

# Leveraging Exploratory Studies to Drive Student Retention, Graduation, and Career Success

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Association for Undergraduate Education at Research Universities (UERU)  
In partnership with Podium Education

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## Background and Context

Many students come to college without having chosen a major or field of study. Research estimates that between 20-50% of all undergraduate students enter as undecided or undeclared. More than a third of students will change their major at least once before graduation, with nearly 1 in 10 changing twice (or more) times.<sup>1</sup> STEM students are even more likely to change majors.<sup>2</sup> Though the reasons for students' choices are as diverse as the students themselves, uncertainty around major choice reflects similar uncertainty in the job market, the complexities of graduation requirements, and rising college costs, as well as personal interests, gender identity, and socioeconomic and cultural differences.<sup>3</sup> Essentially, undeclared undergraduate students are exploratory students. How colleges choose to support students in their exploration will impact whether they stay and complete a degree.

The question of how to best support exploratory students has engendered some debate. Should students be steered toward a major earlier to ensure they do not delay graduation or accumulate credits that do not apply to a degree? Alternatively, should students be discouraged from declaring a major too early before they have had time to explore? On the institution side, there is a clear gap around degree planning for students that need to compare different major and minor

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<sup>1</sup> Gordan, V. A., & Steele, G. E. (2015). *The undecided college student: An academic and career advising challenge*. 4th. ed. Charles C. Thomas.

<sup>2</sup> National Center for Education Statistics: <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2018/2018434/index.asp>.

<sup>3</sup> Soria, K. M., & Stebletin, M. (2013). Major decisions: motivations for selecting a major, satisfaction, and belonging. *NACADA journal*, 33(2), 29-43; Pozzebon, J. A., Ashton, M. C., & Visser, B. A. (2014). Major changes, personality, ability, and congruence in the prediction of academic outcomes. *Journal of Career Assessments*, 22(1), 75-88.

combinations, as most existing tools and advising resources are not set up to evaluate multiple pathways for the same student.<sup>4</sup> Research universities have developed different structures such as exploratory studies' programs, freshman learning communities, and meta majors<sup>5</sup> (structured pathways that group similar majors), to help students learn about and test out possible pathways before deciding.

As public support for higher education remains rocky, universities are thinking more creatively about how to prepare students for careers beyond providing a solid academic foundation in a major or discipline. Work-integrated learning experiences include internships, project-based learning, undergraduate research, and practica, among other opportunities, that help students gain employer-relevant experience and skills.<sup>6</sup> Allowing students to access these types of experiences before they have declared a major will make them truly exploratory and help students make a major choice. Unfortunately, however, students are unable to participate until after they have selected a major. At this point, it is more difficult for a student to apply new knowledge from an experiential learning opportunity toward making a decision.

The Association for Undergraduate Education at Research Universities (UERU) has partnered with Podium Education to explore an underappreciated question in undergraduate education: **how might research universities better support students in exploring academic and career pathways earlier in their educational journey?** As more universities embed work-based learning experiences into the undergraduate curriculum, UERU and Podium are examining institutional strategies for doing so, with particular attention to early interventions in the first two years of college.

Podium Education is a leading experiential education company designing scalable, high-impact practices in partnership with universities and employers to embed real-world, career-connected experiences for credit into the undergraduate degree. Podium has developed relationships with employers and created structured programs to connect students with work-based learning experiences at a scale rarely seen in higher education. Universities that have partnered with Podium are expanding career-oriented HIPs beyond boutique programs, using technology to make these high-quality opportunities available to every student on campus.

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<sup>4</sup> Samaranayake, S., Gunawardena, A.D.A., and Meyer, R. (2021). A Decision Support System for Undecided and Exploratory Students. *Computer and Information Science*, 15(1), 1-12.

<sup>5</sup> Waugh, A. (2016). Meta-Majors: An Essential First Step on the Path to College Completion. Jobs for the Future. National Center for Education Statistics: <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2018/2018434/index.asp>. Though most of the scholarship on meta majors has come from community colleges, Portland State University, Georgia State University and the University of Central Florida (among others) have integrated the practice successfully.

