

Broadening Perspectives

Navigating College and Career Entry with Decision-Making Competence

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When students change majors or withdraw from their degree programs, people usually look to the studies themselves for the causes: exam pressure, inadequate support, or a poor fit between the degree program and the student. That perspective is too narrow. Young people make a far-reaching educational decision without ever having learned how to make it in a well-founded, structured way.

A prospective student says during an advising session: “I have always been interested in economic issues, and now I am torn between business administration and economics. However, sports management also sounds exciting.” The obvious next step would be to compare these fields of study. However, what decision is actually at stake? Is it really a choice among degree programs—or a question of which educational path best fits the student’s objectives, abilities, and vision for life? Academic success depends not only on factors such as aptitude, motivation, or social background. It also depends on the ability to make decisions. Nor does the need for good decisions end once students enroll. Students choose concentrations, plan study-abroad experiences, decide on internships or part-time jobs—and sometimes have to determine whether changing majors is a carefully considered course correction or merely a hasty response to a difficult period.

Information alone is not enough unless it is paired with the corresponding decision-making competence. Anyone who cannot structure their own situation does not automatically gain greater certainty from more information. A sense of direction emerges only when prospective students can relate the information to their own circumstances and use it to make their choice.

Clarifying Objectives

Decision-making competence begins before comparing alternatives—with the question of what decision actually needs to be made. “What should I study?” leads to a different search process than “Which educational path fits my objectives, abilities, and vision for life?” The second question broadens the perspective: the comparison is no longer limited to fields of study but extends to pathways toward a desired future. To do this, prospective students must first know their objectives: academic interest, career prospects, financial security, contribution to society, personal independence, or compatibility with other life goals. Many decisions later experienced as a poor fit result not from missing information, but from unclear personal objectives.

Once objectives are clear, the search for alternatives changes as well. The focus is no longer only on the major their friends chose, a familiar degree program, or a nearby institution. Objectives help people create more and better alternatives (Siebert and Keeney, 2015) and identify the information needed to better assess the consequences of their choice. In the end, trade-offs often remain. One degree program may be academically appealing but located far away. Another may offer strong career prospects but fewer connections to the student’s academic interests. Trade-offs should not be pushed aside; they should be made explicit. Higher education institutions rarely teach this systematically. Even where decision theory is taught, the emphasis is often on analyzing problems that have already been

clearly defined: the objectives, alternatives, and consequences are usually given. In education and career decisions, however, the real challenge often lies in framing the question so that relevant objectives become visible, missing alternatives can be developed, and consequences can be assessed meaningfully. If this step is skipped, even the best tool merely helps analyze a poorly framed problem more precisely.

Decision-Making Competence

Educational decisions can be revised, but doing so often costs time, money, and emotional strain. Studies show that in important decision situations, people frequently recognize only some of their relevant objectives and alternatives. Those who do not know their objectives cannot weigh information meaningfully. Those who do not search systematically for alternatives tend to settle for the obvious and overlook more attractive possibilities. Intervention studies show that these abilities can be trained. A study published in the *European Journal of Operational Research* shows that proactive cognitive decision-making skills strengthen over the long term through targeted training in decision-making competence (Siebert et al., 2021).

If this competence is a prerequisite for successful educational pathways, it cannot depend on a single point in the system. Its development must begin before college, be integrated into university advising, and continue throughout higher education. Good college guidance asks not only, “What information do prospective students need about our program offerings?” Above all, it asks, “What decision do they need to make and how can we help them structure it?” The focus thus shifts from merely presenting program offerings to enabling prospective students to relate those offerings to their own objectives, abilities, and vision for life. This approach can also be embedded in career counseling: a training program developed for Germany’s Federal Employment Agency does exactly that. The same competence remains important during college: KLUGstudieren! applies it, as an interactive MOOC, to typical student decisions such as choosing a concentration, studying abroad, or changing majors.

The Role of Higher Education Institutions

Higher education institutions should therefore understand college guidance not only as a communication and information task, but also as a matter of teaching students how to relate information to their own objectives, avoid prematurely narrowing the set of alternatives, and weigh trade-offs deliberately. When designing deadlines, elective options, curriculum structures, assessment practices, and degree program descriptions, institutions must live up to this responsibility and make decisions easier. Academic advising offices cannot shoulder this responsibility. Moreover, the first year of college is not merely an introduction to academic content. Students also make important decisions during this period: they reassess their expectations, receive their first feedback, and begin shaping their path forward. Institutions should therefore familiarize students not only with the field, its requirements, and ways of working, but also help them clarify their objectives, explore alternatives, and see the room for choice.

Teaching decision-making competence should therefore not be seen as a specialized service for uncertain prospective students or students at risk of dropping out, but as a foundational academic competency that cuts across disciplines. It is a key future skill for college, work, personal life, and civic responsibility. It should therefore not appear only sporadically in advising situations, but be systematically embedded in higher education teaching—for example, as a curricular offering that can ultimately reach all students. Concrete starting points could include relevant modules during the first year of college, reflection assignments in general education courses, digital tools for choosing

concentrations, or structured formats in academic advising and career services. These measures do not replace existing guidance, advising, and teaching offerings; they make them more effective.

Withdrawing from a Degree Program

A good college or university should not try to prevent every decision to withdraw from a degree program. Rather, it should help students recognize in time whether they are on the right path and when another path would suit them better. A well-founded decision may therefore also lead to changing majors, pursuing vocational training, enrolling in a dual-study program, or moving directly into the workforce. What matters is that the decision is deliberate and reflective, rather than a reaction to feeling overwhelmed, frustrated, or pressured. Withdrawing can be stressful for students, especially when they experience it as a personal failure. Leaving a degree program is not automatically a failure; it can also be a wise course correction. The problem is not changing programs or leaving college in itself, but doing so because of avoidable disorientation, unclear objectives, poorly understood trade-offs, or a lack of awareness of relevant alternatives.

Recommended Reading

Siebert, J. U., Keeney, R. L. (2015). Creating More and Better Alternatives for Decisions Using Objectives. *Operations Research*, 63(5), 1144–1158.

Siebert, J. U.; Kunz, Reinhard; Rolf, Philipp (2021). Effects of decision training on individuals' decision-making proactivity, *European Journal of Operational Research*, 294(1), 264–282.

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