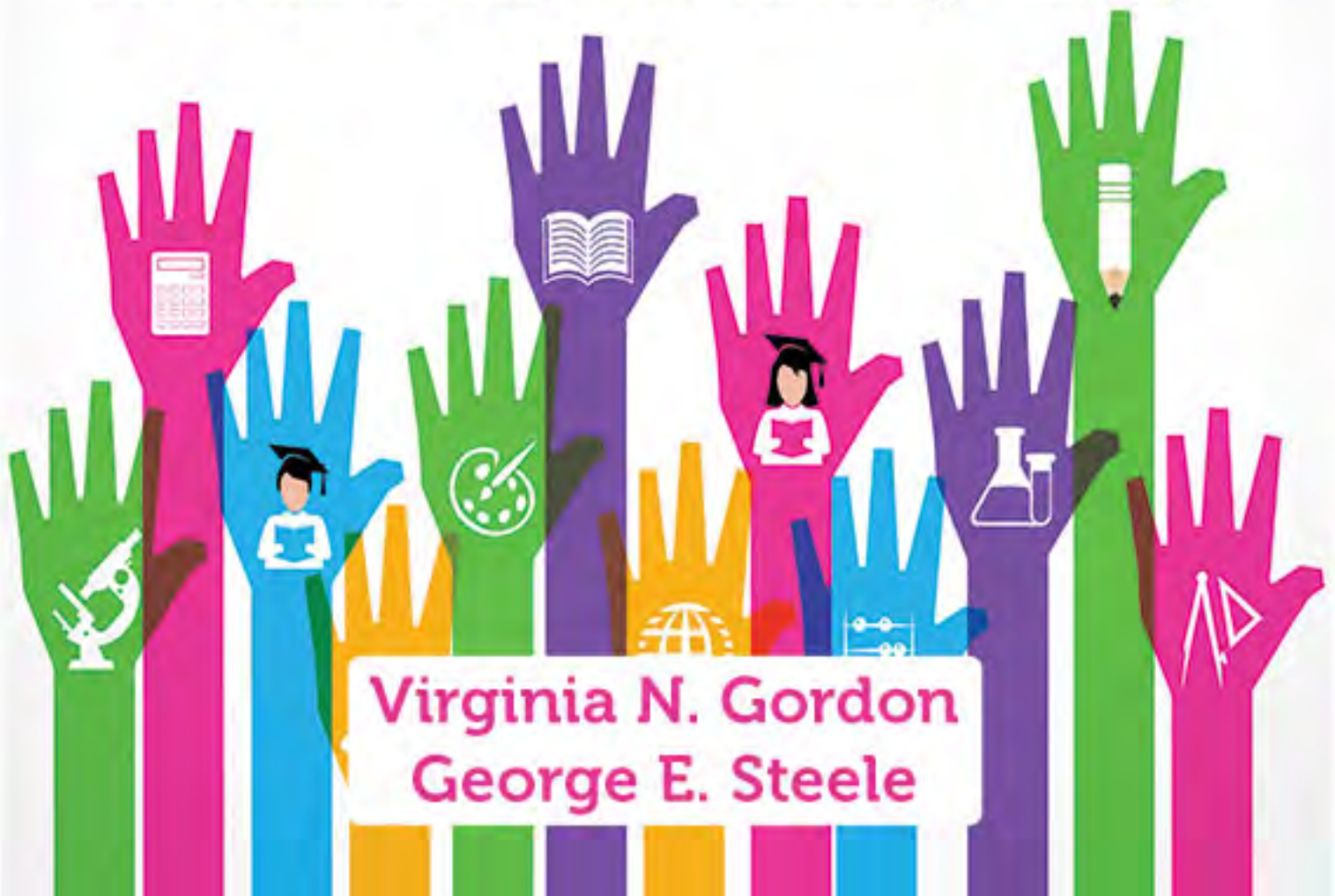


Fourth Edition



The Undecided College Student

An Academic and Career Advising Challenge



Virginia N. Gordon
George E. Steele

**THE UNDECIDED
COLLEGE STUDENT**

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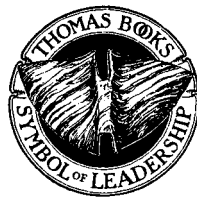
An Academic and Career
Advising Challenge

By

VIRGINIA N. GORDON, PH.D.

and

GEORGE E. STEELE, PH.D.



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FOREWORD

When I wrote the foreword to this volume over two decades ago, I compared the scattered attempts to help and study undecided students as analogous in many ways to the development of orphan drugs in medicine. Up to then our knowledge of undecided students had proceeded slowly because there had been only sporadic interest in the necessary research and very little financial support for even that research. Up to then most research had been the by-product of some “more important” research, and most of the programs and professional practices devised to provide assistance were stimulated by individual practitioners and researchers rather than by institutions.

