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The Exploratory Program at Florida State University

Has anyone ever asked you the question “What do you want to be when you grow up?” This question seems elementary, but it is a question that pertains to many college students today. The exploratory program at Florida State offers a way out, or a way in if you would like to view it that way, for students that are not quite prepared to declare a major yet. When students declare themselves as an exploratory major, they are strongly urged to take a one credit hour twelve week course, SLS 1511. This course focuses on “evaluating major and career opportunities through analysis of their values, interests, and skills.” Exploratory students who are truly unsure of a major direction would want to enroll in the course to further their decision making process. One of the main objectives of this course and the exploratory program is to get students to declare a major, and not only declare a major but do so confidently. Many incoming first year students declare majors without confidence and clarity, this causes a massive amount of students to switch majors.

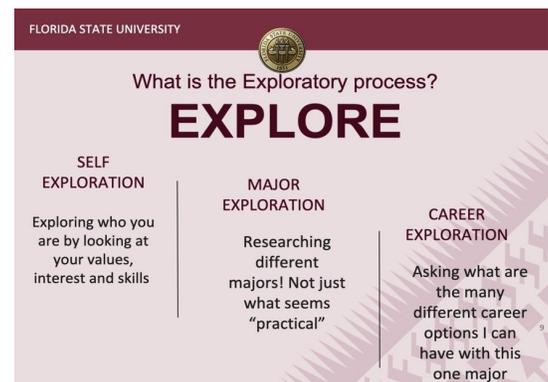
With so many majors and different paths a student can take, it is difficult for a first year student to declare a major and stick with that major in confidence. So much so that the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) stated that “Within 3 years of initial enrollment, about 30 percent of undergraduates in associate’s and bachelor’s degree programs who had declared a major had changed their major at least once.” With this information, one can quantify that

approximately one out of every three students change their major at least once during their college career. This might seem absurd to some, but for a college student it seems like an almost normal thing to change your major selection. When I asked a first year Florida State University student why he changed his major to business finance, while previously being a mechanical engineering major, he stated that “I need time to enjoy the college experience, and to be honest I did not know how hard taking engineering classes would be, and I can not sacrifice my social life for my college degree that is just not the type of person I am.” (Davis Cox Interview) Cox like many other college students just seemed lost on their major selection, which could put students such as Cox in a situation where they are paying for and taking classes that are not geared toward their graduation. This could extend the time it takes to get a degree and cause unnecessary fees by triggering the excess credit hour surcharge.

Exploratory students can often experience uncertainty in different ways as explained by Jamie L. Workman she states that “Some feel pressure to arrive at college with a declared major, and some exploratory students experience high levels of stress while making a decision.” This is true in many of the exploratory majors students that attend Florida State. Many students have external pressures such as parents that are pressuring them to declare a major that is worth it for them to pay for college, or their advisors and peers pressuring them to declare a major fast so that they will not have to go to college for 5 years. Others experience internal pressures such a doubt that they will make a good decision on major choice, or even some being scared that they will have to change their major for a second time. This is why the Florida State University exploratory program and the resources it offers is necessary, to help new students make informed and comfortable major choice.

The exploratory program at Florida State University, according to their website, “offers you the opportunity to develop greater self-awareness, discover the many options offered at the university, and declare departmental majors with confidence.” This is a necessary program at any college because “Research has shown that the majority of college students, especially freshmen and sophomores, often lack the knowledge and experience required to make a planned decision concerning their choice of major and career direction (Kelly & White, 1993; Tillar & Hutchins, 1979)”. Florida State University does a good job at recognizing that there is a need for these programs so much so that they changed the name of the major from “Undecided” to “Exploratory” in order to remove the negative connotation from the name of the degree. Exploratory majors are often urged by their advisor at orientation to take a course geared solely towards helping students select a major. This offers a unique opportunity that other students attending Florida State would not have access to and could quite possibly be an advantage.

This is one of the slides introducing the three major topics that this class, SLS 1511, focuses on. The course begins with self exploration, figuring out what values, interests and skills suit you best. The class explored this by taking the Myers Briggs type indicator assessment, which is a personality test that gives insight on how a student perceives the world and makes decisions. The class also completes an in-class activity where they narrowed down the values that are most important to each student.



Next the class did major exploration, this started with how students should research a major, not just basing their decision of job statistics and how much money they would make out of college but something more rooted in what they are passionate about. The students did this by creating a wandering map of all their interests then relating this information to different majors. One student mentioned that this class “Forced me to think differently about how I should choose my major, not only thinking about STEM fields per say that are high in demand but, thinking that I am going to be taking classes for this major for the next four years it better be something I am interested in or I am going to fail.”(Bryan Hall Interview) Suggesting that this class offers the tools that are necessary for students to make an informed choice about a major decision, and feel better and more informed than the average student declaring right out of high school.

The third topic that the class focuses on is career exploration. After narrowing down major options based on interests and passions, these students explore the types of jobs that can be related to their certain majors. The class hosts a conference in the career center, where a career center representative walks them through possible career paths offered in the fields that they are interested in. These three major sections of the course are all tied together in a way to try to help the students with major selection. Self exploration gives students the building blocks to research majors that would suit them well, while going to the career center helps narrow down major decisions. This class is an essential portion of Florida State University's plan to help students that are confused or unsure about what they should be majoring in.

