SELF-UNDERSTANDING, CONFIDENCE, AND CAREER DECISION-MAKING
IN TRADITIONAL-AGE COLLEGE STUDENTS

by

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# DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to everyone who has paved the way and laid the foundation for me to have the opportunity to pursue an education.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I first want to give honor and thanks to my Lord Jesus Christ who has allowed me to make it this far. A huge thank you to my parents for their incomprehensible support and confidence in me through this process. I'd also like to extend gratitude to my family, friends, faculty, and committee for their guidance, patience, and support. A special thank you also goes to my sister Courtney, and brother VJ, for always keeping me encouraged, laughing, and hopeful.

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# ABSTRACT

SELF-UNDERSTANDING, CONFIDENCE, AND CAREER DECISION-MAKING IN
TRADITIONAL-AGE COLLEGE STUDENTS

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This study examined undeclared undergraduate students' understanding of themselves,

how that understanding affected their confidence in career decision-making, and whether

a career education course had any impact on those factors in the career decision-making

process. Individual student experiences and the theoretical foundation in social

constructionist theory, social cognitive career theory, and Super and Gottfredson's career

theories provided findings that illustrated a relationship between self-understanding and

confidence in undergraduate students' career decision-making. Those findings were

closely related to the presence of career education, personal and societal influences, and

the timing in which a student has received enough experience to make an accurate career

decision. The subjective experiences provided by the students resulted in the expansion

of the first phase of the career development model. This expansion illustrated the way in which innate and external factors influence students' success within the first phase of the career development process and led to the proposal of potential expansions within other phases in the career development model.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION


Career preparation is cited as students' main reason for attending college

(Suganya & Vivekkrishnan, 2013); however, more than half of working individuals plan

to change careers within their lifetime, and 86 percent are not in careers they desire

(University of Phoenix, 2013). Studies show that less than half of working individuals are

very satisfied with their jobs and the majority of the workforce receives more satisfaction

from their hobbies and leisure time than the work that they do (Heldrich, Zukin, &

Szeltner, 2012). Gallup, a global research-based performance-management consulting

company, recently analyzed poll data measuring the public's opinion on the necessity of

college and the factors that correlate with career success (Busteed, 2015; Seymour &

Lopez, 2015). Out of more than 30,000 college graduates participating in the survey,

about 8,000 of the participants stated that they had not thrived in their careers (Busteed,

2015). From that data, researchers found that support from professors and mentors, and

previous work experience, served as primary factors indicating whether a person will

obtain job satisfaction (Seymour and Lopez, 2015).

This issue, career dissatisfaction, is not new, and has resulted in a vast amount of

research conducted to determine how students formulate their career interests. Among the

results of such research, self-understanding has been highlighted as a process that must

happen before an individual is able to use career preparation resources and construct goals towards establishing their vocational interests (Brown et al., 2003; Lent et al, 2002; Super, 1990). Brown (2007) stated that "the individual who finds pleasure and satisfaction in work does so because the position held permits characteristics and values to be used in a way that is seen as important; experiences encountered in work are comparable with the individual's mental image of self" (p. 53). In other words, people who are able to utilize and include their personal interests and unique qualities into their career responsibilities have a greater chance of achieving career satisfaction. In studies centered on the role of personality in college students' career decision-making, it is found that a career is constructed from phenomena occurring in a person's life (Brown, George-Curran, & Smith, 2003). This finding is supported by Laughlin and Creamer (2007), who, while studying female students' levels of self-authorship in decision-making, noted that the students responded to career-related questions more confidently when they associated their career aspirations with phenomena they found personally meaningful (Amundson, Borgen, Iaquinta, Butterfield, & Koert, 2010). Lastly, researchers Chuang and Jenkins (2010) found this notion to be true while examining career decision-making in hospitality students. They determined that students perceived themselves as having the most influence in their career decision-making and credited their motivation for pursuing a hospitality career to their passion to help people and the similarities the profession had with their personality. This research suggests that career decision-making is closely connected to an individual's personality and self-understanding.

**Personal Experience**

My interest in studying college students' self-understanding and confidence in career decision-making initially came from an experience I had as a scholarship interview panelist for undergraduate college students. The students interviewing for the scholarship were very successful in their academics with high grade point averages; additionally, they were involved in numerous university organizations holding prominent positions (i.e. president, vice-president, ambassador). However, very few students could adequately articulate their personal strengths or how they planned to use the skills they learned from their classes and campus involvement within their desired careers. For example, a student would be asked to list three of their personal strengths and explain how they could be integrated in the profession they were pursuing. Most students replied with generic answers such as, "I'm a great communicator and communication is key when working with people," "The organization I am affiliated with is very diverse, so I have good skills working with people from diverse backgrounds" or "I'm a team player and teamwork is necessary to complete large tasks." Outside of those generic responses, the students were not able to further articulate their answers. Then, when the students were asked to explain what they were passionate about, it became increasingly clear that the students had not established a solid career aspiration. Most of the responses were centered on helping people. To give an example, a student responded by saying, "After volunteering at a homeless shelter for two years I really developed a passion for helping people" but when asked in what way they wanted to help people, that student and most others responded by saying they had not determined that at the time.

Research suggests that such a lack in self-understanding results in an individual's struggle with identifying an appropriate occupation. Researchers Saka, Gati, and Kelly (2008) determined that "career indecision and indecisiveness involves difficulties in forming a stable, independent personal and vocational identity and a positive self-concept" (p. 5). In addition to my observations made above, I have also noticed that many of my colleagues, in there mid to late-20s, are beginning to become unsatisfied with their careers and have trouble understanding the source of their frustration. Given that lack of personal fulfillment has been identified as one of the main factors influencing career dissatisfaction, economists within the Bureau of Labor Statistics suggest that individuals conduct a self-assessment and skills assessment before beginning their career decision-making; they credit values, interest, and personality as major factors that should be included in career exploration (Kasper, 2004; Mullins, 2009).

**Problem Statement**

With the primary goals of the higher education system being to educate students and prepare them for employment, there is a need for required mechanisms within the higher education system to help students accurately select an academic major congruent with their personal and career interests. The purpose of this study is to examine undergraduate students' understanding of their personal attributes, and the ways in which this understanding influences their career decision-making self-efficacy (CDMSE). Brown (2007) describes personal attributes as "the uniqueness of each person that is apparent in the individualized combination of strengths and weakness" (p. 47). Self-efficacy is most often described as self-confidence, or the belief that an individual has in

their ability to complete a task (Bandura, 1977a). This research therefore seeks to answer the following questions:

(1) To what extent, if any, do undergraduate students have an understanding of their personal attributes/characteristics?:

(2) How, if at all, do career education courses enlighten students' understanding of their personal characteristics?: and

(3) What role, if any, do such courses play in students' career decision-making self-efficacy?

The theoretical framework used in this study draws from Super and Gottfredson's stages of career development with a major emphasis placed on the first two stages, self-assessment and career exploration. In the next chapter I provide an explanation of this framework, as well as an overview of the literature centered on career decision-making. The review of literature ends with a brief explanation of recurrent influences in career decision-making and is followed by an explanation of the methodological approach used in this study. In my final two chapters, I conclude with a discussion of my findings.

# CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Social constructionist theory indicates that multiple realities influence a person's self-understanding, because people learn about themselves through interactions with others (Bess & Dee, 2008; Blustein & Ellis, 2000; Blustein, Schultheiss, & Flum, 2004; Mertens, 2015). This means that factors influencing career decision-making such as self-understanding, self-efficacy, barriers, culture, and social support do not individually determine career decisions, but rather they are formed by each individual's social interactions. Vocational researchers Singh and Greenhaus (2004), while studying career changers, determined that "simultaneously engaging in multiple career decision-making strategies is effective primarily because of the enhanced levels of awareness that result from combining the advantages of rational and intuitive approaches" (p. 217). Within this review, I place more attention on understanding how the development of self-understanding contributes to both rational and intuitive approaches to career decision-making. I have chosen to focus on developmental theorists Super and Gottfredson's notions of self-understanding as they relate to career decision-making; their theories place more emphasis on how an individual develops the concept of self. However, I also briefly examine other decision-making components that are recurrent in the literature.

**Self-understanding**

      **Super.** Developmental theorists initially hypothesized that vocational interests and aspirations are linked to personal identity and established over a sequence of time while changing with maturity. Theorists Super (1990) and Gottfredson (1996) constructed comprehensive developmental stages for individuals from childhood to adulthood and accounted for changes in identity and career interests over time. Super (1990) stated that each person has a uniqueness in their "abilities and personalities" that makes them distinct. He emphasized that self-concept or "personal construct" develops over time and consists of a person's internal understanding of themselves, and how they view their current situation. Super constructed five life stages to illustrate this: growth, exploratory, establishment, maintenance, and decline. During the *growth* stage (ages 0-14) individuals grow physically and psychologically and form personality traits that become important components of who they are (Brown, 2007). Also during this time individuals begin to understand the working world, or simply the concept of work. In the *exploratory* stage (ages 15-24) individuals understand that working is a component of life (Brown, 2007). However, Super believes that individuals in this stage may still lack a complete understanding of themselves and how they fit into the working world, but they begin to narrow down their career options. The third stage, *establishment*, (ages 25-44) suggests that an individual begins to gain experience in the working world (Brown, 2007). During this phase individuals determine whether their career options formed in the exploratory stage are viable (Brown, 2007). As the individual gains experience and becomes aware of their abilities they are able to decide on an occupation with

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characteristics that best fit their self-concept (Brown, 2007). In the next stage, *maintenance*, (ages 45-64) individuals maintain their working condition because their self-concept and occupation are consistent (Brown, 2007). In other words, the individual is not actively seeking a career change. The only change present is this stage is the individual's efforts to improve unpleasant parts of their work (Brown, 2007). The last stage, *decline*, (ages 65+) consists of individuals meeting the requirements of their work while placing more energy on preparing for retirement (Brown, 2007).

Super (1990) suggests that career counselors can aid individuals in narrowing down their career options by: (1) helping students develop skills and interests and (2) helping them recognize their strengths and weaknesses. In terms of job satisfaction, Super (1990) found that job satisfaction is directly related to the job's fit with a person's self-concept. This idea of person-job fit has served as a key implication in career decision-making research. Current researchers have found congruencies between their findings and Super's development theory. Singh and Greenhaus (2004) supported the notion of self-understanding when they conducted a study on individuals that had recently (within two years) changed a job or career; they found that the "fit" between a person's "interest, values, needs, self-cognitions, and environment" increased their chances of making good career decisions (p. 201). Additionally they found that people were able to accurately determine career choices that were similar to their identity (needs, values, interests, and talents) when they had an accurate understanding of themselves and their work environment. Within a cultural context, Saka, Gati, and Kelly (2008) hypothesized that younger American college students' "search for identity is more directly related to their

anxiety about the process of career decision making and the uncertainty involved in it"
(p. 414). They also inferred that many (first-time) freshmen American college students'
worry about choosing a major and their lack in self-understanding contribute to their
anxiety about the process (Saka, Gati, & Kelly, 2008).

Before moving into the explanation of Gottfredson's theory, I will acknowledge
that Super's early stages (growth, exploratory, establishment) all represent stages
traditional-age college students encounter. However, Super lists individuals' first work
experiences as beginning around age 25. As a critique to his theory, research suggests
that today individuals are beginning to gain work experience (e.g., co-ops, internships) at
an earlier stage than Super projected (Komarraju, Swanson, & Nadler, 2014). Since his
theory was developed in the early 1900s, a suggestion may be to reframe his stages to fit
the way in which society currently approaches work.

**Gottfredson.** Gottfredson's (1996) theory also identifies self-understanding as a
necessity in making effective career decisions. The first three of her four assumptions are
similar to Super's: (1) career development starts in childhood; (2) career interests derive
from an individual's self-concept; and (3) career satisfaction is closely related to the
compatibility of the individual's career and self-perception. Her theory, however, differs
from Super's because her fourth assumption infers that individuals develop career
stereotypes that influence their career options. Another difference is that she defines a
person's self-understanding as including a social and psychological self, with the social
self being the most influential in deriving vocational interests (Brown, 2007). The social
self includes factors such as intelligence, social status, and gender, while the

psychological *innate* self (in correlation with Super's theory) includes values and personality.

