



Hipatia Press  
www.hipatiapress.com



Instructions for authors, subscriptions and further details:

<http://qre.hipatiapress.com>

## **Career Education Discourse: Promoting Student Employability in a University Career Center**

Rose Helens-Hart<sup>1</sup>

1) Department of Applied Business Studies, Fort Hays State University, United States.

Date of publication: February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2019

Edition period: February 2019 – June 2019

---

To cite this article: Helens-Hart, R. (2019). Career Education Discourse: Promoting Student Employability in a University Career Center. *Qualitative Research in Education*, 8(1), 1-26. doi:10.17583/qre.2019.3706

**To link this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.17583/qre.2019.3706>

---

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

The terms and conditions of use are related to the Open Journal System and to [Creative Commons Attribution License \(CC-BY\)](#).

# **Career Education Discourse: Promoting Student Employability in a University Career Center**

Rose Helens-Hart  
*Fort Hays State University*

*(Received: 18 August 2018; Accepted: 31 January 2019; Published: 28 February 2019)*

## **Abstract**

---

In 2016, Gallup reported 80 percent of recent U.S. college graduates who had visited career services offices (CSO) rated their engagement to be somewhat to very helpful. Quantitative reports such as this provide student views of CSOs, but neither address CSO staff's perceptions of the value of their work nor the tools they use to assist students. Staff perceptions provide insight into how they communicate with students and align with emerging career education paradigms. Through in-depth interviews and participant observations, this study illuminates the communicative strategies used by CSO staff at a large U.S. Midwestern public university to support student employability. This study extends our theoretical understanding of career education and employability discourse, where staff engaged students' assumptions about careers and provided opportunities for them to diversify knowledge about themselves and work to develop their career identities. Additionally, career education activities supported the development of students' social capital and personal adaptability through staying positively focused and proactive in career exploration and job searches. Practical implications for this study are that employability discourse could (1) emphasize how institution-sponsored activities could increase student job seeker competitiveness, but also (2) instill a "no guarantees" academic culture where students are responsible for their employability.

---

**Keywords:** career communication, career education, career services, college students, employability

# **Educación para la Profesionalización: Promoviendo la Empleabilidad Estudiantil en un Centro Universitario de Profesionalización**

Rose Helens-Hart  
*Fort Hays State University*

*(Recibido: 18 de agosto de 2018; Aceptado: 31 de enero de 2019;  
Publicado: 28 de febrero de 2019)*

## **Resumen**

---

En 2016, Gallup informó que el 80% de los recientes graduados universitarios de los EEUU que habían visitado las oficinas de servicios profesionales (OSP) las calificaron como algo muy útil. Los informes cuantitativos de este tipo brindan a los alumnos las opiniones de las OSP, pero ninguno aborda las percepciones del personal de las OSP sobre el valor de su trabajo ni las herramientas que utilizan para ayudar a los alumnos. A través de entrevistas en profundidad y observaciones, este estudio muestra las estrategias comunicativas utilizadas por el personal de las OSP para apoyar la empleabilidad de los estudiantes en una gran universidad pública de los EEUU. Este estudio amplía nuestra comprensión teórica de la educación para la profesionalización y el discurso sobre la empleabilidad, donde el personal participó en los supuestos de los estudiantes sobre la profesionalización y les brindó oportunidades para diversificar el conocimiento sobre ellos mismos y trabajar para desarrollar sus identidades profesionales. Además, las actividades de educación para la profesionalización apoyaron el desarrollo del capital social y la adaptabilidad personal de los estudiantes al mantener un enfoque positivo y proactivo en la exploración de la profesionalización y la búsqueda de empleo. Las implicaciones prácticas fueron que el discurso sobre empleabilidad podría: (1) enfatizar cómo las actividades patrocinadas por la institución podrían aumentar la competitividad de los estudiantes que buscan empleo, pero también (2) inculcar una cultura académica “sin garantías” en la que los estudiantes son responsables de su empleabilidad.

---

**Palabras clave:** comunicación profesional, educación para la profesionalización, servicios profesionales, estudiantes universitarios, empleabilidad

College and university career services offices (CSOs) are dedicated to assisting students with transitioning from college to career (Vinson, Reardon, & Bertoch, 2014) and are continuously faced with the pressure of promoting and proving the value of their services. In 2016, Gallup reported 80 percent of recent U.S. college graduates who had visited CSOs rated their engagement to be somewhat to very helpful. These quantitative data along with data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and the U.S. Census Bureau offer a generalized snapshot of the state of career services and employment in the United States but fail to provide subjective, nuanced, and discursive accounts of career education, especially in higher education contexts. In addition, extant research has focused on students' perceptions and outcomes, but has not investigated how CSO staff perceive and communicate the value of their work. Staff perceptions can provide insight into how they may successfully communicate with students and align with emerging paradigms in career education, which is conceptualized here as education focused on "career development and help[ing] students to control the unfolding of their careers as changing sequences and combinations of roles in education, home, community, occupations, and leisure as they go through life" (Super, 1975, p. 27). Through in-depth interviews and participant observations, this qualitative study illuminates the communicative strategies in career education used by CSO staff at a large Midwestern public university to support student employability and career self-management.

