EXPLORING THE RETURN ON INVESTMENT OF A LIBERAL ARTS DEGREE:
PERCEIVED CONNECTIONS BETWEEN EDUCATION AND WORK

By

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Abstract

The value of a liberal arts degree has been placed under scrutiny (Pyle, 2013; Smith, 2012) due to the lower average earnings (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2012) and higher unemployment rates (Flaherty, 2012) experienced by liberal arts graduates. The current study explored student and hiring professionals' perceptions about the return on investment, both financial and non-financial, of a liberal arts degree.

Interviews were conducted with 17 liberal arts students and 14 hiring professionals about their perceptions of the return on investment of a liberal arts degree, and 79 liberal arts students completed a survey with four open-ended questions about their college attendance and major selection. Interview transcripts and survey responses were analyzed using the process of open and axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

Students viewed four aspects of the return on investment of their liberal arts degree: the credential of a college degree, the expectation of financial security, the expectation of (career) success, and the college experience itself. Students viewed their liberal arts major as preparation for a particular career field, while hiring professionals described a student's major as playing a minor role in their organization's hiring decisions. Hiring professionals described college graduates as prepared with workplace skills and the motivation to succeed, and emphasized the importance of work and leadership experience.

Student accounts provide evidence for a master narrative of college, which described college attendance as their expected next step and that college leads to a meaningful career. However, results demonstrated that neither students nor hiring professionals reported important differences between a liberal arts degree and other college degrees. Many respondents portrayed a college degree as a gateway to professional work as a whole rather than emphasizing specific characteristics of a liberal arts degree.

Theoretically, this study adds to literature on anticipatory socialization and meaningful work, by demonstrating the implicit nature of messages about the expectation of college attendance and that college is viewed as the route to a meaningful career. This study extends problematic integration theory by demonstrating how the theory applies in the context of the transition from college to career, and how students manage uncertainty about their future by relying on the master narrative, which reassures them that college will lead to a meaningful and financially stable career.

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Chapter One: Introduction and Rationale

Higher education plays a prominent role in American society. With 68% of all high school graduates enrolling in college (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011a) and a total of 21 million students enrolled in college in 2010 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011b), it is clear that large numbers of Americans choose to pursue a college education. However, as tuition prices increase rapidly (McArdle, 2012; National Center for Education Statistics, 2011b) and new college graduates face uncertain employment prospects (Shierholz, Sabadish, & Wething, 2012), the decision to invest in a college education has come under question (McArdle, 2012). President Obama's recent announcement of a plan to rate colleges on the value (defined in part by the career potential of graduates) provided to students, and tie these ratings to federal funding (Slack, 2013), further demonstrates the nationwide interrogation into the value of a college education. The value of a liberal arts degree has received particular scrutiny (for example: Flaherty, 2012; Pyle, 2013; Smith, 2012) due to the lack of a clear career track (Roksa & Levey, 2010) and the lower average earnings (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2012) and higher unemployment rates (Flaherty, 2012) experienced by liberal arts graduates. The decision to pursue a liberal arts degree is currently being examined from a return on investment perspective by the press and politicians alike, (Flaherty, 2012; McArdle, 2012; Pyle, 2013; Smith, 2012) asking, if the cost of a liberal arts degree is worth it.

Return on investment (ROI), often a key criterion in business decisions, is based on the "assumption that the best alternative investment is one that maximizes profit" (Rachlin, 1987, p. 4). Utilizing a return on investment approach to college decision making involves weighing the financial costs of a college degree against the expected gain in salary a degree provides (Elaug, 1965). Underpinning the ROI perspective is an assumption that decision-makers have information about both cost and benefit and will assess them from an objective perspective. The

term "return on investment" and discussion of the "worth" of a college degree in the media and by policy makers (Adams, 2013; Flaherty, 2012; Payscale, 2013) can be seen as problematic, given the variations in types of colleges and universities, in requirements for majors, and in individual student preparation for higher education, interests, needs and performance. Although the term ROI is currently being used in reference to higher education by the press, politicians, and universities themselves, it is used in a more colloquial way to frame the discussion of the costs and benefits of a college education, rather than in the mathematical sense.

Using the return on investment framework to assess the value of a college degree (Adams, 2013; Payscale, 2013) narrows the meaning of a college education to a purely economic decision, based solely on the financial costs of attending college and the salary earned after graduation. While obtaining a "good job" after graduation is a commonly-stated goal of incoming students (Berrett, 2012), reducing the role of a college education to vocational training can have detrimental outcomes for liberal arts majors who have a plethora of career options, yet no concrete career path, when leaving college (Roksa & Levey, 2010). If encouraged to use a return on investment approach to the college decision-making process (Adams, 2013), students may be swayed against a liberal arts degree, as these degrees have lower initial economic payoff (Payscale, 2013).

However, a liberal arts degree is argued to have holistic value, beyond just the salary earned after graduation. In conversation with the financial return on investment perspective are those who describe liberal arts graduates as equipped to enter the workforce with the exact skills desired by employers (American Association of Colleges and Universities, 2013; Masters, 2012; Pyle, 2013; Riggs, 2013) and claim that a college degree is certainly worth the investment, regardless of the major pursued (Lowrey, 2013; Lovell, 2013). A recent study of 318 employers conducted by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (2013) found that

employers value skills such as critical thinking, clear communication, and the ability to solve complex problems more highly than an applicant's undergraduate major. Riggs (2013) notes that liberal arts graduates have highly developed teamwork, communication, and critical thinking skills, which are all necessary for success in a global workplace. Masters (2012) provides an example of a corporation who is hiring liberal arts graduates to work in their information technology department due to their broad set of skills, demonstrating the value of a liberal arts degree in the workplace.

Although a college education is a large financial investment, students do not necessarily utilize the return on investment model when determining where to attend college and what degree to pursue. As defined in the business literature, return on investment describes a systematic approach to decision making (Maw, 1968) where students would weigh the financial costs of a college degree with the expected gain in salary a degree provides (Elaug, 1965), to determine whether the lost earnings and tuition costs from the college years would be repaid by a higher salary over the lifetime of their career. From a true ROI perspective, decisions on what major to pursue would be made using the same model, basing the selection of a college major purely on financial expectations.

This study explored the perspective of current college students majoring in the liberal arts to determine to what extent they engaged in this systematic decision making, or if they based the decision to attend college on messages received throughout the educational process that link a college education to a successful career (Levine & Hoffner, 2006) and societal expectations about what it means to be a college graduate. The concept of a return on investment of a liberal arts degree is far more complicated than a simple profit/investment calculation, and is tied to anticipatory socialization messages regarding the intersection between education and work (Kramer, 2010), and the expectation of how to begin a meaningful career.

In order to further explore the concept of the return on investment of a liberal arts degree, this study examined the perspective of two groups of individuals who are particularly interested in the preparation received during college and how this links to career outcomes: current liberal arts students and hiring professionals who recruit and employ new college graduates. The student participants elected to attend college and pursue a liberal arts degree, while hiring professionals, who hire liberal arts majors, spoke to the qualities and training they desire in candidates. In previous research, employers reported that they desire a broad skill set, with the foundations of critical thinking, problem solving, and communication (American Association of Colleges and Universities, 2013; Masters, 2012; Pyle, 2013), which are central to a liberal arts degree. This study further explored the core competencies sought by employers and how they viewed liberal arts graduates as prepared to enter their organization. This study used the return on investment framework to explore both the financial and non-financial benefits of a liberal arts degree, from the perspective of both students and employers. Since ROI is currently being used in a colloquial way to discuss the role of higher education in American society, this study further examined how two stakeholder groups understand the investment and return of a liberal arts degree, one of the most frequently scrutinized college degrees. The terms financial and non-financial return on investment are used in this study as follows. The non-financial return on investment includes the non-monetary and experiential advantages of college and the role of college as general preparation for post-college employment. The financial return on investment includes to what extent students demonstrate knowledge of the cost of their education and the salary range expected, as these are indicators of the monetary return on their degree. Considering both in combination provided a more complete view of the role of a liberal arts degree in society, how this notion is developed through anticipatory socialization, and how a college degree is connected to understandings of meaningful work.

The financial return on investment of a liberal arts degree can be calculated by comparing the cost of a college education to the salary earned over one's career. However, the non-financial return on investment of a liberal arts degree cannot be calculated using a mathematical formula as it is based on the socially constructed understandings of a college degree and implicit notions of the links between a college degree and a meaningful career. This study provided evidence that a master narrative of college is at play, shaping students' decisions to attend college. A master narrative is a culturally-mediated belief and assumption (Tannen, 2008) that reflects the values of the dominant culture (Bergen, 2010). Smith and Dougherty (2012) describe master narratives as woven into the fabric of society, and Tannen (2008) notes that master narratives are the larger cultural narratives that implicitly influence our personal stories. In this study, a master narrative of the role of college in American society appeared to be influencing students' decision-making process as they decided to attend college and viewed college as the path to a meaningful career.

A master narrative of college was revealed through the investigation of the financial and non-financial return on investment of a liberal arts degree, as student and hiring professionals' description the benefits of a college education are influenced by the values of the dominant culture regarding higher education. The distinction here between the master narrative of college and the return on investment of a liberal arts degree is purposeful. Since master narratives are predominant stories communicated by a culture that produce expectations and norms within the culture (Bergen, 2010), exploring the master narrative of college was appropriate as the decision to major in the liberal arts takes place once college attendance has already been determined. Based on the master narrative of college, students select to enroll in college, and organizational decision-makers decide to focus their hiring efforts on the college-educated.

By exploring how students and hiring professionals view the return on investment of a liberal arts degree, this study provided a better understanding of what it is college graduates and

their future employers hope is gained from a liberal arts degree. This investigation provided new information regarding the role a liberal arts education plays in our society and adds a qualitative element to the plethora of statistics regarding the current state of higher education. From a communicative perspective, this study advances our understandings of the anticipatory socialization messages about college and the role it plays, and explores the intersection between education and work, which has been overlooked in the research exploring meaningful work (Lair & Wieland, 2012).

This chapter provides evidence to support the need for a study that examines the return on investment of a liberal arts degree by considering current trends in higher education and demonstrating how a communicative perspective, grounded in literature on anticipatory socialization and meaningful work, and guided by problematic integration theory, contributes new insights to this timely topic.

Current Trends in Higher Education

Americans expend vast financial resources to invest in higher education each year. Tuition costs at the nation's colleges and universities increased 42% between 2000 and 2010 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011b), with the price of a college education nearly doubling since 1995 (McArdle, 2012). Graduates take an average of two decades to repay student loan debt (Kingkade, 2013), and, with the recent debate over interest rates on student loans (Stromberg, 2013), future students may take even longer.

Despite the high sticker price, a college education is generally touted as a smart investment (Lowrey, 2013; Lovell, 2013; Riggs, 2013) due to the link between a college degree and higher lifetime earnings. According to a report by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, a college graduate earns 84% more than a high school graduate (Porter, 2013). This same report placed a numerical value on the worth of a college degree over a

lifetime; for an American man a college degree is worth $365,000, while unfortunately for a woman it is only worth $185,000. College graduates are also protected against unemployment; individuals with a bachelor's degree experience lower unemployment rates than those with only a high school diploma (approximately 4% for bachelor's degree holders compared to 8% for those with a high school diploma) (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012).

However, not all college degrees are created equal. Carnevale, Cheah, and Strohl (2012) note that unemployment rates vary by degree earned, with non-technical majors, such as the liberal arts, facing higher unemployment than technical majors, such as healthcare and education. Liberal arts majors consistently report lower starting salaries than other areas: salary data from the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2012) shows that students who major in the humanities and the social sciences report the lowest starting salaries ($36,824), while those in fields such as engineering ($60,639) and business ($51,541) report much higher first-year earnings. In Payscale's (2013) annual ranking of colleges with the best return on investment, which is designed to help students "make a decision that will pay off in the long term," all of the top schools focused in engineering and technology.

The financial return on investment from a college education varies based on the type of degree earned. This discrepancy has led several states to take action that could prove harmful to liberal arts programs and higher education as a whole. Recently, a task force in Florida suggested that the state's universities should charge higher tuition rates for those majors that do not have a clear link to a career (Flaherty, 2012). By making these majors more costly to pursue, the goal is to encourage students to major in other disciplines that are deemed to have an immediate job payoff, described by the task force as "strategic majors" (Flaherty, 2012). A similar effort in Tennessee aims to quantify the value of a degree by providing information on the first year salaries of students graduating with specific majors, with the data organized by the specific

college or university attended (Berrett, 2012). The co-author of this report, titled the *Earning Power of Graduates From Tennessee's Colleges and Universities*, says that the goal of the report is to help students and parents make decisions about higher education, and help students realize that choosing certain majors may result in a lower paying job (Berrett, 2012). Linking specific majors to the immediate salary earned privileges the understanding of a college education as job preparation and implies that majors that do not link directly to a career are not worthwhile pursuits. This also demonstrates the focus in the media and political sphere on the financial return on investment of a college education.

By stressing the need to practically apply knowledge gained during college and focusing only on the financial return on investment of a degree, these perspectives perpetuate the student-as-consumer metaphor. This metaphor has become commonplace in higher education and creates a transactional relationship between student and institution, emphasizing the need for universities to be accountable to their clients, the students (Cheney, Lair, Ritz, & Kendall, 2010). A student-as-consumer approach views higher education as a product rather than a process and highlights the distance between students and the educational process (McMillan & Cheney, 1996). This student-as-consumer metaphor reduces the college experience to the sole purpose of getting a job and opens the door to attacks on liberal arts programs (Berrett, 2012), overlooking other benefits of higher education.

Colleges are adapting to the student-as-consumer concept and concerns about the return on investment of a degree by placing greater emphasis on career development programs (Harpaz, 2013; Smith, 2012). However, understanding the sole purpose of college as career preparation can have detrimental outcomes for higher education, especially for programs where a clear link does not exist between major and career, which is the case in the liberal arts (Roksa & Levey, 2010). The argument that a liberal arts degree has value outside of the financial benefits of

expected earnings demonstrates that the strictly student-as-consumer perspective does not tell the whole story of the liberal arts experience. Riggs (2013) argues that the value of a liberal arts degree cannot be quantified by a salary, as liberal arts majors are prepared to be responsible citizens who will improve their communities. Lovell (2013) states that a liberal arts degree "empowers graduates to create their own way" (para. 8) and encourages students to consider the benefits to their lives as citizens and members of the human family gained from a liberal arts degree. The "pay off" of a liberal arts degree is promoted as building research skills, gaining the ability to think outside disciplinary boundaries, developing creativity, and enhancing communication skills (Lovell, 2013), all qualities that are reported as desired by employers in job candidates (American Association of Colleges and Universities, 2013). This tension between the student-as-consumer perspective that privileges a focus on the financial return on investment of a liberal arts degree and the holistic benefits of a liberal arts degree warrants closer examination.

A liberal arts degree is a more complex phenomenon than the statistics can demonstrate and the perspective of current students and employers who choose to hire these graduates provides an understanding of the return on investment both parties hope is gained from the college education. By investigating the value placed on a liberal arts degree, this study provided a better understanding of the relationship between education and work, and illuminated the complex nature of the socially constructed phenomenon of higher education.

Theoretical Foundations

Four strands of communication literature provide the theoretical foundations for this study: anticipatory socialization, meaningful work, problematic integration theory, and master narratives. The concept of the return on the investment of a liberal arts degree is inherently linked to research on the connections between education and work, as a frequently stated outcome of higher education is to get a "good job" (Berrett, 2012). Anticipatory socialization

literature studies the role the educational system, among other sources, has in creating expectations for work (Levine & Hoffner, 2006). One expectation for a "return" on the investment in a liberal arts degree is the notion that a college degree leads to a meaningful career (DeHauw & DeVos, 2010), and literature on meaningful work from a communicative perspective highlights characteristics of meaningful work and how these expectations are developed (Kramer, 2010). Since the received return on the investment in the degree may not be concretely know until after graduation, throughout their time in college, students experience uncertainty regarding the degree they are earning and the value of this degree in the workplace. Babrow's (1992) problematic integration theory helps to illuminate this uncertain situation as it explores how individuals deal with situations where there is uncertainty surrounding the association between two objects of thought. Finally, conceptions of the return on investment of a liberal arts degree may be guided by broad cultural assumptions about the role of a college degree in American society. Literature on master narratives is included to demonstrate how broad cultural assumptions guide our personal decision-making (Tannen, 2008).

Messages regarding the importance of a college education and the role it plays in career preparation are part of the socialization process (Levine & Hoffner, 2006). Education is one of the main sources of messages regarding role anticipatory socialization; in the educational system students learn about their skills and abilities, and explore possible careers (Kramer, 2010). A key socialization message perpetuated throughout the educational process is that in order to get a good job you need to attend college (Levine & Hoffner, 2006). The proposed study adds to existing literature on organizational socialization by providing a closer look at the connection between college and career and how students perceive this connection. Additionally, examining the messages students receive prior to and during the college process regarding the value of a

liberal arts degree adds new information to our understanding of role anticipatory socialization and how it functions in directing students towards certain areas of study.

In her influential article, Clair (1996) describes the meaning and value of work as relative and communicatively created. I argue that the meaning and value of education is also relative and communicatively created. Through socialization messages "individuals develop their own meaning for work" and these meanings influence expectations for work (Kramer, 2010, p. 40) and our understanding of what makes work meaningful (Clair, 1996). Conceptualizations of meaningful work were explored in the current study by examining the student accounts about the type of work that a liberal arts degree prepares one for, and what they expect out of their career. Cheney, Lair, Ritz, and Kendall (2010) note that "we all have implicit notions of what counts and does not count as work, in addition to what makes work 'real' or somehow valuable" (p. 106). These implicit notions are likely influenced during a student's time in college as messages regarding work and the role students will play in the workforce after graduation are communicated by faculty, advisors, parents, and others. The intersection between education and work has been overlooked in the research exploring meaningful work from a communicative perspective (Lair & Wieland, 2012), and the current study examines this relationship to add a new dimension to the growing body of literature on meaningful work.

In its approach to managing uncertainty, problematic integration theory is well suited to examine the communicative process through which students make sense of their decision to obtain a liberal arts degree and how this relates to their future career. Problematic integration theory provides a lens through which to examine this process, as it deals with how we integrate probabilistic and evaluative orientations of our world, especially during times when our desires and expectations may not align, or we are faced with uncertainty (Babrow, 1992). Probabilistic orientations are a "subjective judgment about the likelihood of an association between two

objects" (Babrow, 1995, p. 283). Students create a probabilistic orientation when they associate a liberal arts degree with employment after graduation. Evaluative orientations refer to the judgments we form regarding whether an outcome, event, or object is good or bad, and the level of its desirability (Matthias & Babrow, 2007). Students use an evaluative orientation when they consider how important it is that they obtain a certain type of job after graduation and evaluate the expected outcomes of their liberal arts degree.

Problematic integration occurs when our probabilistic and evaluative orientations do not align. When the likelihood of a positive outcome occurring is low, or there is great uncertainty surrounding an outcome, we use communication to work through this divergence (Babrow, 1992). As students consider the return on investment of their liberal arts degree, they are engaging in problematic integration. The association between two objects (a liberal arts degree and the outcomes associated with it, including obtaining a desirable job after graduation) is problematic because it is shrouded in uncertainty throughout a student's time in college. Additionally, students may receive messages during their time in college that cause them to question the association between a liberal arts degree and employment, creating a divergence between their desire to transition smoothly from college to career and their assessment of the probability that this will happen.

Finally, literature on master narratives provides an underlying framework for this study. Master narratives are larger cultural narratives that implicitly influence our personal stories (Tannen, 2008). A college degree is a broad reaching cultural phenomenon, and there are many stakeholder groups and societal wide expectations associated with the attainment of a college education. Students' conceptions of the return on investment of their liberal arts degree may be influenced by a broad cultural assumptions about the role of a college education in American society. The literature on master narratives provides a useful lens to consider the perceptions of

participants in this study, as it considers the wide spread nature of the assumptions regarding higher education.

Examining the return on investment attributed to a liberal arts degree from a communicative perspective provides insight into the current discussion of the role of higher education and the variety of purposes it serves. The meaning and value of education is communicated through anticipatory socialization messages; from these messages students develop conceptions of what types of work are meaningful and the role education plays in a meaningful career.

Purpose of the Study

Informed by the above literature, the current study explores student and hiring professionals' perceptions about the return on investment, both financial and non-financial, of a liberal arts degree. Students attending college have chosen to pursue a higher education, and are taking on enormous financial costs and expending great effort in completing a degree. A better understanding of how these students make sense of the decision to attend college and obtain a liberal arts degree adds to the literature on anticipatory socialization and meaningful work, and contributes to the current discussion of the role of a liberal arts degree in society. The perspective of hiring professionals who recruit liberal arts graduates to work at their organizations provides information about what they hope is gained from college. Exploring the connection between education and work, and how this link contributes to conceptualizations of meaningful work, adds new information to the body of literature on meaningful work from an organizational communication perspective. Throughout the college process, students are faced with uncertainty regarding the outcomes of their degree, including whether their degree will lead to a fulfilling and lucrative career after graduation. Problematic integration theory recognizes that we use communication as we deal with uncertainty, particularly when our expectations and desired

outcomes do not align (Babrow, 1992). This study contributes to research on problematic integration theory by applying it to the context of post-graduation employment. Finally, the student accounts in this study reveal a master narrative of college, highlighting the cultural assumptions regarding the role of a college education in American life and how this master narrative shapes individual decisions to attend college.

The current chapter (chapter one) has outlined the nature of the discussion surrounding the role of a liberal arts degree by demonstrating several key issues. These include the increasing number of students attending college, rising tuition costs, uncertainty of employment after graduation, and efforts to highlight the link between specific majors and jobs, which privilege the role of college as career preparation. The case for using a communicative perspective to study this topic and the ways that the proposed study adds to the body of literature in communication studies was also addressed. The literature review in chapter two further examines the organizational socialization literature, specifically focusing on role anticipatory socialization and the messages we receive regarding choosing our career path. Literature on meaningful work is addressed because it can inform our understanding of the education-work intersection, and how a college degree is linked to finding meaning in one's work after graduation. Additionally, the theoretical perspective provided by Babrow's (1992) theory of problematic integration is discussed, including why it is best suited to this study. Finally, research on master narratives is included to demonstrate how other master narratives have been discovered that shape our individual experiences. The research questions guiding the current study are presented at the end of chapter two. Chapter three outlines the methodology used to answer the research questions and why these methods were best suited to the current investigation. Chapter four includes the results related to each research question and chapter five includes the discussion of the findings and how they extend our current understandings of the topic and add to the literature, both

theoretically and practically. Chapter five also includes the limitations present in the current

study and provides suggestions for future research on this topic.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The current study examining the return on investment of a liberal arts degree is informed by four strands of communication studies literature: anticipatory socialization, meaningful work, problematic integration theory, and master narratives. This chapter provides the context for the study by outlining key research in each of these areas and how it relates to the current investigation. This chapter concludes with the research questions guiding the current study.

Anticipatory Socialization

Student perceptions of the return on investment of a liberal arts degree are influenced by the anticipatory socialization process, as socialization research explores how individuals develop knowledge about certain careers and perceptions their role in the workplace (Kramer, 2010). An overview of the key concepts of organizational socialization as a comprehensive research area is necessary to situate the specific topic of anticipatory socialization, which is most aligned with the topic of the current study, in the communication literature. Organizational socialization research describes "the process by which an individual acquires the social knowledge and skills necessary to assume an organizational role" (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979, p. 211). Socialization prepares individuals to enter the workforce in general and for what to expect from a specific occupation (Hoffner, Levine, & Toohey, 2008). This process of socialization is inherently communicative, as social knowledge and skills are acquired through communication (Kramer, 2010). The socialization process is an on-going adjustment of individual and group members as each changes and adapts to the other through communicative processes and practices (Anderson, Martin, & Riddle, 2001).

