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

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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, the myriad ways college students make their postcollege decisions, with implications for campus policies and practice.

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; 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...
refers to an individual’s expectation, preparedness, motivation, and attitude when one interfaces with activities and people; an individual’s general orientation to life, the whole college experience, and specific situations encountered; and, a person’s past as it comes to bear in any new interactions (Brown, 2004). The second condition, experiences, refers to any situation or activity, structured, unstructured, or incidental, such as courses, student involvements, living situations, leadership opportunities, internships, programs of study, and employment. The third condition, interactions with others, refers to all general experiences with people, particularly relationships with friends, family, campus agents, and other influential people, and also includes interacting with individuals and groups different from one’s own. Finally, environment refers to the general institutional setting and its multiple subenvironments (physical/virtual), where a student’s orientation to learning, variety of experiences, and interactions with people might combine in various ways to produce wisdom.

METHOD

The literature illuminates many different conditions that can influence the postcollege decision-making process and the process itself, but there is little research that combines the various influences (i.e., intrapersonal, interpersonal, experiential, environmental) into one context and connects them all. This study’s purpose is to deepen understanding of the multiple ways in which students come through the career decision-making process and the conditions that facilitate them. This study will help educators develop programs and interventions that are more comprehensive and effective to help students make more thoughtful postcollege decisions.

Description of Participants

Eighteen May 2002 graduates from a liberal arts college for women in the Northeast were interviewed 4 to 6 months after graduation regarding their decision-making processes for postcollege activities (e.g., job, graduate school). The time frame for the interviews allowed participants to reflect on their college experiences while it was still fresh. Participants were selected through intensity and maximum variation sampling (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996) by three criteria to ensure a range of perspectives: major (social sciences = 6, natural sciences = 4, humanities = 6, interdisciplinary = 2); ethnicity (Asian American = 2, Latina = 3, African American = 3, Caucasian = 9, international = 1); and use of career center in their senior year (16 or more visits = 3, 11 to 15 visits = 3, 6 to 10 visits = 1, 1 to 5 visits = 4, and 0 visits = 7). Participants were invited to participate in the study through their campus e-mail addresses. All students’ names have been changed.

Data Analysis

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting 1 to 1.5 hours. The interviews were conducted by phone, audiotaped and transcribed. Because the postgraduate decision-making process is a complex phenomenon where there is little empirical research, data were analyzed using constant comparative naturalistic inquiry procedures (Brown, Stevens, Troiano, & Schneider, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The transcripts were analyzed into more than 1,000 individual concepts, then aggregated into larger categories, and finally connected to the top level conditions of the wisdom.
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development model (i.e., orientation to learning, experiences, interactions with others, environment; Brown, 2004). To enhance trustworthiness, a peer debriefer reviewed each transcript, helped test emerging designs and hypotheses, and assisted in clarifying and deepening aspects of data analysis. Also, experts in the field reviewed drafts of the study to evaluate the connectedness of the findings with practice.

The conditions that generally impacted the postgraduate decision-making process will be discussed within the wisdom development framework: orientation to learning, experiences, interactions with others, and the environment. The conditions described below overlap, but for the sake of clarity, they are described separately.

RESULTS
Overview

Participants came to their postcollege decisions by going through some or all parts of an ongoing, iterative, and often nonlinear process: taking stock of their lives, developing decision-making criteria, making on-board adjustments while the search is in progress, connecting to opportunities, narrowing options, and making a decision. Students’ orientation to learning (i.e., precollege history and values, personal qualities, attitude towards college) provided a backdrop as students went through college. College provided opportunities for students to interact with others through a broad range of formal and informal experiences in and

![FIGURE 1. Model of Postcollege Decision-Making](image)
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out of class, on and off campus. Some experiences that influenced students’ post-college decision-making were coursework, internships, and a variety of activities that provided students with a new perspective, led to discovery of key interests, encouraged self-reflection, challenged them, and were applicable to new situations that students would encounter in the future. Significant interactions with others were characterized by others’ level of support and empowerment towards the student, respect for their role model’s opinion, and useful feedback, and the student’s own opportunity to influence others. The college environment provided opportunities to interact with a large number of diverse people in a range of settings and was characterized by its level of challenge and support.

