

**THE UNDECIDED  
COLLEGE STUDENT**



Third Edition

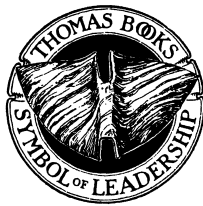
# THE UNDECIDED COLLEGE STUDENT

An Academic and Career  
Advising Challenge

*By*

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*To Sean, Andrew, Katelyn, Patrick, and Alyssa –  
The Future*



## FOREWORD

When I wrote the foreword to this volume over two decades ago, I compared the scattered attempts to help and study undecided students as analogous in many ways to the development of orphan drugs in medicine. Up to then our knowledge of undecided students had proceeded slowly because there had been only sporadic interest in the necessary research and very little financial support for even that research. Up to then most research had been the by-product of some “more important” research, and most of the programs and professional practices devised to provide assistance were stimulated by individual practitioners and researchers rather than by institutions.

The revised version of this volume updates the vast literature that has proliferated in the last decade. This volume will continue to be the major resource for assembling the diverse speculation and theory, the research evidence, and the multiple organizational and professional practices for helping college students who have been characterized as “undecided, unwilling, or unable” to make appropriate educational and vocational decisions. Virginia Gordon has done an impressive job in updating this substantial literature in one volume. Academics, counselors, and researchers will no longer have to scrounge through a wide array of journals, books, and technical reports to obtain a comprehensive and systematic account of the research (old and new), the model programs for assisting students, and the diverse theory for understanding the undecided student.

This volume should continue to stimulate the creation and evaluation of more informed and systematic vocational assistance. Most people will find the use of developmental speculation and theory to integrate and organize the services and techniques of academic advising to be congenial and plausible. Hopefully, this particular orientation will lead to more explicit evaluation as well as more explicit

theory. And, whatever orientation a person adopts, the reader has a useful summary of all theoretical orientations.

JOHN L. HOLLAND  
March, 2006



## INTRODUCTION

Academic and career undecided college students have been the focus of college administrators, faculty, counselors, academic advisors, student affairs professionals and researchers for eighty years. Many fascinating ideas about who they are, why they are undecided, and how to assist them with decision making have been generated, debated, and some even implemented.

When students enter college, many of them feel overwhelmed with the great number of academic major and career options open to them. Many admit they know very little about what is involved in some of the occupations they are considering. Many are unsure of how their personal strengths and limitations relate to coursework required in particular majors and/or the tasks required in specific occupations. They are often trying to make direct connections between their college major and the “jobs” they will be prepared to enter after college.

The students themselves have mixed feelings about being “undecided.” Some are scared, anxious, apologetic, and very negative about their situation. Others are open, flexible, and curious. Many students succumb to societal and parental pressures and make initial choices based on very little if any solid information about academic programs or career fields. Other students deal with the “chicken and egg” question of not knowing which to select first—a career field or college major. Many students solve this dilemma by choosing an area in which the major and occupation are obviously and directly related. Many students change their majors because of changing interests, academic experiences, or becoming more vocationally mature. These students obviously need the same type of advising and career exploration assistance offered to undecided students.

Undecided students are such a heterogeneous group and the administrative variations on campuses are so different that it is difficult to

comprehend generally the enormity and complexity of trying to identify and advise them. It is not only difficult to understand the diversity of this group as a whole, but the needs of individual students are sometimes just as diverse. Some advisors tend to work intuitively with undecided students and prescribe activities that may or may not be responsive to their individual needs.

Tracing the research about undecided students over the past decades is a fascinating endeavor. The progressive ideas of the theorists and researchers of the 1950s to current post-modern theorists and the new constructs about indecision with all of its implications for undecided individuals, offer a picture born of changing times and perspectives. This has not altered the need of undecided students, however, to learn the basic knowledge and skills necessary to make timely, realistic and satisfying academic major and career decisions.

This volume offers a comprehensive examination of this special population—from a review of the vast research about them to practical methods for advising and counseling them. Throughout this book, the term “undecided” is used as the descriptor for students unwilling, unable, or unready to make educational and/or vocational decisions. Many campuses use other more positive terms to describe these students. Examples are “exploratory,” “open-majors,” or “special majors,” to name a few. The term “undecided” is used here because of its use in the research literature and the easy identification with its meaning.

If one of the purposes of our colleges and universities is to help students set and implement educational and career goals, then we must be cooperatively engaged in that venture. Creating an environment that encourages and supports undecided students while they are making important educational, career, and life decisions must be central to that purpose.

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**THE UNDECIDED  
COLLEGE STUDENT**



## Chapter 1

### WHO ARE UNDECIDED STUDENTS?

The fascination with college students who are not committed to an educational or career direction has been continuous for eighty years. The first recorded study (as cited by Crites, 1969), was published in the *Personnel Journal* in 1927 by R.B. Cunliffe who surveyed college freshmen in Detroit. He found that 9 percent of the students who responded to a survey indicated they were undecided. Other studies in the next two decades reported that from 9 percent to 61 percent of the high school and college students were undecided. A great many earlier investigations of indecision were parts of studies intended to research other problems. Achilles (1935) (scholastic study), Kilzer (1935) (college-bound versus noncollege-bound), Nelson and Nelson (1940) (religious attitudes), and Kohn (1947) (family influences) looked at correlates of indecision while investigating other topics (Crites, 1969).

