Spring 2014

Envisioning Life After College: Constructing College Students' Expectations of the Work World

Tess C. Burick

Tess C. Burick

Envisioning Life After College:
Constructing College Students' Expectations of the Work World

Organizational Communication Capstone Project

University of Portland

Spring 2014

Supervised by Alexa Dare, Ph.D.

Abstract

This research study will examine the topic of college students' expectations of the work world and professional life following gradation. Specifically, this study will answer three research questions- *(RQ1):* What resources do college students use in order to construct and maintain their expectations about work and the work world? *(RQ2)* What expectations do college students have about life following college? And *(RQ3)* What messages do institutional organizations within universities deliver to students about the work world? This study will be conducted at a small, private university using three participant interviews conducted with graduating seniors and two workshop observations at on-campus Career Center. The findings of this research suggest college students have prominent expectations of uncertainty and mobility upon graduating and create and maintain lifestyle expectations through the use of peers while using organizational resources as tools for accessing the work world. Additionally, this particular private university focused on institutional messages of professionalism, employment and networking as critical to life in the work world. In conclusion, this study suggests that high levels of uncertainty among college graduates may be minimalized by increased prior exposure to the work world through networking and internships. Therefore future research should examine whether or not universities are adequately stressing the importance of internships and networking and preparing students to engage with these experiences. Furthermore, future research should also examine the willingness of the student to take initiative in pursuing applicable work experience prior to graduation.

Rationale

This research study examines the topic of college students' expectations of work and the work-world following graduation. This research looked at the organizational places where college students construct their expectations about life and work after graduation. In a recent article by Forbes, *College Graduates' Expectations are Out of Line with Reality Says Study,* Susan Adams cites a new poll by consulting firm Accenture that reveals a discrepancy between graduating seniors' expectations of the work world and experiences of recent graduates who are in the workforce (Adams, 2013). Gaps arose in terms of salary expectations, on the job training, pending plans to earn a graduate degree for career advancement, whether or not one will live at home following graduation, the likelihood of internships leading to employment, and overall employment rates for recent graduates (Adams, 2013). Ultimately, these gaps between expectations and reality for nearing college graduates indicate an overestimation of what life will be like after college (Adams, 2013). These expectations will significantly impact the ways in which students prepare for professional life as well as their performance and satisfaction with their first encounters in the work world.

Expectations are further significant in that they carry emotional consequences. In the article "Adolescence and Expectations about College Graduation", Pickhardt explains what expectations are and how they can impact a person psychologically. He states,

> "Expectations are mental constructs we create to anticipate our way through life, through change (from old to new) and through time (from present to future)…For everyone, choice of expectations in life psychologically matters because these mental sets can have such powerful emotional consequences. Thus recent college graduates who choose to hold unrealistic positive expectations about their immediate prospects in life usually do so to their unhappy cost." (Pickhardt, 2011, p. 1).

Graduates can expect to experience a higher level of happiness and fulfillment when their expectations are closer in line with their likely reality (Pickhardt, 2011, p.1). Therefore, it is

theoretically important to examine the expectations of college graduates in light of their associated implications on happiness.

In addition to the psychological importance of assessing college students' expectations of the work world, it is important to consider to the communication related dimensions of expectations. As understood through the Expectancy Value Model that will be discussed in greater detail throughout the theoretical framework section of this research paper, dimensions such as behavior, behavioral intentions and attitudes are impacted by an individual's expectations ("Expectancy value model", (n.d.)). When examined through the lens of the Expectancy Value Model, student expectations for the work world will be derived from their personal beliefs and values. These values will be the drivers of sought experiences which will further influence future behavior, expectations and goals for life after college. Thus, these communication dimensions of values, beliefs, behaviors and goals will be crucial in beginning to understand how students construct expectations for life after graduation.

There are also many practical reasons to examine this research. When viewed as an investment, college students, parents, faculty, staff and donors alike put a large investment into the success of the student. Perhaps the greatest institutional function of universities is to prepare its students for "the real world". Therefore a measure of success for any given institution should be whether or not its students are prepared for their new reality in terms of skills, intellectual ability and expectations. With the added implications that realistic expectations have on the psychological health of the graduating student, it is increasingly important that universities play an active role in the construction process of students' expectations for life in the work world. Therefore, one aspect of this study will look specifically at the organizational messages being

delivered to students by institutional resources around the subject of what the work world will be like for graduates.

It is also important to consider these organizational messages in light of current conversations being held around the success, or lack thereof, of universities and their ability to adequately prepare graduates for the work world. The article, "Poll Shows Business Leaders Think Graduates are Unprepared for Job Experience", by Cynthia Benson of the Arkansas Traveler reported that the Gallup Poll found that universities are failing to produce graduates with the skills and competencies that business professionals are seeking (Benson, 2014). The study found that of the 600 business leaders interviewed for the Gallup Poll, only one third believed that universities were producing competent and prepared business graduates (Benson, 2014). Thus, it is important to investigate the organizational places that assist in preparing students for the work world and play a part in crafting student expectations for life following graduation.

