The Role of Career Services Programs and Sociocultural Factors on Student Career Development

Introduction

Career services centers (CSCs) on college campuses are increasingly viewed as an important venue for fostering students' career development and outcomes. Consequently, CSCs have attracted both investment and scrutiny, with questions being raised about their quality, relevance, and ultimate impacts on students' lives and careers (Chan & Derry, 2013; Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014). However, relatively little empirical research has examined the impact of CSCs on student outcomes such as their career-related skills, social capital, and psychological readiness for the world of work. Furthermore, the impact of other sociocultural factors, such as family and peers on student career development have scarcely been considered in conjunction with CSCs.

> It is important to consider student career outcomes from developmental perspective that takes into account their social contexts, which host a panoply of contributors to their career development.

In this research brief, we highlight main findings using new data from a mixed-methods study of a sample of business undergraduate students in Wisconsin. We conclude that disproportionate pressure is placed on CSCs to meet the needs of both their constituents—including policy makers, practitioners, and students—and the workforce. This considerable responsibility undermines the complex interrelationship of factors that influence students' career outcomes. We provide several recommendations for higher education administrators and practitioners that are based on our main findings—it is important to consider student career outcomes from a developmental perspective that takes into account their social contexts, which host a panoply of contributors to their career development.

KEY FINDINGS

- The impact of career services programs and sociocultural factors on college students' career development was examined through a survey of 372 undergraduate business students and interviews with 35 of them.
- Results show greatest student satisfaction with the pragmatic tools and guidance offered by career services, and least satisfaction when obtaining support that required deeper exploration of long-term career goals.
- Sociocultural factors, particularly those related to students' families, shaped how institutional resources were experienced and utilized, as well as how independent activities such as internships were gained.
- In addition to providing job placement services, career services centers on college campuses should focus on fostering students' career goals, identities, and long-term trajectories.

Factors Shaping Student Career Development and Outcomes

Research on the impact of CSCs tends to focus on students' utilization of and satisfaction with programs and services offered by these campus units (e.g., Gallup, Inc., 2016). While insights into students' use and perception of career services is important, understanding the degree to which these units enhance their social capital and psychological readiness is arguably more salient.

An investigation into these phenomena, however, cannot assume that CSCs are the sole influence on students' lives, career-related skills, professional networks, and vocational development. Research indicates that students' career decisions are strongly influenced by their personal relationships and family backgrounds. Family-of-origin factors such as parents' occupations, emotional support, and provision of educational assistance have also been widely examined with respect to their influence on college students' vocational exploration (Schultheiss, Kress, Manzi & Glasscock, 2001), career aspirations (Hackett, Esposito, & O'Halloran, 1989), and career decision-making (O'Neil et al., 1980). Furthermore, a developmental perspective highlights the fact that students' views on work and careers unfold in stages throughout their lives, such that colleges and CSCs are but one influence on their career-related identities and outcomes. Thus, a key issue facing the field of student affairs and career advising in higher education is not only if students frequent campus CSCs, but also how those experiences might intersect with other factors that influence their career-related skills, social networks, and psychological readiness for the workplace.

It is important to consider college students' career development in the context of their emerging adulthood since college provides a unique transitional space for the career explorations and vocational identity development of many emerging adults (Arnett, 2000). Career construction theory postulates that individuals cultivate their career interests and identities based on the perceptions and values that they have acquired through their actions and roles in their family, civic, and educational lives (Savickas, 2013). Grounded in social constructivism, the theory views vocational trajectories as lifelong processes, influenced by people's adaptations to their social contexts and life circumstances. Significant figures in a person's early life serve as role models or guides that influence career interests and choices in response to normative vocational tasks (e.g., identifying an area of interest) and work transitions (e.g., switching into and out of jobs).

A pertinent skill espoused by career construction theory is career adaptability, which can be defined as a person's "psychosocial resources for coping with current and anticipated vocational development tasks, occupational transitions, and work traumas" (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012, p. 662). Career adaptability is conceptualized as a latent variable that is measured via the constructs of career concern (i.e., future orientation about work), control (i.e., internal characteristics and processes that facilitate self-regulation), curiosity (i.e., interest and motivation to explore), and confidence (i.e., self-efficacy) (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Higher levels of career adaptability have been shown to be linked with stronger career decision-making and job search self-efficacy, and positive employment outcomes (Guan et al., 2013; Zhou, Guan, Xin, Mak, & Deng, 2016). Given the changing nature of labor markets and the uncertainty regarding the future of work, career adaptability has become widely viewed as a critical attribute for college students to develop before they graduate (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Institutional services such as CSCs can offer vocational guidance, education, and coaching, to help students cultivate their skills for career development, one of which is career adaptability.