Using the wisdom development model as a framework (Brown, 2004), each individual element’s placement within the model and how they relate to one another as a whole is represented by the arrows included in Figure 1. The institutional environment provides a setting where orientation to learning, experiences, and interactions with others influence the postcollege decision-making process, and the postcollege decision itself, which in turn changes a student’s orientation to learning for a future experience or interaction with others. It is important to note that the arrows indicate it is possible for individuals to have interactions with others and/or participate in experiences that do not have an impact upon the postcollege decision-making process. Thus, students’ orientation to learning will not have been altered in any way, and they will remain in the exact same place when another situation or interaction is encountered.

Similar to the wisdom development model, the dotted lines around the orientation to learning, experiences, interactions with others, postcollege decision-making, and postcollege decision portions of the model indicate the permeable nature of each element of the college experience. The college environment itself provides one context where the postcollege decision-making process may be facilitated, but the model accommodates the impact of the non-college-related environment and that these, along with college-related experiences, interact with each other to further enrich the learning experience.

Orientation to Learning

Precollege Biographies/Values. Students’ precollege biographies are their experiences before matriculation, particularly those that shaped their core values. Some students cited one precollege experience that had an enduring impact on their biographies and values. Other students reflected on the general influence of their family background on their values and life priorities. Debbie talked about her mother who was a social worker and who exposed her to people different from herself: “[My mom] used to work at a halfway house for at-risk teens. . . . There is just a sense that I grew up with, that you should always try and help other people.”

Personal Identities/Qualities. In addition to precollege values, a number of dimensions related to personal identities, qualities, and character traits affected a student’s decision-making process, such as level of risk-taking, tenacity, optimism, worldliness, independence, expectations of self, willingness to learn, comfort with ambiguity, and general motivation and initiative. Another student quality is confidence and acknowledging one’s own capabilities. Natalie spoke about the challenges she set for herself: “When I
came to college I was extremely introverted, very shy.” To increase her confidence, she said, “I chose to be a student advisor because I knew that it would force me to do stuff that I wasn’t comfortable doing.”

**Attitude Towards College.** Students’ attitudes towards college directly influenced their experiences throughout it. Students varied on several dimensions, ranging from: certainty of what they would study, level of interest in a given topic, amount of long-range planning, amount of effort and active reflection, and self-reported knowledge of college and opportunities. Nia’s attitude towards college affected the limited reflection she engaged in throughout the process: “Do as much as I can to get the most experience possible, then I’ll think about it later.” Livia focused her energies on an important nonacademic endeavor: “I helped found an orchestra, not everyone can say that.” Natalie remarked on her status as an international student: “People who come from countries where things are not so good, they know how important it is to have a good education and to do something important with it.”

**Experiences**

Students reported a wide variety of experiences that influenced their postcollege decision-making process throughout college. These experiences could occur in and out of class, on and off campus, and ranged from formal and structured (e.g., classroom, work), to less formal (e.g., student government, clubs and organizations, internships, athletics, research, community service, study away), to unplanned and spontaneous (e.g., social settings). Generally, significant experiences can be described in terms of variety (few to many), frequency (one-time or ongoing), and level of impact (low to high). Many key issues were raised in the context of making a decision (e.g., choosing a major, applying to an internship, picking classes, and/or applying to a position/graduate school). Significant experiences that affected the postgraduate decision-making process were characterized by the degree that they provided a new perspective, facilitated the discovery of key interests, promoted self-reflection, and provided students with a level of challenge and applicability.