The dimensions of employability as articulated by Fugate, Kinicki and Ashforth (2003) framed data analysis and the exploration of both staff's description of student interactions and desired outcomes at the CSO studied. Staff discussion of preparing students to assume responsibility for managing their careers was framed as encouraging the development of strong career identities, personal adaptability, and human and social capital (Fugate et al., 2003). Institutions of higher education are increasingly turning their attention to the employability skills of their graduates as a result of industry concerns and stakeholder pressures (Paterson, 2017). An employability approach, in career services particularly, can be considered a response to calls for increased college and university accountability toward graduate employment. Employability emphasizes career self-management and re-centers students in career education, particularly in the career planning and job-search processes commonly focused on in higher education, while

recognizing a “no guarantees” employment culture (Hallier, 2009). This approach encourages students to accept responsibility for utilizing what are often out-of-class and voluntary services, while simultaneously urging integration of career themes into curriculum.

To begin, I first discuss the changing form and function of CSOs and then detail the employability framework used to synthesize the diverse set of interviews and participant observations collected. Then, I discuss the methods used to collect and analyze data before presenting the strategies staff used to promote student employability. I conclude with theoretical and practical implications of employability discourse in career education.

### **Career Education Trends**

CSOs have made significant shifts in their services and approaches (Vinson et al., 2014), which mirror a shift in vocational counseling methods and theory. Frank Parsons’ (1909) work on vocational fit set the stage for nearly a century of modernist thought in career counseling and career/job placement. Twentieth-century work has been described as bureaucratic and stable, where hard workers were rewarded with promotions and job security (Savickas et al., 2009). Out of this context, linear conceptualizations of career, predicated on notions of organizational control, loyalty, and long-term membership (Baruch, 2004; Buzzanell & Goldzwig, 1991), sedimented in western career discourses. Since then, however, many CSOs have transformed from job-placement centers into full-service centers that include career counseling and activities such as mock interviews and resume writing (Vinson et al., 2014). While placement centers, modernist assessment methods, and linear career models have not been fully abandoned, the organizational landscape has changed, necessitating a revision to CSO methods and programming (Baruch, 2004).

Twenty-first-century occupational prospects are less discernible and predictable than in the 20th century. Organizations have become leaner and flatter and job security is rare. Boundaryless and protean career models emphasize independent career management (Briscoe & Hall, 2006; Briscoe, Hall, & Frautschy DeMuth, 2006; Hall, 2004) and research suggests workers should expect periodic unemployment and career changes throughout their lifetimes (Jarvis & Keeley, 2003). This trend is already observable when looking at some of the newest members of the workforce. The Great

Recession of 2008 in the United States caused the unemployment and underemployment rates for recent college graduates to significantly increase and sent a ripple felt by economies across the globe. While rates have improved, U.S. graduates still face high degrees of unemployment, underemployment, and lower wages compared to what would be projected in a more healthy economy (Kroeger, Cooke, & Gould, 2016). Career self-management skills can help students cope with these trends and increase their employability (De Vos, De Hauw, & Van der Heijden, 2011; Fugate et al., 2003).

### **Employability**

The ability and likelihood one will obtain work depends on a variety of factors including the labor market and individuals' skills, connections, and attributes. One concept used to group factors is "employability" (De Vos et al., 2011; Fugate et al., 2003). Building on the work of Van der Heijde and Van der Heijde (2006), De Vos et al. (2011) defined employability as, "an individuals' knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to adequately perform various tasks and carry responsibilities within a job, and to their adaptability to changes in the internal and external labor market" (p. 439). One's employability speaks to the probability of job obtainment and successful career management (De Vos et al., 2011; Fugate et al., 2003).

Fugate et al. (2003) conceptualized employability in three dimensions: career identity, personal adaptability, and social and human capital. Career identity is how individuals define themselves in a work context over time and can give direction to future career moves by illuminating the meaning and usefulness of work experiences. It answers the questions of who one is or wants to be in the world of work and provides a cognitive schema to guide behavior. The second dimension, personal adaptability, refers to individuals' ability and willingness to change or manage personal factors such as dispositions and behaviors to meet the demands of a continually changing work environment (Fugate et al., 2003).

The final dimension of employability as articulated by Fugate et al (2003) is social and human capital, which addresses knowing how, knowing why, and knowing whom (Vanhercke, De Cuyper, Peeters, & De Witte, 2014). Social capital is the support embedded in social networks, which can offer insider knowledge about jobs, companies, and fields (Wright & Konrad,

2001). Network size and strength influence the value of information and opportunities accessible. Human capital refers to personal characteristics such as age, education, work experience, and cognitive abilities that allow one to meet the performance expectations of a job. Human capital theory has been a useful theoretical framework for studying employability in the context of higher education (Cai, 2013; Wittekind, Raeder, & Grote, 2009). A basic function of education is to cultivate people to meet the needs of the labor market, but there is little research on how students' are guided to transition from educational institutions to work environments (Cai, 2013). The dimensions of career identity, personal adaptability, and social and human capital come together to build a framework for employability that can be adopted in higher education career education contexts.

## Methods

In this study, I examined a CSO at a large Midwestern university that serviced students in the College of Liberal Arts and those referred from other CSOs on campus for more thorough career coaching and exploration activities. The CSO provided career coaching, and organized career fairs and workshops on topics such as preparing job applications, interviewing, and developing a professional image. It's 2015-2016 annual report stated the office had delivered 426 programs to nearly 13,000 stakeholders (students, faculty, staff, and parents) and met with 1,711 students in individual advising appointments. In addition, the CSO's strong web presence extended it reach with over 15,000 combined social media followers and 98,279 website sessions.