Critique and Question

An emphasis on CSCs as the sole contributor toward students' career development is misplaced, given that other factors such as family influences, have been documented as influencing college students' career-related outcomes. Consequently, the degree to which CSCs—among other factors—influence students' career outcomes in general and career adaptability is an open empirical question.

Our Study

In 2017, we conducted a mixed-methods study on a sample of undergraduate business students in Wisconsin. We surveyed 372 students using an online questionnaire and subsequently interviewed 35 of them via focus groups. Table 1 contains the demographic information of our participants. Our goal was to to examine their experiences with their school's career services center and other individuals, groups, or factors that may have contributed to their career outcomes.

Our research was guided by the following questions:

1. How, if at all, are students using and experiencing their CSC programs and services?
2. From which sources, particularly career services and sociocultural elements, are students acquiring information about careers and the world of work?
3. What are the relative influences of these factors on students' social networks, psychological characteristics, and early career outcomes?

Table 1. Demographic Information for Survey and Focus Group Participants

		Survey (*n* = 372)	Focus group (n = 35)
Category	**Subcategory**	*Average | n (%)*	
Student-reported Family Income		$100,000–$149,999	no information
Gender	Female	189 (50.8%)	23 (65.7%)
	Male	183 (49.2%)	12 (34.2%)
Race/Ethnicity	American Indian or Alaskan Native	1 (0.3%)	0
	Asian/Asian American	47 (12.6%)	4 (11.3%)
	Black/African American	6 (1.6%)	0
	Hispanic/Latino/a	13 (3.5%)	1 (3%)
	White	314 (84.4%)	30 (85.7%)
Student status	First-generation	45 (12.1%)	no information
	International	22 (5.9%)	no information
	Domestic	350 (94.1%)	no information

Results

1. While the majority of students have used career services within the past year, they described having both positive and negative experiences with the services provided.

The majority of survey participants (71%) reported being aware of career services and having accessed them. Within the past year, majority of students reported using career services two to three times (45.8%), followed by once (34.1%), four to five times (11.7%), and more than five times (8.3%). They reported highest satisfaction with the résumé writing services, followed by individual advising sessions, and assistance with interviewing skills. Services that were rated least favorably include the provision of culturally tailored services and information about labor market trends.

> However, for students needing more tailored support such as with exploring and navigating their career paths and specialized industry information, career services missed the mark.

Our focus group participants endorsed positive and negative experiences with career services. Consistent with the survey results, students described finding the technical skills and tools offerted by career services to be useful and beneficial. However, for students needing more tailored support such as with exploring and navigating their career paths and specialized industry information, career services missed the mark. Table 2 summarizes the main themes of students' positive and negative experiences with career services.

Table 2. Themes of Students' Positive and Negative Experiences with CSC

	Theme: Students said they	Definition: Students said career services
Positive experiences		
1	Learned how to secure employment	Provided coaching and training of skills pertinent to employment (e.G., Interviewing, résumé critique)
2	Received relevant information and resources	Provided adequate occupation-related information and assisted in expanding students' networks
3	Received tailored advice and guidance	Cultivated relationships with students that increased students' comfort with asking questions and facilitated students' self-awareness
Negative experiences		
1	Received insufficient internship and employment support	Needed improvement in these areas: connecting students with work opportunities, more rigorous skills coaching (e.G., Negotiations, interviewing), and expanding network of employers into other geographic regions
2	Found staff to lack professionalism and relevant knowledge	Perceived as inadequate given high staff turnover and limited availability; and characterized staff as having limited knowledge about industry-specific insights and labor trends, and at times, unsupportive of students

	Theme: Students said they	Definition: Students said career services
Negative experiences		
3	Received "cookie-cutter" advising with low levels of personalization	Provided guidance and advice that was poorly tailored to meet needs for career exploration, instead seeming "scripted" for average student and focused on job-matching.
4	Received insufficient support for underrepresented students	Provided inadequate support and resources for underrepresented groups including international students and students of color.

