Rhode Island College aims to improve retention with 'meta majors'

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A few years ago, nearly one in six students started at Rhode Island College without declaring a major, and just under 40 percent of them would not return for their sophomore year. Some students were hitting 80 credits earned without a major.

The latest in a series of initiatives at the college designed to improve retention and graduation rates removes the option for new students not to declare a major, but recognizes that they may not be fully ready to pick a specialty. This fall, the state's oldest public college replaced the “undeclared” check box with the Exploring Majors program, designed to start uncertain students on a path toward timely graduation.

“Often students have a sense of a general area that interests them,” said Holly Shadoian, assistant vice president of academic affairs and enrollment engagement at the college. But they may not be ready to pinpoint management, for example, or accounting under the broad category of business. “Exploring Majors is just to get them that foundation and get them on their way, ready to make a decision.”

Rhode Island College’s new program exemplifies the concept of exploratory or meta majors, assorted areas of study -- five “Academic Rhode Maps,” in this case -- that are far more broad than a traditional major.

Each map -- business, humanities, science/math, social or behavioral sciences -- comes with a three-semester plan comprising an assortment of recommended classes, a handful of universally required ones like first-year writing and mandatory advising appointments.

Out of Rhode Island's roughly 1,200 new incoming students, 160 opted for one of the maps instead of a specific major. They will have a maximum of three semesters (or 45 credits) to officially choose a major or face a permanent hold on registration. But the hope is students will find one before running up against that wall or, even better, that the new program will help students find their niche faster than they would without it. And, after a semester or two in the program, they will already have completed some of that major's required courses.

“There are colleges throughout the country trying to do this,” said Davis Jenkins, a senior research associate for the Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University. Arizona State University, for example, and a host of community colleges have all introduced exploratory or meta major programs as part of larger reforms to admissions and advising procedures.
“It’s been an extremely easy sell,” Jenkins said, especially to community colleges and large institutions with limited resources that can’t afford universal, thorough, personally tailored advising. Instead, the curriculum itself allows students to explore their interests and career options while keeping them on a structured path toward graduation.

But do these programs work? Do they increase rates of retention and graduation?

“The evidence is mostly descriptive,” Jenkins said. “Promising, but not definitive.” Surveys and testimonials point toward robust support from students, and “there’s a lot of evidence to support the principles.”

Meta majors reflect two concepts from behavioral economics, he said, that should help students make better decisions. They give students an “active choice” -- one of several broad possibilities rather than the ability to evade any decision at all -- and they provide a “prescribed default exploratory process,” or a structured path forward rather than near-unlimited freedom.

Whether Rhode Island College will further increase retention remains to be seen, but previously instituted reforms do seem to be paying dividends. Before abolishing undeclared majors altogether, the college had already introduced mandatory advising in 2008, started an enrollment management unit two years later and implemented a 45-credit cap for undecided students shortly thereafter.

Between 2011, when only 62 percent of undeclared first-year students returned the next year, and 2014, retention jumped 16 percentage points. That number is within spitting distance of the schoolwide 2018 goal of 80 percent retention.

There is no magic number, though, Shadoian said. “Whatever the magic number is, we always want it to be higher.”

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