



The EAB Daily Briefing

How meta-majors guide students toward on-time graduation

Meta-majors help students make smarter choices

July 26, 2016



Julia Haskins, staff writer

Colleges and universities across the country are dealing with a troubling trend: Students aren't meeting on-time graduation rates.

According to **Complete College America**, full-time students take 3.9 years to graduate, while those at four-year non-flagship institutions take 4.9 years to complete their degrees. And the longer students take to finish school, the more unnecessary courses they rack up. Students at two-year schools accumulate 78.8 credits when only 60 credits are standard. Students at four-year non-flagship schools, meanwhile, accumulate 136.2 credits with a 120-credit standard.

That all adds up to a lot of wasted time at a high cost for students and colleges alike. But an emerging model of academic mapping may offer a solution that benefits everyone.

Meta-majors, sometimes referred to as career clusters or communities of interest, group individual majors under a larger academic umbrella. These programs provide students with a clear pathway to graduation, and help them make connections between their studies and different career tracks. Students also have set schedules depending on their meta-major.

A student interested in health care, for example, may enroll in a meta-major that includes prescribed health-related courses in science, communications, and statistics, opening up career opportunities ranging from nursing to pharmacy.

The concept has emerged in recent years as colleges seek to reduce attrition. In 2013, the Florida

legislature required all community colleges in the state to adopt meta-majors in eight areas of study:

- Arts, humanities, communication and design;
- Business;
- Education;
- Health sciences;
- Industry/manufacturing and construction;
- Public safety;
- Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics; and
- Social and behavioral sciences and human services.

Meta-majors programs have also been launched at colleges such as **Arizona State University** and **Lehman College**.

With the majority of institutions offering more than 100 courses, students may be overwhelmed by the vast amount of options available to them. That's why when it comes to course selection, "choice can sometimes be the enemy," says Melinda Salaman, associate director at **EAB**. Salaman, whose research focuses on the community college space, explains that students at two-year institutions tend to have a general idea of what they want to study, but often need some guidance in the right direction.

Why part-time students could be the key to closing achievement gaps

"Some people see the work of creating a guided pathway as just saying 'All of these majors are kind of alike so we're going to put them in this bucket,'" Salaman says, but categorizing majors is only the first step. "Within each pathway and within each major the job is to figure out what are the learning outcomes across each course and how do those build on one another?"

Meta-majors streamline the process of major selection by limiting choices at the onset. The combination of meta-majors with pre-set schedules "limits options at the start of the student life cycle to preserve options for students later down the line in terms of picking their major," says Tania Nguyen, senior analyst at EAB. There's no guesswork for students concerning which courses will be applicable to their majors, and which will just eat up time and money. That translates into more flexibility throughout the course of a student's undergraduate career.

Meta-majors also offer a safety net in the event that students do get off track, as the program structure accounts for switching among similar disciplines. But they can help cut down on students changing majors as well. Since implementing meta-majors, **Georgia State University** has experienced a 30% reduction in students changing their majors. And students who do end up changing majors are more likely to have enough courses under their belt that will cross over.

"Meta-majors account for that uncertainty that students have about the choices they're making and provide them a pathway to graduate on time despite that uncertainty," Nguyen says.

To improve retention, colleges nudge undeclared students into 'meta majors'

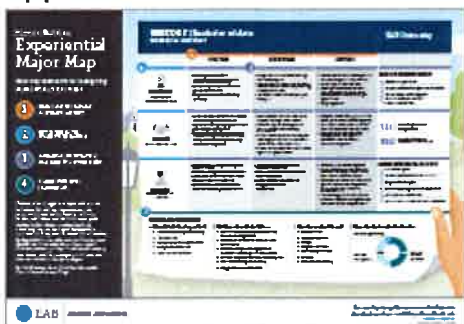
The fixed design of meta-majors can be especially helpful for certain cohorts of at-risk students. **Shawnee State University** is using meta-majors as one way to support its disproportionate share of students who are low-income, first-generation, or in need of developmental education. With six meta-majors launched last summer in business, education, engineering technology, health sciences, liberal arts, mathematics and science, and social science, SSU is working to guide at-risk students on a successful path to graduation.

"We see students who don't understand the options or the opportunities that are available to them and they have a number of barriers" to success, says Jeff Bauer, provost and vice president of academic affairs at SSU. "The worst thing that can happen to students in that situation is to provide them with too many opportunities to fail."

High-touch advising is an essential component of the meta-majors structure. Without regular personalized attention, students can't fully benefit from having their courses mapped out or understand how their curriculum relates to their long-term goals.

Robust advising is key, Nguyen says, because "not only are you providing students with options, but you're educating students about their options" as well.

Bauer envisions SSU developing a strong central advising system for students in their freshman and sophomore years, or the periods during which students are most likely to change majors. Students will then transition to a mentoring relationship with a faculty advisor when they become upperclassmen.



How to build an experiential major map

Meta-majors can be a boon to some colleges, but first, administrators must get faculty and students on board with the concept. Students need to be reassured that they will still have the freedom to

explore courses outside their field of study and will not be totally locked into a single discipline from day one. And administrators have to make clear to faculty that implementing meta-majors will not require any changes to curricular requirements. Faculty also won't be designing the clusters, as that responsibility belongs to academic advisors.

Like what you're reading?

Subscribe now to see all of our latest articles, infographics, and expert research.

Subscribe today →
