THE DISILLUSIONMENT OF STUDENTS DENIED ADMISSION TO A PREFERRED MAJOR VIEWED FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY OF ALIENATION

CLIFTON E. BARBER, PH.D
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Why students respond differently when they are denied admission to a preferred academic major may be explained using a psychological theory of alienation. Using this theoretical perspective, three trajectories producing feelings of alienation are presented. The most intense of these trajectories, the process of disillusionment, is examined using a typology of behavioral responses based on the nature of the thwarted expectations, and the perceived availability of salient alternatives. Both the form and effect of behavioral student responses are included in the typology. The paper concludes with advising guidelines for helping students effectively cope with disconfirmed expectations.

One of the defining points punctuating a student’s pursuit of an undergraduate degree is formal affiliation with a major. For some students, this process is fairly straightforward, and extends to graduation without change or complication. For others, however, the path to a major and to graduation is less well-defined, and often fraught with change and disappointment. Of interest here are those instances when a student is denied access to a desired or preferred major because of selective admissions.

When expectations regarding admission to a major are disconfirmed, feelings of frustration and disappointment often ensue. Both the intensity of these feelings and the form of their behavioral manifestations vary. For example, when denied access to a desired major for which significant preparation was made, some students feel unfairly treated and angrily contest or appeal the decision. Other students are equally upset, but rather than become angry and rebel against the decision, they become withdrawn and isolated; some opt to transfer to another college/university, or even abandon the pursuit of a higher education degree altogether. Responses to disconfirmed expectations may also vary over time for a particular student. For example, a student may initially harbor feelings of anger and resentment toward the program that denied admission. These feelings eventually “cool” as other options are explored, and as the student becomes more engaged in self-reflection and problem-solving.

A PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY OF ALIENATION

Why do students respond differently when denied access to a desired or preferred major? One explanation is found in a psychological theory of alienation proposed by Stokols (1975). Explored here is the value of this theory for the developmental advising of students. After examining the process of disillusionment associated with denied admission, the concept of alienation from a psychological perspective is introduced by describing two of its salient properties: negative sentiment and perceived constraint. Three trajectories leading to a student’s feelings of alienation are subsequently presented: disillusionment, disenchantment, and confirmed estrangement. The most intense of these trajectories
– disillusionment - is further examined using a typology constructed around two contextual factors involved in most changes of an academic major: the perceived source or nature of the thwarting of expectations, and the perceived availability of salient alternative courses of action.

Beginnings of Student Disillusionment

When confronted with being denied access to a desired academic major, a student will likely have, as a key point of reference, a “comparison level” (Thibaut & Kelley, 1986). That is, the student will compare the actual outcome (being denied admission to a major) with the expected outcome (being admitted to a major) in the context of effort expended, both by self and by other students. Feelings of disillusionment surface when the expected outcome falls short of what a student anticipates in the context of effort they have expended (and sometimes in comparison with the efforts they perceive peers to have expended). That the phenomenon of disillusionment is experienced by students who are denied admission to a preferred major is illustrated in the following examples.

Anna recently completed an Associate in Applied Science degree at a community college, with a professional diploma specializing in residential and commercial design. Her hope was to transfer to a four-year institution and complete a Bachelor of Arts degree in Interior Design. However, she was recently notified that – after a review of her portfolio – she would not be admitted:

“I can’t believe I didn’t get accepted. I mean, I did all that they asked. I took all of the required courses at (a local community college), and got good grades; better grades, actually, than my roommate. But she got accepted and I didn’t. I don’t understand it. It’s not fair. Now I’ve spent all this time and money for nothing! I can’t change programs without really losing out. Nobody’s going to accept all of these design credits. Unless I can find another (design) program somewhere else, I’ve really wasted my time!”

Phillip is a second semester junior who was denied admission to a business major: “I thought I had a good shot at it. Really, I did. My grades were pretty good, really. I think my overall GPA was like a 3.3 when I applied for major certification (i.e. admission to a major). My girl friend’s brother had the same grade point average last year, and he got in. I even did better in my accounting class than he did. I still want to get a business degree, but I am worried that I can’t. Both my parents and I have poured a ton of money into my education. I’m upset and so are they. I suppose there are some other options. The courses I’ve taken might work for something like public administration, but I don’t know if that will get me where I want to go as far as a career is concerned.”