Gottfredson's (1996) developmental stages consist of: (1) orientation to size and power; (2) orientation to sex roles; (3) orientation to social valuation; and (4) orientation to internal, unique self. These developmental stages provide a detailed process of how individuals narrow down their career options based on how they develop their concept of self. In comparison to Super's stages, Gottfredson breaks her early stages into smaller age groups to reflect a more modern progression into the world of work. *Orientation to size and power* (ages 3 to 5 years), is the stage when children begin to comprehend that working is a component of being an adult (Gottfredson, 1996; 2005). They remove their desires to become fantasy characters (e.g., Disney princess, Marvel superhero) and begin to picture themselves in adult working roles. They also begin to develop a self-concept based on social interactions (Gottfredson, 1996; 2005). For example, a three year old may attend daycare weekly and begin to notice that they are taller than the other children. In the second stage, *orientation to sex roles* (ages 6 to 8 years), children begin to identify and base their career desires on how sex roles have been modeled in society (Gottfredson, 1996; 2005). For example, a seven year old girl may identify desired careers such as nurse, teacher, or secretary because those are the occupations she sees women primarily occupy. In the third stage, orientation to *social valuation* (ages 9 to 13 years), children and adolescents expand their knowledge of occupations based on how they are perceived by society, the prestige associated with an occupation, and their academic ability (Gottfredson, 1996; 2005). In the last stage, *orientation to the internal, unique self* (ages

14 and older), individuals are more aware of their career choice, and they can describe their "idealistic and realistic" careers (Gottfredson, 1996; 2005).

Gottfredson (2005) suggests that career counselors can aid individuals in determining career options by: (1) helping students "avoid unnecessary, self-limiting circumscription and compromise" (p. 44), (2) teaching students to play to their strengths, and (3) empowering students to "defy expectations by investing in new skills, acquiring beneficial habits" and ultimately "shaping a new environment" (p. 43). Current researchers have found similarities in their findings when compared with Gottfredson's theory. When studying career aspiration among Latino youth, Ivers, Milsom, and Newsome (2012) found that young Latino individuals engaged in circumscription at a young age. They suggest that the lack of images of prominent Latino individuals can heavily impact Latino students' interest in academic achievement and career aspirations. As a result, many Latino students compromise on more accessible career options "even when they are not aligned with their abilities and interests" (p. 237). Blanchard and Lichtenberg (2003) tested compromise in career decision making of college students to determine whether most students would rather sacrifice sex-type, prestige, or interest in their career decision-making. They found that students placed an equal amount of importance on sex-type and the prestige of a profession when making a career decision; however, more female students tend to compromise their career aspirations as opposed to male students. For example, a female may choose to pursue a less demanding career in order to allot time for raising children. Their study also found that students placed less importance on career interest when making a major compromise, however when making

a low degree of compromise students placed more importance on selecting a career that aligned with their interest. A major compromise could consist of a person with a physical disability choosing to forego any career that requires constant mobility, while a low degree of compromise could consist of an individual choosing to forego their aspirations of becoming a medical doctor and instead become a physician assistant.
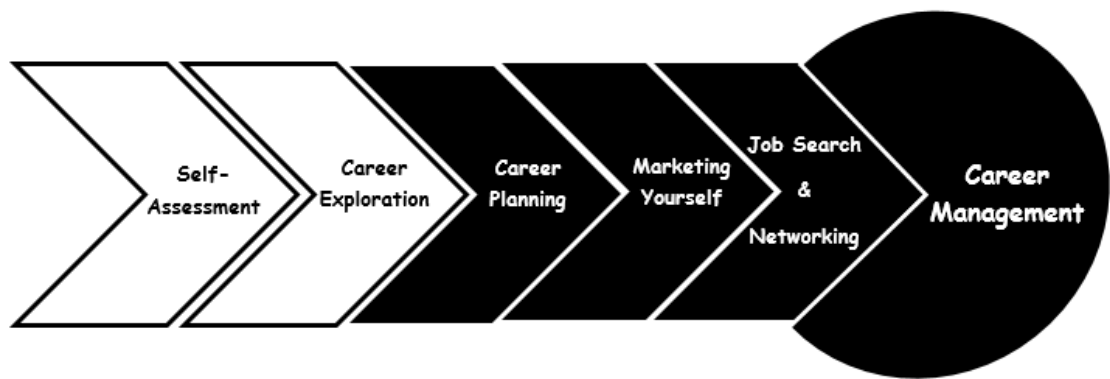


*Figure 1*. Illustration of the career development process.

As shown in Figure 1, the white arrows (self-assessment and exploration) illustrate the early stages Super and Gottfredson's research found to be essential when entering the career decision-making process.

Overall both Super and Gottfredson's theories and the related studies show that individuals' career options are narrowed down and determined based on their concept of self. They highlight maturity as a primary influence that brings awareness to an

individual's values, interests, and understanding of their personal strengths and weaknesses. Both theorists also agree that the variance in an individual's experiences over time contributes to their perception of self. Thus far, self-understanding has been shown to play a major role in helping individuals clarify their career options; however, research also suggests that self-understanding impacts the confidence a person has in their career decision-making (Betz, 2004).

**Self-efficacy**

Helwig (2004), who adopted both Super and Gottfredson's theories in his research, conducted a 10-year longitudinal study to measure changes in student career decision-making between second grade and twelfth grade. He found that with maturity students' understanding of their personal strengths and weaknesses affected their confidence in their career decisions (Bandura, 1986; Gottfredson, 1996; Lent, Brown, Hackett, 1994). He also determined that most students chose career paths that were not geared towards "professional, technical, or managerial" occupations because as they gained awareness of their strengths and weaknesses they determined that they would not be able to complete the necessary tasks required in those vocations; therefore, they chose not to pursue them. Most importantly, he stated that students will not be able to identify their best career options until they have a self-understanding, which is different for each student. Saka, Gati, and Kelly (2008) defined career indecision as a difficulty in forming a self-concept. They believed that deciding on a major could be one of the first opportunities for freshmen to make an important identity-related decision. As a result, this can cause anxiety and decrease self-efficacy in their decision-making. Overall they

inferred that identity-related decisions may be particularly difficult for traditional-age college students because they are still in the process of developing a self-concept. Lastly, in terms of adult students (ages 24 and older), Sandler (2000) determined that confidence in their career decision-making was higher, influencing their initial decisions to enroll in college and re-enroll in classes for the following academic year. Adult student CDMSE, career decision-making self-efficacy, can be closely related to their age-maturity and self-understanding through previous work experiences. These studies illustrate the connection between self-understanding and self-efficacy in the career decision-making process.

The notion of self-efficacy within this research is adopted from Lent, Brown, and Hackett's (1994) social cognitive career theory (SCCT) which infers that career decision-making is influenced by self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals. Their main propositions of SCCT can be constructed into six "frames," the first two being that 1) individuals and their environment influence each other and 2) behavior associated with the career choice process is influenced by self-efficacy, goals, and expectations. This means that students who better define their interests, abilities, goals and actively engage in activities related to career exploration have greater self-confidence in making career-related decisions (Gushue, Scanlan, Pantzer, & Clarke, 2006; Lent et al., 2002). Additionally, students who commit to career planning and goal setting have a higher CDMSE, as opposed to students who make no commitments at all (Chung, 2002; Laughlin & Creamer 2007). Contrarily, individuals with pessimistic views about the career decision-making process have a low CDMSE, (Saka, Gati, & Kelly, 2008).

The third frame of SCCT posits that individuals' confidence in completing work-related tasks influences their career interest. Therefore, students who have a lower self-confidence are more likely to report being vocationally undecided (Taylor and Betz, 1983; Wang, Jome, Haase, & Bruch, 2006). According to the fourth frame of SCCT, ethnicity, gender, health, and disabilities influence self-efficacy goals and development. In terms of gender, research suggests that men generally feel that they are able to complete a task within male-dominated fields of science and technology, while women feel more confident completing tasks in positions generally held by women (Bandura, 1977; 2006). Bandura (1977b) also notes that individuals engage in behavior they have observed, or modeling. Scandura and Williams (2001) found that role modeling has a positive effect on self-efficacy when the gender of the role model and the observing individual is the same.  For example, a female student may become more confident in their career decision to become an engineer after observing other women working as engineers. The modeling concept can also be applied to individuals from various ethnicities (Bigler, Averhart, & Liben, 2003; Chung, 2002). Chung (2002) found that in a larger Black community, Black students tended to have more resources and role models resulting in higher CDMSE and career commitment.

In the fifth frame of SCCT, other factors such as socioeconomic status and culture influence self-efficacy. In Helwig's (2004) 10-year longitudinal study of primary and secondary education students, he determined that the social class from which the students came had an impact on their career decision-making. The majority of the students he interviewed were from middle-class families so he determined through studying students'

extracurricular activities (e.g., dance classes, private music lessons) that those students had more access to resources that impacted their understanding of themselves and increased their confidence in their career decision-making. Mau (2000) conducted a study measuring career decision-making in American and Taiwanese college students and concluded that CDMSE is closely related to career decision-making style. American culture is individual-oriented and therefore promotes self-efficacy, while individuals from other cultures often practice a dependent and collectivist philosophy that can inhibit the development of self-efficacy (Tinsley, Tinsley, & Rushing, 2002). Finally, the last proposition infers that changes in self-efficacy are circumstantial. As discussed earlier in this chapter, several factors influence career decision-making, however, the factors stated in the following sections were relevant for participants in this study.

**Other Influences**

**Barriers.** An increase in an individual's self-understanding brings awareness to their strengths and weaknesses (Amundson, Borgen, Iaquinta, Butterfield, & Koert, 2010) and factors that may hinder their attainment of their ideal occupation (Brown, 2007; Lent et al, 2002; Super, 1990). A University of Phoenix (2013) career report found that 95 percent of people identify barriers that prevent pursuing a career. More than half (57 percent) cite a lack in finances as a barrier, and 31 percent consider themselves to be too advanced in age to change careers. Lent et al., (2002) listed financial concern and negative social or family influences as common barriers that influence career choice. With the rising cost of tuition and decrease in state funding for public higher education institutions, students are forced to make finance-related decisions connected to how and

when they will attend college (Shin & Milton, 2008). This can result in students deciding

to delay their attendance at a college or university in order to earn money, or acquire a

job while pursuing their education, which may prolong their attendance (Keane, 2002).

For students with career aspirations requiring a significant amount of education, this

financial burden may hinder their pursuit of that career (Keane, 2002).  In addition to

finances, sex-roles were also found to be a barrier primarily in women.

**Sex-roles.** Quimby and O'Brien (2004) studied nontraditional female students and

reported their awareness of career barriers. They concluded that those students perceived

strong levels of social support (Amundson, Borgen, Iaquinta, Butterfield, & Koert, 2010)

and only reported moderate levels of hindrances in their education. However, the barriers

that emerged as main predictors of their vocational choices included multiple role conflict

(for nontraditional college women with children), and discouragement from choosing

nontraditional careers as well as conflict between children and career demands (for

nontraditional college women without children). The multiple role conflicts were due to

the issues some students had in allotting time for studying or attending class, while

making time for work and their families. Although this research targeted nontraditional

female students, the barriers they face (e.g. multiple role conflict, determining vocational

choice based on aspirations for children) can be applied to traditional-age female

students. As a solution to minimizing the influence of perceived barriers and sex-roles,

Gottfredson (1996; 2002) suggests that career developmental programs and counseling

can help individuals eliminate career sex-role stereotypes and perceived barriers, and help

identify developmental problems (such as lack in self-understanding) that may hinder

career decision-making. In addition to barriers, research also identifies ethnic culture as a prominent influencer on career decision-making.

**Ethnic culture.** Individuals from various cultures engage in different approaches to career decision-making. Students from ethnic groups that are not prominent to the United States (e.g., Hispanic, African American, Asian American, American Indian) have a higher likelihood of using a dependent collectivist approach to career decision-making because within their culture decisions are generally made based on group and family expectations (Mau, 2000; 2004). The notion of making a decision based on individual preference is a Western concept and more heavily used by European Americans. Saka, Gati, and Kelly (2008) measured career decision-making in students within a Middle Eastern society as compared to American students, and note that Americans typically begin determining career choices at a younger age, thus their career choice difficulties may be more connected with their youth and the anxiety associated with autonomous decision-making.

Most of the research I reviewed on career decision-making has focused on large multiethnic groups. The small amount of career-related research conducted on individual ethnic groups is centered on issues those groups face within the decision-making process. Wang, Jome, Haase, and Bruch (2006) studied the variation of positive and negative perceptions of CDMSE in students. They found that European American students showed greater sociability and reported experiencing positive emotions toward developing career options as opposed to students of other racial and ethnic groups. Mau (2004) posited that individuals from a younger generation within non-dominate ethnic groups may have

issues making decisions because they have trouble conforming to the dominate culture while trying to understand their own cultural identity. Gushue (2006) validated Mau's argument when studying CDMSE in Latino students; he found that their identification with their ethnic group directly influenced their beliefs in their ability to engage in career exploration. Additionally he found that a "more fully integrated identification with one's cultural group provides a base for greater confidence in one's abilities to engage in the process of implementing that identity through vocational choice" (Gushue, 2006, p. 92).