2. Various factors contribute to student career development. In particular, sociocultural factors play a more salient role in influencing students' career interests and decisions as compared to institutional factors that include career services.

Using our focus group data, we identified three main categories of information sources that contributed to students' career decisions and interests: *Sociocultural Factors, Institutional Factors,* and *Independent Activities.*

Sociocultural factors refer to the influential people and familial norms and expectations that influence students' views about careers and work. These factors include: the types of occupations held by family members; family advice, support, and expectations; educators' advice and encouragement; guest speakers in college courses; and work supervisors. For example, many students discussed the significant role of their parents in shaping their career-related thinking via advice or discouragement against certain occupations, and tips and strategies about negotiating salaries or accepting job offers. Students also reported being influenced by their parents' occupations, especially if they were small business owners, which led to their desire to pursue a business-related career.

> Sociocultural factors play a more salient role in influencing students' career interests and decisions as compared to institutional factors that include career services.

Institutional factors refer to organizational or institutional offices and staff that provided career information to students. These sources include: individual sessions with career advisors; classroom experiences in high school and college that explicitly featured career information; professional student organizations; and general support from their college. The most widely reported institutional source of information were sessions with career advisors, where students were able to discuss their goals, develop career-related skills (e.g., resume writing), and obtain information about their selected career and industry. Professional student organizations, such as the actuarial science club, offered opportunities for students to network and exchange industry-specific knowledge. In general, these institutional sources of information provided opportunities for students to elaborate upon already-existing interests in a specific field or occupation.

Independent activities refer to activities that students engaged in independently to gain exposure to career options. These activities include: internships; online research; and previous work experience. For instance, students described their internship experiences as illuminating workplace preferences (e.g. team-based work, leadership styles). While sociocultural and institutional factors often provided the impetus or vehicle for students' access to these opportunities, the influential aspects of internships were ultimately based from students' highly personal experiences in these settings.

[1]Our survey data also showed that sociocultural factors such as friends or peers and family were ranked highest as the most influential or frequently used sources for career information, followed by personal experiences. Of note, career services were ranked the seventh most influential source of career information while the least utilized or influential sources of information were faculty, labor market information and media reports. Overall, survey participants reported a greater reliance on sociocultural resources compared to institutional factors such as career services.

3. Different factors affect student career outcomes in different ways. These career outcomes include psychological characteristics, career decisions, and social capital.

Based on our survey data, we found that students who rated relying on their friends/peers more frequently for career-related information, had higher levels of career concern, control, curiosity, and confidence (as indicators of their career adaptability). Students who relied on their families for information had higher levels of career concern, control, and confidence. Students' rated use of career services was positively correlated with their concern, control, and curiosity scores. Last, students' utilization of career services was also positively correlated with their career concern, which may suggest that students with greater career concern reported using career services more frequently. See Table 3 for more details.

> Different factors affect student career outcomes in different ways. These career outcomes include psychological characteristics, career decisions, and social capital.

Table 3. Descriptive and Correlational Analyses

Measure	Mean	Range	Standard Deviation	Source of influence			Utilization
				Family	Friends/ Peers	Career Services	Career Services
Concern	22.43	6-30	4.40	0.13*	0.21**	0.22**	0.13*
Control	22.55	6-30	4.35	0.11*	0.24**	0.12*	-0.03
Curiosity	21.80	6-30	3.40	0.09	0.20**	0.13*	0.09
Confidence	23.16	6-30	4.10	0.13*	0.22**	0.07	0.04

*$p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, N = 369-372   Data source: survey

Our causal network analysis of the focus group data yielded three career outcome categories: *Psychological Characteristics, Career Decisions,* and *Social Capital.*

Psychological characteristics refer to the thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes that individuals hold about themselves and the world of work. Students described four types of psychological outcomes: better sense of preparedness, increased awareness, enhanced willingness to explore, and increased vocational clarity. For example, students reported an increased sense of

[1] These categories (sociocultural and institutional factors) were mapped based on our qualitative analysis of the focus group data.

preparedness in pursuing their career goals through the influence of their career advisors, business school experiences, and online research. Both career advising and business school experiences represent institutional factors that helped students feel more prepared via résumé workshops, mock interview sessions, and job fairs. While preparing for a job interview, one student noted the helpfulness of career services in providing a list of commonly asked behavioral interview questions, which familiarized him with the interview process and reduced his anxiety. Students also reported deriving increased vocational clarity through exposure to business-oriented content in school as well as their parents' business careers.