<div align="center">Theoretical Framework</div>

Uncertainty Reduction Theory and the Expectancy-Value Model, which is linked to Uses and Gratification Theory, will guide this research. Uncertainty reduction theory (UTR) was originated by Berger and Calabrese in 1975 on the premise that people engage in communication to reduce the feelings of uneasiness that are brought about by uncertainty (Berger & Bradac, 1982). Berger identifies three stages and three strategies through which people enact uncertainty reduction. While his theory focused on the interpersonal characteristics of uncertainty reduction, his theory can also be applied in an organizational context. Organizationally, this study will examine how students use institutional resources as a means of reducing uncertainty when

entering the work world. The first phase of uncertainty reduction is the entry phase ("Uncertainty Reduction Theory", (n.d.)). This phase is the information-seeking phase wherein communication is guided by rules and norms. The second phase is the personal phase. In this phase, the individual gathers information about another's attitudes, values and beliefs. The third phase is the exit phase. In this phase the communicator decides on future interaction plans with the individual (or organization) in question. Berger then identifies three strategies through which an individual can engage in uncertainty reduction: passive strategies, active strategies or interactive strategies ("Uncertainty Reduction Theory", (n.d.)). Adopting a passive strategy refers to using observation as a means of reducing uncertainty. Active strategies involve asking others questions about the person or organization of which one is uncertain and setting up observation opportunities. Finally, interactive strategies utilize communicating directly with the person or organization that one is uncertain about. Uncertainty reduction theory is applicable to the research of where and how college students construct post-graduation expectations because uncertainty is embedded in this transitional process. Therefore, examining how college students express uncertainty and how they reduce their uncertainty about the workforce has the potential to better understand how students construct their expectations.

The Expectancy Value Model was founded by Martin Fishbein in the 1970s ("Expectancy value model", (n.d.)). The core assumption of the expectancy value model asserts that, "behavior is a function of the expectancies one has and the value of the goal toward which one is working." ("Expectancy value model", (n.d.)). The theory also states that, "people orient themselves to the world according to their expectations (beliefs) and evaluations" ("Expectancy value model", (n.d.)). Expectations play a central role in this theory thereby connecting it to this research study. It will be important to observe the expectations and beliefs that the institutional

structures, such as the University of Portland, have for their students, as this will impact its behaviors and the messages that are communicated to the students. These messages about work after college will play a role in forming student expectations and beliefs. It is equally important to examine the beliefs and expectations of the students. Their expectations will guide their behavior as they transition from college life into the work world.

Literature Review

The literature examined for this research study focused on three specific areas: 1) The resources used during student construction of work world expectations and their effectiveness 2) the impact that realistic work world expectations have on the psychological well-being of the student in the work world, and 3) the contextual and individual factors that influence college students' expectations for professional life. These three areas of research will work to establish a basic understanding of the work world expectations that have been expressed by college students in previous research studies and begin to look at the organizational places where students construct these expectations. Additionally, this literature review has included research regarding the psychological well-being of students and the way in which realistic expectations have an effect on psychological health because of their significant impact on their early experiences in the work world.

Examining Resources Used During Student Construction of Work World Expectations and their Effectiveness.

The first study examined for this literature review was conducted by Funkhouser and Savage Jr., which looked at broadcast student expectations for the work world and the role that educators should take in constructing student expectations. Funkhouser and Savage Jr. conducted

a study examining the expectations of graduating broadcast students transitioning into entry level

positions at radio and television stations (Funkhouser & Savage, 1978, p.1). After sighting a

trend of disappointed broadcast managers in regards to the job-related attitudes and expectations

of entry-level broadcast college graduates, Funkhouser and Savage put forth a study to evaluate

whether the expectations of those assuming entry-level broadcast positions had changed over the

years (Funkhouser & Savage, 1978, p.1). Funkhouser & Savage modeled their study after that of

Abel and Jacobs (1975) who conducted a study of 869 broadcast station managers which found

that entry level employees were entering the broadcast positions with unrealistic expectations

and understandings of the industry (Funkhouser & Savage, 1978, p.1). Funkhouser and Savage's

study was conducted in 1983 via a survey that involved broadcast students and broadcast

managers. The results found that overall, students assuming entry-level jobs in broadcasting held

higher expectations of rapid professional advancement than in the previous 1975 study by Abel

and Jacobs (Funkhouser & Savage, 1978, p.4). When discussing the findings of their research,

Funkhouser and Savage stated that it may be of value for broadcast educators to assume a more

prominent role in constructing student expectations of the broadcast industry. They stated,

"Educators may inform students about potential discrepancies between their expectations and

their future employers' perception of them. Students may use information to either reinforce or

alter their expectations and to prepare themselves for the job-related frustration which may enter

their lives" (Funkhouser & Savage, 1978, p.5). Although this study focused specifically on the

broadcast industry, it shows that the topic of examining college graduates' expectations has been

historically significant in research while calling on the need for educators and institutional places

to actively participate in the crafting of work world expectations. Thus it justifies the premise of

this proposed research study to investigate the role that university organizations play in college students' constructions about the workforce.

Barnett's 2012 research further examined resources that assist in student construction of work world expectations and narrowing the expectation-reality gap. Specifically, her research identifies the internship as a successful means for narrowing the expectation-reality gap about the work world as students transition out of college. Barnett collected 59 student exit interviews and/or surveys that qualitatively assessed student's internship experiences. Barnett's results indicated that internships successfully allowed college students to construct more realistic perceptions about the work world. Specifically, it gave students insight into the importance of communication in the work world and a greater understanding of workplace culture (Barnett, 2012, p.6). Additionally, Barnett found that students adopted a more positive view of workplace culture following their internships. She stated,

> "The fact that some students were surprised by a positive climate leads me to wonder what they based their previously held beliefs on—their own experiences, their parents' insights, or perhaps, movies and television shows such as "The Office"? Whatever the source, witnessing actual, positive climates will likely leave the intern with less apprehension about the world beyond the comforts of college life." (Barnett, 2012, p.12)

Barnett's research presents one example of an institution that has influenced where college students construct and maintain expectations about the workplace. As a result, universities should advertise not only the technical training/skill benefits associated with internships but also the practical benefits of internships and their benefits to anticipating new work realities.

