

Article 13

Evaluating a Workshop for Non-Traditional College Students Experiencing Career Transitions

Courtney E. Gasser

Gasser, Courtney E., Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor at the University of Baltimore and a licensed psychologist in the state of Maryland. Dr. Gasser enjoys training and supervising counseling students, performing career counseling outreach in the community, and investigating vocational psychology topics. Currently, her research has focused on helping adult students in career transition.

The world of work has changed dramatically in the past few decades (Arnold & Jackson, 1997; Borgen, 1999; Maglio, Butterfield, & Borgen, 2005). Gone are the days when one would find a satisfying job and keep that same job until retirement. Now, it is far more common to expect that one will be faced with several, if not many, job and career transitions over the course of one's work life (Arnold & Jackson, 1997). Furthermore, successfully completing a career transition may often require additional training and skills, with the implication for some to attend college to seek degrees. In fact, it is likely that with the current global economic issues, and with larger percentages of unemployed Americans, that some individuals will be looking to change career paths to pursue existing employment opportunities that may be perceived to lead to steadier paychecks. Given these employment trends, it is not a stretch to imagine more individuals seeking out collegiate experiences in order to make these occupational shifts possible.

It appears that we have entered into what could be called the age of the "career transitioner." Career transitioners can be defined as those working adults who are making a change in their choice of work (Fouad & Bynner, 2008). These transitioners may have experienced either voluntary or involuntary job loss, and may be retraining in preparation to enter another career. Given the trends of our changing world of work, it seems likely that there will be an increasing number of career transitioners in need of counseling interventions tailored to their unique needs. To date, few studies have focused on evaluating career interventions with mature adult workers (Bobek & Robbins, 2005). This study seeks to expand on what is known about effective career interventions for mature adult workers who are experiencing career transitions.

Career Workshop

Background and Rationale

Several career exercises featured in the book *Experiential Activities for Teaching Career Counseling Classes and for Facilitating Career Groups* (Minor & Pope, 2005) were selected to create a multifaceted career workshop experience, tailored to the needs

of the student body at an East coast university. At this university, many students are nontraditionally aged (over 30 years of age), are in the midst of raising families, and often have at least one full-time or part-time job while pursuing baccalaureate or post-baccalaureate degrees. This author met with a small focus group of current students and the university career counselor many times over the course of six months in order to develop a more focused idea of what might be most helpful for the needs of these career transitioning students. Based on the feedback of this group, a career workshop was born. In the end, it was decided that a time-limited experience of two-and-a-half hours would allow these mature career workers to elaborate on career concepts using a variety of formats (i.e., individual, small group, and large group exercises).

Workshop Structure

The career workshop began with a short explanation of the research being conducted, description of the informed consent information, and the administration of a pre-test measure. Next, there was a short explanation of Holland theory and codes, as it seemed important to this author that workshop attendees be exposed to one system of organizing their thoughts around the world of work. As the late Frank Parsons (1909) pointed out, it is with accurate thinking about ourselves and how we fit into the world of work that we can best chart our occupational journeys. More specifically, Parsons outlined the key features of career counseling by positing that counselors need to guide those with vocational quandaries by increasing the individual's self-awareness, increasing knowledge of the requirements of potential occupations, and facilitating the client's exploration and insight of the relation between the person and the job requirements. The role of interests was embedded in self-awareness: Parsons advocated that individuals needed to know what they have to offer in terms of interests, abilities, and values.

Parson's ideas laid the groundwork for person-environment fit theory, out of which Holland theory developed. Holland theory describes six categories of persons (P) and also parallel work environments (E; Holland, 1997). In P-E fit theory, an individual will select an occupation based on how the work environment matches her or his personal interests. These six categories include Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional (RIASEC). Realistic types of people prefer working with their hands, Investigative types like to figure out solutions, Artistic types like to create, Social types prefer working with people, Enterprising types like to influence people, and Conventional types like set tasks (Holland, 1973). This knowledge of Holland theory was perceived to be something that could be of use to participants, and so the first piece of the workshop involved quickly and simply explaining the concept of P-E fit and the RIASEC codes.

Next, the career groups activity by Zalaquett (2005) was introduced, with the goal of facilitating exploration of career transition issues and providing guidance for students who considered themselves in the midst of transitioning careers. First, facilitators presented learning objectives, sharing that the purpose of this major segment of the workshop involved learning about: (1) one's actions, so as to help participants articulate their personal career values; (2) one's role in the community or society, to help with articulation of the personal mission statement; (3) one's aspirations, to help with creating a personal career vision; and (4) articulating the values, vision, and mission, in order to construct career outcomes or goals (Zalaquett, 2005). Attendees were guided through

exercises intended to help them explore their values, mission statement, and vision (goals) for their next career, receiving the message that knowing your values shapes your mission, delineating your mission shapes your vision, and this vision will help direct future career activities and goals (Zalaquett, 2005). For the workshop organizers, it seemed that without having this framework to help with their direction, it would be less likely that career transitioners will be as successful in implementing the steps necessary to secure their goals.

