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# Discovering Life Purpose

## Retention Success in a Leadership Course at Indiana Wesleyan University

Many of the newer students studying in institutions of American higher education are those categorized as “undecided” or behave as such as they flit from major to major. Research suggests that major choice can have an impact upon the persistence of students (e.g. Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Many higher education professionals intuitively feel that students without a major are, as a population, more in danger of not completing their studies or fulfilling their educational goals than those who have declared a major. Although some research suggests this is not the case (e.g. Kroc, Howard, Hull, & Woodard, 1997), analyses conducted by the Indiana Project on Academic Success found that among first-year students in the 2000-2001 cohort at Indiana public institutions, undecided students were less likely to persist within their first year than students with declared majors, excepting humanities, holding all else constant (St. John & Musoba, forthcoming).

Many institutions have developed programs to assist students who have not declared a major. Although multiple approaches are designed to meet the needs of this population, most are not evaluated rigorously or the evidence of such evaluation is lacking in higher education research literature as is the case with many student programs (Patton, Morelon, Whitehead, & Hossler, in press; Braxton, McKinney & Reynolds, in press). Therefore, institutions have little evidence that these programs are helping students. This brief reports the findings of a program evaluation which is intended to assist undecided students.

### The Program

In fall 2000, Indiana Wesleyan University (IWU) started a program intended to assist undecided students on their campus. These students became institutionally relabeled as ‘undeclared’ rather than ‘undecided’ and were encouraged to take a new class, *LDR 150 Life Calling, Work, and Leadership*. This course has continued to be offered since then and focuses on students developing an understanding of the concept of life calling or purpose through the discovery and evaluation of their foundational values, unique design and personal mission. Students then use this self understanding as a basis for exploring their own life calling or purpose. Following this, students are led to understand how the world of work and individual leadership is best understood from this life calling perspective. Students will examine each component in an in-depth paper, and will integrate this into a life and leadership plan.

As part of their involvement in the Indiana Project for Academic Success, which promotes an inquiry-based approach to enhance student success, IWU realized that even though they had a strong belief this class was benefiting students, they had no real verification that it was truly making a difference.

### The Evaluation

To obtain this evidence, the course was evaluated both qualitatively and quantitatively. Three different regression analyses were conducted to examine the short- and long-term impact of the class on the persistence of students. These analyses were complimented by focus group interviews with students who had taken the course



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over the previous four years to draw out the specifics of its impact on them. (Further methodological details can be found in the appendix and a full report of the research model and findings will soon be available).

**Program Results**

The quantitative analyses showed a significant, positive relationship between taking the course and subsequent persistence at IWU. Here are the major findings:

Students that took the class were:

- almost 6 times more likely to persist to the next year than students who did not take the program in the 2000-01 academic year
- almost 3 times more likely to persist to the next year than those who did not take the class in the 2001-2002 academic year
- 6 times more likely to have earned a degree at the end of four years than those who did not take the class
- 17 times more likely to remain enrolled rather than withdraw after four years if they had not completed their degree, in comparison with those who did not take the class

What does this mean? According to this study, LDR150 is having both a short- and long-term effect. The evidence indicates it is helping IWU keep students that might have dropped out, is significantly contributing to degree completion, and is related to year-to-year persistence.

These results provide evidence that the program is achieving its intended outcome. The increased likelihood of persistence is validation of the need for, and success of, the program. However, looking at the 'likelihoods of persistence' as reported above, it might be tempting to wonder why in the 2000-01 academic year the students' chance of persistence was greater than the next year. Did something change between those years? The likelihood of being three times more likely to persist is a very significant finding but might seem lesser in some way because of the findings the year before. Several things may have impacted this difference. The number of students for the second year was greater than the first year, therefore the smaller size sample may have amplified the odds of persisting in the 2000-01 data. Also, in the first year students self-selected into the program rather than being 'strongly encouraged' to do so, which may have impacted the magnitude of the findings. Regardless of this difference the continued positive effect is the important factor to note.