**Acquisition of a New Perspective.** Significant experiences that influenced the decision-making process often provided students with a new perspective on a familiar situation. When Katya took a year off from school to work at an educational not-for-profit agency, she realized: “I had at my fingertips what people dream about having. . . The things that these kids were working so hard to get, I already had.” Other students experienced a change in perspective in a more dramatic way. Debbie described singing at a memorial service for a young alumna with a rough draft of her thesis due the next day: “I was freaking out that I was going to have to stay up late to work on it. Being at the service and realizing that somebody only a few years older than me was dead, put things in perspective.” Reflecting on one’s involvement in a given activity over time might bring on the new perspective. Hannah described her involvement in student government: “How was it that I spent 3 years constructing this identity, feeling like a very confident, well-rounded person, and then ended up quitting what I feel is a stupid cocurricular activity? What did this mean to me?”

**Discovery of Key Interests.** The experiences that influenced the postgraduate decision-making process helped students
with self-discovery. Many of these discoveries were serendipitous. Mary’s scheduling difficulties affected her choice of her major: “I wanted to be a bio major but bio wouldn’t fit into my schedule so I decided to take computer science, and I loved it.” Lucinda attended a series of public campus lectures as part of a distribution course requirement that had a high impact: “It took me to a direction that I never thought about before. I went to the first one and I was like, ‘Oh, my God, I can see myself doing this.’” Some experiences helped students connect to an interest, which altered their paths. Hannah said, “I didn’t realize how much I cared about politics until I was doing it for myself and not taking on anyone’s beliefs as my own.” An experience can also help a person learn what they don’t want to do, as Debbie points out: “Seeing public defenders—I know that we need those kind of people but it wouldn’t have to be me.”

**Self-Reflection.** Significant experiences directly or indirectly stimulated self-reflection in students, and they came in many different contexts such as a course, job search, interviews, workshops, or even as a participant in a study. Dani described an acting program: “It was a very intense and focused program. You are asked a lot of questions about yourself.” A significant experience can also provide clarification of one’s interest, even if the experience had negative undertones. Debbie described how an internship clarified her goals: “It exposed me to a lot of the less glorious aspects of law and it really brought up immigration again.”

**Challenge.** The significant experience also tended to be characterized by its level of difficulty. The challenging situation might force a student to balance priorities, press their views, or push a student farther than they would have imagined. Kristen was challenged in her student employment position: “My supervisor wasn’t expecting me to finish but I did. I think that I will always remember that when I move on to being in the real world workplace.” Livia reflected on her experience cofounding the college orchestra:

> It was the most difficult experience and also the most rewarding experience. It pushed me to become organized, to become a leader. In that process I learned that this was something I enjoyed, something that I was good at, something that inspired me.

**Applicability.** Significant experiences often could apply to students’ lives beyond one particular situation. Larissa spoke about her experience working with kids: “Working with the art therapist and making masks with girls—those were opportunities for me to take what I had learned in the classroom and apply it.” Many of Natalie’s experiences had high applicability:

> [Employers] want to know whether you can be analytical. I think that was something that I got, not just through my economics classes but even through my English courses and through the general college experience. I think every class has a big focus on analysis on many different levels.

**Interactions With Others**

As expected, the number of significant persons in the postcollege decision-making process ranged from one to many, and can be described in terms of diversity of interactions, frequency, duration, and the nature of the interactions. Dani described the importance of her ongoing relationship with her professor-advisor: “[She] had been my teacher in a number of classes so she saw my development from my first year until my
junior year.” Relationships with key individuals also may change over time. Hannah reconsidered her parent’s wishes in regard to her goals: “I realized that my dream about medicine was really my mom’s dream and not my dream and I got over that.”

There were also several specific aspects and qualities that described individuals who had an influence on the postcollege decision-making process: support and empowerment, respect of opinion, role modeling, and feedback. Students also noted that being in a position to influence others was a significant influence upon what they ultimately decided.