Examining the Impact that Realistic Work World Expectations Have on the Psychological Well-being of the Student in the Work World

Research conducted by Agliata and Renk looked at the expectation discrepancies between parents and college students and communication reciprocity as predictors of anger, depression and anxiety in college students (Agliata & Renk, 2008, p.1). This research is important for beginning to understand how student expectations affect psychological functioning. Agliata and Renk highlight that there is a significant relationship between college students' perceived parental expectations and their resulting behavior and feelings of affective distress (Agliata & Renk, 2008, p.1). This study was conducted with a sample of 69 male and 105 female freshmen and sophomore undergraduate students and 138 mothers and 92 fathers of those undergraduate participants (90 sets of parents from the same families participated in the study) (Agliata & Renk, 2008, p.3). The college students and parents were then issued a packet of questionnaires such as a demographic questionnaire and surveys that measured perceptions of communication reciprocity, perceived parental expectations, experiences of anger, symptoms of depression, levels of anxiety, and levels of social desirability (Agliata & Renk, 2008, p.4). Results indicated that students' affective distress is correlated to student-parent expectation discrepancies however positive communication reciprocity between college students and their parents can mediate affective distress (Agliata & Renk, 2008, p.14). Therefore, healthy communicative behaviors are seen to have healthy effects of decreasing anger, depression and anxiety in college students even if students believe they are not achieving their parents' expectations (Agliata & Renk, 2008, p.14). The findings of this study are significant to my proposed research study for two reasons. Given that parents play a role in the formation of student expectations about undergraduate performance, the influential nature of parents may be also present in how students construct expectations about the work world. Secondly, the article is a clear representation of how expectations are connected to psychological functioning. As

discussed in the rationale section of this paper, fulfilling expectations, or failing to fulfill

expectations, has repercussions on one's emotional state. Therefore the study of college student

expectations and how they are constructed is valuable.

Murphy, Blustein, Bohlig and Platt's research offered further insight into how

preparedness, realistic expectations and social support have behavioral implications such as

making one more resilient when entering the workforce. This qualitative research study used 10

participant interviews of newly employed college graduates. The content of the study focused on

the graduates' transitions from college into careers within the first three years of their

employment (Murphy et al., 2010, p.1). Results indicated that the presence of social support,

optimism and having realistic and well-informed expectations about the work world contributed

to a more successful college to career transition. The article further illustrates how realistic

expectations elicit resilient and adaptive behaviors and attitudes that help prepare college

graduates for the realities of the workforce. This research reiterates the importance of

constructing realistic expectations while also bringing the roles of social support into the light

when examining the college to career transition.

Contextual and Individual Factors that Influence College Students' Expectations for
Professional Life

Betz and Voyten looked at the role that self-efficacy played in college students' career

indecision as well as how exploration intentions were affected by outcome expectations (Betz &

Voyten, 1997, p.1). Their study found that, "self-efficacy beliefs are the best predictor of career

indecision, and outcome expectations are the best predictor of exploration intentions. When

indecision was entered as a predictor, it also was a significant predictor of exploration intentions-

students who were less decided were also more likely to plan career exploration." (Betz &

Voyten, 1997, p.1). It is important to consider the findings of this study and their insights into

how student expectations of being able to find a place in the workforce are impacted by traits

such as self-efficacy. It is also important to understand that a student's motivation to explore

career options is linked to their expectations of what those explorations will yield. Greater levels

of self-efficacy correlate with lower levels of career indecision. Additionally, more positive

outcome expectations indicate greater intentions to engage in career exploration. It is reasonable

to propose that increased career exploration will lead to a heightened understanding of the reality

of the career industry that the student is exploring. Therefore, this research will be informative

when thinking of how universities should help their students construct positive concepts of self

and realistic expectations of the work world.

      Feldt and Woelfel provided found similar results as Betz and Voyten in their research on

how personality factors and self-efficacy impact career indecision. Results indicated that self-

efficacy was correlated to career indecision and outcome expectations when considering

potential careers (Feldt & Woelfel, 2009). Thus, similar to the research cited above, the findings

of this study impress upon the significance of the way self-efficacy is tied to exploration

behaviors that have further implications on constructing expectations about the work world.

      De Hauw & De Vos' research studied the effects of generational, contextual and

individual influences on Millennial's career expectations. Through the use of questionnaires,

they measured optimism, careerism, and expectations of employer incentives (De Hauw & De

Vos, 2010, p. 296). The findings suggested that contextually, the current economic climate has

an effect on the optimism levels of graduating college students thereby changing their

expectations of work-life balance and social atmosphere (De Hauw & De Vos, 2010, p. 293).

Individually, the study found that, "expectations regarding job content, training, career

development, and financial rewards remain high, suggesting that these expectations are largely

embedded within the generation. Moreover, Millennials' expectations are significantly

influenced by individual variables, careerism, and optimism." (De Hauw & De Vos, 2010, p.

293). In the context of the research proposal being proposed in this paper, De Hauw and De

Vos' research gives insight into the contextual and individual factors that influence college

student expectations. These influencers should be considered when looking at how college

students construct expectations in addition to the influence of the organizational messages

communicated by universities about the work world.

