

2003

Bridging the gap : the role of student development in preparing students for the job market

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Nuese, Matthew D., "Bridging the gap : the role of student development in preparing students for the job market" (2003). *Graduate Research Papers*. 1277.
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Student development is an amazing progression, but many students are ill-prepared when they enter post-graduate life, particularly in the realm of their career, where the industry of business has a mission that is clearly dualistic. The transition for recent graduates often creates feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt because the campus culture is significantly different from that of corporate America. Businesses want students who are able to fill into positions quickly and easily: this means people who can think critically, work well with teams, and have defined self-vision. Corporate America typically values the same ideals of student development, but somewhere between the campus and the career, students realize they are the product of two fundamentally different systems.

BRIDGING THE GAP: THE ROLE OF STUDENT DEVELOPMENT IN PREPARING
STUDENTS FOR THE JOB MARKET

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling, and Postsecondary Education

University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

by

Matthew D. Nuese

May 2003

This Research Paper by: Matthew Nuese

Entitled: BRIDGING THE GAP: THE ROLE OF STUDENT DEVELOPMENT IN
PREPARING STUDENTS FOR THE JOB MARKET

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts
in Education.

6-16-03

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Abstract

Student development is an amazing progression, but many students are ill-prepared when they enter post-graduate life, particularly in the realm of their career, where the industry of business has a mission that is clearly dualistic. The transition for recent graduates often creates feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt because the campus culture is significantly different from that of corporate America. Businesses want students who are able to fill into positions quickly and easily: this means people who can think critically, work well with teams, and have defined self-vision. Corporate America typically values the same ideals of student development, but somewhere between the campus and the career, students realize they are the product of two fundamentally different systems.

Bridging the Gap: The Role of Student Development in Preparing Students for the Job Market

Educational reforms are once again coming back into the mainstream of American culture. Many Americans are stating their disenfranchisement with how the educational system is operating and the students it is producing. In higher education, the devaluation of education has been seen in budget cuts that have plagued nearly every state in the union. Society is questioning the practice of the faculty and corporate America is vocal in stating that college students today are not as prepared as they once were (KPMG, 1999). Ask any college student graduating this year what their biggest barrier is to getting a job, and they will tell you it is not the economy, but the lack of experience. Academia continues to protest the claims that are being made and stating that the purpose of education is not to produce workers, but to produce citizens of the world. Now, at this pivotal time in history, academia and corporate America are at a crossroads. In this article, the issue of student development bridging the gap between college and career will be analyzed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the changing needs of the students.

Student Development

In preparing the students of today for their careers tomorrow, student affairs professionals are working at using theory to understand the development that students progress through in their undergraduate years. In the economy of today, students are forced to have a competitive advantage entering the world of work. When the working world calls, students need to be prepared to be active citizens and fruitful workers with a developed, integrated worldview.

As students complete their degree requirements and move from college to work, the challenge to student affairs officials is helping those students continue the development they have gained while in college. In her theory of epistemological development, Marcia Baxter Magolda (1992) describes four levels of knowing that student affairs practitioners and the

campus at-large are attempting to bridge. Those four levels are absolute knowing, transitional learning, independent knowing, and contextual knowing (Baxter Magolda, 1992). The primary focus for practitioners is to assist students in moving towards the integrated worldview of either independent knowing or contextual knowing. For students, it is to find fruitful labor, and for society is to have students become active citizens. Helping students connect these developmental aspects is especially important to helping students transition from college.

In order to understand the development that occurs after college, the development of a student in college provides a grounded framework within which to work. In her research, Marcia Baxter Magolda found that 57 percent of her students were at the independent knowing level of development after one year of being out of school (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). In essence, independent knowers understand that their thoughts are valuable, and they understand that knowledge is uncertain and everyone has their independent beliefs (Baxter Magolda, 1992).

According to Baxter Magolda, the year after college is often very different from the final year of an undergraduate program. Students quickly find that in place of professors, due dates, homework, and critical thinking, there are supervisors, deadlines, overtime, and a lack of time for critical thinking. Yet, in spite of these changes, development continues to occur. As educators, there needs to be a genuine concern to discover what helps the students continue their forward march on the developmental level of *Knowing and Reasoning* (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

The development from absolute knowing, which is the level of most students when they enter college, to the independent knowing comes as a result of a complex combination of the classroom and life experiences. In reflecting on development, Baxter Magolda stated in *Making Their Own Way* (2001), "As one might suspect, the central concerns for most participants (students) after college were career success, finding meaningful relationships, finding their way

in the adult world, establishing families, and in general being happy" (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p. 4). Students want to have academic success, create relationships, and make their way aside from authority (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

Student affairs professionals value guiding students through development because, "research suggests that colleges who build an integrated environment that connects learning, personal development, and out-of-class experiences can expect to have some positive influences on intellectual and academic skills" (Graham, p. 249, 1998). By helping students develop from absolute knowing, student affairs professionals are helping students in their career preparedness by teaching students how to develop day-by-day in the world of work. This is why Baxter Magolda (2001) could see clearly the results of further development in her longitudinal study.