As shown in this brief review of literature, cultural differences and cultural identity issues affect vocational choice in students from non-dominate ethnic groups. Mau (2004) suggests that counselors embrace cultural differences when helping students develop their career interests, and consider a social constructivist approach to their career counseling strategies. Though personal factors influence individuals' career decisions, research also identifies external sources that impact individual's career decisions, such as family members, mentors, and instructors.

**Family, mentors, and instructors.** Students' support and feelings of belongingness from their family increase their academic motivation and have the potential impact the growth of their career decision-making (Lent et al., 2002; Phillips, Christopher-Sisk, & Gravino, 2001; Schulthesis, Kress, & Manzi, 2001; Slaten & Baskin, 2014). Bubany et al. (2008) found that social support reigned as a vital element in students' career choice and had a positive impact on the career decision-making process. Students have more confidence in their chosen career path when they use information from people they know. Due to students' trust in their parents, they often make career

decisions based on opinions of their parents (Cullaty, 2011; Greenbank, 2011; Laughlin & Creamer, 2005; 2007).

In addition to trust, Hargrove, Creagh, and Burgess (2002) found in their study that increased confidence in students' vocational interests and goals were also due to their families casting school and work activities into "competitive and achievement-oriented activities." Family members encouraged student behavior that consisted of academic achievement and career preparation, and with the freedom to express interests, ideas, and feelings the students had positive outlooks on career options (Dietrich & Kracke, 2009; Hargrove, Creagh, & Burgess, 2002). In contrast, students display a lower level of career commitment and confidence for career-related tasks if parents and peers do not encourage independence (Gianakos, 2001). In addition to family members, mentors and instructors have been found to be influential in students' career decision-making (Amundson, Borgen, Iaquinta, Butterfield, & Koert, 2010; Flouri & Buchanan, 2002; Helwig, 2004; Laughlin & Creamer, 2007). Over the course of an academic term instructors may be able to gauge their students' strengths and help students to form ideal occupations based on those strengths. As a result, students can be more inclined to appreciate instructors that teach topics they are interested in and seek career guidance from those instructors (Dick & Rallis, 1991). Lastly, experience and career education are pinpointed by researchers as a major determinant in individuals occupational choices.

**Experience and career education.** Work experience is frequently credited as an influencer on career decision-making, because students are able to develop an idea of their strengths and weaknesses through work evaluations (Bubany et al., 2008; Flouri &

Buchanan, 2002; Kasper, 2004; Lent et al, 2002; Mullins, 2009; Super, 1990). Student exposure to career exploration activities such as job shadowing and internships allows them to clarify their interests, values, and skills, and build realistic expectations of career interests (Chuang & Jenkins, 2010; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994; Lent et al., 2002). Additionally, having a job increases an individual's confidence in their ability to work successfully. Career development identifies likes and dislikes for particular work activities, environments, coworkers, and supervisors and is built on many experiences and activities which include those occurring outside the workplace. In Helwig's (2004) longitudinal study on primary and secondary students he determined that extra- and co-curricular activities helped individuals narrow down their career decisions (Bubany et al., 2008) and played a major role in students' development of their vocational interests.

In addition to experience, research shows that career courses and counseling are necessary to adequately help students determine the best career options (Hoyt & Wickwire, 2001; Reese & Miller, 2006; Schulthesis, Kress, & Manzi, 2001). Career courses have been proven to be an effective way for students to improve their CDMSE. In most cases negative perceptions about career decision-making are eliminated during these courses because students receive help with gathering information, setting goals, and making future plans (Reese & Miller, 2006; Reed, Reardon, Lenz, & Leierer, 2001). Scott and Ciani (2008) conducted a study on primarily first-time freshmen students attending a career education course and they determined that the combination of typology assessments administered during the course proved to be beneficial in helping students understand their personal strengths, and career research projects helped students exhibit

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higher levels of confidence in career decision-making (Scott & Ciani, 2008). Overall, career counseling and courses have proven to be beneficial for students. Suggestions have been made to encourage career counselors to teach students how to use their course curriculum to strengthen their career self-efficacy (Sandler, 2000).

**Summary**

In this chapter, I discussed Super and Gottfredson's theories surrounding the development of self in relation to career interest and career decision-making. Studies testing these theories were also reviewed and the commonalties and variances within each theory was addressed. Most research suggested the need for self-understanding before engaging in career decision-making (Blanchard and Lichtenberg, 2003; Brown, 2007; Gottfredson, 1996, 2002, 2005; Ivers, Milsom, & Newsome, 2012; Saka, Gati, & Kelly, 2008; Singh & Greenhaus, 2004; Super, 1990). The concept of self-efficacy in career decision-making was extracted from Lent, Brown, and Hackett's (1994) social cognitive career theory, and analyzed in its relation to self-understanding. Most research also supported the relation between self-understanding and self-efficacy in career decision-making, and infers that both concepts work together (Bandura, 1986; Chung, 2002; Gushue, Scanlan, Pantzer, & Clarke, 2006; Helwig, 2004; Laughlin & Creamer 2007; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994; Lent et al., 2002; Sandler, 2000; Taylor and Betz, 1983). Finally, other career decision-making components, such as barriers, culture, social support, experience, and career education were analyzed. With this body of research in mind, I explain in the following chapter my method for exploring self-understanding and self-efficacy in the career decision-making process of traditional-age college students.

**CHAPTER 3: METHODS**

The goal of this study was to determine (1) the level of students' self-understanding, (2) if career education courses encouraged the inclusion of personal characteristics in student career decision making, and (3) whether incorporating personal characteristics in career decision-making increased students' self-efficacy in their career choice. I chose a qualitative method for this study in order to examine first-hand experiences that participants believed to be influential in their vocational decisions. More specifically, I used a phenomenological qualitative approach, as this approach places more emphasis on the participants' subjective experiences. Current research on self-understanding and career decision-making self-efficacy (CDMSE) includes many quantitative studies but does not often provide details to fully explain the reasons for study results. The phenomenological qualitative approach allowed me to provide explanations for the ways in which students interpreted their state of indecision and the practices they used in career decision-making. In this chapter I first discuss the location for the study, followed by an explanation of the sampling strategy, and an introduction of the participants. I then elaborate on the procedure that I followed, detail the strategy used for data analysis, and provide a brief explanation of the instrument. This chapter concludes with a brief acknowledgement of limitations to the study.

**Location**

The study was conducted at large public research university located in a Southeastern state. Undergraduate students enrolled at the university were used for the sample of participants. The university has four separate campus locations; however, the students sampled in this study were enrolled at the main campus location. The undergraduate student population consists of over 22,000 students. This institution was selected for the cite for this study primarily because of the presence of career education courses available to undergraduate students, and more specifically because the institution offers a career education course for undeclared students.

**Sampling Strategy**

For this qualitative study, I used a stratified purposeful sample of participants. This sampling style was tailored to specifically select participants that met the requirements for this study: undeclared; between the ages of 18 to 22; and enrolled in college for the first time. Two groups of students were recruited for this study. The first group of students were undergraduate students enrolled in a career education course. The objective of the course was to help students make vital decisions geared toward developing a major and outlining their career options. This was sought to be achieved by focusing on self-exploration and research of academic majors and career options during the decision-making process. Therefore, the academic emphasis was on self-assessment exercises, career inventories, and discussions. The course discussions and research

projects helped students with clarifying and assessing personal attributes that gave them insight into how those characteristics aligned with potential academic majors and career options. The course instructors were experienced career development professionals. The career education course is a two-credit course that consists of three class sections; during the spring semester, when the interviews were conducted, there were 47 students registered for the course.

The second group of students recruited for this study were not enrolled in the course. A snowball sampling strategy was used to recruit these students. The students attending the career education course were encouraged to invite their peers, who were not enrolled in the course but met the criteria for the study, to participate. I also recruited non-career course students through tabling events I held in the main student center on the campus. The tabling recruitment was conducted two weeks before the spring break recess. During this recruitment process students were informed about general information regarding the study as well as the eligibility requirements for the study. Candy bars were used as incentives for students to volunteer to participate in the study. Through this strategy I identified 11 undergraduate students, including five first-time freshmen and six sophomores as participants.

**Participants**

The main requirements for participation in this study included undergraduate enrollment in the career education course for undeclared students, or an undeclared student status. After meeting with career service professionals to request permission to

advertise the study to their students, attaining permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), and presenting brief in-class announcements, six students attending the career education course volunteered, and five non-career course students volunteered, for a total of 11 interview participants. Originally 15 students were identified as fitting the criteria for this study; however, I had trouble with scheduling an interview time for four of the students, therefore, they were not included. There was an even ratio of first-time freshmen to sophomore students who participated; the students' classification was based on the number of credit hours completed at the university. The students whom were first-time freshmen were classified as such because this was their first time being enrolled in college and they had not completed at least 30 academic credits.

Most interviewees were identified before the interview phase of the study began conducted; however, some interviewees (primarily non-career course students) were identified during the interview phase of the study. Some of the students within the non-career course group, who volunteered to participate, were found to be ineligible for the study. Therefore, the recruitment process was extended and the interview phase of the study continued to the end of the semester. A university database was used to cross-check the eligibility of non-career course students who volunteered to participate in this study. Students that were identified as being ineligible for this study were categorized as such because they had already declared a major, and their student classification did not fit the parameters of this study.

During the interviews, each interviewee chose to answer every question asked; at the time of the interviews, three of the students had recently declared a major and eight

were still undecided. Two of the students who had recently declared a major where students enrolled in the career education course. The students who had recently declared majors had declared within one to two weeks before their interviews, and were all sophomore students who were approaching their deadline to declare a major. Students who were unable to identify a major or career path of interest during the interview were able to identify and list careers that they did not want to pursue. Many identifying features have been eliminated from student comments included in this report in order to protect confidentiality. However, slang and grammatically incorrect verbiage has been left in the comments to retain authenticity. Additionally, each student was assigned a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality. Below is a brief description of the participants who took part in the study.

Participant 1, Ally, was 20 years old and not enrolled in the career education course. At the time of the interview, Ally was a first-time freshman student. Her career interests were in engineering, teaching, mass media, and film making. She is a Middle Eastern international student and her first trip to the United States was to attend college. She was undeclared on a major at the time of the interviews.

Participant 2, Connor, was 19 years old and not enrolled in the career education course. At the time of the interview Connor was a sophomore student. He is white and grew up in a nearby county. Connor lived on campus and worked as a Resident Assistant. His career interest were conflict analysis and resolution and psychology. He was undeclared at the time of the interview.

Participant 3, Maddie, was 19 years old and not enrolled in the career education course. At the time of the interview Maddie was a first-time freshman student. She is of Hispanic heritage and lived off-campus. She could not identify an ideal career; however, she acknowledged that she did not want to pursue a career in math or science. Her general interests consisted of traveling and engaging in sports. She was undeclared at the time of the interview.

Participant 4, Vergil, was 20 years old and not enrolled in the career education course. At the time of the interview Vergil was a sophomore student. He is a white European international student and had career interests were accounting, pharmacy, and tourism. Vergil also blogged regularly about his international vacations. He was undeclared at the time of the interview.

Participant 5, Mari, was 20 years old and not enrolled in the career education course. At the time of the interview, she was a sophomore student. Mari is white and grew up in a nearby county. Her career interests were in international affairs, civil engineering, social work, teaching, and graphic design. She had recently declared a major in civil engineering.

Participant 6, Erin, was 18 years old and enrolled in the career education course. At the time of the interview Erin was a sophomore student. She is white. Erin's career interests were in middle and high school teaching and museum studies. By the interview, she had decided that she wanted to teach; however, she was still trying to decide which

subject she wanted to teach. She had recently declared a major in secondary education during an advising meeting she attended before the interview.

Participant 7, Willie, was 19 years old and enrolled in the career education course. At the time of the interview Willie was a first-time freshman. He is of Hispanic heritage. He volunteered as a local medical and safety technician. His career interests were in biology, teaching, and art. He could not identify an ideal career he was interested in at the time of the interview. He also was undeclared at the time of the interview.

Participant 8, Oden, was 19 years old and enrolled in the career education course. At the time of the interview Oden was a sophomore student. His is African American. Oden worked at a local grocery retailer. His career interests were in medical health and psychology. He used the career education course to help him narrow his specific interest in medical health. He had recently declared a major in chemistry.

Participant 9, Eden, was 20 years old and enrolled in the career education course. At the time of the interview Eden was a sophomore student. She identified as being of Asian heritage. Eden's career interests were in game design and music. She had additional interests in graphic design and counseling. She was undeclared at the time of the interview.