Ultimately, this literature review focused on research that examined the individual factors

that influence the process of constructing expectations as well as the places where expectations

are constructed. Finally, the research discussed above also focused on the behavioral and

psychological effects of expectation development because of its significant impact on the well-

being of the individual as this was a significant motivator in conducting this research study. It is

important to note that all of the research noted in this literature review was conducted through

quantitative studies. Thus, this presents an area of research that may invite more qualitative

discussions around college students and their experiences of entering the workforce. Given that

the majority of existing research is quantitative, this study showcases a need for more qualitative

examination surrounding this population.

<u>Research Questions</u>

 (RQ1): What resources do college students use in order to construct and maintain their

expectations about work and the work world?

(RQ2) What expectations do college students have about life following college?

(RQ3) What messages do institutional organizations within universities deliver to students about

the work world?

<div align="center">Methodology</div>

The methodology chosen for this research study was guided by Lindlof and Taylor's

expertise in conducting qualitative communication research in their book *Qualitative*

Communication Research Methods (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). This study was conducted through

a series of two observations and three participant interviews. The observations took place at an

on-campus Career Center at a small, private university during the Career Center's weekly

Thursday workshops. The workshops focused on building career skills and preparing students for

the workforce. All observations were recorded in a designated research binder used specifically

for this research study.

Participant interviews were conducted on campus at the university's main dining hall in

attempt to make the interviewee feel comfortable and willing to share their expectations of the

workforce and life after graduation. Participants were chosen through convenience sampling due

to constraints on finding willing participants through a random selection process. Each

participant was a college senior and the researcher in this study had no prior knowledge of the

participant's post-graduation plans. College seniors were specifically chosen for this research

study given their upcoming graduation and present involvement in considering post-graduation

plans.

The participant interviews conducted for this research were considered respondent

interviews as guided by Lindlof and Taylors research on qualitative communication research.

Lindlof and Taylor describe the goals of respondent interviews as, "(1) to clarify the meanings of

common concepts and opinions, (2) to distinguish the decisive elements of an expressed opinion, (3) to determine what influenced a person to form an opinion or act in a certain way, (4) to classify complex attitude patterns, and (5) to understand the interpretations that people attribute to their motivations to act" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 179). The participants who participated in the interviews conducted for this research were asked to speak only for themselves and were conducted in a manner that facilitated open-ended discussions. Furthermore, the third and fifth objectives of respondent interviews, as stated above, were the key focus of the conducted interviews in learning about college students' expectations of the work world.

The interviews were roughly 30 minutes long and conducted in a one-on-one manner. Each interview was audio recorded with a smart phone with interviewee permission. Interviews were recorded to ensure that no information was left out or unintentionally misrepresented. Following the interviews, the interviews were transcribed and kept secure in the designated research binder. The audio recordings were deleted from the cell phone once they had been transcribed.

This research remained ethically sound by protecting the identities of its interview subjects in addition to keeping the content of their interviews anonymous. All participants signed informed consent forms prior to the interview process and were informed that they were free to stop participating in the study at any time and that it was fully within their right for their participation not to be included in my research should they later change their mind about their involvement. Also, given that the topic of graduation may be stressful for some students, a respectful, open and understanding demeanor was upheld throughout the interview process. Following the interviews, all data analysis information was kept in the designated research binder as the research findings were assessed.

Finally, the data was assessed through a systematic coding process wherein the researcher first read, and re-read all of the collected data received from participant interviews and observations. The interviews and observations were then coded according to the open codes and in vivo codes that recurred throughout the findings. These large chunks of meaning were categorized into emerging themes as they related to each of the three research questions that guided this study (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 214).

Findings

Several themes emerged during the analysis of this research study when examining what resources college students use in constructing and maintaining expectations of the work world, what expectations college students have about life following college and what messages institutional organizations within universities deliver to students about the work world.

The first themes to emerge from participant interviews were the use of peers as references for creating expectations of professional life and the use of institutional resources as tools for gaining access to and preparing for roles in the work world.

In addition to these findings, uncertainty and desire for mobility emerged as themes in the context of expectations for professional life. These themes were tied to the first themes surrounding utilized resources for crafting expectations in the sense that uncertainty was a large motivator in seeking out peers and institutional resources during expectation development and career preparation. Both peers and institutional resources in organizational settings frequently discussed mobility, which may account for its emergence as a prominent expectation of graduating seniors.

Finally, expectations for professionalism in the work world, the importance of networking and a basic expectation of employment were the most notable themes that emerged

when examining what organizational messages were delivered by the institutional resources observed for the purpose of this study. Each of these themes will be examined in further detail throughout the course of these findings and further discussed in the ways that they are interrelated.

Resources in the Construction and Maintenance of Expectations for the Work World

The first research question guiding this analysis was: What resources do college students use in order to construct and maintain their expectations of the work world? As mentioned above, two themes regarding utilized resources emerged consistently throughout all three participant interviews that were conducted: a) college seniors referred to peers as a resource for constructing impressions regarding professional and post-graduate life, and b) college seniors used online resources, institutional contacts such as professors and advisors, and organizational resources such as the on-campus career center and internships as resources for preparing them for a professional role in the work world and when searching for jobs.

Referring to Peers as Resources for Constructing Impressions Regarding Professional and Post-Graduate Life. When looking at the resources that college seniors used when crafting their expectations and understandings of what life would be like after college both socially and professionally, all three interview participants cited turning to peers such as friends who had already graduated and were now in the work world, family members or past coworkers who are currently in a professional role similar to that of the student's future job following graduation. For example, when asked what resources they had used when trying to gain more information about what professional life is like, one participant responded,

>"I've talked a lot to family and close friends who are like, post-college grads just to see how different it is. I guess that's all I've really talked to for just the lifestyle post-graduation. But I've been using resources like online to find jobs."

