Happily Ever After: Guiding Our Students Through Choice-Angst

Dorise Gruber
Assistant Director for Freshman Affairs
Boston University School of Management
Learning Outcomes

- Define “Choice-Angst”
- Examine Social Psychological studies to understand expectations v. outcomes surrounding choice and happiness
- Discuss our role in existing decision-making models & determine where choice synthesis occurs in the process
- Create tools based on this knowledge to aid our work in advising students with Choice Angst
The Inspiration

- A podcast
- a TED (Technology/Entertainment/Design) talk**
- and a student appointment

***With tremendous gratitude owed to Dan Gilbert, Professor of Social Psychology, Harvard University, for his research and insight.
Choice-Angst

- “The Disease of Modernity”
  - (from Radiolab w/ Barry Schwartz, Professor of Psychology, Swarthmore College)
  - The agony of choice is a relatively new concept!

- Pizza with *everything* on it
  - Bananas
  - Candy
  - Rubber Chickens

- BLECH

- You have to pick something!!!
Decision Making

- When decisions are necessary, between A, B, and nothing, nothing is the worst choice.
Predicting the Future

- We have a hard time imagining the future much differently than the present
- An example of extremes
- Our present, much like our future, is dynamic
Predicting the Future

We have a hard time imagining the future much differently than the present. An example of extremes.

Our present, much like our future, is dynamic.

New Kitchen Built to Fit Your Wife

By Gardner Soule

BUILD the cabinets to fit the woman. Build the shelves to fit the supplies. Build the kitchen to fit the family.

Starting with these three principles, Cornell University has re-engineered the most-used room in the house.

The result is a kitchen equipped with:

- Cabinet counter tops that are adjustable—even after installation—to fit a woman of any height, or arm length.
- Shelves or other provision for storing all food and equipment.

SINK CENTER has storage bins behind sink for fruits, vegetables, soups, detergents. There’s a footrest and chair so the housewife can sit at the sink. Dishwasher may be added.

MIX CENTER contains built-in bins for flour and sugar and a flour sifter. There’s an electric outlet for the mixer. Cake pans are racked in cabinet below the counter.

- Separate work center tailored to fit your family now, and ready to be taken down any time by a handy man for re-arrangement to meet new family needs.

All these things, and many other fresh ideas, were included in the kitchen because so many experts worked on it. The experts came from the campus, from manufacturers, from federal, state and private agencies. Their work was coordinated by Glenn H. Beyer, professor of Housing and Design, and director of...
The Psychological Immune System

- Cognitive Dissonance
  - a discomfort caused by holding conflicting cognitions (e.g., ideas, beliefs, values, emotional reactions) simultaneously. In a state of dissonance, people may feel surprise, dread, guilt, anger, or embarrassment. The theory of cognitive dissonance in social psychology proposes that people have a motivational drive to reduce dissonance by altering existing cognitions or adding new ones to create consistency.
Cognitive Dissonance

- **The Fox and the Grapes** (Aesop)
  - A Fox cannot reach the high-hanging fruit, decides the grapes must be sour.
  - Desire something but cannot attain it – reduce dissonance by criticizing.
  - Cognitive Dissonance = Sour Grapes
Synthetic v. Natural Happiness

- [Dan Gilbert TED clip](https://www.ted.com/talks/dan_gilbert_the_free-choice_paradigm) (8:37-14:33)
- “The Free-Choice Paradigm”
- In essence: choices are different once you make them!
Our Role as Advisors

- “Skilled educators . . . help students develop their plans considering the kinds of challenge and support they need to succeed, and help them reflect and make meaning about their learning from those experiences.” (Learning Reconsidered, 2004)
Peace of Mind

- We know that a student will eventually be content with the path that they chose
- (Even if they’re not, most wrongs can be righted)
- ...We just need to help them believe it, too
- Without sounding patronizing!
Is there a “Best Way?”

- The two best indicators of what will make someone the most content with his/her decision:
  - Knowing how many other people experienced the same decision at different points in the cycle
  - “Prefeeling”
What are ways we encourage our students to information-gather?

- Submit your answers to smgpoll.com!
  - Upper-classmen
  - Data
  - Informational Interviews
“Prefeelings” experiment

- Poster experiment – “Explain your decision” (Thinkers) v. “Go with your gut” (Non-thinkers)
- Who was happier?
- Non-thinkers happier than Thinkers!
- Why?
Prefeeling

• “Prefeeling allowed Nonthinkers to predict their future satisfaction more accurately than Thinkers did. Indeed, when people are prevented from feeling emotion in the present, they become temporarily unable to predict how they will feel in the future.” (Dan Gilbert, *Stumbling on Happiness*)

• Prefeeling has limits on prediction of future feelings, but worth noting: *encourage students to go with their gut!*

• Implication: maybe it’s best *not* for a student to explain his/her decision to us (until a decision has been made).
Angst-inducing questions

- **Bound choices (deadline):**
  - To drop, or not to drop?

- **Unbound choices (open-ended):**
  - What should I do with my life? (Majors, Minors, Dual Degrees, Study Abroad, Internships, Jobs, etc).
In Your Groups...

- Discuss examples of some major bound/unbound choices your students have encountered
- Text them/vote on each others’ at smgpoll.com, preface with “Bound:” or “Unbound:”
Decision Models

- DECIDES Model*  
  (Krumboltz & Hamel, 1977)  
  Basic model, good start for immediate bound choices

- Decision Cycle*  
  (Carney & Wells, 1999)  
  Best for unbound choices

*Referenced from NACADA Region I 2010 presentation by Kim-Marie Jenkins & Stacy Stewart of University of Southern Maine
DECIDES Model

- Define the Problem
- Establish an Action Plan
- Clarify Values
- Identify Alternatives
- Discuss Probable Outcomes
- Eliminate Alternatives Systematically
- Start Action

**Where are we?**

**Where can we facilitate choice synthesis in this model?**
The Decision Cycle

- **Awareness** – Something needs to change
- **Self-Assessment** – What does student want, what is he/she willing to sacrifice? What is the intersection between student’s talents and interests?
- **Exploration** – Information-gathering stage
- **Integration** – Learn through experience, then reevaluate
- **Commitment** – When the student is ready to move ahead
- **Implementation** – The plan to proceed
- **Reevaluation** – Is the student happy with his/her decision?

**Where are we?**

**Where can we facilitate choice synthesis in this model?**
Tool Box

- What tools can we employ to help our students make tough, unbound choices, bearing in mind the way students will synthesize the outcome?
- Discuss in your groups, then text responses to smgpoll.com
- Delaying the decision-making – what needs to be answered immediately, what can wait?
- Assuring them they’re choosing between equally good (or equally lousy) options. Help students let go of unpicked option.
- Handing over the planning
Our Role as Advisors

- Lay down realistic boundaries
- Be pointed with our recommendations
- Provide students with the resources they need
- Let students struggle through a bit to synthesize their decisions
- Help students plan and re-plan as their focus becomes clearer
- Decisions are not eternal! The average American changes jobs 10x
When all else fails

- If you think a student will be responsive to it, share what you’ve learned today!
- “I can tell you the secret to happiness…”
- “...we create our own.”
“Wise Words”

- “There is no total satisfaction, and in essence, that is good, for complete satisfaction is a knock on the door to boredom. As long as we dream of things, there is stimulation and reason to move forward.”

- “Every choice has its price, and that cost is other choices. It is in our best interest to rejoice in the choices we purchase and not lament the ones we spend.”

-Beverly Stillerman Gruber, 1988
Resources

Resources