Practice for Life: Making Decisions in College

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Presentation Outline

• Background and context
• Decision-making in five areas
  – Time
  – Connection
  – Home
  – Advice
  – Engagement
• College as practice for life
  – Lessons for students
  – Implications for colleges
Background and Context

Scope of the Research and General Themes
New England Consortium on Assessment and Student Learning

- Seven liberal arts colleges
  - Bates, Bowdoin, Colby, Middlebury, Smith, Trinity, Wellesley
- Longitudinal study of Class of 2010
- Panel interviews every semester
- Cohort surveys every year
Panel Study of the Class of 2010

- Initial sample size = 255
- Race-stratified random sample (42 African-American, 36 Asian-American, 36 Latino/a, 38 International, and 100 domestic white students)
- 66% women and 34% men, but equal numbers of women and men at coed colleges
- About 60% received financial aid
- About 33% were first generation
Panel Study of the Class of 2010

- **Academic experiences**: Best/worst courses, choice of major, study habits, interactions with faculty, self-assessment of knowledge and skills
- **Social experiences**: Interactions with friends, residential life, extracurricular activities, social life
- **Life-management experiences**: Managing time and life, being away from home, finding a sense of belonging, balancing competing demands
- **Aspirations, expectations, and self-reflection**: Definitions of success, perceptions of change, hopes and fears, self-identity
What should I do this weekend?
Which clubs and organizations should I join?
Should I schedule a meeting with my faculty advisor?
Is it better for me to study alone or with others?
How much time should I spend on this assignment?
What can I do to feel more at home here?
What can I learn from this professor whom I don’t like?
Should I go into Boston this weekend?
Why am I enjoying this class so much?
When should I start writing this paper?
What should I talk to my advisor about?
What would make this a successful year for me?
Should I study in the library or in my room?
Who will I sit with at lunch today?
Who will I live with next year?
Should I double major?
What classes will I take?
Should I study abroad?
How will I get everything done this week?
Who can I ask for help with my writing? My problem sets?
Should I study for another hour or go for a run?
How do I tell my roommate that she’s annoying me?
How do I tell my professor that I don’t understand something?
Should I complete an honors project?
Should I talk to my parents about this?
What will I major in?
What will I do after I graduate?
How will I fulfill my distribution requirements?
Decision-Making in Five Areas
What’s most on your mind as your sophomore year gets underway?

First of all, I felt like, “Wow, my [college] career’s about to come to an end!” Maybe that’s kind of early to start thinking about it, but I felt like, “Wow, I only have my junior and senior year left!” So that kind of hit me. I started thinking about graduate school and what do I need to do for that. (Henry, sophomore)
Time: Decisions about Finding Balance and Focusing on the Present

*How would you use your time differently?*

I would be much more selective with who and what I’m giving it to. I think it’s really important to have the freedom to forget about time. I think that one should always realize that time is a non-renewable resource and the ways that you use it; everything that we do, every way that we use our time is a choice to not use it in a million other ways. *(Jason, senior)*
Connection: Decisions about Making and Keeping Friends

I like hanging out with the same people all the time because I know where we left off yesterday and we’re going to pick up from there. Whereas hanging out with different people is a bit confusing to me and I don’t like that style. I like smaller groups and constancy. One of my good friends keeps telling me that I need to diversify more, but I just said this is what I like. But I have this other friend who stays in the student union for like two hours and makes sure she meets everyone. I can’t be like that. (Audrey, junior)
It’s so inconvenient to be picky about your friends here. I felt like I had to make friends with the people on my [dorm] floor and that was really great. That was really, really good because it meant that I socialized with different people that had different priorities and different social preferences. Definitely not the kind of people I hung around with in high school. *(Aneka, first year)*

I think in a way it’s harder because when you’re a freshman you are kind of open to everything. But once you’re a sophomore you’re a lot more comfortable with the people that you know. So you don’t have the incentive to go out and meet people, unless you have a really extroverted personality. *(Katie, sophomore)*
Home: Decisions about Creating Home and a Sense of Belonging

There’s a gap in like the cultural diversity here. I knew that coming in so I was not shocked. It was something that I was aware of. . . But, yeah, you kind of feel it more. (Adam, beginning of first year)

I do feel some sense of [home] at this point. I wasn’t expecting it to come so early, but now a lot of my insecurities and things are kind of mellowed, kind of evened out or whatever. . . So it’s becoming a place where it’s not necessarily a struggle to be at. (Adam, end of first year).

Graduation can’t get here soon enough. I am ready yesterday. . . I’m always looking for that next thing. (Adam, senior)
It’s just not home for me, because it’s very different. It’s not anything that I can say, “Well, if you make this better, I’ll feel at home.” It’s just not going to be. (Oma, sophomore)

What advice would you offer to students starting college?
It’s not just four years of school. It’s four years of everything, and I would advise people to do things outside of courses. Because, I mean it is college, you’re supposed to be doing work, blah, blah, blah, but it’s also like you’re 22 or 21 by the time you get out of here, and you should be getting a lot more out of this than just academics—which I didn’t do. (Oma, senior)
Advice: Decisions about Asking for and Receiving Advice

How important is it to you to get to know your professors well? I guess somewhere within me I feel like I need something to justify talking to the professor, but that isn’t the case. I mean you should go to strike up a relationship with them so that you see each other as people as opposed to the professor and the student . . . so you better understand each other. And I haven’t taken advantage of that and it’s not good. (Sam, junior)
Advice: Decisions about Asking for and Receiving Advice