Next, the workshop culminated in three final pieces. The first involved an activity by Williamson (2005) that was used to wrap up the interventions involved in the workshop. This activity involved filling a large clear container with large and small rocks, sand, and water to demonstrate that people need to prioritize their lives around what is most important to them (the large rocks symbolized this piece) in order to fit in these valued things. At this point, the workshop concluded, and a post-test measure was administered to those workshop attendees who had consented to participate in the data collection. All participants were then invited on a personal tour of the campus career center.

Current Study's Hypotheses

This paper will explore the findings regarding the effectiveness of two career transitions workshops for nontraditional students attending an urban university. First, it was hypothesized that there would be no significant differences between the two workshops, held one year apart at the same university. Given that the workshops were held using the same format, the same interventions, and some of the same facilitators, it seemed likely to this author that the experiences of participants in both workshops were likely to be highly similar. Second, it was hypothesized that the workshop would be effective at helping people with their career transition issues, according to their ratings. Third, it was hypothesized that, regardless of stage in career, students would have a more positive rating of career counseling after participating in the workshop than they would at the beginning of the workshop. The rationale behind this hypothesis involved the idea that many students on this campus may not have had much experience with career counseling, and therefore these students may not have an idea of what career counseling looks like. Given the diverse cultural backgrounds of many of these students, it seemed probable that some of the students may not feel culturally comfortable with the idea of any counseling, career or otherwise. Therefore, it was expected that this workshop experience would provide students with a more positive view of career counseling as well as a concrete perspective on what career counseling can look like when approached in the format of a brief workshop.

Finally, it was expected that persons who indicated having had more work experience in terms of number of jobs would rate the workshop as more helpful than those having experience with fewer jobs. The rationale behind this final hypothesis came from the notion that persons with more work experience would likely be in a better position to take what they needed from the workshop experience due to the idea that with more work experience often comes more knowledge of the world of work. Thus, with this potentially greater knowledge of the world of work and themselves as agents in this

occupational sphere, these individuals could perhaps have a more specific view of what their career missions, values, and vision might look like.

Method

Participants

The survey groups were comprised of 14 diverse, non-traditional college students (women: $n = 8$; men: $n = 6$) from a medium-sized, urban, Eastern university. The participants voluntarily attended a two-and-a-half hour career workshop with the purpose of addressing career transition issues. The ethnicity of the sample was 50% Euro-American, 42.9% African American and 7.1% biracial. Ages ranged from 21 to 38 years of age ($M = 30.5$, $SD = 4.8$). In terms of relationship status, 35.7% of participants indicated that they were currently single, 28.6% were married, 28.6% were divorced, and 7.1% were living with a partner.

Also, the participants indicated that they were hailing from a diverse array of college departments on campus. Specifically, majors represented in the sample involved students of business and business administration, corporate communication, design, history, human resources management, psychology, public policy, and sociology.

Materials

Participants filled out questionnaires before and after the career workshop. The questionnaires included items on demographic variables such as gender, age, marital status, academic class, parent/guardian status, and ethnicity, as well as questions on major and career choice, educational and occupational aspirations, expectations and perceptions regarding the career workshop's effectiveness, and career counseling perceptions. Questions consisted of multiple-choice, scaled, and open-ended formats. Both pre-test and post-test measures were created by this author, and were very brief in nature (one to two pages in length).

Procedures

Participant recruitment. Workshop participants were recruited as a result of several types of university advertisements. These ads for the workshop appeared in electronic form on the university's daily events email notification system, as well as in paper form on flyers posted in various university buildings and common gathering areas. Participants were given the option of registering for the workshops by calling the Career Center, yet they also were able to attend the workshop events unannounced.

Career workshops. Each workshop was a two-and-a-half hour interactive presentation that consisted of individual, small, and large group activities and a tour of the university's career center. The same workshop was repeated one year later, with an eye to keeping the workshop experience consistent from Time 1 and Time 2.

Facilitators. The workshop was facilitated by volunteer graduate students in the counseling master's program at the same university. These graduate students were advanced in their program of study, meaning that they each had had courses on ethics, counseling theories, and counseling skills, and had taken at least one course in practicum or career counseling or both. The graduate student facilitators each attended at least one training session several days prior to facilitating the workshop. Those facilitators who

were actively presenting workshop material had attended a minimum of two training sessions.