Feldman (1976) defined organizational socialization as "the study of the ways by which employees are transformed from total company outsiders to participating and effective corporate members" (p. 64). Socialization practices fulfill three main goals for new employees: developing

work skills and abilities, acquiring a set of appropriate role behaviors, and adjusting to a work group's norms and values (Feldman, 1981). Socialization research focuses on how individuals learn the beliefs, values, orientations, behaviors, and skills necessary to fulfill their new roles and function effectively within an organization. Essentially, "socialization facilitates the adjustment of newcomers to organizations" (Ashforth & Saks, 1996, p. 149). Through socialization employees learn and adapt to organizational culture (Furlich, 2004) and gain information that transforms them into contributing members (Comer, 1991). Organizational socialization practices range from formal orientation activities to individual conversations (Louis, Posner, & Powell, 1983).

Organizational socialization is generally seen as occurring in three main phases: anticipatory, encounter, and change acquisition (Feldman, 1976; 1981). Anticipatory socialization occurs before a new member joins an organization. During anticipatory socialization future employees hope to find congruence between individual skills and employer needs and seek information to prepare for entrance to the organization. In the encounter stage of socialization new recruits experience what an organization is like and begin to change their values and attitudes to match those of the organization. New employees begin to establish relationships with existing employees, learn the tasks required to complete their work, clarify their role in the organization, and evaluate progress towards organization assimilation. Finally, in the change acquisition stage of socialization, employees master the skills necessary to succeed in the organization and resolve conflicts between competing roles.

Socialization practices are critical to organizational goals and individual outcomes. The effects of socialization are pervasive, influencing immediate adjustment to the job and larger organization level outcomes (Ashforth & Saks, 1996). Effective socialization is associated with employees who remain with the company, dependably complete role assignments, and report

increased job satisfaction, motivation, and involvement (Feldman, 1981). Successful

socialization processes have been identified as key factors in building commitment to

organizations (Anderson, Martin, & Riddle, 2001). Feldman (1976) found that satisfaction,

reduced turnover, and job performance measures were linked to effective socialization practices.

The anticipatory phase of socialization is most relevant to investigation of the return on

investment of a liberal arts degree. This phase focuses on "the process of gaining knowledge

about work that begins in early childhood and continues until entering the workplace full-time"

(Levine & Hoffner, 2006, p. 647). Even as children, we develop ideas about what it means to

work (Hoffner, Levine, & Toohey, 2008); young children are commonly asked, "what do you

want to be when you grow up?" (Kramer, 2010), demonstrating how the process of anticipatory

socialization is present in early childhood. Anticipatory socialization messages come primarily

from five sources: parents, educational institutions, part-time employment, friends, and the mass

media (Levine & Hoffner, 2006). Through the anticipatory socialization process individuals

develop occupational attitudes and values, stereotypes of certain careers, understandings of the

meaning of work, and perceptions of what constitutes a real job (Kramer, 2010). Arguably,

understanding of the costs and benefits of obtaining a liberal arts education are influenced by the

anticipatory socialization process as throughout childhood and young adulthood students hear

messages about the types of careers available to liberal arts graduates and the connections

between a college education and one's place in the workforce.

The content of messages from different sources of anticipatory socialization have been

examined, providing some information regarding the messages received during this lengthy

phase of socialization. Levine and Hoffner (2006) used a sample of high school students to study

message sources, finding that the three main sources of knowledge about job requirements were

parents, school, and part-time jobs, with parents providing the most advice about jobs and

careers. Jablin (1985) found that students learned information about four broad categories of work through anticipatory socialization: general requirements, positive aspects, negative aspects, and information/advice. In his study, anticipatory socialization sources emphasized responsibility, hard work, the importance of deadlines, personal characteristics, interpersonal skills needed, and the benefits of making a good living.

Scholars have narrowed the topic even further, within the lengthy phase of anticipatory socialization, describing sub-areas specifically focused on the career development process. Myers, Jahn, Gailliard, and Stoltzfus (2011) define vocational anticipatory socialization as "a subarea of socialization theory that explains how individuals learn about and develop interests in educational and eventual career pursuits" (p. 88), while Kramer (2010) defines role anticipatory socialization as "the ongoing process of developing expectations for a role an individual wants to have in some organization" (p. 6). The topic of the current study aligns with this specific sub-area of anticipatory socialization research, as it looks at career expectations in relationship to a college degree.

The important role of educational experiences in anticipatory socialization has been recognized. Kramer (2010), an expert in organizational socialization research, identified educational experiences as a key source of role anticipatory socialization. Through educational institutions young people learn about work values as they are prepared to be productive members of the workforce (Jablin, 1985). Levine and Hoffner (2006) found that through school students learned about job requirements, the value of interpersonal skills in the workplace, and the necessity of education and training as preparation for a career.

Limited research has focused on the college process, specifically a student's major, and its role in anticipatory socialization. Kramer (2010) notes that while students in majors that lead to a specific career are socialized regarding the attitudes of their chosen career, "this job-specific

anticipatory socialization is not possible for many broad majors like psychology or communication which do not prepare individuals for specific occupations, but would be expected in majors such as accounting or journalism" (p. 30). Lair and Wieland (2012) found that students view major selection as closely tied to a future career, and students feel pressured to make practical choices when selecting a major.

In an environment marked by questions of the value of higher education from a wide variety of observers, examining current perceptions of the relationship between education and career – ideas that initially are formed through anticipatory socialization – is in order. This study builds on our knowledge of socialized ideas about higher education through reports from current liberal arts students, preparing to transition from college to career, and hiring professionals, who recruit new college graduates.

Meaningful Work

The anticipatory socialization process is inherently linked to notions of meaningful work. Through organizational socialization individuals develop a system of meaning about work and life (Clair, 1996) and create understandings of the meaning of work and perceptions of what constitutes a real job (Kramer, 2010). Our "implicit notions of what counts as work and what does not count as work, and what makes work 'real' or somehow valuable" (Cheney, Lair, Ritz, & Kendall, 2010, p. 106) are influenced by socialization.

Those ideas about the characteristics of a meaningful job are key to understanding the relationship between the investment in education and perceived outcomes. According to Kramer (2010), "one of the most important outcomes during role anticipatory socialization is an attitude about work and the meaning of work" (p. 38-39). An individual's understanding of the meaning of work influences his expectations for work (Kramer, 2010). The topic of meaningful work is

central to the investigation of the return on investment of the liberal arts degree, because students hold expectations regarding the types of careers that are available to a liberal arts graduate.

Research on meaningful work recognizes that work is central to human life (Amundson Borgen, Iaquinta, Butterfield, & Koert, 2010) and that our personal well being and identity are influenced by our work (Ciulla, 2000). Finding meaning in work is one of the four values that shape the decisions made about work; the others are leisure time, money, and security (Ciulla, 2000). In the U.S., people tend to orient to work in one of three ways; work as a job, work as a career, or work as a calling (Wrzesniewski, 2003). Viewing work as a job focuses on the material benefits gained from employment, viewing work as a career emphasizes the rewards of advancing through the company, and viewing work as a calling privileges the fulfillment that work brings (Wrzesniewski, 2003). When interviewing individuals about their career paths, Amundson et al. (2010) found that meaningful engagement, defined by participants as work that is purposeful, personally fulfilling, intellectually stimulating, and challenging, was critical to career success. Work is expected to provide not just economic gain, but social status, a sense of belonging, and a sense of purpose (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003).

From a communicative perspective, meaningful work literature recognizes that work is socially and culturally constructed, and individuals' identity and sense of self-worth are tied to their occupations (Ciulla, 2000). Meaningful work is a subjective definition, as different people define meaningfulness in their own way (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). Pratt and Ashforth (2003) describe meaningful work as occurring when one's preferred self is expressed through work. The meaning found in work is not dependent on the type of work completed, but on the relationship the individual has to the work (Wrzesniewski, 2003). Thus, employment considered a part-time job while in school to one person may be another person's career, viewed as a "real job" to some but not others (Kramer, 2010).

Meanings of work are developed over time and influenced by interactions with educational institutions. Young adults create their meaning of work over a long period of time as they learn from others the characteristics and values associated with work (Clair, 1996). Clair (1996) found that college students describe a "real job" as one that utilizes one's education, is enjoyable, has standard hours, and offers opportunity for advancement. Levine and Hoffman (2006) note that one of the most common messages students hear in the educational system is that to get a "good job" you have to go to college; Kramer (2010) adds that this message gains intensity as students move throughout their education. Yet, Kramer (2010) points out that only about 30% of the U.S. population has a college degree; associating a good job with a college education implies that 70% of the population does not have a "good job." This association of a college degree with a "good job" is further explored in the current investigation, as the return on investment of a liberal arts degree includes expectations for career outcomes.

The benefits of finding meaning in one's work may not be thoroughly addressed during the educational process. Although school is responsible for preparing students to be productive members of the workforce, Levine and Hoffner (2006) found that students do not learn about the rewards of finding a fulfilling job through school. However, their sample consisted of high school students; the importance of finding a meaningful career may be addressed more at the collegiate level. Jablin (1985) encouraged educational institutions to not just focus on the attitudes and behaviors needed to succeed in work, but to discuss the personal benefits gained by finding a career that is enjoyable and intrinsically rewarding.

It is critical for career development professionals and organizational communication scholars to understand the information that students receive from socialization sources (Jablin, 1985) and how this influences their understanding of the association between a liberal arts degree and a meaningful career. The perceptions of the return on investment of a liberal arts degree

provides information about how students view the role of a college degree, and what type of job they believe will be attainable due to their college education. Meaningful work research has not yet examined education as a site where the meaning of work is developed, and the intersection between work and education has been absent from meaningful work literature (Lair & Wieland, 2012). This study begins to fill this gap in the literature by exploring the perceived association between higher education and meaningful employment.

Especially in difficult financial times when many college graduates struggle to find jobs they perceive as meaningful, it is appropriate to examine processes students use to deal with the uncertainty of the transition from college to career. Although college student report attending college to get a "good job" (Berrett, 2012) and hear messages during the anticipatory socialization process that support the notion that college education is the pathway to a "good job" (Levine & Hoffman,2006), these expectations are likely to be challenged by messages about the scarcity of good jobs and the value of a liberal arts degree in enabling them to find good jobs. Problematic integration theory (Babrow, 1992) serves as a useful lens through which to consider how students manage their uncertainty about their future careers. How students approach this transition may further reflect their perceptions about the return on investment in their liberal arts degree.

Problematic Integration Theory

As individuals consider attending college, they are faced with a plethora of options, from the size of institution, to the type of institution (public/private, religiously affiliated, etc.), to what major to pursue. Each of these decisions is shrouded by uncertainty, as students ponder how the decisions made in college will influence their life post-graduation. Although researching possible career paths associated with certain majors is encouraged, it is impossible to know where one's career will begin until the first job is secured. Thus, throughout most of the college

experience, students must deal with the uncertainty surrounding their decisions during college and how these will influence their career trajectory.

Babrow's (1992) problematic integration theory helps to illuminate situations where individuals deal with uncertainty regarding the association between two objects of thought. In the current study the association between a liberal arts degree and employment opportunities after graduation is clarified through the lens of problematic integration theory. As students face questions about the anticipated return on investment of their liberal arts degree, what career path to pursue after graduation, how their degree is preparing them for the workforce, and the likelihood that they will obtain a desirable job after graduation, they are dealing with questions that reflect the uncertainty central to problematic integration theory. The central tenets and applications of problematic integration theory are discussed below.

Probabilistic and evaluative orientations are key concepts in Babrow's problematic integration theory. Probabilistic orientations are beliefs about objects in the world (Matthias & Babrow, 2007) that are "held with varying degrees of certainty" (Hines, Babrow, Badzek, & Moss, 1997, p. 202). Probabilistic orientations involve a belief or an expectation about an object, event, or outcome, including assessments of the likelihood that something will occur. Through probabilistic orientations we address questions such as: what is this? what are its characteristics? what caused this? how might it behave? (Babrow, 2001). Evaluative orientations are used to judge whether an object, event, or characteristic is good or bad (Matthias & Babrow, 2007). These orientations can be retrospective, present, or prospective, as we make sense of past/current situations and develop understandings about what is likely to occur in the future (Babrow, 1992). Babrow (2001) explains the associations that are at the root of these orientations to the world:

> Probabilistic orientations are the associational webs of understanding that we form
>
> through more and less thoughtful engagement with the world. Many of these associations
>
> are so deeply ingrained that they guide our thoughts, feelings, and actions without any

conscious awareness. (p. 560)

As individuals integrate probabilistic and evaluative orientations, these associations are linked to other knowledge, feelings, and intended behaviors (Babrow, 1992).

Probabilistic and evaluative orientations can be easily managed when probabilities are clear and converge with expected outcomes in desirable ways. When it is likely that a good outcome will occur, or it is unlikely that a bad outcome will occur, probabilistic and evaluative orientations are easily integrated (Babrow, 1992). However, this is frequently not the case. When probabilistic and evaluative orientations do not align, integration of the two becomes problematic. Problematic integration "gives rise to a struggle for meaning as people try to ascertain what they ought to believe and whether what they believe is good or bad" (Matthias & Babrow, 2007, p. 788). There are four main situations where our probabilistic and evaluative orientations do not align, creating a situation where problematic integration occurs: divergence, ambiguity, ambivalence, and impossibility (Babrow, 1992). Each of these situations is addressed below, as outlined in Babrow's (1992) foundational work on the theory.

Divergence occurs when there is a discrepancy between our desires and our assessment of the reality of the situation. Experiences of divergence intensify when a positive outcome is unlikely to occur, or when a negative outcome is likely to occur. Messages leading to divergence can be interpreted in flexible ways, as imprecise and ambiguous language is frequently used to discuss judgments of probability and evaluation. For example, in reference to the current investigation of the return on investment of a liberal arts degree, students may hear that there is a "tough job market" for new college graduates or that a liberal arts major does not lead to employment after graduation; these messages can be interpreted in a variety of ways as students use problematic integration to make sense of their chances of securing employment. Through this flexibility offered by varying interpretations, communication can be used to offer some relief

from divergence. Divergence is not always experienced just at the individual or interpersonal level. Groups of individuals can experience divergence when they share a common problem; in this instance problematic integration becomes a social dialogue as the group struggles with a universal issue.

Ambiguity is the second type of situation described by Babrow (1992) that leads to problematic integration. Ambiguity occurs when "one is uncertain about which among a *set* of probabilities might describe the given situation" (Babrow, 1992, p. 111-112). An ambiguous situation occurs when the outcome is not known, nor is the probability of a certain outcome occurring known. When describing ambiguity, Babrow uses the example of a job candidate who does not know the qualifications of the other candidates for the job, thus has no way to judge the probability of being offered the position. As with divergence, ambiguity is rhetorically constructed as both speaker and listener can shape the boundaries of an ambiguous situation. When faced with ambiguity, individuals may seek information to attempt to find a more clear probability estimate, however this is not always possible. Additionally, if the information found may uncover the high probability of an unpleasant occurrence (leading to divergence), ambiguity may be preferred over gaining additional information.

Ambivalence, the third situation where problematic integration is encountered, occurs when there is no preference between the possible outcomes. When the alternatives are similarly valued, an individual may be truly ambivalent towards the outcome of the situation. Ambivalence can also occur when many contrasting feelings or emotions are involved with an object or event. Babrow uses graduation as an example of a situation that evokes ambivalence, as students experience equal parts fear and excitement at the prospect of leaving college.

Finally, impossibility is faced when it is certain that something will not happen. However, it is difficult to prove that something is truly impossible, thus situations with a low

probability can also be understood as being 'impossible.' Even when faced with impossibility, an individual may deny this fact in order to keep some hope alive.

Communication plays a key role in creating probabilistic and evaluative orientations and managing problematic integration. Problematic integration theory posits that people use communication as they struggle with uncertainty; communication is the dominant way people create, maintain, and resolve problematic integrations (Babrow, 1992). When faced with problematic integration, people are motivated to interact with others as they make sense of the situation through communication (Babrow, 1992). Babrow (1995) describes communication as "a source, medium, and resource in experiences with problematic integration" (p. 286). Through communication we create, shape, clarify, obscure, challenge, and transform probabilistic and evaluative orientations and manage the problematic integration that may arise (Babrow, 2001). Communication is also the vehicle through which we become aware of, or make others aware of, problematic integration, as we deliver bad news, make threats, hear complaints, and receive criticism (Babrow, 2001). We use communication to deal with problematic integration when we seek information, debate claims, or request assistance to help us resolve our uncertainty (Babrow, 1995). When encountering others who are experiencing problematic integration, we use communication to help them manage their uncertainty by offering warnings, advice, or encouragement (Babrow, 1995).

Babrow proposes that problematic integration can occur on several levels. Problematic integration does not just occur when a lone individual faces diverging expectations and desires in his life: "problematic integration involves processes occurring within individuals, interpersonal interactions, and broader social practices" (Babrow, 1992, p. 98). The situations where problematic integration is experienced range from ordinary, daily circumstances, to profound social, emotional and intellectual experiences (Babrow, 1992). Problematic integration ranges

from occurring at the level of an interpersonal dialogue to a broad public discourse (Babrow, 1992).

Probability and uncertainty are central concepts in problematic integration theory. Within this theoretical framework, probability is usually understood in a qualitative sense, as "our view of what is likely affects our assessment of its value, and value judgments affect probability estimates" (Babrow, 1995, p. 283). Probabilistic orientations are imprecise estimates (Babrow & Matthias, 2009) and linguistic devices (Babrow, 1992). Due to an optimism bias, we tend to believe that positive outcomes are more likely than negative outcomes, and that we will fare better than the 'average' person in most situations (Babrow, 1991). This bias extends to a wide variety of life events, as we generally expect to experience positive outcomes more frequently than average and negative outcomes less frequently than average (Babrow, 1991).

Uncertainty in the context of problematic integration theory is defined as "difficulty in formulating probabilistic judgments" (Ford, Babrow, & Stohl, 1996, p. 189). Uncertainty is not always combated by gaining additional information; we may prefer knowing less about the likelihood of an outcome to allow us to continue wishful thinking (Babrow, 1991). Uncertainty is not always viewed as a negative experience and it is not always possible to reduce uncertainty (Babrow, 2001). Rather, there are many situations where instead of reducing uncertainty, individuals must learn to cope with the uncertainty inherent in the situation (Babrow & Kline, 2000). The transition from college to career is one of these uncertain situations; until a job is secured it is impossible to know what life after graduation will hold. There is a great deal of time during college where the future is uncertain, and students must manage this state through problematic integration.

Problematic integration theory has been primarily applied in the context of health communication, where patients must manage the uncertainty associated with an illness or

pregnancy (Matthias & Babrow, 2007). The centrality of uncertainty during illness (Babrow & Kline, 2000) makes problematic integration theory particularly useful in these contexts where individuals must manage an unknown future. Although not an illness, during pregnancy women are faced with a great deal of uncertainty regarding the birth of their child and the transition to motherhood. For example, problematic integration theory has been used to explore the relationship between mothers-to-be and their midwives or obstetricians, to compare how uncertainty is navigated in traditional and alternative medicine during pregnancy (Matthias & Babrow, 2007; Matthias, 2009). Babrow and Kline (2000) use the framework of problematic integration theory to explore the role of uncertainty in performing breast self-exams to catch breast cancer in early stages. The theory has also been used in studies of elderly patients facing kidney failure, who choose to undergo painful dialysis treatments to extend their life, where they must weigh the decision to endure excruciating treatments with the probability that kidney failure will be avoided (Hines, Babrow, Badzek, & Moss, 1997; Hines, Babrow, Badzek, & Moss, 2001). Dennis, Kunkel, and Keyton (2008) used problematic integration theory to analyze the communication during a breast cancer support group, finding that group members responded to the uncertainty of their situation by seeking and offering information, and discussing the probability and evaluations of possible outcomes. Participants in the group were more likely to make statements that promote, rather than reduce, uncertainty. Another study of breast cancer support groups (Ford, Babrow, & Stohl, 1996), found that social support is a way to help others with their problematic integration, as they deal with the probability of certain outcomes of the disease and the evaluation of these events.

Although problematic integration has been primarily used to explore uncertainty in health contexts, Babrow and Matthias (2009) note that the theory can apply to any study examining communication and our inclination to make sense of the world. Babrow (1992; 2007) uses the

example of college and the job search process to explain the key tenets of the theory. Babrow (2007) opens his chapter on the theory in an undergraduate focused textbook by asking his readers to consider the question of why they are attending college and demonstrates how students have already associated college with other ideas, such as learning, gaining skills, and having fun. He notes that his readers (current college students) believe in the association of college with higher earning potential and that they value highly the idea of getting a good job after college. His examples demonstrates how the problematic integration perspective can be applied to examine how students manage the uncertainty surrounding their decision to attend college and the probability they perceive that certain positive outcomes will be associated with their college degrees.

Babrow's example of how the decision to attend college can be viewed through the lens of problematic integration theory demonstrates the utility of the theory in the current study. With a central focus of understanding the return on investment of a liberal arts degree, this study is concerned with the evaluative orientations students make regarding the value of the liberal arts degree, and the probabilistic orientations held regarding the likelihood the expected returns of the degree will be achieved. Additionally, since problematic integration theory has not yet been studied in the context of the uncertainty surrounding college and careers, this study adds a new application of the theory to the communication literature.

Master Narratives

A broader master narrative of a college education may be guiding students' perceptions of the return on investment of the liberal arts degree. Since the idea of a college education is a broad-reaching cultural phenomenon, with many stakeholder groups and societal-wide expectations associated with it, literature on master narratives provide a useful lens to consider the perceptions of participants in this study. Master narratives are culturally-mediated ideologies

and assumptions (Tannen, 2008) that reflect the values of the dominant culture (Bergen, 2010). Master narratives are woven into the fabric of society (Smith & Dougherty, 2012) and are the larger cultural narratives that implicitly influence our personal stories (Tannen, 2008). Master narratives are communicative in nature (Smith & Dougherty, 2012) and form a canopy over our individual discourse (Tannen, 2008). Bergen (2010) describes a master narrative as a predominant story communicated by a culture that produces expectations and norms within the culture. Master narratives have been explored in reference to retirement (Smith & Dougherty, 2012), sister relationships (Tannen, 2008), mental health patients creating counter-narratives to combat the medical model master narrative of 'broken brains' (Adame & Knudson, 2007), the aging-as-decline master narrative faced by midlife women in their careers (Trethewey, 2001), and how wives who live separately from their husbands to pursue their career reframe the master narrative of marriage (Bergen, 2010).

Smith and Dougherty (2012) found a master narrative of retirement that associates retirement with individual success and freedom. Initially, their study sought to explore connections between socialization and retirement, however due to the repetitive nature of the stories told in their interviews, they concluded that a broader force was driving thoughts on retirement. Smith and Dougherty (2012) conclude that "retirement is a social construct that is learned throughout a person's working life" (p. 454). In a similar sense, college can be viewed as a social construct that is learned throughout childhood and young adulthood. Ideas surrounding this social construct of college in general may be guiding student and employer perceptions of the return on investment of a liberal arts degree in particular.

