

What Factors Influence College Students' Proficiency for Career Readiness?

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Introduction

Preparation for career entry has become a major focus on college graduates (Stone & Lewis, 2012) and preparation of independent minded individuals that are academically, technically and socially ready to enter a career where they can solve problems should be the nexus of public education in America (Wardlow & Osborne, 2010). The expectations for students to excel in the workforce are high and demanding (Carnevale, Smith, & Melton, 2011). “Is it possible that colleges and universities are failing in their role to prepare graduates for the expectations of the workforce?” (Robinson, Garton & Vaughn, 2007, p.19). If so, how do we better understand the needs of college students when many are concerned they are exiting high school not fully prepared for the demands of college or a career? (Stone & Lewis, 2012). The purpose of this research was to explore the factors that influence college students’ perceptions of career readiness by determining self-reported proficiency levels on select knowledge, skills and dispositions, aligning with priority three of the National Research Agenda of the American Association for Agricultural Education which calls for a “Sufficient Scientific and Professional Workforce that Addresses the Challenges of the 21st Century” (Stripling & Ricketts, 2016).

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

The Conceptual Model for the Study of Student Readiness in the 21st Century posits a systems approach is required to prepare students to be both college and career ready (DiBenedetto & Myers, 2016). Students develop learning, career and life skills by acquiring and interrelating a variety of knowledge, skills and dispositions that help them to become life ready individuals. Life ready individuals are one’s that are prepared for work and ready to be responsible citizens in their homes, schools and communities. The guiding theory and framework that was utilized to depict the conceptual model was embedded by the underpinnings of Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) (Bandura, 1986) and Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Theory of Human Development (BBTHD) (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Jointly SCT and BBTHD were intensely studied and theorized to create the Conceptual Model for the Study of Student Readiness in the 21st Century (DiBenedetto & Myers, 2016).

Methodology

The dataset was obtained from an online survey instrument distributed to graduate and undergraduate students in the Agricultural Sciences (AS) Department at Clemson University. The survey instrument consisted of nine career readiness constructs including: learning skills, life skills, career skills, social skills, interdisciplinary topics, knowledge competencies, incidental learning skills, dispositions, and experiences. In an effort to determine student’s perceived level of proficiency for each skill, a variety of knowledge, skills, and dispositions were included for each construct developed from the Conceptual Model for the Study of Student Readiness in the 21st Century (DiBenedetto & Myers, 2016). The instrument was pilot tested with alumni, faculty and staff of the department to determine face and content validity and improve the clarity of the questions. The post-hoc reliability coefficient was $\alpha = .91$. The population frame was provided by the department’s academic coordinator and included an accurate and up to date list of students enrolled in courses in the AS department during the fall of 2017. In addition to emailing the students the survey, faculty in the AS department were encouraged to remind students in their courses about the research. The population of interest included 370 students with a final sample of 163 participants, which translated to an effective response rate of 44%.

Respondents’ belief about their proficiency in the different constructs was evaluated on a four point Likert-scale rating ranging from no proficiency to high proficiency. Considering the

ordered nature of the responses (from low to high proficiency) an order probit formulation was utilized to estimate relationships between the ordinal dependent variables (life skills, career dispositions, learning skills etc.) and a set of independent variables.

Results/ Findings

The majority of the respondents were male (62.7%), between the ages of 17-20 (56.8%), and Caucasian (95.7 %). This result is consistent with the overall gender and race/ethnic distribution in the AS department. The majority were pursuing a Bachelor's degree (90.7 %). Approximately one third of the students represented each of the three majors in the department (Agribusiness, 31.4%, Agricultural Education 28.0%, and Agricultural Mechanization, 23.5%). Over half (52%) of the students transferred to Clemson University. The types of high schools students attended were public (76.9%), private (18.8 %) and charter (4.3%). When asked to report advanced placement (AP) courses taken in high school 59.3% reported taking at least one. An overwhelming majority of respondents reported involvement in college campus organizations (87.3%) mostly represented by participation in student clubs (66.4%). The findings of the ordered probit formulation highlight that students who reported taking AP courses are more likely to consider themselves highly proficient in learning skills ($p = .004$), life skills ($p = .000$), and incidental learning skills ($p = .005$). Second, transfer students were more likely to believe they are proficient in life skills, compared to students who attended Clemson University after high school. The same was true for students majoring in Agricultural Education, compared to students majoring in Agricultural Mechanization and Business or Agribusiness. Third, transfer students, as well as students who reported involvement in college organizations were more likely to regard themselves as proficient in terms of interdisciplinary skills, compared to students who were not actively involved in club activities, or joined the Clemson University after high school. Students who attended private school were more likely to report proficiency in experiences.

Conclusions and Recommendations

It was interesting to discover transfer students in the AS department at Clemson University consistently reported a higher proficiency in four of the nine constructs of interest related to the knowledge, skills and dispositions identified by the Conceptual Model for the Study of Student Readiness in the 21st Century (DiBenedetto & Myers, 2016). This finding may be related to the fact that students who transfer from a technical college to a university have been provided a variety of coursework that may be more focused on career preparedness rather than academic competency. Additionally, students who reported taking AP courses in high school revealed a higher proficiency in three of the nine constructs. AP courses may assist students with problem solving and becoming more independent learners as they interact with the course content where higher stakes are involved. Students who attended private school, majored in agricultural education and were involved in college campus organizations also reported higher proficiency for career preparedness, suggesting involvement in extracurricular activities provided college students with opportunities to enhance their career preparedness in a variety of areas. Further investigation into the factors that contribute to career preparedness within the conceptual model should be explored. To support and enhance the clarification of specific factors identified to influence college students' perceptions of career readiness, we recommend this research be extended across the nation where similar student bodies exist with a prevalence of students who transfer into programs from a technical school to a university.

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