**Support and Empowerment.** A key aspect of influential persons was related to the amount of support they provided to students. Larissa believed support from the college chaplain was critical to her: “[She] really understands me and knows where I am coming from. She empowered me and got me thinking about how I can bring my best self into the world and share my talents and my voice.” Renee talked about another professor’s belief in her abilities that she carried with her beyond that class: “[Professor] believed in me, even though at the time I really couldn’t see it. When I was taking her class she said, ‘I see leadership potential in you.’” Dani described the encouragement she received to pursue a career in theater, something others considered risky: “[My parents] were very encouraging and would help in any way they could. Even my advisors in psychology were excited that I wanted to pursue theater.”

Significant individuals to the postcollege decision-making process also provided support to students by connecting them to people, ideas, resources, and opportunities. Nia networked with her chemistry professor to learn more about the medical field: I ended up doing two medical internships at the hospital near my house. Talking to [my chemistry professor], and talking to some of the people she knew in the field—about the different options in the field and what you can do with your degree.

Students also responded to a person’s level of care. Hannah described an experience with a career counselor: “[He] made me feel like I was talking to a real person, rather than just someone who was a lot older than me who thought what I was doing was unimportant.” Vanessa remarked favorably on the frank discussions about cultural expectations she had with a faculty member who was also Asian American. Students also discussed an individual’s level of care and their availability. Larissa noted that the availability of one professor led to important conversations: “The kind of conversations where you go to get something signed and you end up sitting there talking for an hour.”

**Respect of Other’s Opinion.** Another aspect of what made a given person influential in the process was how much the student respected the influential person’s opinion, usually derived by admiring the person in action or observing qualities that they possessed. Natalie observed her friends who were several years her senior and listened to them speak about the job search process. Livia was empowered to follow her own interests when she observed a friend connecting her college interest to a job: “[She] is now doing event planning and she worked on the [student program board]. Stuff like that where you do something at [college] because you love it and then you figure ‘I could do this professionally too!’” Some individuals became role models because they had personal qualities that students valued and wished to emulate. Debbie spoke of an
[The dean of students] is a huge role model because she is so understanding and capable. She gets so much work done, works really hard, and still is the kindest person I know. I was trying to adopt the things that she does and how she acts.

When students obtained advice, a key aspect was how much credibility they ascribed to the person. Livia described a friend: “[She] has repeatedly given me good advice that I followed. I would always shoot down her ideas, but then think about them. Then I had friends who I probably wouldn’t take into account what they said very much.” Marilyn’s frank advice from her professor about the difficulties of astronomy was pivotal: “That was the starting point of ‘Maybe I don’t want to go to grad school because I am really not that into it.’”

Feedback. Influential individuals also provided feedback that gave students new perspectives about themselves. Feedback can also be characterized by its directness, level of active intervention, and ability to be implemented. Larissa noted the influence of someone who observed many connections in her life:

[Professor] was really supportive of me, not just playing the piano, but also doing art and theater . . . recognizing that there was a central theme, there was something that was linking that together, which is my desire to express myself and to connect to people.

Another important aspect of feedback was an influential person’s willingness to challenge the student. Mary described the ways in which her roommate challenged her socially: “Whenever we would go somewhere together, she would ditch me. I would have to learn, [how to meet new people] step by step. I would start talking to anyone wherever we were.” Lucinda described the challenges given to her by her internship supervisor and coworkers: “I didn’t feel comfortable but they would say, ‘You have to do this.’ I got out of my comfort zone.”

Other individuals would challenge students to reflect on previous experiences. Nia described a session with a career counselor:

[The career counselor] always asked me those provoking questions like, “What do you want?” Making me search deeper into what I want and what I want people to perceive and what I want to take with me from here.

Sometimes the challenge was much more direct, forcing the student to justify her own choices. Erica described defending her decision to pursue nursing:

It was the opposition, “Why do nursing, why not be a physician?” It made me really clarify, “Yes, I want to be a nurse and even though I understand your arguments, I don’t really care.”