Participant 10, Danny, was 18 years old and enrolled in the career education course. At the time of the interview Danny was a first-time freshman student. He identified as being white; however, he was born and raised within multiple Middle

Eastern countries. His career interests were in teaching and scene design. He had plans to declare a major in theatre with a concentration in design and technology.

Participant 11, Ethan, was 19 years old and enrolled in the career education course. At the time of the interview Ethan was a first-time freshman student. He identified as being white. His interests were in art history and mathematics. Ethan expressed a strong affinity for customer service roles. He was undeclared at the time of the interview.

**Procedure**

Previous researchers using a similar methodology suggest that interviews be conducted during the middle of the semester. This is because they found that most participants had determined their major or career path by that point in time, and participants' enthusiasm for the course had diminished after their expectations for the course had been met. In Reese and Miller's (2006) study they found that participants' motivation in career education courses decreases over time due to fatigue from the semester. Therefore, my original plan was to conduct interviews for this study during the middle of the spring semester. However, due to unanticipated scheduling conflicts and the delay due to a few students being found ineligible for the study, I conducted interviews until the end of the spring semester.

Upon arrival at the interview location, an on-campus library study room, I greeted participants and informed them that the purpose of the interview was to understand career decision-making. Before participating in the study, students were required to read and

sign an IRB-approved informed consent statement. The interview consisted of four demographic and 14 career-based questions (see interview protocol in Appendix A). The participants enrolled in the career education course were asked an additional four questions specific to their experiences in the course. The participants who were not enrolled in the course were only asked one additional question. At the end of the interview participants were invited to discuss any other career-related topics they chose. The interviews lasted around 45 minutes each and were audiotaped on a recording device. I made additional written notes at the conclusion of each interview to provide clarity in addition to recording observations of nonverbal behavior.

**Interview questions.** The interview questions were designed to indicate whether participants had an understanding of their strengths and weaknesses as they discussed career decision-making and confidence in their career choice. Pilot interviews were conducted to help create, modify, and clarify the interview questions, as well as gain a basis for the approximate time needed to conduct the interviews. Two high school seniors and two college first-time freshmen volunteered to complete the pilot interview. The remaining questions were based on suggestions made by career service professionals and adopted from previous career inquiry-based protocols.

Three of the questions were adopted from Brown's (2007) discussion of developmental theories with emphasis on Super's self-understanding and self-concept theories. The first of these questions was, "What would you like to be if you could do anything you wanted?" This yielded an imaginary response; if the participant had developed a realistic self-understanding they provided an imaginary response but also

admitted that achieving this career goal was unlikely. The second question was, "What do you expect to be in 10 years?" This question provided participants the opportunity to exhibit self-insight; participants' responses disclosed whether they had made a realistic self-assessment of career goals that they could achieve within a certain amount of time. The final question was, "What is the least you would settle for 10 years from now?" The aim of this question was to reveal how the participant understood their strengths and weaknesses (Brown, 2007, p. 51). Gottfredson (1996) stated that individuals compromise and give up their desired occupational choices for those that are more accessible. Once the interviews started, and after witnessing the apprehension students exhibited regarding their uncertainty as it related to the timing in which they felt they could declare an appropriate major, I added one more question to the interview, "Do you which there was something in place before college to help you narrow down your career interests?, If so, what?"

**Data Analysis**

Interview times, dates, and locations were organized in an Excel file. Once interviews were completed, recorded interview data was transcribed into a computer file. Additionally, the written field notes were gathered and added to the computer file. Initially I examined individual interview transcripts to gain an understanding of how each students' experiences influenced how they interpreted the career decision-making process. I coded each transcript by highlighting and underlining words and phrases that stood out. This initial coding was also determined based on research questions with categories such as "influence," "confidence," "understanding," and "personal." New

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codes were determined by recurrent themes found in the data (Creswell, 2014; Mertens, 2015).

Once I read and coded each separate interview transcript, I then examined the similarities and differences across the transcripts to determine relevant themes and categories unique to the sample population. To do this, I made a list of quotes and phrases that were recurrent throughout the interview transcripts and determined a unifying theme for the list. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggested this strategy when observing social phenomena. Too, the categories and themes, manner of occurrence, order in which they were maintained, or changed, and the interrelatedness between them are defined and their significance is explained in the following chapters (Creswell, 2014, Mertens, 2015). Alternative explanations are provided. The following chapters discuss my findings, including inquiries developed during data analysis.

**Trustworthiness.** To establish trustworthiness, in accordance with Creswell (2014) and Mertens (2015), I initally used member checking as a validity and credibility measure to offer participants the opportunity to access research findings. During the interview, I asked participants to clarify or restate their responses if the need for further inquiry or clarification was neccesary at that time. Upon the conclusion of the interview, I asked participants if they would like a typed manuscript of the interview, and their preference for being contacted at a later date if further inquiry was needed. Two of the particpants asked for the typed interview manuscript and seven of the participants agreed to be contacted if further inquiry was needed. Participants provided their email addresses as their main form of contact and partipants were emailed a transcript of their interview; one student responded to my request for further inquiry, however, most students were not

responsive to the requests for further inquiry. This process was conducted over the summer, as a result, most students may not have viewed their emails when they were not currently enrolled in classes. Therefore, thick description and detailed quotations are provided to allow for a more rich and realistic understanding of the information students shared with me.

Too, as a means of confimability, before beginning this study I acknowledged my personal perception and experiences specific to career indecision and the lack of self-understanding during the undergraduate career decision-making process. While working in various positions in higher education, I have had conversations with a variety of different students regarding their career indecision as it relates to their self understanding, as well as, the way in which work experience and exposure provide insight to career decisions. This viewpoint added perspective to the interviews and strengthened the discussion of participant experiences in the context of career decision-making. However, as previously menationed, in efforts to minimize any inadvertent bias, participants were emailed sections of the findings specific to the experiences they shared and offered the opportunity to make corrections or clarify findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

**Instrument**

As the researcher, I was the instrument for this study. My interest in this research, as described in the first chapter of this proposal, was largely due to witnessing students struggle with identifying how their personal strengths aligned with their intended career path. Based on my observations I assumed that individuals who based their career options on their personal strengths and interests would be more confident in their career decision-

making. I made these assumptions by observing older acquaintances who have been in their careers for 20 or more years. Most of those individuals attribute their career longevity to the personal satisfaction they received in their positions. However, I do understand that the current generation of students endure academic and career difficulties that individuals from previous generations did not have to face.

One element from my personal educational background that may have influenced my interaction with participants, and interpretation of findings, stems from the career indecision I struggled with during my early undergraduate college years. My family, teachers, and peers made the huge assumption that by the beginning of my freshmen year of college I would, and should, have developed enough of a self-understanding to choose a major. As I progressed through college I realized that I had not developed a complete self-understanding before declaring my first major, and as a result switched my major. When making the decision to choose a new major, I considered what I was interested in and what I thought I was good at doing. With this in mind, my personal experience and observations made while interviewing students may have influenced how I interpreted the information that participants shared with me.

**Limitations**

While this study has many strengths, some limitations should be considered, the first being that the sample of students interviewed all came from the same institution. Therefore, my findings may not be generalizable to students at other institutions, or other types of institutions. Further, the students who participated in the career course may

naturally have a higher level of self-efficacy; their purpose for participating in the course could indicate enthusiasm for, or confidence in, constructing a career path. Too, as a part of the career education course these students were encouraged to use university resources to navigate them through the career decision-making process during their state of indecision. I did not measure their use of the university resources, but they may have increased students' ability to successfully navigate the career decision-making process. Lastly, the potential influence of the instructor for each class may serve as a limitation. Participants were recruited from three class sections within the specified career course; each class had a different instructor, therefore, the teaching styles of each instructor may have varied and impacted learning outcomes for students.

In spite of these limitations, most research on self-understanding and CDMSE includes much quantitative data, and my qualitative approach therefore provides an explanation behind the current practices used in students' career decision-making. Findings from this study can also help provide high school students and college first-time freshmen with strategies they can use when initiating career decision-making, and suggestions of when to begin career exploration. Too, my findings can give career education professionals direction when determining primary and alternative approaches to use when providing career guidance. Lastly, these findings validate current practices used by career education professionals, and can be used to suggest changes in career education course curricula. The following chapter will present the findings and recurrent themes in this study. The final chapter will provide a detailed explanation of the findings, offer implications for practice, and discuss ideas for future research

# CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

## Introduction

The focus of this study was encouraged by research illustrating the benefits of self-understanding during the career decision-making process, and the positive connections between students' enrollment in career education courses and their ability to confidently identify a career of interest (Gottfredson, 1996; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994; Reese & Miller, 2006; Super, 1990). With this in mind, the main purpose of this study was to qualitatively examine how undeclared undergraduate students understood their personal attributes, whether this understanding influenced their confidence in their career decision, and the extent to which career education courses had any influence on students' self-understanding or confidence in the career decision-making process.

In this chapter I present the significant findings and themes that I identified through the stories of the participants in the study. The themes that arose recurrently during the student interviews included outcomes of participation in career education courses as they related to a variety of ways in which students understand themselves and gain confidence in the career decision-making process. Additional themes included personal and societal

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influences on career decisions, and the appropriate timing in which an accurate career decision can be determined.

**General Comparison: Career Education Students and Non-Course Students**

Much research on career development has recognized the practice of career guidance as being considerably beneficial to students during the career decision-making process (Hoyt & Wickwire, 2001; Reese & Miller, 2006; Schulthesis, Kress, & Manzi, 2001). The findings for this study coincide with previous research that also suggests that career education courses influence students' self-understanding and confidence in the career decision-making process through personality inventories and in-class pedagogies that encourage career exploration.

**Self-understanding.** According to Brown (2007), self-understanding consists of "the uniqueness of each person that is apparent in the individualized combination of strengths and weaknesses" (p.47). Previous research infers that individuals' career options are narrowed down and determined based on the concept of self (Gottfredson, 1996; Super, 1990). Consistent with the findings from previous research, students who participated in this study identified in-class experiences that related to their self-understanding and how it impacted their career decision-making. Students who were not enrolled in the career education course identified a generic understanding of self. Eden, for example, had the following to share about her experience:

[The career education course] basically taught me how to understand what I'm good at and what I want…before I select a major and take a job. I never really

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considered what I wanted myself or how my personal qualities might contribute to what I want to do. If I don't consider what I actually want myself, I would probably end up hating the job and getting all stressed out about it, so the course helped me realize that.

Eden also referenced a class activity that helped her reach this understanding:

We had to research careers and determine where most of the employment opportunities for that particular job are located. After doing the research, I found out I'd have to move all the way out to California, because that's where most of the jobs are. If I move all the way to California in order to just get a job, I'd be really lonely and really sad that my friends are all over here. So that made me realize that knowing what you want and researching it is important.

Research-based career exploration activities like this one made students who attended the career education course aware of location or where they physically envisioned themselves working based on their geographic preferences, and also allowed them to reflect on what they wanted. However, my findings also suggest that self-inventories and strength-based assessments conducted in the career education courses informed students of areas in which they are successful, or how their personal attributes might influence and contribute to their success in career areas. Willie shared the following statement:

I am just naturally a caring person, but after observing how caring my teachers were when teaching me and my classmates, I really choose to commit myself to that quality. As an art teacher I would care about my students' success and

genuinely want my students to succeed and not just sit there and write on paper for like an hour.

Willie referenced the self-assessment and inventories as partially helping him make this connection:

I mean [the in class inventories and assessment] didn't tell me anything I didn't already know about myself, but it put it on paper, and after reflecting on some of my career interests, it told me how these qualities compare to what I want to do, and other careers I'm compatible with that I didn't know about.

Most of the students within the career education course group made similar statements regarding their previous understanding of personal attributes.

The students that were not enrolled in the career education course were also able to illustrate an understanding of their personal attributes. However, the difference between the students within the career education group, and those students who were not, was their ability to connect these attributes to qualities within specific careers and develop alternative career options specific to those attributes. For instance, when asked about alternative career plans as they related to students' personal attributes, Maddie (non-career course group) stated, "I have no idea what I want to do yet. I don't want to do anything in math or science but if all else fails I would probably join the military." Similarly, Ally (non-career course group) stated, "Maybe a teacher, I'm not sure what kind of teaching though," and Connor (non-career course group) stated, "That's why I'm

taking conflict resolution and analysis, to kind of help figure that out, maybe I'll go into business."

Though the activities practiced in the career education course required students to analyze themselves from multiple viewpoints, my findings suggest that students' participation resulted in their ability to thoroughly understand what they wanted, connect their unique characteristics to their career interests, and develop alternative career interests related to their personal qualities. Further inquiry revealed that these findings were also connected to students' confidence.