To pursue subjective, nuanced, and discursive accounts of CSO staff experiences, I used the methods of semi-structured interviewing and participant observation to seek participants' tacit knowledge and thick descriptions of social reality (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). The use of multiple methods contributed to a more holistic and in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and communication. The following research questions were used to guide data collection and analysis:

- RQ1: How do CSO staff describe the value of their work?
- RQ2: What discursive strategies do staff use to promote student employability?

- RQ3: How does CSO employability discourse frame the university's responsibility toward students and their future employment?

Interviewed participants were CSO organizational members who served in a variety of roles, including directors, assistant directors, career coaches, student and professional administrative staff. Eighteen interviews with full and part-time staff, one group interview with undergraduate student staff, and one interview with an affiliated vocational counseling faculty member were conducted. All participants identified as white/Caucasian; five were men and 21 were women. To protect participant identities in data presentation, all were given female pseudonyms. All but two full-time and two student part-time workers were willing and available to participate in interviews. The average participant age, excluding undergraduate student workers, was 36 years old and 15 of 19 had or were in the progress of completing masters or doctoral degrees. Four held bachelor's degrees and were not pursuing graduate degrees. The average age of the undergraduate student workers was 20 years old and all were pursuing four-year degrees.

I used progressive interviewing script, starting with closed-ended impersonal questions such as "How long have you worked at the CSO?" and "What is your educational background?" and built to more open-ended questions such as "What are your interactions with students like?" and "What do you hope students leave the CSO knowing?" The semi-structured interviewing protocol provided a planned and ordered framework for interviews but was flexible enough to allow me to speak to staff in a variety of roles, ask follow-up questions, and revise the protocol as the project progressed (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Interviews on average were 50 minutes long and transcripts totaled 440 pages of double-spaced text.

I attended 12 CSO events such as career fairs, workshops, CSO staff meetings, and student coaching appointments to collect participant observation data. On average, an hour was spent at each event. At these events, I interacted with students and other individuals present such as job recruiters or other faculty or staff. Twelve sets of fieldnotes were taken totaling 44 pages of double-spaced text, and 50 photographs were taken.

## **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was systematic, rigorous and employed tools of the constant comparative method of qualitative data analysis to begin with a grounded



approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Owen's (1984) criteria of repetition, recurrence, and forcefulness were also used to identify themes and relationships within the data. "Recurrence" was noticed when data had the same thread of meaning but different wording. "Repetition" occurred when keywords and phrases were repeated in a similar way. "Forcefulness" was noted with vocal inflection, volume, and pauses. Themes were identified through the reading and re-reading of transcripts and field notes and comparing them in order to code and categorize them.

Qualitative coding happened at three levels: open, axial, and selective (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). At the first level, I developed a code book of 214 open codes to aid in comparison. Each level of coding lifted data higher in levels of abstraction so that in the final phase of coding, all categories were unified around a core category (employability) representing the central phenomenon of the study (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). For example, a number of open codes focused on career exploration skills. These codes were grouped to form the axial codes of "self-reflection," "critical thinking," and "strategic planning," which were later placed into categories representing the dimensions of employability (Fugate et al., 2003). I did not enter into data analysis with theoretical aim of examining employability discourse and it was through theoretical memoing and returning to literature, however, that the "employability" link was identified.

I discussed analysis in progress and preliminary findings with colleagues and at conferences. When I was confident in the analysis and findings, results were presented and discussed with CSO staff members at a full-staff meeting. Discussion was positive and members stated the themes and categories identified resonated with their professional training and approach to career education. I invited participants to contact me for additional private feedback and two responded providing me with additional information on website changes and a recently drafted proposal promoting employability themes across the curriculum.

## **Results**

The following results describe discursive strategies used by CSO staff to promote student employability. As results are presented, linkages to theoretical and practical contributions are made to lay a foundation for their elaboration in the discussion section. Fugate et al.'s (2003) dimensions of

employability (career identity, personal adaptability, and social capital) provided the framework within which data were categorized.

## **Career Identity**

Career identity evolves over a lifetime as individuals synthesize and make sense of work experiences (Fugate et al., 2003). Since many college students have not had much experience in the workplace or in jobs relevant to their fields of study in college, CSO activities can assist in the development of career identities. Socialization messages about work and career are particularly important for those without much organizational experience because they must rely on second-hand information and the career identity narratives of others to anticipate what work will be like (Kramer, 2010). The major theme emerging from data that elaborate how students were guided to explore and develop career identities was myth busting by way of career exploration and provoking self-reflection.

### **Myth busting**

Students receive socialization messages and information about work and career from a number of sources such as parents, peers, media, and teachers and some messages do not hold up to realities of the working environment. The CSO referred to these messages as “common myths” and interviews showed that staff attempted to debunk several popular myths that commonly caused student anxiety. These myths were discussed in interviews, workshops, and in the office’s website content: 1) being undecided about a major is bad, 2) students should not switch majors, 3) there is one “right” major for every student, 4) majors dictate the career one can pursue, and 5) career coaches, academic advisors, parents and or career assessments will tell a student what interests or careers to pursue. Career coach Felicity talked about some of the myths that came up in a student coaching appointment and said,

I think [the student] is feeling a lot of pressure from society, from her friends, from her parents about getting a career that is nine-to-five that had health benefits, that is in a nice office and has air conditioning and things like that. But it is not where she sees

herself...and I think a lot of us have to demystify those myths and telling students that major doesn't equal career. A communications studies major doesn't mean you have to go into a typical career path in communications, same with English, same with history.

