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Goncalves, Brandon. (2021). Barriers to Careers: How Self-Efficacy Impacts Student Career Readiness. In *BSU Honors Program Theses and Projects*. Item 472. Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/honors_proj/472

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Barriers to Careers:
How Self-Efficacy Impacts Student Career Readiness

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Submitted in Partial Completion of the
Requirements for Departmental Honors in Management

Bridgewater State University

April 27, 2021

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Barriers to Careers: How self-efficacy impacts student career readiness

Abstract

This paper explores how known career barriers such as gender, age, and ethnicity are impacting career readiness during the pandemic. Despite these barriers being significant, participants feel that their most challenging barrier currently is the global pandemic. Self-efficacy was measured to investigate its impact on future career outlook. Those with higher self-efficacy scores were more confident and optimistic for their future than those with lower scores.

INTRODUCTION:

College students spend years in school, working to have the knowledge it takes to succeed in the career of their dreams. Some face far more obstacles than others. Career barriers are present for many people based on their gender, age, race, and sexual orientation. Research has demonstrated that these barriers make it harder for success on the job market and in future careers (Balin, 2008). Students who perceive significant barriers to their learning and employment have a lower commitment to their overall jobs (Balin, 2008). The literature on career barriers discusses these main barriers (gender, age and ethnicity) in depth. However, students are currently facing a new, never before seen obstacle.

In March of 2020, the world entered a global pandemic. Over the past year, everyone's life has changed. College seniors had to adapt to a changing job market and work environment that has never existed before. This generation is uniquely experiencing mostly remote work, in a surprisingly strong job market. While previous generations have experienced recessions, wars, and political turmoil, this is the first generation to experience this type of long-term obstacle. As the pandemic is still underway, and a multitude of students will be graduating into the current climate, it is important to understand what they feel they are facing, how confident they are in their future success, and what we can do to help these students.

This research aims to explore how the Coronavirus pandemic influenced student job search confidence and perception of barriers to career success, as well as if high self-efficacy will motivate students to overcome this new barrier. This paper begins with a review of the career barriers literature as well as its connection to self-efficacy. Then the research questions are explained as well as the methodology of the study. The paper ends with results, discussion, limitations, and areas for further research.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Career Barriers and SCCT

If you feel something within yourself or the environment negatively effects your career progress, it is considered a career barrier (Holloway-Friesen, 2018). Researchers have explored potential career barriers for students for many years (Crites, 1971; Gottfredson, 1981). These

barriers can be personal differences like gender, ethnicity, age etc. Gender and ethnicity specifically have been the focus for many researchers as significant barriers to career success.

“Gender is a career barrier that many people face in the job-hunting process as well as while pursuing their careers (Chuang, 2013).” Research has shown that females were more sensitive to gender issues than males, whereas males were less likely to explore their career options as fully as females. Many studies have the same result that men do not see their gender as a problem with careers compared to women who do perceive this as a barrier (Chuang, 2013).

In addition to gender, ethnicity can also be a career barrier. Barriers offer a partial explanation for the continuing ability–attainment gap in the occupational choices of women and people of color (McWhirter 1997). In a recent study that contained more female than male participants, the results declared that women and ethnic minorities answered they have more career related barriers than men and other ethnicities (Luzzo and McWhirter, 2001). In a study on people of color, researchers concluded that female participants anticipated more barriers than male participants, Mexican American participants anticipated more barriers than Euro-Americans, and these differences were consistent within ethnic and gender groups (McWhirter, 1997).

Career barriers do not only apply to citizens in the United States but to people of the world. A study of Southern Africa and higher education career barriers (Bester, 2011) explored the diverse barrier perceptions and experiences of South African university students. This study found significant gender differences as well as racial-ethnic differences. African American female principles face challenges each day based on their race, gender, and age (Gaetame, 2013).

A key factor of ethnic origin is language. English language knowledge is a significant career barrier among people out of the United States (Watkins, et al., 2012). Research on an all-female population showed struggling with the proficiency of the English language was affecting their well-being. Education level also plays a role in career barriers. A Korean study shows that sophomore students scored lower on career performance and exploration than senior students in this university (Park and Ahn, 2016).

