

## Intermediate Educational Transitions, Alignment, and Inequality in U.S. Higher Education

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### In a Nutshell

- Completing higher education degrees can help advance people's economic and social well-being in the United States, but there are many transition points *within* college that people must successfully overcome before degree completion.
  - E.g., taking mandatory placement tests or passing gateway courses.
- We call these *within-level* transition points, **intermediate educational transitions**.
- One of the most important of these transitions is *declaring a college major*, which, in two- and four-year colleges, is often a prerequisite to degree completion.
- However, we know relatively little about which students are most successful in declaring a major or why they can successfully declare, especially in less-selective or open-access colleges.
- In this study, we show that pre-college *academic and informational resources* are vitally important when it comes to successfully declaring majors in the less-selective, public, four-year colleges we analyze – which also serve mainly lower-income students.
- We also show that *compensatory support*, both in the form of *relationships* between students and parents, family members, and peers, and *college support* in the form of targeted, high-quality, major declaration advising are the difference between remaining undeclared and declaring for students with lower academic and informational preparation.
- We conclude that while the hurdle of major declaration contributes to inequality between students, even those with similarly-low incomes, colleges can help to reduce this inequality by facilitating high-quality major declaration advising and support—especially for students with the lowest academic and informational preparation.

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### The Problem

We know that college degree completion can be a ticket to economic and social well-being for graduates, but that graduation rates on average are low: only about one-in-three students earns an associate's degree and two-in-three students completes a bachelor's degree at the college where they started after three and six years, respectively.<sup>i</sup> There are many explanations for these low rates, but one of the most important is that students often stall when trying to overcome mandatory transitions in higher education *prior* to degree completion, like passing gateway classes or mastering field-of-study prerequisites. *Declaring a major* is one of the most important transitions: among students with similar pre-college demographic characteristics and academic experiences, students who do not declare a major during their first year of enrollment have lower levels of second-year college persistence<sup>ii</sup> and students who remain undeclared for six semesters are less likely to complete a bachelor's degree than are those who declare in that timeframe.<sup>iii</sup> So, we need to understand more about *which students are able to declare a major and why* if we also want to understand higher education degree completion.

**Research Translation Brief:  
Intermediate Educational Transitions**

**New Insights for Addressing the Problem**

- We analyze three waves of interview data from 28 freshmen attending three, less-selective, BA-granting colleges that are part of the same “MetroU” higher education system—a pseudonym required by our data agreement—resulting in 84 total interviews.
- We also draw on college transcript data that allows us to observe whether the students in our interview sample declare majors after 4.5 years of enrollment.
- Using this approach, we find that students fall into three major declaration trajectories based on their *academic* and *informational* preparation and the *compensatory support* (described above) they receive.
  - By “academic preparation,” we mean whether students have taken any college preparatory classes and whether they have above-average high school grades.
  - By “informational preparation,” we mean whether students have received exposure to relevant information about their intended field of study, whether through explicit teaching in high school, pre-college internship or programmatic opportunities, or other sources.

The three major declaration trajectories are:

1. *Seamless:*
  - These are students who declare majors easily and quickly.
  - They can do this because they have relatively higher academic and informational preparation before college entry than their peers, which helps them to achieve alignment between their pre-college field-of-study goals and their academic actions in college.
  - This alignment helps students to avoid major colleges challenges and to gain helpful college support, resulting in successful major declaration.
2. *Stalled and restarted:*
  - These are students who have trouble declaring, typically because the combination of lower academic and informational resources prevents them from achieving initial alignment between their field-of-study goals and their college academic actions.
  - BUT their relationships with family, friends, and trusted advisors, as well as strong college support—e.g., intensive advising related to major declaration—allow them to eventually achieve alignment.
  - As a result, they can restart their academic trajectories and ultimately declare their majors.
3. *Persistently stalled:*
  - These are students who also have trouble declaring due to lower academic and informational preparation prior to college entry.
  - BUT unlike stalled-and-restarted students, they are unable to find adequate support to achieve alignment—largely because of organizational challenges posed by their colleges like confusing, low-quality advising and confusing or conflicting information.
  - As a result, they remain undeclared after 4.5 years of college enrollment.

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### Why Are These Insights Important?

Identifying (a) which students enter college with lower academic and informational resources and (b) how to ensure these students receive personalized, high-quality major declaration support, should help more students attending less-selective colleges to declare majors and persist to degree completion.

### What Should Decision Makers Do?

*Federal and state policymakers should:*

- Incentivize and provide funding to colleges that collect and use data to identify students with lower academic and informational preparation, and then commit to providing tailored, high-quality major declaration advising services to those students.
- Prioritize colleges in open grant competitions (e.g., the federal Postsecondary Student Success Grant Program) that center major declaration support as among their student retention and success initiatives.
- Launch new funding opportunities for institutions of higher education focused on developing programs that provide equitable, high-quality, major declaration support.

*Higher education leaders should:*

- Ensure student data collection efforts early in the college career target assessing levels of academic and informational preparation, especially among lower-income students.
- Funnel academic and advising support resources to students who, based on transcript data, do not appear “on track” for on-time major declaration.
- Communicate with faculty and staff regarding the importance of prioritizing student success in “intermediate transitions,” like declaring a major or passing gateway classes, and provide high-quality training and support to college personnel who can help students through these transitions.

### What Do We Still Need to Know?

It is unclear at this point whether our findings generalize to the entire population of less-selective U.S. colleges and universities, though it is well known that high-quality advising is a well-tested, effective solution for addressing students’ struggles in higher education.<sup>iv</sup> Future research should use a larger sample size, or perhaps an randomized control trial, to test the causal relationships between low academic and informational preparation, high-quality college compensatory resources, and student major declaration success.

### Contact

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<sup>i</sup> National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). 2024. “Digest of Education Statistics: Current Tables.” Tables 326.10 and 326.25. U.S. Department of Education, Washington, D.C. Accessed online, May 28, 2024: [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/current\\_tables.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/current_tables.asp).

<sup>ii</sup> Leppel, Karen. 2001. “The Impact of Major on College Persistence among Freshmen.” *Higher Education* 41:327–42; St. John, Edward P., Shouping Hu, Ada Simmons, Deborah Faye Carter, and Jeff Weber. 2004. “What Difference Does a Major Make? The Influence of College Major Field on Persistence by African American and White Students.” *Research in Higher Education* 45(3):209–32.

<sup>iii</sup> Yue, Hongtao, and Xuanning Fu. 2017. “Rethinking Graduation and Time to Degree: A Fresh Perspective.” *Research in Higher Education* 58(2):184–213.

<sup>iv</sup> Kuh, George D., Jillina Kinzie, Jennifer A. Buckley, Brian K. Bridges, and John C. Hayek. 2006. “What Matters to Student Success: A Review of the Literature.” In *Commissioned Report for the National*

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