

Proposal for “Transitions, career learning and career management skills.
Multi-disciplinary and critical perspectives”
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Title of proposal: Academic Confidence and Career Decision Making Self-Efficacy: Exploring the Experiences of Students within a Module on University Learning

Keywords: higher education, academic, confidence, career, self-efficacy

Relation to conference:

This mixed methods study examines academic and career confidence/self-efficacy and ways students with different levels of each describe challenges faced while pursuing higher education. Quantitative analyses of the survey data as well as qualitative analyses of open-ended responses each present transitional, academic, and career concerns.

Introduction

Student success in higher education is an increasingly important concern in today's information and knowledge economy. This study is largely guided by Bandura's work on self-efficacy, defined as "the beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations" (Bandura, 1995, p. 2). Bandura (1997, p. 3) argues that self-efficacy controls decision making, the amount of effort individuals exert, the length of time individuals persevere through challenges, level of resiliency, and even the level of accomplishment they realize. In line with Bandura's self-efficacy research, theories of higher education retention also framed this study (Braxton, 2014; Tinto, 1993, 2012; Mantz Yorke & Longden, 2004; M. Yorke & Longden, 2008). This case-study examines a group of students who chose to take a university learning module that was designed as a curricular intervention to widen access to higher education and also increase retention.

Within this narrative of increasing retention, it is important to understand that a multiplicity of factors influence student decisions whether to persist or discontinue higher education (Harvey, Drew, & Smith, 2006; Mayhew et al., 2016; Tinto, 1993, 2012). Further, it is important to view student success holistically, to understand that academic, social, and personal transition and integration may be connected. This study focuses on two major areas of student concern: academic skills and career decision making. The aim of this study was to investigate the degree to which student perceptions of their academic skills confidence and career decision making self-efficacy correlated. The study further investigated the different ways in which students described their challenges based on their academic skills confidence and career decision making self-efficacy scores.

Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this study is to determine whether there is a dynamic relationship between student perceptions of their academic skills (academic skills confidence) and their perceptions of their career decision making abilities (career decision making self-efficacy). There seems to be no other study which specifically investigated the relationship between these two concepts, although research suggests that low self-efficacy in one area of life will likely impact another (Bandura, 1995; Hicks & McFrazier, 2014; Taylor & Betz, 1983).

This case-study revolves around two key research questions:

1. Is there a relationship between university student academic confidence and career decision making self-efficacy levels?
2. Do students with different academic confidence and career decision self-efficacy levels describe challenges differently?

Methodology and Methods

My philosophical position is critical pragmatism, a stance that draws heavily on classical pragmatism but is particularly focused on the “emancipatory, polemical, and transformative potential of pragmatist philosophy and social theory” (Vannini, 2008, p. 160). As a pragmatist, my research revolves around organism-environment interactions the reflexive innovations in habit that do or do not occur (Frankel Pratt, 2016). I also do not believe there is only one path or method towards finding empirically solid and useful results. I, instead, rely on a form of analytical eclecticism where I value the benefits of multiple methods, refusing to subscribe only to one (Palmgren, 2016; Sil & Katzenstein, 2010). With this study, I utilized a mixed methods approach, I find this to be useful in providing a richer description of conditions (Palmgren, 2016), particularly in order to make appropriate recommendations for future research, policy, and practice.

This study explores a group of students who chose to take an introduction to university learning course at a major research-intensive university in Sweden. Students completed two psychometric inventories which were translated into Swedish. The first inventory, the Academic Confidence Scale (ACS), was a homegrown scale created at the University of Wales in Cardiff to determine perceived academic confidence levels (Sander & Sanders, 2003). This study used the ACS, an earlier version of the scale that has since been adapted into the Academic Behavioral Confidence Scale (ABC) (Sander & Sanders, 2006). The second scale, the Career Decision Making Self-Efficacy Scale (CDMSE), has been utilized extensively with higher education students in multiple countries (Betz & Borgen, 2009; Peterson & Delmas, 2001; Taylor & Betz, 1983). In addition, participants were asked demographic questions and to describe three challenges they experience related to their academic and career pursuits.

A convenience sample of university students at the university was selected for this study. All students enrolled in an education class designed as an introduction to university learning were invited to complete a survey in class during the second week of the five-week summer class. A total of 75 students were enrolled at the time and 62 chose to complete the survey.

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS (reliability, correlation, descriptive statistics, etc.) and qualitative data were analyzed using NVIVO (thematic coding). Cut-points for overall student results on each scale were obtained by utilizing SPSS to delineate quartile ranges for both scales. The quartiles for the ACS scale were 1 through 3.2083 (low), 3.2084 through 3.5417 (medium), and 3.5418 through 5 (high). The quartiles for the CDMSE scale were 1 through 3.2361 (low), 3.2362 through 3.6839 (medium), and 3.6840 through 5 (high). These quartiles were used to explore both quantitative and qualitative differences between the quartile groups.

Initial Quantitative Findings

Findings indicate that both scales utilized and their subscales were reliable with the Academic Skills Confidence scale having an overall Cronbach's alpha score of .924 and the Career Decision Making Self-Efficacy scale having an overall Cronbach's alpha score of .883. Further, the analysis indicates that there is a statistically significant correlation between academic skills confidence and career decision making self-efficacy (Cronbach's alpha: .657 at the 0.01 level). Additional analysis is being conducted to investigate additional differences between student groups.

Over half of the students who had low academic confidence and low career decision making self-efficacy students had not chosen a major yet 9 out of 17. Of those 9, 8 were male. The average years at university with this group was 2 years. The median age was 25. Their lowest sub scale score average was on verbalizing in the academic confidence scale (2.29) whereas attendance was their highest (3.67). The lowest subscale for the career confidence scale was planning (2.46) whereas self-appraisal was their highest (2.93).

All students in the high academic confidence and high career decision making self-efficacy category had chosen a major 12/12. Over half (7/12) were female. The average years at university with this group was 4 years. The median age was 26. Their lowest subscale was verbalizing (3.67) whereas attendance was their highest (4.50). The lowest subscale for the career confidence scale was planning (3.82) and highest was self-appraisal (4.25).

Initial Qualitative Findings

NVIVO has been utilized to thematically code responses. Analysis was then conducted by dividing students into groups based on their levels of academic skills confidence (ACS) and career decision making self-efficacy (CDMSE). Initial findings have indicated differences in the types of challenges students with low ACS and CDMSE describing more general challenges related to being a university student and belonging (for example: developing a social support group) whereas those with high ACS and high CDMSE described more specific challenges related to their specific coursework and career pursuits (for example: learning how to cite research appropriately).

Intent to Publish

The results of this study will be submitted to an academic journal for publication this spring, and may or may not be approved for publication before the presentation in October.

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