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) suggests that a person’s individual differences such as gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, personality etc. influence their perceptions of career barriers (Lent, Brown & Hackett, 1994). SCCT incorporates these personal attributes with personal behaviors and external environmental factors. External environmental factors can impact perception of barriers and previous research during recessions have demonstrated the challenges it can create for students. People who graduate in a recession have less earnings in return of higher education than other people. They are also at a higher risk for earlier career interruptions (Oreopoulos et al., 2012). Graduating during a recession has more effect on white woman and people of color for less wages (Kondo, 2015). There is proof that people who graduate in bad times tend to move to other states especially with living costs that are lower (Kawaguchi and Kondo, 2020).

Entering a global pandemic is a new and unexpected barrier. The last 50 years have seen huge growth worldwide in the provision of education at all levels. COVID-19 is the greatest challenge that these expanded national education systems have ever faced (Aucjeo, French,

Araya, and Zafar, 2020). Due to COVID-19, 13% of students have delayed graduation, 40% have lost a job, internship, or a job offer, and 29% expect to earn less at age 35. Moreover, these effects are highly heterogeneous (Aucejo, et al., 2020).

Being a student during this global pandemic or graduating in this pandemic means the addition of another barrier to job and career success. In a recent study, it was found that students' loss of motivation, concentration, and/or self-discipline when adjusting and adapting to the pandemic posed the greatest challenge to knowledge acquisition and studying. Losing class engagement and face-to-face clinical exposure greatly hindered skill application. Lowered preparedness and satisfaction of college experience might reduce seniors' competitiveness and readiness to launch a new job (Kong, 2020).

Self-Efficacy

Perceived self-efficacy is defined as people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives. Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves and behave (Pajares, 2003). Such beliefs produce these diverse effects through four major processes. They include cognitive, motivational, affective and selection processes (Luszczynska and Schwarzer, 2005).

Most people have anxiety and concerns when it comes to career barriers. Self-efficacy makes a difference in how people feel, think and act (Luszczynska and Schwarzer, 2005). A low sense of self-efficacy is associated with depression, anxiety, and helplessness which could cause future health problems. "It has been found that a strong sense of personal efficacy is related to better social integration (Metheny and McWhirter, 2013, p.380). In terms of thinking, with self-efficacy, a strong sense of competence facilitates cognitive processes and performance in a variety of settings, including quality of decision making and goal setting (Connor and Norman, 2015). Research has found that self-efficacy can mediate the impact of barriers and the perception of their significance (Meija-Smith and Gushe, 2017).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

- R1: Will participants perceive the pandemic as a significant career barrier?
- R2: Is the pandemic is a more significant carrier barrier than ethnicity, gender, age or language?
- R3: Has the pandemic hindered optimism toward future job prospects?
- R4: Will students who have more self-efficacy be more confident about their career prospects during the pandemic than those with low self-efficacy?

METHODOLOGY:

A survey was used to learn more about career barriers and self-efficacy. The survey consisted of questions relating to plans for graduation and future careers, including what your plans after graduation are and are you currently looking for a job. Next participant confidence was measured by asking how hopeful, positive, and optimistic they felt. These questions were combined to create a multi-item measure for confidence. When asking about career barriers,

participants were asked to select what career barriers they perceived and then ranked those barriers from the largest to smallest obstacle. In order to evaluate self-efficacy, questions from the General New Self Efficacy Scale (Chen, Gully, and Eden, 2001) were used. The survey concluded with general demographic questions that included age, gender, and ethnicity.

Participants were recruited at a large public university in the northeast using social media, with a focus on juniors and seniors. Ninety-three students completed the survey. No participant responses were incomplete or removed from the data, therefore the usable sample was 93. Over half of participants (57%) were seniors, while 30% were juniors. Fifty percent of participants were male. While ages ranged from 18 to 46, the majority of participants (61%) were 21-23. In terms of ethnicity, 69% of participants were white.

RESULTS:

R1: Will participants perceive the pandemic as a significant career barrier?

Participants do perceive the pandemic to be a significant career barrier. When asked to select which career barriers would be an obstacle for them, 22% of participants believed the pandemic would hinder their success on the job market.

R2: Is the pandemic is a more significant carrier barrier than ethnicity, gender, age or language?

