Developing College and Career Readiness Through the Man Up! Men's Leadership Summit

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ABSTRACT

High school guidance counselors have a tremendous job of balancing their administrative responsibilities and providing students with career and college guidance. However, collaborative efforts that bring together guidance counselors, institutions of higher learning, and local community members can provide students with the guidance needed to set and achieve lifelong dreams. A qualitative research design was used to evaluate the merit, worth, and effectiveness of a daylong career development conference offered to male high school juniors and seniors residing in a Midwestern metropolitan area. By following Perna's (2006) multilevel conceptual model, organizers of the *Man Up! Men's Leadership Summit* brought together 166 high school males and community leaders to discuss how to chart a career path. Three themes emerged that support the effectiveness of this model. Implications are discussed and suggestions for future directions are offered.

Introduction

I think what was good about this day is that at my high school my dreams were shot down. I was told I will never succeed in what I do and that scares me. I was at one point so sure who I was but the real world, it gets scary. This program told me that my dream of becoming governor could happen and come true if I put all my heart into it, and that made me feel so much better about myself. After participating in this program, I know I need to go to college to become what I want to become. Being here made me feel welcomed and that there is hope for my future. (student response on evaluation form, March 2011)

For some students, transitioning from high school to postsecondary settings can be difficult and stressful. It seems unnatural for young people to know what they want for their future when they only have eighteen years or less of life experience to draw upon. While some are able to leave high school with the requisite skills to achieve their desired level of success, others lack the academic, social, and financial resources to realize their dreams. Either way, successfully charting a prosperous life-long career path, as a high school upperclassman, can be a daunting experience.

Many schools approach this transition by administering career interest surveys to their students. Effective career and college programming is more complex than simply analyzing the

results of such a career interest survey. It requires a coordinated effort among students, parents, community members, and high school professionals to create life exploration opportunities that engage young people in meaningful experiences (Allen & Robbins, 2010). According to Marc (2010), these organized efforts provide high school students with the necessary mind set to begin formulating life-long professional and personal dreams. Once these dreams are established, students can develop the necessary skill set and begin working towards meeting their goals.

Given the multitude of responsibilities placed on high school guidance counselors, scheduling time to provide their students with career counseling and college guidance is difficult. In fact, Truong (2011) reported that high school counselors struggle to balance their administrative responsibilities with career education programming and counseling for their students. As such, collaborative efforts that bring together guidance counselors, institutions of higher education, and local community members are needed. Not only will they alleviate some of the pressure put on high school counselors but these efforts will also make for a richer learning experience.

In reality, the high school setting is just one location where students can receive information about their future college or career options. Perna (2006) developed a multileveled conceptual model that outlines four factors that contribute to high school graduate's post secondary decisions: (a) students, parents, and families; (b) public school system; (c) institutions of higher education; and (d) education policy set at the federal, state, and local levels. In fact, a 2010 report titled *Up to the Challenge: The Role of Career and Technical Education and 21st Century Skills in College and Career Readiness* supports the benefits of Perna's model. "High school and postsecondary partnerships with employers and postsecondary educators provide pathways to employment and/or associate's, bachelor's, and advanced degrees" (Bray, Green, & Kay, p.15). While these four factors are interconnected (Perna, 2006; Rowan-Kenyon, Perna, & Swan, 2011), there is a paucity of research documenting the impact that a secondary school-higher education institution-community partnership has on helping students chart a career path. This manuscript addresses this gap in the research by describing the evaluative results of a daylong career readiness conference hosted on the campus of a regional Midwestern university.

Purpose of the Study

We agree with previous researchers (Perna, 2006; Rowan-Kenyon, Perna, & Swan, 2011), that it is important for post-secondary institutions (4-year universities and community colleges) to make a significant contribution to helping high school students successfully transition into career paths. However, at this point we are not trying to test any specific theory; rather, we conducted this study from a constructivist perspective (Ponterotto & Grieger, 2007). Our attempt was to discover answers to our research questions about helping young males transition from high school into college and career paths.

For many adolescents the prospects of transitioning from high school to college, and ultimately into a career, can be daunting. Making the choice to attend the right college and set the right career/life goals is difficult for an eighteen-year-old high school student. While there are many programs offered by high schools that provide students with information on attending college, there are unique resources and activities that post-secondary institutions and community

leaders can offer. The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of a career and college readiness development conference offered to male high school juniors and seniors residing in a Midwestern metropolitan region of the United States.