The Concept of Alienation

Although the concept of alienation has been used to investigate student learning and other issues in higher education (Case, 2007; Loo & Rolison, 1986; Mann, 2001), it has seldom been mentioned in the context of academic advising. Given feelings of disillusionment that are often expressed by students when they experience disconfirmed expectations associated with a major change (Gordon & Polson, 1985), the concept of alienation merits a closer examination by academic advisers.

Alienation generally describes a state of estrangement of individuals from one another, or from a specific situation, activity, process, or context. In the sociological literature,
alienation is viewed as a product of social-structural factors, such as economic and social inequality, social isolation, and bureaucratization (Durkheim, 1968; Merton, 1964; Middleton, 1963). As Etzioni (1968) defines it, alienation arises from social situations that are “beyond the control of the actor and are unresponsive to the actor’s needs” (p. 879).

Implied in the foregoing definitions are two psychological properties worth noting because they apply to student advising. The first is that alienation occurs in a social setting or context toward which an individual feels negative sentiment (e.g. disappointment, anger). This sentiment may be targeted at a specific entity, a process, or even the broader milieu or context in which the estrangement occurs. The second property is that of perceived constraint. Part of a student’s feelings of alienation, including the intensity of these feelings, is a product of the extent to which they feel “caught” or “trapped” in an unsatisfying situation. Often, these constraints are embodied in the costs incurred in preparing for the major. For example, a student is likely to have already expended significant time and resources in the pursuit of an education, and particularly in the quest to fulfill requirements to be admitted to a desired major. After learning that their expectations for being admitted to a major are disconfirmed, it may not be easy for a student to pursue a different course of action without risking a loss of investment, or incurring additional costs via transfer to another institution. Although not physically constrained to remain in the unsatisfying situation, the student will often perceive the costs of making a change to be a significant barrier or constraint to pursuing alternative courses of action.

Parenthetically, similar barriers may also apply to students who have been admitted to a major, but who subsequently find it unsatisfactory and unfulfilling. They opt to “stay the course” because further change would risk wasting of time, energy and financial resources already expended. Similar constraints also contribute to feelings of alienation experienced by a student who is place-bound due to work and/or family responsibilities.

Societal-level perspectives of alienation are static in that they do not describe the sequential-trajectories leading to the experience of alienation. Such is not the case, however, with Stokols’ (1975) psychological or personal-level theory of alienation, where it is framed as the product of three antecedent conditions, each of which involves a separate process or developmental trajectory. It is to these antecedent conditions that attention is now turned.

**Antecedent Conditions of Alienation**

Conditions associated with alienation can be viewed as combinations of values associated with two variables: (a) the valence of student sentiment centered on outcomes (i.e. positive versus negative sentiment), and (b) the extent of student involvement in terms of time spent preparing to enter a major (i.e. high versus low duration). Defining configurations and examples of four conditions are presented below. Note that the fourth condition describes a state of alienation; the first three are viewed as antecedent conditions, each of which leads – albeit via separate trajectories - to alienation.

**Condition 1: Positive sentiment and high involvement.** A student feels positive about a particular major, and has been involved for some time in preparing to enter it. Example: Because of a teacher who served as a positive role model during high school, a freshman is attracted to the field of accounting, and begins their college education as a pre-major in business. The student subsequently spends two years completing pre-major requirements, and then applies to become a business major with a concentration in accounting.

**Condition 2: Positive sentiment and low involvement.** A student feels positive about a particular major, but has not been very
involved in terms of the amount of time expended in preparing for it. Example: A student transfers to a four-year university with an associate of arts degree from a local community college. Elective credits for the associate of arts degree included courses in criminology, juvenile delinquency, law and society, and law enforcement. Due to the student’s positive experience in these courses, they are attracted to a major in Criminal Justice soon after the transfer and subsequently take one pre-major course.

Condition 3: Negative sentiment and low involvement. A student feels somewhat negatively about a major, but really has not expended much time preparing for it. Example: A student’s parents strongly encourage a major in computer science. Due to limited quantitative skills demonstrated in high school (i.e. comparatively low grades in math and science), the student questions whether pursuing a degree in computer science is really a good fit with aptitude. Still, the student tentatively pursues this major to please parents; spending one semester taking four pre-requisite courses and receiving only marginal grades.