Another participant who had already secured a first career-job for themselves at a local Portland public accounting firm exemplified their use of peers as a resource for crafting lifestyle expectations when they stated,

>"One of the guys I worked with this summer is doing a rotation in Geneva right now and he just posts pictures of him[self] on ski trips. I'm sure he works really hard too, but they know how to do it [*laughter*]. Work-life balance is way different over there too."

Thus, this participant has identified a previous coworker as a site of reference when conceptualizing future employment possibilities and lifestyles. Furthermore, topics such as free time and flexibility, job satisfaction, keeping in touch with friends and discussing what their peers were doing in terms of post-graduation work were the most frequently noted topics that the participants discussed with peers. However, online and organizational resources were used in a different manner.

Using Online Resources, Institutional Contacts and Organizational Resources. The student participants also performed uncertainty reduction through referring to online resources, institutional contacts such as advisors and professors and organizational resources such as the Career Center or internships. Yet these resources were primarily used to gain access to the work world or to prepare them with technical skills required for a given career. The utilization of online resources was primarily used in job searching and was not referred to as being used for conceptualizing a professional lifestyle. Analysis further showed a distinction between the manner in which peers and institutional and organizational resources were used. The student participants indicated that they did not refer to professors or advisors for constructing ideas around post-graduation lifestyle. However they did acknowledge using them as resources for

networking and honing technical skills. For example, when asked whether or not they had referred to on-campus resources like the Career Center or professors to find out more of what post-college life would be like, one student said,

> "Not necessarily for post-grad life I guess, but a lot of stuff for job preparation and preparing for interviews. But not really for transition or things like that."

When discussing internships, the participants acknowledged internship experiences both as valuable tools to gaining career-specific skills for the work world and as beneficial experiences for gaining insight into what a job in that related field would look like. Viewing internships as a resources for building technical skills and constructing work world expectations was noticed as one participant described their expectations for employee interactions based on their previous internship experience when they stated,

> "I think I'll be guided a lot just because of the structure of my job. You work in a team of people from all different levels. So there's usually somebody they call an experience associate, so someone who's been there for two years, and then a senior who has been there for four or five years, and then a manager who's been there for five to six years. And you have interactions with all those people all of the time."

> It is clear that uncertainty reduction strategies are being enacted through information seeking behavior with peers, institutional contacts, and organizational and online resources. However, our data indicated that peers, institutional and online resources served different purposes to the interviewees who participated in this study.

Expectations about Life Following College

The second question guiding this analysis was: What expectations do college students have about life following college? The data supported two themes regarding post-college expectations that occurred in the responses of each of the study's participants: a) feelings of uncertainty, and b) expectations for mobility.

Feelings of Uncertainty. Each participant expressed feelings of uncertainty regarding a variety of topics. Participants described feeling uncertain about where they would be living, whom they would be living with, what their lifestyle would be like, how their social interactions may change, or what it was that they would be doing in terms of career plans. Participants anticipated changes in social interactions such as seeing friends less frequently and described anticipated lifestyle changes such as having less free time and adjusting to a less flexible daily routine. The two participants who had not yet solidified jobs following graduation expressed additional uncertainty over their career plans and being able to afford living independently. It is significant to note that many of these anticipated lifestyle changes such as having less free time, adjusting to a less flexible daily schedule and changes in social interactions were topics that participants noted frequently talking about with peers who had previously graduated. Therefore this indicates the significant impact that peers have on informing expectations for life following college.

The shared experience of uncertainty was also noticeably perceived as potentially face-threatening to one's autonomy and competency. According to Ting-Toomey, "face" can be understood as the way in which a person projects an image of one's self (Ting-Toomey, 1998). Thus Facework are the communicative strategies that one enacts in order to save face or uphold one's self image. A person's sense of autonomy and competency are two components of being that are intrinsically important to an individual's concept of face. Therefore, uncertainty emerged as an observable face-threatening phenomenon when participants discussed expectations for life following college in the sense that it tainted participants' views of themselves as autonomous and competent beings. Observation during participant interviews indicated that participants engaged in laughter, a face-saving behavior, when they were discussing an expectation that could be

interpreted as face-threatening. Specifically, participants laughed after instances when they

discussed potentially moving back home with parents, not having a set career plan, or having to

work at a job that would likely not be very "cool". For example, one participant described their

feelings regarding graduation in this particular manner,

> "[Laughs] I don't know what I'm going to do [laughs]. I'm scared that I'm going to get
> stuck at my parent's house or something like that [laughs]. So I'm kind of just nervous
> about what I'm going to do afterwards."

One could argue that the act of moving home again is potentially face-threating to one's

autonomy after having lived independently throughout their college years. Additionally,

admitting that you do not have post-college plans could also seem threatening towards one's

concept of competency. However, laughter, or being able to laugh at one's self could be seen as a

face-saving behavior where one dictates that the manner in which they want their disclosed

information to be interpreted. This was seen again in another participant's response to being

asked the degree to which they considered their expectations to be realistic:

> "I truly just have no idea what to expect my life balance will be like, but I'm leaning
> towards the expectation that I'll have less time than I expect. So I think that's realistic
> [laughs]. Yeah I just expect to do whatever I'm told to. Like at work I don't really expect
> my job to be very glamorous. I think it will be a lot of group work and I think it will take
> a while before I'm doing anything cool [laughs]."

