THE FOUR YEAR EXPERIENCE:

CAREER SEARCH SELF-EFFICACY OF NEW GRADUATES

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Introduction

Employer expectation is driving career development as a vital discipline in higher education for connecting school-to-work as career professionals struggle to continuously facilitate the transition into employment for millions of students at the end of each academic year. Clarifying career goals, perfecting job-seeking skills, and sharpening personal attributes are positive steps towards positioning oneself favorably for purposeful post-college career exploration, planning and decision-making. According to Astin (1993), the primary purpose of attending college is to prepare for a career. The outcome of a modern day undergraduate education, therefore, is one that aligns career goals with personal values, skills, and abilities, in addition to obtaining a balance of academics and marketable transferrable skills. These skills are particularly relevant in times of economic downturn, when only 22% of hiring managers entered into the 2012-2013 recruiting season with plans to hire (Gardner, 2013).

Blustein, Prezioso, and Schultheiss (1995) described career exploration as a process where individuals seek information and make decisions about themselves, as well as education and career options related to their area of study. Solberg, Good, and Nord (1994) defined career search self-efficacy as an individuals' efficacy expectations regarding their ability to perform important activities associated with career search and selection. Crites (1978) indicated five mechanisms for good career decision-making: accurate self-appraisal, gathering occupational information, goals selection, making future plans, and problem-solving. These mechanisms can be successfully supported if one possesses a high level of career search self-efficacy, or the degree to which an individual performs a variety of career exploration and decision-making activities, such as exploring personal values and interests, effectively

networking, and successfully seeking and interviewing for positions of interest (Solberg, Good, Fischer, Brown, & Nord, 1995).

College students are in the midst of continued transition (Schlossberg, 1981). High levels of career search self-efficacy can help illuminate understanding of the transition process with regard to careers, and perhaps assist undergraduates in coping, particularly as seniors entering the world-of-work.   Research suggests career search self-efficacy may be improved through participation in credit-bearing, career development courses (McWhirter, Rasheed, & Crothers, 2000). Career courses are common guidance interventions, which differ from other interventions because they are longer and provide opportunities for in-depth study. Such approaches have been incorporated piecemeal at a handful of institutions, but the concept is in its infancy in terms of comprehensive career-related programming for undergraduates. For instance, Hindle (2000) described the design, implementation, and evaluation of an educational intervention intended to prepare geography majors to communicate effectively in the workplace by having students deliver presentations, job search, and interview in conjunction with traditional discipline-related curriculum. What benefited students most, reported Hindle, was the ability for them to practice important verbal and written communication skills in a realistic context (2000). Another example of a career intervention course is University of Utah's Successful Career Planning for Humanities Majors career course. This upper-division, semester-long, one credit-hour course is designed to educate humanities students about the career decision-making and planning process. Research findings indicated that at the conclusion of the course, students demonstrated strong movement in their awareness of the career decision-making process and campus resources available to assist and support them through this process (Leckie, Mitchell, Inman, 2011). Courses such as these showcase career

development as a central aspect – a primary goal – of the college experience, and communicate to students that their success is a priority of the institution.

Today, career-related courses are typically offered as electives, such as Florida State First Year Seminar. First developed in 1992 to address the issue of retention by integrating students academically and socially into the university environment, this pass/fail elective includes a career center intervention as a component of the class (Bertoch, Reardon, Richer, Lumsden, & Ruff, 2011). Although researchers in higher education have theorized that the more students are involved (Astin, 1984) or integrated (Tinto, 1987; 1993), it is generally believed that classroom attendance is a strong indicator of course performance. Past research conducted on attendance and student grades indicates a significant relationship between the two (Hancock, 1994; van Blerkom, 1992). Another study by Moore (2003) revealed high rates of class attendance greatly increased participants chances of making a high grade. Conversely, when students did not get academic credit for attending class, they became skeptical of the value of class attendance for academic success, and their attendance decreased. Overall, research suggests that students are more likely to attend — and to succeed — in courses where attendance records are maintained. Most college campuses do not even have the luxury of having academic courses designed to include career curriculum; required, or as an elective. Bulger, Lindauer, and Jacobson (2007) reported that while nothing prohibits students from taking advantage of, and participating in, career-related exploration and planning opportunities, they may be less inclined to participate if not required to do so as a component of formalized curriculum.

