Faculty Research Note: Orlando Olivares

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One of the eternal questions of college undergraduates is what kind of job can they get with a liberal arts degree? Professor Orlando Olivares of the Psychology Department is using a summer grant from the college's Center for the Advancement of Research and Teaching to approach that eternal question from the perspective of the employer.

Professor Olivares sees the key issue about liberal arts and employment as one of job performance and the ingredients necessary in order to heighten job performance. In order to examine the relationship between the liberal arts and job performance, Professor Olivares will construct a survey instrument this summer that will target a number of corporations in the region and elicit responses from managers on how well recent college graduates perform assigned tasks in the workplace. Olivares is interested in a number of factors that may influence job performance. One factor that he is especially interested in is the connection between grade point average at graduation and success in completing job responsibilities. He is also interested in comparing the performance of what he calls specific skill graduates - accountants, chemists, engineers - versus liberal arts majors who come to the workplace with a more generalist background.

There will also be comparisons of performance based on school status with private and four year public college graduates examined in terms of their job performance. With this range of responses from the managers, Professor Olivares will then assess the factors that seem to be most influential in predicting success in the corporate environment.

The importance of Professor Olivares' study is that it will bring close attention to the issue of the role of a liberal arts education in the development of job skills. There is currently a debate within academia over the value of specialized education as opposed to the generalist approach that is accented in the liberal arts curriculum. By surveying key corporate managers, Olivares hopes to bring this debate into clearer focus by determining what may be the essential elements critical to successful employment of recent college graduates. After completing the survey, Professor Olivares hopes to convene a conference at the Moakley Center to present the data and evaluate the ramifications of the results for liberals arts colleges, for liberal arts students and for potential employers seeking to hire high performing employees.

Building on this initial study of job performance in the corporate setting, Professor Olivares has set his sights on another research project in which he will investigate predictors of college grade point average. This study will investigate aptitude, environment, interest and personality as predictors of college grade point average. Environmental factors of interest are whether students come from intact families or divorced families, whether students come from households where the parents are college graduates or high school graduates, how many hours students work, and whether students are members of a minority group. Personality factors that Olivares will examine as possible keys to grade point average are conscientiousness, intellectual inquiry, and the tendency to be anxious or worried. This study complements the summer research project in that it will allow Olivares to compare and contrast those characteristics necessary for success at the college level versus those characteristics necessary to be successful once students leave the academic environment.

Professor Olivares comes to his research with excellent analytical credentials. A graduate of Texas A&M with a Ph.D. in industrial organization psychology, Olivares has an extensive consultancy resume as he has worked with numerous corporate clients on performance assessment. He has served as a consultant to companies on strategies to enhance organizational effectiveness and facilitate organizational change. Currently Professor Olivares is a member of the New England Society of Applied Psychologists and the Society of Industrial/Organizational Psychology.

When not involved in his research efforts, Professor Olivares has an active teaching schedule with courses in statistics and research methods, industrial psychology and organizational behavior. Although new to the faculty, Professor Olivares has already made his mark with a research agenda that is certain to make a valuable contribution to the college and the region.