<sup>6</sup> Torpey-Saboe, N., Grubb, K., and Amankwah-Ayeh, A. (2025, July 23). *Internships and Beyond: Strengthening Career Value Across Diverse Models of Work-Based Learning*. Strada Education Foundation. <https://www.strada.org/reports/internships-and-beyond>.

*“Allowing freshmen to get exposed to all different types of organizations and what it’s like to work at those organizations gives students some quick wins and hopefully moments of inspiration as well.”* – **Chris Parrish**, Podium Education

The following brief white paper is drawn from a 1-hour roundtable conversation with 9 Vice Provosts for Undergraduate Education (UVPs) and their colleagues on exploratory studies programs, with support from Podium Education. The wide-ranging discussion captured some of the challenges and opportunities of experiential learning, how majors have become synonymous with careers in ways that do not serve students, and how early exploratory programs shape students’ identity development. The results will inform a forthcoming UERU community of practice on world readiness<sup>7</sup>, which will support UVPs and their teams in providing students with learning experiences that will prepare them for work, citizenship, and life.

Key themes from the roundtable conversation include:

1. Using language to influence student identity development
2. Decoupling majors from career pathways
3. Designing institutional structures, resources, and support for exploratory students
4. Making exploration count toward degree progress
5. Incorporating early experiential learning and career exploration
6. Supporting development of students’ durable skills
7. Engaging employers, alumni, and families in exploratory student success

## Exploration of Findings

The roundtable conversation surfaced a variety of considerations from philosophical framing of exploratory studies programs to program design and implementation, and broader connections to the world beyond the academy. Even basic language choices around undeclared students can impact students’ sense of belonging, persistence, and identity development, as well as reflect university structures more than students’ needs. Participants also shared high-level data on the number of undeclared students and major changers as well as the impact of various interventions on retention, persistence, and completion. The group shared common insights from engaging with local employers that may shape how future work-integrated learning experiences are constructed for students early in their academic journey.

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<sup>7</sup> See p. 11 in: Boyer 2030 Commission. (2022). The equity and excellence imperative: A 2030 blueprint for undergraduate education at U.S. research universities. *Association for Undergraduate Education at Research Universities*. <https://wacclearinghouse.org/docs/books/boyer2030/report.pdf>.

## 1

## Using language to influence student identity development

*“Our office was called the ‘undecided/undeclared’ office and that bothered me because the students are decided – they decided to be undeclared.”* – **Michael Dennin**, University of California, Irvine

A critical decision for universities is the terminology they use to describe students that have not selected a major. The term *undecided* was discouraged, as it suggests a lack of direction or commitment which may inadvertently stigmatize students. *Undeclared* or *exploring*, on the other hand, suggests students are making a conscious choice not to declare a major while they explore their options. Roundtable participants shared how they label their programs, from “The Exploratory Program” at Chapman University, to “University Undeclared” at the University of California, Irvine. Attention to language and labels helps universities show their support for students who choose to explore and facilitate the development of students’ identity and personal growth.

Participating UVPs also recognized that exploratory students are not a static nor monolithic group. The characteristics of exploratory students vary across institutions and are tied to institutional missions. Broad access institutions focused on university enrollment rather than admission to particular majors or colleges may allow significant flexibility, while institutions with lower acceptance rates limit major changes. At Michigan State University, for example, 75% of students change their major at least once, compared to the national average of 33%, while the University of Florida saw only 5-8% of their incoming class declare themselves exploratory. Students who are defined or self-identify as exploratory possess a variety of motivations and approaches to their exploration. Universities should take care not to paint students with the same brush and assume they are all struggling to find their way.

*“The student who is getting into our exploratory program because they just have a gap in understanding how they would use a major after graduation is different from the student who has not worked any part-time jobs and can’t articulate one interest. These are wildly different types of students who need different things”*

– **Justin Edwards**, Kent State University

## 2

## Decoupling majors from career pathways

Another recurring theme from the roundtable conversation was the need to decouple major choice from career pathways. A major does not equal a career. Institutions need to dial down their emphasis on major choice as there are many possible career pathways for each major.

