

# Professionals in Post-Secondary Education: Conceptions of Career Influence

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Students and their families seem to be consistently motivated to attain Canadian university or college credentials as they perceive post-secondary education as a viable avenue to gainful employment. Consequently, many post-secondary institutions are reacting and enhancing their career and employment services (Shea, 2010). However, as institutions continue to tackle the reality of dwindling resources, it may be unrealistic for campus career centres to assume the full responsibility of providing career guidance and programming for the entire student population.

Canadian students are likely to consult their post-secondary instructors and educational staff (e.g., academic advisors, volunteer managers) rather than campus career specialists and counsellors for career guidance (Environics Research Group, 2011). These professionals often serve as trusted liaisons between students and their institutions, and therefore contribute tremendously to both student and institutional success (Astin, 1993; Downing, 2011; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh & Whitt, 2010, Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). For this study's purpose, these individuals are referred to as *career influencers* (CIs).

CIs are defined as *individuals working in a post-secondary institution who informally provide career-related advice, guidance, and/or counselling to prospective and current students and/or alumni*. This definition is informed by prominent scholars in the fields of career development and strategic enrolment management in post-secondary education. Hiebert and Borgen's (2002) distinction between service levels helps outline the types of activity CIs conduct: from advising, where professionals impart generic career information to students; to counselling, where they actively engage students to consider their unique experience to inform their career decision and planning. Fee and Forsyth's (2010) student engagement model suggests the stages, or touch points, where CIs might conduct these activities: access, transition, retention, and graduation.

Despite CIs' contributions to student engagement, to date, little is known about their inclination to assist students with their career development. Having a greater understanding of CIs may increase opportunities to mobilize the talent and accessibility of these professionals in order to fulfill students' prime objective of finding and pursuing fulfilling careers. This is a major

gap in Canadian post-secondary education research and practice (Canadian Association of College and University Student Services, 2011).

This study aims to understand: *How do post-secondary education professionals conceive their influence in student career development?* To achieve this goal, we begin by learning their definition of the term "career"; identifying the contributions they believe they make – as professionals and as individuals – towards student career development; and finally, identifying the resources and support they feel would be helpful to further their impact.

## Method

### Research Design

The study took place in a teaching-intensive university in British Columbia, Canada. To determine whom students most likely turn to for career assistance (e.g., professionals they deem as CIs) a poll informed by Redekopp and Austen's (2015) community helper recruitment approach was used. This was administered in January 2017 to 100 students taking a course on job search and professional readiness. Since the course was



offered at three of the university's four campuses and attracted students in various years of study within a wide range of disciplines (arts, business, and science), it was inferred that the types of professionals identified by these students would be somewhat representative of the university's student population.

Professional types (e.g. academic advisors, instructors, coordinators) identified as CIs from the student poll were then invited to participate in this study through university-wide and departmental mail lists. Snowball sampling was also employed by asking participants to recommend colleagues they would consider as CIs, and to refer them to this study.

Between February and May 2017, data was gathered through two one-on-one, semi-structured interviews, each between 60 to 90 minutes long. The first interview asked participants to describe their background and role and answer questions that pertain to the research sub-questions (e.g., definition of "career", their perception of their role and approach to the role, resources they need or would like to be successful). The second interview took place six to eight weeks after the first interview. Participants were asked to review summary notes from their first interview and to reflect upon if their self-perception had changed since the initial interview.

Sixteen participants originally took part in the study; of which, data from one participant was omitted as a second inter-

view did not take place despite multiple attempts to contact the participant. Due to the study's qualitative nature, the resultant sample size of 15 participants was deemed sufficient to achieve theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

## Results

### Early Findings

**CIs defined the term "career" by drawing from their professional and life experiences.** These definitions have grounding in various career development theories. Having experienced intense stress and burn-out at one point in his career, one participant succinctly described career as "a way to make ends meet", and urged his students to pursue interests outside of their professional lives; his definition is rooted in Super, Savickas, and Super's (1996) life-role, life-span theory which regarded work as one of the many roles an individual assumes over their lifetime.

Another participant saw career as "a vocation a person chooses considering their values, dispositions, temperaments, etc...keeping in mind that these components change over the person's life time and as a result their career options should also evolve", effectively combining Parson's (1909) trait and factor theory with Bright and Pryor's (2011) chaos theory of careers; the former theory emphasized the match between a person's attributes with that of occupa-

tions, while the latter focused on the role that a dynamic, ever-changing environment plays in a person's career development process. Also, as an aside, it is interesting to note that the traditional career development theories – some over a century old – remain relevant in our context today.

