CHAPTER 2
Career Decision-Making
Benefits of College Student Employment

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In addition to the consistently cited academic benefits associated with college student employment (Augenblick, Van de Water, & Associates, 1987; Hammes & Haller, 1983; Healy, O'Shea, & Crook, 1985; Ma, 1984; Stern & Nakata, 1991), recent empirical investigations have provided clear evidence of an important link between student employment and indices of effective career decision making. Researchers interested in determining the relationship between college student employment and the career decision-making process have examined the impact of full- and part-time employment on several career development variables, including job satisfaction, career maturity, and career locus of control.

The late Donald Super, whose theory of career and life development is one of the most widely researched theories in the field, emphasized the importance of student employment and related activities in the career decision-making process. Super (1957) believed that exploratory experiences are critical facets of effective career decision making that ultimately lead to the development of important career decision-making skills. Super recommended that jobs obtained during the exploration stage of career development provide opportunities for students to experience a variety of work settings and job tasks. He conceptualized student employment as providing young adults with the chance to "reality test" a variety of work environments (Kane, Healy, & Henson, 1992).

As Luzzo and Ward (1995) recently explained, "Earning while learning provides the student with both financial assistance to help meet college expenses and practical experience which may lead to enhanced opportunities for employment after college graduation" (p. 307). Recent research has helped clarify some of the specific benefits of college student employment in the career decision-making domain. Findings from such studies consistently indicate that the degree to which employment experiences tend to enhance the career decision-making process for college students may depend, at least in part, on how similar or congruent a part- or full-time job is with an individual's career interests and aspirations (Kane et al., 1992; Luzzo, 1995; Luzzo, McWhirter, & Hutcheson, 1996; Luzzo & Ward, 1995).

The concept of career-related congruence stems from John Holland's (1985) theory of careers. According to Holland, congruence refers to the match between an individual's vocational personality (i.e., likes and dislikes, career aspirations) and a particular work environment. Individuals in a congruent state are those who seek and secure occupations that are directly related to their personality type, whereas individuals in
an incongruent state are those whose occupations are unrelated to their vocational personalities. Holland believes that occupational satisfaction, stability, and achievement depend on the degree to which a particular work environment is congruent with a person’s vocational type.

Recent investigations designed to evaluate the role of college student employment in the career decision-making process have primarily examined the relationship between college student employment and job satisfaction, career maturity, and career locus of control. Results of these studies have provided substantial evidence that certain types of employment experiences—especially those that are congruent with career interests and aspirations—appear to provide college students with several vocational advantages.

**Job Satisfaction**

In their comprehensive investigation of the relationship between college student employment and job satisfaction, Kane et al. (1992) distributed a survey to more than 5000 undergraduates attending a large, urban university in the West. Students were asked a series of questions such as: “How satisfied are you with your current job? Is your current job related to your long-range career goals? Have you experienced difficulty in finding employment?” Of the 1,438 students who responded to the survey, 61% reported that they were employed at the time they completed the survey. Of those students currently employed, only 15% indicated that they held jobs closely related to their college majors, and only 16% indicated that they held jobs closely related to their career aspirations.

As expected, results revealed that the respondents who held jobs that were congruent with their career interests were significantly more satisfied with their jobs than students who worked in positions that were unrelated to their interests. Descriptive analyses also showed that students employed in engineering, health care, teaching, laboratory, and computer-related occupations were significantly more likely to have jobs congruent with their career aspirations than were students employed in bookkeeping, clerical, delivery, and food service occupations. As such, students employed in the former fields were also significantly more likely to report high levels of job satisfaction.

Another interesting finding reported by Kane et al. (1992) was the presence of a significant relationship between year in college and level of job congruency. Seniors and juniors were more likely than first- and second-year students to be employed in jobs congruent with their career interests. Students at all levels expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of job opportunities in fields directly associated with career aspirations. Sixty-four percent of all respondents reported that a major obstacle to securing employment during college was the fact that there were few jobs available that they preferred.

