Making Change Work: Empowering Students Who Are Changing Majors

From the MENTOR, Penn State, Division of Undergraduate Studies

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“I’ve wanted to be an engineer since I was a kid obsessed with LEGO building blocks. My high school didn’t offer AP calculus, so I am taking it this semester. Nearly everyone else took calc in high school. I am about to fail this course, which could mean the end of my engineering major.”
– Jack

“I came in as an undeclared major because I really wasn’t sure what direction I wanted to go. Now that I’ve taken some courses and done a little research about possible careers, I am ready to declare a major in psychology.”
– Jorge

“I liked my econ courses well enough, but my finance class this semester makes so much more sense to me. I love this stuff, and now I’m tutoring a couple of friends to help them understand the material.”
– Elizabeth

Given that nearly 75 percent of entering students will change their majors during their undergraduate careers (Gordon, 2007), academic advisers hear stories like the ones above from students every day. Whether students are seeking to change majors of their own free will or are being forced to leave their current program due to not meeting departmental progression requirements, switching majors can be quite difficult. As a result, academic advisers are often the “go to” campus representatives that students turn to for assistance. Students who switch majors are prone to falling through the cracks of the institution, feeling their previous majors no longer want them, and being unsure who to see or how to proceed in their newly declared major. This is one of the most important times for academic advisers to step in and help students go through what can be a scary transition between majors. The purpose of this article is to adapt William Bridges’ (2009) transition model as a theoretical framework to guide academic advisers as they help students successfully transition to a new major. In addition, we will provide a resource guide template for students to introduce the phases of transition and support services that facilitate the change to a new major (see Changing Your Major?).

Changes and Transitions

The old saying “change is hard” is one worth remembering as academic advisers assist students as they transition to a new major. Even if students want to make the change or meet the GPA required to finally enter their chosen major, they must still react to and process the situation. Typical reactions to change include passively resisting, aggressively undermining, or embracing the change. Reasons for these reactions include the wish to hold onto something they value, confusion about what the change will mean, lack of understanding why the change needs to be made, or simply a dislike of change in general (Kotter, 1999).
Though academic advisers typically are not trained as counselors, Reynolds (2004) advocated that they turn to grief and loss theories to help major changers deal with their feelings and make the transition more easily. Reynolds (2004) argued that students who are changing majors experience a significant loss, regardless of whether the student or the academic department prompts the decision. She suggested before advisers recommend alternative majors or career exploration courses, they make time to simply acknowledge the students’ loss associated with the change. For example, an academic adviser can simply say to a student who needs to change majors, “Changing majors for some students can be a major life transition. I just want you to know that it is normal to feel a range of emotions as you go through this process, and I want you to know that I will be here to help ease your transition into this new major.” Again, academic advisers typically are not trained therapists and can refer students who appear to be having deeper psychological issues to the counseling center, but advisers are in an ideal position to help students reflect, process, and move forward in a new direction. Advisers can also share stories about other students’ successful negotiations of the major-change process to instill confidence in advisees, a sense of comfort, and knowledge that they are not alone.

Organizational behavior consultant, William Bridges, offered another framework that can be adapted to assist students who are changing majors. He suggested that individuals can be taught specific techniques for helping them deal with change, as “transition management is based on some abilities you already have and some techniques you can easily learn” (Bridges, 2009, p. x).

**William Bridges’ Transition Model**

Bridges’ (2009) model can assist academic advisers gauge where students may be in the transition process as well as help advisers understand and interpret the behaviors of students who are changing majors. In addition, academic advisers can use this model to help students anticipate and understand some of the typical emotions they will likely experience when changing majors and to identify proven strategies for moving through these stages. The three phases of Bridges’ (2009) Transition Model are: Endings, Neutral Zone, and New Beginning. People must deal with their losses (Endings), experience the period of uncertainty between the unavailable past and the uncomfortable future (Neutral Zone), and do what is necessary to make the change begin to work and move beyond the transition (New Beginning) (Bridges, 2009).

**Phase One: Endings**

All transitions begin with an ending, a letting go, and leaving the old situation behind. In discussing Bridges’ theoretical framework in a corporate setting, Tichy (2002) identified common feelings people experience during Bridges’ three phases of transition. Typical emotions students may experience as they leave their current majors are disengagement (“I don’t belong at this institution”), disidentification (“I’m lost now that I can’t be a psychology major anymore”), disenchantment (“if only my chemistry professor was a better teacher, I wouldn’t have to change majors”), and disillusionment (“I’m a victim of the system and wasted two years in pre-architecture, pre-med studies, etc.”).

Academic advisers are ideally positioned to help students recognize what is happening by helping them acknowledge the loss they feel in leaving their majors. Peer advisers can be
invaluable in normalizing this process for their classmates, particularly if they themselves have gone through a change of major. For this reason, the University of South Carolina has added peer advisers (PAs) to its Cross Campus Advising program. These PAs are trained to share personal stories and experiences to help students see themselves as one of many who are students working through this process and not as a victim or failure.

Tichy (2002) offers two “Breaking Out Strategies” to help people move through the Endings phase. First, academic advisers can give students permission and the opportunity to react to the end of their time in their initial major rather than pretend the change does not impact students. Advisers can ask questions that prompt students to reflect, such as, “What will you miss most about your previous major?” In addition, advisers can encourage students to prepare for confusion in the Neutral Zone and understand that uncertainty is part of the process. Advisers can guide students toward a new source of stability and guidance, such as an academic adviser in the new major or one dedicated to working with students “between” majors and can help them successfully navigate between the two degree programs. For example, at the University of South Carolina, members of the Cross Campus Advising staff work with students to devise a list of questions to ask the academic adviser in the new major and help students begin to determine how the courses they have previously taken can be used to meet their new major’s degree requirements.