How would you describe your interactions with your First Year Advisor?
I really love my First-Year Advisor. She’s kind of like the mother figure I have on campus. . . . I talk [to her] about my family and all sorts of things. She’s actually kind of eccentric, but somehow the conversation seems to be comfortable. . . Even though I wouldn’t say she’s my favorite professor in a classroom, I mean I wasn’t stunned by her class, she’s the only professor that I feel affectionately for. (Nileen, first-year)

What do you think you’ll remember most about your senior year?
Probably my thesis advisor. Oh, she’s so sweet. I just absolutely love her. I know I can swear in front of her. I know I could throw up in front of her or cry in front of her, and it would be fine. I never thought that I would be this close to anyone that wasn’t my age. She’s a good friend of mine at this point. She’s my rock. (Nileen, senior)
Engagement: Decisions about Approaching New Ways of Thinking and Doing

How are your classes going this semester?

- I’m really frustrated with my math class. I loved calculus last semester, and I just really understood the way my professor lectured. This semester I have another professor, and I’m not getting what’s going on in that course at all . . . But the way that it’s presented is very fast, and she frequently references previous examples. And it’s like, “Oh, you should know this.”

- I love organic chemistry, because I get to play with these model sets, which are basically like Tinker Toys for big kids. And they’re very amazing.

- My social justice class is frustrating because nothing’s due. I don’t do things unless there’s a deadline. . . But I’m really liking the course and the readings are all very interesting. And we have lunches every week, which is something that I really value because it’s just like a smaller group and we get to talk with the professor and it’s really good.

(Denise, sophomore)
Engagement: Decisions about Approaching New Ways of Thinking and Doing

I don’t really care about topics that philosophy actually covers. What I care more about is reading an argument and dissecting the argument and objecting to the argument, or proving it, or thinking of a new argument or coming up with an analogy. (Dan, junior)

Did your summer job change your academic plans?
Yes, because I know I’m interested in public policy and that is the career path I could see myself in. I have definitely started to take some classes this semester that reflect that… If I had found out that I really didn’t like working in the legislator’s office, I might not be pursuing those classes. (Dan, senior)
College as Practice for Life

Lessons for Students
College as Practice for Life

What was the most important thing you learned about yourself in college?

I’m not quite sure what I did learn about myself. I guess I learned how to make decisions. I think that’s a very general and basic thing people learn while they’re at college. These decisions that may have seemed for me at one point very out of the blue and very random, such as joining this club or choosing to focus on art history as opposed to history, were huge decisions for me and altered the course of how my life played out during college and post-college. So learning how to weigh options and make decisions was probably a pretty significant thing to learn and practice.

(Cindy, one year post-graduation)
What will I major in?
How can I get a better grade in this course?
How much time should I spend on this assignment?
Should I study abroad? What can I do to feel more at home here?
Who will I sit with at lunch today? What will I do after I graduate?
Should I study for another hour or go for a run? How will I get everything done this week?
Should I go into Boston this weekend? What should I do this summer?
Should I schedule a meeting with my faculty advisor?
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How will I fulfill my distribution requirements?
Why am I enjoying this class so much?
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Should I study in the library or in my room?
Lessons for Students

- **Don’t underestimate the value of small decisions**
  - Students can learn from every decision they encounter, from the big ones, like what to major in, to the everyday ones such as how to spend your time and with whom.

- **Try to see college as an end in itself, rather than as a means to an end**
  - The series of decisions, and the deadlines attached to them, can orient students too much toward the future rather than allowing them to stay in the present.

- **The importance of making new friends**
  - College is an opportunity for students to broaden their social perspectives and gain valuable life practice in creating new and meaningful friendships.
Lessons for Students

• **Making a home away from home**
  – Because residential colleges are places where students learn, live, work, and play in the same space with many of the same people, they provide excellent practice for “home-making” and reflecting on what home means.

• **Developing professional relationships starts in college**
  – Faculty members are potential mentors who offer valuable advice, but students have to make the effort to get to know them.

• **All academic experiences are not equally engaging**
  – But students shouldn’t use this as an excuse. Students must seek out subjects, ideas, or approaches that excite them every semester and chances are they will have experiences that build toward more sustained engagement overall.
College as Practice for Life

Implications for Colleges
Implications for Colleges

To what extent do our policies and practices:

• Intensify students’ future orientation and focus on the big decisions?
• Diminish rather than enhance academic engagement?
• Fail to sustain students’ interactions with difference?

What can we do to encourage students to see the decisions they make as opportunities to “restart college”?
Reflections, Regrets, and Imagined Restarts

As a senior, what would you want to tell an incoming student?

I would say one of the largest things is when you fall or when you mess up, when something does not go your way, when something is by all counts horrible, do the best you can do from where you are. A lot of times a situation takes on a life of its own. And the what if's, the should haves, could haves, would haves, will kill you. They will eat you up. I would say, do the best you can do from right now. And that’s for any age group. (Adam, senior)
Reflections, Regrets, and Imagined Restarts

As a senior, what would you want to tell an incoming student?

Try to enjoy college as much as you can. In the grand scheme of things, it doesn’t matter how many awards you win or what [grades] you get in your classes. Don’t be desperate if you get a C on a paper. Be desperate if you get an A on a paper and realize that you didn’t learn anything. Be flexible, don’t be judgmental. Find as many friends as you can, and if you’re not friends anymore, don’t stay in a social situation that you don’t enjoy just because of what people may think or say. Try to be yourself. This is probably the most tolerant community you’ll encounter in life. (Sonya, senior)