Research Questions

Based on the above literature on anticipatory socialization, meaningful work, problematic integration theory, and master narratives and situating it in the current environment marked by

limited job availability and by public evaluation and critique of higher education, this study sought to address the overarching question of how liberal arts students and hiring professionals perceive the value of a liberal arts degree, particularly how they connect liberal arts education and employment. Specifically, the following research questions guided the current study:

RQ1: How do student accounts reveal perceptions of the return on investment of a liberal arts degree?

RQ1a: What are hiring professionals' expectations of liberal arts graduates?

RQ2: How do liberal arts students describe their future careers?

RQ3: How do liberal arts students report they manage their uncertainty regarding their future careers?

RQ4: To what extent do participant accounts reflect a master narrative of college?

Chapter Three: Method

The purpose of this study is to examine the perspectives of college students and hiring professionals regarding the return on investment of a liberal arts degree and the links between higher education and employment. This chapter makes a case for why interviews of liberal arts students and hiring professionals and a survey of liberal arts students were appropriate to answer the study's research questions. In addition, this chapter provides information about the characteristics of study participants, how they were recruited, and interview and survey procedures. The data analysis techniques used to interpret the interview and survey responses are outlined. The interview protocols for student and hiring manager participants, recruitment emails, the open-ended student survey questions used for this study, informed consent documents, and evidence of Instructional Review Board approval are included in Appendix B-N.

Research Methodology Justification: Interview and Survey Data

A qualitative approach was used to examine the study's research questions. Qualitative inquiry allows researchers to "determine how meanings are formed in and through culture" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 12) and to achieve an "in-depth understanding of social reality in a specific context" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 109). The central focus of this study is the perceptions of return on investment of a liberal arts college degree as it is understood in American life, and an exploration of the perceived links between education and subsequent work. I examined the meanings interviewees and survey participants associated with a liberal arts degree and the accounts students and hiring professionals gave regarding the links between a college degree and employment after graduation. Qualitative inquiry was appropriate to address the return on investment of a liberal arts degree, career expectations, how uncertainty surrounding the transition from college to career is managed, and the potential master narrative of college as this type of inquiry allowed me to explore the socially-constructed meaning of a

liberal arts degree. As outlined in chapter one, many statistics can be used to describe the salaries of the college educated and the protection against unemployment associated with a college education. However, the goal of this study was to uncover more than the monetary value of a degree, and instead to describe the personal and social meanings surrounding liberal arts education. A college degree has a more elaborated meaning to students and hiring professionals than statistics can demonstrate, and the qualitative examination used in the current study revealed these complex meanings. In order to gather this qualitative data, interviews with liberal arts students and hiring professionals were conducted, and a survey with open-ended questions was administered to liberal arts students.

Interviews were used to explore the perceptions students and hiring professionals have of the return on investment of a liberal arts degree and their broader understanding of the role of a college education. Qualitative researchers accept that the talk of interviews is "the rhetoric of socially situated speakers" and that interviews are used to understand "the social actor's experience, knowledge, and worldviews" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 173). Through interviews, stories that give shape to experience, accounts of social conduct, and explanations all can be uncovered (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). In this study, I examined the perceptions of students majoring in the liberal arts and hiring professionals who are open to hiring liberal arts majors and their impressions of the return on investment of a liberal arts degree. These two groups of interviewees were selected due to their close proximity to a liberal arts degree; the explanations they provided regarding the decision to obtain, or hire those who have obtained, a liberal arts degree revealed perceptions about the meaning of the degree.

Babbie (2010) described qualitative interviews as a conversation between the interviewer and the interviewee, where the interviewer can establish a direction for the conversation and pursue additional topics raised by the interviewee. Semi-structured interviews with students and

hiring professionals were used as the primary data collection method for this study. Interviews allow for rapport to be developed between the interviewer and the interviewee, which is not possible in a survey method (Frey, Botan, Friedman, & Kreps, 1992). Rapport development was important to my study as the questions asked probed for personal information regarding career plans, college choices, and hiring decisions, all which required a level of trust between the interviewer and interviewee. Semi-structured interviews are based on a pre-planned interview guide, with carefully crafted questions designed to gather data relevant to the research questions. However, semi-structured interviews allow for flexibility in the interview, as interviewers can probe certain topics and ask follow up questions (Frey et al., 1992) to obtain more reflective explanations about college choices and work preferences. For example, it has already been demonstrated that students attend college with the goal of obtaining a "good job" after graduation (Berrett, 2012). However, in this study I probed further, forcing students to reflect upon what makes a job "good" and how the credential of a college degree makes one qualified for these "good" jobs.

In addition to the interviews, a secondary data collection technique using an online survey of liberal arts students was included in the research design. Although the interview data remained the primary focus of this study, the survey was included to determine if the themes present in the interview transcripts were also present in a larger sample of undergraduate students majoring in the liberal arts. The survey included open-ended survey questions which allowed the qualitative focus of the investigation to be maintained, while gathering the perceptions of a larger sample of students than interviews alone would allow. A survey including four open-ended questions was administered to students in the University's Speaker-Audience Communication course research pool. Frey et al. (1992) notes that a "major strength of survey research is learning how large groups, even whole populations of people think about something" (p. 85). While the

interviews provided the opportunity to ask follow-up questions and gather more in-depth information from participants, the open-ended survey questions, although they elicited brief responses, allowed me to determine if the ideas present in the interviews were also found in a larger sample of liberal arts students. Although this survey was open to all students in the Speaker-Audience Communication course, only the responses of liberal arts students were used for this study.

Corbin and Strauss (2008) describe the reflexive role of the researcher in qualitative research: "The experiences of whoever is engaged in an inquiry are vital to the inquiry and its implicated thought processes" (p. 4). Due to this engaged and interactive process, I recognized that my past experience as a student affairs professional and current status as a PhD student in the liberal arts would influence the research process. I spent five years providing career guidance to college students at three unique institutions and, as part of my doctoral studies, I teach undergraduate courses in communication studies. In these ways, I am clearly personally connected to a liberal arts education. Through my work in career services I developed my own observations regarding the role of college in preparing students for careers and gained knowledge about the types of jobs students can realistically expect to obtain after graduation. A further influence on the framing of the interviews and interviewee responses is that my position as a graduate teaching assistant and doctoral student creates a power differential between the student participants and myself.

Participants

Participants in this study included two groups of interviewees and students who completed an online survey. Two groups of participants were interviewed for this study: college students in their junior or senior year who are majoring in the liberal arts and hiring professionals who recruit and hire new college graduates and college interns, including liberal arts majors, to

work at their organizations. For both groups, I engaged in purposeful sampling, as I made

informed judgments about whom to interview (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). I recruited individuals

to interview who have experiences that were vital to my research questions and who have

specific kinds of knowledge (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

The student interviewees included 17 students ranging in age from 19 to 33 years (*M* age

= 22.11, *SD* = 3.5). This group of 8 female and 9 male participants were recruited from the

research pool of students enrolled in Speaker-Audience Communication (Coms 130) during Fall

2013. Student participants earned 15 points of research credit for participating in the interview.

Of the student interviewee sample, 16 were in their junior or senior year at the university and one

was in his sophomore year, though he was returning to school to complete a second bachelor's

degree. All students were pursuing a Bachelor of Arts or a Bachelor of General Studies in the

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, though several had a second major or minor outside of the

college. Kansas residents accounted for 11 of the participants, with three students from Missouri,

one student from Texas, and two international students (Canada and England). Participants

identified themselves as Caucasian (*n*=14, 82%), Asian or Pacific-Islander (*n*=1, 5.8%), Hispanic

(*n*=1, 5.8%), and African-American (*n*=1, 5.8%). The sample included one student athlete, two

transfer students, two students who were attending college on the GI Bill, and two students who

plan to attend graduate school. Five (29%) students interviewed identified themselves as first-

generation college students, with the remaining 12 (71%) indicating that they were not the first in

their family to attend college. To ensure student privacy, student names have been replaced with

pseudonyms in this document (see Table 1 in Appendix A).

The employer participants interviewed for this project were 14 hiring professionals,

including 13 females and one male, ranging in age from 23 to 65 years (*M* age =38.1, *SD* =

12.98). All employer participants are actively involved in the recruitment, hiring, and/or

managing of college student interns and new college graduates. Employer participants represented a range of organizations, including non-profit, higher education, retail, financial services, educational reform, and insurance. Employer participants ranged in experience levels, from six months in their current position to over 25 years in the field. The hiring professionals interviewed held a range of job titles, from recruiter to executive director. Due to differences in organizational structure, some of my participants worked in an exclusively recruiting role, where they are primarily involved with attending career fairs, screening resumes, and conducting initial interviews. Employer participants also included those who are responsible for a range of human resources functions, and several participants also trained and managed staff. The common thread throughout the employer participants was that these individuals all actively recruit college interns and new college graduates to work at their organizations and are open to hiring liberal arts students. To ensure employer privacy, employer names have been replaced with pseudonyms (see Table 2 in Appendix A).

Interviews were conducted until saturation was reached, based on the standards set in qualitative research. Corbin and Strauss (2008) define saturation as when the concepts that are emerging from the data are well defined and explained. Similarly, Lindlof and Taylor (2011) suggest that sampling should continue until interviews are no longer producing new data. In order to ensure saturation was researched, I began the open coding process on the transcripts, noting when new codes were no longer being created. When looking at research question 1 and 2, student transcript 15 did not yield any new open codes, which demonstrates that the ideas have already been well-examined and no new information is being found. Transcripts 16 and 17 also did not yield any new insights. A similar process was used to ensure saturation was reached in the employer transcripts.

A total of 245 undergraduate students representing all majors completed the survey. However, only responses from the 79 students who completed the survey and indicated that they are majoring in the liberal arts were used for this study. The remaining surveys were excluded due the current project's focus on the return on investment of the liberal arts degree. These 79 liberal arts students ranged in age from 18 to 29 (M age=19.6, SD=1.55). The sample was split between males (n=34, 43%) and females (n=45, 57%), and was primarily freshman (n=19, 24%) and sophomore (n=47, 59%) students with fewer junior (n=8, 10%) and senior (n=5, 6%) level students represented. Students who completed the survey identified as Caucasian (n=58, 73%), African-American (n=7, 9%), Mixed (n=7, 9%), Asian/Pacific Islander (n=4, 5%), and Hispanic (n=3, 4%). All 79 students who completed the survey were pursuing a degree in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. Students were pursuing a mix of degrees, including Bachelor of Sciences (n=23, 29%), Bachelor of Arts (n=42, 53%), Bachelor of General Studies (n=9, 11%) and 5 students (6%) who were unsure what degree they would pursue.

First generation college students accounted for 12 (15%) of the survey respondents, while 67 (85%) indicated that they were not the first member of their family to pursue a bachelor's degree. The majority of the survey sample described themselves as Kansas residents (n=52, 66%), with 22 out-of-state students (28%) and 5 international students (6%).

Recruitment and Procedures

Student participants for the interviews were recruited through an email sent by the research pool administrator to all students enrolled in the Speaker-Audience Communication course during the Fall 2013 semester. Students who fit the criteria of the study were invited to email me to express interest in participating. Through email communication I verified that they met the requirements of the study and scheduled a time for the interview. Student interviews took place during regular business hours in an interview room in Bailey Hall. Lindlof and Taylor

(2011) note that the timing and location of interviews are important considerations in the interview process. Scheduling interviews with students during the normal school day at an on-campus location was the most convenient for participants. Also, since students completed the interview as part of a class requirement, it was appropriate to hold the interviews on-campus. Students received 15 points of research credit for participants in the interview. Interviews with students lasted between 21 and 61 minutes (*M* length=38.2 minutes), with a total of 649 minutes of interview talk recorded.

When participants arrived at the interview location, I greeted each student and reviewed the informed consent form, as required by the Institutional Review Board (Appendix D), and asked them to complete a brief form gathering demographic information (Appendix E). The demographic form required students to report their name and the name of their Coms 130 instructor so that research credit could be assigned. This form asked for basic information including gender, age, race, status as a first-generation student, and expected gradation month/year. Students also reported their major(s) and minor(s) and the type of degree they are seeking (Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of General Studies). Finally, students were asked to rank the sources used to finance their education from a list including the following sources: federal student aid loans, private loans, scholarships, income from their own jobs, and parental support. This question was included to gather information about the variety of sources students use to fund their college education, and to prompt students to start thinking about the financial aspects of their degree. The absence of a question on the demographic form asking students to report the total cost of their degree was purposeful, as I wanted to hear their explanations and thought process regarding the costs of their degree, rather than gather the numerical data. Since this study is examining the qualitative understanding of the return on investment of a liberal arts degree, how students describe their financial investment is more important than the actual

number provided. Overall, the use of a demographic form allowed for this information to be collected in a more efficient manner than if these questions were asked verbally in the interview.

After students completed the demographic form, I then provided an overview of the interview process, and confirmed that participants agreed to being audio recorded. Although I followed the interview protocol (see Appendix F), during the interviews I adapted the questions as needed and asked follow up questions to probe for further information.

The student interview questions were developed in order to address each research question that pertained to the student perspective. In order to examine the first research question regarding student perceptions of the return on investment of their liberal arts degree, students were asked why they decided to attend college, to describe the costs of their education, and describe what they hope to gain from their degree. Additionally, students were asked specifically about their major selection process, the benefits of their major, their career plans, and expected salary. Since the purpose of this study was to explore how students view the liberal arts degree, they were not prompted with a definition of the liberal arts. This was done intentionally so student responses were not influenced by my definition of the liberal arts; instead I wanted to explore the perceptions students already hold of the degree. Research question two asked how students describe their future career. In order to answer this question, students were asked about the daily tasks they expected in their first job after graduation, what it means to have a "real job", how they imagine their career trajectory, and to describe their dream job.

Research question three explored how students manage the uncertainty inherent in the transition from college to career. Questions to examine this research question included asking students how confident they are in securing a desired job after graduation, how they manage the uncertainty surrounding their future, and what steps they will take to increase their confidence in their future plans. Research question four examined the extent to which a master narrative of

college appeared in participant responses. Since this question addresses the holistic notion of a master narrative of college, it was examined through the consistency of responses throughout the interview protocol. However, several questions were designed to address this question more specifically, including, *Do you think you have to attend college to get a "good job"? Why/why not?* and *Almost 70% of students who graduate from high school enroll in college; tell me what you think of that number?*

Hiring manager participants were recruited using my personal network developed through my work experience in career services and using contacts made through the University Career Center. All hiring manager participants are interested in recruiting new college graduates for internships and/or entry-level positions, including liberal arts majors. I began by interviewing the recruiters that I have already established contact with through my professional network. Additionally, I received from the University Career Center a list of names and contact information for hiring professionals who frequently attend on-campus career fairs to recruit college students to work at their organizations. One interviewee was referred to me by another participant.

I contacted potential employer participants via email to explain the purpose of my study and ask for their participation (see Appendix G for a sample email). When I heard back from employers, I scheduled a time and location for the interview. Four interviews took place over the phone and the other ten occurred at the participant's workplace, either in their office or a conference room. At the start of each interview I reviewed the informed consent form (see Appendix H), as required by the Institutional Review Board, and then provided an overview of the interview process, and confirmed that participants agreed to being audio recorded. Although I followed the interview protocol included in Appendix J, during the interviews I adapted the questions as needed and asked follow-up questions to probe for further information.

Employer interview question were developed in order to address each research question that pertained to the employer perspective. Research question 1a explored what hiring professionals expect of liberal arts graduates. This research question was address in interview questions that asked employers to describe their ideal candidate, the importance of a students' major in the hiring process, and what they want students to gain from their college education. A set of questions that focused employers specifically on the liberal arts degree included: *If a student is a liberal arts major, what jobs would be available to them at your organization?, Why do you hire liberal arts majors for these positions?, Are there certain positions that would not be available to a liberal arts major? Why?,* and *When you hire a liberal arts major, what skills/knowledge do you expect them to bring to the position?* Since research question four was looking at the potential of a master narrative, which is a broad cultural story, several questions in the employer interview protocol were designed to explore this idea. For example, hiring professionals were asked why their organization focuses on hiring new college graduates, what specific skills college graduates bring to their organization, and what could be changed about the college experience to make it more valuable to students.

Hiring manager participants did not receive any compensation for participating in the interview. Interviews lasted from 16 to 52 minutes (*M* length=30), with a total of 389 minutes of recorded interview talk. One employer requested not to be audio recorded, and instead I took typed notes during this interview.

Student participants for the survey were recruited through an email sent by the research pool administrator to all students enrolled in Coms 130 during the Fall 2013 semester (see Appendix L). This email included a link to the survey, which was created and managed using the Qualtrics survey software. This survey was open to all student enrolled in Coms 130, regardless of major or class level, though only the responses of liberal arts students were used as part of this

study. When students accessed the survey, they viewed an informed consent document where they agreed to participate in the survey (see Appendix M). Next, they completed a series of closed ended Likert and ranking style questions which are part of a separate study and not included in the data analysis of this project, and then responded to four open-ended questions before completing demographic information. The four open-ended questions used for this project addressed: 1) messages received about a college education as they were growing up; 2) why employers want to hire people with a bachelor's degree; 3) the process they used in selecting their major; and 4) if they think their college education is worth the cost. The survey questions used in this project are included in Appendix N. Although the survey included both open- and closed-ended questions, only the open-ended responses were used as part of this project. Students earned 10 points of research credit for completing the survey. In order to protect student's privacy and assign research points, at the end of the survey students were directed to a separate Qualtrics survey where they provided their names and the names of their Coms 130 instructor.

Data Analysis

All interviews were audio recorded using a digital recording device and were transcribed by a paid transcription service (rev.com). The audio files did not include any information that could be used to identify participants. The 17 student transcripts yielded 213 pages of single-spaced text; the 13 employer transcripts yielded 146 pages of single-spaced interview text. One employer did not agree to be audio recorded; three pages of single-spaced types notes were taken during this interview. I checked all transcripts for accuracy and made changes to the transcripts as needed to more accurately reflect the audio files. The survey responses to each of the four open-ended questions were downloaded from the Qualtrics website and organized in a word document. These created a total of 26 pages of single-spaced text.

In order to create a more manageable data set to begin thematic analysis, the interview transcripts were first organized by research question. I read through all of the transcripts and selected areas that addressed each research question. I created a new word document for each research question and moved the responses relating to each research question into their new document. This allowed me to organize the data into areas that addressed each research question as a starting point for analysis. In total, this created 94 pages of text relating to research question one, 47 pages of text for research question two, 29 pages of text for research question three and 27 pages of text for research question four. Sections of the interviews that appeared to address multiple research questions were included in both documents.

Once the interview data was organized by research question, I began the open-coding process, with Owen's (1984) criteria of recurrence (occurring when at least two parts of a report have the same meaning, even though different wording was used) and repetition (looking for the explicit repeated use of the same key words, phrases or sentences) guiding my process. Corbin and Strauss (2008) describe open coding as using "a brainstorming approach to analysis because, in the beginning, analysts want to open up the data to all potential and possibilities contained within them" (p. 160). This open coding process is the unrestricted coding of data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In this stage, I focused on each research question individually, moving through the open and axial coding stages for RQ1 before moving on to RQ2. I have outlined in detail the process I used in open and axial coding for RQ1, including examples, below. I followed the same process for the all of the research questions.

To conduct the open coding process, then I read through the entire text of the RQ1 word document and created a list of ideas in the data that addressed the research question. For example, several open codes were created from quote below from Rebecca, a junior with a double major in Human Biology and Applied Behavioral Science:

Yes, (pause) I do. I don't know what the number exactly would be, but … and I also
think it depends on what you want to do, because like for, just as an example, if your
major was art, you could use all the money that you would spend on your education to
start your own studio or on supplies and things like that. And you might get a slower start
into what you wanted to do, but you'd essentially be doing the same thing. I don't know.
Then, like for me, since I want to go to medical school and I would have to attend college
in order to go there—spend money to spend more money (laugh)—I don't know what
number would really deter me from attending, but there probably would be one.

After considering this quote, I created two open codes: 1) degree as gateway to more
opportunities, and 2) having actual skills vs. being certified by the degree. After examining all 94
pages of text related to RQ1, more than 60 open codes were created.

Next, I moved to axial coding, "creating a new set of codes whose purpose is to make
connections between categories" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 252). During this stage I organized
and combined codes that seemed to address the same idea. For example, the idea of "getting a
poor grade as hurting you" was listed as an open code. At first, I was not sure how this fit in to
the larger picture, but during open coding this seemed like an important concept. After reviewing
all of the initial codes and my memos, I categorized this open code with the ideas of the college
degree as certification. My thought process for this was that if the degree is about the actual
learning of the material (material that will then be needed in the workforce), being challenged by
the classes would be seen as a positive because students are learning critical material that will
help them to succeed in their future careers. Instead, having a poor grade is seen as "hurting" a
GPA, which may set students back in their process of certification. This speaks to the broader
idea that the material itself is not as important; rather, it is just the certification of earning of the
degree that is necessary.

Through this process of axial coding, I organized the open codes into central ideas present in the transcripts that addressed the research question. For example, the open codes of "out of your comfort zone," "college is fun," "living away from home," "study abroad," and "making friends" all addressed the non-academic benefits of college. I categorized these ideas into the axial code of "return as the college experience" since they all addressed benefits of college that do not relate to academics or career, but rather to the growth, development, and fun aspects of attending college. In my initial round of axial coding, I created the following axial codes for RQ1: *Return as the credential of a college degree*, *Return as the expectation of financial security*, and *Return as the college experience*. The following axial codes were created for RQ1a, focusing on the employer transcripts: *Professional skills & drive to succeed*, *Additional experience (beyond the degree) required*, and *College major as minimally important*. Next, I placed each of these axial codes in an excel spreadsheet and returned to the 94 pages of interview transcripts that addressed RQ1. I reread the entire document and moved quotes that addressed each of the axial codes in to the excel spreadsheet. This step served three purposes; 1) I was able to organize example quotes for my manuscript to illustrate each theme, 2) I was able to determine the extent to which each of these ideas were present in the data, and 3) I was able to see if any counterexamples were present. This open and axial coding process was repeated for each research question. My analysis was revised and reorganized through feedback from my advisor, as additional axial codes were added to RQ1.

Once a draft of my results was created using the interview responses, I moved to analysis of the survey data to determine whether or not the ideas present in my 17 student interviews were indicative of a wider group of liberal arts students. I followed a similar data analysis process to the interview transcripts but adapted it to the nature of the data. Student responses to the open-ended survey questions were much shorter and less descriptive than the interview transcripts. I

initially read the entire text for each survey question and created a list of open codes. For example, for the survey question about why students selected their major, I generated of list of four primary reasons students chose their major: personal interest in the major/subject area; career/job prospects associated with the major; expected salary associated with future job; and aptitude for the subject matter. Then I reread all responses to the question and counted the number of references to each of these considerations. Using 79 (the total number of students completing the survey) as the total, I was able to determine the percentage of students who indicated each criteria was used in their major selection process. This allowed me to see how widespread each criteria was and was used to provide a comparison point to the interview data. I used the same process for each of the four open-ended interview questions.

Through the entire data analysis process I engaged in memoing, creating 9 pages of single-spaced memos. Corbin and Strauss (2008) describe memos as written records of analysis and note that writing memos forces the analyst to think about the data. Memoing occurred during the entire analytic process, and these memos were used to move forward the analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Memos included my thoughts on the emerging analysis including how ideas may fit together and notes from meetings with my advisor.

Throughout the entire process, I met with my advisor to reflect on my findings and gain additional insight, which provided the tactic for confirming findings described by Miles and Huberman (1994) as triangulation by researcher. Based on our discussions, I returned to the quotes in my axial code documents to determine the prevalence of each idea within the sample. Additionally, my advisor reviewed a subset of my transcripts to verify codes.