In addition to addressing the myth that students' majors do not directly reflect the types of job they can pursue, Felicity pointed out another common assumption about work that she and other staff noted addressing with students—the “nine-to-five desk job.” Staff reported students would talk about dreading a nine-to-five desk job and imagined something different for themselves.

Career exposure was an important component of career identity development as it served to diversify the number of futures students could imagine. Staff had a set of go-to resources such as LinkedIn to help students challenge assumptions and myths that may be holding them back from pursuing a career identity that was exciting and hopeful. Career coach Patrice said,

So, students that might come in when they are panicky about picking a major and just having the conversation--a lot of times students think their major equals their career, it's a very linear path. “If I major in history then I can only do these things.”... So one of the things is like well if you look, we'll go to LinkedIn and here are all the people that majored in history and look at all the different jobs that they are doing and just seeing that open up the possibilities for them.

Patrice's comments acknowledged the “major-equals-career” myth but further emphasized career exploration as a strategy for busting this myth. But having many career options can be as anxiety provoking as having only one or no options (Campbell & Ungar, 2004). By directing students to investigate other graduates' careers, students could focus on a more narrow set of (new) options. Staff seemed comfortable directly challenging common myths, but when assumptions became more specific or tied to particular fields, a more targeted variation of the myth-busting strategy, challenging assumptions with specific evidence, emerged.

Staff readily admitted that they were not the experts in all fields and so to assist students, they would potentially present students with conflicting or

additional evidence so that students could re-evaluate or further refine their assumptions. Similar to Patrice's tactic of using LinkedIn to debunk the myth of the linear path from major to career, career coach Tatyana talked about using other online resources such as Glassdoor.com that provided specific information employment information. She described countering a student's inaccurate salary expectation and said, "It was important to gently respect their ideas but at the same time present realistic information. Tatyana did not personally have to be the bearer of bad news but rather let the evidence speak for itself."

Career coach Violet had a similar experience working with a journalism student who believed he would be making over \$60,000 in broadcast journalism after graduation. She recalled the interaction with the student and retold the conversation:

"So, let's take a look at this page and what it says is the average journalism major starts making \$34,000 and is in broadcast. How do you feel when you see that compared to what you were thinking?" Where there is that discrepancy they'll tell me, "well that can't be right" and I'll say, "well tell me more about how you think, what your plan was to get into that position," you know... it is informing them on how to do research in an accurate way.

Staff attempted to lead students to informed conclusions and teach them tools for investigating present and future careers. Gathering accurate information about job targets and work environments is important to the development of career identity, but individuals were also encouraged to identify their personal values and desires to determine if a career identity was consistent with other dimensions of their identity. To pursue this goal, the CSO guided students to think introspectively about their interests, strengths, and values.

### **Self-Reflection**

Productively exploring career possibilities requires a level of self-understanding. The CSO encouraged students to locate and articulate their interests and skills rather than focusing on the things they disliked about work and personal weaknesses. The main tactic coaches used to do this was asking

probing questions. An assumption coaches commonly said they held was that students already knew the answers to what they were looking for so they needed to reflect and verbalize to clarify their self-understandings. Career coach Crystal said, “Students know more than they give themselves credit for and they know more about what their gut reactions are and what they might really want.” Through the lens of employability, self-reflection directs students to articulate narratives of career identity. Knowledge about the self was revealed in coaching sessions with staff and reflections on career assessments’ results.

Staff frequently described the positive and clarifying effects of acknowledging fears out loud and talking about oneself. In a coaching session observation, the student, Tom, was having doubts about entering a nursing program. The coach, Veronica, asked questions to have him consider what led him to nursing and what skills he believed he possessed. The student revealed that his interest in nursing was sparked by taking care of a relative but lately he wondered if he had made the decision to pursue nursing before he had considered other careers. After some preliminary questions, Veronica validated and normalized the student’s doubts by assuring him that questioning one’s direction could be a positive thing. They concluded the session by setting up a meeting for after the student had taken a career assessment to help him clarify his interests.

### **Personal Adaptability**

Personal adaptability refers to the willingness to change one’s personal factors to meet the demands of a changing work environment (Fugate et al., 2003). Adaptability depends on an individuals’ ability to partake in proactive planning with a positive attitude, accept change, and learn about environmental threats and opportunities (Fugate et al., 2003). CSO staff reported encouraging these behaviors. As coach and administrator Jane explained, the CSO was interested in promoting student flexibility:

A classic line from students is, “I’ll do anything but I won’t do this, that, this, this, that, and I definitely won’t do that.” And it’s really not based on real experiences, it’s really, you know, kinda junior information, and so we want them to have multiple job targets, so be focused on each of those. Why are you choosing this and that and

that? Be flexible enough so that they consider multiple, Plan A, Plan B, Plan C, maybe a Plan D.

Data analysis revealed that staff attempted to bolster student's adaptability by 1) emphasizing the positive and 2) promoting strategic planning.

### **Emphasizing the positive**

When staff was asked to describe students who used CSO services, many first stated that students were diverse, coming in with a variety of needs and levels of preparation, but inevitably they discussed students who were in distress. Students were "panicked," "freaking out," feeling "alone" and "pressured," or having a "crisis moment." The staff made efforts to reduce anxieties through positive messaging.