**Phase Two: Neutral Zone**

The Neutral Zone is characterized by discomfort, when the previous situation is no longer available but the new way is not yet familiar (Bridges, 2009). It can be a painful and disorienting time for students. Bridges (2009) argued this is the best time for individuals or organizations “to be creative, to develop into what they need to become, and to renew themselves” (p. 9). Typical emotions identified by Tichy (2002) and adapted for major changers include confusion (“I’m not sure what I should major in”), resolution (“I need to graduate as soon as possible and will use better study habits to be successful in my new major”), and bipolar reaction (“one minute I love my new major and the next I want to go back to the old one”). Academic advisers working with students in the Neutral Zone can reaffirm that confusion is integral to successfully moving through this phase. Nudging students to think outside the box about possible majors may facilitate a decision more closely aligned with their interests and talents than anticipated. Within USC’s Cross Campus Advising program, advisers challenge students to think critically about why they are feeling a particular way and encourage them not to discount those feelings but, rather, use them in a positive way along with Tichy’s “Breaking Out Strategies” (2002). Advisers can also refer students to the campus career center for assistance in considering possible new careers.

As he did in the Endings phase, Tichy (2002) outlined several “Breaking Out Strategies” for the Neutral Zone that can be modified when working with major-changing students. First, academic advisers should encourage students to find a regular time and place to reflect on the impact of the change. This may take shape as a weekly meeting with an academic adviser, career adviser, or with friends. Second, advisers should encourage students to review their lives, enabling them to begin to understand how their past has influenced their present situation. For some students, a referral to counseling resources may be appropriate. Third, academic advisers can assist students
to come up with a way to symbolically mark their passage from the old to the new major. This can be as simple as having the student set up an “exit interview” with his or her academic adviser from the old major. Fourth, advisers can assist students identify sources of support to help them make sense of the transition and sort out their understanding of the new world. In addition to academic advisers, family members, career advisers, faculty mentors, or counselors may help major changers deal with this time of uncertainty. USC’s Cross Campus Advising staff and Peer Advisers use *Changing Your Major* to give students concrete information about specific campus resources that can assist with the major change process. The Cross Campus Advising staff member or peer adviser highlights the resource(s) that best meet the student’s needs and discusses the value of using the *Changing Your Major* resource guide to successfully identify options and transition to a new major.

**Phase Three: New Beginnings**

The third and final phase requires emotional commitment by individuals to do things the new way and see themselves as new people (Bridges, 2009). This new beginning is typically signaled by announcements, such as the list of applicants admitted to the upper division nursing major for the fall semester or notification of the student’s assignment to a new academic adviser. Students with limited new major choices, those who do not meet minimum GPA requirements, may need extra help to come up with new plans. For example, applicants not selected for the upper division nursing program need advising to, gather information, make decisions about whether to remain at the institution and, if so, choose a new degree program. As people come out of the transition, those in the New Beginning phase “develop the new identity, experience the new energy, and discover the new sense of purpose that makes the change work” (Bridges, 2009, p. 5). In this phase, major changers may experience understanding (“I enjoy the creative side of things and this major is a better fit for my talents”), acceptance (“I was a little wary of this new major initially, but I really loved my first week of classes in this major”), hope (“I am looking forward to future classes in my new major”), and fondness (“even though I didn’t do well in that class, my lab partner and I became close friends”) (Tichy, 2002). Advisers working with students in the New Beginning phase should keep in mind the three phases may overlap or occur simultaneously.

Tichy (2002) suggests two “Breaking Out Strategies” in the New Beginnings phase, which can be adapted for major-changing students. First, advisers should encourage students to take bold new actions, such as join a major-related club and seek friends in their new major. Academic advisers can warn students that the road to the new major may be bumpy at times and they will likely make mistakes. Students in new majors may need some time to become familiar and comfortable with concepts and terminology commonly used in the new academic discipline. Students should be aware of this period of adjustment and resist the urge to let frustration overshadow their learning during the transition. Advisers can reassure students that this is normal and share with them the advisers’ confidence in the students’ ability to perform well in the new major. The second “Breaking Out” strategy recommends seeking opportunities to help others. By assisting students who may be new to the institution, major-changing students can put their own emotions in context. Advisers can encourage students to attend group advising sessions or workshops designed for students changing majors, or to meet with peer mentors involved with academic and/or career advising resource offices. Group support can reduce isolation and
normalize the emotions major changers may experience individually. For this reason, USC’s
Cross Campus Advising often recruits student assistants and peer advisers who are going or have
gone through the major-change process. In addition to helping others, taking on this
responsibility allows the major changer to finalize his or her move into and through the New
Beginnings phase.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to introduce Bridges’ Transition Model to academic advisers as a
theoretical framework for understanding how major-changing students may experience the
transition of switching academic programs. Individuals move through a transition at different
rates and levels of ease, although some generalizations can be made. The three phases Bridges
outlines in the Transition Model—Endings, Neutral Zone, New Beginning—can be another tool
utilized by advisers working with major-changing students. For academic advisers interested in a
more in-depth examination of Bridge’s Model of Transition, including checklists for each phase,
we recommend Bridges’ (2009) *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change* as a
resource. The straightforward presentation of the theoretical framework enables academic
advisers to incorporate the concepts into their daily work and academic advising administrators
to consider using Bridges’ Model in training programs for faculty and staff. When advisers can
identify where students like Jack, Jorge, and Elizabeth are in the transition process, they can
empower students to move toward their new majors with an appreciation for the past and
excitement about the opportunities that accompany a new beginning.

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Filed Under: advising, change, major, students