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Career Decision-Making for Undergraduates Enrolled in Career Planning Courses

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Abstract

Many students face a number of challenges when they enter into their undergraduate years. Career planning courses allow students to explore various major and career of interests along with their decision-making skills. These kinds of courses can either be general or focused to a specific discipline. The current study examined career decision-making with undergraduate students enrolled in a general and discipline-focused career planning courses. The results showed no

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significant differences in post scores between the two courses. Implications for career counselors, school counselors, counselor educators, and college/undergraduate advisors are discussed.

Keywords: career planning, decision-making, undergraduate students

Emerging adults are faced with many significant career-related decisions, such as post-secondary plans, career choices, and securing employment. This can cause confusion and distress, potentially leading to mental health concerns (Rottinghaus, Jenkins, & Jantzer, 2009). However, when these individuals have strong career decision-making skills, they experience fewer mental health concerns and have a greater sense of life satisfaction and power (Walker & Peterson, 2012). Researchers have explored ways to enhance college students' career decision-making skills, such as a career decision-making course or other individualized interventions based on career assessments (Belser, Prescod, Daire, Dagley, & Young, 2017, 2018).

These courses are most often offered as a semester-long class and are open to students at all grade levels. In addition to exposing students to a variety of degree and course options, they also support students in adjusting to the college environment and learning networking and socialization skills (Hansen & Pedersen, 2012). Career planning courses are effective in increasing career exploration and decreasing attrition for undergraduate populations (Fouad, Cotter, & Kantamneni, 2009; Reardon, Melvin, McClain, Peterson, & Bowman, 2015). Engagement in a career planning course is a predictor of

interventions for STEM undergraduate and graduate students and the journeys of women/students of color in higher education.

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graduation rates and confidence in vocational decision-making (Fouad et al., 2009; Reardon et al., 2015). In a major comparison of 3,546 undergraduate students enrolled in a semester-long career development course and 3,510 undergraduate students who did not participate in a career course, researchers found that those participating in the course graduated with a higher cumulative GPA and higher credits obtained (Hansen, Jackson, & Pedersen, 2017).

While many career development courses are offered to students in all colleges and majors (Fouad et al., 2014; Lam & Santos, 2017), some have investigated efficacy of planning courses that are major-specific (Komarraju, Swanson, & Nadler, 2014). Komarraju et al. (2014) assessed the effectiveness of a career planning course available for students within specific majors in social sciences and found an increase in career decision-making self-efficacy for undergraduate students. Research has found that engaging in a career planning course, specific to undergraduate students interested in STEM, predicted retention in a STEM major and decreased negative career thoughts (Belser et al., 2017, 2018; Prescod, Daire, Young, Dagley, & Georgiopoulos, 2018. The current study examined differences in career decision-making skills between students enrolled in a general career course and student enrolled in a discipline-focused career course. We aimed to determine differences in career decision-making for students enrolled in a discipline specific career course and for students enrolled in a general career planning course. We also aimed to determine differences in career decision-making between those groups.

Method

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Dr. Robert Orndorff is currently the Senior Director for Penn State Career Services and a member of Student Affairs. He is also an Affiliate Associate Professor of Counselor Education, teaching graduate-level courses on career development. Bob received a doctoral degree in counselor education (specializing in career development) from Penn State University.

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Participants

We received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) before conducting this research study. The current study took place at a large university in the Northeastern United States. Participants were undergraduate students enrolled in career planning courses during Spring 2018. There were 56 participants (N = 56); of the sample, 55% (n = 31) were enrolled in a career planning course designed for students in Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS) who had declared their major. Nearly 45% (n = 25) of the sample enrolled in a general course in effective career decision-making and had not yet declared a major. The majority of students (n = 23) were sophomores and 30% identified as first generation college students. About 31% of participants were male (n = 15) and 68% were White, non-Hispanic (n = 32).

Measure

The Career Decision Scale (CDS) is a 19-item assessment that measures career decision-making (Osipow, 1987, 1994). The CDS utilizes a 4-point Likert scale ranging from *like me* to *not like me* and includes both a Certainty scale and Indecision scale. Items 1 and 2 provide the Certainty scale and ask about deciding on a major or career and feeling comfortable with that choice. Items 3-18 provide the Indecision scale and includes statements such as "*I can't make a career choice right now because I don't know what my abilities are,*" and "*I think I know what to major in, but I feel I need some additional support for it as a choice for myself.*" Item 19, an open-ended question asking the responder to better describe themselves, was not used in this study. Higher scores on the CDS indicate less certainty and more indecision. Adequate internal consistency of .93 for Indecision and

.69 for the Certainty subscales was found on a sample of university college students (Alexander, Bartrum, & Hicks, 2014). For our sample, alpha coefficients were .84 for the Indecision pretest and .84 for the Indecision posttest; alpha coefficients were .78 for the Certainty pretest and .71 for the Certainty posttest.