Measures. Questionnaires were distributed by the workshop's presenters at the beginning and again at the end of the workshop, at which times students were given 10 minutes to complete the questionnaires. Participants were informed that filling out questionnaires was completely voluntary, was not necessary to participate in the career workshop, and that they could discontinue at any time. Participants returned the questionnaires to facilitators upon completion.

Results

Again, it was hypothesized that there would be no significant differences between the two workshops. Also, it was hypothesized that the workshop would be effective at helping people with their career transition issues, according to their ratings. Third, it was hypothesized that, regardless of stage in career, students would have a more positive rating of career counseling after participating in the workshop than they would at the beginning of the workshop. Finally, it was expected that persons who indicated having had more work experience in terms of number of jobs would rate the workshop as more helpful than those having experience with fewer jobs.

First, analyses focused on comparing the data collected from the two workshops, in an effort to see what differences may emerge. No significant differences were detected, and so the decision was made to analyze the data from both workshops as one group. In regards to the second hypothesis, results showed that 71.4% of the workshop attendees rated the workshop as "above average" to "excellent" in terms of its helpfulness (see Table 1). This finding was not surprising, given that most career workshops tend to be rated positively by their participants (Robbins, Chartrand, McFadden, & Lee, 1994). However, 28% ($n = 4$) of the participants rated the workshop as "average" in terms of helpfulness, which may indicate that the workshop experience might merit improvement for these individuals. In any event, it was interesting to note that about three-fourths (71.4%) of the sample indicated that the workshop had changed their perceptions of their careers (see Figure 1). Perhaps these were the same individuals who indicated that the workshop was a helpful experience.

In addition, it was expected that a difference would be found between participants' helpfulness ratings of their previous and current experiences with career counseling ($t = -2.65$; $p < .05$). This hypothesis was supported in that it was found that workshop attendees had a more positive rating of career counseling after participating in the workshop than they had at the beginning of the workshop ($t = 5.34$; $p < .0001$). It may be that these mature adult transitioners were perhaps able to benefit from looking at their career paths in a supportive group setting that also had the flexibility to allow for more individualized attention due to a favorable ratio of facilitators to participants (1:4).

In regards to the fourth hypothesis, people who indicated having work experience in more careers did not rate the workshop as more beneficial than those who had indicated working in fewer careers. Thus, this hypothesis was not born out by the data. Perhaps all participants, regardless of the number of jobs previously held, all felt affected in some way by the workshop.

In conclusion, it seems that the majority of participants felt helped by the workshop and had more favorable perceptions of career counseling as a result of their experience. However, it does seem as if there might be some changes made in the future in order to make this experience more helpful for all participants.

Discussion

Overall, it appeared that these career workshops were helpful and effective for the groups served. It is especially exciting that these experiences helped improve participant ratings of career counseling. If career practitioners and others can help career counseling seem more approachable to diverse groups, then these groups may be more likely to take advantage of career services.

Limitations of the current study include the small sample size, the use of “home grown” measures, and the need for more detailed knowledge about what participants might find more helpful in future workshops. First, the small sample size of this study limits the generalizability of these findings. The sample involved individuals who had self-selected to be a part of the workshop, rather than a randomly selected group of people. This may mean that there was some characteristic or set of characteristics specific to this sample that may not allow these findings to be generalized to a larger population. For example, participants may be more proactive or invested in resolving their career concerns than people who did not attend the workshops. Also, these participants were all students at one university, a university that is known as a unique urban access-oriented institution of higher education. Again, these characteristics may also reduce the generalizability of this study.

In terms of the second limitation, it should be noted that this study’s measures were both created by this author and thus may be considered “home grown” instruments that have not been studied psychometrically. In other words, no reliability or validity information is available for these instruments. Therefore, the findings of the current study are limited by the measures employed.

Finally, another limitation of the current study involved a need for more detailed knowledge about what could improve the workshop. According to the data, about three-fourths of the attendees found the workshop to be a beneficial experience, yet it is not clear what the remaining quarter of attendees might find more helpful. It should be noted that several open-ended questions were provided in the post-test survey that were aimed to elicit this sort of feedback; yet, few comments were made by participants about what could be done to improve the workshop. It is this author’s opinion that not all of the workshop attendees might have been in a place to benefit from these kinds of activities. Perhaps some individuals would have needs that may be better served in other frameworks, such as individual counseling or a psychoeducational experience. However, without the data to support such notions, it still remains unclear as to precisely what needs to change.