Condition 4 (alienation): negative sentiment and high involvement. A student feels negatively about a major after having expended considerable effort in preparing for it. Example: After having spent two years in preparation for a major in architecture, a

Figure 1: Combinations of Sentiment and Involvement with Regard to a Student’s Denial of Access to a Major: An Illustration of Three Developmental Trajectories Leading to Alienation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Sentiment</th>
<th>Degree of Student Involvement</th>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Condition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>POSITIVE</td>
<td>HIGH</td>
<td>CONDITION 1</td>
<td>CONDITION 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Disillusionment</td>
<td>Disenchantment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEGATIVE</td>
<td>LOW</td>
<td>CONDITION 3</td>
<td>CONDITION 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Confirmation of Estrangement</td>
<td>ALIENATION</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
student is denied admission because of what a faculty review team deems to be a weak portfolio of studio work. As a result, the feelings of the student toward this major are less-than-positive.

Three Trajectories Leading to Alienation

The aforementioned conditions are illustrated in Figure 1. Condition 4 (negative sentiment combined with high involvement and constraint) is representative of alienation.

Conditions 1-3 represent starting points for three different trajectories leading to feelings of alienation (Condition 4). The trajectory from Condition 1 to Condition 4 is a process termed “disillusionment”. The trajectory from Condition 2 to Condition 4 represents the process of “disenchantment”. And the trajectory from Condition 3 to Condition 4 is entitled “confirmation of estrangement”.

Disillusionment. The process of disillusionment (Condition 1 to Condition 4) begins with a student's high expectations for positive outcomes (e.g. being admitted to a preferred major), and is accompanied by significant involvement in terms of preparation. Against this backdrop of high expectations and investment, a disconfirmation leads to intense feelings of frustration and alienation. Example: A student is attracted to a major in occupational therapy (OT), and spends two years completing the requisite course work outlined for pre-OT majors; only to learn at the end of their sophomore year that they will not be admitted to the OT major.

Disenchantment. In the process of disenchantment (Condition 2 to Condition 4), the student begins with high expectations for positive outcomes, but with only minimal involvement in terms of preparing for a major. At some point, however, the situation changes when outcomes become less-than-satisfactory. Example: A student is encouraged by a roommate to consider a major in finance, which is attractive due to the student’s interest in the stock market, and also because of the high starting salaries for graduates. After entering this major, severe financial crises ripple through the national and global economies, resulting in a significant losses for those who invested in stocks, and a decline in hiring and starting salaries for graduates with degrees in finance. This developmental trajectory involves only a moderate amount of comparison level discrepancy and the resulting feelings of alienation, since the disconfirmation of the student’s expectations does not totally dissolve the earlier commitment to finance as a career.

Confirmed estrangement. The process of confirmed estrangement (Condition 3 to Condition 4) involves the least amount of comparison level discrepancy. Consequently, of the three trajectories, this one will result in the least intense feelings of frustration and alienation. The student begins with minimal expectation and involvement, only to subsequently have confirmed the suspicion that outcomes will at best be marginal. For example, some students are persuaded by parents and/or peers to pursue a major in which they have only a minimal level of interest. After a short period of exploration, they confirm the expectation of incongruent fit, and pursue other courses of action.

The remainder of this paper is devoted to exploring the process of disillusionment and the trajectory leading to alienation (i.e. Condition 1 to Condition 4). The rationale for this emphasis resides in the observation that a student advisee’s most intense feelings of frustration and alienation derive from disillusionment as opposed to disenchantment or confirmed estrangement. This observation is supported by Stokols’ (1975) claim that the greatest discrepancy in comparison levels exists in the process of disillusionment: “For it is along this path that (a person) begins with high involvement and high expectations only to arrive at, or be jolted into, an extremely unfavorable situation” (p. 31).
Two Factors Affecting the Intensity of Student Disillusionment and Alienation

Importantly, the sentiment associated with expected outcomes and degree of involvement only partially explains the intensity with which alienation is experienced. In order to derive a more complete explanation, Stokols identifies two additional factors: (a) the nature/source of the thwarting of expectations, and (b) the perceived availability of alternative courses of action. As they relate to students who are denied admission to a preferred major, each factor is discussed in greater detail in the following sections.