Coach Milly described how she attempted to comfort students when they were discouraged and said,

The student has been down on themselves and not feeling like maybe they have what it takes to be a successful applicant...And so I have spent a significant amount of time trying to build them up and point out strengths...when I see a strength [I] point it out and say, "Do you realize you worked over a strong obstacle that showed a great amount of persistence on your part?"

Rather than providing her students with general assurances, Milly focused on specific and demonstrated student skills and abilities to influence their lives and adapt in uncertain situations. In other words, Milly emphasized the positive aspects of their human capital and internal locus of control. Her comment suggested that students should not rely on chance or luck alone because their strengths and character positively influence their prospects.

Staff positivity was a foundational part of the career coaching model adopted by the CSO. Coach Genevieve said, "[the model] focuses on certain positive aspects of students to kind of really get them to focus on goals and look at the positive of what they have to offer, you know, what are your strengths?" Focusing on the positive was intended to liberate students from past failures and motivate them to pursue goals. Coach Felicity described

positivity and focusing on strengths as something she was trained to do when she began working at the center. She said,

[The career coaching process] helps students focus on the positives that are going on in their life and not just actual experiences but things that they do well. Skills that they know that they use well or that they like to use...I consider myself a pretty positive person too so I was like, “Why wouldn’t you want to focus on the positives or developing good action items?”

It was a part of coaches’ training to be positive with students to boost their confidence and reassure them they had something to offer an organization.

Pointing out student strengths and skills was important to raising student confidence so that they could embrace the unknown. The words “strengths” and “skills” were used interchangeably in interviews and career education workshops, and were conceptualized as knowledge about and abilities to navigate and perform in one’s field and the job search/career planning process. Personal adaptability relates skills as students need to identify transferable skills that could be translated to a variety of jobs. If students could not immediately identify their skills, anxiety could cause a psychological barrier to seeking help in career planning. Coach Violet said,

And in reality we are seeing like a ton of graduates that are walking away with not necessarily being employable or having the skills they need because [college] doesn’t always prepare you for skills and so I think some students tend to realize some of this but don’t want to face it, which forces them to not think about coming.

In this comment, Violet is referring to technical skills tied to a particular vocation and job search skills. Students may possess skills such as critical thinking, leadership, and communication but lack a clear picture of how those skills prepare them to adapt to a variety of work roles or contexts. Her comment resonates with accusations that universities are failing to prepare students for work and emphasizes the importance career services in higher education.

When asked what she hoped students took away from a visit to the CSO, administrator Heidi said, “...They have the ability to translate their experiences, those skills that employers want”. Administrator Eleanor said,

Our job is really to educate [students] so they have the tools to, yes, find what they are looking for now or to get to where they want to be now. But then five years from now, if they lose their job or decide that they don't like their job, that they can refer back to those tools and see it as like a cyclical model.

Eleanor's comment emphasized that career management skills equip students to adapt to uncertain and changing circumstances.

### **Strategic planning**

Proactive engagement and planning have been linked to reducing uncertainty and anxiety and increasing one's perceived control over life events (Saks & Ashforth, 1996). In this study, strategic planning involved setting up work and career-related goals and actionable steps to achieve those goals. Coaching sessions were described as action-oriented and focused on getting students to feel confident to act by breaking down overwhelming tasks and decisions into smaller steps. Coach Patrice articulated her action-orientation and said,

There is no "Hey you did it and now it's over. You went to the career office, everything is going to work out." But what is it that you are going to do? What work are you going to put in to make sure you are going toward your goals that you just established?

Strategic planning can provide much-desired focus to the job search process but potentially at the expense of more thoughtful contemplation. Coach Felicity described learning from the mistake of moving forward with action steps too quickly with a student and said,

The action-oriented person in my head said "oh well here are the resources you can use to get to this place" but it's not what she wanted and she left my office way more confused and more stressed because I put all these other options to her and I just didn't listen. I think it was a growing moment for me because I learned to shut-up and ask the right the questions and ask the student how they are feeling.



This comment revealed that while the structured, action-oriented coaching process was useful and conflict free most of the time, it still required coaches to pay close attention to the individualized needs of students. Coaches could not craft strategic plans that were one-size-fits-all; students needed to be the architects of their own plans. This personalized attention was described as or more valuable to students than attending career workshops and events alone.

### **Social Capital**

Focusing on positivity, strengths, and strategic planning served to combat feelings of hopelessness and discouragement associated with looking for a job. But in order to execute plans and develop realistic goals, students needed to have exposure and access to people and information germane to their career plans. In other words, learning about and planning for career was described as a social activity. Different from human capital, which refers to personal factors such as age, education, and work experience, social capital refers to the support one may receive from formal and informal networks (Fugate et al., 2003).

Fugate et al. (2003) identify both human and social capital as the third dimension of employability, but the results in this section focus on social capital. In data analysis, human capital was addressed indirectly in the previous section as skills and abilities one might have. This section of results focuses on CSO strategies to help students build their professional networks. The center offered opportunities for students to connect with others who might provide insider information on careers and job opportunities, and staff members themselves became part of students' networks and acted as liaisons linking students to others.

All staff reported the centers' connection power as one of its best assets. Staff said they possessed knowledge and had relationships with employers that would be difficult for students to come by on their own. Thus, they were an asset to students' professional networks. Student workers, who often critiqued resumes, said they used their training to help friends and roommates with job applications and frequently referred others to the center. Coach and administrator Jane talked about students' networks and said,

We want them to have developed a network of people who can support them in their career, in their pursuit of a job and internship. You can't do this alone. You really do need help from professionals or friends and family, anyone who is in their corner. Looking for a job, looking for an internship is a lonely experience.

