“Discover to Declare” Program Proposal

Existing research shows that undeclared students often feel awkward, out of place, isolated, disconnected, and lacking an academic “home” (Dennis, 2007; Reiner, 2012; Siarzynski, 2020). It is no wonder that undeclared students may feel a lesser sense of belonging compared to their declared peers (Reiner, 2012). Siarzynski (2020) found that this is especially true for first-generation students. Currently, a majority of No Major Selected/Undeclared students are housed within The A Center, a unit under Student Success and Retention Innovation (SSRI). With SSRI’s commitment to fostering a sense of belonging for all students at the university, and with the university strategic goals of eliminating achievement gaps and increasing student retention, The A Center believes that a renewed focus on undeclared students is crucial to developing the culture and achieving the results that we want as an institution. This is particularly crucial when considering that one out of seven of all incoming students in Fall 2020 began as undeclared. It has been shown that primary ways of enhancing undeclared student belonging include building their connections to campus resources and creating opportunities for sustained engagement (Siarzynski, 2020). Thus, as the academic home for undeclared students at the University of Arizona, we are looking to develop a program called “Discover to Declare” aimed at increasing the connectedness to The A Center resources and sustained engagement opportunities to ensure that all incoming undeclared students feel the sense of belonging that contributes to their success and retention.

While The A Center already has a number of initiatives dedicated to undeclared students and their journey to major declaration, such as our unit’s courses (TLS 100: Navigating a Research University/SERP 197P: Explore, Discover, Decide…Your Major), the Meet Your Major Fair, and mentorship programs, we feel that we can enhance our services at the beginning and end of students’ major exploration in order to ensure sustained engagement throughout their journey. Thus, we propose beginning this journey with a Major Discovery Launch event to mark all incoming undeclared students’ first days as a Wildcat in The A Center. In this event, our primary purpose will be to begin fostering a sense of community and “communal potential” (Henderson et. al, 2016) amongst all undeclared students, which we will achieve through offering food, community-building activities, and materials such as T-shirts, stickers, and water bottles that enhance the students’ sense of belonging within The A Center and the University of
Arizona. We will also utilize this event as an opportunity to highlight the ways that students can and will continue to engage with The A Center through the point of major declaration.

Then, at the end of students’ major exploration journey with The A Center, we plan to celebrate and congratulate them by holding a Major Declaration Day where we provide students with mementos and certificates that mark the ending of one chapter and the beginning of another, highlighting the accomplishments that they have achieved along the way. While these beginning and ending events are strongly geared toward developing undeclared students’ sense of belonging, the most important thing is bringing all undeclared students together, and in order to do that we will need to get the word out about these events through a marketing campaign and associated marketing materials.

As a part of this program, approximately 1,000 students will be reached and engaged in a new way to promote their overall sense of belonging. To gage the success of the initiative, we will evaluate the retention numbers of First-Time Full-Time students in The A Center in comparison with the numbers in other colleges at the university with similar programs. We will also look at changes in retention numbers within The A Center comparing pre and post program in hopes of seeing an increase in retention. Additionally, we will evaluate the success of the program based on the number of undeclared students that participate in the “Discover to Declare” events. While we are currently looking at implementing this program over a one-year timeframe, we are hopeful that the program will be successful and will warrant greater longevity. If this proves to be the case, we plan to further incorporate the “Discover to Declare” program into The A Center mission, aligned with the mission of The University of Arizona.

References