Participants believe the pandemic is the most significant career barrier they are facing. Twenty-two percent of participants felt the pandemic was an obstacle. The other barriers of concern for participants were lack of available jobs (18%), still need more skills for my field (16%), and lack of networking opportunities (14%). Traditional barriers of ethnicity (4%), gender (4%), age (7%) and language (<1%) were not frequently selected as barriers for participants (See Figure 1). When asked to rank all perceived obstacles from most to least significant 27% of participants selected the pandemic as the most significant career barrier (See Figure 2).

Figure 1

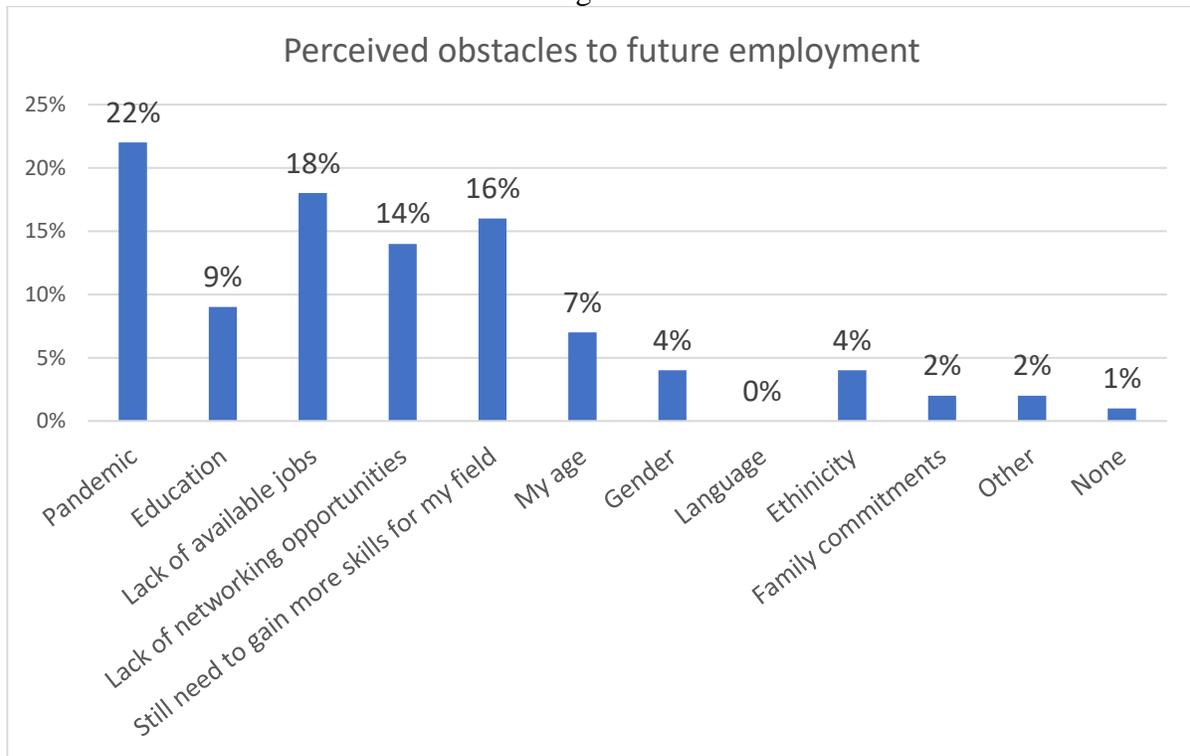
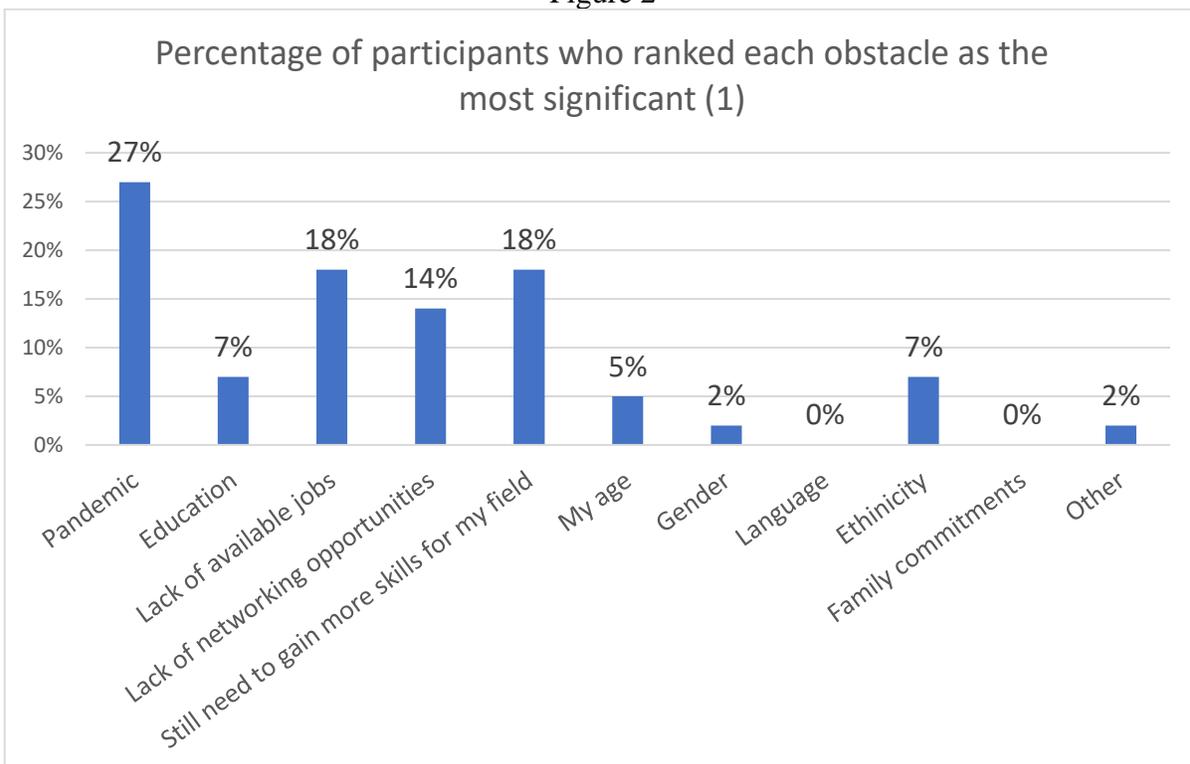


