subject is one of the ideological effects of constitutive rhetoric. For Charland’s original subject, and for many applications of constitutive rhetoric, this effect means positioning the subject as having always existed as that subject group, and its members always being members of that subject. This project expands the notion of the transhistorical subject to include a group that is always going to exist but whose membership will change. There will always be Exploratory students, but the actual students in
this group will change; in fact, the membership of the group is intended to change for the subject group to survive. This expands the usage of constitutive rhetoric for new types of subjects, such as long term hospital patients or members of temporary service organizations like the Peace Corps, where members will inherently or ideally cease to become members of the subject group while the group itself maintains its existence permanently.

This project also illuminates Charland’s third ideological effect, the illusion of freedom. While the Exploratory persona constructs a positive experience for students without majors, it also can be read as only containing the illusion that one has the choice to choose a major for whatever reasons they want. The constitutive rhetoric instead only positions students to choose a major by discovering their life passions; they are not positioned to pick a major for any other reason, such as job prospects upon graduation or financial considerations. While the Exploratory persona is still a more humane option than the Undecided persona, it is nonetheless still problematic for students that may struggle to find a clear life passion or want to pick majors for reasons other than personal interest. Parental influence also plays a role in this area, as parents may push for the financial considerations of a potential major and career over how interested a student is in the subject matter. Future research in this area must consider the impact that this third ideological effect has on students in these programs.

The Exploratory persona represents a positive combination of encouraging personal discovery amongst students and managing the financial needs of universities and families. While the label does not achieve total penetration among the students at the University of Cincinnati, it does represent for many students a positive change of direction from the current literature about students still deciding on majors. Universities should be encouraged to employ humane rhetorical tactics and construct positive persona like the Exploratory persona to both make their universities attractive to prospective students as well as to provide agency to current students, rather than stigmatize them.
References


Arts, Innovation, and Design Exploration. (N.d.). Retrieved February 7, 2017, from

 https://undergrad.osu.edu/majors-and-academics/majors/detail/333


The Ohio State University. (n.d.). Retrieved December 16, 2016, from https://www.osu.edu


Requirements for Entering a Major. (n.d.). Retrieved December 18, 2016, from https://www.wright.edu/university-college/advising/requirements-for-entering-a-major


What is University College? (n.d.). Retrieved December 19, 2016, from http://ask.ohio.edu/index.jsp?requestType=NormalRequest&source=4&id=610&sessionId=005c2fa2-726a-11e6-ab25-83f32a043e2d&question=What+is+University+College


Appendix: Interview Guide

Interview Protocol

This project aims to understand some of your experiences as an Exploratory Studies student. The project is not affiliated with the Exploratory Studies program in any way; I am simply interested in the impact it may have on students here at UC.

Tell me a little about your experience of choosing a major.
- What majors were you considering before coming to UC?
- Have the majors you considered changed at all? If so, how?
- Did choosing UC as a school have any impact on the major you chose? In other words, would you have chosen a different major if you had gone to a different school? If so, why?

How did you learn about the Exploratory Studies program at UC?
- (If needed to clarify) How did you get into the Exploratory Studies program at UC (switched into it, started there, etc.)
- (If needed) Did you know about the Exploratory Studies program before coming to UC/during the admissions process?
- Did the Exploratory Studies program have any impact on your choice to attend UC?

University Rhetoric
- What does it mean to you when UC refers to you as an Exploratory Studies major? What do you think of?
- How do you feel about the label “Exploratory Student”?  
  - Is it positive or negative? Why?
  - Do you like or dislike it? Why?
- Do you or any other students/staff use a label other than ‘Exploratory’ to describe your major? (Ex: Undecided, undeclared, still deciding, etc.)  
  - If so, what do they say?  
  - How does that make you feel?
- Do people who are NOT affiliated with UC (students at other schools, parents, etc.) use a label other than ‘Exploratory’ to describe your major?
  - If so, what do they say?  
  - How does that make you feel?
- If so, do these other labels have a different connotation/meaning for you? What meaning is that? Do you prefer a certain one? Why?
- Does it make a difference to you that UC labels the program ‘Exploratory Studies’ as opposed to using some other label? Why or why not?

How do you feel about being an Exploratory Studies major?
- Did you have strong feelings or reactions when choosing this major? Why?
- What did your parents say about the choice?
- How did your friends react to the choice? What did they say?
  Have your feelings about being an Exploratory Studies major changed from when you first chose the major? Why or why not? (If necessary) How have your feelings changed?
(If time allows) How would you describe your experience in...
  • the Exploratory Studies program?
  • the Exploratory Studies learning communities?
  • the Exploratory Studies classes?

Closing Thoughts
  • What, if anything, would you change anything about the way the program is described to current or future students?
  • Is there anything else you think I should know or that you want to say in regards to what we’ve discussed?

Demographic questions:
  • What year are you (freshman, sophomore, etc.)?
  • How would you describe your race/ethnicity?
  • From the list below, please indicate what you believe your family income is:
    • Less than $10,500
    • $10,500-$13,999
    • $14,000-$17,599
    • $17,600-$21,199
    • $21,200-$24,799
    • $24,800-$29,999
    • $30,000-$39,999
    • $40,000-$49,999
    • $50,000-$59,999
    • $60,000-$69,999
    • $70,000 - $89,999
    • $90,000-$99,999
    • $100,000 - $149,999
    • $150,000+
    • Don’t Know
    • Prefer Not to Say