In this sense, admitting an expectation or assumption that is not an ideal working condition may

also be interpreted as face-threatening. Thus it appeared that laughter was an indicator of feelings

of apprehension or self-consciousness. In addition to the shared experience of feelings of

uncertainty, each student participant also cited mobility as an expectation for life in the work

world.

Expectations for mobility. The recurring theme of expectations for mobility can be understood in three capacities: 1) mobility through opportunity for advancement, 2) mobility in pursuing interests, and 3) geographic mobility.

Mobility through opportunity for advancement was characterized by a collective understanding that participants would likely enter the work world at entry-level positions where they would then work their way through the ranks. Each participant described having expectations of working hard out of college in order to gain experience and advance in their careers. Two of the three participants stated that they did not have high expectations when it came to making a lot of money immediately following graduation. All of the participants were of the expectation that their first careers would require much effort, demanding hours, large amounts of learning and that through hard work they could rise through the ranks.

Each participant indicated that pursuing work that they were interested in was important to them. When discussing expectations for the work world, many participants identified that they expected to gain experience in a broad spectrum of industries where they could explore different interests. Participants described being able to attain these expectations either through working for large organizations that managed a diverse portfolio of clients and projects, or through working a number of shorter duration positions at various smaller businesses such as nonprofits. For example, one participant described the driving factor of her job search by saying,

> "I'm not thinking that I'm going to keep the same job for like the rest of my career just because I really have no idea what I want to do at this point. So I think it's good to work at a job, and maybe that's why I want a bigger company, so I can try more things or maybe work on big projects and try different aspects of that. So I can figure out what I want to do and then maybe move on to a different company in a couple years."

The data observed in each participant interview also suggested a connection between uncertainty and a desire for mobility. This could be due to the notion that uncertainty regarding one's career

plans presents students with a more flexible ability to explore interests. Thus, uncertainty may be one contributing factor in having expectations for mobility in the way that it allows students to feel a greater sense of control in growing their work world experience through a variety of career positions.

In regards to geographic mobility, each participant held an expectation for being able to live in various locations over the course of their career. Participants discussed this in terms of either having the flexibility to change organizations and move to different locales, or to stay within the same organization, which is likely larger in size, and be transferred to another branch at a different location. This type of mobility as discussed both nationally and internationally among participants and was closely tied to gaining fulfillment through mobility. One participant referred to mobility when they said,

> "My goal is to work for five years and then hopefully do a rotation abroad and then split. I mean, they're [the local public accounting firm] in like 150 countries so it's the biggest public accounting firm in the world. I really want to work in like Switzerland or Munich or Vienna or something like that."

Another participant stated,

> "I mainly want to get a job with a larger company at first just so that there's time to move up and to a different location because I don't want to stay in Portland. But for now it's more realistic for me to get a job here and work for a little bit and then try and get transferred to a different branch.

Institutional Organizations' Messages about the Work World

The third research question guiding this analysis was: What messages do institutional organizations deliver to students about the work world? The data collected from two on-site observations suggested that institutional organizational messages focus less on what the work world will be like and rather on three other primary messages: a) there is a general expectation

for employment following graduation, b) there are particular professional expectations when entering the work world, and c) networking is imperative to professional success.

General Expectation for Employment. Each participant discussed feeling that there is a general societal expectation that college students should have a job when they graduate. However, participants also acknowledged that expectations and emphasis on securing a job after college was approached differently according to one's school of major. Of the three participants, one belonged to the Business School while the remaining two belonged to the College of Arts and Sciences in the English department and in the Communication department. The business student discussed that there is a high expectation for accounting majors to graduate with a job and that employment is one of the primary focuses of the Business School. For example, they said,

> "I think that especially the accounting department is really rigorous and their focus is to get you a job at the end. They teach you a lot of the things that are really important and pragmatic and they're not really going to teach you anything that you're not going to use."

Another participant described their experience of employment expectations in saying,

> "I feel like as an English major and [the] College of Arts and Sciences, or maybe just as an English major, that I haven't done a lot of like, like the Business School has all of these pre-job things and they try and set you up for a job right after you graduate and stuff like that and its [the English Department] not really like that."

Even as the participants described varying expectations from their respective schools of major regarding future employment, it is evident that there is an underlying assumption that one should be employed following graduation.

Professional Expectations for Entering the Work World. Through workshop observations at the university's Career Service building, it was evident that students are expected to represent themselves as professionals through their appearance, attitudes and behaviors. The two

workshops "What Employers Want" and "How to Work a Career Expo" highly emphasized

professional appearance through discussing appropriate business attire and was reiterated

through the way that the guest speakers and Career Service counselors were dressed.

In addition to appearance, attitudes such as preparedness and confidence were discussed

as well. Students entering the work world were expected to have conducted much research about

their own individual interests, and information regarding the organizations that they were hoping

to work for or network through. The workshops relayed the message that students were expected

to show investment and interest in organizations that that this required much time and effort on

the student's part.

Lastly, students were given the message that professional behavior such as strong

introductions or a responsible online profile is also necessary when entering professional life.

Many of the panelists at the "What Employers Want" workshop discussed using social media

profiles as hiring "checks" on potential candidates and therefore one should always maintain a

professional online history.

Interestingly, neither the students present at the Career Center workshops or those who

participated in the study's participant interviews raised any questions or made comments

regarding appearing professional. This could be because students either have less concern for this

topic, are already familiar with this topic, or professionalism is an already held assumption for

entering life in the work world and therefore is not a focus during student interactions with

institutional resources.

The Importance of Networking. This was perhaps the most reiterated institutional

message given to students during workshops. Networking was described as a means of creating

employment opportunities, an aspect of relationship maintenance and a tool that can be used to reduce uncertainty.

