

MyMajors Impact on Four-Year Graduation Rates

Executive Summary

Students who start college with a declared major stay in school and graduate in four years at a significantly higher rate than those who enter “undecided.” Statistics support this, as does a new tool that helps high school seniors and college freshman select the major that will increase the odds of staying in school and graduating on time.

An Overview

“Is College Worth It?” asks David Leonhart in *New York Times*’ “The Upshot,” and the answer is an emphatic “Yes!”

The benefits of a college degree to the individual and society as a whole are well known, and becoming more so all the time. Leonhart cites statistics showing that in 2013 holders of a four-year college degree made, on average, 98 percent more per hour than those without, up from 89 percent just five years before.

The disadvantages of dropping out have been covered by additional pieces in the *Times*, the subject of a report by the Pew Research Center (“The Rising Cost of Not Going to College”) and received extensive mention in *The Atlantic*’s April 2015 cover story (“Can Starbucks Save the Middle Class?”) in which the author, Amanda Ripley, succinctly stated “many Americans fail to finish college, because many colleges are not designed to be finished. They are designed to enroll students.”

It follows, then, that new tools and methodologies that facilitate and streamline that process should be an integral part of every new student’s preparation for college. One such tool is MyMajors, which can help students determine what major is the best fit for them. In a single 15 minute session a student is guided to the major that best determines and increases the likelihood that he or she will stay in school and graduate in four years, whereas a single, one-on-one session with a qualified advisor would take approximately one hour to reach the same conclusion.

MyMajors and the Research Supporting It

MyMajors is an online assessment tool for students, primarily high school juniors and seniors, and college freshmen and their counselors that guides them in choosing the right major, college and career. The free assessment software surveys students’ academic aptitudes, grades, achievement tests, course enjoyment, interests and personalities.

Created by Dr. Fritz Grupe at the University of Nevada, Reno, it was first registered in 2002 and has been rewritten and improved several times over the following decade. In July of 2007, MyMajors partnered with Townsend Communications to promote the online assessment tool to students and counselors.

Research supporting the predictive and statistical validity of measuring the retention and graduation rates of their own students entering college with a declared major vs. those entering undeclared was conducted by Colorado State University. The study and results showed that:

- **On average, declared students had higher retention rates (83.6 percent) than undeclared students (78.7 percent) as well as superior graduation rates (65.7 percent for declared; 59.3 percent for undeclared)**
- **Academically, declared students had a statistically higher average index for first-term GPA, and last-term cumulative GPA.**

In January 2015 Townsend Communications partnered with the National Student Clearing House to study the enrollment and graduation records of 4,000 students who had completed the MyMajors Assessment between 2008 and 2010. These students included those who enrolled directly in four-year and two-year schools.

The random sampling was drawn from students at three education levels at the time they used MyMajors: high school Junior, high school senior and college freshman. The results for each cohort, as compared to the national average rates of graduation as reported by *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, were:

4-Year Graduation rates of MyMajors Assessment Users (Figure 1)