Another benefit of bringing together students via credit bearing career courses is peer-to-peer interaction in a structured environment. Leidner and Jarvenpaa (1995)

believe learning is the sharing of knowledge among learners, which should rest primarily on peer interaction. Integrating group work into the academic curriculum is a positive way to infuse peer evaluation and observation of others into one's individual career development, thus creating an environment of maximum learning, simultaneously satisfying self-evaluation difficulties.

Career development programs are also intended to introduce and navigate students through a variety of task-approach skills associated with career readiness and decision-making. Examples of these task-approach skills are value clarification; goal setting; identifying and seeking career alternatives; anticipating future events; and gathering occupational information (Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1996). Solberg et al. (1994) stated a critical area of career development is the development of skills and competencies essential to the career search and decision-making process. Career search self-efficacy encompasses four broad dimensions: job search, interviewing, networking, and personal exploration efficacy. Success in each of these four dimensions requires a mastery of the task-approach skills associated with career readiness. This set of skills may not successfully exist without strong self-efficacy. Mauer and Gysbers (1990) believed as undergraduates, students face developmental issues, specifically career indecision, lack of confidence in the career exploration process, limited self-knowledge, and inadequate occupational realization. Credit-bearing career courses may help combat some of this uncertainty by encouraging students to examine where they are and where they are headed in terms of career and professional growth in a structured, supportive environment.

Gardner and Van der Veer (1998) proposed that colleges and universities must do more to enhance their students' readiness for transition by fostering collaborative initiatives among academic departments and career services units. However; to date,

little research exists examining the effectiveness of a mandatory career series, such as credit-bearing, career courses for undergraduates. In fact, few courses of this nature actually exist. This study investigates an existing, mandatory, credit-bearing, career development program for undergraduates by examining the relationship between the degree of participation and career search self-efficacy.

Method

Career development programs at the undergraduate level may be a powerful tool in increasing self-awareness and preparing students for the career transitions during college and beyond. Students having four years of structured career programming may indicate high self-efficacy relating to the career search. To investigate this possibility, a small, private business college in New England was the site for this quantitative research. The research question asked was: what is the relationship between participation in four years of structured career programming and the career search self-efficacy of college graduates?

At the time of this study, said institution offered a series of four one-credit, mandatory, career courses over a four-year period, designed to provide students with a foundation for career exploration and a framework for increasing self-efficacy regarding career exploration, planning, and decision-making.

The Four Career Courses

Each career course enrolls approximately 20 students per section and is delivered in seminar format, once a week for 75 minutes, 12 weeks during a semester. Course topics and assignments are created based on each population's career transitional needs; therefore program content is developed using a mixed methods approach of career development theories. A sample of course topics are as follows:

Year One. Academic success; campus networking; attending classes; managing time; understanding strategies for research; individual portfolio development; exploration of values, skills, and abilities; diversity; and exploring relationships.

Year Two. Employment options during college; major/minor exploration; creating professional documents (cover letters, resume, mission statement, recommendations, and reference page); understanding how academic coursework relates to various industries; and exploring how academic knowledge interconnects with employer expectations.

Year Three. Employer expectation and talent transfer from college-to-career; in-depth interviewing; impact and use of social media on career; professional organizations; options after graduation; networking; and job search basics.

Year Four. Recruiting; in-depth job search; options after graduation; role as emerging leaders; salary/benefits negotiation; managing post-graduate expectations; professional dress; networking; ethics; and etiquette in business. This year also includes participation in student choice programs, a series of topical workshops, some of which include networking; law school and graduate school admissions process; transitional issues from college to career; young alumni panel; etiquette dinner; alumni leadership forum; salary and benefits; dress for success; and more. Students are required to attend four of the programs offered to meet their senior choice program requirements.

Participants

The research sample represented alumni who graduated in 2007 and 2008 (N=242), and participated in the career program as part of their undergraduate curriculum. Demographics including gender, age, year of graduation, GPA, and

current employment status were also collected to provide a portrait of the graduates in this study.