Some individuals would use their knowledge of the student to challenge the assumptions she was making. Hannah talked about the thought of approaching a professor who knew her quite well:

There were certain things that I wanted to do, that if I were to ask a faculty member for a recommendation on that they would laugh at me and ask me why I thought of doing that. [Professor] pushed me very hard for 4 years to challenge most of the ideas that I had.

Larissa described an aggregate impact of her interactions with others:

 Conversations with friends, life experience, and having the supportive environment, having professors challenge me and ask the right questions at the
right time, and not only encourage me to move forward but also support my ideas and encouraging me.

**Being Influential to Others.** Students also had opportunities for deeper reflection when they were in a position to influence others in some way. Their position of influence could be through formal leadership positions or in informal settings, working one-on-one, or impacting many people. Oftentimes providing advice to others developed this increased clarity. Katya saw some younger students repeating mistakes she had made:

These sophomore girls [sic], who were where I was before, thinking, “God, I am so sick of being in school,” I got to say to them, “Are you crazy, do you know how much it sucks when you are not in school?” I got to step away from that and look again [at my previous experience], which I don’t think happens very often.

Hannah reflected on her college experience: “I saw the biggest contrast when I was trying to explain to someone else the stuff they have done that they don’t even realize they’ve done. I realized I was like that at the beginning.”

**Environment**

The college environment provided one context where students’ orientation to learning, experiences, and interactions with others came together and influenced the ways in which the students made their postgraduate decisions, but students reported that certain aspects of the college environment were especially influential. Although many of the findings described below have been explored in more detail in the preceding sections, together they create the ethos of a particular environment. Of particular salience were the levels of challenge and support in the environment.

**Challenge.** An institutional environment may be characterized by how much it generally challenges its students. Katya ascribed her ability to persevere through difficult times to the environment: “When I am committed to something I really don’t let go. I think that tenacity came from having to work so hard at [college].” Nia also credited her tenacity as a product of an environment that is “helpful and challenging and soothing but always very pressuring for you to do better and do better. [College] is a place where mediocrity isn’t okay.” Becky talked about the changes in herself in this environment: “I was very shy when I came to [college], intimidated by a lot of things. Leaving [college], I wouldn’t say I am very shy or intimidated by many things.”

**Support.** Often concomitant with challenge was the amount of support available to the student. One component of support was the development of a student’s “voice.” Renee:

One of the first things that the women learn at [College] is that you have a voice and use it. There had been times in my life where I wouldn’t buck the system or I wouldn’t challenge a comment, whether it was a racial comment or a sexist comment. Now I don’t do that.

Larissa described multiple supportive experiences within the campus environment that contributed to her direction: “Classroom discussions, doing art, exploring my own sense of creativity and imagination, having support and encouragement from professors, being part of the multifaith council, support from friends. Those are the main things that got me to where I am.”
Postcollege Decision-Making Process

Although the previous discussion focused on the general conditions that influenced the decision-making process throughout college (i.e., orientation to learning, experiences, interactions with others, and environment), the following discussion refers to the ways students formulated their actual postcollege plans. General issues that affected the postgraduate search were the time the postcollege search was initiated, amount of preparation for the search, amount of reflection before the process, number of changes in plans, and time of change in plans. Other issues were students’ awareness of resources and accuracy of perceptions. Characteristic of the decision-making process is the degree of decisiveness and certainty throughout the process. For Marilyn, the decision arrived too quickly: “When I was deciding what I wanted to do, I took the GREs just in case. I realized that I really wasn’t ready. I still don’t know what I want to do.”

The decision-making process itself was ongoing, often nonlinear and iterative, and may be comprised of one or more of the following actions: taking stock, developing criteria, making on-board adjustments, connecting to opportunities, and narrowing option/making decisions. For the sake of clarity they are described separately, though in effect, they can be overlapping and mutually reinforcing.

