Where This Path May Lead: Understanding Career Decision-Making for Postcollege Life

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Abstract

Although students may use campus career center programs and services, their career decision-making processes can be influenced by a variety of people and experiences, in and out of class, on and off campus. This study is an exploration, through the framework of a wisdom development model, of the myriad ways college students make their postcollege decisions, with implications for campus policies and practice.
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Career centers are designed to facilitate a student’s journey from confusion to career self-enlightenment. Practitioners spend hours developing workshops, programs, and print and electronic resources to assist students with their career searches. However, students decide on postcollege plans with, or much more likely, without, the exclusive, comprehensive help of a campus career office. Although students use career programs and services, their decision-making process can be influenced by a wide variety of people and experiences. Although researchers have discussed a variety of factors related to the postcollege decision-making process, few researchers have focused on how students might integrate these many factors during the decision-making process.

The various influences on a student’s postcollege decision-making process are widely discussed in the professional literature. Some are related to intrapersonal characteristics including: age (Luzzo, 1999; Super, 1992); gender (Farmer, Wardrop, Anderson, & Risinger, 1995; Murray & Hall, 2001); race/ethnicity (Liu, 1998; Mau & Fernandes, 2001); sexual orientation (Nauta, Saucier, & Woodard, 2001; Tomlinson & Fassinger, 2003); class year (Long, Sowa, & Niles, 1995; Luzzo, McWhirter, & Hutcherson, 1997); levels of self-efficacy (Gianakos, 2001); approaches to career decision-making (Niles, Erford, Hunt, & Watts, 1997); career assumptions (Laker, 2002); and levels of indecision (Gaffner & Hazler, 2002; Jurgens, 2000; Skorupa & Agresti, 1998). A number of external factors might influence college decision-making, including: student involvements such as athletics (Martens & Cox, 2000); institutional types (Zagona & Cramer, 1994); and interpersonal interactions with others such as family (Hargrove, Creagh, & Burgess, 2002) or mentors (Packard, 2003; Packard & Nguyen, 2003). These studies discuss a variety of factors related to the postcollege decision-making process; however, little research exists on how students integrate these factors during the decision-making process.

To better understand students’ postcollege decision-making, particularly the conditions that facilitate this process, a framework for wisdom development was applied to this process (Brown, 2002, 2004). Brown (2004) stated that the conditions that stimulate students’ development of wisdom are: (a) orientation to learning, (b) experiences, (c) interactions with others, and (d) environment. Orientation to learning

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