Some schools have developed career-focused tools to help students choose a major based on the types of jobs they would like to do in the future. The University of Pittsburgh's [Degree Finder](#), for example, helps students identify possible majors based on broad interest areas (e.g., people and society, math and numbers, words and stories). The University of Nebraska Lincoln's [Explore Center](#) helps undeclared students and those who identify as pre-health, pre-law, or pre-engineering explore different professional areas and specialties. The Center also connects them with job shadowing so they can experience what it is like to be a professional in specific fields.

*"I always sort of bristle a little bit at the combination of major and career as if it's the same thing, perhaps it's because I'm an English professor and I know that English can take you to any career path you're interested in and not just one that we've predetermined for our students."* – **Amy Goodburn**, University of Nebraska Lincoln

## 3

## Designing institutional structures, resources, and support for exploratory students

Though all the institutions represented in the roundtable were research universities, they each approached the design of exploratory programs quite differently. The University of California, Irvine, and the University of Pittsburgh, for example, both had dedicated advising offices for undeclared students that were located centrally within the division of undergraduate education or the student success hub. Other universities embedded exploratory programs and undeclared student advising in the various colleges on campus, lending a more decentralized approach. Relying on a specific college to support undeclared student advising had clear disadvantages, for example:

*"One of the challenges is because [our exploratory tracks] are all housed within the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences...the advising load is significant...and so we are looking at whether we can move exploratory advising centrally to support students moving between colleges and majors."* – **Matt Jacobs**, University of Florida

Another common structure was freshman seminar courses. The University of Pittsburgh, University of California, Irvine, and Chapman University all provide 1- or 2-credit courses designed to help students pick a major in their freshman year. Chapman University also has a pre-orientation program in which incoming students spend a few days on campus as a cohort with the career center. These programs support student exploration in a structured way while conferring credit and helping students make progress toward a degree.

## 4

### Making exploration count toward degree progress

A critical consideration for equity and accessibility is ensuring student exploration does not derail timely progress toward a degree. Otherwise, students who make the conscious choice to explore their options will pay a penalty (which can cost thousands of dollars in excess tuition). Combining similar majors into tracks or meta-majors is one way to organize and support student exploration. When done right, institutions can deliver successful outcomes for undeclared students in excess of their peers that declared a major early.

The University of Florida, for example, has four tracks for exploratory students: the humanities, the social/behavioral sciences, STEM, and Engineering Studies. These tracks give students a chance to get up to speed before selecting a major. For majors affected by students taking exploratory courses, the university forms a Memorandum of Understanding with students so they can be treated like majors even as they explore. This gives undeclared students an advantage if they change majors into one of the impacted fields.

At the University of Pittsburgh, students can be undeclared in most schools (except for Nursing and Public Health, which have only one major). Pitt's hybrid approach incorporates assigned advisors within each school as well as a Success Hub with supplemental resources for exploration beyond those provided by the school. These supplemental exploratory resources help students who have already declared a major find a new path and transition without losing momentum.

*“Our exploratory students have shorter times to degree and higher graduation rates than our students who come in with a major.” – Mark Largent, Michigan State University*

## 5

## Incorporating early experiential learning and career exploration

Several members of the roundtable agreed that too much structure in the first year can prevent vital exploration, leading to regrets later if a student chooses the wrong field. For example, students who initially identify as pre-medicine may learn through a practicum that they do not enjoy the lifestyle associated with working in a clinical setting. It would be more advantageous for this learning to happen in the first year of college rather than the third or fourth. A few radical proposals from the group included: no required courses in the first year; taking the question of what is your preferred major off the admissions form and Common Application; and getting rid of majors altogether. Though majors are likely here to stay, at least for the time being, the sense that first-year students in particular should be allowed to take a broad range of courses persisted during the discussion.