Future directions include the need for more research on interventions for adults who are experiencing career changes. Specifically, career counselors could benefit from having evidence of which interventions work best with this client population. Also, it is indicated from the results of the current study that knowledge of what is most helpful for

working, nontraditionally aged, ethnically diverse students in career transitions still remains at least somewhat unclear.

In conclusion, preliminary findings support the helpfulness and utility of this career workshop for mature adult workers attending an Eastern university. This study adds to the literature by providing an evaluation of workshop based primarily on a career groups activity by Zalaquett (2005) with a sample of nontraditional students experiencing career transitions.

References

- Arnold, J., & Jackson, C. (1997). The new career: Issues and challenges. *British Journal of Guidance and Counseling*, 25(4), 427-433.
- Borgen, W. A. (1999). Implementing "Starting Points": A follow-up study. *Journal of Employment Counseling*, 36, 98-114.
- Bobek, B. L., & Robbins, S. B. (2005). Counseling for career transition: Career pathing, job loss, and reentry. In S. D. Brown & R. W. Lent, (Eds), *Career development and counseling: Putting theory and research to work* (pp. 625-650). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Fouad, N. A., & Bynner, J. (2008). Work transitions. *American Psychologist*, 63, 241-251.
- Holland, J.L. (1973). *Making vocational choices: A theory of careers*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Holland, J. L. (1997). *Making vocational choices: A theory of vocational personalities and work environments* (3rd ed.). Odessa, FL: Psychological Assessment Resources.
- Maglio, A. T., Butterfield, L. D., & Borgen, W. A. (2005). Existential considerations for contemporary career counseling. *Journal of Employment Counseling*, 42, 75-92.
- Minor, C. W., & Pope, M. (Eds.). (2005). *Experiential activities for teaching career counseling classes and for facilitating career groups* (Vol. 2). Tulsa, OK: National Career Development Association.
- Parsons, F. (1909). *Choosing a vocation*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Robbins, S., Chartrand, J., McFadden, K., & Lee, R. (1994). Efficacy of leader-led and self-directed career workshops for middle-aged and older adults. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 41, 83-90.
- Williamson, L. L. (2005). Touchstone. In C. W. Minor & M. Pope (Eds.), *Experiential activities for teaching career counseling classes and for facilitating career groups*, Vol. 2 (pp. 60-61). Tulsa, OK: National Career Development Association.
- Zalaquett, C.P. (2005). The importance of defining your vision, mission, and values. In C. W. Minor & M. Pope (Eds.), *Experiential activities for teaching career counseling classes and for facilitating career groups*, Vol. 2 (pp. 67-70). Tulsa, OK: National Career Development Association.

Note: This paper is part of the annual VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Find more information on the project at: http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/VISTAS_Home.htm

Table 1. Participants' ratings of the helpfulness of the workshop.

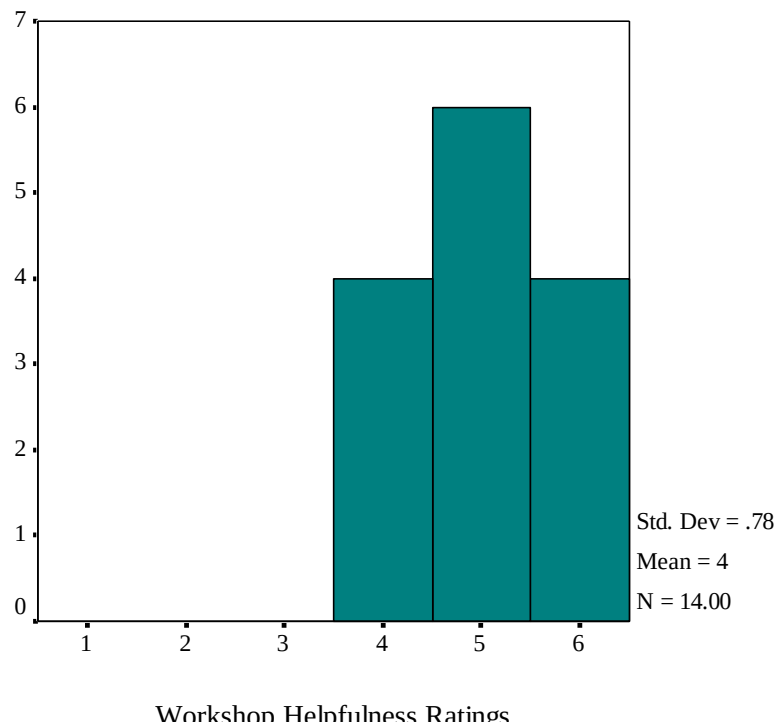


Figure 1. Responses to “Has this workshop changed your perceptions of your career?”