An additional part of the exploratory program are the recurring workshops that the course instructors strongly suggest you attend on a regular basis. Attendance is mandatory for at least one workshop if you are taking the SLS 1511 class. These workshops are cleverly named “Pizza

and A Major Workshop” and offer pizza as an incentive to attend. The university describes the workshop objectives as “Each week targets one of the three phases of discovery (self, major and career). Students fully participate in this fun learning opportunity, which always concludes with free pizza.” These workshops hammer home the same points that the class SLS 1511 emphasizes in a unique way. For example, in the “Major Exploration” workshop, the participants played Major Jeopardy which helped them further their knowledge of majors. These workshops effectively convey necessary information in a fun and engaging manner.

The Florida State University exploratory program Instagram page is not only a way to keep up with events that exploratory program is hosting, but also includes dates and times of important activities going on around campus. One

specific example of this would be their post on August 23rd in which they listed important dates for incoming exploratory majors. This instagram post listed many important dates such as the move in dates, drop/add deadline, first day of classes, launch, Nole call, pizza and a major and lastly, spring registration. The



information on the graphic is organized chronologically from top to bottom and has an alternating color pattern of the classic Florida State University garnet and gold with a building in the back and the Florida State University Center for Exploratory Students stamp in the corner also stating where the Center for Exploratory Advising is housed, which is the William Johnston Building on the ground floor. The graphic is straightforward and easy to understand.

A second way the exploratory program utilizes their Instagram page is to push the narrative that declaring a major is a huge part of someone's college career and should be done so



confidently and happily. This second example was

posted on April 19th and showcases two students on the ground floor of the William Johnston Building next to the “I Declared” wall. This wall is where exploratory students go when they are done with the program and are ready to officially declare their major. It serves as

somewhat of a right of passage for students to write their newly declared major on the wall. This Instagram post is

also “Boomerang” which is a sort of live moving picture that allows emotion and movement to be conveyed easier. In this post the students are grinning ear to ear and the girl is even doing a little dance conveying the body language of someone who is excited or happy with the actions they have just taken. The Florida State exploratory Instagram page is a helpful tool not only for students, but also for the exploratory program using it to push their messages and further involvement in the activities that they offer.

Another aspect of the exploratory program at Florida State University is mandatory advising. At orientation, all the exploratory major students were taken to the William Johnston Building for the first advising appointments. During this appointment, the students were to state the major that they seemed most interested in and the advisors then suggested classes based on this major. This meeting is mostly just a rushed meeting to make sure that you know what classes you should take the first semester at Florida State. The second meeting you have with

your advisor is a lot more meaningful than the first, the New Nole Advising exploratory meeting students are expected to complete the Majors and Exploration packet which according to the Florida State University exploratory website contains “Information that is then translated into a list of potential majors, and the student is charged with tangible action steps to fully explore their customized major and career options.” This is supposed to give students an idea of what major they want to take if they are starting from square one, this meeting really should kickstart the process of what major you should be choosing. After this meeting, there is an additional mandatory meeting previously to entering the first spring semester in which they really push the idea home that declaring a major as early as possible would be the best decision for you and also structure your classes based on the hypothetical major you have chosen. The advising program is an essential aspect of the exploratory program at Florida State.

The exploratory major is not a four year major. The maximum time you can spend as an exploratory major is four semesters. This means exploratory majors have two years maximum to figure things out. right? Wrong! Exploratory majors are pressured constantly to declare a major and graduate in the same four years allotted to students who declared their majors on the first day of class freshman year. Every meeting you have with your advisor is geared toward getting you into a major and graduating in a four-year period. Every powerpoint slide presented by the instructor in SLS 1511 is trying to get you to declare a major. When asked on how he felt about the pressures to declare a major Bryan stated that “They make it seem like you have to declare a major after the first semester or you will be stuck at this college forever.” (Bryan Hall Interview) This is something many exploratory students struggle with and seems very counterintuitive and hypocritical of the university to state that they want you declare with confidence yet pressure you

the entire way to declare prematurely. This is one flaw that seems fairly recognized among exploratory majors and is something the Exploratory program at Florida State could take into account when discussing flaws in the program.

In my personal opinion, the exploratory program at Florida State University is one that is extremely beneficial to students who do not have a plan upon entering college. I initially thought I was a computer science major coming in, but one hard look at the academic program mapping, and I knew that computer science was not for me. That left me with absolutely no idea what direction I was going in when coming to Florida State. The advising was the most critical and valuable portion of the exploratory program for me. The one on one time with my advisor discussing what interests I had and how rigorous of classes I would like to take was priceless. She then took the information I gave her and used her expertise to suggest classes that would interest me and further help me choose a direction. She also proposed possible majors and their mapping and finally, related careers. The one credit hour course also helped guide me to recognize what I actually cared about instead of just viewing statistics on high demand careers or six figure average starting salaries. Truthfully, even after all the terrific advising and classes I attended, I am still not one hundred percent certain which major I would like to declare, but I am definitely in a much better spot and at the end of spring, I hope to declare my major confidently.

In conclusion, I think Florida State University is unwavering in their commitment to providing the resources that they believe are necessary and helpful for encouraging exploratory students to eventually choose a major. Although the pressure that students are faced with to choose a major can be somewhat daunting, the Florida State University exploratory program is one that has helped me and many others in my community to make a more informed confident

decision on the studies we are choosing going forward. Without this program, I feel as though there would be many more students waffling back and forth about their majors for longer and maybe ultimately not making the best decision for them about a major and a career path.

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