Career Advising and Development in Community Colleges: A Review of the Literature and Implications for Practice

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Abstract

Preparing students for careers is a primary responsibility of college administrators. However, career preparation can be challenging at the community college level since students attend two-year institutions with diverse motivations and goals, including transfer, vocational/job training, participating in recreational courses, or enhancing their skills and/or basic knowledge in a particular area of study. With the goal of understanding career advising and career development for community college students, this literature review describes the current climate of career development at the community college level, explores challenges that community colleges face in serving the diverse needs of students in the area of career development and readiness, and provides recommendations for effectively serving such a diverse body. This article concludes by discussing best practices and future research directions for supporting career readiness of community college students. It is important to use the information from this review to create best practices for effective career development initiatives at community colleges across the United States.

Keywords: community college, career, career advising, career development

The community college system in the United States serves and educates a diverse population of students with unique purposes and motivations for attending. As such, student support services at the community college level are challenged with providing appropriate and effective services to a diverse student body. Some common reasons why an individual might choose to attend community college include: transferring to a four-year institution, vocational/job training, recreational education, or enhancement of basic knowledge in an area of study (Guthrie, 2016). According to Ma & Baum (2015), much of the community college population does not fit a traditional college student profile as many work full-time, are over 25 years of age, or are academically underprepared. In addition, Cadenas, Cantú, Spence, and Ruth (2018) bring awareness to the fact that community college in the United States is a highly
convenient and affordable option for minoritized, low-income, and non-traditional students. These underserved groups face unique barriers to persistence in higher education, which drastically impacts their career-goal achievement as well. Engaging with traditionally underserved groups presents a special set of barriers for administrators that need to be considered and recognized when supporting community college students, such as challenges using technology, getting to class, accessing resources outside of the classroom, and more (Cadenas et al., 2018). Combined, all of these factors drastically affect a two-year institution’s ability to provide student support services that meet the needs of all students.

One area significantly impacted by this reality of the community college setting is career development. At a four-year institution, it is common to see career centers provide resources for career development to their students, including resume building, career counseling, job search assistance, mock interviewing, and networking, among other activities and services. However, less is known about the career development opportunities offered in the community college setting. This literature review seeks to better understand career advising in the community college system in the United States and seeks to provide recommendations for practitioners in the field. When considering recommendations, it is important to look through the lens of social cognitive theory, which suggests that creating an environment that emphasizes career development is key for student success (Lent, Brown, and Hackett, 1994). An overarching question guiding this literature review is: What is the career advising experience like in community colleges? This inquiry prompts two additional questions for consideration: a) What challenges do career advisors and advising centers face and b) What considerations need to be made when serving a diverse student body in regards to career development at the community college level?

Overview of Career Advising Services in Community Colleges

Most career advising focuses on aspects of career and professional advancement. Some institutions provide courses, seminars, and workshops to their student body with the goal of reaching more students in one setting (Grubb, 2001). Other institutions may choose to utilize advisors to participate in one-on-one conversations with students on topics related to occupational opportunities, resumes, interviewing, and job-seeking tips (Grubb, 2001). These conversations may be performed by a career advisor and/or a dual-advisor, who are meant to support students in other areas of their development, such as personally or academically (Ledwith, 2014). Some colleges take the initiative to integrate cooperative approaches to career advising through curriculum with faculty to engage students in career-readiness in the classroom (Grubb, 2001). As a general rule, healthcare programs, such as nursing, engage in more career
development than other programs (Grubb, 2001). Regardless of the platform for which career preparation manifests at the community college level, it is important to know that each institution is unique in their approach to career advising and development.

Career Services Centers

Community colleges may have career services offices on campus to provide career support to students. Data is not collected regarding the existence of and/or interactions between career centers at two- or four-year colleges. This makes it challenging for practitioners to understand what is needed, as it is unclear what the current climate looks like for career services in higher education. However, navigation through community college career services websites suggests that some of the services offered include: a job board for job/internship postings, career counseling, mock interviews, resume and cover letter assistance, job search resources, and career fairs. In these spaces on campus, staff offer resources to students interested in engaging in career development. An example of a community college career services center is at the College of Southern Nevada (CSN) in Las Vegas, Nevada. The CSN Career and Transfer Services office works in collaboration with their ReEntry program, which consists of six full-time staff members serving in various capacities, to aid students returning to school and/or facing barriers to education or employment (“Career and Transfer Services,” n.d.). In surveying different institutions’ websites and career center webpages, it is evident that most offices offer the same common resources, such as resume reviewing, job fairs, career counseling, and more. For example, according to the Pasadena City College Career Center website, they offer very similar services, including meeting individually with a career specialist to facilitate these career development activities (“How to Explore Majors & Careers,” n.d.).