**Career Maturity**

Career maturity is one of the most widely researched aspects of the career development of college students (Savickas, 1984). It encompasses the readiness of a student to make age-appropriate career decisions and cope with a variety of career decision-making tasks and activities (King, 1990). Although there are several different ways of conceptualizing career maturity, the most substantial attention in the career development literature has been given to John Crites’s (1971) model.

According to Crites (1971), career maturity consists of both affective and cognitive components. The affective domain of career maturity is best characterized as a person’s attitudes toward making career decisions. Career-related attitudes are expectations that influence the interpretation of career experiences and play an important role in the accomplishment of career decision-making tasks (Healy et al., 1985). The cognitive domain of career maturity is represented by career choice competencies, such as an individual’s knowledge of career decision-making principles and her or his ability to exhibit effective problem-solving strategies when solving career-related dilemmas. Research with college student populations has consistently supported the idea that career maturity consists of both affective and cognitive components (Healy, 1991; Jepsen & Prediger, 1981).
The importance of career maturity among college students has been underscored by numerous investigations within the past 15 years consistently linking career maturity with various characteristics associated with effective career decision making. Significant, positive relationships have been observed between career maturity and academic achievement (Healy et al., 1985), self-esteem (Khan & Alvi, 1983), and career self-efficacy (Luzzo, 1993).

In a recent study designed to evaluate the relationship between college student employment and career maturity, Luzzo (1995) asked 134 undergraduates at a large Midwestern community college to indicate their current occupation and their career aspiration and to respond to a series of demographic questions. Participants also completed two different measures of career maturity, the Attitude Scale of the Career Maturity Inventory (Crites, 1978) and the Decision Making Scale of the Career Development Inventory (Super, Thompson, Lindeman, Jordaan, & Myers, 1981). The degree of congruence (i.e., relationship) between each student’s current occupation and career aspiration was determined by calculating a congruence index that has been utilized in several investigations with college students (Iachan, 1984). Higher congruence scores indicated a stronger relationship between an individual’s current occupation and her or his career interests and aspirations.

Results of the investigation indicated a significant, positive relationship between occupation-aspiration congruence and both the affective and cognitive measures of career maturity. In other words, students whose employment during college was related to their career aspirations were more likely to possess mature attitudes toward the career decision-making process and to display a general knowledge of career decision-making principles and problem-solving strategies than their peers whose employment was unrelated to their aspirations.

**Career Locus of Control**

Relationships between college student employment and measures of sociocognitive functioning have also been recently evaluated by vocational psychologists (Luzzo et al., 1996; Luzzo & Ward, 1995). These studies have primarily focused on the relationship between student employment and career locus of control, a construct based on Julian Rotter’s (1966) locus of control concept.

As conceptualized by Rotter (1966), locus of control describes the extent to which individuals consider themselves to be in control of the sources of reinforcement in their lives. Those with an internal locus of control are likely to take both an active role in the direction of their lives and personal responsibility for their actions. In terms of career decision making, students with an internal career locus of control are more likely to be involved actively in career development activities and more likely to take responsibility for making career decisions and gathering information necessary to make such decisions (Taylor, 1982). An internal career locus of control has been linked to greater involvement in career exploration activities (Blustein, 1989), higher levels of career decisiveness (Taylor & Popma, 1990), and higher levels of career maturity (Luzzo, 1995). Students with an external career locus of control, on the other hand, tend to believe that career development is primarily influenced by uncontrollable factors (i.e., chance or fate). Such students are unlikely to engage in appropriate information-gathering and career-exploration activities (Luzzo et al., 1996).

It has been hypothesized that college students who are employed in occupations congruent with their career interests and aspirations are more likely to possess an internal career locus of control than students who are employed in occupations that are unrelated to their career interests and aspirations. This is primarily expected because students who take the time and expend the amount of effort necessary to obtain employment experiences congruent with their career interests and aspirations are exhibiting the type of behavior indicative of persons who believe that their efforts are meaningful and effective. Such individuals are likely to possess an internal career locus of control, signifying the belief that effort and persistence contribute to career success.

