

Navigating a Sea of **Choices**: The Community College Student Perspective

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The Challenge of Choice

- Dizzying array of program & course options
- Complex “decision context” = delay / regret
- “Mistakes” can delay graduation or worse

Supporting Academic Decision-Making

I. Developmental / Holistic

- What interests students?
- What do students want long-term?

II. Logistical

- Choose program of study
- Specific class selection and course enrollment

A Resource-Constrained Environment

- CC student:advisor ratios often > 1,000:1
- Self-advising
 - Are **current resources** sufficient?
 - Do students **want** to self-advise?
 - **Can** they self-advise accurately?

16 focus groups, large midwest CC

- 8 original focus groups
 - 4 groups “decided” on a program
 - 4 groups “undecided”
- 4 groups (6 months later) on a specific online tool
- 4 groups (6 *more* months later)
 - Assessed students’ ability to self-advise

Student comments: some **broad** themes

- Advising sessions tended to be “rushed” / “efficient”
 - **Decided** students typically **fine** with this
 - **Undecided** students more **frustrated**
- Students appreciated availability of **online** resources
 - But some voiced explicit preference for **real person**
- Students particularly frustrated by complexity of **transfer** process

Self-Advising “Scenarios” (final 4 groups)

- Can students use **current** resources for accurate **logistical** decision-making?
- 12 scenarios (N = 38 students)
 - Choosing program of study
 - Choosing transfer school
 - Understanding course requirements (for degree; for transfer)
- Scored out of 100
- Scenarios & grading rubric created w/ CC’s advising office

Example Questions: Choosing Program of Study

- “You have never been to college... You like business and want to earn at least \$50,000 when you graduate... You want to declare a major, but have no idea which you should declare and how much education you’ll need.”
- 45 minutes to use online resources on own to answer questions, e.g.,
 - What program of study matches this interest?
 - What degree in this program (cert, assoc, BA or more) typically needed for this salary?
 - Any prerequisites?
 - Which campus for this program’s classes?
- All students (except 1) finished in time

Students' perceptions of accuracy

- About 1/3 felt answered every question correctly
 - “It took me 10 minutes to do. I just typed in ‘business management’ in the search bar and scrolled down. . . it was really easy. If you have [inaudible] using the Internet, then you should probably be able to do it. But I think also because I know how everything works on this website because I’m a current student, that’s why I got it done so quickly. So, I feel like a freshman in college incoming would take a little bit longer to do.”
- Others made best guesses
 - “I just didn't really know where to go; that's my problem really, right there. I tried my best using the search browser, trying to type in transfer to different college or just typing in transfer and see what will come up.”
 - “Mine was, I had the mechanical engineering one, that I had to find the school that it transferred to best, based what I took already... I used the “my program” link or something, and it showed me what I had to take and all that. But with that, I had a few issues, it was kind of confusing. Cause it said stuff about, to have an associate’s degree, you can apply for an associate’s degree; but it didn't state that you needed one, or it was just optional. It didn't specify for that. It didn't show the maximum number of credits that transferred, that you could transfer.”