In addition to emphasizing the social aspects of career, Jane highlighted the social support and insider information a network can provide. Coach Lindsay talked about networking in a coaching session with a student who had been discouraged after several rejections. She said,

I think at that point we kind of talked about his network and you know like who do you know in this industry or what could that yield any results for you and it was kind of like a light bulb went on and he was like "oh my gosh I haven't thought about networking at all. I've been going about it in the way you know the applying for fifty jobs on indeed.com,"... so then we were able to spend the rest of the time kind of really building on that and who would you reach out to?

Lindsay's comment identified how coaches worked with students to evaluate their existing network outside of the center but coach Crystal pointed out how she too personally added value to students' networks. When asked what a typical student appointment was like, she said,

Um, [I offer] different resources that might be useful and then just the knowledge, even connections/encouragement to follow through with those like "Oh I know a professor in the sport psych department. Let me hook you up with them... That was completely different than like [a student thinking] "I want to do sports psych. I don't know anyone. I don't know how to contact anyone."

Most staff said face-to-face interaction with students was their favorite part of their jobs. Administrator Lola, who worked predominantly with employers, said, "The connections with people I love. Whether it's outside that I am connecting with students, employers, you know businesses, I enjoy that and I connect with them a lot through e-mail, phone, and things." By developing links in her own network, Lola claimed that she became a greater asset to students as well. Most CSO members described themselves as

contributing to students' social capital by connecting them with resources such as career guides, job boards, workshops, and individuals that could provide them with insider information about jobs, careers, and employment opportunities.

## **Discussion**

Data analysis revealed strategies staff used to promote student employability and career self-management. Strategies served to help students articulate career identities, exercise personal adaptability, and grow human and social capital (Fugate et al., 2003). Staff reported engaging students' assumptions about work, exploring their strengths, interests, and values as well as potential careers to develop career identities. To help enhance students' personal adaptability, staff emphasized the positive and focused on student skills to boost their confidence. Students were also prompted to strategically plan for the future and cope with change. To increase students' social capital, they were encouraged to reach out to professionals in the field to expand their contacts and connections. Staff also considered themselves a part of students' growing professional networks, linking them to resources, opportunities, and professionals on and off campus. This section synthesizes the findings and explains how this study contributes to literature on career and employability in higher education.

## **Theoretical Contributions**

This study's significant theoretical contribution is demonstrating the utility of employability as an organizing framework (Fugate et al., 2003) in career education discourse. Consisting of three dimensions (career identity, personal adaptability, and social and human capital), this framework helped make sense of one CSO's described work and clarified its perceived value. Furthermore, it assisted in the identification of discursive strategies used when working with students. Findings reveal CSO staff discursively constructed career education as the pursuit of employability, rather than just job placement. This discourse, the language surrounding the topic of career education to produce meaning and perpetuate ways of thinking (Carling, n.d.), can affect the positioning of career services in higher education if leveraged to wider academic and administrative audiences. By clarifying and

categorizing the employability value of CSO services, centers can better justify certain activities and services and promote both the necessity of career education and the responsibility of students to seek assistance when preparing for work after graduation.

The discourse used by CSO staff, re-centered students in their career education by challenging their preconceived notions of work and engaging them in self-reflection. These efforts in particular served to develop student career identities. Staff engaged in myth busting incorrect assumptions about college, career, and work and challenged student expectations about specific jobs or fields with evidence to provoke critical thinking and encouraged students to engage in self-reflection to locate their skills, interests, and desires. Activities promoting exploring and crafting career identities socialized students to possible careers.

Staff discussed promoting flexibility and adaptability in students' job search processes and how these qualities were essential to career management. The relevant characteristics of personal adaptability were maintaining a positive attitude, identifying strengths and skills, and proactively planning. Staff used positive language and identified students' strengths and skills to attempt to boost student confidence, morale, and resilience in career exploration and job searches. Staff described themselves as action-oriented to guide students to craft plans to set and pursue goals. A particularly important finding was that career education was constructed as a social activity requiring an individual to network to identify opportunities and obtain information. CSO staff considered themselves part of students' networks, connecting them with valuable resources. While professional networking is a known element in career management, staff positioned themselves as an essential, however, often underutilized part of that network.

Results demonstrate how the CSO staff constructed career education as the pursuit of (long-term) employability rather than immediate (short-term) job placement. This conclusion resonates with popular discourse that emphasizes higher education as a necessary stepping stone to a job but goes beyond the short-term goal of job placement after graduation. Employability discourse emphasizes individuals' abilities to take control of their career futures, which has wide implications in an academic setting. A critical view of an employability approach in organizations contends that it allows organizations to distance themselves from the primary responsibility of protecting jobs, providing stable work, and instills a "no guarantee" work

culture that elevates individual worker responsibility over organizational support (Hallier, 2009).

Since employability emphasizes individuals' responsibility for improving themselves, endorsing it as a response to calls for greater institutional accountability is somewhat paradoxical. An employability approach is simultaneously a move to help graduates be more empowered and competitive job seekers but can also be seen as reducing the responsibility of institutions to ensure graduates' employment. In other words, a paradox of accountability arises when taking responsibility for others means asking them to take responsibility for themselves. If students do not learn job search skills because utilizing career services is largely voluntary, they (not institutions) would be culpable if they were not competitive against others who had.