The survey was administered to the 242 participants in the fall of 2008. Seventy-six of the 242 participants completed the questionnaire for a final response rate of 31.4%. Of the response group (N=76), the majority were female (53.9%). The largest number of respondents by age category was 22-24 years old (92.1%). Forty-four percent of the surveyed population graduated in 2007, and 98.7% indicated a bachelor's degree as their highest degree earned at the time of survey completion. Grade point averages ranged from 64.5% reporting a 3.1 to 4.0, 34.2% reporting a 2.1-3.0, and 1.3% reporting a 1.1-2.0 on a 4.0 scale. The overwhelming majority of responses (93.4%) reported they were currently employed full-time.

Measures

An ex-post facto design was chosen for this research because subjects had already participated in the career development program being examined. This design allowed inferences to be drawn based on data comparisons. An individual data sheet was constructed by the researcher and administered to participants to describe the sample and to identify degrees of participation in the career program. Participants assessed their own levels of overall participation; class attendance; student choice programs – a series of 20 topical seminars of which students chose four to attend; group work; course assignments; and overall content satisfaction with the career program.

Questions from the Career Search Efficacy Scale (CSES) were administered with the individual data sheet to provide an overview of participants' current career search self-efficacy. As previously stated, college students are in the midst of continued transition (Schlossberg, 1981). High levels of career search self-efficacy

can help illuminate understanding of the transition process and help undergraduates cope, particularly as seniors entering the world of work. The CSES is an instrument designed to measure career search self-efficacy, or the confidence a person has for performing various career search tasks (Solberg et al., 1994). The CSES yields four factors: Job Search, Interviewing, Networking, and Personal Exploration Efficacy, and consists of 35 unique facets, or subscales, of career search self-efficacy. Descriptive statistics were computed to characterize the sample, and then Pearson's correlations were performed to determine whether there was a relationship between degrees of participation in the career program and career search self-efficacy using the CSES. Additionally, as a more conventional test of incremental validity, a regression analysis was also used. Regression analysis is typically performed to model and analyze numerical data consisting of values of a dependent variable and one or more of the independent variables to identify relationship (Rea & Parker, 2005).

Response to each question indicated whether an individual possesses a high level of self efficacy when conducting a career search. The overall scale allowed a maximum score of 315 and a minimum score of 35. Higher scores on the 35 questions inventory indicated a higher level of self efficacy. Reliability of the CSES was estimated at a .97 Cronbach's alpha, with ranging subscales between .87 to .95, indicating very good internal consistency (Solberg et al., 1994). Solberg, Good, Nord, et al. confirmed the internal structure of the CSES using a factor analysis and demonstrated high correlation between the CSES and the Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy Scale (Taylor & Betz, 1983).

Results

Inspection of the skewness and kurtosis statistics revealed that all variables were approximately and normally distributed (i.e. skewness < 3; kurtosis < 5). The

mean for overall self-efficacy in the career search was 7.4 (SD = 1.2), with a range of 6.1 and a Cronbach's alpha of .98. Because the CSES can be broken down into four subscales of efficacy, descriptive statistics were also run for the following subscales: (1) Job Search Self-Efficacy, (2) Interviewing Self-Efficacy, (3) Networking Self-Efficacy, and (4) Personal Exploration Self-Efficacy. The mean for the Career Search Efficacy Subscales ranged from 7.1 to 7.5 (SDs = 1.2 to 1.4), and reliability of the four subscales was established by producing a Cronbach's alpha of .95 for Job-Search Self-Efficacy, .93 for Interviewing Self-Efficacy, .93 for Networking Self-Efficacy, and .90 for Personal Exploration Self-Efficacy.

Pearson's correlations and regression analyses were performed to test for relationships between variables (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). In both analyses, statistical significance of test statistics were determined by *t*-tests (one-tailed tests are reported throughout this section, given that the direction of relationships was predicted *a priori*). Primary analyses were Pearson's correlations, computed to determine whether there were statistically significant linear relationships between the career program participation variables and career search self-efficacy. As a follow-up, multiple regression analyses were performed to test whether specific career program variables were uniquely associated with career search self-efficacy. As shown in Table 1, there were statistically significant (p < .01) positive correlations between overall career search self-efficacy and the following career program participation variables: frequency of participation in class discussions (r = .51), attendance (r = .23), group participation (r = .40), completion of course assignments (r = .37), and overall career program engagement (r = .40). By contrast, no statistically significant correlations were found between career search self-efficacy and participation in Student Choice programs (r = .03).

