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FHDA Research Memo

The effects of removing “undecided” as a major choice

Background: On September 9, 2014 “undecided” was removed as a major choice on the dropdown menu of the FHDA application. In order to move on to the next page of the application students had to select an intended majors; they could no longer choose-not-to-choose. This change was made at the same time that the CCCs transitioned from a third-party application provider to an in-house application. In this study I examined the effects of this change on student application and course-taking behaviors.

Choosing Undecided: Rhetoric (in research, state-level conversations) has indicated that being “undecided” about one’s major could have negative implications for progress and persistence. While research has found that having a clear goal is helpful for making progress (e.g. Grant & Dweck, 2003; Staff et al, 2010; Sabates et al, 2011; Morgan et al, 2012), in the context of community college students it seems that selecting undecided could be an indication of a number of different phenomena, some of which might be of little concern to school administrators: students intent on transfer whose intended major isn’t offered at the community college, students who want to take a few classes to explore college, students who want an associate degree or certificate but are unsure of the field, students who have varied, but well defined, interests...

Data: The data used in this study were all applications submitted to FHDA and all course taking data from falls, 2011-2014.

Research design: I used a regression discontinuity design in which I compared the behavior of students who applied just before the policy changed to the behavior of students who applied just after the policy changed.

Findings: Before examining the effects of the policy change on student behavior, I examined what kinds of students selected “undecided” when given the option, and what this choice is associated with. I found that certain groups of students are more likely to select “undecided” than others (e.g. White students and students from high SES backgrounds are the most likely to select undecided—shown in Figure 1). Students who select undecided were more likely to enroll after applying, and conditional on enrolling take fewer classes and have higher GPAs. In short, there is evidence that the group of students who select undecided could be a heterogeneous group of students with varied motives.

Requiring students to choose an intended major at the time of application had different effects at Foothill and De Anza. At Foothill, requiring students to choose a major resulted in fewer women applying. At De Anza, the policy seems to have induced older students not to submit applications. At Foothill fewer students enrolled after submitting

applications. All of these findings seem to indicate that students met the requirement of choosing a major with some concern—they might not have felt ready to choose a major and might have decided to put off applying or enrolling until they felt more ready.

Figure 1