**Confidence.** Bandura (1977a) most often defines confidence as the belief that an individual has in their ability to complete a task. Previous research identifies a relationship between self-understanding and confidence in career decision-making, and infers that both work together (Bandura, 1986; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994; Taylor & Betz, 1983). This first example, provided by Oden, aligns with this research as Oden had the following to share about his experience:

> [The inventories taken in the career education course] really kind of puts on paper
> or spells out what you already know about yourself, which kind of confirms a lot
> of stuff. So that gives me some confidence, I know for sure I'm on the right path.
> That confirmation lets me know I'm moving in the right direction.

The personality-based inventory results Oden received confirmed his preexisting self-understanding. Therefore, the similarities between his prior self-understanding and recent inventory results, he said, gave him confidence in the career direction he was pursuing.

This reference to self-assessments and strength inventories highlight the relation between self-understanding and confidence in the career decision-making process. Erin and Ethan also made similar statements to Oden's as they also believed that the results they acquired through personality and career-based inventories affirmed previous assumptions they had of themselves.

In my additional findings participants identified a multitude of experiences that related to their confidence in the career decision-making process. Though the students discussed different ways in which they acquired confidence in their career decision-making process, they all said that results they received from course curriculum played an important role in fostering their feelings of confidence. This finding is consistent with self-efficacy propositions made by Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994), and will be further analyzed in the following chapter.

Danny shared that his sole presence in the course increased his confidence in his career decision-making, as he believed his participation in the course would lead to a successful and accurate career decision. Two participants said that the presence of other undeclared students gave them confidence in the career decision-making process because they felt they were not alone in their state of indecision. Willie, for example, stated:

> The [career education] course increases [my feelings of confidence], because every now and then someone would be like, oh I declared this, and I would be like, oh well I'm still here…but realizing that other people are having the same trouble making a career decision eases my anxiety in the process.

Again, though the factors that shaped their confidence varied, the students still identified the course as a having a positive impact on their confidence in the career decision-making process.

Similar to the career education course students, the career decision-making self-efficacy (CDMSE) reported by the non-career course student's varied. Maddie and Mari stated that they were not confident in their career decision-making thus far, because they felt they needed to take more classes and do more research to help narrow their interests. Mari discussed her lack of confidence by saying,

> Part of it is that I feel like, I don't know maybe it's just part of me telling myself that [civil engineering] would be the smarter career or better career, which is not really right. Maybe it's because I think social workers do a very important job too. I wish I had done all this career research…or at least done research before I came to college. So, I just don't know, I can't say I'm very confident.

Both Mari and Maddie's lack of confidence originated from their lack of knowledge associated with their careers of interest. Too, they struggled with general indecisiveness associated with career decision-making.

In contrast, Ally identified her presence at a university as a step towards pursuing a career; therefore, although she was undecided on a major, she found confidence in her mere presence on campus. Both Vergil and Connor found confidence in being able to perform well academically; however, Connor only had partial confidence in pursuing his

ideal career because he did not think he would be able to secure a job in that career upon graduation. Connor's split in confidence can be illustrated in his statement below:

> In terms of conflict analysis and resolution, I think I would have a lot of confidence pursuing that. I mean I do well in my classes I've taken. The information just comes really easily to me, I do very good in the classes, and so it's just like really easy for me and like makes me really confident in my ability to like apply things. But, best case scenario I would love to go into psychology. I'd love to go into like counseling but I can't afford grad school, and I'm like constantly told you can't get a job if you don't go to grad school so I wouldn't be confident pursuing psychology because of that reason.

When examining CDMSE in the students from the non-career course group, my findings suggest that academic performance can be closely related to confidence in career decision-making. However, the students who expressed less confidence in their career decision-making lacked the knowledge students in the career education course received as a result of the instruction within the course. Overall, these findings support students' participation in career education courses. Therefore, I further examined whether these findings coincide with students' ability to successfully narrow down their career interests.

**Narrowing career interests and declaring a major.** Previous research indicates that students' participation in career education courses allows them to narrow down their career interest and successfully declare a major (Hoyt & Wickwire, 2001; Reese & Miller, 2006; Schulthesis, Kress, & Manzi, 2001). My findings coincide with this

research as the students within the career education course proved to be more successful when narrowing down their career interest as opposed to the non-career course students. For example, Oden, who attended the career education course, acknowledged that he had decided to pursue a science-based career in the health professions. However, he was debating whether to declare a major in biology or chemistry. Similarly, Erin expressed that she was confident in her decision to pursue teaching, yet she was unsure of whether to teach English or history. In contrast, the students that did not attend the career education course continued to deliberate between a wide range of potential careers. For instance, Mari struggled with the decision to major in civil engineering, social work, or graphic design, while Vergil expressed interest in Pharmacy, tourism and hotel management, or accounting.

Though this finding largely aligns with previous career education research that associates career education courses with students' ability to narrow down their career interests, a key consideration is the number of students who had declared a major by the time of the interviews. The interviews conducted in this study took place between the middle to latter portion of the course; however, only two of the students who identified as attending the course had declared a major by the time of the interviews. Previous research indicated that most students attending a career education course were able to declare a major by the middle of the course (Reese & Miller, 2006). Therefore, this finding suggests that factors influencing student's career decisions may be increasing over time and consequently cause students to have more trouble declaring a major. These factors can include, the overall presence of more majors to select from, increased economic

instability, and shifts in employment opportunities. Further findings suggest that personal and societal factors may serve as primary influence on students' career decisions.

**Personal and Societal Influences**

Though the experiences and details examined in the previous sections give some insight into how students interpret their level of self-understanding and confidence, the following sections explore more detailed personal and societal experiences that influenced their self-understanding, confidence, and overall career decision-making. All of these findings, with the exception of personal successes, are unique as they encompass career decision-making factors that equally influenced both groups of students.

**Personal success and failure.** Students repeatedly referenced the ways that significant personal experiences influenced the way they interpreted characteristics unique to them and even inspired students to pursue a particular career. Though most of the personal experiences that students discussed were ones that they identified as failures, some of these experiences resulted in success. For example, Erin disclosed various learning difficulties that she struggled with throughout her years in primary and secondary education; however, she credited the encouragement she received from her instructors as an inspiration to pursue teaching. Erin reflected on this experience, stating, "I didn't always have the opportunity to enjoy reading, so now that I can enjoy it, I want to teach English and provide other students that opportunity." In addition to using that experience as a means to develop a career interest, she was also able to use that experience to identify a personal strength. She shared:

Determination is a strength of mine. As I said earlier, although I feel like I missed

the boat and was way behind in my reading abilities as a child, I was determined

to learn how to read. If I do decide to become an English teacher, I would be

determined to encourage and include all my students in the learning process. So if

a kid is like you know sitting alone in the corner, I'd bring him in and be like,

guys this is so and so we're going to put you in a group project.

Willie described a similar experience that sparked his interest in teaching. He explained

that, as a high school student, he struggled to stay motivated and put effort into learning

class material; however, his teachers encouraged him to succeed. For example, he stated,

"[My teachers] they kind of like helped push me through…so I actually want to do the

same and help students succeed."

Other students disclosed experiences they encountered during a traumatic event to

illustrate how they determined their career interest. For example, Oden shared that before

a surgery, he was petrified of the thought of being unconscious:

…for a surgery that I had for [a medical complication], I had to be put under. I'd

never been put under before, and it so…it was really like a nerve-racking idea of

being unconscious while being operated on. The surgery went through without a

hitch, it was fine. Like I got to speak with the anesthesiologist before I went under

and he was just explaining, like where do you go to school, or rather what school

are you thinking about – just small talk like that. His ability to ease my anxiety in

such as stressful situation made me want to do the same, and that was that kind of

moment where I started to do some research and then decided that's the field I think I might pursue.

Although these personal experiences vary, they all illustrate each student's ability to overcome an obstacle. These findings suggest that students' success associated with conquering difficulties can inspire them to help others overcome similar difficulties. In addition to these findings, it is important to note that only the students within the career education course reflected on how significant personal events, such as the experiences described, served as a career influence. The fact that none of the non-course takers shared such experiences may suggest that the activities offered in the career education course allowed students to produce positive personal reflections that give students insight into careers they may want to pursue.

Though students described successes they encountered by conquering personal difficulties, they also discussed current anxieties they face that are related to previous failures. With respect to failures, both groups of students shared similar doubts. Previous failures included academic and personal struggles such as poor grades, poor time management, and disorganization. Ultimately, these obstacles affected students' confidence in their chosen major or career interest, as those obstacles came as a surprise to many of the students, and caused them to remain apprehensive about any career path they pursued, primarily because of the possibility of failing again. As Eden shared, "I have to get my grades up – I originally declared to be a business major and that did not end well. That's definitely not me." Mari shared a similar experience:

I did very well in my – the physics class I took in high school. I don't know maybe the professor assigned simpler questions, but I took another physics class last summer here, it was university physics…I don't know what happened. I like have problems doing the problems that I hadn't experienced before…maybe I'm not good at physics, so maybe not engineering.

Mari further expanded on how this setback was coupled with a personal struggle that ultimately contributed to her doubts about pursuing a civil engineering career:

Ever since I was a kid I would always have problems getting my homework done on time – since civil engineering is a very deadline oriented field um part of me doubts that I will ever be able to get my act together in terms of like deadlines and stuff like that…and time management.

Willie described a similar struggle that encompassed both academic and personal concerns:

Eh, just not having the right motivation, per se. Like with biology, I took one class it got hard and I quit. So, that may be my biggest barrier, perseverance. I'm scared when things get rough I might just stop and look for another major.

This finding largely aligns with previous research associated with barriers in the career decision-making process (Gottfredson, 1996; Lent, Brown, & Hackett 1994).

Three students within the career course reflected on their success in overcoming former difficulties. For these students, activities completed in the career education course

produced positive personal reflections that resulted in their ability to gain insight into careers to pursue.  However, with respect to the eight students whose decision-making was shaped by previous failures, my findings suggest that students may reflect more on barriers and former setbacks when narrowing their career interest. Ultimately, the students' ability to reflect on personal successes or failures, as they relate to career decision-making, served as a form of self-understanding primarily because they were able to identify their strengths and weaknesses.  Too, this finding reinforces previous career development research that infers that both self-understanding and confidence work together, as most students who reflected on previous setbacks had less confidence in the decision-making process. Other themes found in the students' narratives further explored personal factors as they intersected with societal influences.

**Stability.** Stability was the most recurrent theme throughout all of the interviews. Most of the students defined careers with stability as those that guaranteed employment. Students often admitted that they were having a difficult time choosing between careers they were interested in and careers they found to be more "realistic" that appeared to have "structure."  As Connor explained,

> I'm very teeter-tottering because I'm constantly told, it's not…you can't really get a job [in psychology], you have to go to grad school with it. So that's like definitely -- I'm not going to get an undergrad in something I'm not going to get a job with you know.

Similarly, Ethan said,

Although I absolutely love art history, and though my interest in mathematics is not as naturally inclined, majoring in mathematics presents a more stable path. Like when someone looks at a resume or they try to question like what position would be like the best position or part of the company, I feel like it would be stronger if I had like economics or mathematics listed.

These comments suggest that students' indecision can, in some cases, stem from choosing between a career of interest or a career that they perceive to offer stability. Out of the 11 students interviewed, eight of the students identified having a primary interest in education or humanities-based vocations. Though all of the students made a reference to job stability, every student who had a primary interest in an education or humanities-based career repeatedly discussed their anxiety associated with the decision to either pursue a career of interest, or a career that promised employability. This finding suggests that students may perceive education or humanities-based careers as having less stability. However, it is important to note, the five students who discussed anxiety with pursuing education-based vocations felt their age would serve as an employment barrier. The students were between the ages of 18 and 20 yet they primarily expressed interest in teaching high school students. Therefore, after they completed their undergraduate program they would still be relatively young and only three to seven years older than the students they taught. As a result, the students thought employers may find them undesirable to teach high school students because of their young age. Nonetheless, these findings related to students' perception of stability draw into question where this perception originated. Vergil's explanation of his struggle to decide whether to pursue a

tourism-based career, which he identified as his ideal career, or pharmacy, which he perceived as promising employability, gave some insight into the origins of his perception. Vergil shared:

> I think [pharmacy is] a very secure position. Like right out of college, right out of school you're guaranteed a job. As in, if I was majoring in tourism, what I enjoy, you know it would be a little more difficult to get a job.