Career Planning Courses

This research project involved two career development courses: Effective Career Decision Making and Career Planning for Human Development and Family Studies Students. The courses are unique in many ways, but share some common elements that led to their inclusion together in this study. In terms of similarities, both courses require students to gather career information through reading, and through conducting informational interviews. Both courses require students to write a narrative end-of semester project where they state their plan moving forward.

Both courses exist on the assumption that students in the class are in the process of investigating career pathways and possibilities, and that students in the classes benefit from in-class discussion, out of class reading and reflective writing, and from conversations with people in professions that are of interest to the students. Additionally, both courses require students to engage in self-reflection through the completion of assessment instruments designed to help students to organize their interests, values, abilities, and personality. Students enrolled in these classes ask questions and statements such as, “What can I do with this degree?” or “What kind of careers are out there for me?”. One of the objectives shared by these two courses is that these questions shift to statements such as, “With my knowledge of myself and

of the world of work, I see how many different career paths I can open and pursue."

The courses are unique in several ways. The Effective Career Decision Making course was 3 credits, met twice weekly for 75 minutes, and was marketed to first and second year students who were a part of the university's Division of Undergraduate Studies (DUS), a unit of enrollment that offers academic advising services to students who hold academic interests in multiple colleges or are in the process of selecting the best-fit academic college (major) for their goals and plans. This course was taught by a Counselor Education Doctoral student who was also employed as a Graduate Assistant at Career Services.

The Career Planning for Human Development and Family Studies Students was a department-specific career planning course, and was taken for one credit by students who were in the Human Development and Family Studies major at the university. These students were typically in their sophomore or junior year, and were recommended to the course by their specific departmental academic advisor. These students shared a broad goal of "working with people" but did not understand the many career paths or opportunities related to using their degree. The course met once weekly for 50 minutes, and required students to complete a weekly reflection activity and participate in class discussion as well as out of class activities. This course was taught by the Associate Director for Career Counseling within Career Services.

Procedure

We used a quasi-experimental pretest/posttest

comparison group design for our study. Participants were either enrolled in an effective career decision-making course or in a career planning course designed for students in HDFS. Both courses assign the CDS as one of the class assignments, but we only used data from those who agreed to participate in the research study. The assessments were administered during the 2nd and 15th weeks of class. The dependent variable was the pretest and posttest CDS Certainty and Indecision scores, and the independent variable was the grouping variable indicating students' class (the effective career decision-making class or the HDFS career class). Students in the HDFS career course, comprised of mostly juniors and seniors, declared a major prior to taking the career course and began with lower indecisiveness. Students in the general career course, comprised of mostly first-year students, had not yet declared a major.

A repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to examine differences from pre to post assessment. Certainty and Indecision scores were used as the independent variables. We then conducted a one-way ANOVA to examine differences in post scores between the two courses. We used Certainty and Indecision scores to examine differences between the groups.

Results

The data set met assumptions for ANOVA in regard to independence, normality, and equality. We had no missing data. The repeated measures ANOVA found that CDS Certainty scores increased significantly from pre (M = 4.45, SD = 2.6) to post (M = 5.42, SD = 2.8) assessment for the HDFS students, Wilks' Lambda = .60, F (1,30) = 20.3, p = .000, $h2$ = .40. CDS Indecision scores significantly decreased from pre (M = 26.23, SD =

14.9) to post (*M* = 23.32, *SD* = 13.85) assessment, Wilks' Lambda = .82, *F* (1,30) = 6.6, *p* = .015, *h2* = .18. The repeated measures ANOVA found that CDS Certainty scores increased significantly from pre (*M* = 3.88, *SD* = 2.1) to post (*M* = 5.32, *SD* = 2.2) assessment for the general career planning course students, Wilks' Lambda = .57, *F* (1,24) = 18.3, *p* = .000, *h2* = .43. CDS Indecision significantly decreased from pre (*M* = 35.16, *SD* = 12.9) to post (*M* = 28.88, *SD* = 12.41) assessment, Wilks' Lambda = .74, *F* (1,24) = 8.6, *p* = .007, *h2* = .26. See Table 1.

