

By the Numbers

Focus on the Facts

Office of Institutional
Research
University of Wisconsin—La Crosse

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Fickle & capricious students?

Exploring Student Major Change Patterns

According to the Career Development Center at the University of Nevada, Reno, 70% of undergraduate students nationally change their majors at least once in the course of their undergraduate study. Some web sites, such as Northwestern and Virginia Tech, claim that students change their majors an average of 3 times! This sentiment is echoed in the web sites of career development

and academic advising offices across the country—largely in an effort to relieve anxious parents that changing majors is neither a harbinger of failure nor a cause for significant concern.

How do UW-L Students Compare?

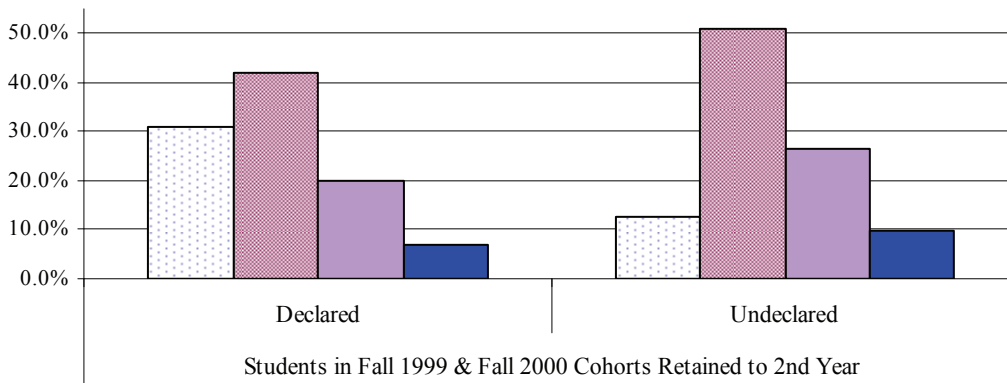
Students at UW-L are not that different from their national peers. Data from the new freshmen cohorts starting at UW-L in Fall 1999 and Fall 2000

Inside this issue:

Student Major Change Patterns	1
Editor's Note	1
UW-L Advising Resources	1
Characteristics of UW-L Fall 1999 & 2000 Cohorts	2

% of UW-L Students who Change Majors

- Don't Change Majors
- Change Majors Once
- Change Majors Twice
- Change Majors 3+ Times



UW-L Advising Resources

Academic Advising Center

<http://www.uwlax.edu/advising/index.htm>

College of Business Administration Academic Advising

<http://www.uwlax.edu/ba/advising1/index.html>

College of Liberal Studies Academic Advising

<http://www.uwlax.edu/ls/html/clsadvise.htm>

College of Science & Health Academic Advising

<http://www.uwlax.edu/sah/html/advising-csah.htm>

Editor's Note

I can't tell you how often I hear stories of how frequently students change their majors. To hear some tell it, students change their majors as often as they change their clothes! This issue debunks the

myth that students are whimsical and inconstant in choosing their major field of study. Data from two UW-L new freshman cohorts for whom graduation rates can be calculated is also

provided to show the possible impact of major changes on graduation outcomes.

Teri Thill

Editor & Director of Institutional Research

Characteristics of the UW-L New Freshmen Cohorts from Fall 1999 and Fall 2000

Fall 1999 New Freshmen Cohort

- 1630 students
- 404 (25%) Undeclared
- 1349 (83%) Retained to 2nd Year
- 383 (23%) 4-year graduates
- 514 (33%) additional 5-year graduates
- 110 (7%) additional 6-year graduates

Fall 2000 New Freshmen Cohort

- 1606 students
- 559 (35%) Undeclared
- 1356 (84%) Retained to 2nd Year
- 413 (26%) 4-year graduates
- 467 (29%) additional 5-year graduates
- 121 (8%) additional 6-year graduates

Sources:

Laing, J., Valiga, M.J., & Eberly, C. *Predicting Freshmen College Major Choices from ACT Assessment Program Data*. College & University, Spring, 1986: 198-205.

Northwestern University "Advice for Parents" web site: <http://www.northwestern.edu/parent/advice.html>

UNR Career Development Center web site: <http://www.unr.edu/career/Parents.html>

Virginia Tech Undergraduate Admissions web site: <http://www.admiss.vt.edu/majors/index.php?major=US>

Exploring Student Major Change Patterns (cont.)

shows that on average, students will change their majors once over the course of their undergraduate studies. Students who begin their undergraduate studies with an undeclared major have a slightly higher tendency to change their major, as would be expected. This finding is consistent with data reported in a 1986 study from Michigan State University, which stated that about 65% of new students change their major, though the rate is lower (48%) if undecided students are excluded (Laing, Valiga & Eberly, 1986).

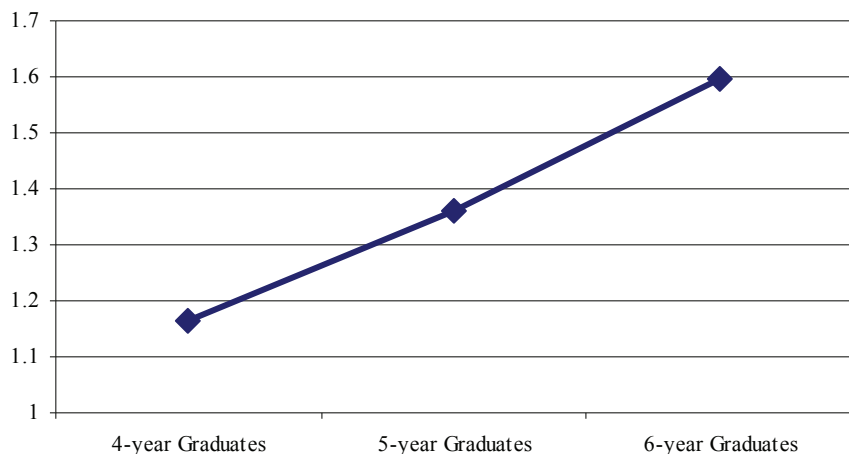
Further, students who are retained to their second year of study are more likely to change their majors than students who leave, though it's unknown if the students that leave do so because their intended major field of study isn't available at UW-L.

So what?

Given how common it appears to be for students to change their majors, the obvious question is does it make any difference in their eventual degree completion.

Analysis from the UW-L Fall 1999 and Fall 2000 cohorts indicates that there is a statistically significant relationship between how quickly students earn their degrees and the number of times they change their majors.

Mean # of Major Changes by Time-to-Degree



Students who graduate in 4 years or less change their majors on average 1.2 times, whereas students who graduate between 4 and 5 years after the start of their undergraduate studies change their majors an average of 1.4 times. The trend continues for students who take between 5 and 6 years to earn their degree; these students change their majors an average of 1.6 times. While it is impossible to say that changing majors causes longer degree-completion times, the relationship between the two appears to be quite strong.