Another possible solution is using on-campus employment opportunities to help students develop marketable skills and explore career pathways. Since on-campus employment is within the university's locus of control, universities could invest in creating more on-campus internship or work-study opportunities across the various offices and units that employ professionals from common fields. All the administrative functions of the university contain roles in these fields (e.g., marketing within campus communications, accounting within the business office, hospitality management within housing and dining services). These experiences will need to be thoughtfully constructed. One roundtable participant, for example, shared that a pilot of 8-10 week micro internships on campus was unsuccessful, as students struggled to fit the extra hours required for engagement into their schedules. Done right, however, such opportunities could potentially be a win-win for universities and students alike if they are integrated into the curriculum and provide critical financial support for students.

*"We tell the families, especially when they arrive, that this is a place that encourages and congratulates exploration."* – **Brad Petitfils**, Chapman University

## 6

## Supporting development of students' durable skills

The group questioned whether preparation for a career was the right focus, particularly early on in the students' journey. Several participants discussed how they cultivate a set of *durable skills* that add value for students no matter what career field they ultimately choose. Employers have long argued that college graduates need better communication skills, critical thinking, and problem solving. Though universities have long excelled selecting students with durable skills, they must now focus on *teaching* those skills.



Adam Lee (University of Pittsburgh) suggested trying to identify, for each major, one durable skill that is essential for success in that major or field. For example, the skill of abstraction is extremely valuable in computer science. Using artificial intelligence (AI) meaningfully and effectively might be an emerging durable skill across many majors.

*“Help students figure out what it means to meaningfully use [AI], help them scaffold effective learning and separate from things that derail learning...I’d love to figure out how we can get that across in the first year or two.” – Adam Lee, Pitt*

College leads students to focus on their own individual achievement through grades and test scores. In the workplace, however, college graduates will rarely be achieving alone. More likely, they will be asked to work collaboratively with others, demonstrate leadership, and contribute to the success of their team or organization. Durable skills such as curiosity, resilience, collaboration, and teamwork may be even more important than technical skills for a student’s career success. These skills take significant time to develop. Providing opportunities for students to gain durable skills earlier in their academic journey will ensure exploratory learning provides value no matter what field or major students ultimately choose.

## 7

### Engaging employers, alumni, and families in exploratory student success

One of the best ways to help students explore pathways is connecting them with alumni who can talk about their own academic and career journeys. Alumni conversations inspire students to pursue fields they hadn’t considered and gain an inside look into what the day-to-day experience is like in the workplace. Alumni also help students start and build their professional networks – an essential asset for continued employment throughout the student’s lifetime.

Roundtable participants acknowledged a persistent challenge engaging with corporate leaders who employ the university’s graduates, as these contacts are usually held by individual colleges and departments. Entities such as workforce councils (Michigan State University) and External Advisory Boards (University of Florida) provide a more direct line to industry experience, allowing undergraduate education leaders to learn from employers and connect students with the breadth of opportunities that exist in each field. As Mark Largent (Michigan State University) noted, “corporate leaders don’t care what the student’s GPA was, they want to know the student went to college and graduated.” These cross-cutting structures can help overcome institutional barriers that inhibit exploratory students from accessing industry connections.



Rather than a transcript with grades, the name of a degree or major, or even the name of the school itself, employers want to see what students did during their time in college. It is hard, however, for many students to articulate this in a coherent way. They think of their academics and other parts of the college experiences as “disintegrated components,” as Matt Jacobs (University of Florida) put it, rather than something to cultivate and curate. Co-curricular records and Learning and Employment Records (LERs) are an increasingly important tool that universities might use to help students convey their experience to future employers.

Lastly, participants encouraged their peers to spend time talking with parents, as parents often have ideas about what their kids should major in and may need to be sold on the idea of exploration. The labor market has changed dramatically since parents were young. With the rise of the gig economy and expected changes from AI, students of today need a new model for career preparation.