Method

Procedure

Our research team consisted of two university professors in gifted and talented education, whose research focuses on talent development, and one graduate student working on an advanced degree in gifted and talented education. The two university professors consulted with school administrators, guidance counselors, and local community professionals about the organization of the daylong college/career readiness conference. The graduate student did not participate in the organization or implementation phase of the study. Her sole contribution was to help analyze, code, and report data. Finally, the two university professors kept field notes during the conference as a way to record immediate impressions of the conference's events.

This conference was organized to study how male high school students would respond to an opportunity to build a commitment to seek postsecondary college or career options. Our purpose was to provide attendees with, (a) an opportunity interact with other high school students from throughout the region, (b) the opportunity for these students to experience a university campus, and (c) a connection between high school students and prominent business and community leaders through breakout session workshops. We used these three themes as points of departure (Charmaz, 2008) as we designed the conference, developed participant evaluation forms, and analyzed data. These themes should be viewed as a frame of reference for our study around which we defined our data. Our intent was not to form predetermined conclusions to support our pedagogical philosophies.

We invited all juniors and seniors in public schools to attend the *Man Up! Men's Leadership Summit*; a daylong college and career readiness development conference. Invitation packets with flyers advertising the daylong event and registration forms were sent to all high guidance counselors in the metropolitan region (n = 35 schools). Guidance counselors were asked to post the flyers in their school's hallways and provide registration forms to all interested, male, juniors and seniors. While we advertised a $10 registration fee, we informed the guidance counselors that no student would be excluded for financial reasons.

All attendees completed a conference registration form. There were 60 seniors, 105 juniors, and one sophomore from a total of 20 schools. Eighteen of the schools were public and two were private. In addition, three were rural schools, ten suburban, and seven urban. Fourteen of these schools were considered to be diverse schools in terms of the percentage of students attending the schools who qualify for free and reduced lunch status. Of the 166 attendees, 20% (n = 33) had decided on which college they were attending and only 45% (n = 20) of the seniors indicated which college they planned to attend.

Conference Structure

We relied on our professional network, and the networks of our collaboration team, to identify local professionals who potentially would be willing to speak to a group of male high school students. Recruitment letters were sent inviting selected professionals to speak about their professions, describe paths they took to become successful, and offer advice on transitioning from high school to post-secondary settings. The opening keynote speaker was a professor whose research focuses on diversity issues. The themes of his presentation were the importance of setting both personal and professional goals, giving back to the community, and valuing diversity. The luncheon keynote speaker presentation was titled "*Finding Your Passion, Living Your Dream*" which highlighted the importance of setting and pursuing one's life goals while finding work that is personally and professionally meaningful.

The opening keynote speaker spoke for one hour. After which, participants attended the first of their two, 1-hour breakout sessions. The first session focused on college readiness and the second focused on career readiness. The day concluded with a luncheon and a lunch speaker. Topics for Breakout Sessions I and II ranged from workplace skill development and college entrance themes to career readiness and career path themes (see Table 1).

Table 1. Breakout sessions topics by student participation

The topics for the college readiness sessions included				
Session I Title	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
University Housing	14	10.9	10.9	10.9
Getting Involved On Campus	4	3.1	3.1	14.1
Developing Your Leadership Skills	11	8.6	8.6	22.7
Student Financial Aid	13	10.2	10.2	32.8
College Life	20	15.6	15.6	48.4
Life As A Student Athlete	12	9.4	9.4	57.8
Financial Management	2	1.6	1.6	59.4
The Admission Process	11	8.6	8.6	68.0
Time Management	17	13.3	13.3	81.3
Using Strengths To Guide Your Career	13	10.2	10.2	91.4
Interviewing And Resume Writing	11	8.6	8.6	100.0
Total	128	100.0	100.0	
Topics for the careers breakout session workshops included				
Session II Title	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Journalism	8	6.3	6.3	6.3
The Legal Profession	9	7.0	7.0	13.3
Marketing	12	9.4	9.4	22.7
Medicine	9	7.0	7.0	29.7
Managing Your Future	9	7.0	7.0	36.7
Public Relations	7	5.5	5.5	42.2
Engineering And Mathematics	13	10.2	10.2	52.3
Entrepreneurship	7	5.5	5.5	57.8

