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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

**The Attitudes, Perceptions, and Outcomes of
Students in a Professional Development Course**

A Thesis Submitted to the

University Honors Program

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements of the Baccalaureate Degree

With Upper Division Honors

Department of

Family, Consumer, and Nutrition Sciences

By

Meghan Francisco

DeKalb, Illinois

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ABSTRACT (100-200 WORDS):

Many retailing and apparel merchandising programs now offer their majors a professional development course. These courses are designed to help students develop their professional skills. Additionally, it provides assistance to students in discovering their potential for their own futures. Because this is becoming such a vital piece of every student's education, any professional development course should be enhanced in such a way as to nurture those aspects. The attitudes, perceptions, and outcomes of students (n=26) enrolled in a professional development course were assessed through administration of a pre-course and post-course survey. Little or no change occurred in students' perceptions of most personal and career characteristics throughout the duration of the course. However, the desired careers of the students experienced a dramatic shift upon completion of the course. Upon entrance to the course, there was a large interest in pursuing a buying career. However, after completion of the course, the interest in retail management overcame the interest in buying. Additionally, students stated that the interviewing skills learned in the course would be useful in their careers.

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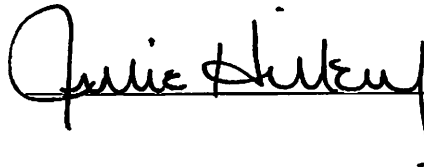
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Abstract

Many retailing and apparel merchandising programs now offer their majors a professional development course. These courses are designed to help students develop their professional skills. Additionally, it provides assistance to students in discovering their potential for their own futures. Because this is becoming such a vital piece of every student's education, any professional development course should be enhanced in such a way as to nurture those aspects. The attitudes, perceptions, and outcomes of students (n=26) enrolled in a professional development course were assessed through administration of a pre-course and post-course survey. Little or no change occurred in students' perceptions of most personal and career characteristics throughout the duration of the course. However, the desired careers of the students experienced a dramatic shift upon completion of the course. Upon entrance to the course, there was a large interest in pursuing a buying career. However, after completion of the course, the interest in retail management overcame the interest in buying. Additionally, students stated that the interviewing skills learned in the course would be useful in their careers.

Introduction

In order to provide youth and adults with opportunities for improved careers, a greater focus on skill development and integration of professional development curriculum into the academic arena should be pursued (Summary...2004). The value that would be added to the students' overall education would promote success both inside and outside the classroom.

Review of Literature

Miller (1975) suggests seven career development strategies. The first is *Achievement Motivation Training*. This is designed to increase an individual's motivation to obtain success by helping that person work independently and efficiently. It requires four tasks (1) teach the characteristics of a high achiever (2) teach strategies that lead to high achievement (3) help set short and long-term goals and (4) provide support for achieving those goals. Increased motivation helps individuals feel positive about themselves and helps to develop effective goal setting behaviors.

Secondly, Miller states that *Assessment Techniques* should include standardized tests and other methods that measure specific characteristics. An individual's performance can be measured in relation to specific program objectives by reporting the number of objectives successfully achieved and what errors led to objectives not being met. This technique assists students in relating personal characteristics and career alternatives. Assessment data can bring support to career planning goals.

Third, Miller discusses why it is important that there should be an availability of a *Career Resource or Learning Centers* and adequate staff to support it. The most

effective would include comprehensive information systems, curriculum linkages, and career guidance experiences to help individuals use the resources effectively.

Fourth, *Career Development Curriculum* needs to emphasize individualization, which is imperative so individuals can explore relevant information. Instructors need to be trained to be effective in relating to others and in structuring the class so that exploration may occur. This facilitates self-awareness and career planning behaviors. Teachers should also have an active role in developing the curriculum and provide continuous guidance to students.

Fifth, *Decision Making Training* enhances self-development by helping individuals identify personal values and relate them to career goals. The result of this training is to enhance students' abilities of planning and decision making.

Career guidance may also employ the use of *Media*. However, media has some dangers; it is difficult to individualize and it only provides one-way communication. Simulated experiences, however, can provide individuals to participate in situations resembling those of a career. Media promotes career awareness by allowing individuals to simulate career decision-making, work behaviors, and attitudes and occupational problem solving.