**Taking Stock.** Some students began their postcollege decision-making by reflecting on their previous experiences and identifying salient themes and patterns. Larissa said: “I have huge visions and thoughts about community building and creating circles that everybody can be a part of, art, people, and inclusiveness. . . . There is definitely a common thread between everything I am doing.” Others talked about the role of their priorities, both conscious and unconscious. Debbie took stock of her previous experiences. Debbie:

> I thought about journalism, but my experience with the [school newspaper] really turned me off. Then I worked as a writing assistant my junior year. I got bored with editing. So I made the leap to what publishing would be like and I ruled that out. I came back to my internship and history stuff. I ruled out academia. I was left with law.

Although some students took stock by looking into the past, others looked at possible futures. Hannah looked ahead:

> I spent the last 2 years doing a bunch of different internships, seeing what I can really see myself doing. If I could close my eyes and wake up 60 years old, what would I have wanted to do with the last 40 years? I began to chart and list. I have a full legal pad of flow charts of how different things could work out.

Some participants took stock of their situations alone, whereas some engaged others. Mary: “I would talk to [friends] first and then they would come up with some really wild and crazy ideas that would make me think differently.”

**Emerging Criteria for Decision-Making.** There were certain criteria that repeatedly factored into a student’s decision-making process. Some criteria can be characterized by their feasibility, such as finding concrete opportunities, identifying viable options, financial issues, a student’s perceived ability to get hired, and relative difficulty of finding work in a given field or location. Natalie talked about the opportunities available to students who are limited by visa issues: “A lot of people need to go for investment banking jobs because there aren’t too many jobs [available where companies] are going to hire and sponsor them.”
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Other key criteria that were a part of the decision-making process were less concrete and aligned with students’ sense of purpose and values and personal satisfaction, despite the risks, financial or otherwise. Dani weighed several factors when considering her theatrical aspirations: “Am I in a place where I can just take that risk and pursue this 100% when I can’t exactly support myself? That is my biggest doubt, but I’m still going ahead with it.”

Making On-Board Adjustments. Once the postgraduate decision-making process was engaged, the search itself often helped clarify the types of experiences that students found more compelling. For some, it was obtaining more helpful information. Some students found interviewing to be helpful in making on-board adjustments by rethinking their initial ideas. Nia reflected on her own reactions to her search:

By the time I interviewed with [an organization], I had gone through a huge learning process. I realized that what I was lacking before was the conviction to convince the person on the other side of the table that I really wanted to do the job.

Getting Connected to Opportunities. Throughout the process students sought opportunities that seemed worth pursuing. Some students actively looked for ways to increase their options. Debbie described her strategy:

I knew that I had to be [in Minnesota] to get a job. I used the [alumnae career network] and I wrote to all of the lawyers in the area who are alums. I talked to some of them and got their ideas about what to do, their experience of being a [college alumna] and a lawyer. Then I just got on the Web, applied to a ton of places, and sent out resumes.

Some students were connected to opportunities very passively and let opportunities come to them. Katya received a call from the founder of the organization where she interned: “He called me and said, ‘I have a couple of job opportunities here, and I was wondering if any of them appealed to you because we would love to have you work for us.’” Becky’s decision was also very passive, she simply sent in a brochure to a Ph.D. program with her name and GPA: “The next thing I know they flew me down here and they offered me a fellowship to attend, so that is where I am.”

Narrowing Options and Making a Decision. If there were no clear options on what to do, students narrowed their decisions and further clarified their search in making some decisions. When making a decision, the right path was not always clear. Nia described: “They are all telling you different things, who do you believe? Which one do you choose and how do you incorporate it all? That is what makes it frustrating.” After much consideration, Natalie was certain she wanted to do some sort of consulting:

Eventually I narrowed it down to economics consulting because I was comfortable in environments that were leaning towards an intellectual environment. From my interviews with economics consulting firms and people who had worked there, it just seemed like the perfect combination.

Eventually, students might come to some decision through self-assessment, reflecting on options, synthesizing multiple perspectives, and consideration of consequences. Hannah put the pieces together and evaluated all the evidence: “I think answering the questions that I was getting from the outside was just as key in my path as questions that I was asking myself.” Liz: “My senior year
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was full of ups and downs and confusion. Finally I just listened to the redundancy of what everyone was saying, and what I was thinking.”