However, he went on to further state:

> I don't really enjoy [pharmacy] that much. If you don't really have passion towards something or you don't enjoy it as much, it might be difficult to perform well in those classes or to continue on. But my family just has high expectations for me, most of my parents' friends are in the medical field so that just influences my decisions a lot…since my father traveled…moved here just for us to have a better life, like I owe it to them.

As previous research has indicated, students trust the opinion of their parents (Cullaty, 2011; Greenbank, 2011; Laughlin & Creamer, 2005, 2007), and parents and peers play a major role in students' career decisions.

In terms of other influences, Mari attributed her decision to pursue a major in engineering, as opposed to international studies, to employment-based information acquired from online web and employment statistics she saw posted in the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*. Other students cited the opinions of teachers, friends, and educational professionals as major contributors to their perceptions of the value associated with a

career. These findings suggest that the notion of stability is primarily based on societal values. Gottfredson refers to the form of indecision that originates from the choice to consider both personal and societal factors in the career decision-making process, as the beginning of the compromise phase (1996; 2005). This will be discussed in further detail in the following chapter.

Finally, all of the international students admitted that they considered societal values when exploring potential careers; however, the career-based social values associated with their respective countries of origin sometimes conflicted with values in the United States. Vergil, Ally, and Danny all stated that certain jobs have a different societal value in their country, and since all of them had plans to move back to their country of origin after graduation, they found that their career interests were greatly impacted by that decision. Ally stated:

> I think with media being less prominent in [my country of origin] than over here, it serves as a barrier that may hinder me from moving forward with that career. I plan to move back to [my country of origin]. For me no, it does not matter if I have a job or if I will make a lot of money but all people like say to me you have to consider these things. I think if I like went into [media] I like – I can make money…but people say this is not reality.

Danny shared a similar experience but instead listed potential careers he would pursue based on where he chose to live:

I mean, if I lived in the United States I would continue to pursue working in

theatre technics, even technics for concerts, and other types of shows, but it's not

as prominent overseas. I've also considered teaching as my parents are both

teachers in the Middle East. I plan to eventually go back over to [the country

where I spent most of my childhood], so I might decide to teach if I do that.

Aside from Eden who briefly discussed where she envisioned working, the international

students were the only students within the non-career course group of participants who

referred to their ideal career geographic location. This finding suggests that there may be

additional contextual influences on the career decision-making processes of international

students as they must evaluate potential careers in relation to where they want to live or

expectations within their country of origin, one being the differences in international

primary and secondary education. For example, Ally explained,

I was in one school for like my entire life, like from grade one until the end of

high school, so things were a little different. Like in our country when you go to

like 11$^{th}$ grade you should like decide whether you will go to a scientific major or

like a literary major. So when I got here I was planning to major in science like

engineering.

Ally, however, continued to explain that she experienced difficulty in classes such as

math while in college because it is taught differently in the U.S. than her native country.

Although she said within American society her grades were not considered bad, in her

country of origin, her grades would not be deemed appropriate for mathematical careers.

Therefore, she decided to forego careers specific to the computer sciences, engineering, or statistics. These findings coincide with previous literature that indicates that cultural differences affect vocational choice (Gushue, 2006; Mau 2000; 2004; Saka, Gati, & Kelly, 2008). The final category of findings focus on the uncertainty associated with the timing in which students are successfully able to determine a career path.

**Appropriate timing**

Previous research provides multiple age ranges that included a 30 year timespan in which an individual is able to narrow down and identify an appropriate and accurate career that complements their personal attributes and relates to their overall understanding of self (Gottfredson, 1996; Super 1990). During the interviews, every student acknowledged their concern with their ability to identify an accurate career at their current age.

**Timing.** The students generally reflected on high school experiences, as those were the most recent. Many of the students stated that they wished they had been more serious about researching potential careers during high school, to alleviate or prevent them from being in their current state of indecision. Some of the students attending the career education course stated that they wished they had taken a similar course in high school. However, most of the students questioned the timing in which a student is able to accurately identify a potential career path. Most of the students described there indecisiveness from the perspective of an 18 year old. Mari, for example, stated:

There is a certain amount of unrealism in asking an 18 year old what they're going to do for the rest of their life and have them be 100 percent sure…just doesn't usually happen. I think it would have been nice if in high school I would have done some sort of career research and like tried job shadowing or something like that. Yeah...it would have been nice, but there is still the uncertainty of I'm just 18, I haven't learned everything that might impact that decision.

Oden made a similar comment and stated:

Trying to discern whether the career path you are pursuing is actually right is tough. I really want to [become a medical doctor], I really think I'd really want to do this, but right now at this age I'm only making that decision based on what I think. I might actually get in the field and be like nope.

These comments suggest that students primarily associated a successful career decision with experience; therefore, their lack of experience contributed to their inability to fully articulate what they wanted. This finding also suggests that the exact time in which an individual will acquire an amount of experience that will enable them to make an accurate career decision is unknown. As discussed in Chapter Two, social constructionist theory indicates that multiple experiences influence a person's self-understanding, because people learn about themselves through interactions with others (Bess & Dee, 2008; Blustein & Ellis, 2000; Blustein, Schultheiss, & Flum, 2004; Mertens, 2015); therefore, in terms of career decision-making, the exact timing in which a student gains this experience likely varies for each person.

After witnessing students' anxiety when discussing their uncertainty related to when they would be able to identify an appropriate career path, I further inquired as to whether those students would have preferred some form of career guidance before college. Some of the students' responses to my question were consistent with the social constructionist theory, insofar as they felt that the timing in which a person gains enough experience to determine an appropriate career path is not concrete, and is dependent on the timing of their individual personal experiences. Ethan, for example, stated:

> No, I don't wish there was anything in place before college to help narrow down my career interests. I mean I think it's all a part of the process. Even if I had the career guidance in high school that I do now, I would have still lacked the experience to make a thorough and sound career decision. I would not have encountered as much as I have now. So taking a course similar to this one in high school would have only allowed me to explore what's out there. It's just a part of the process you know.

Similarly, Ally (non-career group) stated:

> I heard that there is a lot of written exams to know like what careers you match. I took them but like each time I take it I got different results. So I don't know if there is some kind of exam that doesn't rely on what you think because you think that you're good at this so your results won't be as accurate. But maybe some time from now your results of what you think may be right because you have more experience.

Ethan's and Ally's statements reflect a comment that Oden shared earlier, being that, at their age students' career decisions are only based on assumptions. As college students, they believed that they had not acquired enough experience to know the exact career path they should pursue; therefore, they felt that as high schoolers they would have been even less able to identify a career path.

In contrast, about half of the students supported the idea of offering structured career guidance in high school. Connor stated:

> Definitely, coming in I was actually in a completely different direction. I was thinking about going into computer science because I had taken it in high school. But like my senior year I just like kind of got burnt out by it and decided, you know what, I'm kind of like done with it. Coming here I actually met with like, for – during the orientation, I met with like I think, the IT field and then end up just not doing that. But… 'cause I know all through high school I noticed my friends all knew what they wanted to do, and then like now everyone knows what they want to do, but I kind of like had no idea. So, some sort of career guidance or career class in high school…that would have been beneficial to just help me out earlier.

Though these two findings conflict, as some students did not believe they would have been mature enough to seriously utilize career guidance in high school, while the others believed they would have greatly benefited from early career guidance, findings from both sets of students support the need for self-understanding in the career decision-

making process. They also support the need for structured career guidance, at some point, in the career decision-making process.

**Summary**

Overall the students enrolled in the career education course exhibited a better understanding of self and more confidence in their career decision-making. As students reported, the in-class activities, research assignments, personality inventories, and general course curriculum aided in their ability to determine a specific career interest, or find success in declaring a major they were confident in. Indeed, the career education course students were able to fully detail and elaborate on their career plans, personality traits, doubts, career alternatives and even the areas in which they wanted to improve. All of the findings within these categories suggest that self-understanding and confidence work together. However, they also show that multiple factors can have an impact on how students interpret their confidence and self-understanding in the career decision-making process, ultimately influencing when an individual is able to make an accurate career decision.

Most importantly, my findings suggest that the current career development model can be extended to highlight those findings. The career development model included in Chapter Two illustrated a linear career development process consisting of self-assessment, career exploration, career planning, marketing oneself, the job search and networking phase, and finally, career management. In conjunction with the findings presented in this chapter, I have developed an extended model that can be used to

illustrate the complexities associated with the first two phases in the career development

process.  In the following chapter, I discuss this extended model and further discuss my

findings as they relate to the current literature. I also discuss implications for policy and

practice, and suggest areas for future research.

# CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Students often recognize their attendance in college as their first steps towards preparing for a successful career (Suganya & Vivekkrishnan, 2013). College provides students with the necessary education to be successful in a career; however, as an oversight, students often fail to conduct a thorough self-assessment to consider the activities they enjoy doing when they prepare for a career. Research indicates that this oversight results in career dissatisfaction (Gottfredson, 1996; Super, 1990). While in college students are engaging in vital steps toward their career pursuit, therefore, early career education can guide students through self-assessments, help students identify occupations that connect with interests they enjoy, and reduce the risk of students pursuing the wrong career.

With that in mind, I examined undeclared undergraduate students' understanding of themselves, how that understanding affected their confidence in career decision-making, and whether a career education course had any impact on those factors in the career decision-making process. A phenomenological qualitative approach was used to examine this topic, as it places emphasis on the participants' subjective experiences to explain how students interpreted their state of indecision as it related to their self-understanding and confidence in the career decision-making process. This approach also

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allowed me to use the experiences students provided in their individual stories to expand on current literature that highlights factors that impact the career decision-making process. The following questions guided this study: (1) To what extent, if any, do undergraduate students have an understanding of their personal characteristics, (2) How, if at all, do career education courses enlighten students' understanding of their personal characteristics, and (3) What role, if any, do such courses play in students' career decision-making self-efficacy?

My analyses revealed three main categories of findings related to undeclared students in career decision-making. The first of these three categories align with previous research and suggest that career education courses successfully help students narrow down their career interests by providing career guidance that allows students to gain a thorough self-understanding, and increase their self-efficacy in the decision-making process. The second category of findings highlights personal and societal influences on career decision-making, and can be separated into two groups, personal success or failure and stability. The last set of findings reveal the uncertainty that students associated with the timing in which they felt they would be able to accurately determine a career path.

Although my original intent was to primarily examine students' understanding of their personal attributes as they related to their overall self-understanding and confidence in career decision-making, data analyses showed that students identified experience as a primary source of their understanding of self and confidence in the career decision-making process.  They specifically attributed the presence or absence of experience as the key indicator for how they understood their personal attributes, developed their

confidence in the career decision-making process, and determined the time in which they were able to accurately identify a career path. Experience also influenced students' overall state of indecisiveness. Therefore, I created an extended career development model that illustrates how these findings contribute to the model discussed in Chapter Two (Figure 1). The following sections include a detailed discussion of my findings in light of current research and practices in higher education. I conclude this chapter by offering recommendations for policy, practice, and areas for future research in career decision-making.

**General Comparison: Career Education Course Students and Non-course Students**

**Self-understanding and Confidence.** Much career education research identifies the importance of self-understanding in the career decision-making process (Blanchard & Lichtenberg, 2003; Brown, 2007, Gottfredson, 1996, 2002, 2005; Ivers, Milsom, & Newsome, 2012; Scott & Ciani, 2008; Super, 1990). The findings of this study confirm that various forms of self-understanding influence career decision-making, and suggest that self-understanding is greatly affected by each student's individual experiences (Bess & Dee, 2008; Gottfredson, 1996; Super, 1990). As the participants' narratives confirm, the structured career guidance and pedagogy exercised in the career education course proved to be beneficial in helping them expand their self-understanding and better articulate their career desires. This resulted in the overall finding that traditional-aged students' ability to understand their personal characteristics as they connect with their vocational decisions can be closely related to behavior associated with guided career exploration. Both of these findings align with previous research (Hoyt & Wickwire,

2001; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994; Lent et al., 2002; Reese & Miller, 2006;

Schulthesis, Kress, & Manzi, 2001).

Additionally, previous work (Gushue, Scanlan, Pantzer, & Clarke, 2006; Lent,

Brown, Hackett, 1994; Lent et al., 2002) supports my finding that structured career

guidance impacted students' confidence in declaring a major and determining a career to

pursue. As the social cognitive career theory (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994) infers,

behavior associated with career exploration increases students' career decision-making

self-efficacy (CDMSE); the results of my study also demonstrate this as the students who

attended the career education course expressed more confidence in career decision-

making than the students who did not attend the course. Ultimately, my findings show

that the material students learned in the career education course increased their

confidence in their ability to assess their interests and plan their career.

While behavior associated with career exploration increased students' ability to

develop a deeper understanding of their personal qualities and increase their confidence

in career decision-making, it did not eliminate their career indecision.