In trying to determine what guides students as they move from maturing developmentally to being successful in a profession, Susan Phillips and David Blustein propose that, "From the developmental point of view, those who have been on target already possess the prerequisite attitudes and behaviors to cope with stage-strategy tasks" (Phillips & Blustein, 1994, p. 65). In the social cognitive approach to helping a student develop cognitively, the student must find work that is fulfilling. This occurs during the undergraduate years, and it should incorporate self-efficacy beliefs, which are the accomplishments of the person: vicarious learning, environmental influence, and developmental states and reactions (Chartland, 1996). Furthermore, "The goals of career counseling and the school-to-work movement should be to facilitate the learning of skills, interests, beliefs, values, work habits, and personal qualities that enable each participant to create a satisfying life in a constantly changing environment" (Krumboltz, 1999, p. 323). When students begin the transition, which occurs years before a diploma is received, they are already moving in the right direction of development or they are

already far behind. It is important to guide students toward having a successful transition because, "Research suggests that how you approach your first year will have a major impact on your future salary, advancement, job satisfaction, and ability to move within the organization- and your own feelings about success and commitment to the job" (NACE, 2002, p. 62)

John Gardner explains that the transition from college to the world of work "often involves stress and disorientation due to the differences between the campus and the workplace cultures and the behaviors that are required to succeed in each" (Gardner, 1998, p. 6).

Frustrations that result are often geared toward the alma mater because the student was ill-equipped to handle the new environment. The idea that college cultivates a young person into more than an "expert" is valuable to academia's mission. Exploring the idea that students are more than just "employees-in-training" shows the value that the entire college experience can bring to a person's well being.

In a recent article appearing in the *NASPA Journal*, students were encouraged to understand how their talents can be coupled with their interests to define their purpose in life and to create life goals (Moran, 2001). Guiding students to an understanding that their job should be interesting to them is an important aspect of student affairs. By encouraging students to explore their talents and interests, student affairs professionals are helping students become better employees. Students who have explored themselves enters the workplace more prepared, and probably more intellectually gifted, developmentally advanced, and ready to face corporate culture.

Within higher education, the focus has been to help students bridge the gap between the global marketplace and their development as college students. As stated by to Donald Jacobs, Dean of the Kellogg School of Business at Northwestern University, "The university has got to

be closely connected to the public we serve, otherwise the public's going to go in one direction, and we're going to go in the other" (KPMG, 1999, p. 25). According to Sheila Smith (2001), "One of the objectives of education is to prepare students to be competitive in an ever-changing workplace" (2001, p. 200). The two objectives, those of higher education and business, are different. Due to the differences, recent alumni fall deep into the thinking that they are inadequate to be successful in their careers. They are frustrated that their alma maters did not prepare them with the skills they need, and they suffer an identity crisis because the educational culture they have grown accustomed to is suddenly gone. Research has shown that, "New graduates then face a dramatic culture shift when they move from college to the professional world. The work world is so fundamentally different from the world of education that it requires an almost total transformation on the part of the new graduate" (Gardner, 1999, p. 100). Typically, the school has done an outstanding job of helping the student develop and make connections, and the business sees the potential of their new hire, but the gap can seem insurmountable. Fortunately, the Valley of Despair is only a few feet wide, not miles.

According to NACE's Job Choices, "Starting work in an organization is a unique and critically important time that requires you to have a special perspective and use special strategies to be successful" (NACE, 2002, p. 62). Understanding that this is a special time will allow graduates to fully develop their skills. Career development theories "emphasize that individuals have the potential to exercise some agency in the school-to-work transition," that "...provides scholars with the conceptual tools they need to understand more fully the antecedents and consequences of an active and involved approach to the school-to-work transition" (Blustien, 1999, p. 349). Building upon the work of Perry and Baxter Magolda, Robert Lent et. al developed the notion that "Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) represents a relatively new

effort to understand the process through which people form interests, make choices, and achieve varying levels of success in educational and occupational pursuits" (Lent, 2000, p. 36).

It appears that making an early choice in a major or career is an advantage to the student in helping them cope with the transition from college to work. "Consistent with SCCT, results indicate that career self-efficacy, career planning/exploration efficacy, and perceived parent support interactively predicted young adolescents' career interest" (Turner, 2002, p. 46). In helping students make the transition from college-to-work, SCCT is relevant as it focuses on helping students cope with the transition. Students who are able to cope during this time are more successful in that students with "relatively high levels of coping efficacy are more likely than those with low coping efficacy to engage in efforts to overcome perceived barriers associated with a particular goal or objective" (Albert, 1999, p. 234).

To understand Lent's Social Cognitive Career Theory further, it must be understood that the theory focuses on three main areas. According to Lent, "SCCT is aimed primarily at explaining the process through which (a) academic and occupational interests develop, (b) interests, in concert with other variables, promote career-relevant choices, and (c) people attain varying levels of performance and persistence in educational and vocational pursuits" (Lent, 1996, p. 311). Through the use of SCCT, a counselor should be able to assist students in making the transition more smoothly. The transition, which is from the world of an academic culture to a work setting, should guide the students to continuing what allowed them to develop in their undergraduate careers. In order to do this, students must be fruitful in their labor, have an integrated worldview, and attain active citizenship.