Thwarting of Expectations

A student’s disillusionment begins when expected positive outcomes with regard to a major do not materialize despite a fairly high level of involvement in terms of an expenditure of preparatory effort. The intensity of feelings of alienation resulting from disillusionment will vary, in part, depending on the student’s perception of the nature or context of the thwarting. In those instances when feelings of frustration and alienation are most intense, the student will view the thwarting to be personal; to be intentionally directed at the student in a way that is undeserved, at least from the student’s point of view. Less intense feelings will occur in instances when the student perceives the thwarting to be neutral; that is, not intention or personally directed. Both types of disillusionment processes are illustrated in the following examples.

Example of disillusionment - personal thwarting. Susan was a transfer student from a community college, and had taken nearly three years of courses prescribed for entrance into a reputable urban planning and public administration program at a four-year university. Part of the admissions process included reference letters from internship supervisors. Indirectly, Susan learned that one of her internship supervisors had submitted a reference letter claiming that she, Susan, lacked initiative and frequently failed to follow through on assigned responsibilities. When Susan received word that she had not been admitted, she attributed the denial to the letter of recommendation from this particular supervisor, and was angry because she felt the supervisor’s negative assessment was not grounded in reality.

Example of disillusionment - neutral thwarting. During high school, Richard’s interest in film-making was piqued by an impassioned teacher who taught several elective courses in this subject; all of which Richard took and thoroughly enjoyed. When he was admitted to a local four-year university, Richard indicated film studies as his major of choice, and devoted his freshman and sophomore years to completing the required coursework as a pre-major. Richard’s application for admission to this major followed two years of significant budget cuts at the university, all of which negatively impacted the film studies program. In the wake of significant attrition in faculty positions and operating resources, the film studies program was only able to admit half the usual number of new majors the year Richard applied. Unfortunately, he was one of more than 100 students denied admission. Though extremely disappointed, Richard realized that the admission denial was not personal, but rather the result of state-wide budget cuts adversely affecting all institutions of higher education.

Although the above illustrations of personal versus neutral thwarting are presented as different scenarios of the process of disillusionment between two or more students at a given point in time, they could also be framed as changes experienced by an individual student over time. For example, a student may initially perceive the source of thwarting to be personal; only to subsequently discover that the context of the disconfirmation of expectations was neither personal nor intentional, but
neutral. Conversely, a student might initially construe a thwarting to be neutral, only to find out later that it was personal and intentional. What is important to note is that it is the perceived nature of the thwarting that is critical. Regardless of “reality,” the student’s attributions regarding the source and nature of the thwarting are the salient factor here; evoking W. I. Thomas’ famous dictum that situations defined as real are real in their consequences (see Janowitz, 1966).

**Perceived Availability of Alternatives**

In addition to the attributed source or nature of the thwarting of expectations, a student’s feelings of alienation will also be impacted by the extent to which they perceive alternative courses of action deemed to be salient. Recall from an earlier section of the paper that the second property defining alienation was that of constraint; feeling trapped in an unsatisfactory situation. The impact of the perceived source or nature of thwarting on feelings of alienation must be considered in the context of “restraining forces” that perpetuate a person’s continued association with a situation that has failed to meet expectations. One element of such restraining forces is the extent to which the student perceives that alternative courses of action are available. Just as the most intense feelings of alienation are associated with personal versus neutral thwarting, the most intense feelings of alienation are also experienced when the student perceives a lack of salient alternatives. When the future is perceived to be devoid of avenues for escaping an unsatisfactory situation, a student’s feelings of alienation become intense and potentially problematic. On the other hand, regardless of whether the source of thwarting or disconfirmation of expectations is perceived to be personal or neutral, the alienating situation is bearable if the student views it as temporary; that salient alternatives will serve as a means of escape in the near future.

**Examples of perceived availability salient alternatives.** Two examples are cited here, both of which involve input from an academic advisor. They are intended to emphasize a key point to be derived from this paper; namely, that academic advisors represent a key source of information regarding alternative courses of action for students who have experienced a thwarting of expectations regarding a major.