Member checks were conducted with student and employer interviewees. Lindlof and Taylor (2011) define member checks, or member validation, as "taking findings back to the field and determining whether the participants recognize them as true or accurate" (p. 279). Miles and

Huberman (1994) describe this process as one the most logical ways to evaluate the findings of a study. Member checks were conducted via email with four student interview participants. For student member checks, the email included a quote from their interview along with a brief description of the theme I felt it represented in my analysis, and asked for feedback from the participant on whether or not my interpretation of their quote accurately represents their beliefs. Member checks were conducted via email due the fact that since students were no longer enrolled in the Speaker-Audience Communication course I had no incentive for them to meet with me again.

Many of the hiring professional participants indicated an interest in viewing the results of the study, therefore all 14 employers were contacted via email to conduct a member check. The email included a brief summary of the findings to RQ1a, and asked for feedback from the participant. Specifically the email asked for feedback on whether the individual felt that my finding accurately represents their experience. Employer member checks were conducted via email to respect the time and schedule constraints of the hiring professionals. Since they had already voluntarily taken time to meet with me for an interview, I did not want to impose further by scheduling a follow-up meeting, particularly since I would like to maintain a professional relationship with these individuals for future research purposes and/or employer visits to my classes. Member checks did not result in any changes to the data analysis.

Summary

This study used a qualitative approach to examine how liberal arts students and hiring professionals view the return on investment of a liberal arts degree and the link between college and career. Interview and open-ended survey questions provided the data for this study, which were analyzed using the process of open and axial coding. Chapter four presents the results of this analysis, describing how participants perceive the return on investment of a liberal arts

degree, what employers look for in college graduates, how students describe their desired job, and how they report managing uncertainty surrounding the transition from college to career. It also reports on evidence in the student accounts that support the presence of a master narrative of college.

Chapter Four: Results

This chapter presents findings from the qualitative investigation concerning student and hiring manager perceptions of the return on investment of a liberal arts degree, including how these are linked to students' career expectations, how students report managing the uncertainty surrounding the transition from college to career, and the emergence of a master narrative of college in general which appears to influence perceptions of the liberal arts in particular.

Interviews with 17 liberal arts students and 14 hiring professionals about their perceptions of the return on investment of a liberal arts degree and responses from a survey completed by 79 liberal arts students served as the basis to address the research questions. Student interviews covered questions regarding their decision to attend college, how they chose their major, their plans for after graduation, and expectations for their career trajectory. Hiring manager interviews covered the types of positions for which they hire college graduates, what they look for in the hiring process, and how colleges can better prepare students to enter the workforce. Data from the student survey included four open-ended questions regarding messages received about a college education, their perceptions about why employers want to hire people with a bachelor's degree, the process of selecting their major, and whether they think their college education is worth the cost. Complete results of the analysis of the survey data is in Table 3 (see Appendix A), and survey results are included throughout this chapter to provide support for findings from the interview responses.

The results below are organized by research question with a summary table for each question is included in Tables 4, 5, 6, and 7 in Appendix A. Detailed descriptions of each theme with example quotes are included below. Theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed in chapter five.

The first research question asked how student accounts reveal perceptions of the return on investment of a liberal arts degree. A related question examined the employer perspective of that ROI.

Student Accounts of the ROI of a Liberal Arts Degree

Student descriptions of the return on investment of their liberal arts degree can be grouped into four themes: 1) return in the form of the credential of a college degree; 2) return in the form of the expectation of financial security; 3) return in the form of the expectation of (career) success; and 4) return in the form of the college experience itself. Employer representatives reported they want students to gain the general workplace skills necessary to enter the workforce, that they think college graduates demonstrate particular positive characteristics, that they value the experiences students gain outside of the classroom, and that they view a student's major as playing a minor role in the organization's hiring decisions. Results for RQ1 and RQ1a are summarized in Table 4 and 5 (see Appendix A) and each idea is discussed below, with sample quotes to demonstrate the central components of the theme.

The financial investment. When asked to assign a number to the total financial cost of their college education, student responses varied widely, from a low of $20,000 to a high of $200,000. Certainly, the cost of attending college does vary widely due to factors such as residency status (in-state, out-of-state, international), scholarships, parental support, living expenses, and number of credit hours. However, the purpose of this study is not to determine how much students are actually paying for college, as there is ample data (see chapter one) regarding the increasing costs of tuition and rising student debt. Rather, my interest here is to determine how students perceive the return on investment of their liberal arts degree. Thus looking at their perceptions of the financial investment in their degree is a necessary starting point.

Most telling here is that half of the students interviewed were unable to provide a clear estimate of the financial cost of their college education. Kayla, a junior transfer student from a community college, responded in this way when asked what the total cost of her college education would be: "Like, $100,000, maybe, or $200,000, I would say." Claire, a junior whose parents are financing her entire college education, said:

> Honestly I have no clue. I think a teacher said once that like a credit hour is $500? I don't know … A lot. I think around 6,000 a semester? I don't know, I don't live in dorm so that definitely reduces cost but, I think 12, 13 a year. I'm not really sure though.

These two quotes illustrate comments from the half of the student interviewees who did not have a firm grasp on the financial investment of their degree.

The other half of the students interviewed were able to provide more detailed descriptions of their financial investment, including what costs they included in their total figure and how they defined their investment. Cassandra, a junior history major from Texas who is the first in her family to attend college, provided the following response when asked the cost of her education: "Lets see, I pay……Probably $90,000 because I pay about $22,000 or $23,000 per year." Macy, a junior global and international studies major, provided a detailed description of her financial situation:

> I went to a community college during high school and that was paid for by my school district, so that actually saved me about a year because I'm graduating a year early, so that saved me about a year's worth of what it would have cost, but for the 50,000 or so left, I have ... my parents do help me, they give me about 6,000 a year, and then the rest I get ... let's say, I don't know, 75% of it is from loans also, 75% of what's left, and then I pay some of it from my savings, and what I've earned myself, and then I have scholarships

here and there. My first year I had higher scholarships, but now it's just kind of little

scholarships, but they make a huge impact.

Students reported the methods they were using to finance their college education on the

demographic form completed at the beginning of the interview. Students in both groups

described above, those unaware of the cost of the degree and those with a firm grasp on the

financial investment in their education, were funding their education through a variety of

sources. Students who indicated parental support as their primary method for funding their

education were not more likely to be unaware of the cost of their degree. For example, Kayla,

who above provided a $100,000 range on the cost of her education, listed federal student loans as

her primary source of funding. The students interviewed ranged widely in their estimated

financial investment in their degree, but all recognized that this was a large financial investment,

regardless of who was footing the bill.

Return as the credential of a college degree. Every student interviewed described a

return on the investment in his/her education as earning the credential of a college degree, and

that this credential signified that one possesses certain positive qualities. Students described this

credential as an essential qualification when entering the workforce, as it demonstrates that

students went beyond the "required" high school diploma to earn a bachelor's degree. A

bachelor's degree was viewed as necessary to enter the students' chosen career path, and the

attainment of the bachelor's degree in general was focused on, rather the attainment of a liberal

arts degree in particular. Kent, a senior double-majoring in political science and English, when

asked what employers see when a candidate has a bachelor's degree responded: "It's a

certification. You've put a lot into one area and you could be considered a certain level of

expertise in that area, I guess." A college degree was described as a "differentiator" and a way to

limit the pool of applicants for a position. Kyle's (a senior communication studies major with a

business minor) response to a question regarding what a bachelor's degree tells employers is representative of the view of students interviewed of the return as a credential: "This is what I come prepared with, this is what I can bring to the table and this degree is verified, it's like a certificate saying that I am competent in all these areas."

Additionally, this credential was viewed to demonstrate positive qualities about the degree holder. All students interviewed perceived that having the credential of the degree demonstrates that the individual has a variety of positive characteristics that are viewed favorably by employers, which would make them a "better" employee. Although students listed both skills and personal qualities, it was more common for students to indicate that having a degree demonstrated general personal qualities, rather than mastery of specific skills. Only a few students listed specific skills as being associated with the credential of a bachelor's degree including: problem solving, communication, better grammar, and critical thinking. However, all students interviewed listed a range of positive personal qualities that they associated with the credential of a bachelor's degree. These characteristics include: competence, commitment, diligence, being more intelligent, flexibility, being serious about the job, perseverance, caring about one's future, dedication, initiative, being open to new experiences, well-rounded, work ethic, trusting in one's abilities, and having potential. James, an anthropology and education major returning to school on the GI Bill, even described a bachelor's degree as certification that "your mind 'works the right way.'" Support for this theme was also present in the survey of liberal arts students. in response to an open-ended question about why employers might want to hire people with a bachelor's degree, 35 (N=79, 44.3%) students described positive characteristics that are associated with college graduates, including traits such as dedication and hard working. Additionally, in response to the same question, 29 (N=79, 36.7%) students

surveyed indicated that individuals with a bachelor's degree would be "better" candidates because they were more qualified.

Four students noted the distinction between having the credential of a degree and actually being prepared with a certain skill-set for a career. Examples such as art, computer science, and language skills were provided to demonstrate that in specific fields the "certification" of a college degree was less important than the ability to demonstrate a specific skill. Kevin, a senior majoring in East Asian language and culture, demonstrated this sentiment in his response about the importance of a degree in the workplace:

> I think that depends on the job and I guess the company that's looking to hire you. Going back to computer science and how I believe you don't actually need to go to school to get work in that field, employers usually don't look for a degree when you're applying to a computer science position. They just look for work experience and results. They'll often ask you to write some code on the spot and show it to them or bring your portfolio.

This quote represents a minority of the students interviewed who perceived a distinction between gaining the credential and being prepared with a specific skill set.

Students perceived that because new graduates reflect these positive qualities, employers could trust that they would perform at a high level in their organization. Rebecca, a junior majoring in applied behavioral science, responded in this way when asked why employers might want to hire college graduates:

> I feel like it's required because the type of person that they're looking for for their job they're trying to fill would be someone who could make a commitment to doing, at the very minimum, a decent job and I think that that also aligns with getting a degree in college.

Henry, a junior religious studies major, responded in a similar way:

Because even if the degree doesn't necessarily relate to the job, it proves that you have

some degree of competence and being able to take in new, lessons and being able to

understand. I feel like college, compared to a high school graduate, college is much more

focused on problem solving then strictly, here's information, now go ahead and

memorize everything and copy it down on the test at the end of the day.

Carly, a junior applied behavioral science major, had a simple response: Employers would hire college graduates because, "They're smarter. They have four years of, more of education than somebody without."

Due to all of these characteristics associated with completing a college degree, students perceived that it would be to their benefit to have this credential when entering the job market. Tyler, a junior theater major, described the trust associated with the degree: "There's more of a trust in someone with a degree than someone without, and so it gives them a reassurance." Kyle, a senior communication studies major with a business minor, described how the college degree can be used to limit the applicant pool:

I think that it is a way of kind of limiting the number of people that they get so that way

you can set a particular standard. These people they've earned an education and they're

also well rounded because with all the general studies that you have to do regardless of

the major they at least teach you everything. It kind of ensures that you're not just going

to be picking from an enormous amount of people…. It's kind of a way to ensure that for

the employer that everyone that you're interviewing is at least on this level where it

would be satisfactory to meet the requirements of an employee.

Clair, a junior applied behavioral science major, perceived that college graduates would be "better" employees:

I feel like they want the better person for the job and showing, having the bachelor's

degree versus not, I mean its showing that you've learned more and you've gone to

school for four years and you want the job, like you've almost worked for it a little harder

than not going to school.

All students interviewed shared the idea that earning the credential of a degree is a return on the

investment in their education, and that this credential is used as a differentiator in the workplace

and allows them access to more favorable jobs. Further, it demonstrates that they have certain

positive qualities as a job candidate.

Return as the expectation of financial security. All but one student interviewed

described a second return on their investment as the expectation of financial security that they

perceived comes from obtaining a bachelor's degree. Financial security also was mentioned in

the open-ended responses to the student survey. Of the 79 students who took the survey, 15

(19%) mentioned in response to an open-ended question that a college education was worth the

cost because graduates would be financially secure after graduation, and in a question about why

they chose their major, 16 (20.3%) indicated that the salary of their future job was an important

factor. Although only a few students interviewed were able to quote a specific starting salary

associated with their career plans, there was a general perception that they would be "fine"

financially, as Kevin's (a senior majoring in East Asian language and culture) response when

asked about his financial situation after graduation demonstrates:

As it stands right now, I don't think it's going to be too much of an issue for me. I mean

obviously, I worry just like everyone else. Am I going to find work right out of school?

Am I going to make timely payments on this debt? But something in the back of my head

tells me I'll be fine where I stand right now.

Students interviewed were interested in paying back their debt, but after that indicated that they would be fine with a "normal" or "average" salary, whatever that may be. Garrett, a junior pursuing a double major in linguistics and computer science, said: "So I want to get a decent paying job, I want to be out of debt because debt sucks." This quote demonstrates this perception that a college degree will lead to a job with a "decent" salary that will allow one to pay back student loans.

Earning enough to support themselves and their family was important to the students interviewed, and they expressed confidence that this would be within their reach after graduation. Kyle, a junior communication studies major, said: "the confidence that I have in myself I feel like I'll be making some … at least some pretty good money especially four or five years down the road I feel like I'll be making a good amount of money." Even students who had no clue as to what type of salary to expect after graduation did not express concern for their financial situation. Carly, a junior applied behavioral science major, responded in this way when asked about her expected salary: "I don't even know, that's why I say something that you could provide, I don't even know what that is. What's like a normal salary? I have no idea." Later, when asked about her plans for career path she said: "I guess I should probably look at salary. I never even thought about that." The majority of students interviewed did not question the fact that their degree would lead to a job with a salary that would allow them to not have to worry about their finances and live comfortably.

Only five (out of 17) of the students interviewed were able to quote a salary range that they expected to earn after graduation, based on research and knowledge of the field they plan to enter. Even those without a reference point as to what type of salary might be expected perceived that they would be able to earn more with a college degree than without. Kent, a senior political

science and English major, described a key moment in his decision to attend college, which demonstrates the expectation that a college degree will lead to financial security:

> I remember being a server and overhearing one of my coworkers, one day, talk about basically walking around begging people for extra shifts because she had to take her kid to the dentist. I remember thinking, "Wow. I don't ever want to be in that position," because she was like 40. When I think back on it, that memory sticks out a lot.

Kyle, a junior communication studies major with a business minor, echoed this sentiment that the degree is required to obtain a certain standard of living:

> My parents and I are viewing this like you couldn't do all this, you couldn't own a home, you couldn't start a family and start college funds for them without this education because you won't be able to get a job to support that.

Cassandra, a junior history major who plans to work in museums, described the standard of living she expects after earning a college degree as follows:

> But I'd at least like to make something that I can pay back a student loan but I can also pay back the bills. If I also had a family or something I could pay those bills and give my children, like, "Hey, I'm not going to give you a car but I'm going to send you to a decent school or something. You can totally sign up for all these clubs because I have money to get you a uniform or get you this or get you that." I guess to just be stable with it.

Although all students expressed that they would earn a "comfortable" salary after graduation, several (6 out of 17) students noted that the amount earned after graduation would vary based on their major. These students understood that a liberal arts degree may not yield as high a salary as other degree options, but they still said that the liberal arts degree would lead to a job where they could feel financially secure. Henry, a junior religious studies major with plans to

enter the seminary, admitted that his career path does not lead to a high salary but did not express concern over his ability to live on this salary:

> I already know, the salary for a pastor obviously isn't much. It's minimum salary for a year, but through the United Methodist Church I also receive housing. I'm not sure what minimum will be by the time I graduate from seminary, but that's what I know what I'll receive plus compensation for housing and stuff.

Heather, a junior American studies major and international student, responded to the question of her expected salary in this manner:

> I never thought about it … I just want to have a job that I like, that I enjoy. Whether I work my way up in the field or I stay in the same position my whole life, as long as I'm happy doing it and I enjoy it, I'm not worried about it, if I only ever earn $30,000 a year for the rest of my life but I really enjoy my life then that's great and if I earn a $100,000 a year and enjoy my life for the rest of my life then that's also great but money doesn't really matter and the position doesn't really matter.

Several participants described happiness and an enjoyable job as more important than the money earned, which will be discussed further in research question two. That participants did not question that they would be able to provide for themselves with the salary earned after graduation further demonstrates the expectation that the college degree will lead to a financially stable career.

Return as the expectation of (career) success. Students perceived a return on their investment as the expectation of success, with references to both career-specific success and success in a more general sense. Of the 17 students interviewed, all described college as their preferred route to career success. In response to an open-ended question about the messages they have heard about college, 19 (N=79, 24%) students surveyed said that they had heard that college

was the route to success. Additionally, 31 (*N*=79, 39.2%) reported hearing that one goes to college in order to get a job. Students were not prompted to speak about "success," yet this term repeatedly appeared in interviewees' responses. A response from Kevin, a senior East Asian language and culture major, demonstrated the messages he received that equate college to success: "I am the first in my family to go to college, so that was always a talking point with my parents. They just tell me, you should go to college; you should be successful." Even though he described his parents as making good money without a college degree, Kevin perceived a college education as the route to "success." Claire, a junior applied behavioral science major, also described messages about college and success in her life:

It was always important to go to college and it was always a way of growing up. It was always emphasized in my high school, really emphasized; you go to college to succeed.

So I knew from a young age that I needed to go to college in life to succeed.

Spencer, a junior economics and German major, described a college education as the route to career success in this way: "Obviously, it increases the probability of you being hired in a firm." Henry, a junior religious studies major, also spoke to this idea: "Just because it's that mindset that it's, 'Go to college or you're a failure.'"

The credential of the degree was perceived as allowing students to move beyond a "job," which was described as being lower-paid, having less room for advancement, and not being enjoyable, to let students enter a "career." When asked what they perceived their life would be like if they did not attend college, the majority of students interviewed mentioned having the same job they had as a high school student, demonstrating the perception that a person needs the degree to move beyond an hourly paid, low-skilled job. Most students did not see other paths available to a successful career; without college they would be "stuck" in their part-time job as a waitress, nanny, or movie theater attendant. Only a few students interviewed mentioned the

opportunities available in trade school or the military, and when these were mentioned, they were primarily viewed as not the "best" option. Earning the credential of the college degree was viewed as the preferred pathway out of the unskilled labor setting students experienced as part-time employees. When asked what her life would be like if she had decided not to attend college, Kayla's response is representative of this view that jobs that do not require a college degree are less desirable:

> Well, I'd probably be working as a hostess, because that's what I'm doing right now. I don't know what I would do, honestly. I'd probably be working the same job. I don't think I'd have as many doors open right now. I don't think I'd meet as many people. So I don't think it'd be good.

Nick, a junior student-athlete majoring in communication studies, expressed it in this way: "If I sacrifice now, then I'd have a better career in the future."

The survey responses (*N*=79) also provide support for this perception of the college degree as a required credential for the future career. In response to the open-ended question *College is expensive; do you think it is worth the cost? Why/why not?* 38 students (48.1%) mentioned that college was worth the cost because it was a required to get a job. Additionally, in response to an open-ended question about the messages students had heard growing up about college, 31 (39.2%) mentioned that they heard that they should attend college in order to get a job. The interview and survey responses illustrate a view that an important return on the investment of a college education is the expectation of success, including promising career opportunities.

Return as the college experience. Viewing part of the return on the investment as the experience of college life in itself was expressed by 16 of the 17 students interviewed. This idea was also evident in the student survey. When responding to the open-ended question about the

messages received about college as they were growing up, 31 (*N*=79, 39.2%) students mentioned that they heard that college was a fun time, and the phrase "best four years of your life" or "best time of your life" was mentioned 12 times in student responses. In the student survey, college as a fun experience was mentioned with the same frequency as attending college in order to get a job. Studying abroad, living away from home, meeting new people, and developing as a person were all indications of the benefits of college life. Although these are not related to career outcomes, as the first three themes are, students described the college experience itself as being worth the investment in their degree. This return does not come after the completion of the degree, but is obtained within the process of working towards the career goals and financial outcomes mentioned above. Tyler, a junior theater major, described this benefit of college as:

> You'd be getting the chance to live on your own if you choose to live in the dorms or live in student apartments. So you'd be getting, your view on how living away from your family and how you need to cope with that. You'd be meeting a lot more people because you'd be going to classes and going to school, living in the same place as a bunch of other people. And you'd make friendships, which is always good. You could never have enough friends.

Students described the benefit of "growing as a person," developing personality traits, and becoming a free thinker as positive outcomes of their college experience. Rebecca, a junior human biology major with plans to attend medical school, described many of the aspects of the college experience in her response to a question regarding what you can gain from college:

> You, your eyes are opened to other people's lives, I think, and where you've been privileged and where you've been underprivileged or other people have been, and even if you didn't graduate, even attending, I think, the classes. Especially at KU, a more liberal school, the classes that I have taken, I've gotten to know myself in different ways, so

things I didn't know I was passionate about came to the surface and you get to meet

people who are doing things that inspire you to do cool things. And also, leadership

opportunities. There are so many campus organizations and Greek life as well for you to

be in a leadership role that you may not have expected for yourself and that has taught me

a lot about who I am and who I want to be, outside of obviously academics, which you

gain a lot from your coursework. But outside of academics, I think you just grow as a

person.

These responses indicate a sentiment that was shared by the majority of students

interviewed: that the experience of attending college in itself is beneficial. College is seen as a

fun time where a person can live away from their parents and become an adult self, as Claire, a

junior applied behavioral science major described:

You can gain, I mean you gain friends instantly. I feel like you transform as a person;

you leave your high school self and just continue to grow. You find new interests, you

find what you're good at; you're a different person than when you left high school.

The four years spent in the pursuit of a bachelor's degree are viewed as a time to enjoy making

new friends, taking advantage of fun opportunities, and to become an adult self.

To summarize the findings from research question one, approximately half of the

students interviewed were unable to quantify their financial investment in their degree. Students

interviewed consistently reported the following as benefits of their degree: obtaining the

credential necessary for a career, realizing the expectation of financial security, realizing the

expectation of (career) success, and enjoying the college experience in the process.

Hiring Professionals' Expectations of Liberal Arts Candidates

A sample of 14 hiring professionals who recruit students with a liberal arts degree were

interviewed about what they look for in college graduates. All hiring professional participants

reported wanting students to gain necessary workplace skills from their college education and believed that the degree demonstrates a drive to succeed that will be beneficial in the workplace. Hiring professionals also agreed that they highly value the experiences gained outside of the classroom; employers seek to hire applicants who demonstrate a history of work experience, leadership roles, and extra-curricular involvement. Finally, the majority of employers interviewed described a student's major as playing a minor role in their organization's hiring decisions. These ideas are summarized in Table 5 (see appendix A) and are discussed in detail below.

Workplace skills and drive to succeed. When asked what skills they are looking for in college graduates, the sample of hiring professionals interviewed all described skills needed for entrance to the professional workplace, with general words like professionalism and specific skills such as communication and persuasion. Primarily, the sample described the general "good person" skills that allow for success in all realms: motivation, resiliency, dedication, independence, organization, passion, and leadership. Leadership was the most consistently used term, with 12 of the 14 employers interviewed stressing the importance of the leadership skills developed during college and the ways students could stand out as leaders in work experiences and extra-curricular organizations. Several employers mentioned the specific skill of communication competence as desired in candidates. Other than the specific skill of communication, employers did not mention other skills that they want students to gain from their college education. Instead, they focused on the drive to succeed in the workplace. Robbie, a 32-year-old executive manager in a retail environment, described what he looks for in candidates:

> I mentioned it once before but that resiliency is a big piece so being resilient, being able
> to move within work flows so not being pushed back or not ... not being ... having a bad

attitude about something changing or being able to work through changes or being able to

work through failures. I think that's probably the number one thing we look for and then

just the ability to be a strong-willed person like we said that's the typical being a leader

part so not sitting back and just watching everything happening but being involved, being

somebody that will push the whatever process it is forward.

