Career Services (CS)
Assessment of First-Year Interest Groups (FIGs)

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ABSTRACT
In fall semester 2010, CS assessed how the use of the CS office services impacted two First-Year Interest Groups (FIGs), made of first semester students at UM. One FIG acted as the treatment group (n=12), and one as the control group (n=13), for a total of n=25 participants.

The results of the study indicated that the treatment group, those that received the services, increased in their knowledge or ability to research majors and careers; understand the majors available at UM; understand the impact of their values, interests, skills, and abilities; implement their career choices; implement their chosen majors; and coordinate resume and cover letter writing. However, students in the treatment group saw no change or became less confident in their ability to choose majors or careers; see the connection between majors and careers; identify or understand their values, interests, skills, and abilities; and implement their major choices.

The control group saw an increase in their knowledge or ability to coordinate resume and cover letter writing. Students in the control group saw no change or became less confident in their knowledge or ability to choose their majors or careers; research majors and careers; understand the available UM majors; understand the connection between majors and careers; identify or understand their values, interests, skills, and abilities; and implement their chosen majors and careers.

Overall, the treatment group saw increases in several areas, while the control group saw increases only in resume and cover letter writing.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION
CS provides students and alumni with educational, career, and life planning services to assist with their personal and professional goals. The office offers career and educational counseling, interest and personality assessments, business communication document assistance, interviewing techniques, employment search and applications, graduate school applications, career and employment fairs, and student employment. To better fulfill the CS mission, CS surveyed FIG students about how the use of resources provided by the office impacted them.

FIGs are learning communities of first-year students, usually 15-20, grouped by a major or theme. FIG students share the same class schedule with their group while completing General Education requirements and getting to know other students with similar interests. FIGs were created to help students build a foundation for their majors and increase the likelihood of their staying in college. FIGs add an academically substantive structure to the first year and help build social networks for new freshman as well as contribute to student success by offering unique opportunities for academic enrichment and helping first-year students build their own communities.

ASSESSMENT PROCEDURE
At the beginning and end of the fall 2010 semester, the CS office administered to the treatment and control groups a pre- and post- questionnaire, respectively, with 12 statements. The treatment and control groups were both FIGs with a focus on business related courses. The questionnaire required students to rate each statement from 1-5. A rating of (1) indicated they strongly agreed, (2) that they agreed, (3) that they were not sure, (4) that they disagreed, and (5) that they strongly disagreed. The treatment group students were required to complete the Strong Interest Inventory (SII) assessment, meet with a career counselor for an interpretation of the results of the SII, and meet with a counselor for a resume critique and attend an overview of the office and its resources. The control group was given an overview of the CS office. Both groups were presented with an explanation of the assessment project.

FINDINGS
The following graphs represent the differences in responses of the treatment and control groups to the statements on the pre and post questionnaires.
Student Questionnaire Results:

The treatment group agreed more strongly than the control group that they had identified majors and/or career fields that interested them (statement 1).

**Statement 1:** I have identified majors and/or career fields that interest me.

The treatment group agreed more strongly than the control group that they knew how to conduct research on majors and careers (statement 2).

**Statement 2:** I know how to conduct research on majors and careers.

Both the control and the treatment groups expressed interest in several careers and several majors, but had a difficult time deciding among them (statements 4 and 5).

**Statement 4:** Several careers interest me, but I’m having a difficult time deciding among them.

**Statement 5:** Several majors interest me, but I’m having a difficult time deciding among them.
The control group agreed slightly less strongly than the treatment group that they had identified their choice of majors, but was not sure of the fulfilling career paths. However, both groups agreed more strongly that this was the case (statement 6). Similarly, both groups agreed more strongly that they had knowledge of what career paths they wanted to pursue, but did not know which major would best prepare them for their chosen career (statement 7).

**Statement 6:** I know what I want to major in, but I don’t know what careers it can lead to that would satisfy me.

The control group agreed more strongly that they had identified their values, interests, skills, and abilities, more than the treatment group (statement 8). Consequently, the treatment group had greater agreement that they understood how their values, interests, skills, and abilities impacted their choice of major or career (statement 9).

**Statement 8:** I have identified my values, interests, skills, and abilities.

**Statement 9:** I understand how my values, interests, skills, and abilities impact my choice of major/career.
Neither the treatment group, nor the control group agreed more or less strongly that they had decided on a career and now knew how to implement their choice (statement 10).

**Statement 10:** I have decided on a career and I know how to go about implementing my choice.

The treatment group agreed more strongly that they knew how to write an effective resume and cover letter (statement 12).

**Statement 12:** I know how to write an effective resume and cover letter for use in applying for jobs.

The treatment group reported increases in knowledge about researching majors and careers; majors available at UM; understanding the impact of values, interests, skills, and abilities; implementation of career choices and resume and cover letter writing. The control group saw increases in knowledge about resume and cover letter writing.

Students in both the treatment and control groups experienced a variety of outcomes. Some students saw increases in knowledge and abilities, some saw no change at all, and some became less confident about their knowledge and abilities.
Over the course of the study, some students who declared majors remained committed to those majors, some students who declared majors decided to change majors, some students chose a major, and some students who were undeclared remained undeclared. The majority of participants gained valuable knowledge about how to research majors and careers, but had not decided on a specific major or career direction by the end of the study.

There are several possible reasons for the mixed results. After completing the SII, students who thought they were sure about their choices of major and career may have received assessment results that were contradictory to their ideas, or that opened a wider range of possible majors and careers. Students who were sure about their choices of major may have discovered more career options associated with their major, and so had greater difficulty deciding among careers, or saw no change. Students who were sure of a career direction may have realized many different majors could prepare them for that career, and so had greater difficulty deciding among majors or saw no change.

Another consideration is that the participants were first semester freshman and, as new college students, were still exploring their interests and skills. Some participants may not have been ready to make a decision about a major or a career. All participants had the opportunity during the study to become familiar with the CS office, as well as career and education decision-making and assessment processes, and the online and campus resources.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the documented treatment group, the interventions used in the treatment group had a corollary effect on the increase in knowledge about UM majors; researching majors and careers; implementation of career choice; resume and cover letter writing; understanding the impact of values, interests, skills, and abilities; and implementation of chosen major. Proactive interventions such as career assessments, interest inventories, career counseling, and resume critiques would be advantageous as a retention effort for all at-risk student populations, including undecided/undeclared students.

It is recommended that the results of this study be shared with colleagues in the Undergraduate Advising Center (UAC) to determine if further study should be conducted to confirm replication of results, and if consideration should be given to the establishment of a formal structure wherein these types of interventions are included in the advising process, including FIGs, for undecided/undeclared students. The decision to establish a formal process for including interventions in the FIG program would be made by the UAC.