**Example 1:** After two years as a pre-major, Monica was notified that she would not be admitted to the journalism program at a large public university. With the help of her advisor, however, Monica realized that journalism techniques (e.g. using storytelling strategies to convey news and information through print, radio, television, film, and online media) could also be used in business settings to frame corporate agendas in a manner that makes for appealing, front-page news. With this realization, Monica pursued a major in communication, with a focus on becoming a media relations specialist.

**Example 2:** Robert was intent on pursuing a degree in Interior Design. Faculty reviewing a portfolio of the first two years of his work as a pre-major, however, felt he did not possess the skill sets necessary to do well in the program’s studio courses. After receiving word that he would not be admitted to the Interior Design major, Robert’s advisor informed him of a degree in Leadership Studies. Robert was able to see that a degree in leadership studies, when combined with a minor in Interior Design, would afford him the skills needed to manage an interior design firm.

**Example of perceived lack of salient alternatives.** Stacia had intended to pursue an undergraduate degree in the allied health sciences. The only program in this field available at the university where she is enrolled is in Physical Therapy (PT). She knew the PT program was a restricted major, and subsequently worked hard for two years in completing the pre-major requirements and doing her best to
earn high grades. Despite her effort, however, she was not admitted. Stacia knew that a university in a neighboring state offered a degree in Occupational Therapy, but work and family responsibilities prevented her from pursuing this route. There are no other allied health sciences programs at the university in which she is enrolled.

**BEHAVIORAL RESPONSES**

Most of the foregoing discussion in this paper has centered on the psychological element of alienation. Attention now shifts to behavioral responses of alienation, wherein the form and effect of behavior are presented as a typology.

**Experiential Stages**

A student’s behavioral response to alienation stemming from being denied admission to a major is complex, and should be examined developmentally against the backdrop of three experiential stages. In the first stage, a student experiences disillusionment stemming from disconfirmed or thwarted expectations. This is followed by a post-thwarting period wherein the student appraises the source and nature of the thwarting and examines whether the expectation can be salvaged via re-application of admission, or whether alternative courses of action need to be pursued. The third stage occurs when the student determines that the pursuit of the desired major is no longer viable, and begins to pursue alternatives.

**Form and Effect of Behavioral Responses**

Students’ behavioral responses to alienation or disconfirmation of expectations to denied admission to a major can be viewed in terms of “form” and “effect”. Form refers to the extent to which a behavioral response is aggressive versus nonaggressive, directed versus non-directed, and active versus passive. The effect of a behavioral response refers to the extent to which it is adaptive or maladaptive; that is, whether it alleviates or intensifies feelings of alienation. Discussed below are the ways in which the nature of thwarting and the perceived availability of alternatives influence the form and effect of behavioral responses to alienation.

**Form of behavioral response in the context of personal versus neutral thwarting.** In those instances when a student perceives the thwarting or disconfirmation of expectations to be personal in nature (i.e. specific and intentional), the form of the behavior as a counteractive response is often active, directed, and aggressive. They take action, focus it on an entity (the perceived source of thwarting), and sometimes do so in an aggressive manner. Conversely, when the source of thwarting is perceived to be neutral (i.e. non-specific and unintentional), the form of the behavioral response is more passive, less directed, and usually non-aggressive. The latter response form affords a comparatively greater range of options. The reason is that - because the student’s frustration is a product of something perceived to be vague and unintentional - there is a higher likelihood that the resulting behaviors will focus on problem-solving rather than on retribution or rebellion. By contrast, when the source of thwarting is perceived to be personal, “bridges have been burned” and the student often sees no option for (or even reason for) reversing disconfirmed expectations. Indeed, they are often so “turned off” by what has happened, that they would not pursue this course of action even if it were reversed. In the case of neutral thwarting, there is a high likelihood that the student will perceive several options, one of which may be to re-apply for admission after seeking feedback regarding the reasons for having been denied admission in the first place. If this fails, the student may seek advice regarding similar majors with a greater promise for being admitted.