Table 1

Correlations of Career Search Self Efficacy Scales with Career Program Variables

	CSSE
Frequency	.51**
Attendance	.23*
Group Participation	.40**
Student Choice Programs	.03
Assignments	.37**
Overall Engagement	.40**

Note. CSE, Career Search Self-Efficacy; *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$ (one-tailed)

Pearson's correlations were also computed to determine whether there were statistically significant relationships between degrees of participation in the career program and the self-efficacy subscales. There were significant positive correlations between all four career search efficacy subscales: (1) job search, (2) interviewing, (3) networking, and (4) personal exploration and five of the six career program variables (Table 2). Specifically, there were positive correlations between job search self-efficacy and frequency of participation in class discussions ($r = .50$), attendance ($r = .26$), group participation ($r = .41$), completion of course assignments ($r = .39$), and overall career program engagement ($r = .41$).

Interviewing efficacy was also correlated positively with frequency of participation in class discussions ($r = .47$), attendance ($r = .20$), group participation ($r = .37$), completion of course assignments ($r = .32$), and overall career program engagement ($r = .34$).

There were also positive correlations between networking efficacy and frequency of participation in class discussions ($r = .52$), attendance ($r = .20$), group participation ($r = .37$), completion of course assignments ($r = .31$), and overall career program engagement ($r = .41$).

Personal exploration efficacy was correlated positively with frequency of participation in class discussions (r = .46), attendance (r = .20), group participation (r = .39), completion of course assignments (r = .38), and overall career program engagement (r = .36).

Table 2

Correlations of Career Search Self Efficacy Subscales with Career Program Variables

	Job Search	Interviewing	Networking	Personal Exploration
Frequency	.50**	.47**	.52**	.46*
Attendance	.26*	.20*	.20*	.20*
Group Participation	.41**	.37**	.37**	.39**
October Programs	.04	.01	.02	.03
Assignments	.39**	.32**	.31**	.38**
Overall Engagement	.41**	.34**	.41**	.36**

*Note. *p < .05, **p < .01 (one-tailed)*

Regression Analyses

As a follow-up, linear regression analyses were conducted using career search self-efficacy as the criterion variable and five of the six career participation variables as predictor variables: (1) frequency of participation, (2) attendance, (3) group participation, (4) Student Choice programs, and (5) completion of course assignments (Table 3). Beyond a contribution of overall participation, the effect of frequency and group participation were significant for career search self-efficacy.

Table 3

Linear Regression Analysis of Overall CSSE and Career Program Variables

Career Search Self-Efficacy		
	β	t

Frequency	.393*	3.08
Attendance	-.096	-.761
Group Participation	.227*	1.65
October Programs	-.171	-1.57
Assignments	.140	1.08

Note. $*p < .05$ (one-tailed)

Discussion

The focus of this research was the relationship between self-efficacy in the career search process and degrees of participation in a career development program. Results indicated there was a relationship between degrees of participation in the career program and the career search self-efficacy of participants, revealing an overall association in the career program participation with high levels of career search self-efficacy. Furthermore, there was evidence for correlations between specific dimensions of career search self-efficacy and the career program participation variables. Because growth takes place as a result of learning (Krumboltz, 1994), and there is a significant and positive association between successful learning experiences and expressed occupational interest (Jackson, Potere, & Brobst, 2006), the results suggest that participation in career-related development programs, such as the career program, can contribute positively to one's self-efficacy in performing career search processes. Gottfredson (1996) argued students who have faulty self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations may experience career choice difficulties. Self-efficacy is significant to career development because of the positive beliefs associated with implementing and executing effective career readiness and decision-making techniques.