As a tool used for creating employment or learning opportunities, networking can be looked at through the lens of the Expectancy Value Model. The expectancy value model operates on the assumption that behavior is derived from one's expectations and the value that is placed on the goal towards which one is working ("Expectancy Value Model"). Thus, networking can be seen as a behavior that one engages in from one's expectation that creating networks and connections with other professionals will aide them in achieving a desired goal or outcome. Thus, people create networks on the expectation that they will advance in their career and therefore their behavior is modeled after these expectations.

Networking was also discussed in the context of relationship maintenance. The workshops reiterated the importance of sending thank you notes to employers or professionals that students interact with. This not only serves a positive reflection on your professional presentation, but it also maintains a positive relationship with fellow professionals. The Expectancy Value Model may also explain this behavior. Relationship maintenance behaviors such as following up with employers are the result of the expectation that doing so will put you closer to an intended goal.

Lastly, networking was also framed as a tool for reducing uncertainty. In instances where one may be exploring a new or unfamiliar career path, the workshops emphasized how informational interviews and networking with alumni or relevant professionals in your desired field allows one to learn more about the job they are pursuing. Thus, networking can be seen as information-seeking behavior and as a way to assess the attitudes, norms and benefits about a particular career. Ultimately, networking was a central message of this institutional organization

and was discussed as a way of achieving a career, maintaining a career and exploring future opportunities.

<div align="center">Discussion</div>

The purpose of this research study was to examine what expectations graduating college seniors hold regarding the work world as they transition into professional life. Additionally, this study examined where students construct these expectations and what organizational messages are communicated to students about the work world. While several themes emerged throughout the gathered data, a few findings are most prominent in guiding the discussion of this study's analysis.

First, uncertainty was a recurring experience for each of the three interview participants when discussing work world expectations. Uncertainty regarding location, lifestyle and vocations served as the main motivator in seeking out interactions with peers. Using peers as points of reference when conceptualizing and maintaining work world expectations can be understood through the lens of Uncertainty Reduction Theory. Uncertainty Reduction Theory operates on the premise that people engage in communication to reduce feelings of uneasiness that are brought about by uncertainty ("Uncertainty Reduction Theory", (n.d.)). Thus, the use of peers as resources by the study's three interview participants can be seen as an information-seeking behavior enacted to reduce one's uncertainty regarding expectations about post-graduation and professional being.

However, recent research indicates that professionals are finding new college graduates to be entering into the workforce with either unrealistic expectations or ill prepared for their positions. This evidence was supported in Funkhouser & Savage's research on emerging

broadcast graduates as well as in the Benson article where the Gallup Poll noted that one third of business professionals considered graduates to lack the skills and competencies necessary for business positions in the workforce (Benson, 2014). Therefore, if students are creating their expectations of the workforce from peers, but they are proving to be unrealistic or lacking competency, then should students be turning to institutional resources at university organizations when conceptualizing their expectations of the work world?

As the previous research conducted by Agliata and Renk and Murphy et al., revealed throughout the literature review, realistic expectations go a long way in fostering positive psychological health, forming adaptive behaviors during the transition phase from college to the work world, and are conducive to harnessing personal resilience during periods of change. Therefore it is important that college seniors are able to successfully conceptualize realistic expectations for what lies ahead following graduation. When looking at the organizational messages given to students about the work world, the data collected in this study shows that the majority of topics discussed pertain to expectations for professionalism, the importance of networking, and a general expectation for employment. There are seemingly few conversations being held around the topic of what students can expect from entry-level positions in their employment following graduation. Therefore, there is a potential for future research to examine whether universities are falling short in holistically preparing students for life after college and why students hold unrealistic expectations or such high levels of uncertainty upon graduating from college.

In considering whether universities are falling short in preparing their students for the work world, it is significant to recognize that certain fields of study place varying levels of emphasis on employment or internship experience throughout the duration of their academic

programs. For example, participants discussed how the Business School is known for emphasizing employment upon graduation and requiring internship experience- more so than say, the English department. Therefore there seems to be a greater focus on employment and preparation for the work world depending on one's field of study. One participant explained how her experience with the English department was less focused on immediate employment and less rigorous in requiring internships. Rather, she described being encouraged to explore interests and then "figure out the rest later". Thus, it becomes evident that certain majors experience different organizational expectations for work world experience while enrolled at the university, which consequently has effects on how students conceptualize expectations following graduation. However, these disparities in organizational expectations across majors may be a result of different levels of experiences or skill sets needed for a students' respective field of work. Thus, the concept of *experience* comes into play.

If organizations are not talking specifically about what the work world will be like, perhaps this indicates that these expectations should be constructed elsewhere and that it is not actually the role of say, the career center, to construct student's understandings of what their first job will be like. Alternatively, experiences such as internships or employment within one's field of major may be a more accurate resource to use in constructing work world expectations. Therefore it may be more appropriate to evaluate the success of universities on the degree to which they prepare students for internships and encourage students to seek professional experience related to their field of study prior to graduation so that students can use these resources for expectation development. This line of thinking then begs a different question- Are universities adequately preparing students for and accentuating the importance of internships? It seems that while some schools of study, such as professional development majors such as

Nursing or Business are doing this better than other departments such as the College of Arts and Science's English department. This finding introduces a potential field of research that could look at the differing employment expectations across majors and how varying departments prepare students for the work world in different manners.