Scenario-Based Responses - Scores

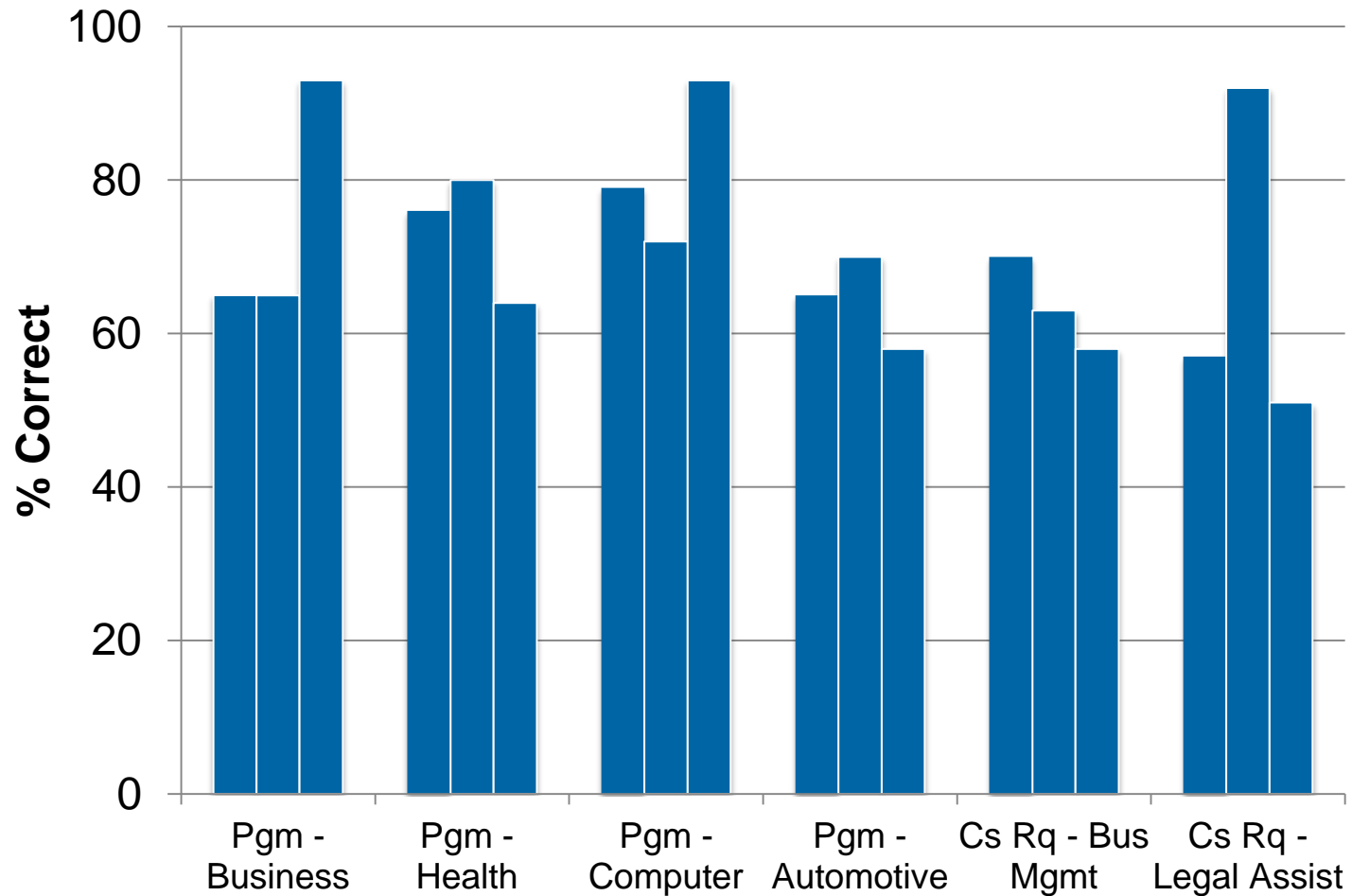
- Choosing a program of study: 73%
- Choosing a transfer school: 53%
- Understanding course requirements: 54%
 - 65% for CC program degrees
 - 43% for programs at transfer destination

➔ *t*-test comparing “CC program” (N = 18) vs. “transfer” (N = 20) scores: $p < 0.05$.