Career decisions refer to the processes of and outcomes related to students' decision-making about their majors and/or careers. Three themes were identified in this category: deciding on specific major, deciding on general academic program, and articulating disciplinary foci. For example, students' decisions to pursue a particular discipline, in this case, the field of business were shaped by their coursework and families. Familial advice against entering a particular career field (e.g., teaching), and support for choosing a business-related career path, often attributed to the likelihood of job stability and income. Similarly, students whose parents worked in business noted its influence in their decisions to pursue a similar career path. Exposure to non-business courses were often described as moments of occupational epiphany where students began to identify areas where their skills did not match well with other career paths. Similarly, students' decisions on specific business majors were influenced by their experiences with courses and parental advice.

Social capital refers to the the development of students' professional or social networks, and the career information and opportunities afforded via these networks. This category represents an important mechanism by which students gained career opportunities. One student recounted how she had relied on their instructor in a marketing course to deepen her understanding of both digital aspects of marketing and the restaurant industry. In other cases, students relied on their own searching of online resources to get information about different careers. Student organizations also provided a venue through which students acquired information about possible careers. The most frequently cited factor that influenced students' work opportunities was the well-established biannual career fair held by their school, during which hundreds of (primarily) regional recruiters provide on-the-spot networking opportunities. For several students, the career fair provided the opportunity for a conversation with regional employers, leading to internships and later, several full-time jobs. For other students, many of their families' social connections were described as pivotal in creating internship opportunities for them.

Conclusion

Our data suggest that students are most satisfied with the pragmatic tools and guidance offered by career services. However, students were dissatisfied with career services when obtaining support that required deeper exploration of students' long-term career goals. Sociocultural factors, particularly those related to students' families, were influential in shaping students' career goals. Above all else, the types of occupations held by family members were regarded as an important indicator of students' future career aspirations. Outcomes from this influence often took shape in students pursuing similar career paths as their parents or siblings, and/or drawing on their own observations of their parents' occupations in choosing their own. While other types of influences—such as institutional resources and independent activities—also impacted students' career goals, sociocultural forces shaped how institutional resources were experienced and utilized, as well as how independent activities such as internships were gained. Beyond wages and post-graduation employment, students developed a variety of career outcomes (i.e., Psychological Characteristics, Career Decisions, and Social Capital), some of which parallel constructs defined by career adaptability, an attribute crucial for future workplace success (Savickas, 2013).

> Beyond wages and post-graduation employment, students developed a variety of career outcomes, such of which parallel constructs defined by career adaptability, an attribute crucial for future workplace success.

Implications and Recommendations

We propose the following strategies to improve our support of students' career development:

1. **Promote career services centers and encourage students' engagement with these offices.** Our results suggest that approximately 30% of our sampled students were unaware of career services, which is comparable to national findings that 40% of students have never used career services resources online or in-person (Gallup, Inc., 2017). Participants who were aware of career services reported visiting the center at least once. Thus, the active promotion of career services centers is necessary to boost students' engagement with career services.

2. **Career services and higher education practitioners need to be attentive to the various factors shaping students' career goals and outcomes, and how the institution can support their career development.** Given the importance of sociocultural factors in shaping student career development, practitioners can improve their effectiveness if they adapt their services to leverage students' social networks, by identifying students' social capital as related to their personal networks. For students who lack such resources, often the case for first-generation and low-income students, career practitioners should engage with these students as early as possible and work to expand their personal networks so that they might have stronger ties to their chosen industry. Active and creative outreach (e.g., partnering with student organizations to embed career programs) are encouraged to connect more effectively with students.

3. **Career services centers and practitioners need offer students space to reflect on and explore their career trajectories as rooted in their early and ongoing experiences.** By cultivating strong rapport and using narrative exercises (Savickas, 2013), practitioners can provide more tailored experiences that encourage students to be intentional about their career exploration and discernment. If these services exceed the constraints and expertise of practitioners, close partnerships with other student services (e.g., counseling services) are integral to ensure that students are referred to other professionals that can help them explore their career paths more deeply.