Early researchers attempted to differentiate undecided from decided students dichotomously (Ashby, Wall, & Osipow, 1966; Baird, 1967; Holland & Holland, 1977). Other early studies concentrated on more psychological factors such as anxiety, locus of control, and identity (Appel, Haak, & Witzke, 1970; Goodstein, 1965; Kimes & Troth, 1974; Rose & Elton, 1971). Later studies classified students according to their level of undecidedness (Gordon & Steele, 2003; Savickas, 1989), while other researchers classified them by the interaction of cognitive and affective dimensions of career indecision (Chartrand et al., 1994; Feldman, 2003). A great deal of research has studied multiple types of decided and undecided students (Gordon, 1998).

Although not always using undecided students as subjects, a great many characteristics related directly or indirectly to indecision have been studied, such as career-related barriers (Holland, Daiger, &

Power, 1980; Swanson, Daniels, & Tokar, 1996), career decision problems or difficulties (Kelly & Lee, 2002; Lancaster et al., 1999; Osipow & Gati, 1998), career self-efficacy (Betz & Luzzo, 1996; Gianakos, 1999), and cross-cultural differences (Arbona, 1996; Sharf, 1997; Mau, 1999).

The results of all the years of research efforts have only confirmed the prevailing consensus that undecided students comprise a complex, heterogeneous group and their reasons for indecision are just as varied. Kelly and Pulver (2003) list several limitations to the various research studies that may account for the disparity in results. They suggest (1) the dearth of predictive evidence, (2) the failure to consider academic aptitudes, (3) the use of "convenience samples" that include decided as well as undecided subjects, (4) the way statistical analyses are interpreted, and (5) the variation in the personality variables included in the studies. All contribute to a complex and confusing picture of who they are.

Reasons for this complexity may lie also in the different ways writers and researchers define "indecision." Early approaches, according to Osipow (1999), were based simply on asking students to rate their degree of decidedness from survey questions. Today indecision is considered a developmental phase that is part of the decision-making process. As Osipow points out, indecision is no longer the purview of adolescence and early adulthood, but is now viewed from a broad life-span perspective. Career plans often need to be revised because of the challenge of a changing and complex workplace. Osipow suggests that broadening the term should be helpful in understanding the many shades of this stage of the decision making process.

In spite of this vast amount of research and the complexity it presents, understanding the origins of indecision and how undecided students differ from truly decided ones can provide helpful insights. Being cognizant of the research that has focused on treatments and interventions is also important in advising and counseling them effectively.

## ORIGINS OF INDECISION

Attempts to determine the antecedents of career indecision have a long and varied history. Early studies concentrate on various corre-



lates of decision rather than on undecideding persons or the levels of their indecision. In more recent years, researchers have viewed indecision as an important topic itself and have tried to identify characteristics common to indecision. One of the earliest studies is that undertaken by Holland and Nichols (1964). The purpose of their investigation is to validate an indecision scale, but in the process some of the personal characteristics of undecided individuals are identified. The subjects used in this research are National Merit finalists, who are asked to respond to activities in which they “frequently, occasionally, or never engaged.” Items are identified that appear to describe a cluster of personal traits common to undecided students. Some of these include a socially oriented cluster, an artistic-creative cluster, and an aggressive cluster of activities. The researchers point out that, in the past, indecision was identified with confusion, illness, and the need for counseling. This study suggests that, for some people, indecision is an aspect of the rate of personal development and that intellectual curiosity and creativity are characteristics of students who cannot narrow their interests.

Antecedents of indecision have been examined in a variety of ways. Osipow (1983) suggests four reasons for “misdirected” career development as proposed by vocational theorists: (1) vocational choices that are inconsistent with the individual’s self-information, (2) students’ not keeping pace developmentally with their peers, (3) emotional instability, and (4) frozen behavior between two desirable choices. Osipow sees retarded rate of development as the reason that causes the most difficulty.

Tyler (1953) postulates a number of antecedents for vocational indecision. She suggests that opinions and attitudes of family and friends can act as deterring factors. For example, a parent’s expectations may create a situation that prevents a student from deciding. A cluster of reasons for indecision may emanate from not accepting or not being satisfied with the role that the occupation represents, even though the skills and activities within the occupation are appealing. Sex-role stereotyping of occupations may be a factor, too. Tyler also discusses the multipotential individual who is interested and talented in many directions and finds it difficult, if not impossible, to narrow down the alternatives. Another cause of indecision, according to Tyler, might be not accepting realistic limitations or obstacles that stand in the way. After accepting the fact that a particular decision is impossible, the