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A Culturally-Integrative Career Course for First-Generation Racial/Ethnic Minority College Students

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Research Abstract

This study investigates how peer mentoring, within a collectivistic orientation, influences career decision-making self-efficacy for first-generation racial/ethnic minority (REM) college students. The study method chosen is a culturally-integrated career course for REM students at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Curriculum for the course will focus on increasing student's career decision-making self-efficacy through peer discussion, individual reflection, identifying and developing role models and support systems, integration of personal and familial cultural values, and exploration world-of-work information. Using quantitative survey instruments and a focus group of university REM faculty, staff and students, this study will attempt to secure deep-structure information on the career decision-making self-efficacy process for REM while simultaneously providing a critical career service for the students.

Study Rationale

While there is still a considerable enrollment gap between the number of White and REM students enrolling in American colleges and universities, their participation has increased significantly. According to the Minorities in Higher Education Twenty-first Annual Status Report (2003-2004) released by the American Council on Education, from 1991 to 2001 the college enrollment of REM students rose 52%, to more than 4.3 million students. Enrollment of REM increased by 16.1% while enrollment of White students decreased 3.1% between 1993-1997. Many of these new REM students come from first-generation families. First-generation students are considered those whose parents have not attended a college or university; though siblings may be enrolled or may have graduated (Billson & Terry, 1982). Several general characteristics of first-generation students have been found, including: 1) the family falls within a lower socioeconomic status; 2) tend to have dependent children themselves; and 3) tend to be of Hispanic or other typically underrepresented racial/ethnic heritage (Bui, 2002; Terenzini, et al., 1995).

Traditional career theories are built upon the experiences and expectations of European-American males. Current research looking at the affects of these theories on REM shows they do not adequately address the unique experiences and worldviews of this population (Brown 1995, Brown & Ryan-Krane 2000, Fouad & Byars-Winston 2005, Osipow & Littlejohn 1995). Historically career theories have ignored environmental, sociopolitical, and cultural contexts that affect career decision-making thus assuming a shared experience by all who engage in this process. These assumptions include: a belief that the labor market is accessible to all; that merely finding any job provides dignity in one's life (when society continuously reminds us that some jobs are valued more than others); the valuing of work as the central role in one's life; and a rational nature for the career development process driven by an individual's personality characteristics (Brown, 1995; Cook, Heppner, & O'Brien, 2002). Unlike traditional Euro-American families who emphasize personal achievement, advancement, and work as the primary driving force in one's life; REM tend to embrace an interconnected relationship between family and work roles with family needs taking precedence and work serving in a secondary capacity as a means to support the family or represent the family's success (Garrett & Herring, 2001, Brown 1995, Gloria & Segura-Herrera 2004, Tang 2002). By ignoring the environmental, sociopolitical, and cultural contexts which impact the career development process of REM some of the most widely used career theories and techniques are rendered inadequate.

This research study seeks to explore how the development of a more culturally-integrative career course influences the career decision-making self-efficacy of first-generation REM college students. Additionally, this study uses a peer mentoring model to engage students in this process.

Collaborators

Letters & Science/ Human Ecology Career Services (L&S/HECS) have joined with TRIO and UW-Madison's Counseling Psychology Department in the development of a career course that seeks to specifically meet the unique needs of first-generation REM college students. This partnership developed from recommendations made during a listening session comprised of UW-Madison faculty, staff, and students that was hosted by the L&S/HECS. Twenty-three individuals participated in this listening session which consisted mostly of academic staff but also several faculty and students. Three-quarters of participants identified as REM and all are involved in university positions that work intimately with first-generation

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and REM students. Ideas from this focus group and from subsequent one-on-one conversations are being used to inform this research study and course development. A few of the key themes that emerged were:

- It is important for each staff member to engage continually in self-education on race, class, socio-economic status in order to better understand our own views and biases and how those may be impacting the students that are seen. This should be incorporated in the day-to-day work of the unit.
- Continue and expand on collaborations across campus, so that the process is more integrated and communications are always transparent and seamless. Make interactions and connections intentional.
- Develop a student advisory board that is multicultural, have this board plan activities. By participating in the creation and evaluation of services these students will take ownership and spread positive opportunities through word-of-mouth to friends.
- Seek out and promote paid internships if at all possible.
- Provide incentives for students (e.g., award credit for career courses) and speak of tangible benefits for them.
- Word-of-mouth publicity and marketing is vital with these populations. It is important to personally tap into student organizations and form trusting relationships with them so that this word of mouth communication can occur.

Course Description (for publication in timetable)

This course is designed to explore career opportunities and examine how your personal goals, values, and interests may influence the career decisions you make. This course is an experiential-based course and highly participatory! Career interests and opportunities will be explored through group discussion, individual reflection, assessments and hands-on activities.