In discussing the career program participation variables, several findings were significant; however, it appears that overall students do reap benefit from participating in credit bearing career development programs. While enrolled in the career program, the majority of respondents (64.5%) indicated being either extremely or very participatory overall. The career program is intended to minimize the frequency of unproductive experiences by providing students with a set of basic guidelines and skills for making responsible decisions concerning the future direction of their career and professional development. Since the career program is mandatory for graduation, it is not surprising that overall participation in the program would be high.

The career program participants also indicated high participation (43.4%) in class discussions and reported high levels of class attendance (84.3%). In all career program sections attendance is mandatory, and weight (10% of final grade) is given to participation in class discussions.

The majority of respondents (64.5%) reported high levels of participation in group projects. One of the components of career awareness is the ability to gauge one's own skills, values, abilities, and preferences, and understand how each relates to career choice (Ganster & Lovell, 1978). However, if an individual is unable to perform this self-evaluation, the results could hinder the career development process. Self evaluation can be difficult; therefore, participation in group work may be beneficial to one's career discovery. Additionally, peer feedback can have a positive impact on learning through evaluation, both for the evaluator and the recipient.

Fifty percent of respondents were extremely or very participatory in Student Choice Programming, a month-long, guest speaker series in the senior section of the career program, held in lieu of regular class meetings. Of the 20 or so programs offered, students are required to choose four of their choice to attend, allowing

customization. Topics may include managing generational differences in the workplace, post-graduate options, alumni leadership forums, first day on the job issues, negotiating salary and benefits, and careers for liberal arts majors. Gaining first-hand knowledge of the day-to-day industry expectations, challenges, and responsibilities, as well as networking with professionals can help manage environmental conditions and events (Krumboltz, 1994) that can potentially reshape short term career decisions. It is advantageous for students to be informed of the latest information surrounding the world-of-work, therefore, offering specialized programming allows for this informational platform to occur.

Finally, the majority of respondents (77.6%) reported being extremely or very participatory in course assignments. This participation finding is consistent with Bulger et al.'s (2007) study which found that students are not likely to invest a great deal of time or effort researching their career options and career-related goals and objectives unless prompted by specific course assignments. The career program course assignments are given heavy academic weight (90% overall respectively) in student's final grade.

Limitations

This study focuses on a small, private business college where 90% of the degrees awarded are Bachelor's of Science in Business Administration. The remaining 10% are Bachelor's of Arts degrees, and therefore not generalizable to those populations. Additionally, the evaluation of this population does not take into consideration the potential influences exposure to the world-of-work may have had on one's career self-efficacy and the fact that participants assessed their own levels of participation and content satisfaction with the career program.

Implications

The research results indicated a strong correlation between participation in a career development program and career search self-efficacy. These findings align with previous research, which found a significant and positive association between successful learning experiences and expressed occupational interest in the career development process (Jackson et al., 2006). In another related study on the effectiveness of a Professional Development Planning (PDP) course, Monks, Conway, and Dhuigneain (2006) found that participating students were significantly more confident performing job-related tasks, such as the application process, setting and achieving goals, and evaluating their own performance than students not enrolled in the PDP course. These findings suggested that students exposed to positive career development programs may possess high self-efficacy in the career search as a result of these learning experiences.

Social learning theory emphasizes the importance of behavior (action) and cognition (knowing) in career decision-making (Krumboltz, 1994; Sharf, 2006). These factors impact the career and professional development process. Career education helps to facilitate the learning of skills, interests, beliefs, values, work habits, and personal qualities, (Krumboltz, 1996) thus providing an outlet for this knowledge and action within the undergraduate curriculum seems essential. Dressel (1968) stated that the goal of higher education is to graduate students who are self-aware, who "know how to acquire knowledge, and how to use it" (p. 210), and who can contribute positively to society. Career development directly contributes to these stated goals by assisting students in exploration, clarification, and implementation of career-related decisions (Smith & Gast, 1998). Instituting mandatory, credit-bearing, career development programs, such as the career program can be an avenue for higher

education to meet their overarching goals of an undergraduate education. If credit –

bearing is not an immediate option, program implementation could begin, for

instance, by offering a series of career-related, certificate-based workshops where

students are recognized upon successful completion (transcript notation). These

offerings may later develop into credit-bearing courses. The success of the career

program was largely built on support from the college president, who recognized the

importance of providing students with a foundation of career and professional

development during the undergraduate years. Higher education professionals

interested in implementing similar programs should look to communicating program

value to all stakeholders, especially those ultimately responsible for making

institutional decisions.