### **Practical Applications**

Promoting student accountability for developing employability and increasing institutional responsibility for post-graduate employment are difficult goals to pursue simultaneously, but CSO staff spoke to pursuing both. Given my observations and analysis of this case, I offer some suggestions for CSOs utilizing or switching to an employability-based approach. These suggestions are inspired by the challenges the CSO studied faced in drafting students into its office to use services and its efforts to communicate employability as its guiding mission. Centers need to consider how an employability approach potentially changes the way services are deployed and perceived in their institutions. The employability approach ideally requires resources to employ career coaches, advisors, or counselors and a variety of services directed toward students at different times during their education. Centers also need to be supported and aligned with a university-wide career mission to engage students in more long-term career education endeavors.

Employability branding may change the way institutional stakeholders perceive the importance of career services in exciting and challenging ways. Although an employability approach does benefit immediate job searches, it distances the center from the job-placement model and emphasizes students' commitment to career education. This may be criticized by those looking for immediate employment results. Participants reported some individuals came

to the CSO believing they would receive a career plan or be placed in jobs. This model, while still existing to some extent, has faded in feasibility and preference. Trends in career advising highlight the importance of client empowerment and autonomy and the benefits of articulating positive personal career narratives.

Communication with a career advisor can be critical to disrupting negative career narratives and helping students identify their skills and values, and promote their self-confidence. Staff believed more interaction with students throughout their college career would benefit their development and career management abilities. To maximize the potential of an employability approach, centers would need to be staffed with train coaches, advisors, or counselors that could meet the demands of the student body. Adequate staffing and resources have been identified as a major weakness for career services offices (Vinson, Reardon, & Bertoch, 2014). To ensure staff members are utilized, career exploration activities beyond the basic resume and cover letter writing would need to be integrated into college curriculum and supported by academic departments. A successful move toward this would require planned engagement with students throughout their academic careers rather than in their last year of studies. Similar to “common book” and “writing across the curriculum” programs, career services could be integrated across the curriculum.

After results of the study had been presented to staff, a participant shared with me a proposal for an employability curriculum that had developed after data collection. The CSO had embarked upon an effort to raise the profile of employability as a fundamental concern for itself and the university and was pursuing collaborative relationships with other departments to integrate career education earlier in students’ academic programs. This added support for the idea that an employability approach could give CSOs a clear framework with which to identify and categorize learning outcomes of services and highlight areas for programmatic development. This clarity may make assessment and resource allocation justification easier and it would look at factors beyond post-graduate job placement. CSOs as well as other academic entities involved in career education could use employability instruments to evaluate students’ progress before and after their involvement with the centers (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijde, 2006). Few studies attempt to determine the employability outcomes of organizations that offer

employability development programs (Hallier, 2009) thus having this type of data would support CSO efforts and highlight areas in need of improvement.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The limitations of this study are inherent in qualitative case study analysis and involve access to participants and the generalizability of results. While interviews were relatively easy to arrange, participant observation opportunities in student coaching appointments were limited by logistical and privacy considerations. Greater opportunity to shadow coaches may have provided additional data to challenge and confirm themes present in interview data. However, this study attempted to provide a reasonable and realistic representation of the discourse at the CSO studied. Results may be applicable to other CSOs that share common student and staff demographics and services but will have limited generalizability. For example, participants were fairly homogenous in age, ethnicity and education level and no demographic data was available on the students participants served. An examination of diversity factors may nuance the approaches taken when supporting minority students' employability.

Additional case studies of CSOs that also include patron interviews would diversify understanding of career education discourse. An important extension of this research would be to investigate students' levels of perceived employability and employer perceptions of students who had assistance from career services to determine the success of an employability approach.

### **Conclusion**

This study conceptualizes the career education discourse of one CSO as the empowered pursuit of employability. Students were described in data as centered in the career education process and staff guided them through determining their strengths, skills, values, and goals to help them make educated and thoughtful career decisions. Fundamentally grounding the discussion of career education were three dimensions of employability: career identity, personal adaptability, and social and human capital (Fugate et al., 2003). CSO staff engaged students' assumptions about work and career and provided opportunities for them to re-evaluate, confirm, and diversify

knowledge about themselves and work to develop their career identities. Additionally, career education activities supported the development of students' social capital and enhancement of their personal adaptability through staying positively focused and proactive in career exploration and job searches.

This study extends our theoretical understanding of career education discourse in higher education by identifying themes and discursive strategies used by staff to promote student employability. There are significant practical implications for this study as well. In a time higher education institutes are placing a greater emphasis on the employability skills of their graduates (Paterson, 2017), employability discourse could 1) emphasize how institution-sponsored activities could increase student job seeker competitiveness, but also 2) instill a “no guarantees” academic culture where students are ultimately held responsible for their employability (Hallier, 2009).