Course Details

The course will run for 5-weeks and meet once weekly for 3 hours -- Wednesdays starting March 22 through April 19, 2006. Enrollment for the course will be capped at 12 with the expectation that at least 8 students will maintain enrollment in the class for its entirety. The course will meet in one of the university's classrooms.

Course Objectives

1. To assist you in clarifying your values, goals, and career objectives.
2. To encourage individual and collective growth by increasing awareness of human diversity, cultural values and beliefs, and how those influence the career decision-making process.
3. To provide a forum for you to discuss opportunities and potential challenges in career decision-making.
4. To increase your awareness for and develop skills with which to navigate the world-of-work.
5. To help establish a support network for your career exploration and an understanding of available resources.
6. To provide a supportive atmosphere for your development of short and long-term career goals.

Curriculum Seeks to Infuse the Following Key Concepts

- Within student's own frame of reference help establish work and life goals and develop an action plan for the short and long term; provide students with a sense of accomplishment by completing hands-on activities during class thus providing a positive experience where students' feel they can continue to build upon these skills (mastery experiences).
- Consideration of how cultural, familial, and personal values and responsibilities influence the career decision-making process.
- Use peer mentoring activities to role model and break-down career exploration and career decision-making stages into manageable pieces.
- Personalized interpretation of student's needs with opportunity for feedback → here's where one-on-one time with course instructor, family members, and mentors is key; utilizing individual meetings with students outside of class to "check-in"
- Assist students in obtaining accurate information on the world-of-work and potential careers; discuss perceived and real barriers and stereotypes students feel different careers may pose.
- Engage students in identification of upper-class students/recent graduates who are REM and who have successfully navigated a similar career path; also, tap into existing partnerships with alumni and employers.

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Measurement Procedures

Participants will be asked to complete several questionnaires prior to and at the end of the course (will take approximately 15 minutes to complete in total), including:

- 1) Consent form which describes the nature of the research and their rights as participants;
- 2) Demographic information form that asks them to list their race/ethnicity, year in school, gender, status as first-generation college student (or other), and previous use of career resources on campus;
- 3) Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy Short Form (CDMSE-SF; Betz, Klein, & Taylor, 1996) which assesses an individual's self-efficacy as it relates to their career decision-making;
- 4) Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM; Phinney, 1992) which is an assessment of one's feelings and thoughts about their own ethnic identity and how they view themselves in relation to other ethnic/racial groups;
- 5) Cultural Congruity Scale (CCS; Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 1996) which assesses affective and belief-based perceptions of university life; and
- 6) Collective Self-Esteem Scale (CSES; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992) which assesses an individuals' level of social identity as it relates to their membership in an ascribed group.

Challenges and Considerations for Development of Course

There have been many challenges and details to consider during the development of this course. First, it was important to consider the time of year, semester, and length of the course. Based on research of successful existing career courses it was decided to hold this course for five sessions of three hours each. By having a three hour course period the instructor will be better able to engage students in hands-on activities while leaving ample time for reflection, discussion, and relationship building among group members. Also, during the listening session sponsored by L&S/HECS, many participants expressed deep concern that students should receive credit for this course. Observations that first-generation REM students are often pulled in many directions on a predominantly white campus to participate in special events/programs/research, which leads to a compression of their already busy schedules, reinforced the importance of offering academic credit for participation.

Second, because this particular course is being designed as part of a master's thesis it has been critical for the researcher/instructor to be aware of and reflect upon her own racial/ethnic identity as a European American and her other identities in order to recognize how her world views will influence the development of course content and may influence interactions with students enrolled in the course. This concern is being addressed on multiple levels through open consultation with course sponsors as well as through the development of on-going listening sessions that bring together the voices and ideas of various REM faculty, staff, and students on campus. In addition, the researcher/instructor has been and will continue to engage in self-reflection and supervision from both her faculty advisor and career services practicum advisor.

Third, one of the most integral components to the development of this course has been the on-going relationship development between the course's sponsors. Several key staff within L&S/HECS have been very involved in various diversity programs on campus and establishing genuine collaborative relationships with colleagues throughout campus including the TRIO program. In addition, the Counseling Psychology Department and L&S/HECS have partnered over the past several years in the training of career counseling practicum students. Over time these relationships have built trust and collaborative energies such that proposing the idea for this study was received with support and enthusiasm from all involved. Throughout the development of this study it has been important to keep all sponsoring parties involved in and aware of the progress of the course's development and administrative considerations. In addition, course content is grounded in current multicultural career counseling research and theory as well as through direct feedback from REM faculty, staff, and students on campus. This intentional partnering of academic as well as real-world experience has been helpful in garnering support.

Certainly there are many challenges and considerations when developing any research study or course. For this particular study several underlying components have been key 1) an attention to the cultural factors influencing both the instructor and participants' involvement, 2) establishment of genuine relationships between collaborating sponsors, 3) development of opportunities to receive and integrate feedback and input from various REM faculty, staff, and students on campus, and 4) an intentional pairing of research based as well as experientially based content in the course design.

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