Specific dimensions of career search self-efficacy: job search, interviewing,

networking, and personal exploration efficacy can also be addressed through

structured career development courses. Essential task-approach skills relevant to the

job search, including value clarification, setting goals, identifying alternatives,

gathering occupational information and anticipating future events (Sharf, 2006) are all

essential to sound career exploration, planning and decision-making. If one does not

possess high levels of career search self-efficacy, performing these task-approach

skills may produce ineffective or undesirable results. However, students who master

task-approach skills may experience a less burdensome job search process.

Addressing personal exploration as a topic included in a typical career

planning course is often achieved through formal and informal assessments. For

instance, students may be asked to complete an on-line interest inventory, such as the

Strong Interest Inventory (Strong, Hansen, & Campbell, 1985), which highlights skills

for which an individual might be suited. Students may also be asked to write a

reflection paper on their ideal job, and short and long term goals associated with achieving this position. Results of each of these exercises would provide instructors with valuable information on assessing the students' position within the career planning process. For students, assessment exercises are intended to enhance academic performance and promote career exploration and decision-making. Monks et al. (2006) reported that students actively engaged in assignments and activities showed high self-efficacy in their ability to evaluate their own performance.

The research results indicated a correlation between participation in a career development program and career search self-efficacy, specifically a positive correlation between participation in the career program and high career search self-efficacy scores. Monks et al. (2006) reported students not enrolled in professional development planning courses appeared to be far less confident about their future direction. These findings suggested a sharp decline in students' career search self-efficacy in the absence of career education courses. Institutional implications of these findings may lie in decreased student retention and satisfaction with the institution overall. In comparison, students completing such courses seemed to be more secure in their career planning when comparing pre and post study results. Equipping students with an understanding of how their skills can be valued in the world-of-work, as well as offering tailored career decision-making guidance can combat some of this indecision, dissatisfaction, and lack of direction.

Although difficulties in funding within higher education may pose a challenge when introducing new initiatives, such as mandatory career exploration programs, adding course components to existing structures and systems may be a more short-term, viable option. Exploring the possibility of sharing resources and staffing may work as a way to implement components of said programs on a smaller scale.

Creative options can satisfy student needs, as well as alleviate the burden a more comprehensive grass roots program would cause. Introducing program components under this approach can also lessen replication of activities and programs that are already ongoing across campus. An evaluation of existing programs would be necessary to flush out preexisting piecemeal career development initiatives being offered in modules across departments.

High levels of career search self-efficacy in recent graduates also have clear benefit to employers. One specific advantage is increased employability with the identification of explicit transferable skills. However, in the absence of career education, Monks et al. (2006) found substantial gaps between students' perception of their skills and those required by employers. Conversely, students actively engaged in assignments and activities allowing self-reflection of skills reported high self-efficacy in their ability to evaluate their own performance. This knowledge of self allows students to effectively sell themselves in the job search. Career choice decisiveness is also a benefit to employers, who are interested in reducing hiring and training costs association with attrition. Building a sound career development program that offers comprehensive exploration and preparation components can prepare viable professional staff for employers.

Conclusion

Results of this, as well as past research indicate the need for structured career development programs and initiatives for undergraduate students. Future career development in higher education must undergo a paradigm shift in the conceptualization and delivery of structured, career-related services. Because career development is a life-long, holistic, continuously evolving process, this integration must include not only career practitioners, but academic departments and student

affairs professionals as well. The success of today's college students can be influenced significantly by the quality and comprehensiveness of the career development exposure on college and university campuses. Together, career development programs can provide a whole-person contribution: social, moral, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, physical, and vocational (Smith & Gast, 1998) through co-curricular involvement. Forging ahead to meet the developmental and programmatic needs of an increasingly diverse student, and a continuously evolving global population is no longer a choice. The vision of higher education must perceive career development as an integral component, and commit to proactive solutions for providing a foundation of career and professional development programs, services, and practices.

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