The study of longitudinal persistence also included a variable that looked at the effects of major choice. Having chosen a major was also significant to students' persistence. Therefore, this shows that choosing a major or taking the class were both significant to students' persistence at IWU. Consequentially, taking the LDR150 class may stand in for the positive effects that research has associated with some majors in the past (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

The quantitative analyses strongly show that the class is a contributing factor in the persistence of students. What it cannot tell us though is exactly why it is working. The analyses describe effect in dichotomous terms – persisting at college based on taking or not taking the class. The companion qualitative study is able to illuminate

the effect the class had on the students as they report it, therefore we can perhaps determine what it is about the class that is helping students to persist.

Before taking the class some students were unconcerned about their undeclared status whereas others were more worried about it. These students described themselves as feeling “abnormal”, “displaced”, and quite shockingly for one student, “less of a person”. Their decision not to select a major was a concern to these students who felt like they were breaking a societal norm, or falling off the road to success.

In this context, our analysis of their discussions identifies three major ways in which they benefited from the class as undeclared students. The class helped them lead more intentional lives, it helped them come to terms with expectations, and it provided them with the support necessary for them to be successful.

At its core, the class gave students the tools to be able to start living more *intentional lives*. It achieved this in part by helping most of the students develop more direction and focus. With increased direction students were able to be more positive about their college career and future plans. Their sense of direction was aided by the self-awareness they gained from the class, which is a vital aspect of leading an intentional life. Due to their new found self-understanding students were importantly able to find congruity between who they were and what they wanted to do which affirmed the choices they made. Several students commented that they knew decisions they had made were right because of exercises they had done in class. They also stated that without the class they would have doubted their suitability.

The class provided students the opportunity to come to terms with *expectations* – their own, their family and friends’, society’s even – as expectations were a large part of their self-imposed and reflected pressure about being undeclared. As these students discovered, in a society where being college-bound is always accompanied by questions regarding major, this class helped them understand that even though they felt as if they needed majors at some point, they had the time to explore and make informed choices rather than rushing to decisions for decisions’ sake. Therefore, it relieved and reduced any panic or pressure they may have been feeling as they resisted societal expectations and remained undeclared, a decision which one student described as making him look like he was not serious about college. The class put being undeclared in perspective for them: that even though it seemed like everyone around them knew what they were doing, many did not, that even though they may have felt alone being undeclared, they were not, that even though they felt like they were worryingly different, they were not. In fact, even though some felt they were not doing what was expected of them when they came to IWU undeclared, many of the students later believed that they made better decisions than some of their peers who did not

*“I really didn’t think it was normal to be undeclared”*  
(Sophomore Female)

### ***Living Intentional Lives***

*“I think the class just gave me direction because I had no clue what I wanted to do”*  
(Freshman Female #4)

*“Yeah, it’s a class about yourself and self-discovery”*  
(First Generation Female #2)

*“...even if it doesn’t help you decide on a major or anything, it equips you...especially becoming more self-aware which is a good tool to have. It just helps with a lot of things that can be applied to daily life, not just college.”*  
(Freshman Female #3)

### ***Coming to Terms with Expectation***

*“If anything it [the class] maybe encouraged me to see that other people were undecided too, and that a lot of people change their majors anyway”*  
(First Generation Female #1)

*“I had lots of interest and stuff, so it was kind of nice to be able to see what I wanted to do in the future and look at my options. Not to be set on one thing.”*  
(Junior Female #1)

## Discovering Life Purpose (*con't*)

take the class and thought that they changed their majors less, if at all. Taking the class seems to have made these students more sophisticated consumers of higher education than they might have been without the class, allowing them to fulfill their own expectations of themselves rather than others.

The final major attribute which was of huge benefit to the students was that of **purposeful support** as a resource of the class. Students talked of the impact of their class teacher, life-coach, or adviser as they guided them through the class process. This three-pronged approach appears innovatively essential as it allows students to have a strong foundation of support rather than a lonely advocate. It also lets students gravitate to the person they felt more compatible with rather than forcing one relationship. Some students talked about interaction with all three as avenues of support while others talked more enthusiastically and appreciatively of their interaction with one of them. It is without a doubt that the reassurance, encouragement, knowledge and challenge provided by these mentors allowed students the stress-reduced space to work out who they were and what they wanted to do.