Figure 2



R3: Has the pandemic hindered optimism toward future job prospects?

Despite participants believing the pandemic will hinder their career, the majority of participants were somewhat optimistic about their future job prospects (61%), while 23% of participants were very optimistic. On a 1-10 scale of how positive to negative participants felt about pursuing their careers, 87% of participants were at least somewhat positive ($M=2.95$).

R4: Will students who have more self-efficacy be more confident about their career prospects during the pandemic than those with low self-efficacy?

Participants with higher self-efficacy scores were significantly more confident than those with low SE scores ($F(18)=2.792, p=.002$). Higher SE scores for participants also meant they were more likely to feel calm than anxious in regard to pursuing their careers ($F(18)=2.194, p=.015$).

DISCUSSION:

Based on the results, the participants feel the pandemic will be a more significant career barrier than language, age, gender, and ethnicity. Most were concerned about the availability of jobs and not being prepared due to the disruption of the pandemic. Despite the negativity the pandemic did cause, the majority of the results indicate that students have a somewhat positive outlook in terms of their future job prospects. Participants with a higher self-efficacy score were more likely to be confident and less likely to be anxious when compared to those with lower self-efficacy.

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION:

While the results of this study demonstrate that the pandemic is a significant career barrier, this study did have several limitations that should be considered. The sample size is small, and the participants were not extremely diverse in terms of ethnicity. A future study should look across geographic locations and using a more diverse ethnic population to ensure these results still hold. Delving further into the barriers the pandemic has created is also important to understand. Lastly, a longitudinal study is necessary to see how long these results last and understand any changes that occur over time.

This study suggests that self-efficacy can help students feel more confident on the job market despite the challenges of the pandemic. Higher education institutions should focus on increasing student self-efficacy to give students every advantage while they look for jobs. Research has found that using technology to write self-explanations, providing feedback to one another and solving word problems can improve self-efficacy (Hall and Vance, (2010).

Improving student confidence will help to minimize perceptions of the obstacles the pandemic has created and hopefully allow for more future career success.

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