The Academic Journey

A research study about students, education, degree completion, and focus.

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Method and Overview

This document summarizes research conducted with college students during Q4, 2012. Our researchers first engaged in contextual inquiry – a form of in-context, immersive interview – in order to understand and empathize with students of varying levels and experiences. Each session lasted approximately two hours. During these sessions:

1. Students were asked to describe their college experiences
2. Students were asked to visualize their academic timeline, using prepared timeline artifacts as prompts
3. Students participated in participatory design exercises intended to evoke emotionally rich anecdotes
4. Students showed our research team a variety of artifacts used to support education, including physical and digital products and tools

Following the research, the research team conducted a quantitative, statistically-significant survey of our 300,000 student profiles and 1+ million members, and then synthesized the data into a series of themes and visualizations. These were then used to derive insights – provocative statements of truth that are used to support the design of future products, systems, and services.
Primary Findings

1. Students think they are following a pre-defined journey (high school, college, major selection, internship, job), but the academic system does not provide such a clean-cut path, resulting in anxiety and a variety of tactical breakdowns.

2. Students feel urgency to make decisions; as a consequence, they often make decisions based on a poor rationale, and regret these decisions after the fact.

3. More and more students are now “non-traditional students,” as the traditional path is no longer available or appropriate for the majority of students.

4. Students demonstrate no real idea of how to present themselves to employers, yet they feel empowered to apply for a job or internship.

Supporting Findings

These findings describe MyEdu’s 300,000 student profiles, based on a statistically significant, randomly selected sample (n=1047) at a 95% confidence level, with a confidence interval of +/- 3.2.

1. Over half of students have switched or considered switching their major during their academic career; the overwhelming reason for this change was due to changing interests, and a lack of enjoyment in the first major selected.

2. 37% of students consider themselves “Non-Traditional Students.”

3. When confronted with the thought of switching majors, approximately 22% of students reported feeling anxious, while only 13% reported feeling happy.

4. 39% of students turn to their family for help with college and career decision making, prior to soliciting help from academic or career services.

5. 6% of students report having no-one to turn to for help in making college and career decisions.
The Academic Journey

**Foundational Educational Memory**
An early educational moment, where a primary authority figure establishes expectations around learning and work ethic.

**College Selection**
A decision of where to attend college, usually made during high school, balancing various utilitarian and emotional constraints.

**Major Selection**
A commitment of what to study, usually decided during the first few months of college; typically based on whim or convenience.

**Major Renegotiation**
A change of major, often made during junior or senior year, as a response to prior major selection and a result of deep emotional searching.

**Resigned Commitment**
An emotional resolve to a particular course of study, lifestyle, and future, based primarily on academic experiences.

**Non Traditional Academic Experience**
A non-traditional learning experience, such as study abroad, internship, or mentorship, that dramatically changes or solidifies a trajectory.

**Identification of Aspirational Goal**
A vision of post-graduation, with an aspirational career or educational goal identified (graduate school, a job, a particular title, etc).

**Emotions**
- Extreme. Either empowering or demoralizing.
- Stressful.
- Stressful, yet simultaneously arbitrary and cavalier.
- Shameful, as if letting down friends, family, and themselves.
- Resolved, and a sense of being trapped.
- Reflective, and full of opportunity.
- Optimistic nervousness.

**Collaborators**
- Grade school teachers, family, personal mentors
- High school guidance counselor, family, friends
- Family, friends
- Mentor

**Tools & Processes**
- High school Survey
- -
Students continually described a memory from early childhood that involved an educator either supporting their academic studies, or holding them back.

They referenced how this foundational memory now impacts their ability to focus, study, or make decisions.
During high school, and sometimes as early as middle school, students described pressure to select a college. This selection was based on a number of factors, many of which were circumstantial and not academic (geographic proximity to “cool cities”, “my friend went there”, etc.)
Major Selection

Perhaps the most anxious part of the academic experience for the students we spoke with was the selection of a major course of study. Students described selecting majors based on little or no rational data, and feeling as though they were trapped with their decision. Changing major was described with feelings of shame or stress, yet it was a common thread from nearly all of our participants.
After initially selecting a major, some of our participants followed-through on changing their major. This was a process of personal and familial renegotiation, and often had a direct connection to the shaping of identity in later journey stages.

This was a period of deep anxiety for the students we spoke with.
Students described a feeling of resigned commitment to a course of study – not necessarily because they wanted to complete the degree or subject, but because their time had run out, the economics of change didn’t make sense, or a host of different emotional reasons.
Some students described a non-traditional experience that dramatically changed their outlook on life and their academic trajectory. This experience – an internship, or a semester learning abroad in another country – seemed to either reinforce a good decision to change majors, or prompt a fresh set of introspection.
For some students, the end of college brought about the identification of an aspirational goal. This goal – getting into graduate school, or landing a dream job – seemed directly tied to the renegotiation of course of study and to the non-traditional learning experiences.
Students feel that college determines the “rest of your life”, and describe pressure and an urgency to constantly push forward.

Students of various ages and levels expressed uneasiness about their short and long-term future, and articulated worry about achieving the next perceived milestone. Additionally, each milestone is seen as critical, non-optional, and a “make-or-break” moment. For example, not registering for the right classes may result in not graduating on-time. This, in turn, is seen as disrupting opportunities for an internship. Without an internship, students fear they won’t get a “good job”, and without this job, they won’t be happy.