Major Challenges Faced by Community College Career Advising

Common challenges faced by community college career services include staff concerns, challenges related to students’ utilization of services, and data issues (e.g., collecting post-graduation salary and employment information). These challenges are described below, as community colleges that are unable to address these challenges often struggle to provide appropriate resources to students.

Staff Concerns

Community colleges are significantly understaffed and lack financial resources to support student services (Langen, 2011). According to a study conducted by Langen (2011), as many as 91 percent of community college staff are classified as part-time. With such a small pool of full-time employees to train on career development, there is a challenge in offering career advising to community
college students. Services that are most often understaffed and under-resourced are typically related to career advising (Grubb, 2001). Many advisors who get the chance to work with students one-on-one at community colleges are often overworked with large caseloads that stymie their ability to best support their students (National Association of Colleges and Employers Staff [NACE], 2017). In fact, according to the 2016-2017 Career Services Benchmark Survey Report for Colleges and Universities, the mean number of students per staff member at the associate degree level was 6,068 compared to 1,689 at the bachelor’s degree level (NACE Staff, 2017). In many of these advisor-student interactions, the focus is placed on academic advising, which relegates career development to a secondary priority (Grubb, 2001). One way to avoid this would be to implement more career-readiness training for advisors to encourage them to actively think more about career preparation when engaging with their students. In addition to these staffing challenges, it seems that many community colleges are struggling to find professionals to assist students in career-readiness (Langen, 2011). Career development is a topic in student affairs practice which requires increased attention at the community college level in the United States.

Utilization of Resources

Research suggests that when career and professional development resources are provided to students in community colleges, students are not utilizing them (Grubb, 2001; Harlow & Bowman, 2016). Furthermore, those who significantly need these resources are less likely to engage with career services. Students use guidance and counseling differently and at differing capacities, often leaving those who really need them the most unable to capitalize on the resources offered to them (Grubb, 2001). In the early part of the century, community college students reported having low opinions of their career and academic advising centers (Grubb, 2001). Further, even if students do utilize resources, their needs are so diverse that it becomes quite challenging to fit the needs of all students through advising measures. Community college students also enroll in a higher percentage of online courses compared to four-year college students, which means advisors are more likely to serve a commuting population who are less likely to be physically on campus (Lederman, 2018). Suggestions to address these challenges could be to integrate career development into curriculum through engagement in focused assignments/activities in the classroom to support more students across disciplines and with varying identities. This practice may make it more convenient or accessible for commuting and online students to access career education information.

Data Challenges

Tracking progress and/or collecting data is a challenge experienced by community college career services professionals. First Destination Survey (FDS) data is one of the most utilized forms of identifying career-attainment at
higher education institutions. These surveys provide evidence related to a student’s placement after obtaining a degree/credential from an institution. For instance, this data may indicate how many students are employed full-time or part-time, pursuing service/volunteer opportunities, furthering their education, or even joining the military, and is crucial in understanding how an institution is preparing their students for life after college. Collecting this data in community colleges is challenging for several reasons. First, not all students who take a community college course intend to complete a degree. Second, certificate programs do not have the same evaluation and outcome measures, which make it difficult to track and compare data. Third, some students who start at a community college do not complete a degree or credential before transferring, which means they are not included in FDS results, giving community colleges an inaccurate estimate of students who attend community college for transfer purposes (Guthrie, 2016). An example of a student who may not be included in this survey is a student who transfers to a four-year college or drops out before meeting degree requirements. Tracking students’ career progression and next steps is a major hurdle in addressing the issues related to career advising. It might be beneficial for community college professionals to create a survey that provides students the opportunity to report a variety of post-attendance plans, such as transferring to a four-year institution, career obtainment, and other plans, encouraging more helpful data.

**Considering Diversity**

It is evident that community college students are very diverse. When considering the identities of students, approaches for career readiness and preparation likely need to manifest differently. Considerations related to race, ethnicity, and first-generation status is explored in the following sections to further understand the unique challenges faced by students engaging in career development at the community college level.

**Racial & Ethnic Considerations**

Supporting underserved, minoritized, and non-traditional students, who make up a large percentage of the community college population, can create specific challenges within career preparation and advising. Teng, George, and Anderson (2001) suggest “community college career counseling providers should be sensitive to the ethnic and age backgrounds of students in assisting them to identify their career goals, type of career plans, and utilization of career preparation action as related to attending career related lectures” (p. 125). This means that practitioners are encouraged to provide unique and equitable career-related opportunities to students of racial/ethnic minority groups. One suggestion to ensure sensitivity to the backgrounds of each student is by offering specific workshops on career education to students based on their identity (Teng et al., 2001). For example, providing workshops focused on supporting Native American students could help improve equity and effectiveness of career-related
services. Individualization allows students to feel more supported in their career development. Another suggestion is to partner minority students with a faculty mentor, as studies report minority students are more likely to persist when they engage with faculty at their institution (Stebleton & Diamond, 2018). Offering targeted interventions and connections with faculty or career mentors of the same race can help to support minority students navigate their career aspirations.