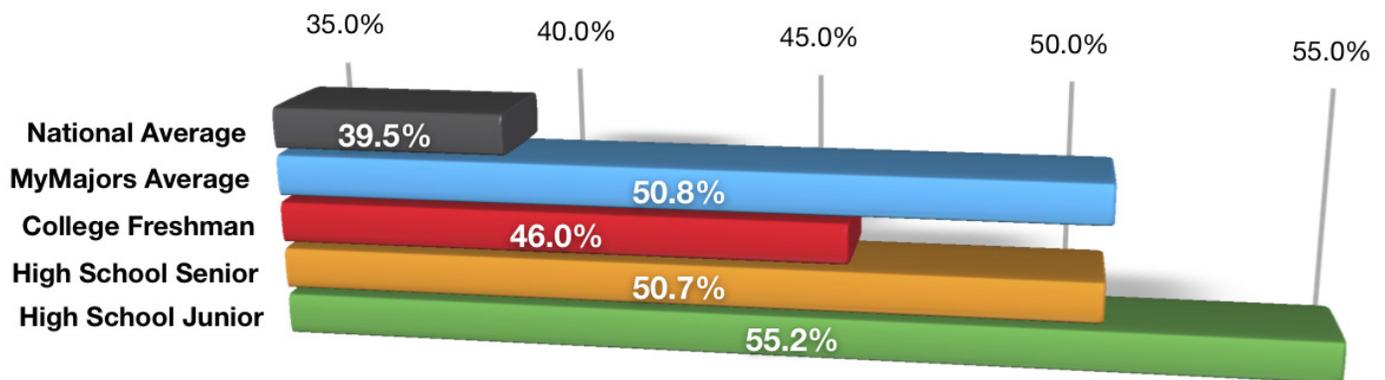


Figure 1: 51 percent of students who used MyMajors graduated in four years – 11 percent higher than the national average. And students that have completed the MyMajors assessment as a high school junior had the best results.

4-Year Graduation rates by Ethnicity (Figure 2)

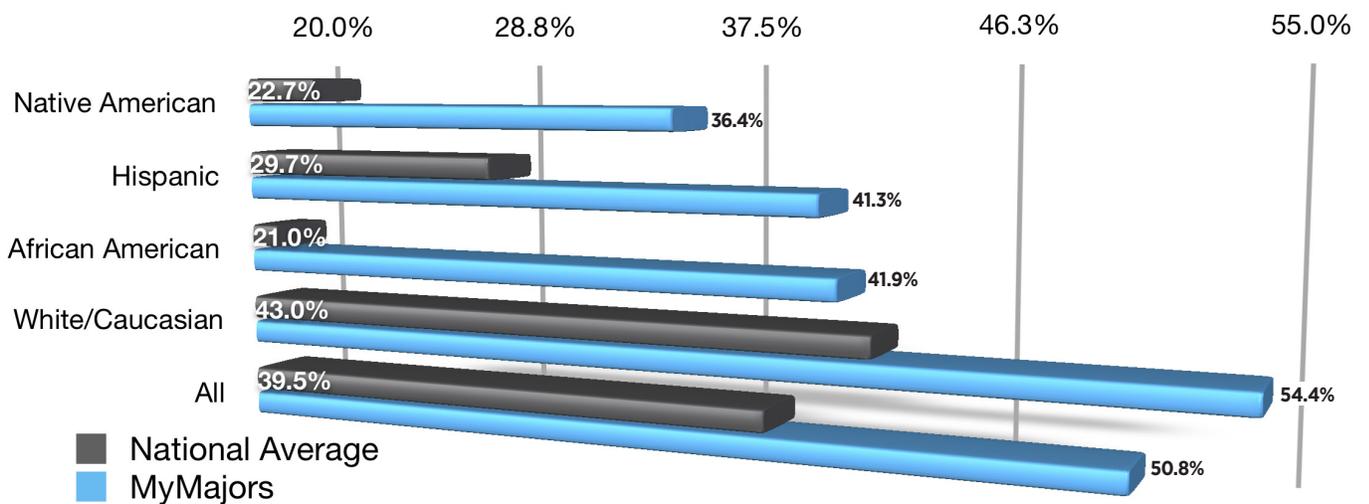


Figure 2: Students of color that completed the MyMajors assessment also graduated at rates higher than the national average: African American (41.9 percent vs. 21.0 percent); Hispanic (41.3 percent vs. 29.7 percent); Native American (36.4 percent vs. 22.7 percent); and multi-national (58.3 percent vs. 39 percent) – and all within four years.

Retention Rates (Figure 3)