Caitlin, a 30-year-old recruiter in a financial services organization, associated the following

qualities with college graduates: "I mean I think we recruit college grads for a reason. We feel

like they're very bright and motivated coming out of schools today." Patty, a 50-year-old

supervisor at a non-profit organization, noted that the degree demonstrates a base level of ability

in candidates: "And we know that they are at least bright enough to get themselves the degree.

There's some level of testing that they've gone through."

All employer participants echoed this focus on candidate characteristics, rather than

specific skills. Only one hiring professional (out of 14) noted that her company requires certain

technical skills gained from specific coursework in their applicants.

These positive qualities and personal characteristics are not necessarily learned in a

specific college course or major, but employers described these as gained from the process of

going through college, as this quote from Tammy, a 28-year-old recruiter for the insurance

industry, demonstrates:

If I'd never been through that experience, of college, trying to juggle everything, I'd

probably crack right under the pressure, but relying on the fact that you've done it before

and you have tools and resources personally, whether that's an Excel spreadsheet that you

use, or a planner, or your phone. Those things, I think, definitely help with the day-to-day

tasks of being in the workforce.

Helen, a 45-year-old manager in a retail organization, described what her organization looks for in college graduates, highlighting the workplace skills associated with a college education:

Because what we want to look for is two things, that they can learn quickly and be able to want to do more and have goals for themselves set in there. We think college brings that out of students. That's two qualities that we feel like are a must to be able to work [at our organization] long term.

Hailey, a 23-year-old recruiter in a financial services organization, similarly described the personal characteristics one gains from the process of obtaining a college degree:

I believe that it teaches you life skills, how to cope, how to persevere … you know, whenever you have four exams in two days, how are you going to time manage yourself, what are you going to do to get that done, you're working with different professors who are from different worlds, how are you going to create that communication and clarity in to what you're doing also.

The hiring professionals interviewed in this project articulated a perception that college graduates possess certain qualities that make them assets to the organization. Characteristics such as dedication, perseverance, resiliency, and work ethic were all described as qualities signaled by the act of graduating from college that would benefit students in the workforce.

Additional experience (beyond the degree) required. Hiring professionals interviewed also agreed on the importance of experiences gained outside of the classroom. The employers interviewed all actively recruit on college campuses for interns and full-time hires; thus a college degree is the base requirement for these positions. All hiring professionals interviewed stressed the importance of the work experience and leadership opportunities gained by students during college, and did not focus on the topics learned in a classroom environment. Robbie, a 32-year-

old executive manager in a retail environment, described this deemphasizing of the topics learned in the classroom:

> I think ultimately if you go ... you learn something when you go to college and that's what we ... that's what ... if the interactions with people and your professors and just that journey, like [our company] understands that that is a learning time and if ultimately if you complete that learning time, that's what we want. And so it doesn't matter what you learned about as long as you have that personality and those leadership skills that you gathered along the way, that's what we're looking for.

The work experiences and hands-on skills are viewed as more important than learning content in a specific major. Kathleen, a 65-year-old human resources manager in the financial services industry, described what she looks for on a candidate's resume:

> One of the first things before I get them in is I do pay attention to the work experience that's listed on the resume. When we get them into an interview, and before the interview, when I'm looking on the resume, I like to see longer term work history.

Stacy, a 25-year-old recruiter in the financial services industry, echoed this privileging of work experience, as she described what she wants to see in candidates: "Are you working while you're in school, are you involved in organizations, are you getting that leadership experience?"

Leadership in particular was stressed by employers, and was the most cited quality in the interviews with 12 of the 14 hiring professionals mentioning this term specifically. Jessica, a 33 year-old human resources executive in the retail industry, talked more specifically about the importance of leadership:

> It seems to me like and I've talked to a lot of different employers that the big competencies that everyone's looking for right now is always leadership. So I don't know if its like stressing that within projects that … it's important to at least take on a

leadership role within a project at least even if it's outside of your comfort zone. If you're a good solid contributor making sure that you lead a project at least once in your college career. So leadership always seems to be one.

Helen, a 45-year-old executive manager in the retail industry, described the importance of leadership in this way:

It's about being a leader and figuring out the experiences that way to look at leadership things for me anyways and you can do multiple things and it shows you that you pushed yourself and you want to learn and you want to be better.

These comments about internships, work history, and leadership involvement demonstrate how much emphasis is placed on experience. When asked what could be done to improve the college experience and how faculty and staff could help students to be better prepared to enter the workforce, all of the suggestions were focused on the skills gained through work experience and hands-on leadership. Employers suggested experiences such as job shadowing, career exploration, and internships, and classes on workplace behavior, networking, and relationship building.

This privileging of experience over education is also reflected in the discussion of the importance of a candidate's GPA. Only a very few employers required a specific GPA, and several did not care about it at all and instead were simply looking for the college degree. Elisa, a 35-year-old human resources manager in a retail environment, described the GPA policy at her organization:

We don't really look too much at the GPA. I don't look too much the GPA at all. Again, we're looking for different skills. If you've worked through your school and you can't focus totally on school, I can see that your hard work has been put in in that aspect. We just don't really, or I don't really look at GPAs all that much. I mean, obviously, if you're

not very, if it's really low, that might be a problem but ...No. In our background checks,

we check for a Bachelor's Degree. We do not check for GPA. We don't check the GPA at

all.

Although GPA is seen as a quick way to estimate how "driven" an applicant is, which is a

desired quality, the hiring professionals interviewed reported looking for a balance between

education and experience. Since all of the applicants they are considering have a bachelor's

degree, this education is the baseline requirement and in order to stand out students need to excel

in leadership positions and work experiences.

College major as minimally important. The hiring professionals in this sample reported

their organizations were open to hiring a wide variety of majors, and therefore they described the

choice of a college major as minimally important. Only one employer indicated any strong

preference for a certain major, and all of the others said that experiences gained outside of the

classroom were more important when considering the candidate than what major they pursued.

Patty, a 50-year-old working at a non-profit organization, responded in this way when asked

about the importance of a student's major:

It can help get them in the door but honestly depending on their personality and how they

present themselves and maybe what they've done like a volunteer or in other parts of their

life, the major may be totally unimportant. Our executive director at [the organization]

has a masters degree in like in rhetoric in Russian literature, something crazy, nothing to

do with social service but she has a background. So, it's not that important but can

definitely help get you in the door.

Tammy, a 28-year-old recruiter in the insurance industry, had a similar response, indicating that

a student with any college major could be a good fit for the positions she hires for:

I wouldn't say one type of major is more successful in these roles than another. We're not

major specific and so, I just interviewed someone who got his Bachelor's in theater.

Talking to him, he would be a fantastic fit for the role. We're not major specific and I

personally haven't noticed any specific themes or trends with majors.

As Patty noted above, people established in their careers do not always have majors that "make sense" with their position. Stacy, a 25-year-old recruiter in the financial services industry, echoed this sentiment and described the secondary nature of the college major in her organization:

We always laugh here because I mean the managing directors, I mean one of them was a

history major, one of them was … I have no idea what William was; he is our managing

partner. Literally no clue. I mean it just, they just kind of laugh because they don't think

it really matters at all. I mean you need your college degree and you need to have that

experience but there's a lot of other things that you can learn along the way. So I don't

know, I am a true believer of that. My dad's always told me that. It doesn't matter what

your major is, just who you are and what you can with what you have, so.

The hiring professionals interviewed were open to hiring a variety of majors, and did not indicate a preference for a certain major. The experiences and skills the candidate has built up outside of their classroom experiences were more important than the content learned in a certain discipline.

Summary. Research question one explored the concept of the return on investment of the liberal arts degree. Students saw the degree as providing a return in four areas: providing a credential necessary to enter the workforce, providing financial security after graduation, leading to the expectation of (career) success, and the fun times and personal growth of the college experience. Hiring professionals reported they want students to gain the general skills required in the workplace and that completion of the college degree demonstrates a candidate's internal motivation to succeed. Although the degree is a baseline requirement for these positions,

employers are more interested in what students have done outside of the classroom in regards to work experience and leadership roles, and are open to hiring a variety of college majors.

Student Career Expectations

Research question two looked at how this group of students describes their future career. Four characteristics of their future career were described, and a fifth idea of a balance between money and happiness in one's career emerged as an important consideration for students. The four characteristics of a desired career are: 1) a career that provides personal fulfillment; 2) a career that is stable, yet growing; 3) a career that "uses" their college degree; and 4) a career where they can make a difference. These themes are summarized in Table 6 (see Appendix A) and each is elaborated below.

A career that provides personal fulfillment. A majority of students interviewed (16 of the 17) specifically described wanting a career that provides personal fulfillment or enjoyment. Responses to the student survey reinforced this finding, as 54 (N=79, 68.4%) mentioned that when selecting their major personal interest and enjoyment was a key concern. Students described personal fulfillment as enjoying the work so they don't get bored, and constantly learning and applying knowledge in their work. Students expressed the desire to have a career where they are "where you want to be" and are able to complete tasks that are interesting to them. Tyler, a junior theater major, described this as, "When you feel truly happy about what you do. When you don't get tired of doing what you do."

Personal fulfillment was frequently defined in contrast to jobs that participants have held in the past that were unfulfilling, boring, and repetitive. Heather, a junior American studies major, compared her experience working in a clothing store to what she hopes to be doing after graduation:

I'm attending college because I like to learn and I didn't really see anything else with my

life because when I had a job, I wasn't learning anything and it seemed pointless to me. I

decided I want a job in education because I want to always be learning or want to be

finding something new because otherwise I get really bored and I don't find interest in.

Garrett, a junior linguistics and computer science major, explained this aspect of personal

fulfillment as part of what distinguishes a job from a career:

A job is something you do to make money; and while you should do your job well still,

you should still take pride in your work, that's what it is. A career is essentially the path

you want to be on. It's hopefully a field you love that you take enjoyment being in. It's

not always going to be roses; it's where you want to be, essentially.

When describing their career goals, respondents' enthusiasm for their major and/or career path

was obvious. Whether that was working in a museum, becoming a pastor, or going on an

anthropological dig, students' interest in their chosen career field was evident in remarks such as

James's (an anthropology and education major) quote below:

Even though some people might find digging in the dirt, looking for small little bone

shards or this that and the third boring. This sounds awesome to me. Having been able to

it a couple times, finding a lot of dirt, and then you find the one arrowhead or find this

after you unearthed everything and find a specific layout of rocks. It made all the digging

through all the dirt and hundreds of hours for that 10 minutes of actual pure exploration

just awesome. That's why I think an advanced degree in anthropology.

Although not all of the participants had such a clear-cut career goal, they still described the goal

of finding a career that is personally fulfilling, provides happiness, and doesn't seem like

"work."

A career that is stable, yet growing. A majority of students interviewed (13 of the 17) described their desired career as one that provides job stability with room for advancement. The career students plan to pursue after graduation not only has potential for advancement, but also potential for the student to move away from their hometown, which was specifically mentioned by several students.

Students' descriptions of their anticipated careers included security in knowing that they will not be terminated without cause, and that provides the ability to move up into management roles or advance within the organization. For these students, a "good job" means that there are options and flexibility in how tasks can be fulfilled, and it is possible to "maximize your potential." Claire, a junior applied behavioral science major, described the characteristics of her dream job as a camp director:

I feel like because it's a mix of working with kids, it's in a fun environment, which I want to be in a fun environment and constantly moving and fast paced. It's in a beautiful area in California. Just I feel like the potential of what you can do within that job.

Here Claire described her desire to be in an interesting environment with the potential for growth, which she perceives will be in her reach due to her college education. This description can be contrasted to Nick's (a junior communication studies and psychology major) description of what his life would be like without a college degree:

Because there's not too much left you can do after that. There are not too many options. I could always go back into construction after college or whatever if nothing else works out but I didn't want to leave that as my only option.

Students perceived that without a college degree they would be stuck in a career, with no room to advance and described their desired career as one that would provide security and room for advancement.

A career that "uses" one's college degree. Finding a career that "used" their college degree was important to most of the participants interviewed (13 out of 17). This sentiment is echoed in the results of the student survey, as 40 students (*N*=79, 50.6%) mentioned that the career prospects associated with their major were an important component of the major selection process. Students expressing this idea wanted a career that would use the skills developed during college or at least require some level of specialization. The perception that what individuals learn in college is relevant to their careers, and ideally the job they obtain after graduation job is aligned with their major, is demonstrated by this quote from Claire, a junior applied behavioral science major:

> I feel like if it … You say a real job, its like applying your major to something and using your degree to get a job, not just go to a mall and work at a desk. I feel it's using your, if you get a business degree going to find a business or a marketing degree or a communications degree, you want to write newspapers and TV companies.

For some students, like Rebecca, a human biology major who plans to attend medical school, this pathway from college to career was clear, and the skills that she was learning in her biology major were perceived to relate directly to her future career goals. Even students without a clear goal in mind expressed the perception that their job after graduation should relate in some way to what they studied during college. Cassandra, a junior history major, responded in this way when asked about what her job after graduation might entail:

> Not going in and like … I mean, you still have to work your way up but not going in at the bottom where it's like, "Oh, well we kind of don't need you because anyone could do that job." It's at least semi specialized. You have a degree for a reason. It's not like anyone could come in and do it. Its like, "Well, I know this so I know how to do it … I

can actually do that job," and like, "That's why we're hiring you because you can do this."

For these students, their desired career requires the specialization of the degree and the "reason" they are working toward the college degree is to prepare them to work in a specific career field.

Kent, a senior political science and English major, noted that although the goal is to have a job that "uses" one's degree, it is not always apparent how the skills developed during college play out in the workforce. Below is his response when asked what he felt could be done to improve the college experience:

> Telling us why the skills that we're learning are truly relevant for the rest of our lives; why we're not just customers at a business; and a little bit more of how exactly, we are going to use the things that we're learning. I work in an office on campus now, and I'm around people in the office that are professionals. They work there. They have benefits. They have all of the things that go with having a grown-up job. I don't know how much I see them utilizing what they learned in college. It seems like they went through college to get the piece of paper that says, "I'm good to work for this," and then they learned an entirely different skillset upon entering the workplace. I just … I don't know why that's not as cohesive. But, maybe I'll find out. I just wish that we had a little more explanation as to … or maybe a little more, "Hey. These are the things that you're probably actually going to be doing in the real world, so here it is in the curriculum."

Here Kent expressed his desire to have a clear connection between the skills learned in college and the competencies needed to be successful in the workforce, while noting a disconnect between the two. These quotes demonstrate the perception expressed by these 13 students that a person's career should "use" the knowledge from their degree, and highlights the fact that it is

not always clear to students how these skills will translate into the workforce. Students expressed a desire for their college courses to relate directly to their future career.

A career where they can make a difference. Of the students interviewed, 10 out of 17 specifically mentioned wanting to pursue a career that allows them to see the outcomes of their work, in whatever capacity might fit their personal career goals. Whether healing as a doctor, teaching children, or entertaining people in theater, the goal is the same: to make a positive "impact" on society. Participants want to feel useful in their career and have the potential to advance their field. Henry, a junior religious studies major who plans to become a pastor, described this well:

> I guess, just first instinct, I want to help people, whatever that looks like, whatever shape or form. I know helping takes a variety of forms for different people. That's my number one interest. I never feel better than if I know I've helped someone in some way, shape, or form. Sometimes that's words of advice or just physically being there, not saying anything, for someone in crisis. I've had to do that in the past couple years with my position in the hall. For me, that is a great feeling of success for me.

Other students expressed an interest in making significant contributions to their field, as described by Garrett, a junior linguistics and computer science major:

> Honestly, I would probably hope to eventually be some level of management, because I think I can do it. I'm pretty decent with people. I'm working on being better in leadership roles. I would like to be in some kind of software company like I was saying earlier. And honestly, I would like to help develop things, help push the frontiers of things. I just don't feel like I need to be Bill Gates. But yeah, that would be ... to me, that would be a lot of fun to be part of a team, essentially, that is pushing the frontier of technology ... whatever I'm working on at the time.

The contribution students want to make in their career could be through directly helping others or contributing to their field as a whole.

As with the previous themes in research question two, the concept of "making an impact" was often defined in terms of what is not desired in a career, including sitting behind a computer, data entry, and working as a cashier. Heather, a junior American studies and history major, described an ideal career in this way, after reflecting on her previous work experience:

One that you enjoy, one that you're always learning something in, one where you're not just … One where you're useful, not useless because you know there are people that hate their jobs the most that doing something that being useless to society because they're not gaining anything from it. I feel like you need to gain something from your job to be useful and for it to be a good job.

Students overall articulated a desire to pursue a career that allowed them to make a difference, be useful, and advance in their field.

Balance between money and happiness. Finally, the balance between the salary earned and the enjoyment of the career was discussed by all participants as they responded to an interview question about how they weigh money and happiness in their future career. Although "happiness" was privileged for almost all of the participants, there was clearly a tension between the two that students recognized. Student comments included a focus on paying off their student loan debt, but overall they indicated happiness rather than earning a lot of money was the most important indicator of success. Participants recognized that they needed to have "enough" money (though they largely were not able to define what this might be), and assumed that since they were earning their college degree, the salary associated with their career would be sufficient. A quote from Nick, a junior communication studies and psychology major, demonstrates this vague notion of what a career should entail: "Somewhere where I have enough money to pay for the

essentials and live like normally and be happy with it." This finding relates back to the idea in research question one that the expectation of financial security is one of the returns on the investment in a degree.

The majority of participants expressed the importance of focusing on what is of interest, rather than just what will make money, and they discussed the balance between work and life. Kevin, a senior majoring in East Asian language and culture, described the privileging of happiness in this way: "I'm of the opinion that you should probably be doing what you love if you want to be happy in the end. Even if you aren't making mad bank, you're still, you're happy with what you're doing." Heather, a junior American studies and history major, reiterated this point in the following quote: "If I'm working a job that I love, even if I don't get paid a lot, I love it so I don't equate money to success like some people do. I equate being happy to being successful." When asked about the salary she would like to earn after graduation, she responded in this way:

> I never thought about it … I just want to have a job that I like, that I enjoy. Whether I work my way up in the field or I stay in the same position my whole life, as long as I'm happy doing it and I enjoy it, I'm not worried about it, if I only ever earn $30,000 a year for the rest of my life but I really enjoy my life then that's great and if I earn a $100,000 a year and enjoy my life for the rest of my life then that's also great but money doesn't really matter and the position doesn't really matter.

Overall, the students interviewed in this study privileged the concept of "happiness" in their career over the goal of making money. They expressed confidence that they would make "enough" money to live "normally" or "comfortably" but that they did not need to earn a high salary to be happy in their career. It is more important, according to these students, to pursue a

career that is interesting and fulfilling to them, as expressed by Cassandra, a junior who switched from engineering to history:

> Kind of say that they are kind of equal but more like earning a living a little more but I definitely want to enjoy it. If I only just wanted to make money, I would have definitely stayed an engineer but I don't want to be bored out of my mind and just a droid making stuff or something. I actually want to have some remote interest in it.

Cassandra is a first-generation college student who chose to attend an out-of-state school, despite the high tuition costs.

Summary. The findings from research question two describe how students view their future career and how they privilege the idea of happiness over monetary gain. The students in this sample describe their future career as one that is stable with room for advancement, provides personal fulfillment, and allows one to make a difference in their field while using the knowledge gained in college.

Managing Uncertainty Regarding Employment After Graduation

Students pursuing a liberal arts major may face uncertainty due to the lack of a pre-determined career track associated with their major. Students interviewed expressed a range of levels of certainty in their future, from articulating a specific career goal with a step-by-step plan for achievement, to vague notions of what their career path may look like. The following two quotes demonstrate the opposite ends of the spectrum. Rebecca, a junior human biology and applied behavioral science major, had a very clear picture of the path her career will follow:

> So I'll start applying to medical school now. Well not now, but this coming summer, and if I get accepted, then I'll attend the fall after my graduation from undergraduate work and it's four years. The last two years are more clinical practicum stuff and the first two is just academic coursework, so similar to undergraduate. And then, from there, I go to

residency which is like one to two years for a naturopath. But I, I would graduate with a

doctorate in Naturopathic Medicine, but the specific program that I want to do is actually

six years and it combines naturopathic medicine with oriental medicine.

In contrast, Nick, a junior student-athlete communication studies major who recently transferred

to this university, did not articulate specific plans for post-graduation:

My goal is to play in professional baseball but if that doesn't work out then I'd get a

degree out of it, out of being here. My goal's to play but like if I could do something

related to baseball or something like that, that would be beneficial….. I honestly don't

know what I'm going to do with this major yet. I haven't really gotten that far into it. I'm

pretty much just floating through right now I guess. I haven't really figured out too much

about my future other than right now.

Students also varied in their knowledge of their chosen career path, some able to

articulate exactly what the daily tasks of the job entail, with others struggling to describe what

the tasks associated with their career would be. Kayla, a junior communication studies major

with a vague interest in marketing, responded in this way when asked about what the specific

duties of her job would be: "Maybe just like taking notes, making PowerPoints over what I'm

supposed to do. I don't know, be in meetings. I'm not really sure." In contrast, others were able to

describe in more detail what their future job would entail, as demonstrated by this quote from

Tyler, a junior theatre major who would like to pursue a career in acting, in response to the same

question about the specific duties of his future job:

Memorizing lines, blocking some scenes, eating a bagel with crew people, waking up at

like 6:00 in the morning to get ready, to get ready for a film shoot or to get ready with the

blocking in the play on Broadway or something. Just all I can see me doing is looking at

a script, try to memorize the lines, try to get your work cut out for you by researching on

what, on who your character is and what kind of a character that person is, what makes the character the character.

Overall, students expressed a high level of confidence in their ability to successfully transition from college to career. Although students ranged in their ability to articulate a plan or specific career goal, the majority (15 out of 17) expressed confidence in their future. Only two students interviewed expressed anxiety or concern about the future. This quote from Garrett, a junior linguistics and computer science major, demonstrates this minority of students who felt uncertain:

> Right now, I'm very anxious about it, because I haven't had an internship yet, I don't have a fantastic resume for this field, and I don't necessarily have the best grades in engineering for a variety of reasons that don't include necessarily school itself. But I'm working on it. I'm working on it pretty hard. When I get into the flow of it, I'm not bad at ... I'm not bad at programming; I'm good at it when I actually am making myself doing studying, doing the thing well.

Macy, a junior global and international studies major, expressed her uncertainty in this way:

> I'm not very confident just because ... I don't know. I know that it's really competitive, and I don't really know what I want. So I'm worried people will be able to see that, but I feel that I have enough extra that's going for me like speaking Spanish, and I studied abroad, and I've had good jobs, and hopefully I'll get an internship this summer, and I hope that those sort of things will like make people choose me over other people, so I'm not particularly confident, but I feel like I can get something for sure, even if it's not my first choice.

Although both of these students acknowledged a level of anxiety or insecurity about their future, at the same they expressed an underlying perception that everything would be "okay."

For the majority of the sample interviewed, however, students expressed confidence in their future plans and accepted that uncertainty is part of life that must be dealt with. They reflected a perception that although life after college is uncertain, as one cannot know what job they will hold after graduation until it is secured, that everything would be "fine." Nick, a junior communication studies and psychology major, described this sentiment when he said:

> I try, I try to think about the present not so much like the past or the future. I try to live in the now kind of thing and do everything I can right now to help myself in the future. I believe it will work itself out.