“I think everyone wishes they had a plan. Even if they don’t have a plan, they say ‘this is my plan’, because it makes them feel good to have a plan.”
Keith, 19 year old finance major

MyEdu users who have changed their major described feeling Anxious (22%), Confused (14%), and Scared (7%), while only 13% described feeling Happy.

n=1047, CI = +/- 3.2
Students cite a strong familial influence in driving fundamental academic or career decisions.

Students describe how they select colleges, majors, and career paths based on off-hand comments from their parents, their parents’ jobs, or attitudes they may have heard or learned from their relatives. This has the potential to conflict with the new-found autonomy students realize at college, leading to emotional conflicts about direction and future decision making.

“I used to want to be a criminal psychology, but my mom said I shouldn’t do that because I wouldn’t be a happy person after three years in that job....”

Nancy, 18 year old psychology major

39% of MyEdu users report turning to family members for help, before other sources like Academic Advisors (26%), online resources (10%), or friends (8%). Only 7% of MyEdu users turn to career services for help.

n=1047, CI = +/- 3.2
Insights

Students have little or no guidance in selecting a major course of study, and often regret their choice.

Students perceive an urgency in establishing a major, primarily driven by social and emotional constraints (rather than financial or policy constraints). They select a major based on arbitrary criteria, such as what their friends are selecting, what’s perceived as “easy”, or what’s convenient. Students expressed regret for their choice, after experiencing several courses or semesters in the given major.

“I didn’t even want to do MechE; I wanted to do biomedical engineering. When I got to UTSA, it wasn’t available. So I randomly picked mechanical engineering because I had a lot of mechanical engineering friends.”

Samantha, 21 year old engineering major

56% of MyEdu users switched majors, or considered switching majors, during their college career.

n=1047, CI = +/- 3.2
Students feel trapped in their major, and describe a perceived social shame in changing their own trajectory.

Students continually described feeling as though academic milestone decisions were permanent – that changing majors was emotionally charged and carried a social stigma. Students referenced feeling as though they let themselves, their parents, and their friends down by considering a change of direction midcourse; students who followed-through on the change expressed feeling confident in their decision and happy that they made a change.

“I thought since I couldn’t complete the major, I was a little dumber than everyone else... It’s OK to change your major, no one will think less of you.”

Trisha, 21 year old sociology major
Insights

Advisors are seen as incidental, directive, or extraneous resources that are too busy to help and hard to gain access to.

Students described a number of different relationships with advisors, ranging from non-existent (“I don’t know who my advisor is”) to authoritative (“the advisor just tells me what to do”). Students expressed interest in advisor relationships that were more personal, consistent, and meaningful.

“I need someone who is OK with helping me one on one.”
Maria, 21 year old international business major

“This is frustrating to me because it’s hard to get an appointment – you feel lost.”
Ann, 52 year old criminal justice major
Students perceive the educational system as a black box, which operates in a confusing and machine-like manner.

Students view the educational system as a large and anonymous machine, one with systemic rules that are bizarre and often vaguely defined. They speak of the system as a necessary evil, one which adds anxiety but offers little value.

“College feels like a maze. I don’t know where I’m at in it.”
Samantha, 21 year old engineering major

“When you call financial aid, you talk to someone different every time. And you get different answers.”
Ann, 52 year old criminal justice major
Students have an ambiguous idea of what employers want, and they are often wrong.

Students have built an implicit understanding what employers are looking for in a hire, and use this understanding to shape decisions related to courses, effort, and work-life balance. Unfortunately, their understanding is not entirely accurate.

“Resume is like your life – it is your golden ticket to the chocolate factory.”
Maria, 21 year old international business major

“The most important thing is to have that experience because no one will hire you unless you have that experience.”
Samantha, 21 year old engineering major

67% of MyEdu users think they know how to present their skills to a potential employer.
n=1047, CI = +/- 3.2
Participants
Synthesis Process
Survey Responses, By Question

What is your classification in school?

- Post-2016 Grad
- Freshman
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior
- Already Graduated
Survey Responses, By Question

Have you ever switched majors, or thought about switching majors?

56% of all MyEdu users have switched their major, or thought about switching majors.
If you ever switched majors, or thought about switching majors, which of the following best describes why?

- My Interests Changed
- My friends were in a different major
- My earning potential was higher in another major
- I didn't enjoy my first major
- I wasn't learning what I wanted to learn in my first major
- I couldn't get the courses I wanted or needed to complete my first major
- I wanted to graduate faster
- My family urged me to change
- My school eliminated my major
- My school added a new major

60% of all MyEdu users who have switched their major, or thought about switching majors, cited changing interests.
Survey Responses, By Question

If you ever switched majors, or thoughts about switching majors, what word best describes how you felt?

22% of all MyEdu users who have switched their major, or thought about switching majors, felt Anxious.

- Anxious: 220 responses
- Challenged: 150 responses
- Excited: 230 responses
- Scared: 50 responses
- Confused: 100 responses
- Happy: 120 responses
- Bored: 10 responses
- Defiant: 5 responses
Would you characterize yourself as a "traditional student", or a "non-traditional student"?

37% of MyEdu users consider themselves to be "non-traditional students"
Survey Responses, By Question

Which word best describes how you feel about your overall college experience so far?

33% of MyEdu users describe their overall college experience as “Happy”
When you think about getting a job after college, do you know how to present your skills to potential employers?

67% of MyEdu users feel that they know how to present their skills to potential employers.
Survey Responses, By Question

Who do you turn to for help with your college and career decision making?

39% of MyEdu users turn to their family for help with their college and career decision making.

6% of MyEdu users feel they have no one to turn to for help with their college and career decision making.
Thanks!

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