4. **Adopt a holistic and integrative approach to cultivating students' career development.** Career practitioners can further improve their services by collaborating with instructors who teach courses that are applicable to students' career-development. Similarly, mental health practitioners in college counseling centers are encouraged to explicitly assess for and address career concerns as part of treatment to ensure that these concerns are not artificially relegated to career advisors only (Schaub, 2012).

5. **Future research and program evaluations to measure psychosocial outcomes in addition to employment and wage statistics.** Because our data is limited to a single site, we encourage researchers to examine how students in other schools (e.g., letters and sciences, engineering) experiences their career services programs. We also recommend that administrators, researchers, and practitioners integrate measures that reflect students' psychological readiness for work in addition to labor-based metrics such as wage and post-graduation employment when assessing their programs' effectiveness. It is imperative to look beyond how career services are imparting technical skills and consider if or how they contribute to students' vocational development by cultivating their psychosocial skills such as career adaptability in the context of other significant influences.

Contrary to a vocationalist perspective, our study demonstrates that career services centers can be a source of institutional resource for students' career development that is not simply restricted to their eventual job placements. By doing so, we can integrate often disparate fields of student affairs and vocational psychology to more fully understand students' experiences with institutional programs geared towards their career development.

References

Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist, 55*(5), 469–480. https://doi.org/10.1037//0003-066X.55.5.469

Chan, A., & Derry, T. (2013). *A roadmap for transforming the college-to-career experience.* Winston-Salem, NC: Wake Forest University. Retrieved from http://rethinkingsuccess.wfu.edu/files/2013/05/A-Roadmap-for-Transforming-The-College-to-Career-Experience.pdf

Dey, F., & Cruzvergara, C. Y. (2014, July 15). 10 future trends in college career services. *LinkedIn Pulse.* Retrieved from https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/20140715120812-11822737-10-future-trends-in-college-career-services

Gallup, Inc. (2016). *The value of career services, inclusive experiences, and mentorship for college graduates.* Gallup-Purdue Index Report 2016. Retrieved from http://www.gallup.com/reports/199172/gallup-purdue-index-report-2016.aspx

Gallup, Inc. (2017). *Crisis of confidence: Current college students do not feel prepared for the workforce.* Strada-Gallup 2017 College Student Survey. Retrieved from http://news.gallup.com/reports/225161/2017-strada-gallup-college-student-survey.aspx#aspnetForm

Guan, Y., Deng, H., Sun, J., Wang, Y., Cai, Z., Ye, L., … Li, Y. (2013). Career adaptability, job search self-efficacy and outcomes: A three-wave investigation among Chinese university graduates. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 83*(3), 561–570. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.JVB.2013.09.003

Hackett, G., Esposito, D., & O'Halloran, M. S. (1989). The relationship of role model influences to the career salience and educational and career plans of college women. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 35,* 164–180.

O'Neil, J. M., Ohlde, C., Tollefson, N., Barke, C., Piggott, T., & Watts, D. (1980). Factors, correlates, and problem areas affecting career-decision making of a cross-sectional sample of students. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 27,* 571–580.

Savickas, M. L. (2013). Career construction theory and practice. In S. D. Brown & R. W. Lent (Eds.), *Career development and counseling: Putting theory and research to work* (2nd Ed., pp. 147–186). Portland, OR: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Savickas, M. L., & Porfeli, E. J. (2012). Career Adapt-Abilities Scale: Construction, reliability, and measurement equivalence across 13 countries. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 80*(3), 661–673. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.JVB.2012.01.011

Schaub, M. (2012). The profession of college career services delivery: What college counselors should know about career centers. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy, 26*(3), 201–215.

Schultheiss, D. E. P., Kress, H. M., Manzi, A. J., & Glasscock, J. M. J. (2001). Relational influences in career development a qualitative inquiry. *The Counseling Psychologist, 29,* 216–241. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0011000001292003

Zhou, W., Guan, Y., Xin, L., Mak, M. C. K., & Deng, Y. (2016). Career success criteria and locus of control as indicators of adaptive readiness in the career adaptation model. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 94,* 124–130. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.JVB.2016.02.015