**Narrowing career interest and declaring a major.** The findings in my study

were consistent with previous research which indicated that students' participation in

career education courses successfully helped them narrow their career interest (Hoyt &

Wickwire, 2001; Reese & Miller, 2006; Schulthesis, Kress, & Manzi, 2001; Scott &

Ciani, 2008). However, my findings were not consistent with previous research findings

with respect to declaring a major. Reese and Miller (2006) conducted a study using a

methodology similar to the one that I used in this study, and found that the majority of the students attending career education courses declared a major by the middle of the course. They also found that students' enthusiasm for the course diminished after they had declared a major (Reese & Miller, 2006). Based upon those findings, I conducted my study during the middle to latter portion of the career education course; however, my findings indicated that less than half of the career course group of students had declared a major by the time of the interviews. The timeframe between this study and the time in which Reese and Miller's (2006) study was conducted is about 10 years. My findings suggest that personal and societal factors affecting students' career decision-making may have increased over time and caused students difficulty in declaring a major.

**Personal and Societal Influences**

The original purpose of this study was primarily focused on examining students' personal understanding or natural inclination, as I sought to examine how students' self-understanding impacted their confidence in the career decision-making process, since previous research indicated that students' lack of self-understanding contributed to their low confidence in career planning and career indecision (Amundson, Borgen, Iaquinta, Butterfield, & Koert, 2010; Chuang & Jenkins, 2010; Laughlin & Creamer, 2007; Super, 1990). However, my findings demonstrated a stronger relationship between students' experiences and career indecision, self- understanding, and confidence in the career decision-making process. In particular, I found that experiences related to students overcoming personal difficulties, academic struggles, personal concerns, cultural

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differences, and family pressures were all important factors in students' career decision-making process.

**Personal success and failure.** Previous literature concerning the impact of career education courses indicates that material covered in the course challenges students to reflect on personal experiences that contribute to how they understand themselves and how that understanding can be used to reveal a career interest (Komarraju, Swanson, & Nadler, 2014; Reese & Miller, 2006; Scott & Ciani, 2008). My findings were consistent with this literature as students reported that the activities practiced in the career course allowed them to reflect on previous obstacles they overcame and as a result gave them insight into potential majors. As one student reported, this reflection also helped reveal a personal attribute. Though students' self-reflection provided insight into potential careers to explore, this reflection also reminded students of the personal challenges and setbacks, or barriers, they had encountered over the course of their lives.

Gottfredson (1996; 2005) identified barriers as a factor that can influence students' self-understanding and confidence in career decision-making. Indeed, as my findings indicated, students reflected more on personal failures and former setbacks during the career decision-making process. Personal failures served as a barrier to students pursuing their career of interest because those failures made students aware of their weaknesses, which in turn caused students to lose confidence in their ability to be successful in that career. These barriers most often included poor academics and personal concerns. Though barriers did not serve as a key phase within Gottfredson's (1996; 2005) circumscription and compromise theory, barriers were associated with phases within the

circumscription process, or the manner in which an individual narrowed down their career interests based on their strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, in conjunction with Gottfredson's theory, my findings indicate that students' reflections on setbacks and failures contributed to how they limited their career options. Students' perception of stability, or employability, however, directly aligned with phases highlighted in Gottfredson's (1996; 2005) circumscription process.

**Stability.** The intersection of personal and societal experiences that the students experienced parallels most with Gottfredson's (1996) circumscription and compromise theory, as the theory was based on examining how individuals' personal and social selves connect. My findings support previous research (Phillips, Christopher-Sisk, & Gravino, 2001; Slaten & Baskin, 2014) that shows students' decisions are shaped by their perceptions of the value that family members, peers, and society associate with a career. Within the circumscription process, this overall societal opinion is defined as *social valuation*, or society's perceptions that influence students' understanding of an occupation (Gottfredson, 1996; 2005). The social valuation phase occurs earlier in the circumscription process. Therefore, once students reach the final phase in the process, *internal unique self*, or the ability to identify an ideal career based on personal insights, they are forced to consider a compromise. Compromise is most often defined as the process in which an individual chooses an occupation that does not fit with the individual's self-view. Such a choice is necessary because of a lack of "quality of educational or employment opportunities," which in turn leads to the development of "a zone of acceptable occupations" (Brown, 2007, p. 57).

Based on my findings, most students' career indecision originated from deciding whether to pursue a career that aligned with their interests (internal unique self), or choose a career that offered more stability or employability (social valuation). Since the majority of the students had not selected a major at the time of the interviews, their anxiety associated with the career indecision was related to the struggle over whether or not to compromise. Ultimately, this intersection of personal and societal influences coincides with the first proposition of the social cognitive career theory, which infers that individuals and their environment influence each other (Lent, Brown, Hackett, & 1994). Findings specific to international students also identified how personal and societal factors impacted their career decisions.

**International students.** Previous literature indicating that cultural differences impacted the vocational choice of international students corresponds with my findings, as most international students evaluated both American occupational values and values associated with careers in their respective countries of origin during the career decision-making process. For example, Mau's (2004) research on career decision-making difficulties in culturally diverse students inferred that younger generations of culturally diverse students may have difficulties navigating the norms of a majority culture, while remaining true to their own culture. My findings similarly demonstrated the difficulties associated with navigating American norms as the international students discussed concerns they had with either choosing a career that was supported by American societal values or, a career specific to the values of their countries of origin.

Other studies centered on career decision-making in international students have highlighted family pressures as a primary influence on international students' career decisions (Mau, 2000; Singaravelu, White, & Bringaze, 2005; Tinsley, Tinsley, & Rushing, 2002). My findings also revealed the influence of families for international students, which align not only with prior research but also the cultural influences on self-efficacy identified in social cognitive career theory (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). Further, the international students described more confidence in pursuing a career they were interested in as opposed to a forced career, as an individualistic decision-making style, specific to American culture, encourages CDMSE (Mau, 2000; 2004).

My final category of findings was specific to students' anxieties associated with the timing in which they would gain enough experience to make a successful career decision.

**Appropriate timing**

The target population for this study was traditional-aged 18 to 22 year old students. This population was determined with respect to previous research that indicated that age-maturity impacts the career decision-making process (Gottfredson, 1996; Super, 1990). More specifically, this prior research demonstrated a relationship between age-maturity and experience, as older students were predicted to have more of the life experience necessary to make an informed career decision. Therefore, the following section examines how previous research aligns with my findings associated with age-maturity and informed career decision-making.

Both Super (1990) and Gottfredson's (1996) theories attempted to identify an age-range, or time in which an individual would be able to make an informed vocational choice. However, their combined prediction was broad, and equated to a 30 year timespan in which an individual may acquire these experiences. Other literature supports the general understanding that age-maturity equates to more experiences, and therefore, more self-assurance in career decision-making (Sandler, 2000). For example, Sandler (2000), who studied career decision-making in adult students, found that students' age-maturity and self-understanding acquired through work experiences contributed to their ease in discerning a career path and overall confidence in their career decision.

Instead of focusing on age, social constructionist theory infers that the time in which a person receives enough experience to determine a career path is not concrete, and varies based on when an individual establishes enough experience to make that decision (Bess & Dee, 2008; Blustien & Ellis, 2000, Blustein, Schulthesis, & Flum, 2004; Mertens, 2015). In other words, students' ability to make a knowledgeable career decision is primarily based on experience and less focused on age. My findings are supported by this theory as they show that students' anxieties associated with identifying a successful career path were based on their uncertainty about when they would acquire enough experience to make that decision.

Since experience was found to bring awareness to self-understanding, confidence, and the timing in which students' could make a knowledgeable career decision, the social constructionist theory can serve as the overarching theoretical foundation for each category of findings in my study. Though the current career development model is linear,

in respect to social constructionist theory and my findings, the construction of students' career paths are not linear. Therefore, I expanded the first phase of the current career development model to include my findings.

**Expanded Model**

As previously mentioned, my intent with this study was to examine self-understanding, and the impact self- understanding had on students' confidence in career decision-making. However, my findings demonstrated a stronger relationship between students' experiences and their self- understanding, confidence, and maturity related to the career decision-making process. Figure 2 illustrates these findings within the first phase of the career development model, self-assessment.
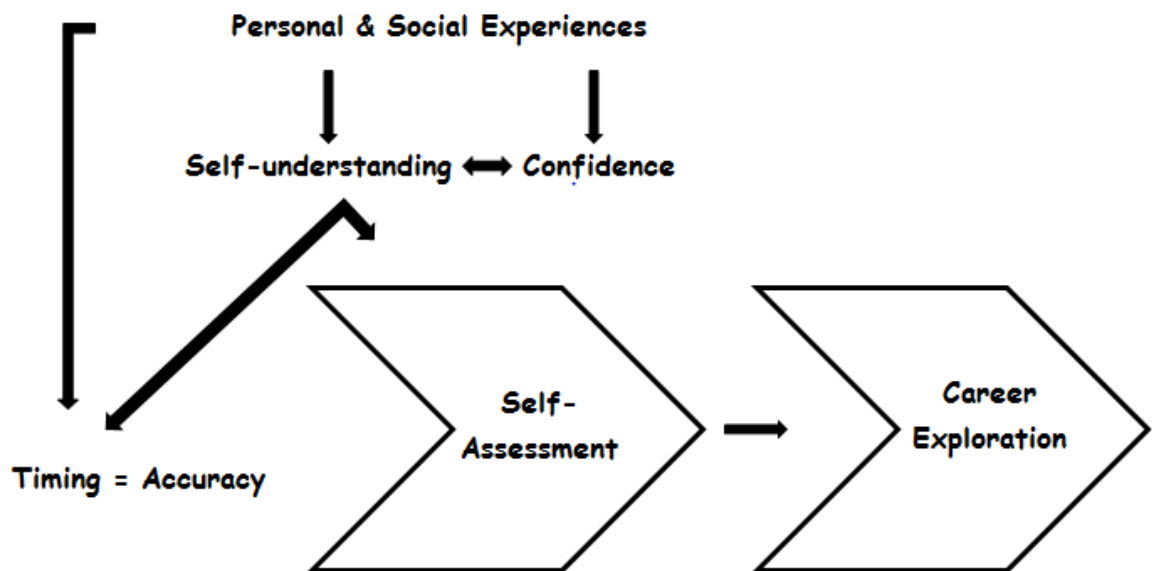
*Figure 2*. Extended model of the first phase of the career development process.

As shown in Figure 2, the white arrows (self-assessment and exploration) illustrate the early stages that Super and Gottfredson's research found to be essential when entering the career decision-making process. As my findings indicate, personal and societal experiences influenced how students developed their self-understanding and confidence in the career decision-making process. Those experiences, in turn, impacted the timing in which a student was able to make an accurate career decision and influenced when a student could begin the career decision-making process. Therefore, these factors should be considered when implementing future policies, practice, and research specific to student career development.

**Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research**

This study recognized three categories of findings related to career decision-making in undeclared undergraduate students; outcomes of participation in career education courses; personal and societal influences on career decisions; and the appropriate timing in which an informed career decision can be determined. The positive outcome of career education courses as demonstrated in this study and in previous literature (Hoyt & Wickwire, 2001; Komarraju, Swanson, & Nadler, 2014; Reese & Miller, 2006; Scott & Ciani, 2008) signify that those courses offer a promising approach to helping students increase their self-understanding and confidence in the career decision-making process. The following sections present implications for policy, practice,

and research that provide suggestions for further implementation, adjustments to practice, and additional research in career education.

**Policy.** Although the success related to students' participation in career education courses has been recurrently presented in research (Komarraju, Swanson, & Nadler, 2014; Reese & Miller, 2006; Scott & Ciani, 2008) many institutions resist offering such courses specific to entering first-time traditional-age college students, as most career courses are specifically tailored to helping students improve resumes, cover letters, interview skills, and job search strategies. As a result the initial step in the career preparation process, determining an area of career interest, is ignored. Since the rate of students switching majors has increased (Freeman, 2013) and the factors affecting students' career decisions have become more complex (Chatfield, Lee, & Chatfield, 2012), higher education institutions could benefit from offering mandatory career education courses tailored to first-time traditional-aged students. As my findings revealed, during the early stages of the career development process students endure much uncertainty; therefore, required career education can allow colleges and universities to minimize assumptions associated with students' ability to discern an appropriate career path and provide students with assurance in the process.