Although they ranged in their ability to articulate a career plan, the majority of students in this sample expressed confidence in their future.

Student interviews reflected three strategies to manage uncertainty regarding their future: 1) Viewing their major as linked directly to a career field; 2) Creating an action plan; and 3) Expressing confidence in their personal background and skills. These are summarized in Table 7 (see Appendix A).

Viewing their major as linked directly to a career field. All students interviewed in this sample viewed their major as preparation for a specific career field. Although degrees in the liberal arts do not lead to specific occupations, as might an engineering or education degree, all students interviewed described their majors as preparation for a certain type of career, and in many cases articulated a specific career track based on their major. Kevin, a junior majoring in East Asian language and culture, had the following plan for his path after graduation and described how he perceives his major to be preparation for this career:

> I would like to eventually work in the videogame industry, like I said, how I detailed previously, but I do realize that's probably not going to happen right away. Those are positions that, again, you know, require the years of experience. So coupled with my

journalism experience and that kind of, I guess, PR kind of work, perhaps I could start off in a company, whether they're an American company that deals with Japanese business or if it's a Japanese business that has a branch in America or potentially even just a Japanese company in Japan, I could build myself as a PR person or one with writing experience and try to get maybe an entry level job somewhere there to start off with and then work my way up with experience.

This quote demonstrates the type of link students see between their major and their career path. Even students with a less clear sense of their career path saw the major as connected to future careers, as shown in this quote from Kayla, a junior communication studies major:

I could probably do a lot with communications. Public relations, like I said. If I wanted to freelance write, I could do that. With my minor, I kind of want to do marketing. Just maybe work in ... I don't know, whatever will take me, honestly. Maybe counseling, I could do that. Something like that.

Kent, a junior political science and English major, described the role of a major as preparation for a career by explaining how he started with his career goals in mind and then decided what major would provide preparation for this career:

Well, I thought about what I wanted to do, really, first. I didn't know exactly what. I didn't decide, "I'm definitely going to law school," or anything like that. But, I kind of worked backwards from that. I knew I wanted it to be something public service related, something communications related. So, yeah, I went backward from that, and then I looked at other majors and thought about what they could offer me and what I could get out of them, what kind of potential was there, and I wound up with the two.

Cassandra, a junior history major who had switched from engineering, is a good example of how the students in this sample managed uncertainty by connecting their major with a career path.

Here she described her switch from engineering, which she perceived would lead directly to a job, to a history major:

> It's not like I just completely and utterly just jumped over it like, "History major," it's like, what would I do with a history major. Am going to become a teacher? Am I going to do this? Am I going to do that? I was like, "I don't know, I kind of like museums. I'm in museums all the time." I give tours at the D-Day Museum in New Orleans over a summer because I literally was there every day and got so acquainted with it. I was like, "That's something I could do with a history major," it's not just like, "Oh, I want to graduate with a history major and have no idea what I want to do with my life." I know what I want to do with this so I'm actually going to be like, "Ok, I can allow myself to jump to a new major and not just quit I guess."

For Cassandra, it was acceptable to switch to a history major because there was a new career goal in mind. Uncertainty in one's future was managed in this sample by viewing the major as a linked to a career path.

This strategy is also expressed through the desire of students to take "useful" classes. When asked for their suggestions on how they would improve the college experience, approximately half of the students interviewed wanted to take more practical classes that would directly help them in their future career, instead of taking classes such as foreign languages and western civilization that they did not view as being important for their future. Elizabeth, a senior visual art and anthropology major, reflected on her experience of retaking a variety of general education classes after her credits did not transfer from another school:

> I don't really appreciate doing that. I don't think that it's very relevant to anything that I'm going to do in the future. A lot of it is not important when compared to how important it would be to get a class with laboratory experience, or a class on paleo-Indian sites or

something specific that actually gives me a skill that I will use when I leave here as

opposed to dead philosophers that I don't really care about.

The participants who expressed discontent with taking classes that would not apply to their major

wanted instead to replace these classes with ones that would more directly apply to their future.

In particular, seven participants wanted to take personal finance classes that would cover such

topics as taxes, mortgages, and paying back student loans.

Creating an action plan. For a majority of the students interviewed (13 out of 17)

uncertainty about their future was mitigated through the articulation of an action plan. These

action plans outlined steps that the student would take to increase their confidence about the

transition from college to career. These action plans included: conducting research about career

possibilities, gaining experience in internships, speaking to advisors, attending career fairs,

improving their GPAs, working on time management, gaining leadership experience,

volunteering, taking additional courses, and networking. Carly, a junior applied behavioral

sciences major, described her research-oriented action plan to reduce her uncertainty about her

future:

> I would look on the KU website and find the certain types of jobs, I'd look and see who
>
> the employers were, what the titles were and what those meant. I guess I should probably
>
> look at salary. I never even thought about that. Just to be able to say when people are like,
>
> "So what do you wanna do?" I can confidently be like, "I wanna do this."

Spencer, a junior economics and German major, outlined his action plan, including internships

and additional coursework:

> Internships during the summertime. Internships are big. You hear employers talking
>
> about it. Last Thursday I had a job interview at the computer center. I would be an entry-
>
> level student assistant, whatever, over the telephone, which I think would be really good

experience. General IT experience is something that a lot of employers look for. I was

talking to a friend earlier today about his major. He's a computer science major. I asked

him if they offer like a minor in computer science, and he didn't know. I'll probably find

that out, and if it's real easy to minor in it, then maybe that's something I should think

about. Internships, and just focusing on finding a minor that's really going to complement

my major, no matter what I'm going to be doing after I graduate.

Kyle, a senior communication studies major with a business minor, described his action plan for

the job search using networking and starting the job search well in advance of graduation:

I guess what I've kind of decided to start my job search is just kind of getting contact

with some of my connections that I've made through networking and just kind of explore

some opportunities. I've kind of narrowed the fields down to sales, marketing, and public

relations because that's kind of within communication. Then kind of just right now

exploring, seeing if I can get any contacts of people within those fields and kind of get

the ball rolling a little bit. It is October so I do have some time but I don't want to wait

too long and then really just kind of go from there.

These quotes are representative of the majority of interview participants who reported managing

uncertainty in their future by articulating an action plan.

Expressing confidence in their personal background and skills. Approximately half

of the students interviewed (9 out of 17) reduced uncertainty in their future by expressing

confidence in their personal background and skills. These students reported feeling confident that

their career plans would be realized due to their previous experience and specific skill set. A

quote from Rebecca, a junior human biology major who plans to attend medical school,

demonstrated this strategy for managing uncertainty about her future:

I am very confident that I will be able to, that I will be accepted to medical school and I don't know of anyone to graduate from medical school and not get a job, so I'm also very confident there. And like the experiences I kind of just talked about have led me to feel confident, especially for naturopathic medical school what they want to see is that you express deep concern for why people are the way that they are and so with the combination of my major and then the things that I'm involved in outside of academic work, I think it'll show them that's true about me.

Claire, a junior applied behavioral science major, expressed similar confidence in her future due to her past experience:

I'm pretty confident with the camps just because I have had now six years of experience within the organization and I know they like to have people … They like to hire people that have been there for a while and I feel like I've done all the stages of it, being a camper and then their junior leadership stuff.

Kayla, a junior communication studies major, described how her skill set creates a level of certainty in her ability to obtain her career goals: "Communication skills, definitely, just with people. Customer service skills. A lot of creativity, I bet, and just a good work ethic. I think that'll help." These quotes are representative of the approximately half of students interviewed who used the strategy of expressing confidence in their personal background and skill set to manage uncertainty regarding their future.

Summary. Research question three examined how liberal arts students manage the uncertainty surrounding employment after graduation. Students expressed a range of certainty in their future, from a clear articulation of a career path with step-by-step plans to a vague notion of what they might do after graduation. However, across all levels of clarity in career plans was an underlying perception of confidence in one's future with only two students expressing high

levels of uncertainty about their post-graduate life. Students managed the uncertainty in their future through three strategies: 1) viewing the major as linked to a certain career; 2) articulating an action plan; and 3) expressing confidence in their personal background and skills.

Student Accounts Reflecting a Master Narrative of College

Research question four explored the extent to which participant accounts reflect a master narrative of college in American life. A master narrative is defined as a larger cultural narrative that implicitly influences our personal stories (Tannen, 2008), and such narratives reflect the values of the dominant culture (Bergen, 2010). Student accounts described two overall themes that suggest a master narrative of college that may guide student's thoughts and decisions: 1) College attendance is an expected next step for them; and 2) College leads to a meaningful career. Similar articulation of these themes from the interviews with hiring professionals is included to demonstrate the broad-ranging nature of these ideas. These two ideas are connected to the findings from the previous three research questions, as will be discussed in chapter five.

College attendance as their expected next step. Participants in this study described a college education as an assumed next step, rather than as an active choice. Of the students interviewed, only one had not expected to attend college; the remaining 16 assumed college would be an expected step in their life. In response to an open-ended survey question regarding messages received about college, 21 (N=79, 26.6%) students mentioned that they were expected to attend college, or always assumed that they would attend college. Although not specifically asked about the expectation of college attendance or their own decision to attend college, several hiring manager responses also spoke to the idea of college attendance as an expected next step.

For 16 of the students interviewed, attending college was an expectation and was described as less an active choice and more an obvious next step. Students were unable to articulate specific messages from others regarding their own college attendance, and instead

described this an underlying assumption. Macy, a junior global and international studies major, described her decision to attend college in this way: "I just knew. I always knew I'd be going to college. So, I mean there wasn't really a point in high school. I just always planned to go to college." Kent, a senior political science and English major, said: "Well, I mean, it [college] was never an if. It was a when" and Elizabeth, a senior visual art and anthropology major, said, "College was kind of expected." Garrett, a junior linguistics and computer science major, responded in this way when asked about when he first started hearing about the idea of college: "You know, I don't know about my first recollection. Honestly, it [college] was just kind of a thing people did I guess really, and so I'm not really sure. Pretty much everybody was talking about going to college." These quotes exemplify the overwhelming perception expressed by interview participants that college was an expected next step. Only Cassandra, a junior history major and a first-generation college student, reported not considering attending college until her junior year of high school when a teacher approached her about it:

> Well, I was in advanced class, like the AP classes. It was more of like one teacher …
> whatever. Miss Smith, she was just like, "Cassandra, you have to go to college, like that's
> not a choice. I don't care if I have to pay for your application fees, you have to go,"
> and I was just like, "Okay, Miss Smith, great."

Even though Cassandra's parents did not instill in her the expectation of college attendance, she still heard this message through her teachers.

Several hiring professionals also spoke to the idea of college attendance as required, which reinforces an argument for a broad-based cultural assumption. It is noteworthy that all of the employers interviewed were selected because they primarily, and in many instances exclusively, hire individuals who have a bachelor's degree. Robbie, a 32-year-old manager in the retail industry, described the necessity of a college education in the workforce:

I think it's worth ... more worth it now because I think more people are getting it and so

you have to ... if you don't, you're behind. And I think the more you can and that's where

I can say now where even GPA matters and all these other extra things matters because

more and more people are getting degrees. And I think it's ... that's, again, where you

have to be strategic about what you want, what degree you get and how you leverage that.

So yeah, I think it's ... yeah, I think it needs to happen no matter what.

Tammy, a 28-year-old recruiter in the insurance industry, responded in this way when asked about the investment in a college degree: "I think, for me, it's been worth the investment. I think for the majority of the globe it's worth the investment. Any time we have a recession people go back to school."

Several students did acknowledge that other paths are available to high school graduates, namely the military and trade school. However, although this was perceived as an acceptable option for others, it was not viewed as an attractive option for the students interviewed. For them, college was the expected, and preferred, next step in their lives. Overall, these descriptions illustrate the idea that a college degree was perceived as an expectation for these students, an idea that was reinforced by several hiring professionals.

College leads to a meaningful career. Second, student accounts demonstrated the perception that college is their path to a meaningful career. This component of the master narrative is informed by several themes discussed in the previous research questions, which taken together demonstrate the perception of students that college will lead them to a meaningful career. Students described a benefit of their degree as the expectation of career success and viewed their major as linked directly to a career field. The characteristics of a "good job" as described by student align with previous research on meaningful work, as students described a desire for such qualities in a career as personal fulfillment, making a difference, and advancing

in the organization. Additionally, students viewed happiness in their future career as of primary importance, and their responses indicated a confidence that this would be achieved. In the student survey, 54 students (*N*=79, 68.4%) mentioned in response to an open-ended question that they picked their major due to personal interest in the subject area. This was by far the most consistent response in the survey and speaks to the broader idea of a link between a college degree and meaningful work. One of the most telling ways student responses spoke to the master narrative of college as leading to a meaningful career was through the consistent contrast between the jobs that they perceived were available to those without a college education and the careers they aspired to after graduation. Student accounts frequently contrasted the part-time jobs that they currently held with the career they would like to have after graduating from college, highlighting the ways in which their current job was unsatisfactory. Every student interviewed had a good sense of what he or she did *not* want to be doing as a career and expressed confidence that a career path with a college degree would be preferable to that without the degree. A quote from Macy, a junior global and international studies major, exemplifies this component of the master narrative as she outlined her beliefs about a career that does not include a college degree:

> You're not going to be able to get anything other than something really boring like data entry or receptionist type thing if you don't have a degree, otherwise you'll probably end up working in like the service industry where the hours are really off. That's mostly from my experience.

Students interviewed had a good sense of what they *don't* want to be doing, and see the college degree as the path away from these undesirable options. Jobs that require no college degree are viewed as less permanent and force a person to "bounce around." Words used to describe a career path of an individual without a college degree included "stagnant," "trapped," "stuck," and "struggle." This sentiment was demonstrated by James's (a junior anthropology and

education major) description of his motivation for attending college: "So by the time I figured out, wow I really need to go to college, otherwise I'm going to end up dying this town working at the local factory, which is Pacific Truck." Kyle, a senior communication studies major, had a similar perception to the contrast between his career prospects with and without a college degree:

> I don't think I would be very happy, just in the sense that I want to get a job where I can, where its like focused on relations, relationships with other people. I enjoy that and everything and you don't quite get that aspect in an hourly paid job, there might be something like that and everything but in terms of finding a job that I want to do that provides benefits, pays money and then also kind of fits within the criteria of what I would want to have as my dream job. You're not going to be able to find that without school.

These negative perceptions of a career are in contrast to what students want to be doing after graduation, which is working in personally fulfilling careers where they can advance and make a difference in people's lives. The responses of hiring professionals touched on this idea of college as linked to a meaningful career in several ways. Jennifer, a 43-year-old supervisor in higher education working in university admissions, spoke to the concerns prospective college students and their parents hold regarding the outcomes of a college education:

> It's definitely ... I think there's always been the job component. I mean, I think not always but in the recent history there's always been a job component but I think even more so, people are really wanting to know outcomes of what have other people been able to do with it, what type of jobs have they had, can I see myself doing that. They really want to know about internships. They want to know about job placement.

This quote speaks to the idea of college as linked to a career, and that students enter college with

certain career goals in mind. Dianne, a 59-year-old director of a non-profit, spoke to her own

perception that a college degree is linked to career success:

> I believe and this was just instilled in me from my parents, you are worth far more with a
>
> degree than you were without it. I don't care what your degree is. It opens doors. It opens
>
> doors. Regardless of what your major is. I think it gives you instant credibility on paper.
>
> You know, on paper it does. When somebody is looking at a résumé and you've got the
>
> degree versus somebody who doesn't, that's going to give you more consideration.

The majority of employers interviewed spoke of the college degree as a starting point in their

organization, and individuals with a degree would be able to move up in as little as 18 months.

These all speak to the link between college and career.

Summary. Research question four explored the potential of a master narrative of a

college degree, which guides student decisions to attend college and influences their decisions

during college. Student accounts were consistent with two aspects of a master narrative of

college, and interviews from hiring professionals provided support for these as broad-based

assumptions. The two components of the master narrative present in student accounts are: 1)

College attendance as their excepted next step; and 2) College leads to a meaningful career.

Summary of Results

Taken together, these results illuminate several aspects of how liberal arts students and

hiring professionals perceive the liberal arts degree and describe the expected connections

between education and work including how these ideas relate to career expectations and

managing the uncertainty surrounding the transition from college to career. Research question

one asked what liberal arts students perceive as the return on the investment of the liberal arts

degree and what hiring professionals expect of liberal arts candidates. The results here

demonstrated that students vary considerably in their ability to describe the financial investment

in their degree and perceive four benefits of attending college: obtaining a required credential which demonstrates that they will be a good employee, the expectation of financial security after graduation, the expectation of career success after graduation, and enjoying the college experience in the process. The hiring professionals interviewed wanted students to gain basic workplace skills and demonstrate their motivation to succeed by obtaining a college degree. Additionally, they highlighted the necessity of work and leadership experiences outside of the classroom, and described the college major as minimally important.

Research question two asked how liberal arts students described their future career. Students in this study described their desired career as one that provides personal fulfillment, is stable yet growing, "uses" their college degree, and provides the opportunity to make a difference. Finally, students viewed the happiness associated with their career as more important than salary. Research question three asked how liberal arts students report they manage their uncertainty regarding their future career. Student accounts demonstrated three strategies for managing uncertainty regarding their future: viewing the major as linked directly to a career, creating an action plan, and expressing confidence in their personal background and skills. Finally research question four explored the possibility that a master narrative of college may be influencing student and employer perceptions of the return on investment of a liberal arts degree. Student accounts spoke to two aspects of a master narrative of college: the expectation of college attendance and that college leads to a meaningful career.

The next chapter synthesizes the findings to the four research questions and makes a case for how this study contributes to the communication literature on master narratives, anticipatory socialization, meaningful work, and problematic integration theory. Additionally, practical implications for several key stakeholders in higher education are presented, including students, faculty/staff, and hiring professionals.

Chapter Five: Discussion

This study used interviews with liberal arts students (N=17), interviews with hiring professionals (N=14), and a survey of liberal arts students (N=79) to explore current understandings of the return on investment of a liberal arts degree. Specifically, the perceptions of both students and employers on what can be gained from investing in a bachelor's degree in the liberal arts were explored Additionally, students were asked about their career aspirations and how their college programs supported them. Results further addressed how uncertainty regarding the transition from college to career, particularly in light of the lack of a clear career track associated with a liberal arts bachelor's degree (Roksa & Levey, 2010), is managed by students. Finally, evidence of a master narrative of college that may influence perceptions of the liberal arts degree was explored.

This chapter provides both theoretical and practical implications of the results of the interviews and survey data presented in chapter four. First, this chapter describes how the liberal arts is defined by participants, discusses the evidence that points towards a master narrative of college, and describes participants' understanding of the financial and non-financial return on investment in the degree. Second, a case is made for how the results contribute to several areas of communication research. Third, practical implications of the results for college students, faculty/staff at the university level, and for hiring professionals who recruit college students are included. Finally, limitations of this study and directions for future research and final conclusions are presented.

Defining the Liberal Arts

A key finding of this study is the fact that students and hiring professionals did not define the liberal arts as a distinct entity, with specific characteristics sought out by students or valued by employers in the workforce. Although I did not enter this study with the goal of creating a

definition of the liberal arts, through the investigation of the financial and non-financial return on investment of the liberal arts degree, evidence that the liberal arts were not perceived as having an intrinsic value of their own emerged. Based on the perceptions revealed in the interview transcripts, it appeared that employers and students did not view a liberal arts degree as having specific attributes that have unique value, particularly in the workplace. Rather the liberal arts degree was described by this sample of hiring professionals as providing a baseline requirement for employment, certification that is needed for entrance to many of the organizations represented. The student sample described their liberal arts degree as fulfillment of the required certification of a bachelor's degree and as preparation for a chosen career field.

The hiring professionals interviewed did not differentiate the liberal arts degree from a business or journalism degree, saying that each would provide the basic requirement of a bachelor's degree that is necessary for entrance to their organization. With the exception of one financial services recruiter, the hiring professionals interviewed did not note any particular benefit of a liberal arts degree, just reported that this degree would provide the basic requirement of a bachelor's degree necessary for employment in their organizations. This was seen in the finding that hiring professionals view the college major as minimally important, and instead focus on additional experience gained outside of the classroom, whether in college settings or work, for the majority of the hiring decisions. Although this can relieve the pressure on liberal arts programs who worry that their graduates do not have a clear career track available to them after graduation (Roksa & Levey, 2010), this is also troubling news for programs that want to promote their distinct value to students. In light of recent attacks on liberal arts programs in the press and by political decision makers (Flaherty, 2012), the ability to articulate and promote the unique qualities of a liberal arts degree is significant. However, the findings here demonstrated that the hiring professionals interviewed did not see any unique benefits of the liberal arts degree,

and in several instances the jobs available to students in the organization were limited by the fact that a student was a liberal arts major, since only less specialized roles would be available to them. Interestingly, although the hiring professionals interviewed reported being open to hiring liberal arts majors, most mentioned focusing their recruitment efforts in the business or journalism school. This is another area for concern as liberal arts students may be missing out on information about career options and networking connections.

The students interviewed described their liberal arts degree as providing the preparation for their intended career and giving them a required credential. All students interviewed had at least a specific career field in mind for their future and saw their degree as preparation for this career. Only a few students spoke about their degree as a liberal arts degree in particular and instead focused on their specific major and the fact that a college degree was a required credential. Since the focus of the interview was gathering the perceptions of students about their liberal arts degree, they were not prompted with a definition of the liberal arts. The recruitment email specified that only liberal arts students were eligible to participate, so it was evident that the student interviewees were aware that their degree was indeed a liberal arts degree. However, they did not speak of any unique benefits related to the fact that they were earning a liberal arts degree. Rather, the students interviewed focused on the fact that their degree was an expected required credential that would open the door to job opportunities. The few students who mentioned that described their degree as a liberal arts degree in particular noted the perception that it may be difficult to find a job due to their liberal arts degree.

When asked what could be done to improve the academic part of their college experience, the students interviewed indicated a desire to take more "useful" classes, described as those that apply to their major, instead of general education requirements such as western civilization. Particularly since the liberal arts students interviewed were all (with one exception)

in their junior or senior year of college, and thus fully immersed in the liberal arts curriculum, it is notable that they did not express a desire to take classes which lead to goals of creating the well-rounded citizens which is a defining feature of a liberal arts education. Instead, students wanted to take more classes in their specific major, which was perceived would prepare them to transition more smoothly from college to career. The students interviewed defined their degree not as a liberal arts degree, but as a bachelor's degree that opened the door to job opportunities in a specific career field.

The way participants defined the liberal arts degree provides a framework for the discussion of the financial and non-financial return on investment, as it indicates that both students and hiring professionals are not necessarily viewing the liberal arts degree as a distinct entity with specific characteristics or benefits, but rather as a fungible requirement for employment.

The Pervasive Role of a Master Narrative

Interview and survey results demonstrate the influence of a master narrative of college in American life on student and hiring manager perceptions of the return in investment of the liberal arts degree, the career expectations of students, and how the uncertainty surrounding the transition from college to career is managed by students. This section makes a case for the existence of a master narrative of college, considers findings regarding the financial and non-financial return on investment of this degree, and outlines how this master narrative informs communication research in anticipatory socialization, meaningful work, and problematic integration theory.