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear that there are many ways students might arrive at their postcollege decisions, whether this process is methodical or haphazard, comprehensive or abbreviated. Many of the following recommendations fall within the purview of career services; however, given the wide variety of factors that influence the postcollege decision-making, they have institution-wide implications. These recommendations provide a framework for educators to help students make more sound decisions that reflect the variety of conditions that shape postgraduate decision-making processes, the way students actually make them.

Orientation to Learning

Students’ precollege values/qualities in this study echoed several themes in the literature in terms of the varying degrees of students’ readiness, anxiety, and durability of career searching myths (Luzzo, 1999; Skorupa & Agresti, 1998); and various fluctuations in self-efficacy (Gianakos, 2001), and various dimensions of identity (Farmer et al., 1995; Liu, 1998; Mau & Fernandes, 2001; Murray & Hall, 2001; Tomlinson & Fassinger, 2003). Interventions that might better assist students in the career searching process include: orienting students to the postcollege decision-making process and personalizing the process by focusing on a particular aspects of a person’s identity.

Orient Students to Postcollege Decision-Making Process. Students often have a great deal of unease with the postcollege decision-making process and this unease should be actively addressed. Providing fact-based information and programs to combat debilitating myths and irrationality (Skorupa & Agresti, 1998) helps demystify the process and target students’ specific concerns (e.g., it is okay to not have all the answers, resources only apply to seniors in business). Students need more concrete evidence that makes it more compelling for them to undertake this decision-making process more thoughtfully (e.g., benefits of the process reduce anxiety, save time, help students to be a better candidate, to be happier). Additionally, many students feel overwhelmed by the amount of things they need to do in a given day and the decision-making process can seem abstract and foreboding. To combat this factor, have students develop a clear and comprehensive strategy that: (a) grabs students’ attention in an already cluttered information environment through a variety of means (e.g., Web, e-mail, come by, contact via phone), and (b) is well-positioned (e.g., place materials in venues that students frequent). For traditional students, market programs and services in ways that acknowledge the different learning needs of a generation that has grown up in a digital environment where learning is “active, contextual, social, engaging and owned by the student, who expect to control when, where, how, and how fast they learn” (Barone, 2003, p. 1).

Personalize the Process by Salient Dimensions of Identity or Pressing Issues. Students often identify with certain ascendant aspects of a given identity at a particular time or situation, and should be engaged specifically and appropriately (e.g., by class year, major, ethnicity) (Brown, 2002a; Mau & Fernandes, 2001; Murray & Hall, 2001).
Some examples might be “Finding Jobs in Your Home Area,” or “Fellowships and Scholarships for African Americans,” or “Are you a Computer Scientist Looking for a Job?”

Experiences
The experiences that had the most impact on students’ decision making provided them with a new perspective, stimulate self-reflection, and were challenging and applicable. Effective interventions that can influence the decision-making process include encouraging ongoing reflection opportunities to students and increasing the efficacy of programs and services.

Encourage Ongoing Reflection. Provide ongoing and annual campus-wide interventions that encourage reflection, integration, and application of the aggregate college experience (e.g., What have I learned about myself? How am I different from this time last year?). Examples include portfolios, capstone courses, transition or senior year programs. Provide policies that encourage reflection and are tied to intrinsic and extrinsic motivators (e.g., grades, requirements). Create or use self-assessment instruments that help students most broadly reflect, integrate, and apply the lessons they have learned in and out of class, on and off campus.

Increase Efficacy of Programs and Services. Design programs that provide students with identifiable concrete benefits that they readily understand and value. Schedule workshops so that all students will have an opportunity to take advantage of them (e.g., some workshops miss science majors in lab or athletes; Martens & Cox, 2000). Hold workshops where the students are (e.g., office hours in student union, cultural houses).