Providing equitable opportunities for all students to be successful in their career advising experiences, regardless of race or ethnicity, is critical. This practice adheres to the universal mission of community colleges, which is to serve and support students in their academic and career pursuits no matter what their goals are. The benefits of same-race matching of faculty/career mentors and facilitating individualized workshops prove to be invaluable in providing equitable career education opportunities to minoritized groups at the community college level.

First-Generation Students

First-generation students face specific barriers that not all traditional college students experience. For instance, first-generation students often lack the general understanding of college processes, including financial aid, class registration, tuition and fee payments, advising, and program selection. Among these, career readiness is often a challenge for many first-generation students, especially in community colleges (Grubb, 2001). For example, a student who comes from an immigrant family may be unfamiliar with basic college processes and occupational opportunities (Grubb, 2001). With such little understanding and preparedness, community college practitioners must consider working in different ways to support first-generation students. Stebleton (2018) even found that first-generation students are least likely to say they used career services at their institution. Data recognizes that first-generation students are not using career advisors, thus it is important to be intentional about providing support to this subgroup. Creating programs geared directly toward first-generation students might be a good place to start.

Recommendations for Community College Career Services

This literature review has demonstrated that career development and advising in community colleges is important but challenging for a number of reasons. The following practical applications are derived from the literature and offer direction and recommendations to community college career professionals. To inform this discussion, the social cognitive career theory, in which career aspirations are influenced by one’s environment, will be used as a framework (Lent, Brown, and Hackett, 1994). These recommendations are based on the
goal that, to be successful, community colleges must create spaces for students to actively and openly plan for their careers.

Career Pathways Programs

Community colleges have created unique ways to incorporate career and professional development into the student experience. One way is through career pathways programs, in which students engage in career-related activities, which are directly built into curriculum and instruction (Bragg & Krismer, 2016). Going to class and completing coursework is arguably one of the only things that students are required to do to complete a degree or move onto their next step. Thus, a career pathways program is an innovative approach to career advising that makes participating in career development a requirement for students. Since it is considered a component of the curriculum, it can be a very effective way to engage in career exploration for community college students. Bragg and Krismer (2016) studied a career pathways program focused on competency-based principles that helped students secure and persist toward employment opportunities through intensive support services related to career goals. This practice helped to encourage and motivate students towards their individual career goals. Studies indicate that students in healthcare programs are likely to benefit from an innovative approach like this, in which students participate in career development in the classroom (Bragg & Krismer, 2016).

Guided Pathways

Guided Pathways is another potential approach to integrating career development efforts into the community college student experience. Guided Pathways is a program that maps out academic programs for students in order to create a coherent pathway of study, premised on the idea that creating clearly defined goals motivates students to persist toward their next step in career and academic pursuits (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Jenkins & Cho, 2013). Implementation of the Guided Pathways program has led to alignment with transferring to a four-year institution and meeting requirements for occupational programs and career advancement (Jenkins & Cho, 2013). Essentially, Guided Pathways create a streamlined opportunity for students to more effectively and efficiently meet the goals and needs related to attending community college. According to Jenkins and Cho (2013), students who enter a program of study in a Guided Pathways approach are more likely to complete a credential (which can enhance their ability and chance of employment). Some Guided Pathways programs even partner with a local four-year institution to guarantee transfer if a student succeeds in their program, which contributes to advancing onto a four-year college and creating more opportunity for career and professional development (Jenkins & Cho, 2013). Through these programs, students are offered additional student support services, such as integrated coaching and tutoring (Jenkins & Cho, 2013). This enhances a student’s ability to be successful and meet program needs, thus persisting to transfer to a four-year
institutions, credential/degree completion, or job attainment (Jenkins & Cho, 2013). Both academic and career services units would be responsible for implementation of this type of program, in that it both aligns with career and academic development. This type of program could serve as a source for collaboration among student affairs professionals at the community college level, providing a unique career and academic development service to meet the diverse needs of community college students.