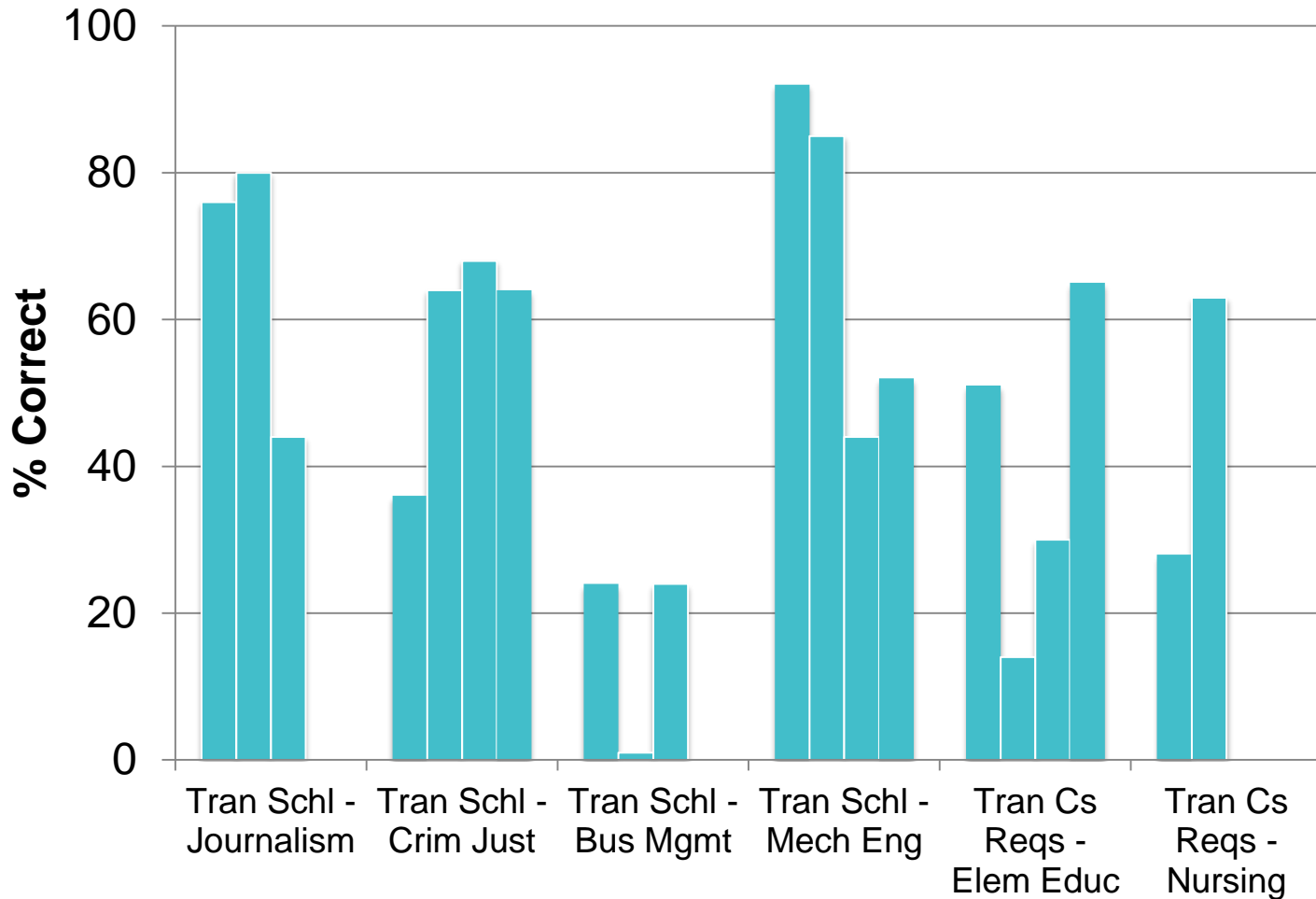
Potential sources of **variance**

- Transfer-oriented tasks more difficult
- Did different programs / transfer schools vary in usefulness of provided information?
- Did students differ in ability to find, interpret, apply that information accurately?

Variation of Individual Scores – Program of Study



Variation of Individual Scores – Transfer



Conclusion and Recommendations

- **Simplifying** Programs
- **Teaching** students to self-advise
 - Integrate w/ course curricula
- **Renovating** Online Systems
 - Clear, consistent, useful information
 - Tracking and warning systems
- **Integrating** online and face-to-face
 - Triage processes
 - Integrated touch points

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