## Early Links to Student Outcomes

The roundtable left some questions unanswered, such as how long students should be allowed to explore, and the impact of exploration on students’ outcomes (retention, graduation, and employment). The participants shared a few high-level examples that suggest overall benefits of exploration for student success:

- Undeclared students at the **University of California, Irvine**, have the same time-to-degree as declared students, suggesting they are not slowed down by their exploration.
- **Chapman University** saw a double-digit turnaround in undeclared student retention over the past three years thanks to their interventions.
- At **Kent State University**, exploratory students who complete a career course are retained 14% higher than their peers, with a 26% increase for first generation students.

These examples suggest that early exploration may help students stay in college and strengthen their sense of belonging without delaying progress toward graduation. However, these examples are still largely anecdotal. Additionally, leaving a major or degree program entirely may be the best choice for a student who engaged in exploration. How might universities measure success for those who leave the institution and find a better path elsewhere? Research universities may benefit from deeper exploration of exploratory studies programs and their links to common student success outcomes – both for students who stay at the university and those who leave.

## Conclusion

*“What we’re trying to do is help students find what they love, open doors to curiosity, give them an opportunity to test and reflect through real experiences, and then use that to figure out a set of possible careers – things they perhaps didn’t know existed”*

– **Lindsey Rosenbluth**, Podium Education

The findings from this roundtable support research universities’ focus on what the Boyer 2030 Commission calls *world readiness*. Early exploration in the first or second year may help students make better-informed choices about what to study by considering both their personal interests and career opportunities they or their parents might have overlooked in high school. Providing experiential learning and connections to alumni in the first two years of college will help students gain exposure to potential future employers, build their professional networks, and cultivate durable skills (e.g., critical thinking, curiosity, resilience).

The question is how to scale exploratory experiences in ways that ensure adequate support for all students. Starting in 2027, for example, all students at the University of Florida will need to meet an experiential learning requirement (such as undergraduate research, study abroad, or an internship). With 40,000 students, the institution risks overwhelming Gainesville's local labor market if every student seeks an off-campus internship. Florida is already addressing these challenges proactively and may serve as a guide for peer institutions. UERU's Community of Practice on World Readiness and its ongoing partnership with Podium Education will continue to serve as resources for universities working to better support exploratory and undeclared students.

## Roundtable Participants

- **Michael Dennin**, Vice Provost for Teaching and Learning and Dean for the Division of Undergraduate Education, University of California, Irvine.
- **Jordan Edelman**, Director of Academic Advising, Kent State University
- **Justin Edwards**, Executive Director for Career Exploration & Development, Kent State University
- **Amy Goodburn**, Senior Associate Vice Chancellor and Dean of Undergraduate Education, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
- **Matt Jacobs**, Interim Associate Provost, University of Florida
- **Mark Largent**, Vice Provost and Dean of Undergraduate Education, Michigan State University
- **Adam Lee**, Vice Provost for Undergraduate Studies, University of Pittsburgh
- **Brad Petitfils**, Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education and Student Success, Chapman University

## About UERU

The Association for Undergraduate Education at Research Universities (UERU, pronounced “*You-Roo*”) is dedicated to excellence and access in undergraduate education by sharing and developing expertise across member institutions and other higher education organizations. The UERU membership is comprised of 138 research universities across the U.S., which collectively serve nearly 3 million undergraduate students. UERU helps its members stay current and forward-thinking, fosters connections across academic units, and enlists leaders in common projects to meet the challenges and opportunities facing undergraduate programs. Learn more at [ueru.org](http://ueru.org).

## About Podium Education

Podium Education is the leading experiential education company partnering with universities and industry to embed scalable, real-world, career-connected experiences directly into the undergraduate degree for credit. Podium works with 100+ universities, including ASU, Harvard, and UT Austin, and 50+ leading employers like L’Oréal, Coinbase, OpenAI, and Wells Fargo. Podium’s experiences deliver fully digital, for-credit learning that strengthens student retention, confidence, and career readiness. Students from all backgrounds gain early career experience, explore potential pathways, and build the skills and competencies employers expect—through hands-on, work-based learning experiences that align with workforce needs.

For more information, visit [Podium Education](https://podiumeducation.com) and follow us on [LinkedIn](https://www.linkedin.com/company/podium-education).