Interactions With Others
There are potentially many influential people in a student’s postcollege decision-making process. The key attributes of influential people are their level of support, their willingness to provide feedback, and their ability to make connections. Key individuals can be career staff, other campus administrators, peers, faculty, alumnae, and parents/families. These recommendations help these groups better realize their potential influence.

Maximize Career Staff. Design an office that makes all students feel expected and welcomed, and hire professional and student staff that reflects the demographic makeup of the student body. Use a wide variety of tactics to help students to determine what is most important to them and why; to articulate what knowledge, skills and qualities they have gained and developed; and to learn how to bring those forward into future opportunities (Brown, 2002b). Prepare staff to meet the wide variety of students and the various ways they came to the postgraduate decision-making process. Encourage students to make “decision timelines” where they identify key experiences throughout their lives (significant people and experiences) and explain why and what the impact was on their lives.

Collaborate With Other Campus Offices. Participate in campus-wide resource fairs, cosponsor with class boards, academic deans, chairs of committees, and those who work with groups based on gender, major, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation that can relate to core career issues (Long et al., 1995; Murray & Hall, 2001).

Maximize Peer Influence. Take advantage of influential peers to compel students to consider career issues. Encourage positive word of mouth by targeting formal
and informal peer leaders and empower them in an appropriate way to leverage these issues. Use more students to send messages where students congregated (e.g., make announcements at dinner). Create “friend packs” to focus on smaller groups and do more small group work (Jurgans, 2000). Take advantage of natural linkages among student groups (e.g., new members to organizations, individuals who just declared a major).

**Educate Advisors, Faculty, Staff, and Supervisors.** Many students have encounters with a wide range of influential people. Create materials that cast all advisors, work supervisors, and faculty as possible influences on this process and provide easy-to-implement information (e.g., Helping Faculty Help Students Beyond the Classroom). Provide programming for students to help them take full advantage of particular relationships on campus (e.g., How to Get the Most out of Your Academic Advisor). Help students develop a variety of “composite mentors” to help them think through a variety of career-related factors (Packard, 2003).

**Use Parents and Families.** Parents and families were a significant presence in students’ decision-making process. Communicate with parents about what the career office does, and dovetail with other campus-based parent-oriented initiatives (e.g., parent orientation, parent organizations). Create standing a brown-bag lunch series that taps into the parent and family expertise when they are on campus to give informal discussion about their career paths, sponsor internships and entry-level jobs. Provide specific programming to help students acknowledge the role of their families and cultures in their decision-making process (e.g., Whose Life is it Anyway?).

**Alumni/ae.** Students often identify with alumni/ae because they can connect their own college experiences with the “real” world. Create a searchable database where students can identify alumni/ae who have a similar major, field of interest, or postgraduate education. Create multipronged mentoring opportunities (e.g., alumni/ae and student programs, workshops, panels, alumni/ae career network, online mentoring).

**IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES**

Consonant with qualitative research, these results should be viewed within the particular context of this study. Though the purpose of the study was to develop an overarching framework that addressed the wide variety of factors related to the career decision-making process, all the participants were women, nearly all traditional-aged, at a highly selective, single-sex, liberal arts college. Future studies might further address other specific dimensions of student identity related to this model (e.g., gender, socio-economic class, sexual orientation) and educational settings. Additionally, the ways in which people change in their decision-making processes beyond college were not discussed (Baxter Magolda, 1994).

**CONCLUSION**

A student’s postgraduate decision-making process can be influenced by a variety of people and experiences within the academic community and beyond. Although career offices have the most direct responsibility for this process, their efforts to help students in such decision-making should include other members of the community. The professional/research literature illuminates nearly
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infinite permutations that might influence the postcollege decision-making process, yet no study puts all of the various influences (experiential, personal, human, environmental) into one context and connects them to each other. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the ways students came through the decision-making process and the conditions that facilitated them, allowing educators to formulate more effective and comprehensive interventions.

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