The revised version of this volume updates the vast literature that has proliferated in the last decade. This volume will continue to be the major resource for assembling the diverse speculation and theory, the research evidence, and the multiple organizational and professional practices for helping college students who have been characterized as “undecided, unwilling, or unable” to make appropriate educational and vocational decisions. Virginia Gordon has done an impressive job in updating this substantial literature in one volume. Academics, counselors, and researchers will no longer have to scrounge through a wide array of journals, books, and technical reports to obtain a comprehensive and systematic account of the research (old and new), the model programs for assisting students, and the diverse theory for understanding the undecided student.

This volume should continue to stimulate the creation and evaluation of more informed and systematic vocational assistance. Most people will find the use of developmental speculation and theory to integrate and organize the services and techniques of academic advising to be congenial and plausible. Hopefully, this particular orientation will lead to more explicit evaluation as well as more explicit theory. And, whatever orientation a person adopts, the reader has a useful summary of all theoretical orientations.

JOHN L. HOLLAND
March, 2006

Note: When Dr. John Holland wrote the Foreword to the first volume of this book in 1984, the focus on undecided students was beginning to broaden through theoretical applications, research and practice. Dr. Holland generously updated the Forewords to the next two volumes of this book in 1999 and 2007. After his death in 2008, Dr. Holland's notable contributions to vocational theory and practice continue to have a tremendous influence on how we perceive, counsel and advise undecided students.

INTRODUCTION

When the third edition of this book was published almost ten years ago, the world of technology was advancing at a remarkable pace. Facebook and Twitter were fairly new and were changing in many ways how young people in particular were communicating. Currently new career fields are emerging, new interdisciplinary majors are being developed, and new college majors are being formed to prepare students for an ever-changing workplace. Amid this environment a new generation of undecided students is entering college and like generations past, need timely and relevant academic and career advising. These new generations of students are digital natives who expect academic and career advising resources and methods to be online and available 24/7. Academic and career advisors and counselors are challenged to assist these students in ways that incorporate new and innovative practices while retaining and still learning from those proven methods and resources from the past.

Much of the knowledge and information we have accumulated over many years of research about the characteristics of undecided students and career indecision is still viable, but new theoretical and practical ideas that enhance our understanding of them are flowing constantly. Although this book outlines some of the newer and more promising concepts and approaches to advising and counseling undecided college students, it is important to acknowledge and pay tribute to the foundations upon which today's knowledge and practices are built.

Academically and career undecided college students have been the focus of college administrators, faculty, counselors, academic advisors, student affairs professionals and researchers for almost 90 years. Over that period of time we have acquired new knowledge and formed new concepts about who they are, why they are undecided, and how to assist them with decision making.

When students enter college, many of them feel overwhelmed with the great number of academic major and career options open to them. Many admit they know very little about what is involved in some of the occupations

they are considering. Many are unsure of how their personal strengths and limitations relate to coursework required in particular majors and/or the tasks required in specific occupations. They are often trying to make direct connections between their college major and the “jobs” they will be prepared to enter after college.

The students themselves have mixed feelings about being “undecided.” Some are scared, anxious, apologetic, and very negative about their situation. Others are open, flexible, and curious. Some feel perfectly happy to be undecided. Many students succumb to societal and parental pressures and make initial choices based on very little, if any, solid information about academic programs or career fields. Other students deal with the “chicken and egg” question of not knowing which to select first—a career field or college major. Many students solve this dilemma by choosing an area in which the major and occupation are obviously and directly related. Many students change their majors because of changing interests, academic experiences, or becoming more vocationally mature. These students obviously need the same type of advising and career exploration assistance offered to undecided students.

Undecided students are such a heterogeneous group, and the administrative variations on campuses are so different that it is difficult to comprehend generally the enormity and complexity of trying to identify and advise them. It is not only a challenge to understand the diversity of this group as a whole, but the needs of individual students engage us even more. Some advisors tend to work intuitively with undecided students and prescribe activities that may or may not be responsive to their individual needs.

Tracing the research about undecided students over the past decades is a fascinating endeavor. The progressive ideas of the theorists and researchers of the 1950s to current post-modern theorists and the research that yields new constructs about indecision, offer a picture born of changing times and perspectives. This has not altered the needs of undecided students, however, to learn the basic knowledge and skills necessary to make timely, realistic and satisfying academic major and career decisions.

This volume offers a comprehensive examination of this special population—from a review of the vast research about them to practical methods for advising and counseling them. Throughout this book, the term “undecided” is used as the descriptor for students unwilling, unable, or unready to make educational and/or vocational decisions. Many campuses use other more positive terms to describe these students. Examples are “exploratory,” “open-majors,” or “special majors,” to name a few. The term “undecided” is used here because of its use in the research literature and the easy identification with its meaning.

If one of the purposes of our colleges and universities is to help students set and implement educational and career goals, then we must be cooperatively engaged in that venture. Creating an environment that encourages and supports undecided students while they are making important educational, career, and life decisions must be central to that purpose.

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**THE UNDECIDED
COLLEGE STUDENT**

Chapter 1

WHO ARE UNDECIDED STUDENTS?