*Career education for first-time students.* In order to address factors specific to declared and undeclared first-time freshmen students colleges and universities could offer two career education courses specific to each type of student. By offering a course specific to undeclared students, students entering college may, in turn, feel less pressure to make a rushed career decision and more inclined to apply course material in their

decision-making process (Folsom, Reardon, & Lee, 2005). Instead of offering career education courses that are constructed and taught by a centralized office, the courses could be co-instructed by career education professionals, university academic advisors, department-specific advisors, and faculty, as a means to provide a range of support (Chan, & Derry, 2013). Individual academic colleges and schools could provide a course specific to students who have declared a major within their school or college.

By attending a career course offered by individual academic colleges and schools, students could gain an awareness of jobs specific to their major, develop an accurate understanding of the requirements for those jobs, and engage in job-shadowing activities to increase their exposure and experience in their industry of choice. This early exposure to career-specific actualities could allow students to clarify their interests and develop realistic expectations of careers associated with their major (Chuang & Jenkins, 2010; Lent et al., 2002). Self-assessments and personality inventories could be included to help students understand how they are compatible with their selected major, and serve as an extra measure of assurance before students begin taking courses specific to their program. Ideally, these two course offerings have the potential to offer benefits to both colleges and universities and their students.

*Benefits.* As a result of these courses, students may feel valued as they would be able to witness the institution's investment in their success. Too, as revealed in my findings, these courses could allow students to develop a cohort, or culture of peers that are engaging in a similar process or that possess similar interests, leading to more enthusiasm and less anxiety in the process. The instructional collaboration within each

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course would increase students' feeling of support and expose students to the multiple resources available to them while navigating the career decision-making process. Ultimately, these course offerings have the potential to produce large scale benefits that may minimize the rate of students changing majors, increase student retention, and increase the number of students persisting to graduation. Yet, a few considerations should be made before putting these courses into practice.

**Practice.** As the findings in this study indicated, career education courses proved to be a useful way to help students in the career decision-making process. However, students' participation in the course did not exclude anxieties associated with their realization of barriers that could potentially hinder their career pursuit. Though the self-assessment exercises practiced in the career education course brought awareness to students' strengths, it also made them aware of areas for improvement. This realization of the need to improve in some cases came as a surprise and led to students' increased fear of failing, as for some of the students; these barriers appeared to overshadow their accomplishments and strengths. Therefore, further implications for practice could consist of helping students identify and minimize barriers. Other considerations for practice include diversifying and decentralizing career education as these various perspectives may help students minimize their anxieties associated with career-related barriers.

*Accurately identify and combat barriers.* In addition to helping students capitalize on their strengths, career education should also include opportunities for students to identify barriers and weaknesses that threaten their career pursuit. Activities that could help students identify potential weaknesses may include listing personal

concerns, identifying current and previous academic struggles, or asking trusted family members and peers for feedback. After identifying potential barriers, strategies can then be offered to inform students on the ways in which they can improve. Though some barriers require student effort to improve upon, others factors affecting students career decision-making cannot be changed by physical effort (Gottfredson, 2005). For instance, the participants who expressed concerns with acquiring high school teaching jobs did so because they believed their age would serve as an employment barrier. As previous literature and my findings demonstrated (Cullaty; 2011; Greenbank, 2011; Gottfredson, 1996; 2002; 2005; Laughlin & Creamer, 2005; 2007) societal influences greatly impacted students' perception about employment. With today's threat of unemployment circulating throughout many media streams such as *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Fabris, 2015), *Inside Higher Ed* (Kiley, 2011), and in some cases associated with certain academic majors (Schawbel, 2014), approaches should be taken to encourage students to pursue their desired careers while minimizing the perceived threat of unemployment. This could involve providing diverse perspectives during career education as a potential means to boost students' confidence in being employable.

***Decentralize and diversify career education.*** More campus offices should be included in the process of helping students discover their ideal careers, as 88 percent of college undergraduates have identified career preparation as their primary reason for attending college (Wyer, 2013). This could consist of decentralizing career education and engaging in collaborative career instruction that includes student service and academic departments. Student service departments for example career services and academic

advising may work together to directly advise students while faculty instructors can incorporate career-aspects in their course instruction (Chan, & Derry, 2013). For instance, undergraduate academic instructors, including those who teach general education course could be challenged to practice using application-based pedagogies that enlighten students on how their course material relate to their career of interest (Sandler, 2000). With that in mind, course projects and exam questions could be crafted in a way that places students in the mindset of a particular career. This form of instruction would force students to learn more about occupations associated with their major, or if undeclared, provide insight into the career they may want to pursue. Additionally, depending on the career-field, this form of instruction may encourage faculty to facilitate conversations around their experiences within their career and inspire students to continue in that field despite various perspectives on employment.

Thus far these recommendations have been intended for general higher education practices in career education. However, the implications for further research in career education not only provide suggestions for general practices in higher education but also focus on special populations.

**Research.** Based on the findings from my study, suggestions for further research include analyzing specific career education course curricula and pedagogy that yield students career decision-making success, exploring the ways in which global education impacts career decision-making in international students attending American higher education institutions, and examining the role of high schools in career education.

***Analyzing career education course curricula.*** Research supporting career

education courses has been well documented, and as previous research and the findings in

this study demonstrate, career education courses can be used as an effective way to help

students narrow their career interest and reduce anxiety in the process (Reese & Miller,

2006, Scott & Ciani, 2008). Research examining career education courses often cites

course curricula and activities, such as career research projects, career inventories,

strength finder assessments, and other course material as the key tools that contribute to

students' success in career education courses (Reese & Miller, 2006; Reed, Reardon,

Lenz & Leierer, 2001; Scott & Ciani, 2008). However, the effectiveness of these course

materials should be analyzed over time. Further research could involve analyzing those

resources to determine the most effective tools for practice. Many assessments, for

instance, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator personality test, StrengthsQuest, and the

Strong Interest Inventory are often used in career education courses (Savickas, 2003).

However, as the issues impacting students' career decisions become more complex, it

may be beneficial to enhance current assessment scales to reflect emerging factors that

may affect students' career decision-making (Savickas, 2003).  Career educators should

also analyze course activities such as career research projects, career card sorting

exercises, and reflection exercises to determine their appropriateness over time. Lastly, in

concurrence with my findings, career educators should consider evaluating the use of

career course material as it relates to the successful career guidance of international

students (Yang, Wong, Hwang, & Heppner, 2002).

***Foreign education and career decision-making.*** As American colleges and universities continue to seek and recruit international students for admission they should consider helping those students address issues related to cultural differences in career decision-making. However, it may first be necessary to examine the effects of global education on international students. International students navigating the American higher education system have expressed difficulty in the career decision-making process due to the variances in decision-making practices specific to their culture (Mau, 2000; Mau, 2004; Saka, Gati, & Kelly, 2008; Wang, Jome, Haase, & Bruch, 2006). Therefore, career educators should examine the differences in international and American primary and secondary education to determine how they affect international students' career decision-making. As detailed in my findings, some international students attended one institution for primary and secondary education; therefore, their academic involvements and exposure may be limited and impact how those students construct their career interests. Additionally, as conveyed in my findings, some countries require high school students to determine a career path before their senior year. This policy can greatly affect how students maneuver career decision-making in the U.S (Yang, Wong, Hwang, & Heppner, 2002). For that reason, further research could include examining the policies specific to career choice in countries where international students are often recruited to attend U.S institutions. Research specific to career decision-making policies for foreign high school students can also inform or provide insight into the role American high schools can assume when aiding students in the career decision-making process.

***High school role in career education.*** Many students choose to attend a college or university based on the academic majors offered by that institution. As my study findings and previous literature indicate, factors affecting students' career decisions are primarily based on experience (Bess & Dee, 2008; Blustien & Ellis, 2000, Gottfredson, 1996; 2005). Therefore, further research could entail examining strategies that encourage high school students to begin actively reflecting on their experiences as a means to initiate the process of narrowing their career interests. Opportunities that allow students to acquire direct hands-on learning could also be explored as a potential way to help high school students initiate career exploration and prepare for the workforce (Balingit, 2016). Ultimately this research can be expanded and used to determine what benefits, if any, are associated with attending career education classes in high school.

## Summary

Overall this study provided three main categories of findings that closely related to previous literature and in some cases aligned with career development-based theoretical concepts. The analysis indicated that social constructionist theory served as the overarching theoretical foundation for the findings. As a means to enhance the current career development model to illustrate this central theory and my findings, the first phase of the career development model was expanded. Based on the findings, suggestions for policy encouraged higher education institutions to offer required career education courses for first-time traditional-aged students. Further implications for practice consisted of enlightening students on ways to identify and minimize barriers and diversifying and decentralizing career education to offer more perspectives in the career decision-making

process. Lastly, recommendations for further research included inquiry in general

practices in higher education and special populations, such as international and high

school students.

## CONCLUSION

Helping students effectively prepare for careers while in college has the potential to make college a more meaningful investment. As the factors influencing students' career decisions become more complex over time, providing early career guidance can help students identify occupations that connect with things they enjoy doing and alleviate anxiety associated with the decision-making process. This study recognized three categories of findings related to career decision-making in undeclared undergraduate students, including outcomes of participation in career education courses, personal and societal influences on career decisions, and the appropriate timing in which an informed career decision can be determined. Overall, this research found that most traditional-age students have a general self-understanding; however, career-based education courses can help students expand on this understanding and connect it with vocational responsibilities. Too, career education courses can help narrow students' career interests and increase their confidence in their chosen career.

Moving forward, higher education institutions should consider requiring early career education for traditional-age students as a means to help students minimize anxiety, increase confidence, and clarify their career interests. Such early guidance has the potential to benefit both students and institutions. Additional practices should include

strategies that help students minimize barriers and offering a diversified level of support in career education. Added research may consist of examining career education pedagogies and curricula, adjustments to career education for international students, and the role high schools can play in providing career education. It is my hope that the findings from this study will help educational professionals craft and perfect the mechanisms they have in place to accurately assist students in determining their career interest, and potentially encourage further research to inform how other phases in the career development model can be expanded.

# APPENDIX

## Appendix A: Interview Protocol

*Demographic*

1. What is your student classification (first-time freshman or sophomore) *based on credits*?
2. What race/ethnicity do you identify with?
3. How old are you?
4. What is your gender identity?

*Career*

1. What do you enjoy doing in your free time (i.e. drawing/painting, fixing cars, and coaching sports)?
   a. How did you become interested in this activity?
2. What would you like to be if you could do anything you wanted? (Adopted from Brown -2007)
   a. Why would you want to do that?
   b. Where did this interest come from?
3. Have you identified a major and/or ideal career?
   a. If so, what is it?
       i. Why did you choose that career path?
   b. If not, what are you interested in potentially pursuing?
   c. **\* If occupation is different from question 2, ask why\***
4. How long do you think it will take you to begin working in that career?
   a. Why do you think it will take that length of time?
   b. How do you plan to pursue preparing for that career?
5. What or who has influenced you the most when determining this career path?
   a. How has/have this/they influenced you?
6. Do you feel there are any barriers that hinder you from pursuing your ideal career?
   a. If yes:
       i. Why is this a barrier for you?
       ii. Do you think you can overcome this barrier?
   b. If no:

   i. Do you foresee any barriers in the future?

7. If I were to ask your closest friends or family members to describe 3 to 5 qualities or strengths you possess what would they say? (E.g. planner, developer, adaptable, disciplined)?
  a. Why do you think they would name those strengths?

8. How might these strengths serve you in your desired career, or in a career?

9. Considering the link you made between your ideal career path and the qualities and strengths you possess, do you feel that gives you confidence in your chosen major?
  a. Why?
  b. Or, why not?

10. Have you developed alternative career plans?
  a. If so, what are they?
    i. Why did you choose these alternatives?
  b. If not, do you plan to?

11. Based on your current knowledge and preparation thus far, how confident would you say you are in your chosen career path, or with your current career interest?
  a. If confident, what would you credit your confidence to?
  b. If not confident, what doubts do you have?

12. Do you have any doubts regarding your chosen career path?
  a. Why?
  b. Why not?

13. What do you expect to be *doing* in 10 years?
  a. Why?

14. If you did not accomplish what was stated in your previous response, what is the least you would settle for 10 years from now? (Adopted from Brown -2007)
  a. Why?
  b. What influences this decision?

15. *__For career course students__* Before taking this career course did you utilize any other career preparation services?

16. How, if at all, has this career course helped you narrow down your career direction?

17. How, if at all, did this career courses enlighten your understanding of your personal strengths and characteristics?

18. How, if at all, did this career course affect your confidence in your chosen major?

**OR**

19. *__For non-career course students__* Are you aware of any career development and preparation services offered?
  a. Have you used them or do you plan to use them?
    i. If so, in what way?

***Bonus question*** *Added during interviews, not a part of original protocol*

20. Do you wish there was something in place before college to help you narrow down your career interests?
    a. If so, why…
    b. If not, why not…

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