Learning Communities

Institutions may also enhance career development through effective and innovative learning communities. The adoption of learning communities is a trending approach that creates an opportunity for students to persist through developmental education courses by working and collaborating within a learning community. While learning communities do not have a direct focus on career and professional development, they create a unique opportunity for students to engage with their peers and advisors to gain support, which improves their chances of earning a credential (Minkler, 2002; Tinto, 2003; Weiss, Visher, Weissman, & Wathington, 2015). As mentioned earlier, earning a credential enhances a student’s ability to identify and secure career/employment opportunities. Horn and Skomsvold (2012) revealed that many community college students indicate their goal is to achieve a bachelor’s degree or higher. A program that promotes student persistence to degree/credential completion or transfer can also contribute to their career development, especially if there is a thematic focus in the learning community. For example, having liberal arts students in the same learning community or engineering majors all in the same community can be highly beneficial as it relates to student development and retention. Grubb (2001) encourages institutions to establish new and innovative programs, such as learning communities and occupational programs, to improve career development efforts on campus. For example, occupational faculty (who serve as experts in a specific career field) may offer expert mentorship and advising to enhance a student’s exposure to their career field and opportunities. Any approach that can enhance a student’s exposure to or understanding of a particular career field is useful in their career development. While not traditionally used for career development purposes, learning communities and occupational programs can motivate students to complete their degree, which increases their career opportunities.

Campus Collaboration

With very little funding and so many part-time staff, collaboration may be a way to bolster career advising capacity on community college campuses. Across the nation, there are unique ways to collaborate across campus to promote career development, and one common way is having advisors serve dual roles on campus to students (Ledwith, 2014). For instance, sharing the role as a career
and academic advisor may allow colleges to more adequately serve students and equip them for success. Creating a scenario in which a student can visit one advisor to meet both their academic and career needs is an effective strategy for meeting the unique demands of the community college population, in that students are often full-time workers with other obligations outside of their campus commitments (Ledwith, 2014). If a student can go to one advisor for both a resume review and academic planning, they might be more likely to use their advisor and persist toward degree/credential completion or transfer. Institutions can support their staff in serving this dual role by encouraging them to research both career and academic development, attend webinars related to career and academic development, and engage in active self-assessment (Ledwith, 2014).

Career and Professional Development Programs

Building programs and creating opportunities for community college students to engage in career development is a creative and effective way to participate in career advising. An evaluation of one program, the Career Placement Project, showed that participation in career development activities, including job-seeking skill development, job shadowing, career exploration, was positively associated with strong engagement in their career preparation (Norton & Field, 1998). This program is designed to provide tools and resources to students to promote their chances of being career ready when they persist to their next step, whether it is transfer, job obtainment, or credential completion.

Stebleton and Diamond (2018) discuss high-impact practices for career development, in which faculty engagement plays a vital role in students’ career readiness and preparation. Specifically, first-year students as well as students with minoritized identities positively benefited from engagement with faculty and staff. Thus, this study encourages institutions to extend the opportunity to engage in career readiness through credit and non-credit courses, reimagining the role of career services at each unique institution, and embedding career-readiness opportunities into the first-year experience through faculty engagement. In summary, “career-life planning and exploration during the first year of college would not only meet incoming students’ demands for support, it would strengthen outcomes associated with overall student success, such as improved sense of purpose and self-efficacy” (Stebleton & Diamond, 2018, p. 161).

Implications for Practice

It is important to provide the opportunity to innovate and determine the best practices for supporting community college students in their career and professional development journeys regardless of their purpose for study, and regardless of whether their intention is transferring or career attainment. This literature review highlights key areas that need to be improved. First, it may be
important that both structurally and socially, community colleges begin to emphasize career development as much as they tend to emphasize four-year transfer. Many community college students may feel pressured to pursue a four-year institution and avoid career development because that is what they are pushed to do but what may not be the best for them. As higher education administrators, it is important to be supportive of all students’ educational pursuits. Second, more support is needed for career services professionals and agents of change in the community college systems. Institutional agents are those in an educational setting who are actively working to challenge systems (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). In this case, more resources should be directed towards those practitioners working to change the way career advising operates in the community college system (Bensimon, 2007). Lastly, according to the social cognitive career theory, career aspirations are influenced by one’s environment (Lent, Brown, and Hackett, 1994). Therefore, community colleges may seek to create spaces for students to actively and openly plan and discuss their career decisions. In addition, staff need to be provided advanced and interactive training to learn how to engage with a variety of students with varying challenges and opportunities. Both efforts would help to create a culture of career preparation on campus, which can help to support community college students in attaining their career goals.

Conclusion

Community colleges are systems of higher education that face unique challenges related to limited funding, lack of resources, and overworked staff, all while serving a diverse student body with varying needs. Under these conditions, it is challenging to find optimal ways to support students in their academic and career pursuits. However, community colleges need to be prepared to serve both the first-generation student who identifies as African American studying nursing and the parent working full-time and is studying to complete an English as a Second Language (ESL) certificate, among others. All students need to be provided resources to achieve their career goals. Practical recommendations include: career centers with more full- and part-time staff, joint academic and career counseling, Guided Pathways, the use of learning communities, faculty engagement, and more. Career advising and development at the community college level needs increased attention, and it is the responsibility of higher education administrators to marshal support for these important student service activities.

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References