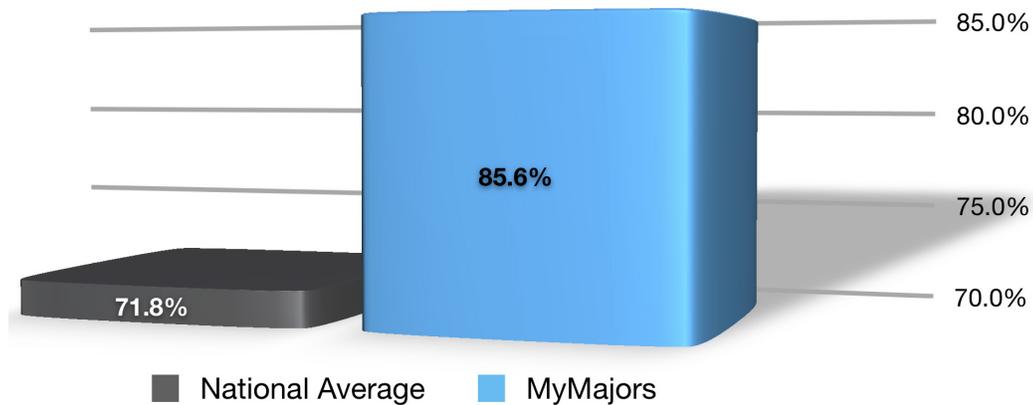


Figure 3: The national average retention rate for four year schools is 71.8 percent. MyMajors survey takers have an average retention rate of 85.6 percent. The retention rate of MyMajors students is consistent across all ethnicities and genders ranging from 84.7 percent to 89.5 percent.

The more timely and effective direction provided by MyMajors impacts not only students and the success of their college career, it also has a very real financial effect on all stakeholders: students, their families, colleges and universities. Lower retention means lost revenue for the institutions. For 300 freshmen enrolled paying \$20,000 annual tuition, for instance, a typical retention rate of 70 percent represents a loss of \$5,400,000 over three years. Having students use MyMajors has the potential to reduce that loss by as much as \$760,000 per year.

The Status Quo

America’s poor college retention and graduation rates have become the focus of national attention. Colleges and universities are under increased pressure to improve student outcomes under threat of losing funding as determined by graduation rates.

Colleges and universities are being encouraged to increase student access to guidance and advice to improve retention and graduation rates. However, face-to-face advising is cost prohibitive for many institutions that, as a result of federal and state budget cuts, lack the funding to add staff and ensure their students ready access to advisors.

According to the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics, the average graduation rate for students at four-year institutions who complete their degree in six years is 59 percent, and the Chronicle of Higher Education places the rate of graduation in four years at a mere 39.5 percent. Overall, graduation rates for males within six years is 56 percent and, for females, 62 percent. And for students of color the rate drops to 42 percent.

Also impacting graduation rates are issues of retention. One-third of all students switch institutions at least once before earning a degree, says a report by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

And, alarmingly, the United States has slipped behind in college completion, to 19th place among 28 countries, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development’s “Education at a Glance” report, which tracks education investment and performance of wealthier democracies.

There is a way to raise these averages, and a large scale, two-year research study of the effectiveness of MyMajors provides insight into how to do so.

Summary

In conclusion, new freshmen with declared majors have higher graduation and retention rates compared to undeclared freshmen. Colleges nationwide are experimenting with new strategies to help students succeed. Unfortunately, right now most advising begins after the student has already made the wrong choice of college major.

MyMajors decidedly improves graduation and retention rates and improves positive outcomes for every stakeholder in the higher education landscape. Education is an investment in every sense of the word, now more than ever. And any tool that makes that investment payoff is one that warrants the attention of the academic community, students, and those charged with keeping those students enrolled and engaged, fully prepared to participate, compete and thrive in the modern economy.

About the Research Study

In January 2015, Townsend Communications partnered with the University of Missouri, Kansas City's mathematics department and the National Student Clearinghouse to study the enrollment and graduation outcomes of students that completed the MyMajors interview between 2008 and 2010.

It was determined that a starting data set / sample size of 4,980 would be sufficient for the desired margin of error to determine: Do students who take MyMajors interview have a higher four-year, five-year, six-year graduation rate than the national average? If so, what is the average time graduation for the students? What percentage of the students graduate from the college which they started?

Sample selection: A sample size of 2,640 randomly selected records from the entire population (all groups together), then, an additional 780 samples from each group individually (HS Juniors, HS Seniors, College Freshman). A total of 4,980 records were selected which ensured that there was enough information to run analysis on the entire population, as well as each group individually. This also included an extra 10% margin to ensure for no matching records.

The National Student Clearinghouse was able to match 4,000 of the MyMajors student records supplied. The outcomes of the students were tracked and summarized. Highlights appear in this Executive Summary.



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