Lastly, *Value Clarification* helps individuals to define values. Instructors may introduce a range of values and emphasize the impact of values on actions and decisions. Role playing, media, conflict situations, values questionnaires, weekly reaction sheets, and time diaries can all be used to help identify and clarify values. This technique affects self-development and is essential to career planning and decision-making.

Once values have been discovered and a career plan has begun to emerge, students will develop a career goal that will be satisfying. Job satisfaction is essential to achievement on the job (Jackson, 2005). Jackson (2005) states the voluntary turnover rate is nearly at 40%, which is due to a sharp decline in job satisfaction since 1995. Good management, where an employee's opinions matter to the employer; compensation and perks, receiving benefits that allow employees to experience recognition; and room for personal growth can all attribute to job satisfaction. The most important of the three is room for personal growth (Jackson, 2005). Professional development courses can also be brought out of the classroom and into environments on-the-job. Continuous education will assist employees in reaching new goals and maximizing potential.

Galvin (2003) finds that workers are seeking jobs that align with their values. This finding agrees with the research done by Miller, 1975, who states that value clarification should be incorporated in a professional development course. Job seekers are also searching for positions that provide meaningful work opportunities and room for personal and professional growth. This concurs with the research conducted by Jackson, who suggests that recognition and room for growth both attribute to job satisfaction.

Negative stereotypes are present when considering retail careers. Shapira (2000) states; retail jobs are stereotyped as minimum wage jobs with the constant ringing of "cha-ching" from the cash register and the robotic "May I help you?" voice. However, while impressive opportunities in retail exist, many students are unaware of them.

D'Amico (2004) shares some skills that are needed in order to be successful in a retail career: friendliness, enthusiasm, strong work ethic, creativity, sincerity, genuineness, dedication, leadership, and good customer service. A degree is required in

many positions in management, human resources, marketing, merchandising, or public relations.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore the attitudes, perceptions, and outcomes of textiles, apparel, and merchandising students throughout a course in professional development. Three factors were explored throughout this study. First, personal characteristics, career expectations, and career goals were assessed through the administration of a survey. Second, merchandising career aspirations were analyzed through qualitative analysis to investigate if the course broadened the views of the students. Last, what students perceived to be useful in their future career was examined.

Method

This study, approved through the Northern Illinois University Institutional Review Board, was conducted using survey research. The participants were Textiles, Apparel, and Merchandising majors who were enrolled in a professional development course in the School of Family, Consumer, and Nutrition Sciences at Northern Illinois University. A pre-course survey was administered at the beginning of the course with a sample size of 26 students. A post-course survey was given at the conclusion of the course with a sample size of 26 students. The survey measured personal characteristics, career expectations, and career goals. The questions were formatted to be answered on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 symbolizing strong disagreement and 5 symbolizing strong agreement. Additionally, one question on the pre-course survey and two questions on the post-course survey were open-ended, qualitative, questions. Data was analyzed using the

Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Open-ended questions were assessed using qualitative analysis.

Results

A total of 26 students completed both the pre-course survey and post-course survey. Both surveys included the same 24 questions that asked the students' perceptions of their own characteristics and the characteristics of a variety of merchandising careers. The means were calculated for both the pre-course and the post-course surveys. In general, the majority students strongly agreed that they were slightly more creative than analytical; however, both characteristics were highly rated. They also agreed that they were leaders, detail-oriented, and worked best independently. Furthermore, working in groups was rated just below working independently, acknowledging the importance of teamwork in the workplace. Based on job satisfaction, the least desired position was a sales representative (See Table 1). Overall, there was consensus among the students that they expected to have a large variety of activities in their careers, a satisfying career, and to work with people from diverse populations.

Upon completion of the course and administration of the post-course survey, findings revealed that most of these characteristics showed little or no change throughout the entirety of the course (See Table 1). One item on the survey, however, demonstrated a significant change ($\alpha, 0.05$) from the pre-course survey to the post-course survey. The item on the survey was stated as "Selling will be an important part of my career position." The mean response to this item increased throughout the duration of the course demonstrating that students have become more aware of the importance of selling.

The pre-course survey concluded with an open ended question about the career the student hopes to secure upon graduation. A similar question was asked on the post-course survey, as well. Based on the results from this survey, it is evident that a large proportion of students (31%) began the course aspiring to become a buyer. The two most desired positions were buyer (31%) and store management (27%). The remaining nine positions desired had a more equal distribution of interest, including visual merchandiser, personal shopper, and fashion designer. On the post-course survey, the most desired position became store management at 54%, and the number of students identifying buying as a desired career dropped to 4% (n=1). It is interesting to note that on the pre-course survey, 8% of students provided no response to the question, but on the post-course survey, only 4% provided no response (See Table 2.)