The Arts	13	10.2	10.2	68.0
Education	7	5.5	5.5	73.4
Business Management	9	7.0	7.0	80.5
Financial Planning	4	3.1	3.1	83.6
Computer Science	12	9.4	9.4	93.0
Keeping The Books	9	7.0	7.0	100.0

Participants selected and attended a variety of interactive discussion panels and session workshops with themed tracks for personal development. When registering for the conference, participants selected specific breakout session topics. Sessions' topics focused on providing career specific information as well as life and workplace skills. Sessions were designed to teach important skills needed to be successful in the workforce and ways for the participants to develop their individual leadership potential. Successful men who represented a variety of careers, or were experts on issues that male high school students were facing, led the individual breakout sessions. This included current university students and faculty, as well as business and community experts.

Instrumentation

At the end of the conference, participants were given an evaluation form asking them to provide feedback about the summit's merit, worth, and effectiveness (Patton, 2002). The form consisted of 10 questions. Three questions (*I learned something from this conference, The information was presented in an interesting way,* and *I enjoyed the conference*) were 4-point Likert-type items (1 = Not At All; 2 = A Bit; 3 = Enough; 4 = Very Much). The following seven items were open-ended questions that allowed participants to share their thoughts and impressions of the conference: (1) *What do you think was good about the conference*?; (2) *What do you think would improve the conference*?; (3) *How has your career plan changed as a result of this conference*?; (4) *Describe what your dream your life to be like 15 years from now*; (5) *What activities will you engage in to make your dreams come true*?; (6) *Is there more information you require that would help you achieve your dreams*?; and (7) *Other Comments*. No demographic or personally identifiable information was solicited on the evaluation forms in hopes that participants would feel more comfortable in responding honestly.

Analysis

A qualitative evaluation research design (Patton, 2002) was used to collect and analyze participants' perceptions of the merit, worth, and effectiveness of the *Man Up! Men's Leadership Summit*. Data were gathered from evaluation forms submitted by conference participants and from our field notes. In order to make data analysis more manageable, the research team (two university professors and graduate assistant) randomly selected 30% (n = 38) of the evaluation forms for intensive analysis (Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999) and compared them with our field notes. Research team members independently analyzed and coded the data into smaller units. Next, we came together to review codes and agree upon a coding structure. Once this coding structure was established, the we independently themed the data and analyzed those themes. During the independent thematic analysis, distinctive categories emerged. Afterwards, we reconvened, compared similarities and differences in the themes, and developed theory (Saldaña,

2009). When there was disagreement on themes we discussed the differing views and reached a consensus about the emerging theme in question. In order to verify the themes and theory that emerged, we conducted a less intensive examination of the rest of the sample (Elliott el al.).

Results

Out of the 164 participants who attended the conference, 128 (78%) completed and submitted the evaluation forms (see Table 2).

Table 2. Mean scores from student evaluation forms

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.
I Enjoyed The Conference	128	1	4	3.56	.600
I Learned Something From This Conference	128	1	4	3.49	.602
The Information Was Presented In An Interesting Way	128	1	4	3.26	.724
Valid N (listwise)	128				

After analyzing students' responses to the open-ended questions, the following three themes emerged from which we developed theory: (1) *Motivation to Set and Achieve Career/Life Goals,* (2) *How Do I Make My Dreams a Reality?,* and (3) *Making a Personal Connection with the Speaker.* The first theme demonstrates participants' desire to have a successful life. The second two themes represent a need to provide young people with the requisite resources which will allow them to take an active role in making their lives successful.

The reported data below are representative of the entire sample. In an attempt to accurately report and illustrate data, we selected quotes from evaluation forms that represented participants' views, feelings, and intentions (Charmaz, 2008). Our intention was to provide the reader with a thick description, demonstrate evidence of the themes, and illustrate how we built our theory (Ponterotto & Grieger, 2007). Rather than correcting grammar, we left the participants' words intact.

Motivation to Set and Achieve Career/Life Goals

In describing their dreams for the future, many of the participants in this sample desired to have an established career. While some described their career aspirations in general terms like "I will have a good paying job I enjoy" or "Be in some kind of career", others had specific careers in mind. It was eclectic mix of dreams such as "Be in the law profession or hold public office", "Own an aquaculture farm to help out the oceans against the demands of people", and "A nurse with a great job". Given the number of participants who completed the evaluation form, the wide range of interests supports previous research (Allen & Robbins, 2010; Marc, 2010) about high school male career interests and did not surprise researchers While many participants in this sample have set career goals, some have considered how these career goals will benefit their lives.