This hypothesis was recently evaluated (Luzzo & Ward, 1995) by asking students attending a
small liberal arts university in the Midwest to complete an established measure of career locus of control (Trice, Haire, & Elliott, 1989) and indicate their current occupation and career aspiration. As expected, results revealed a significant relationship between aspiration-occupation congruence and career locus of control. The more congruent a student’s career aspiration and part- or full-time occupation, the more internal her or his career locus of control was likely to be. In other words, students who were working in occupations that were directly related to their career aspirations (e.g., students who aspired to be medical doctors working in hospitals or medical clinics) were more likely to believe that career decision making is a controllable process for which they are personally responsible compared to students who were working in occupations unrelated to their aspirations.

Luzzo et al. (1996) recently extended this line of research by analyzing differences in career locus of control between three types of undergraduates attending a regional university in the South: (a) students who were unemployed, (b) students who were employed in congruent situations (i.e., working in jobs that were related to their career interests), and (c) students who were employed in incongruent situations (i.e., employed in occupations that were not related to their career interests). Results of the study indicated more of an internal career locus of control among working students than among unemployed students. Furthermore, as in previous research, the career locus of control of participants was most internal among those whose occupations were congruent with their career interests.

Summary of Research Findings and Implications for Student Employment Administrators

The results of research evaluating the benefits of college student employment clearly demonstrate the importance of student employment experiences in the career decision-making process. Investigations conducted within the past few years with students from different regions of the country attending a variety of colleges and universities have consistently revealed that students who are able to obtain jobs that are related to their career interests and aspirations are more likely to experience certain vocational advantages than their peers who are not working in congruent occupations. As revealed in this chapter, these vocational advantages include higher levels of job satisfaction and career maturity and a stronger belief in the notion that career decision making is within an individual’s control (i.e., an internal career locus of control).

Although employment opportunities that are congruent with the career aspirations of most college students may be challenging to identify and secure, student employment administrators and their colleagues need to make a concerted effort to explore creative and effective methods of integrating work experiences into the career planning process. Employment opportunities that are congruent with college students’ career interests and aspirations will undoubtedly provide students with valuable opportunities for career exploration. As research has consistently shown, congruent work experiences may play an integral role in helping students develop more mature attitudes toward career development and obtain the decision-making skills that are required for satisfying career choices.

Super’s (1957) statement made 40 years ago is as relevant today as it was then: Part- and full-time jobs provide valuable opportunities for students to experience a variety of work settings and job tasks, allowing them to “reality test” potentially long-term work environments. In addition to the financial benefits of employment during college, occupational experiences often play an important role in the career decision-making process. It is no surprise, then, that researchers and practitioners alike have emphasized the importance of college student employment in the broader context of career development (Healy et al., 1985; Kane et al., 1992; Luzzo, 1995).

Results of recent research in this domain emphasize the need for business and industry to provide a wide variety of work experiences for college students, enabling them to obtain part- and full-time work that is more congruent with their career interests and aspirations. Results also
underscore the importance of cooperative learning arrangements and internship programs that provide students with the opportunity to try out various career options during their college years. Pascarella and Staver (1985) have gone so far as to suggest that national employment agencies and associations become involved with the development of quality employment opportunities for college students, recognizing that such programs may significantly benefit students’ career development.

A Call for Additional Research

As vocational psychologists and student affairs professionals have repeatedly suggested (Goldstein & High, 1992; Greenhaus, Hawkins, & Brenner, 1983; Healy & Mourton, 1987; Kane et al., 1982), substantially more attention needs to be directed toward college student employment and an evaluation of its career decision-making benefits. There is no question that additional research in this area is warranted and, in fact, critical to our understanding and awareness of the role that college student employment plays in the broader context of career development. Future research should explore other potential career decision-making benefits of college student employment (e.g., career commitment, career indecision) among diverse student populations as we continue to determine effective methods for integrating employment experiences into the career development process.

References


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