**Form of behavioral response in the context of perceived availability of alternatives.**
**Figure 2: Typology of Form and Effect of Behavioral Responses to Alienation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceived Source of Thwarting of Expectation Regarding Denial of Admission to Preferred Major</th>
<th>Perceived Availability of Salient Alternatives?</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student perceives source of thwarting to be vague and unintentional</td>
<td>FORM: Active; non-aggressive and non-directional</td>
<td>FORM: Passive; non-aggressive and non-directional</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student engages in problem-solving behavior; explores alternative majors and/or institutions; may invest more energy in preparation for desired major and re-apply for admission; may lower expectation for outcome/major after careful self-appraisal.</td>
<td>Student becomes isolated and withdrawn; does not engage in active problem-solving within the institution; does not actively seek information about alternative majors or institutions; may remain undecided and/or eventually withdraw from the institution.</td>
<td>EFFECT: Adaptive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PERSONAL</td>
<td>FORM: Active; aggressive and directional</td>
<td>FORM: Passive; aggressive; and non-directional</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student perceives source of thwarting to be specific and intentional</td>
<td>Student may actively contest or appeal decision to deny admission; may eventually explore alternative majors; some problem-solving activity, but this may be narrowly focused.</td>
<td>Student does not engage in problem-solving; does not actively seek information about alternative courses of action. Student adopts a posture of subjugating self to an unfulfilling and unsatisfying situation where the perceived source of thwarting is personal.</td>
<td>EFFECT: Adaptive (unless feelings of rejection and insult negatively impact self-concept and hamper exploration of alternatives)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEUTRAL</td>
<td><strong>EFFECT: Maladaptive</strong></td>
<td><strong>EFFECT: Maladaptive</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The forms of a student’s behavioral response to alienation may also be influenced by the extent to which they perceive the availability of alternative courses of action. If a student perceives that they are only temporarily trapped in an unpleasant and unsatisfying situation, but that the future holds promise for escaping via taking advantage of alternatives (e.g. other possibilities for a major), the form of their behavior will more likely be exploratory and involve problem-solving. By contrast, if the student feels trapped - that the future is devoid of alternative courses of action - there is likelihood that the form of the behavioral response will be more narrowly focused, regardless of whether the source of thwarting is personal or neutral.

**Effect of Behavior: Adaptive Versus Maladaptive Responses**

*Availability of alternatives.* In terms of the effect, the most adaptive behavioral responses will be those associated with situations in which the student perceives (or is lead by an advisor to perceive) the availability of salient alternatives. The least adaptive responses (i.e. those least likely to reduce the intensity of feelings of alienation and the least likely to promote exploration and problem-solving) are those associated with situations wherein the student is unaware of alternative courses of action.

*Perceived source or nature of thwarting.* To gauge the extent to which a student’s behavioral responses will be effective or adaptive in the face of presence or absence of alternatives, it is also necessary to take into account the behavioral implications of personal versus neutral thwarting. In those instances when a student fails to perceive the availability of alternatives, the perception of personal thwarting will make it more difficult for a student to accept the outcome than would be the case were the thwarting perceived to be neutral. The reason for this resides in the fact that the rejection conveyed to the student via denial of admission to the major will frustrate the student’s hope for a positive association with the major in the future. As Stokols (1975) observes, “the frustration resulting from subjugation to an unreformable situation would be greater than that stemming from a temporary isolation in a situation which may subsequently improve” (p. 35).

Additionally, in situations where salient courses of action are available, the student’s potential for adaptive behavior will be greater in the context of neutral versus personal thwarting. Given that the student – in the wake of being denied admission to a major – is constrained to remain in an unsatisfactory state of “limbo” (that is, without formal affiliation with a major), the student’s range of options in coping with a neutral or unintentional thwarting will be greater than those situations when a student experiences what they perceive to be personal rejection.

**A Typology of Behavioral Responses**

Figure 2 incorporates the foregoing discussion and depicts a typology of different forms and effects of behavioral responses to alienation, depending on whether the student perceives the source of thwarting to be neutral or personal, and whether or not there is the perception that salient alternatives are available. A general observation/conclusion to be derived from the typology is found in Stokols’ hypothesis that “the perception of available alternatives in the context of neutral thwarting should engender the least amount of frustration, whereas a personal thwarting, in the face of salient alternatives, would evoke the most” (1975, p. 34).

The four quadrants in the typology should not be construed to represent actual and exclusive responses to alienation. They are presented here only as “ideal types”. Students who have experienced being denied access to a major for which they made significant preparatory investment may demonstrate behaviors representative of more than one type.
The objective in presenting this ideal typology is to help advisors better understand the factors contributing to different behavioral responses to alienation, and grasp the rationale behind strategies and guidelines intended to help these students.