For example, in describing future career goals, many of the participants dreamt of having a family or being part of a strong family. Sample responses include "I would like to be in a job I enjoy doing and have a family to care about and live happy with", "Having a family and being able to provide for them", or "Own a big business and have kids and a wife". This common theme around family and parenthood among participants was not something we expected to emerge. For participants in this sample, this unanticipated finding represents an opportunity for future research. Prospective studies could investigate high school males' perspectives on parenthood and provide breakout sessions focusing on various husband/father related topics.

The event helped many realize the importance of taking an active role in determining their own future. A majority indicated that the conference either reinforced their future goals (e.g. "My career plans have not changed but I have picked up on some helpful hints" or "It strengthen my passion to join the law profession and gave me a better understanding on the extension of law itself") or helped them make better decisions about their future (e.g. "I need to let go of the less important things and do what I need to succeed" or "Has not changed but it has helped me think of new ways to boost my ambition for my career"). Based on these responses and this theme, follow-up studies should investigate if similar conferences impact the depth to which participants gave to pursuing their future aspirations.

As young people transition from high school students to high school graduates, deciding on a career path is a big decision. However, making a wrong decision can be costly in both time and resources. Some students indicated that they learned enough about a particular profession to know they no longer wanted to pursue that path ("I learned I do not want to be an Accountant" and "I realized that the engineering field might be too difficult for me"). While these participants did not indicate if they settled on an alternative path, this realization is important because it allows them to begin inquiring about other careers.

Making a Personal Connection with the Speaker

Several students indicted that one successful element of the conference was the valuable information shared by the speakers. For instance, a majority of students indicated that the speakers' information was interesting, informative, and valuable. Comments like "I was given a lot of information no one else gives in school", "It was very informative and I learned a lot about what it was like to be a college student", and "I learned a lot of valuable information that I can use in my future" demonstrate the conference's success in being able to meet the participants' desire to speak with those who have successfully overcome life's obstacles. This was a goal that researchers had set for participants and suggests that recruiting speakers who can share personal successes and failures is important.

A majority of students reported that the speakers really connected with them and passed on life lessons. Two comments in particular sum up this sentiment, "They [speakers] urged me to think about different aspects of my life than I have in the past. They encouraged me to think about careers and planning, as well as a professional life." Similarly another participant remarked, "It was good hearing from someone who had overcome many obstacles in life...the speakers could relate to us and tried to guide us based on what they learned from their

experiences." This finding supports Allen and Robbins (2010) assertion that high school students value meaningful and authentic experiences. Participants in this sample valued speakers who provided real-life examples of struggle and eventual accomplishment.

By making personal connections with the participants, we believe the speakers impacted the lives of those who attended the conference. Evidence of this conclusion is supported by comments like, "My life choices have changed. I am going to try as hard as I can in school. I will make my life matter. Now I'm more aware of what I want to plan for and what goes into attending college" and "I have realized that in order to make it through college I'll have to be determined and hardworking." While we recruited speakers who could provide personal experiences about the paths they took to reach their particular level of success, we did not anticipate that they would make deep, meaningful connections with the participants.

How Do I Make My Dreams a Reality?

Although the participants gained information about their futures, they were left with a desire to learn more specifics about how to achieve their dreams. For example, a majority of students reported the conference made them realize that they still had more to learn. One student asked, "What exact steps to take for my future? I want more information on the best path to get me where I want to be and how to pay for that path." Another student commented, "Now that I am more positive of my future I want to know how to achieve it. Nobody has prepared me to do that…its frustrating to know what you want to be but not know how to make it happen." These findings support previous research (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2011) that as young people gain knowledge about careers and potential career paths, they realize that there is more they do not know. Further evidence of this point emerged as these participants described the types of information they desired, which fell into one of the two following categories: (1) college specific and (2) career specific.

Analysis of the data revealed that many of the participants indicated they desired more specific college information. They appeared to be interested in learning about the pathways to access post secondary institutions. These ranged from finding the financial assistance to pay for college (e.g., "How am I going to pay for college?", "…scholarships that are available to me.", and "…more information on performance scholarships. Particularly visual arts-based ones.") to selecting the right college for their desired career path (e.g., "It would help to be able to find more information about colleges and what kind of majors those colleges offer", "Knowing which majors require which classes", and "What the best major would be to achieve being an athletic trainer"). These results indicate that participants are thinking about making the right decisions that will influence their future but they lack enough information to achieve their goals.