Fruitful Labor

Students typically go to college to have the potential to find better jobs. Though this goes against the foundation of the academic socialites, it does bear a reality. In Gardner's *Senior Year Experience*, the ideas of Sullivan & Ellin (1993) are expressed by explaining "Because they have invested so much time, energy, and resources, they and their families have the highest expectations. Seniors expect that finishing their degree will be a big deal: an exciting, satisfactory, rewarding, and proud accomplishment; a celebratory experience; the ticket to a high-paying job" (Gardner, 1999, p. 5). Students who are graduating will find themselves in a transitional phase that requires them to reflect upon their previous years education. In trying to make the transition work; students will begin to seek answers that explain what has occurred over the past sum of years. Developmentally, most students will be at a point of understanding that knowledge is not concrete, and authority is granted. In business though, this is often not the case, as business generally wants their employees to believe that they have the authority to determine truth and knowledge. NACE suggests that "At the heart of the problems most new grads (and their managers) experience during the transition period is the failure to recognize how much the educational culture has shaped their attitudes, expectations, and behaviors....the culture of education is often so different, that if you continue to have the same expectations of your employer...you'll be greatly disappointed and make costly career mistakes" (NACE, 2002, p. 65).

For nearly seventeen years, students have been trained to raise questions, challenge authority, and to be autonomous in their thinking. In business, the new employee is expected to observe the corporate culture, follow their supervisor, and to work in a team environment (Gardner, 1998). Developmentally, this is at odds with being either transitional or independent in knowing, and it often reverts back to absolute knowing. The way that this helps students

move toward higher levels of knowing is that students who are successful at reverting back to absolute knowing in their first transitional role, yet keeping their intellectual knowing further on the developmental scale are able to traverse domains of knowledge freely. By being able to traverse knowledge domains, students learn what is essential in their own personal development this brings the student closer to contextual knowing. According to Baxter Magolda (1992), "Contextual knowers' assumptions are evident in six areas: the varying value of ideas, expertise, learning, teaching, evaluation, and decision making" (p. 170). Being able to traverse between the domains is a sign that a new employee/student is beginning to develop an integrated worldview.

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Integrated Worldview

The hope of educators is that students leave college with more than a degree that qualifies students for work. Educators hope that students are able to have a true liberal arts education, which teaches students a link between their everyday lives and their value to society. Student development theorists desire to help students make the connections between their own their everyday real world and their conceptual framework (Evans, 1998). Evans continues to explain that the decision making process has progressed so that the student understands that their decisions to everyday issues are complex and they carry important implications (Evans, 1998).

Employers value employees who can see beyond the problem and focus on the solution. In a book written by Harvard Business School Fellow, Spencer Johnson, called *Who Moved My Cheese* (2000), the author takes a simple story about change and how to deal with change and looks at how employees often fail to be able to change. In a humorous story, the main characters must go through development of mice in order to be able to cope with the changes. Their integrated worldview is displayed in understanding how the cheese (values) shapes a person's

decision-making even if the outcomes are unknown. In a fashion to *Knowing and Reasoning*, readers find that decisions should be made with comparative perspectives, accurately measuring their own competence, and understanding their understanding is contextual (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

The value of having an integrated worldview is seen in business as leaders often hope employees will be able to see contextual relationships. Employers hire college graduates because grads have the ability to understand complex reasoning and the relationships that are intertwined within the reason. The final stage is helping students relate their fruitful labor and integrated worldview with a sense of community, or active citizenship.

Active Citizenship

One of the key components in bridging the gap from students to employees is to help students gain a sense of active citizenship. This notion goes beyond voting, though that is important. It hits at the heart of society's value of having higher education. Society wants the educated population to produce leaders, to take their education back to those who have not had the privilege, and to educate citizens who are able to confront social injustices. "The institution should work directly to solve basic social problems; prepare more and better teachers; act to reduce poverty, homelessness, drug abuse, and chronic unemployment; prepare students for careers in international trade; and be more heavily engaged in moral development for everyone" (Cohen, 1998, p. 414). Society as a whole wants an educated population to rise up as the leaders to cure society of its ills.

The benefits society gains from having an educated populous include a larger tax base, more economic opportunities, and ingenious people who are able to find ways to keep society working. Society has a lofty goal and hope for education, and though education may never

produce to society's satisfaction, these expectations are present. In order to meet these expectations, educators need be prepared to provide students with the tools to continue their development.

Future Direction

Using student development theory to explain and answer questions regarding students' post graduation preparedness provides an intellectual framework that can drive future student research. In addition to explaining the fundamental differences between corporate America and higher education, it can provide direction that could guide student programming to enhance student development. Further research could be conducted to examine the relationships between business and education. It could improve the dialogue and provide new initiatives that might couple the corporate world with higher education for creative and useful partnerships. In addition, by understanding the first-year-after-graduation experience, educators could better prepare students for life after college. This could prove an invaluable addition to the literature and understanding of higher education, and it could give student affairs an even broader base of respect from academia as a whole.

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