Predictions
Based on the information presented in this paper, several predictions can be advanced with regard to the experiences and behaviors of students who have been denied access to a preferred major for which they have invested significant preparatory effort:

1. The intensity and duration of a student’s frustration and alienation will be greater in instances when the thwarting or disconfirmation of expectations is perceived to be personal versus neutral.

2. A student who perceives thwarting to be personal will manifest more aggressive, hostile, even retaliatory behaviors, than will a student who perceives the thwarting to be neutral.

3. If, after an initial period of appraisal, a student’s perception of the source of thwarting shifts from personal to neutral, there will be greater effort expended in exploring alternative options. Continued appraisal of the source of thwarting to be personal, however, will result in a sustained level of hostility and continued aggression; often devoid of exploration or problem-solving behavior.

4. The aggressive/hostile behavior of a student who continues to perceive the source of thwarting as personal will become less intense and less focused as alternative courses of action are perceived.

In presenting a comprehensive definition of developmental advising, Crockett and Habley (1987; cited in Raushi, 1993) state that advising “is a decision-making process by which students realize their maximum educational potential through communication and information exchanges with an advisor; it is ongoing, multifaceted, and the responsibility of both student and advisor. The advisor serves as the facilitator of communication, coordinator of learning experiences through course and career planning and academic progress review, and an agent of referral to other campus agencies as necessary” (pg. 9).

With this definition in mind, four guidelines based on the aforementioned predictions are recommended for academic advisors. Importantly, these guidelines may be useful to advisors located in programs to which a student is denied access, as well as general academic advisors and those representing programs to which the student may subsequently apply.

This paper has primarily been focused on applying theory to explain and predict student responses to being denied access to a desired major. Before presenting these guidelines, it is important to point out that there are other advising applications, as well. For instance, when a student is not able to gain access to a required course, or when they receive a lower-than-expected grade for a course, or when a student feels “singled-out” by a professor and fails to earn the grade they feel was deserved. These and similar alienating situations may also be applicable to the content and applications of this paper.

The four guidelines below are organized in terms of the intensity of student feelings. Guidelines 1-3 are likely to pertain to students experiencing less intense feelings of alienation. Guideline 4 is intended to focus on situations when a student’s feelings are more intense.

1. Explore with the student the extent to which they feel the denial of admission...
to a desired major was personal. If the response is affirmative, explore the reasons why they believe the thwarting was intentional and directed. Sometimes such a dialogue will enable a student to realize that being denied admission was not intentional; that they were not “singled-out” for being unfairly treated. If this exploration reveals that the student’s perception of the source of thwarting to be neutral, ascertain why, and proceed to address the issue of whether the student now perceives alternative courses of action.

2. Encourage the student to examine the value of the preparation they have made, beyond simply qualifying or preparing for the desired major. In many instances, a review of investments made in preparation to enter a thwarted major will enable the student to see that such efforts were not made in vain; and that many skills and knowledge sets can be transferred to other majors and different new avenues of opportunity.

3. Employ strategies for discerning the extent to which the student has a “back up plan”; that is, investigate whether the student has thought about alternative courses of action. If not, then begin the task of helping the student to see in other majors the opportunity to realize career goals and aspirations.

4. For students who continue to express fairly strong feelings of anger and hostility over being personally thwarted in their quest to pursue a desired major, one strategy is to refer them to the institutions counseling center. Another is to let them vent frustration at you. The author’s experience has been such that this is not easy and takes time, but eventually results in less focused and less intense feelings; and a greater openness to explore options. Another strategy (though not usually effective) is to have students engage in an appeals process, if it is available. This process sometimes results in having the student see that the admission denial was not personal and directed.

Conclusion

In a higher education environment characterized by increasingly constrained resources, academic advisors frequently encounter students who – after significant preparatory effort – are denied admission to preferred majors. Responses to denied access to a major vary, both among students at a given point in time, and through time for individual students. Stokols’ (1975) theory of alienation provides insight into factors affecting both psychological and behavioral responses. Elements of Stokols’ theory provide academic advisors with insights regarding reasons for varied students responses, and guidelines for assisting these students to effectively cope with feelings of disillusionment and alienation.

References