### **CIs highlight personal experience to support students' professional success.**

Intrinsically motivated to help students reach their career aspirations, CIs offer advice based on their personal experiences. One participant – an exceptional story teller – educates students on workplace etiquette and professionalism using examples from her former role as a recruiter "so that [students] do not become the characters featured in my 'what not to do' stories". Another participant uses his own undergraduate student experience, specifically exploring multiple areas of study and ultimately pursuing a new degree program, to help students normalize feelings of career anxiety and "be empowered, rather than be paralyzed, by their options and possibilities".

Whenever possible, CIs also leverage their own resources to benefit their students' career prospects. One participant invites his industry colleagues to his classes based on the students' career goals. Students are encouraged to "ask any questions, no matter how silly they think their questions are...because the classroom is safe and a non-judgmental environment...maybe a student will meet their future em-



ployer and all I had to do was flip through my rolodex”. Examples such as this one illustrates CIs’ ownership and pride over student career success.

**CIs seek opportunities to learn, to connect, and to be “recognized”.** When asked to describe resources and competencies they deemed as important in furthering their support of student career development, over one-third of the participants would like to see learning opportunities related to career development offered on-campus and/or online:

I wouldn’t mind getting a quick tutorial on career development theories...[so I can develop] a solid foundation and can back up my stories with credibility...would also be nice to learn what our career centre does so we can become knowledgeable about what’s available to our students.

There is also a desire from the participants to connect with each other to exchange experiences and practices, as one of them described this EdD research as a “start of a cross-pollination process [of career influencers] across our campuses”. Finally, CIs would like to be acknowledged for their work with student career development, not for the sake of recognition, but rather to highlight their impact on student success with the hope of inspiring other colleagues to become CIs in their own way. One participant exclaimed, “I’d like to see us [CIs] influence more than our students – there is potential to mobilize our co-workers to do this as well”.

### Preliminary Implications

Prior to discussing implications, it would be important to point out the study’s main limitation: that its findings were based on a small number of participants at a single university. Specifically, the university’s teaching-intensive mandate denoted small class sizes and instructors who have relevant industry experience. These two factors alone naturally facilitate close relationships between students and instructors, who were often identified as CIs, as they readily share their professional experience as a teaching tool.

Therefore, results and implications from this study may not be generalizable to other post-secondary institutions differing in mandate, culture, and structure. Researchers and institutions interested in further exploring the concept of CIs should be cognizant and reflective of their research site(s)’ institutional context(s).

### Research

While there is a growing body of research on post-secondary professionals, most are primarily concerned with how professionals can improve their practice (Beer, Rodriguez, Taylor, Martinez-Jones, Griffin, Smith, Lamar, & Anaya, 2015; Cooper & Stevens, 2006; Culter, 2003; Haley, Jaeger, Hawes, & Johnson, 2015; Harrison, 2014). However, a lack of inquiry exists related to how post-secondary professionals conceive their

practice, and how their conceptions influence their approach. For example, the CIs interviewed in this study relied upon personal experience and anecdotes to enhance student support through illustrating their points and narratives. This is a missed opportunity because professionals – and in this study, CIs – play a role in shaping institutional practice, culture, and identity (Canadian Association of College and University Student Services, 2011). Hence, this study not only aims to help address an important research gap, but it also gives way to potential future studies that highlight CIs’ contributions in student engagement and retention, and in turn institutional identity and success.

### Policy

Since the relationships between CIs and students are often informal, the study intends to bring these organic connections to light, so that institutions may be able to design policies and systems to support, and even increase, the occurrence of these beneficial relationships and conversations. For instance, human resources departments might use the study findings to inform recruitment policies and training practices, both in seeking candidates who have the propensity to be CIs once employed, and/or in inspiring current employees to develop helping qualities possessed by CIs. Academic programs may also infuse elements of career exploration into program and course learning



outcomes to stimulate career conversations between students and instructors.

### Practice

Post-secondary institutions should consider ways to recognize current CIs for their informal yet meaningful roles and contributions, while encouraging others to adopt CI behaviours and practices. One idea is to form a community of practice (CoP) for professionals interested in student career development to encompass current and prospective CIs. Participants in this study expressed a desire to meet with other CIs, share experiences, and potentially seek ways to collaborate; convening a CoP would address these needs. If campus career centres have the capacity and resources, they would be ideal to lead these communities since they can provide professional development and training to help CIs enhance their credibility in providing career assistance. At the same time, CIs as conduits between students and institutions can be consulted on how to promote career development on campus and encourage students to utilize centre resources, truly promoting the ethos that career development is ultimately everyone's responsibility.

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