The interest and study about college students who are not committed to an educational or career direction has continued for almost 90 years. Although the concept of career indecision has been investigated extensively in the past, current research continues to reveal new insights and applications for practice. Generations of college students, both decided and undecided have benefitted from the wealth of information and new ideas this proliferation of research has offered. Although this chapter incorporates some new research about career indecision and undecided students, it retains the important underpinnings on which new thinking and practices are built.

The first recorded study about undecided students (as cited by Crites, 1969), was published in the *Personnel Journal* in 1927 by R.B. Cunliffe who surveyed college freshmen in Detroit. He found that 9 percent of the students who responded to a survey indicated they were undecided. Other studies in the next two decades reported that from 9 percent to 61 percent of the high school and college students were undecided. A great many earlier investigations of indecision were parts of studies intended to research other problems. Achilles (1935) (scholastic study), Kilzer (1935) (college-bound versus noncollege-bound), Nelson and Nelson (1940) (religious attitudes), and Kohn (1947) (family influences) looked at correlates of indecision while investigating other topics.

Early researchers attempted to differentiate undecided from decided students dichotomously (Ashby, Wall, & Osipow, 1966; Baird, 1967; Holland & Holland, 1977). Other early studies concentrated on more psychological factors such as anxiety, locus of control, and iden-

tity (Appel, Haak, & Witzke, 1970; Goodstein, 1965; Kimes & Troth, 1974; Rose & Elton, 1971). Later studies classified students according to their level of undecidedness (Gordon & Steele, 2003; Savickas, 1989), while other researchers classified them by the interaction of cognitive and affective dimensions of career indecision (Chartrand et al., 1994; Feldman, 2003). A great deal of research has studied multiple types of decided and undecided students (Gordon, 1998).

Although not always using undecided students as subjects, a great many characteristics related directly or indirectly to indecision have been studied, such as career-related barriers (Holland, Daiger, & Power, 1980; Swanson, Daniels, & Tokar, 1996), career decision problems or difficulties (Kelly & Lee, 2002; Lancaster et al., 1999; Osipow & Gati, 1998), career self-efficacy (Betz & Luzzo, 1996; Gianakos, 1999), and cross-cultural differences (Arbona, 1996; Sharf, 1997; Mau, 1999; Lopez & Sujin, 2006).

The results of all the years of research have only confirmed the prevailing consensus that undecided students comprise a complex, heterogeneous group and their reasons for indecision are just as varied. Kelly and Pulver (2003) list several limitations to the various research studies that may account for the disparity in results. They suggest (1) the dearth of predictive evidence, (2) the failure to consider academic aptitudes, (3) the use of “convenience samples” that include decided as well as undecided subjects, (4) the way statistical analyses are interpreted, and (5) the variation in the personality variables included in the studies. Although newer research has addressed some of these concerns, the diverse picture of who they are remains.

Reasons for this complexity may lie also in the different ways writers and researchers define “indecision.” Early approaches, according to Osipow (1999), were based simply on asking students to rate their degree of decidedness from survey questions. Today indecision is considered a developmental phase that is part of the decision-making process. As Osipow points out, indecision is no longer the purview of adolescence and early adulthood, but is now viewed from a broad life-span perspective. Career plans often need to be revised because of the challenge of a changing and complex workplace. This is certainly true with today’s global economy and the demands of different economic patterns. Osipow suggests that broadening the term should be helpful in understanding the many shades of this stage of the decision-making process.

In spite of this vast amount of research and the complexity it presents, understanding the origins of indecision and how undecided students differ from truly decided ones can provide helpful insights. Being cognizant of the research that has focused on interventions and assessments is also important in advising and counseling them effectively.

ORIGINS OF INDECISION

Career indecision is the most researched issue in vocational psychology (Miller & Rottinghaus, 2014). Attempts to determine the antecedents of career indecision have a long and varied history. Early studies concentrated on various correlates of decision rather than on undecided persons or the levels of their indecision. In more recent years, researchers have viewed indecision as an important topic itself and have tried to identify characteristics common to indecision. Brown and Rector (2008) identified over 50 variables that have been explored as possible correlates of indecision. A few include career information needs, vocational identity, career choice anxiety, career self-efficacy, lack of motivation, career myths, dysfunctional career thoughts, internal and external barriers, chronic indecisiveness, and career decision-making difficulties.

Tyler (1953) was one of the first to postulate a number of antecedents for vocational indecision. She suggested that opinions and attitudes of family and friends can act as deterring factors. For example, a parent's expectations may create a situation that prevents a student from deciding. A cluster of reasons for indecision may emanate from not accepting or not being satisfied with the role that the occupation represents, even though the skills and activities within the occupation are appealing. Sex-role stereotyping of occupations may be a factor as well. After 60 years, Tyler's ideas about the antecedents of career indecision are remarkably accurate.

One of the earliest studies on undecided students was undertaken by Holland and Nichols (1964). The purpose of their investigation was to validate an indecision scale, but in the process some of the personal characteristics of undecided individuals were identified. The subjects used in this research are National Merit finalists, who are asked to respond to activities in which they "frequently, occasionally, or