Table 1: Mean Pretest and Posttest CDS Scores

			General Career Planning		***HDFS Discipline-Focused***	
		N	***M***	***SD***	***M***	***SD***
Pretest	*Certainty*		3.88	2.1	4.45	2.6
	Indecision	56	35.16	12.9	26.23	14.9
Posttest	*Certainty*		5.32	2.2	5.42	2.8
	Indecision	56	28.88	12.41	23.32	13.9

The one-way ANOVA found no significant differences in post scores between the two courses. No significant differences existed in CDS Certainty scores for the general career course (*M* = 5.32, *SD* = 2.23) and the HDFS course (*M* = 5.42, *SD* = 2.83), *F* (1,54) = .021, *p* = .89. Indecision scores for the general career course (*M* = 28.88, *SD* = 12.41) and HDFS course (*M* = 23.32, *SD* = 13.40) were not statistically significant, *F* (1,54) = 2.44, *p* = .12.

Discussion

Students in the general career course and the discipline-focused course both saw increases in career decision-making, as measured by the CDS. Students enrolled in the HDFS career course, comprised of mostly juniors and seniors who had declared their major, started with lower means on the CDS indecision scores than students in the general career course (comprised of mostly freshman and sophomores). Significant differences in career certainty and indecision existed from pre to post assessment for students in both courses. Career certainty scores increased significantly and career indecision significantly decreased for both groups. Although significant differences existed in scores from pre to post assessment, which speaks to the effectiveness of the courses, we did not find a significant difference in post CDS scores between both groups.

Our results show the effectiveness of career courses for undergraduate students at all levels, and the importance of timing when providing career courses. Although each course showed significant differences in CDS scores from pre to post assessment, there was no significant difference in post scores between groups. Undeclared students (in the general career course) had similar certainty and indecision as students who had declared a major (HDFS career course), meaning, senior and junior students had similar scores as students just beginning their undergraduate experience. In theory, many would think that juniors and seniors who have chosen a major and are nearing the end of their studies, would have more advanced career decision-making. This result speaks to the importance of engaging students in career courses and other career development interventions

earlier in their undergraduate experience. Encouraging first-year students to enroll in career planning and decision-making courses could increase the likelihood that they stay in their major (Belser et al., 2018). Discipline-focused career courses are effective in decreasing negative career thoughts (Belser et al., 2017, 2018; Prescod et al., 2018) and increasing career decision-making self-efficacy (Komarraju et al., 2014), and the current study shows the importance of introducing career courses earlier during students' undergraduate years.

Limitations and Future Research

Although the sample size was adequate for our study, the results came from one university in the United States. The majority of our sample identified as White, which is representative of other predominately White institutions (PWIs). Unfortunately, these results cannot be generalized to historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), community colleges, labor colleges, universities with considerable first-generation populations, or universities with a more diverse student body. For example, researchers have found that first generation college students have lower levels of career certainty than their non-first generation peers (Pulliam, Ieva, & Burlew, 2017) so exploring other kinds of universities would be beneficial. Another limitation of our study is that we did not include student age in our data. We discussed grade level, but age could have illuminated other trends in the data and influenced our results.

Our results have implications for career counselors, school counselors, counselor educators, and college/undergraduate advisors. Undergraduate students

should be encouraged to enroll in career planning courses because of their effectiveness and the amount of meaningful information students receive. Whether decided or undecided in their major, students benefit from such courses. Future research should focus on replicating this study at an HBCU or at a university with a more diverse population. Continuing to research career planning courses will benefit undergraduate students and those who work with this population.

We know that a positive relationship exists with self-efficacy and career development (Fatima, Asghar, Khatoon, & Fatima, 2017). Future research can also examine this relationship focusing on undergraduate students and looking at differences between freshman, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. As postsecondary institutions prepare for the next generation of college students, it is important to consider how we can best support them. Generation Z, students entering college from 2013 and after, have different expectations about their education and future careers (Seemiller & Grace, 2017). They are more likely to engage in extensive career exploration, including self-exploration and career values (Seemiller & Grace, 2017). Future research might consider these characteristics as career planning courses are developed.

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