The post-course survey included a second open ended question inquiring about the specific information gained in the course that is expected to be put to use in a retailing career. Students responded with a wide array of answers (See Table 3). Thirty-five percent of students expect to use the interviewing skills gained in the class. Twenty-three percent expect to use everything they learned in the course in their retailing career. Ethics, portfolio construction, and professionalism each contributed 12% of the responses that students expect to put to use in their career.

Discussion

The items on the surveys that received the highest degree of agreement were: “There will be a variety of activities in my career”, “I expect to have a satisfying career”, and “I will work with people from diverse populations in my career.” These are important characteristics of the retail industry. It is important to note that the students

found these statements to be true, since each of those statements describe the nature of a merchandising career. The careers in the retail industry, such as those listed in Table 2, have a variety of activities involved. Numerous responsibilities are required of each of the positions mentioned.

Because the Textiles, Apparel, and Merchandising major is one that is so well-defined, these findings may be easily explained. Students in this major expect to have satisfying careers. Textile, Apparel, and Merchandising majors have already identified their interests prior to their education and probably already had some idea of career goals.

Additionally, students are aware that their career will involve working with people from diverse populations. This is very important since the workforce is ever-changing. Women and minorities are becoming more prevalent in management positions, and will eventually be the majority. Furthermore, being involved with fashion, these students are likely to travel to abroad to other fashion-forward countries.

Students perceived themselves as being both creative and leaders. Two of the characteristics that D'Amico (2004) states are needed in order to be successful in a retail career are creativity and leadership. This corresponds with the characteristics that students found to be important, as well.

Most of the perceptions of students remain constant throughout the duration of the professional development course. A few factors help to explain that finding. First, the length of the course is relatively short. It lasts only sixteen weeks, which may not be enough time to result in significant changes in perceptions. Since the course is not required in the curriculum of a textile, apparel, and merchandising student, observation of students throughout their complete education, is not entirely possible.

Secondly, since the course is not a required element of the students' program of study, the students who do choose to enroll may represent a more professionally motivated sample. These students are already interested in their future careers and are taking a proactive approach. The perceptions these students have are likely to more accurately reflect what is required to be successful in the retail industry. This explains why their perceptions do not change, since they may already be correct.

A third explanation for why students' perceptions remain constant is that the sample was small. A larger sample would have led to higher randomization; which would perhaps lead to more diverse outlooks.

In regard to the significant change in realizing that selling will be an important part of the students' careers, it is interesting to note that the lowest desired position after graduation is a sales representative. While more students have recognized selling as being an important part of their career, few students desire a career dedicated to selling. This may be due to the in-depth discovery of careers during the course. Students have realized that selling is an aspect that is apparent in all career opportunities, whether it is selling an actual product or service, or if it is selling themselves or the integrity of the company. As a result, while a career as a sales representative may not be desirable; the students are not denying the importance of selling.

While the desired positions of the students experience a shift, the array did not broaden. Upon entrance into the course, most students expressed interest in a buying position. After completion, the majority of students desired a career in store management. This shift of interest might be due to new outlooks of the students. Beginning a retail career in store management provides a strong foundation for the

student. The position exposes the student to the retail industry, while leaving all other doors open. From management, one can go on to pursue a variety of careers (e.g., buyer, stylist, visual merchandiser or entrepreneur). Students prefer to have choices and to keep their options open. Beginning a career in store management lets the student “test the waters” and discover where their passion truly lies. A position as a store manager requires one to hold a variety of responsibilities. For example, depending upon the nature of the company, the store manager may be able to view his job as running his own segment of the business. Furthermore, visual merchandising may be enhanced through following company-provided plan-o-grams and then making changes as necessary to work with his specific store.

It is also noteworthy that the percentage of “no response” to the open ended question of career position declined from the pre-course survey to the post-course survey. This demonstrates that students who are unsure of their futures when entering the course may discover their potential and begin to further define their career goals.