Student interview accounts provide evidence for a master narrative of college, which described college attendance as their expected next step and that college leads to a meaningful career. Support for these ideas was also present in the open-ended survey questions. Research on

master narratives varies widely in the sample size used to argue that a master narrative does indeed exist. Adame and Knudson (2007) proposed a narrative of mental health in a study of just four individuals, while Trethewey (2001) interviewed 15 women to build her master narrative of how professional women experience aging and Tannen (2008) had over 100 participants in her study of the master narrative of sister relationships. With a consistency of responses amongst the 17 student interviewees on the ideas of the master narrative, and additional support from the survey data (N=79) and the 14 hiring professional interviewees, there is sufficient evidence to posit a master narrative of college. Additionally, the master narrative of college as described here aligns with the definition of master narratives as reflecting the values of the dominant culture (Bergen, 2010) and woven into the fabric of society (Smith & Dougherty, 2012). Master narratives are larger cultural narratives that implicitly influence our personal stories (Tannen, 2008). The ideas of the proposed master narrative of college permeate participant accounts, as demonstrated below.

The master narrative of college as described by the students in this study includes two components: college attendance as their expected next step and that college leads to a meaningful career. The interviews of hiring professionals included references both ideas, indicating the broad-based nature of these assumptions. The consistency of the responses in regards to the master narrative, combined with the alignment of these responses with the background data presented in chapter one regarding the current state of higher education in America, suggest that a master narrative of college contains powerful messages that guide student expectations and norms within our culture (Bergen, 2010). This master narrative is reflected in the accounts of two key stakeholder groups in higher education: current liberal arts students and hiring professionals. Their roles are central both to the process of college and career and to perpetuating messages about the value of college. College students are making a large financial investment and

spending four (or more) years in pursuit of their degree, and organizations dedicate a significant amount of time and resources to recruit, hire, train, and manage college interns and new college graduates. The master narrative of college in general appears to influence the understandings of the return on the investment if a liberal arts degree, as the broader assumptions of the role of college in American society guide students as they make the decision to attend college and major in the liberal arts. The master narrative of college will be discussed in reference to each section below, as it underlies each of the findings.

Return on Investment of a Liberal Arts Degree

This study explored the concept of a return on investment as it relates to student and employer perceptions of a liberal arts degree. The lack of clear and pre-specified career tracks (Roksa & Levey, 2010), lower average earnings (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2012) and higher unemployment rates (Flaherty, 2012) of liberal arts graduates have combined to place the value of a liberal arts degree under scrutiny (for example: Flaherty, 2012; Pyle, 2013; Smith, 2012). As outlined above, the findings of this study indicate that students and employers did not associate particular characteristics with a liberal art degree but rather spoke of the degree as representative of completion of the basic certification of a bachelor's degree, which is understood by the students interviewed as required to enter the workforce at their desired level.

Not only did students not articulate particular learning benefits from their liberal arts degree, few in this sample described a systematic approach when considering the financial return on investment of their decision to attend college and to major in the liberal arts. However, students did report value in the college experience itself, with life learning and experience themselves as important returns. Further, they spoke of their degrees as paths to a meaningful career, which is part of the master narrative of college found here. Specifics regarding the financial and non-financial returns on investment described by participants are outlined below.

Financial return on investment. Maw (1968) describes the return on investment approach as one that is used to make systematic decisions, but the students interviewed in this study did not articulate a systematic decision making process when speaking about their decision to attend college and major in the liberal arts. Approximately half of the students interviewed were unable to quantify the financial cost of their own college education, and few had a concrete sense of the probable salary range they could expect upon graduation. Rather than a systematic approach, interview responses suggest that students may be relying on the expectation that a return on the investment in their liberal arts degree is financial security. Even though most students had not researched the salary data or occupational outlook of their chosen career, they overwhelmingly affirmed that they would be "fine" financially and said they were confident that they could live comfortably on the salary they would have. Four students who had switched from another major, were double majoring, or returning to school after a military career, noted that a salary with their liberal arts degree would likely be lower than their previous or expected salary. However, all still perceived that they would be able to live comfortably on their salary.

In consistently reporting that one of the outcomes of their college education was financial security, the master narrative may be at play for liberal arts students. Certainly they are exposed to persistent narratives in the media, perhaps in conversations with family and friends, and even in classes that reinforce the connection between education and financial wellbeing. To the extent that they are operating under the culturally-mediated belief and assumption (Tannen, 2008) that college is their route to a meaningful career, students may not feel it is necessary to research salary data since they believe that a college degree will guarantee them financial security by providing them the path to their meaningful career.

Non-financial return on investment. A liberal arts degree is more than simply a financial investment, and the students in this sample perceived two key non-financial benefits of

their degree: the college experience and the anticipation of a meaningful career. The return on the college degree articulated by employers is the belief that by hiring a college graduate they are hiring an individual who will be successful in their organization.

Students viewed the college experience itself as a return on their investment, including ideas such as living away from home, making new friends, and the chance to "grow as a person." Although this benefit is not linked to financial or career outcomes, students described this as an important aspect of their time in college. Particularly in the student survey, references to college as the "best time of your life" were mentioned as part of the messages heard about college while growing up. This also demonstrates the limited notion of a college education as described by this sample. With two exceptions, the students interviewed were traditional-aged college students who had entered college right after high school graduation, and although less information was reported about the paths of the students who completed the survey, the age of survey participants (*M* age=19.6, *SD*=1.55) suggests that the survey also represented students who took a traditional path to higher education. Prevalence of remarks about the "college experience" as a benefit of higher education may be influenced by the homogenous nature of the sample here, and further research on other populations of college students (online education, community college students, non-traditional students) is needed to determine if this benefit is widespread and consistent. The connection of a college education to the ideas of moving away from home, living independently, making new friends, and having the "best time of your life" may be limited to the expectations of 18-24 year old traditional aged college students.

The second non-financial return on investment apparent in student accounts was the link between a college degree and a meaningful career, which I argue is another expression of the master narrative. Although students recognized that other paths were available (namely the military or trade school) to careers, they said college was *their* route to a meaningful career.

Students interviewed perceived the jobs available to them without a bachelor's degree as not as attractive, and although these jobs were acceptable for other people, they expected their college degree to be the route to a meaningful career. The student survey data also supported this notion with references to college as the route to a "good job." Characteristics of a meaningful career were linked in student responses to their ideas of career success: by obtaining their meaningful career they would achieve career success, and a college degree was the credential that would make this possible.

For the hiring professionals interviewed, the non-financial return they perceived from hiring candidates with a college degree were the positive characteristics associated with college graduates that would prepare them to successful in the workforce. The 14 hiring professionals interviewed here described college graduates as having a variety of positive personal qualities, from motivation to dedication. Simply because students had been through the process of obtaining a college degree, the hiring professionals in this sample were quick to ascribe a range of positive qualities to candidates, regardless of their major or GPA. The findings here differ slightly from a recent large scale study of 318 employers conducted by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (2013) that found that employers value skills such as critical thinking, clear communication, and the ability to solve complex problems more highly than an applicant's undergraduate major. Although a few of the hiring professionals in this study mentioned specific skills such as communication, for the most part the interview transcripts included references to broader personal qualities rather than skills. Qualities such as motivation, resiliency, dedication, independence, and passion were mentioned much more frequently than the skills found in the AACU study.

Credential versus Preparation

In the exploration of the return on investment of a liberal arts degree, the contrast

between the ideas of the college degree as a required credential and a college education as preparing one for a career was evident. Participant accounts support the perception of the college degree as a required credential, a ticket to enter the workforce which opens the door to job opportunities, rather than a college education as providing specific skills or knowledge required in the workplace. Hiring professionals and students perceived that a college graduate, regardless of major or GPA, is prepared with workplace skills necessary for success, and associated a variety of positive qualities to college graduates without reference to specific skills learned. Additionally, hiring professionals' emphasis on the value of out-of-classroom work and leadership experiences provides further evidence of the notion of the degree as a necessary credential rather than specific preparation, as it appeared that key components of the preparation valued by employers occurred outside of the classroom.

The credential of a college degree was also described by every student interviewed as a return on the investment in his/her education. Students made references to the "piece of paper with a signature on it" that would be obtained at graduation, and the degree as "certification." Students described this credential as an essential qualification when entering the workforce. By understanding a college degree as a required credential that signifies to employers that one is ready to enter the professional world, the learning itself that occurs in college may be underemphasized by both students and employers. At the same time, student responses indicated that they wanted their degree to be preparation for a specific career field, demonstrating a tension for students between the degree as credential and the degree as preparation.

Again serving as evidence for the presence of a master narrative of college, including the idea of college as the path to a meaningful career, students reported confidence that their investment in their liberal arts degree was worthwhile without having to enter in to a systematic decision making process. Similarly, by ascribing a variety of positive characteristics to college

graduates, hiring professionals expressed confidence in candidate quality. Taken together, these perceptions may perpetuate the idea that the actual learning that occurs in the pursuit of a liberal arts degree is less important than acquiring the credential of the bachelor's degree.

Theoretical Implications

The master narrative of college discussed above is woven throughout each of the theoretical implications of this project, as it informs anticipatory socialization messages, understandings of meaningful work, and how students manage uncertainty surrounding the transition from college to career. Tannen (2008) describes master narratives as forming a canopy over our individual discourse, and the findings from this study suggest that the master narrative of college may be doing just that, as it influences student and employer perceptions of the value of a liberal arts degree and the intersections between education and work.

Adding to the literature on anticipatory socialization, this study demonstrates that the expectation of college attendance is communicated early to students who do go to college. The messages about college also appear to have been more implicit than explicit, as the students interviewed for this study (with one exception) were unable to recall specific messages or a specific time when they made a conscious decision to attend college. Adding to the meaningful work literature, this study contributes the notion that completing college will lead to a meaningful career. Finally, this study extends problematic integration theory by demonstrating how students manage uncertainty about their future by relying on the master narrative, which reassures them that college will lead to a meaningful and financially stable career.

Anticipatory socialization. The findings of this study align with previous findings that a college education is linked to a "good job" through messages that occur early in one's life during the anticipatory socialization process. Levine and Hoffner (2006) found that a key socialization message perpetuated throughout the educational process is that in order to get a good job a

person needs to attend college. Students in this study reported a similar linking of a college degree to career success, and when a specific socialization source was noted, it was primarily parents and teachers who were given credit for communicating this message. However, the findings here demonstrate that students in this sample were unable to articulate specific conversations regarding college, because socialization messages about college attendance were so ingrained into the lives of students interviewed. They recalled that there was a general expectation regarding their own college attendance, but not the time or place of these messages, or the specific conversations that lead them to this belief.

The importance of part-time employment in the anticipatory socialization process was also highlighted in this study. Levine and Hoffner (2006) described part-time employment as one of the primary sources of anticipatory socialization messages, and the interviewed students in this study spoke extensively about their part-time work as they articulated their expectations for their career. A key outcome of anticipatory socialization is "developing expectations for a role an individual wants to have in some organization" (Kramer, 2010, p. 6). The students interviewed used their part-time work experiences in particular to develop expectations about what they did *not* want to encounter in their careers and contrasted these to the meaningful careers they expected to enter after graduation.

The current study also supports Lair and Wieland's (2012) finding that students view academic major selection as tied to a future career field. The students interviewed in this study all described their major as preparation for a specific career field, although they varied in their ability to articulate the specifics of the path from college to their first job. Although Roksa and Levey (2010) describe liberal arts majors as having a plethora of career options, yet no concrete career path, when leaving college, the students interviewed in this sample generally perceived a link between their major and an intended career path. The strategy of perceiving a link between

their major and a career path may help to reduce their uncertainty about the transition from college to career. However, the findings in the current study differ from Lair and Wieland's study in regards to the pressure felt when choosing a major. Lair and Wieland reported that students feel pressured to make practical choices when selecting a major. Overall, students interviewed in the current study did not report pressure from parents or others regarding their major selection. Several mentioned specifically that their parents were very supportive of their decisions as they changed or selected a major. This difference could be due to the sample of students included; over half of the students in Lair and Wieland's study were not liberal arts majors.

Meaningful work. This study contributes to literature on meaningful work by demonstrating that for these students a college degree is viewed as the route to a meaningful career. Lair and Wieland (2012) described the intersection between education and work as being overlooked in the research exploring meaningful work from a communicative perspective. The findings of the current study begin to fill this gap in the literature by demonstrating how students view college as their route to a meaningful career, a part of the master narrative of college.

Descriptions of the career expectations reported by the students in this study align with previous definitions of meaningful work. In this study students described their desired career as having the following characteristics: providing personal fulfillment; providing stability with room for advancement; using their college degree; allowing them to make a difference; and being one that will make them happy. Previous research has defined meaningful work in similar ways. Wrzesniewski's (2003) participants emphasized the rewards of advancing through the company and the fulfillment that work brings, while Pratt and Ashforth (2003) note that work is expected to provide a sense of belonging and a sense of purpose. Amundson et al. (2010) found that participants defined meaningful engagement as work that is purposeful, personally fulfilling,

intellectually stimulating, and challenging. These definitions of meaningful work describe similar characteristics that students interviewed used to define their desired career after graduation. Students frequently described what they felt their job options without a college degree would be remaining in their current or past part-time jobs, which they described in a negative light and which did not include any of the characteristics they associated with meaningful work.

This notion that a college education is the route to a meaningful career is a central component of the master narrative of college. Even students who did not have concrete career plans in mind did not question that they would be able to obtain a meaningful career after graduation, and they expressed confidence that the career options available to them after graduation would be more attractive than those that did not require a college degree. By relying on the master narrative of college, students expect that they will obtain a desirable and meaningful career after graduation.

This finding highlights a gap between the expectations liberal arts students hold during college and the reality of the workforce they may encounter after graduation. By relying on the master narrative of a college degree as linked to a meaningful career, students may elect to attend college under the assumption that it will automatically lead them to a meaningful career after graduation. Relying solely on this assumption can be problematic as it may lead students to believe that researching the reality of certain careers may be unnecessary. If students rely too extensively on the message of the master narrative that college is linked to a meaningful career, it could lead to inflated expectations and students who are uneducated about the realities of the workforce for new graduates.

Problematic Integration Theory. This study also contributes to problematic integration theory by demonstrating how this group of students described managing uncertainty surrounding

their future careers, a situation when probabilistic and evaluative orientations may not align. Babrow (1995) defines probabilistic orientations as a "subjective judgment about the likelihood of an association between two objects" (p. 283), and evaluative orientations judge the positive or negative valence of an object or event (Matthias & Babrow, 2007). Through the lens of problematic integration theory, the uncertainty surrounding the transition from college to career could reflect divergence (Babrow, 1992), where there is a discrepancy between our desires and our assessment of the reality of a situation, or ambiguity, which occurs when the outcome is not known, nor is the probability of a certain outcome occurring known. The communication used to manage uncertainty in situations such as this, where there is a divergence or ambiguity surrounding the probabilistic and evaluative orientations, are central to problematic integration theory (Babrow, 1992). The student interview transcripts reveal several applications of problematic integration theory in the way they discuss their level of uncertainty and strategies for managing it.

Given the hiring trends of liberal arts students and the current economic situation faced by college graduates in general, students may face a divergence between their desired career outcomes and the reality of the hiring situation. However, this situation could also be considered one of ambiguity. Babrow (1992) uses the example of the job search in his definition of ambiguity, as the candidate does not know the qualifications of the other candidates for the job and has no way to judge the probability of being offered the position. Additionally, although there are general trends in hiring, there is no way to know what specific jobs will be available when a student is ready to graduate. The job search is such a complex process that it can be viewed as an ambiguous situation where it is not possible to know the probability of a certain outcome.

Students in this sample appeared to view the job search through the lens of an ambiguous situation, as defined in problematic integration theory. Students did not give any indication that there may be a discrepancy between their ability to achieve their desired career goal and the reality of the situation. With a few exceptions, student responses also did not report a recognition that an unfavorable job market might await them after graduation, or that as a liberal arts student in particular their job search might be problematic. In their interview responses, students in this sample provided primarily positive evaluations regarding the likelihood of achieving their career goals. Although they ranged in their level of certainty regarding specific career plans, they expressed a general sense of confidence in their future careers.

This general sense of confidence could be indicative of situations informed by problematic integration theory. First, Babrow (1991) notes that due to an optimism bias, we tend to believe that positive outcomes are more likely than negative outcomes, and that we will fare better than the 'average' person in most situations. These students may be relying on this optimistic viewpoint to increase their positive evaluations that their investment in their college education will be associated with a positive outcome--the achievement of their career goals. Second, students may be relying on the master narrative, a deeply ingrained assumption that college is their route to a meaningful career, to increase their certainty in their future. Babrow (2001) explains the role of deeply ingrained associations that are at the root of our orientations to the world:

> Probabilistic orientations are the associational webs of understanding that we form through more and less thoughtful engagement with the world. Many of these associations are so deeply ingrained that they guide our thoughts, feelings, and actions without any conscious awareness (p. 560).

The master narrative that describes a college education as linked to a meaningful career could be this kind of deeply ingrained assumption that is guiding the thoughts and actions of students without their conscious awareness. This would explain the lack of information-seeking behaviors also evident in their interviews. Students may not feel the need to seek out specific information regarding their future career because they are relying on the messages of the master narrative that tells them that they will be successful due to their college degree.

Although it appears that students are framing the transition from college to career as an ambiguous situation, a case can also be made that students are in denial regarding the divergence between their desire to pursue a certain career after graduation and the likelihood that they will achieve that desire. Babrow (1992) notes, "some problems with divergence can be resolved simply by wishful messages or interpretations" (p. 104). Students may truly be unaware of the information that would lead them to believe there may be a divergence between their desires and outcomes, or they could be interpreting information about the job market to minimize the divergence. It is important to mention that students were not specifically asked in the interview protocol about the current job market, or unemployment rates. Rather, they were prompted to talk about their confidence in obtaining a desired career after graduation. The way individuals manage divergence, or lack thereof, can have unintended consequences: "divergence-minimizing interpretations of probability and evaluation involve a variety of functional contradictions" (Babrow, 1992, p. 103). Inflating the probability of a positive outcome can lead one to strive for an unattainable goal, and it can also make it less likely one will take action when a threat is present (Babrow, 1992). By not viewing their situation as a divergence, students may not take the necessary steps to adequately prepare to be competitive in a tough job market.

Information seeking or information avoidance in times of uncertainty is another key tenet in problematic integration theory (Babrow, 1992). Information seeking is noted as a strategy to

reduce ambiguity in problematic integration theory, though in certain situations ambiguity may be preferred over gaining additional information (Babrow, 1992). The students in this sample appeared to tolerate ambiguity, rather than actively seeking to reduce their uncertainty through additional information. Although the students interviewed primarily had a specific career field in mind, only one reported seeking specific information regarding the hiring outlook in this area. As students consider the job market in a specific field, there is information available regarding occupational outlook and hiring trends; however, in this sample, with few expectations, this information was not being sought out by students. Although several students mentioned as part of their action plan that they *should* look at salary information or available careers, for the most part they had not already taken this step to reduce uncertainty.

Students interviewed in this study used two strategies to manage uncertainty that have been identified in previous research on problematic integration: using a plan of action and reframing. Matthias and Babrow (2007), in a study of pregnant women, found that having a plan of action could provide a sense of control that helped to cope with problematic integration. When asked about how they could become more confident in their future goals, about half of the students interviewed for this project articulated an action plan. These action plans included such steps as gaining internship experience, maintaining or raising their GPA, conducting research on possible career and salary data, and gaining work experience. Creating these action plans may be a step to reduce uncertainty regarding the future.

Reframing is another strategy used to cope with problematic integration. Matthais (2009) found in a study of pregnant women that reframing was a strategy used to cope with problematic integration. In her study, women used reframing to focus on the outcome of labor (the healthy baby) rather than the method of delivery. In the current study, students used reframing to link their major to a specific career path. Although a liberal arts degree generally does not provide a

clear pathway between major and career (Roksa & Levey, 2010), every student interviewed for this project viewed their major as linked directly to a specific career, or at least to a career field. Using the lens of problematic integration theory, this strategy of reframing the major as preparation for a specific career is used to reduce uncertainty in the future and may give students the confidence to make more positive evaluations regarding their future.

Overall, the findings from this study contribute to problematic integration theory by showing how the theory applies in a new context where uncertainty is present, and by illuminating how student accounts regarding their liberal arts degree and employment outcomes reflect the tenets of the theory.

Practical Implications

The information gained in this study has practical implications for those involved in higher education, including students, faculty/staff in the university setting, and hiring professionals who recruit college interns and graduates.

Students. There are three implications for current college students based on the findings of this study. First, it was found here that students are not always knowledgeable about either the financial investment in their degree or the expected salary after graduation. With the rising cost of tuition (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011b) and the fact that graduates take an average of two decades to repay student loan debt (Kingkade, 2013), learning about the financial costs and potential salary after graduation is crucial. Although overall college graduates do earn significantly more than individuals without a college degree (Porter, 2013) and experience lower unemployment (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012), this should not be interpreted by students as license to ignore the financial aspects of their college education, particularly in regard to expected salary and hiring trends. A very large financial investment is made in a college

education, regardless of how the bills are being paid, and students have a responsibility to be aware of these costs and the reality of repaying student loans.

Second, the hiring managers interviewed stressed that their organizations look at additional experience, in the form of work and leadership experience, as a very important part of a candidate's background. Since the bachelor's degree is the base requirement for the positions they are recruiting for, a way for candidates to stand out is to have this additional experience. Employers also reported that they would like to see consistency in work experience and prefer candidates who have stayed at a job for several years or made a significant contribution to one organization, rather than being involved in many organizations in a minor way. Students would benefit from selecting a few experiences to excel at and sticking with these for several years during college.

Third, the hiring professionals interviewed placed minimal importance on the college major and were more interested in the out-of-classroom experiences mentioned above. This sample of employers were interested in hiring business, journalism, and liberal arts majors and did not indicate a preference among the three. Students frequently change their majors, sometimes several times, and may be discouraged when they are not admitted to their first choice major; the findings from this study can provide solace as the major was viewed as relatively unimportant by these organizations. Rather than stress about choosing the "right" major, students might be better served selecting a major that will allow them to graduate in a timely manner and focusing instead on boosting their out-of-classroom involvement.

Faculty/staff. Many of the implications for students noted above can be applied to university administrators and faculty as well, as faculty and staff have the ability to focus the attention of students on certain topics through coursework and programming. Four implications for faculty and staff from this study are detailed below.

First, hiring professionals noted that work experiences and hands-on leadership skills are an essential part of a successful candidate's resume. Faculty and staff can communicate this message to students, starting from the beginning of their college career, so they can have the time necessary to engage in these experiences. Organizing curriculum so that information about what employers are seeking and how students can develop themselves into attractive candidates is presented early in the college experience can allow students the time to act on these messages. Service-learning projects for freshman and sophomore students could be an excellent way to allow underclassmen to start developing these sought-after leadership skills.

Second, faculty and staff can continue the development of classes and programs that integrate information about careers after college into the college experience and engage students with the world beyond academia. Faculty can incorporate information regarding careers into the curriculum, and should be careful to be highlight the experience of a variety of graduates, not just emphasizing highly successful graduates while ignoring the experiences of others. Inviting employers to the classroom would allow students to hear directly from hiring professionals what opportunities are available and how they can become competitive candidates.

Third, when asked what students would like to see changed about the college curriculum, several students (7 out of 17) indicated that they would like to learn about personal finances, including specific mentions of taxes, loans payments, buying a car, and mortgages. Incorporating these topics into the curriculum would address student unawareness of the financial aspects of their degree.

Finally, for faculty and academic advising staff who help students select and persist within a major, the knowledge that the choice of a major (depending on the field) may not be as critical as other aspects of the student's resume can help alleviate some stress for students. Educating students on the types of organizations who are open to any college major, and are

instead looking for the completion of a bachelor's degree, can help students to be more aware of the role their major plays in their future and see that it does not pigeon-hole them into only one option.