## References

- Baruch, Y. (2004). Transforming careers: From linear to multidirectional career paths. *Career Development International*, 9(1), 58-73. doi:10.1108/13620430410518147
- Briscoe, J. P., & Hall, D. T. (2006). The interplay of boundaryless and protean careers: Combinations and implications. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 69, 4-18. doi:10.1016/j.jvb.2005.09.002
- Briscoe, J. P., Hall, D. T., & Frautschy DeMuth, R. L. (2006). Protean and boundaryless careers: An empirical exploration. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 69, 30-47. doi:10.1016/j.jvb.2005.09.003
- Buzzanell, P. M., & Goldzweig, S. (1991). Linear and nonlinear career models. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 4(4), 466-505. doi:10.1177/0893318991004004004
- Cai, Y. (2013). Graduate employability: A conceptual framework for understanding employers' perceptions. *Higher Education*, 65, 457-469. doi:10.1007/s10734-012-9556-x
- Campbell, C., & Ungar, M. S. (2004). Constructing a life that works: Part 1, blending postmodern family therapy and career counseling. *The Career Development Quarterly*, 53(1), 16-27. doi:10.1002/j.2161-0045.2004.tb00652.x



- Carling, S. (n.d.). *The University of Chicago: Theories of media: Keywords glossary: Discourse*. Retrieved online from <http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/discourse.htm>
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- De Vos, A., De Hauw, S., & Van der Heijden, B., I.J.M. (2011). Competency development and career success. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 79, 438-447. doi:10.1016/j.jvb.2011.05.010
- Fereday, J., & Muir-Cochrane, E. (2006). Demonstrating rigor using thematic analysis: A hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding and theme development. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5, 1-11. doi:10.1177/160940690600500107
- Fugate, M., Kinicki, A. J., & Ashforth, B. E. (2003). Employability: A psycho-social construct, its dimensions, and application. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 65, 14-38. doi:10.1016/j.jvb.2003.10.005
- Gallup (2016). *Great jobs, great lives. The value of career services, inclusive experiences and mentorship of college graduates*. Retrieved from <https://www.luminafoundation.org/files/resources/great-jobs-great-lives-3-2016.pdf>
- Hall, D. T. (2004). The protean career: A quarter-century journey. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 65(1), 1-13. doi:10.1016/j.jvb.2003.10.006
- Hallier, J. (2009). Rhetoric but whose reality? The influence of employability messages on employee mobility tactics and work group identification. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 20(4), 846-868. doi:10.1080/09585190902770760
- Jarvis, P. S., & Keeley, E. S. (2003). From vocational decision making to career building: Blueprint, real games, and school counseling. *Professional School Counseling*, 6, 244-250. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42732437>
- Kramer, M. (2010). Occupational role anticipatory socialization. In M. Kramer (Ed.), *Organizational Socialization* (pp. 25-44). Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Kroeger, T., Cooke, T., & Gould, E. (2016). *The Class of 2016: The labor market is still far from ideal for young graduates*. Retrieved from: <http://www.epi.org/publication/class-of-2016/#epi-toc-5>

- Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (2002). *Qualitative communication research methods*. Thousand Oaks: CA.
- McDow, L. W., & Zabrucky, K. M. (2015). Effectiveness of a career development course on students' job search skills and self-efficacy. *Journal of College Student Development, 56*(6), 632-636. doi:10.1353/csd.2015.0058
- Owen, W. F. (1984). Interpretive themes in relational communication. *Quarterly Journal of Speech, 70*, 274-287. doi:10.1080/00335638409383697
- Parsons, F. (1909). *Choosing a vocation*. New York: Houghlin Mifflin.
- Paterson, R. (2017). 'Because sometimes your failure can also teach you certain skills': Lecturer and student perceptions of employability skills at a transnational university. *Qualitative Research in Education, 6*(3), 241-271. doi:10.17583/qre.2017.2583
- Saks, A. M., & Ashforth, B. E. (1996). Proactive socialization and behavioral self-management. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 48*, 301-323. doi:10.1006/jvbe.1996.0026
- Savickas, M. L., Nota, L., Rossier, J., Dauwalder, J.-P., Duarte, M. E., Guichard, J., Soresi, S., Van Esbroeck, R., & van Vianen, A. E. M. (2009). Life designing: A paradigm for career construction in the 21st century. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 75*, 239-250. doi:10.1016/j.jvb.2009.04.004
- Super, D. E. (1975). Career education and career guidance for the life span and for life roles. *Journal of Career Education, 2*(2), 27-42. doi:10.1177/089484537500200204
- Van der Heijde, C., & Van der Heijde, B. I. J. M. (2006). A competence-based and multidimensional operationalization and measurement of employability. *Human Resource Management, 45*(3), 449-476. doi:10.1002/hrm.20119
- Vanhercke, D., De Cuyper, N., Peeters, E., & De Witte, H. (2014). Defining perceived employability: a psychological approach. *Personnel Review, 43*(4), 592-605. doi:10.1108/PR-07-2012-0110
- Vinson, B. M., Reardon, R. C., & Bertoch, S. C. (2014). Career services at colleges and universities: A 30-year replication study. *Journal of College Student Development, 55*(2), pp. 203-207. doi:10.1353/csd.2014.0018

- Wittekind, A., Raeder, S., & Grote, G. (2009). A longitudinal study of determinants of perceived employability. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 31*, 566-586. doi:10.1002/job.646
- Wright, D. B., & Konrad, A. M. (2001). Job-seeking in a turbulent economy: Social networks and the importance of cross-industry ties to an industry change. *Human Relations, 54*(8), 1015-1044. doi:10.1177/0018726701548002

**Rose Helens-Hart** is an Assistant Professor of business communication in the Department of Applied Business Studies at Fort Hays State University, United States.

**Contact Address:** Rose Helens-Hart, Fort Hays State University, Department of Applied Business Studies, 600 Park Street, McCartney Hall 113, Kansas, United States. Email: [rhelenshart@fhsu.edu](mailto:rhelenshart@fhsu.edu)