According to the students it is these major attributes that assisted most of them in making the transition from undeclared to declared, from declared to graduate. The quantitative and qualitative analyses combined shows that this class is making a difference, and may have a continuing impact on students' lives.

### Conclusion

The thorough evaluation of the LDR150 course through multiple, rigorous avenues of study has provided substantive proof that the class is fulfilling the needs of students and is a contributing factor in their persistence and graduation. This brief is only able to scratch the surface of the research material available, but provides a lens into the experiences and stories of students who took the class in this period. Unlike the quantitative data, the qualitative data cannot provide evidence of persistence, as in this case, but it is able to tease out the effects of the class that may be contributing to increased persistence of the students who took it.

This type of mixed methods evaluation can bolster support within the institution and outside funding agencies for the continued financial support of the program. It can be used to sway skeptics as to the efficacy of the course, and it can be offered as evidence of the program's success for scholarly review. Such evaluation provides a template for the types of studies that should be conducted with our student programs so that we, as higher education professionals, can continue to provide students with appropriate, effective, reflective support.

### Purposeful Support

*"It [the class] focuses on positives for students who kind of feel like they're going to fall between the cracks; it's good for them."*

*(Junior Male #2)*

*"...the life coach is definitely the most helpful part of the class."*

*(Junior Female #3)*

### Final Thoughts

*"Every day [referring to the class] is an adventure and learning more about yourself than you thought possible."*

*&*

*"Don't think that they're going to try and tell you what you should do. They're going to leave the decision to you and you're still going to have to do the work and decide for yourself. But it's really beneficial to find out who you are, what your strengths are, what your God-given abilities are and that you have time to search through that and explore yourself and what you may be interested in."*

*&*

*"I would say the key word is confidence. It gives you not only confidence while you're in the class but afterwards for I don't know how long... forever!"*

## Discovering Life Purpose (con't)

# Appendix

## Quantitative Methodology

Using IPAS's workable model approach, which provides a rationale for the variables included in the analysis and advocates for the more efficient use of institutional data, three different regression analyses were conducted to examine the impact of the class on the persistence of students. The three regression analyses all considered a range of demographic and academic characteristics, including age, minority status, high school preparation, college major, and college GPA. The first analysis (Model 1) examined between-year persistence for students enrolled at IWU in the academic year 2000 -2001. In this analysis "between-year persisters" was defined as, "students enrolled in the spring semester of 2000-01, who returned the fall semester of the 2001-02 school year." The almost identical second analysis (Model 2) identified persistence between spring and fall 2002. The third analysis (Model 3) was a multinomial regression analysis that compared students who had earned a degree and students who were still enrolled at the end of four years to students who had withdrawn. This last analysis added a longitudinal perspective on the impact of the program while the first two analyses offered evidence of a short term impact. There were 5-6000 cases in the between-year persistence models and 1,748 cases in the longitudinal study.



## Qualitative Methodology

Five focus groups were facilitated with a total of 29 students. The groups were separated by year of enrollment groups for the interviews – freshmen, sophomores, juniors, seniors – with a separate group of first generation students. Both genders were represented, but reflecting the ratio of males to females in the university, more women participated. As far as the facilitator could ascertain, the students were ethnically homogenous. All students were aware of the voluntary nature of their involvement and were informed of the group procedures.

The questions for the focus groups were developed by adapting Kreuger's (1998) suggestions for pacing and question types and applying them to the course. The questions were approved by representatives from IWU and were the base set of questions used for all the focus groups. The facilitator pursued independent questioning to clarify the students' responses and to delve further into their opinions and experience as necessary. The analysis of the focus group transcripts identified major themes based on the frequency, intensity, and clarity of the students' responses. For this research brief, the themes were gleaned across the interviews as a whole rather than being group or question specific.

A forthcoming full report of the research model and findings will soon be available from IPAS. Please contact preynold@indiana.edu for further information.

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