Equally important for many the participants, was the need for more career specific and experiences. The responses ranged from what is it like to work in a particular field (e.g., "What is it like to be a biology teacher?, "I need more information on the different kinds of engineering jobs", and "Real world experience would help me the most") to the specific steps required to enter a given profession (e.g., "How would one join the gaming industry?", "How to get the financial means to start up a product?", and "I need information on foreign language jobs"). While the conclusions gleaned from these data indicate that participants in this sample still

require information about pursuing their career aspirations, they suggests that these participants are in the midst of the natural growth of a young person learning how to chart life-long course.

Discussion

Qualitative results from the *Man Up! Men's Leadership Summit* suggests the potential effectiveness of a secondary school-higher education institution-community partnership in delivering a daylong career development conference. In this study, the collaborative efforts among these groups provided students with an authentic learning experience. However this seamless, behind the scenes relationship went unnoticed by the conference's participants. Still, its importance cannot be overstated in the discussion of these results. Data support existing literature that high school students in this sample require authentic career development experiences with those currently working in the field. Finally, these results revealed that, in addition to thinking about their future careers, these young males are concerned with playing an active role in the family.

Quality of the Speakers

Based on the results of this quantitative evaluative study, *The Man Up! Men's Leadership Summit* was ultimately successful because speakers meaningfully connected with the students in this sample. First, practicing professionals, community leaders, and current college students spoke to the obstacles many male adolescents face when transitioning from high school to post secondary settings. Second, they provided participants with an opportunity to ask detailed questions about specific professions and solicit information about how to access the necessary resources to make entrance into a post-secondary setting possible. Finally, participants viewed the speakers as providing information that is typically not provided in schools.

One explanation for this finding may be that the speakers were not individuals with whom the participants have daily contact. Certainly the messages of hard work, perseverance, and goal setting are common themes expressed by most high school teachers, guidance counselors, and parents. However, the constant interaction with those individuals can cause an adolescent to become immune to the impact of their messages. A critical component of the *Man Up! Men's Leadership Summit* was participants were removed from their high school settings and invited to a university campus. This finding supports previous research (Perna, 2006; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2010) that authentic experiences helped reinforce career-based learning opportunities.

Establishing and Meeting Life Long Goals

The results of this study revealed that the conference helped participants recognize the importance of establishing life-long personal and professional goals. This finding supports previous research (Allen & Robins, 2010; Marc, 2010) that, when provided with the right information and guidance, students can make informed decisions about their career paths. The

detail that participants used to describe their future career goals demonstrates they were able to articulate future aspirations.

In addition to detailing their career goals, a significant number of participants aspired to have a family. While this finding surprised researchers, perhaps the amazement represents an unidentified bias. In planning the conference, collaborators only focused on college readiness and career path related issues. Any discussion of what it means to be a 21st century male and a male's role in the family was purely coincidental. Given the limited number of participants, it is difficult to generalize these finding to a larger population; however, these findings suggest that high school males in this sample are thinking about their roles as a father and husband. Future career readiness conferences should dedicate some time and discussion to this topic.

Limitations

The intent of this study, as with most qualitative research, was to inform and not to generalize. Readers should view the presented data with this in mind and formulate their own opinions as to the results' applicability (Gentry, Steenbergen-Hu, & Choi, 2011). There are a few limitations that need to be addressed. The major data source were participants' evaluation forms completed immediately at the end of the conference. We did not follow-up with them to evaluate the longitudinal impact of the day's events. Conducting this type of survey might have provided additional insight. Additionally, by nature of their attendance at the conference, participants were pre-motivated to develop college and career readiness skills. As such, responses on evaluation forms might have been inflated and conclusions cannot be generalized to those who did not attend.

Conclusion

The results from the *Man Up! Men's Leadership Summit* bode well for partnerships among secondary schools, institutions of higher education, and community leaders in terms of developing career readiness skills and dispositions of adolescent males. Partnerships and conferences such as this can have a positive impact on assisting male students to successfully transition from secondary education, to postsecondary education settings, and hopefully into career pathways. Incorporating the multileveled conceptual model in this manner allowed for a dynamic student experience.

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