

RQ1: In what ways are Emerging Adult students making decisions about their academic majors and or/potential careers?

- **In what ways are students' intersecting identities, in particular Emerging Adulthood, relevant to their academic majors/ career decision making process?**
- **What is the role of family, friends, and institutional agents (faculty) in this process?**

Maria Rodriguez

*“Because I don't want to just set something if I haven't tried everything yet...
Because I don't know what- but what if it's something I really, I really enjoy
and I'm really good at it. I don't want to just settle. I want to try.”*

Maria is a 19-year-old American young woman of Latinx descent in her last semester at SoCal college who has decided on a major but reluctant to settle on any career path right now. Maria initially enrolled at PCC because she wanted to pursue the film/television and electronic media program. Although when she was younger, Maria envisioned becoming something “heroic” like a police officer or firefighter, she began college with the desire to pursue a career as a disc jockey/radio personality. Maria initially pursued this path given the advice from her family who said she could be a good DJ because of her voice. During her first few semesters, Maria took general education courses, classes in the radio/tv program, and communication courses. At the start of her second year she decided to switch to a communications major. When I asked her why, she said that most of her friends were communications major and she thought it would be a good idea to switch into that major. When I asked her to tell me more about it, she said that another reason why she wanted to switch is because her initial major was too “technical” and narrow. She wanted to have more options and not settle into something so concrete so early on in spite of still being very interested in radio.

Maria sees majors as preparation for her future career plans. In her own words **“But I know most of the time they do and it just prepares you for what do you need to know, what to do and everything. So I think it's just really important I guess. It's like the basic before getting into something because you can't get into something without knowing all these things. So it's important I think”**. Additionally, it's clear from speaking to Maria, that she sees majors as the primary vehicle to explore a career, however, she is not ready to take a big decision and settle on an academic area that she views as narrow. She mentioned her mother fully supported her switch into a different major. Additionally, she consulted with different counselors to ensure that her major will allow her to maintain all her credits when she transferred.

From this conversation, I can see how being an emerging adult influences Maria's decision-making when it comes to her major. She speaks of this time as “full of possibilities”. In fact, she believes that people always have options and they should pursue all of their interests. Her high optimism and interest in experimentation/exploration is a very clear indicator of the emerging adulthood stage. At the same time, part of Maria's exploration has been stunted by her fear of failure. During our interview she talked about three or four different opportunities and/or areas of interest she has wanted to pursue but failed to do so because she has been afraid of the outcome. For instance, she talked about looking into a career in advertising and/or human resources but has yet to truly “explore” these paths. On another instance, Maria talked about her interest in possibly pursuing an internship opportunity with NPR in her first major, but her stopping herself from doing so because of how that would change her timeline at

SoCal college. She figured out that would mean staying at SoCal college for an extra year and that would not work for her. Maria even discussed studying abroad in Australia but becoming afraid once she began to explore the process in depth.

In terms of Maria's other identities, particularly her racial/ethnic, Maria seems to be going through a process of discovery and exploration as well. Maria describes herself as "Americanized" but with Latinx roots. She says that she knows her family comes from Mexico and Central American but her parents were born in the US just like she did. The main presence in her life pulling her to Latinx roots is her grandmother, who speaks Spanish to her. Maria is a bit conflicted as to what being Latina means for her. In her words **"I grew up very Americanized but a lot ... But school and society has put me in the box of Hispanic-ness until ... they say all these things, I'm like, "I don't know what you're talking about." Because I wasn't raised like that."** She has tried to figure out what her heritage is about and find her own definition of Latinx. She has also leveraged some of her communication courses, particularly those that deal with culture to reflect on her background.

From this conversation, I gather that emerging adults at community colleges may see a major as the primary vehicle of exploring their future career and identity. They might also be very optimistic about possibilities that are open to them. However, given that they choose majors with very little active exploration and career-path knowledge, might make them very fearful of this process.

Maria is someone who has support from her family and has sought support from the institution. Her family has been the number one influence in the major she chose. She has done all of the "right things" by seeking out guidance yet continues to be very ambivalent as to how her major will lead to a career. She has met regularly with counselors and overall notes that the institution, in particular the Pathways program, has been "supportive". In terms of faculty, she says that all have been "nice" but did not elaborate past this description.

From our conversation, it is evident that Maria would have benefitted from some active, hands on experience that allowed her to contextualize how being a "communications" major could manifest into a career. Something that stuck with me was her comment that from a very young age her mom has told her that she will attend college. Essentially, Maria is doing what her mom, and society as a whole in pushing young people to do, "attend college". Maria is finishing at SoCal college and transferring to a four-year institution in the Fall. At this new institution, she hopes to try many of the areas and opportunities she was too afraid to follow while at SoCal college. Maria says that she is going to try a lot more classes to see what she likes. However, I wonder how Maria's experience could have been different if she had an internship portion to her communications major, some type of active/structured exploration that could have closed down some "potential opportunities" and help her narrow down her interests. You can explore a potential area of interest with more than just your major. In fact, I am not even sure that taking theoretical/conceptual classes is an efficient strategy to figuring out what a job or career would look like in practice.

For all students, especially someone like like Maria, who has never had a job in high school or college and is motivated to explore her academic and career path, community colleges should have some form of mandatory "experiential learning" which allows them to actively engage with their interests. During this experience, they can explore what it would be like for them to work in this setting, which in turn would help them make an informed decision about the prospects of this career for them. What would it take to create a more structured exploration for emerging adults at community colleges?