Limitations

In order to enhance further studies on this subject, a researcher will want to consider following a sample for a longer span and using a larger sample. After implementing these two factors more significant data may be found. The length of time between pre-course and post-course survey will allow for more significant changes in values and perceptions. However, more explanations for those changes may arise, as well. A larger sample will lead to a more random sample. If a sample of 100 students was used, generalization of findings would be more likely. Lastly, if a sample of students in a professional development class could be taken from one that is required for

graduation, the sample is less likely to be biased. It would be more probable to represent the general population, without the choice of completing the course being a confounding variable.

Table 1 - ANOVA Comparing Pre- and Post-Course Survey Results that Explore Individual Characteristics and Attitudes toward Career Positions

Responses are based on the scale: 1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree

Survey Item	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean	F	Significance
I will make a lot of money.	3.8846	3.9231	0.028	.868
There will be a variety of activities in my career.	4.1923	4.5000	2.730	.105
I will have the opportunity to be creative in my career.	4.4615	4.3846	0.187	.668
I will be able to initiate a variety of tasks in my career.	4.5385	4.4615	0.227	.636
I will be able to complete a variety of tasks in my career.	4.5385	4.4615	0.227	.636
I expect to have a satisfying career.	4.5000	4.5000	0.000	1.000
I will be able to work independently in my career.	3.6154	3.5769	0.028	.868
My opinions will be valued in my career.	4.3077	4.3077	0.000	1.000
Selling will be an important part of my career position.	3.6923	4.2692	4.109	.048*
I will make decisions that have ethical implications in my career.	4.0385	4.3846	2.503	.120
I am analytical.	4.0385	4.0385	0.000	1.000
I am a follower.	2.1923	2.1923	0.000	1.000
I am creative.	4.3077	3.3462	0.029	.866
I have a lot of attention to detail.	4.3846	4.1923	0.853	.360
I work best in a group.	3.3462	3.3462	0.000	1.000
I work best independently.	3.6923	3.3846	1.476	.230
I will be satisfied in a store management position.	2.6923	3.0385	0.968	.330
I will be satisfied in a buying office position.	3.4615	3.1923	0.709	.404
I will be satisfied in a product development position.	3.3846	3.6923	1.238	.271
I will be satisfied with a career position in a fashion office.	4.1154	4.1154	0.000	1.000
I will be satisfied with a career as a stylist.	3.8077	3.7308	0.053	.820
I will be satisfied with a career as a sales representative.	2.5769	2.7308	0.242	.625
I am a leader.	4.2692	4.2692	0.000	1.000
I will work with people from diverse populations in my career.	4.6800	4.6800	0.000	1.000

* Significant at $\alpha < 0.05$

**Table 2 - Comparison of pre- and post-survey responses to the question:
 “The career position I hope to secure upon graduation is...”**

Desired Position	Pre-Course Survey (n=26)¹	Pre-Course Survey – Percentages	Post-Course Survey (n=26)¹	Post-Course Survey – Percentages
Administrative Assistant	-		1	4%
Buyer	8	31%	1	4%
Corporate Management	1	4%	-	
Entrepreneur	1	4%	-	
Event Planner	-		1	4%
Fashion Designer	2	8%	2	8%
Merchandise Coordinator	1	4%	1	4%
Merchandise Planner	1	4%	1	4%
Personal Shopper	2	8%	-	
Product Development	2	8%	1	4%
Sales Representative	2	8%	1	4%
Store Management	7	27%	14	54%
Stylist	2	8%	2	8%
Visual Merchandiser	3	12%	-	
Wardrobe Consultant	-		1	4%
No Response	2	8%	1	4%

¹ Some students responded with more than one desired position

Table 3 - Post-Course Assessment: Responses to “What specific information gained in the professional development course do you expect to put to use in your retailing career?”

n=26²

Course-Related Topic	# of Responses	% Responding
Interviewing skills	9	35%
Everything	6	23%
Ethics	3	12%
Portfolio Construction	3	12%
Professionalism	3	12%
Cover Letter Techniques	2	8%
Life-long Learning Appreciation	2	8%
Initiative	1	4%
Internship as Discovery	1	4%
Interpersonal Skills	1	4%
Job Satisfaction	1	4%
Leadership	1	4%
Management being a Springboard into more opportunity	1	4%
Networking	1	4%
Personnel Issues	1	4%
Researching Careers	1	4%
Resume Development	1	4%
Standing Out	1	4%

²Percents exceed 100% since some students responded with more than one answer

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