Another finding that emerged in during the participant interviews was the use of online resources as a source of expectation development and access to the job market. Both participants who had not net secured jobs following graduation discussed turning to the Internet to look for jobs or understand what certain career positions would be like. On a basic level, this could be understood in terms of the Internet being readily accessible. Millennials have grown up being tuned in to a digital age therefore they may be more comfortable in exploring unknown facets of professional life through the internet, rather than interpersonally, because of their constant participation online. However, it is interesting that college graduates so readily turn to online resources when institutional resources, such as the career center, highly emphasize and reiterate the importance of interpersonal networking. Thus, future research might exam why college seniors are more apt to use online resources when job hunting rather than engage in networking with professionals. Perhaps this is indicative of the generational communicative stance that young adults "don't know how to communicate anymore" as a result of being raised in a digital age. Organizationally, universities can exam this idea in assessing whether or not students are being adequately prepared with interpersonal skills such as the ability to network, communicate beyond digital means and have competent public speaking abilities.

Ultimately, the findings of this research indicate a prominent presence of uncertainty around graduating seniors' expectations for the work world. As students turn to peers in conceptualizing lifestyle changes as they transition into the work world, research indicates that

students are still relatively unprepared in terms of skills or expectations for their entry-level positions. Therefore, future research should assess whether universities are adequately preparing students for internship experiences and career-specific work experience prior to graduation given that it is incredibly important that students are exposed to experience in the work world before earning their degree as this will positively impact the success of creating realistic work world expectations. The ability to apply internship experience to the expectation construction process will enable students to enter the work world more prepared which will have positive psychological health benefits. Universities must also address students' continued use of online resources when accessing and seeking to understand professional roles. Organizational institutions should evaluate whether they are enabling students to explore careers and network beyond online networks through preparing them with competent interpersonal and communication skills.

Ultimately, the findings of this study highlight future opportunities for improving student expectations for life after college by challenging universities to increase their emphasis on gaining internship experience in a more universal manner across all majors and by directing students away from online resources when constructing expectations and seeking professional life. While organizational institutions do construct messages about the importance of networking, it may be worth looking into ways that networking can become a mandatory element of curriculum or class experience. These two things, in unison have the potential to better prepare student expectations for post college life, which are fundamental to professional success and psychological well-being.

References

Adams, S. (2013, may 2). College graduates' expectations are out of line with reality, says study. *Forbes* . Retrieved from http://www.forbes.com/sites/susanadams/2013/05/02/college-graduates-expectations-are-out-of-line-with-reality-says-study/

Barnett, K. (2012). Student interns' socially constructed work realities: Narrowing the work expectation-reality gap. *Business Communication Quarterly, 75*(3), 271-290. doi:10.1177/1080569912441360

Benson, C. (2014, April 9). Poll shows business leaders think graduates are unprepared for job experience. *The Arkansas Traveler*. Retrieved from http://www.uatrav.com/news/article_b83b9144-bea6-11e3-8462-0017a43b2370.html

Berger, C.R., & Bradac, J.J. (1982*). Language and social knowledge: Uncertainty in interpersonal relations*. London: Arnold.

Betz, N. E., & Voyten, K. (1997). Efficacy and outcome expectations influence career exploration and decidedness. *The Career Development Quarterly*, *46*(2), 179-189.

De Hauw, S., & De Vos, A. (2010). Millennials' career perspective and psychological contract expectations: Does the recession lead to lowered expectations? *Journal of Business and Psychology, 25*(2), 293-302. doi:10.1007/s10869-010-9162-9

Feldt, R. C. W., Cheryl. (2009). Five-factor personality domains, self-efficacy, career-outcome expectations, and career indecision. *College Student Journal, 43*(2), 429-437. Retrieved from https://login.ezproxy-eres.up.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=pbh&AN=42517491&login.asp?custid=s8474154&site=ehost-live&scope=site

Funkhouser, E., & Savage Jr., A. L. (1987). College students' expectations for entry-level broadcast positions. *Communication Education, 36*(1), 23. Retrieved from https://login.ezproxy-eres.up.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ufh&AN=9453494&login.asp?custid=s8474154&site=ehost-live&scope=site

Kanter Agliata, A., & Renk, K. (2009). College students' affective distress: The role of expectation discrepancies and communication. *Journal of Child & Family Studies, 18*(4), 396-411. doi:10.1007/s10826-008-9244-8

Lindlof, T., & Taylor, B. (2002). *Qualitative communication research methods* . (2nd ed.). London: Sage Publications, Inc.

Murphy, Kerri A. Blustein, David L. Bohlig, Amanda J.Platt, Melissa G. (2010). The college-to-career transition: An exploration of emerging adulthood. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 88*(2), 174-181. Retrieved from https://login.ezproxy-eres.up.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=pbh&AN=49868454&login.asp?custid=s8474154&site=ehost-live&scope=site

(n.d.). *Expectancy value model*. Retrieved from http://www.utwente.nl/cw/theorieenoverzicht/Theory Clusters/Interpersonal Communication and Relations/Expectancy_Value_Theory/

(n.d.). *Uncertainty reduction theory.* Retrieved from http://www.utwente.nl/cw/theorieenoverzicht/Theory Clusters/Interpersonal Communication and Relations/Uncertainty_Reduction_Theory/

Pickhardt, C. (2011, June 13). Adolescence and expectations about college graduation.*Psychology Today*. Retrieved from http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/surviving-your-childs-adolescence/201106/adolescence-and-expectations-about-college-graduation

Ting-Toomey, S., & Kurogi, A. (1998). Facework competence in intercultural conflict: An updated face-negotiation theory. International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 22, 197–225.