Hiring professionals. The hiring professionals interviewed for this study are all actively involved in recruiting on college campuses, yet they did not have a clear sense of what topics might be covered in the curriculum. Building partnerships with faculty in the liberal arts would allow hiring professionals to get a better sense of the type of experiences that occur in the classroom, and to highlight the career paths available to liberal arts students. Although the employers interviewed were open to hiring all majors, most focused their campus outreach primarily on the business school, which can limit the visibility of these career options for liberal arts students.

Limitations

The findings here are limited by the fact that the perspective of only two groups of participants; college students at a large Midwestern public university and hiring professionals in the same geographic area were consulted for this project. Additionally, the sample of hiring professionals was limited by the fact that the employers interviewed did not always have responsibility for managing student interns and new college graduates, so their perceptions of what students should gain from their degree is limited in scope. Recruiters are primarily focused on screening applicants and may not have as much knowledge about how the skills from college are utilized in the daily activities of the job. To address this limitation, a broader sample of employers who have primary responsibly for the daily supervision of new graduates should be used in future research. Although this study provides useful information regarding the perspectives of two key higher education stakeholder groups in this area, in order to further explore the master narrative of college, it would be necessary to gather information from

additional groups. In Smith and Dougherty's (2012) work on a master narrative of retirement, participants from four life-stages and all socioeconomic classes were interviewed. A similar range of participants would be needed here to make similar claims about a society-wide master narrative of college.

Additionally, I recognize that my experience as a member of an institution of higher education as a graduate teaching assistant and a doctoral candidate influences my interpretations of the research project. I also have four years of experience working in career services, where I helped students transition from college to the workforce, and through those experiences, I have developed ideas regarding the skills needed to succeed in the job search and the career paths of liberal arts students. To limit the influence of my personal experience on my interpretations of the data of this study, I used checks with my advisor and member checks with interviewees to stay true to the perspective of my participants.

My alignment with the university may have also resulted in a social desirability bias on the part of interviewees, since students might be influenced to present themselves in a certain manner when speaking to a graduate student in an academic setting. For example, in the survey responses the idea of the experience of college as a fun and enjoyable time was mentioned more frequently than any other message about college. These students were completing the online survey with no personal contact with me as the researcher. However, in the face-to-face interview setting, although students mentioned the college experience as enjoyable, the career and financial benefits of college were given primary focus.

The student survey included both open-ended and closed-ended questions, however only the open-ended questions were used in this study. Student survey participants completed a series of closed-ended questions prior to the four open-ended questions used for this study which included Likert style and ranking questions about why they are attending college, how they

selected their major, and the characteristics of a "good job." Since these questions were similar in topic to the open-ended questions asked in the survey, student responses to the open-ended questions may have been influenced by the prompts and characteristics listed in the closed-ended questions.

A limitation present in the interviews with the hiring professionals is that not all of the interview questions specifically asked employers to reflect on their experience with liberal arts students. Since the hiring professionals interviewed recruit and hire students with a range of majors, at times the interviews drifted away from the specific topic of the liberal arts. Since the focus of this study was on the liberal arts, interview questions that focused more specifically on liberal arts students would have been helpful.

Future Research

As noted above, a limitation of this study is that it only looked at two groups of participants. In order to provide a broader range of perspectives, future research should look at a variety of other groups of participants, including university faculty and staff, working adults who did not attend college, college graduates several years into their careers, parents of college students, high school teachers and students, and students with a variety of majors and at a variety of types of institutions, including community colleges, liberal arts college, online universities, and for-profit universities. Additionally, an examination of the messages colleges provide to prospective students through their recruitment and admissions materials, including television commercials, brochures, web materials, and campus visits, would provide another avenue to explore the master narrative of college and how the concept of a return on investment of a college degree is communicated by the largest stakeholder in the attainment of bachelor's degrees- colleges and universities themselves. There are also a wide variety of other stakeholders in different aspects of the attainment of college degrees, including banks that provide loans,

apartment complexes that profit from housing students, and businesses in the community, who all provide messages regarding the college experience that could be examined.

A second avenue for future research is exploring the concept of meaningful work as it develops over the transition from college student to working professional. Students in this study articulated several characteristics they would like to have in their future careers, including finding personal fulfillment, advancing within their field, making a difference, using their degree, and valuing happiness over money. Although three participants had already held full-time jobs prior to returning to college, the students interviewed were primarily inexperienced in the realities of the workplace and had not yet been financially independent. As students move into their first full-time job and experience financial independence, the expectations of a meaningful career and the reality of the workforce may not align. Examining the sense-making process throughout this transition would allow for a further understanding of the concept a of meaningful career and how it is tied to a college degree to be developed.

A third avenue for future research is to further explore student definitions of "success" and whether or not "success" is viewed as distinct from career success. In this study the two are equated, in the finding a return on the investment in the degree is success, including a successful career. However, there may be a distinction here, where "success" in life in general is viewed as a distinct construct from "career success." A future study is needed to further examine these definitions, which may have implications for the master narrative of college.

A fourth avenue for future research is to explore the employer definitions of the term "leadership." Leadership as a desired quality was mentioned by 12 of the 14 employers interviewed, making it the most frequently mentioned candidate characteristic. In the interviews, employers mentioned that leadership would be gained through out-of-class experiences such as work, volunteer, or organizational involvement. However, employers were not prompted to

provide a definition of leadership or asked to further describe how these experiences were perceived to benefit the organization. Future research is needed to further explore how employers, and perhaps also students, specifically define leadership and how hiring students with these skills benefits organizations.

Conclusion

This study explored student and hiring professionals' perceptions about the return on investment of a liberal arts degree and in a broader sense the connections between education and work through interviews with both groups and a survey of college students. A central finding of this study is that students and hiring professionals did not perceive the liberal arts degree to have unique characteristics that are valued in the workforce. Instead, hiring professionals viewed the liberal arts degree as fulfilling the requirement of a bachelor's degree, which was necessary to enter their organization, and liberal arts students viewed the degree as providing the gateway to a meaningful career. Findings demonstrate that students perceive a college degree as a required credential that will lead to financial stability and career success and value the experience of college itself as a component of the non-financial return on their financial investment in college. Students want their college education to lead to a meaningful career, defined as one where they can use their college degree, find personal fulfillment, and advance within their field while making a difference. Their accounts reflect efforts to manage the uncertainty surrounding the transition from college to career by viewing their degree as linked to a career field. Interviews with hiring professionals who recruit new college students revealed that employers want students to gain professional qualities needed in the workplace, and believe that college graduates demonstrate the drive to succeed by completing their college degree. Additionally, the employers interviewed viewed additional experience beyond the degree as critical and described a student's major as of secondary importance.

A master narrative of college revealed in the student responses portrays college as an expected next step in their life and that college leads to a meaningful career. The accounts of the hiring professionals interviewed provide support for the links between college and a successful career. These two ideas of the master narrative infiltrated the responses of participants and informed the contributions of this study to communication research in three areas: anticipatory socialization, meaningful work, and problematic integration theory. Further research exploring the perceptions of other populations is necessary to provide a more complete picture of the master narrative of college.

This research can contribute to current conversations regarding the role of higher education and be considered by faculty and staff as they develop programs and curriculum. The overarching goal of my research is to help college students be better prepared to successfully transition from college to career, and I hope the findings from this study can be used to work towards that goal.

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Appendix A: Tables

Table 1

Student Interview Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Class Level	Major(s)/Minor
Rebecca	20	Junior	Human Biology Applied Behavioral Science Minor: Human Sexuality
Tyler	20	Junior	Theatre-Performance
Kevin	22	Senior	East Asian Language and Culture, Japanese Language and Literature
Nick	20	Junior	Communication Studies Psychology
Heather	22	Junior	American Studies History
Kyle	23	Senior	Communication Studies Minor: Business
James	27	Sophomore (returning for 2nd degree)	Anthropology Education
Claire	20	Junior	Applied Behavioral Science, Early Childhood Education and Intervention
Cassandra	21	Junior	History
Henry	20	Junior	Religious Studies
Macy	19	Junior	Global and International Studies Minor: Business
Kayla	21	Junior	Communication Studies Minor: Marketing
Garrett	23	Junior	Computer Science Linguistics
Spencer	20	Junior	Economics German
Carly	20	Junior	Applied Behavioral Science
Elizabeth	33	Senior	Visual Art Anthropology
Kent	25	Senior	Political Science English-Creative Writing

Table 2

Employer Interview Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Organizational Type
Diane	59	Non-profit
Tammy	28	Insurance
Robbie	32	Retail
Hailey	23	Financial services
Kathleen	65	Financial services
Jessica	33	Retail
Patty	50	Non-profit
Stacy	25	Financial services
Elisa	35	Retail
Helen	45	Retail
Caitlin	30	Financial services
Tessa	40	Higher education
Jennifer	43	Higher education
Mary	25	Education reform

Table 3

Survey Questions and Student Responses

What did people (parents, teachers, others) tell you about a college education as you were growing up? Who talked to you about college and what did they say? Please explain.	Number of Students Mentioning Item	Percentage of Total (N=79)
College as a fun experience/best time of your life	31	39.2
Attend college to get a job	31	39.2
College attendance as expected or assumed	21	26.6
College as the route to success	19	24
Attend college to make more money	14	17.7
Many jobs require a bachelor's degree. Why do you think employers want to hire individuals who have earned a bachelor's degree?		
Demonstrates a general quality/characteristic about the person (dedicated, hard working)	35	44.3
Demonstrates that they are a better candidate (more credible, more qualified)	29	36.7
Put in the time and effort to get the degree	20	25.3
Demonstrates competency in specific skills, educated in specific subject area	19	24
How did you select your major? What factors did you consider when selecting your major? Please explain. If you have not yet selected a major, please indicate what factors you are considering during the process of selecting a major.		
Personal interest in the major/subject area	54	68.4
Career/job prospects associated with the major	40	50.6
Expected salary associated with future job	16	20.3
Aptitude for the subject matter	10	12.7
College is expensive; do you think it is worth the cost? Why/why not?		
College is a required credential	38	48.1
College is too expensive	26	33
College leads to financial security	15	19
College is fun, enjoyment of college life	8	10.1

Table 4

Student Interviewee Perceptions of the Liberal Arts Degree

Themes	Examples
Return as the credential of a college degree (17 out of 17)	"It's a certification. You've put a lot into one area and you could be considered a certain level of expertise in that area." "Because even if the degree doesn't necessarily relate to the job, it proves that you have some degree of competence and being able to take in new, lessons and being able to understand."
Return as the expectation financial security (16 out of 17)	"As it stands right now, I don't think it's going to be too much of an issue for me. I mean obviously, I worry just like everyone else….But something in the back of my head tells me I'll be fine where I stand right now."
Return as the expectation of (career) success (17 out of 17)	"It was always important to go to college and it was always a way of growing up. It was always emphasized in my high school, really emphasized; you go to college to succeed so I knew from a young age that I needed to go to college in life to succeed."
Return as the college experience (16 out of 17)	"So you'd be getting, your view on how living away from your family and how you need to cope with that. You'd be meeting a lot more people because you'd be going to classes and going to school, living in the same place as a bunch of other people."

Table 5

Hiring Professionals' Expectations of Liberal Arts Candidates

Themes	Examples
Workplace skills and drive to succeed (14 out of 14)	"Being resilient, being able to move within work flows so not being pushed back or not ... not being ... having a bad attitude about something changing or being able to work through changes or being able to work through failures."
Additional experience (beyond the degree) required (14 out of 14)	"Are you working while you're in school, are you involved in organizations, are you getting that leadership experience?"
College major as minimally important (13 out of 14)	"I wouldn't say one type of major is more successful in these roles than another… We're not major specific and I personally haven't noticed any specific themes or trends with majors."

Table 6

Student Interviewee Career Expectations

Themes	Examples
A career that provides personal fulfillment (16 out of 17)	"When you feel truly happy about what you do. When you don't get tired of doing what you do."
A career that is stable, yet growing (13 out of 17)	"I worked at a movie theater and I worked with a lot of people that were older and hadn't gone to college, and I always felt bad that they didn't have the motivation because I wouldn't want to be stuck in their position."
A career that "uses" their college degree (13 out of 17)	"You say a real job, its like applying your major to something and using your degree to get a job, not just go to a mall and work at a desk. I feel it's using your, if you get a business degree going to find a business or a marketing degree or a communications degree, you want to write newspapers and TV companies."
A career where they can make a difference (10 out of 17)	"I want to help people, whatever that looks like, whatever shape or form. I know helping takes a variety of forms for different people. That's my number one interest. I never feel better than if I know I've helped someone in some way, shape, or form."
Balance between money and happiness	"If I'm working a job that I love, even if I don't get paid a lot, I love it so I don't equate money to success like some people do. I equate being happy to being successful."

Table 7

Student Strategies for Managing Uncertainty

Strategy	Examples
Viewing the major as linked directly to a career (17 out of 17)	"I knew I wanted it to be something public service related, something communications related. So, yeah, I went backward from that, and then I looked at other majors and thought about what they could offer me and what I could get out of them, what kind of potential was there, and I wound up with the two."
Creating an action plan (13 out of 17)	"I guess what I've kind of decided to start my job search is just kind of getting contact with some of my connections that I've made through networking and just kind of explore some opportunities." "I would look on the KU website and find the certain types of jobs, I'd look and see who the employers were, what the titles were and what those meant."
Expressing confidence in their personal background and skills (9 out of 17)	"I'm pretty confident with the camps just because I have had now six years of experience within the organization and I know they like to have people … They like to hire people that have been there for a while and I feel like I've done all the stages of it, being a camper and then their junior leadership stuff."

Appendix B: Institutional Review Board Approval (Interviews)

KU RESEARCH & GRADUATE STUDIES
The University of Kansas

APPROVAL OF PROTOCOL

October 2, 2013

Laura Barrett
lola7@ku.edu

Dear Laura Barrett:

On 10/2/2013, the IRB reviewed the following submission:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title of Study:	Exploring the Return on Investment of a Liberal Arts Degree: Perceived Connections Between Education and Work
Investigator:	Laura Barrett
IRB ID:	STUDY00000325
Funding:	None
Grant ID:	None

The IRB approved the study from 10/2/2013 to .

1. Before submit a Continuing Review request and required attachments to request continuing approval or closure.
2. Any significant change to the protocol requires a modification approval prior to altering the project.
3. Notify HSCL about any new investigators not named in original application. Note that new investigators must take the online tutorial at https://rgs.drupal.ku.edu/human_subjects_compliance_training.
4. Any injury to a subject because of the research procedure must be reported immediately.
5. When signed consent documents are required, the primary investigator must retain the signed consent documents for at least three years past completion of the research activity.

If continuing review approval is not granted before the expiration date of approval of this protocol expires on that date.

Please note university data security and handling requirements for your project:
https://documents.ku.edu/policies/IT/DataClassificationandHandlingProceduresGuide.htm

You must use the final, watermarked version of the consent form, available under the "Documents" tab in eCompliance.

Sincerely,

Stephanie Dyson Elms, MPA
IRB Administrator, KU Lawrence Campus

Human Subjects Committee Lawrence
Youngberg Hall l 2385 Irving Hill Road l Lawrence, KS 66045 l (785) 864-7429 l HSCL@ku.edu l research.ku.edu

Appendix C: Student Interview Recruitment Email

Dear Coms 130 Students,

Below is information regarding a study that has just been posted on the Blackboard site. If you meet the edibility requirements and are interested in participating, please email lobarrett@ku.edu.

Title: Exploring the Return on Investment of a Liberal Arts Degree: Perceived Connection Between Education and Work

Researchers: Laura O. Barrett & Dr. Tracy Russo

Contact: lobarrett@ku.edu

Participants: 15-20 junior/senior liberal arts majors

Eligibility: Must be in your junior or senior year at KU and pursing a major in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences.

Time to complete: participate an interview that will take approximately 1 hour

Points: 15 points

Purpose: This study explores how students choose a major in college and how this relates to their career plans after graduation.

Procedure: Email lobarrett@ku.edu to express your interest in participating.

Appendix D: Student Informed Consent Document

Exploring the Return on Investment of a Liberal Arts Degree

_____

INTRODUCTION

The Department of Communication Studies at the University of Kansas supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research. The following information is provided for you to decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You may refuse to sign this form and not participate in this study. You should be aware that even if you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time. If you do withdraw from this study, it will not affect your relationship with this unit, the services it may provide to you, or the University of Kansas.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to explore the value students place on a liberal arts degree and how they view this degree as related to future career goals.

PROCEDURES

Interviews will be conducted in person and will be audio taped using a digital recorder (with your consent). You will be asked questions about your time in college and your career goals. The interview should take no more than 60 minutes.

It is not required that the interview be audio recorded, however it will allow me to have the most accurate record of your comments. The recording can be stopped at any time. The audio files will be used to create transcripts of the interviews, which will be done by a paid transcription service who will not have any identifying information about you. The audio files will be stored on my computer and only my advisor, the transcriber and I will have access to the files. The audio files will be deleted once the file has been transcribed and checked for accuracy.

RISKS

There are no foreseen risks to participating in this this study.

BENEFITS

There is no direct benefit to you, other than the knowledge that you have contributed to an understanding of how college prepares students for their future career. The researcher will share the results of this with you, if desired.

PAYMENT TO PARTICIPANTS

You will receive 15 points of research credit in Coms 130 for participating in this study.

PARTICIPANT CONFIDENTIALITY

Your name will not be associated in any publication or presentation with the information collected about you or with the research findings from this study. Instead, the researcher(s) will use a study number or a pseudonym rather than your name. Your identifiable information will not be shared unless (a) it is required by law or university policy, or (b) you give written permission. The researchers may use direct quotes from your interview using a pseudonym and all information that may identify you will be removed from the quotation.

Permission granted on this date to use and disclose your information remains in effect indefinitely. By signing this form you give permission for the use and disclosure of your information for purposes of this study at any time in the future.

REFUSAL TO SIGN CONSENT AND AUTHORIZATION

You are not required to sign this Consent and Authorization form and you may refuse to do so without

affecting your right to any services you are receiving or may receive from the University of Kansas or to participate in any programs or events of the University of Kansas. However, if you refuse to sign, you cannot participate in this study.

CANCELLING THIS CONSENT AND AUTHORIZATION
You may withdraw your consent to participate in this study at any time. You also have the right to cancel your permission to use and disclose further information collected about you, in writing, at any time, by sending your written request to: Laura O. Barrett, The University of Kansas, Communication Studies, Bailey Hall, 1440 Jayhawk Blvd. Room 102, Lawrence, KS 66045. If you cancel permission to use your information, the researchers will stop collecting additional information about you. However, the research team may use and disclose information that was gathered before they received your cancellation, as described above.

QUESTIONS ABOUT PARTICIPATION
Questions about procedures should be directed to the researcher(s) listed at the end of this consent form.

PARTICIPANT CERTIFICATION:
I have read this Consent and Authorization form. I have had the opportunity to ask, and I have received answers to, any questions I had regarding the study. I understand that if I have any additional questions about my rights as a research participant, I may call (785) 864-7429 or (785) 864-7385, write the Human Subjects Committee Lawrence Campus (HSCL), University of Kansas, 2385 Irving Hill Road, Lawrence, Kansas 66045-7568, or email irb@ku.edu.

I agree to take part in this study as a research participant. By my signature I affirm that I am at least 18 years old and that I have received a copy of this Consent and Authorization form.

_____   _____
    Type/Print Participant's Name   Date

_____
            Participant's Signature

Audio Recording Authorization:
Please initial here if you agree to have your interview audio recorded.

_____ I agree to have my interview audio recorded. Only the researchers and transcriber will have access to the audio recording.

Researcher Contact Information
Laura O. Barrett   Tracy C. Russo Ph.D
Principal Investigator   Faculty Supervisor
The University of Kansas   The University of Kansas
Communication Studies   Communication Studies
1440 Jayhawk Blvd.   1440 Jayhawk Blvd.
Bailey Hall Room 102   Bailey Hall Room 102
Lawrence, KS 66045   Lawrence, KS 66045
lobarrett@ku.edu   trusso@ku.edu
                                   785-864-9877

Appendix E: Student Demographic Information Form

Please provide the following demographic information. It will be used to assign research credit to you and help us know a little about you. Your name and identifying information will not be reported in any of the research findings.

Name: _____

Instructor Name: _____
Please indicate the instructor who referred you to this study so research credit can be assigned.

Gender:
        □ Male
        □ Female

Degree Seeking
Check the Appropriate Box:
        □ Bachelor of Arts
        □ Bachelor of General Studies

Expected Graduation Month/Year: _____

Major(s): _____

Minor(s): _____

Age (in years): _____

Hometown: _____

Please indicate your race:
□ Caucasian   □ African-American   □ Hispanic
□ Native American   □ Asian or Pacific-Islander   □ Mixed

Are you the first member of your family to attend college?   □Yes   □ No

Please rank the sources you are using to finance your education. Use a 1 for the largest source, 2 for the next largest source, etc.

___ Federal Student Aid Loans   ___ Income from your own jobs
___ Private Loans   ___ Parental Support
___ Scholarships

Appendix F: Student Interview Protocol

Introduction:
Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. Before we get started, we need to review two forms. The first is an informed consent form. This form states that all of your responses will be kept anonymous; although I may use quotes from this interview, your name and identifying information will never be associated with your responses. Also, I would like to audio record this interview. Only my advisor and I will have access to these recordings. Please take time to review and sign the form, you will keep one copy and I will keep one for my files.

Second, please complete the demographics information, including the last name of your instructor in Coms 130 so that research credit can be assigned. You will earn 15 points of research credit for participating in this study.

As I mentioned when we scheduled this interview, this is part of a study I am conducting for my dissertation about your experience in college and how this relates to your career goals. The informed consent we just reviewed indicated that I will be digitally recording this interview. Remember that if you wish you to stop the interview at any time, just let me know; I will stop the interview and none of your responses will be used.

Please feel free to ask me to rephrase any question that is unclear or skip any questions that you are not comfortable answering. Do you have any questions about the interview process before we begin?

The interview has three main sections. First, I'll ask you about why you came to college and the role your time in college played in preparing you for a career. Next, we'll talk about your work experience and your job search. Finally, I have some questions about your expectations for your life after you graduate from KU.

Decision to Attend College

When did you know that you would attend college after high school graduation? (RQ2/RQ4)
 Did you ever consider other options for life after high school? Why/why not?
 Do you know anyone who did not graduate from college?

Almost 70% of students who graduate from high school enroll in college. Tell me what you think about that number. (RQ2/RQ4)

What do you think your life would be like right now if you did not attend college? (RQ2)
 What do you think your life would be in 10 years if you did not attend college?

If you had a younger sibling who is currently applying to colleges, what would you tell him/her about what you can gain from attending college? (RQ2)
 When employers see that you have a bachelor's degree, what does it tell them?

Many jobs require a bachelor's degree, why do you think that is? (RQ2/RQ4)

Why are you attending college? (RQ1/RQ2)

What do you hope to gain from attending college?

College is expensive; do you think it is worth the cost? (RQ1)
Why/why not?
What will the total financial cost of your education be?
How are you financing your college education?
Tuition seems to increase every year; is there a price at which you would no longer think it is worth it to attend college?

Life in College: The Liberal Arts Major

Tell me about how you selected your major. (RQ1)
What majors did you initially consider?
What was important to you when selecting a major?
Did you discuss this decision with your parents (or others)? What was their advice?

If you were talking to your best friend about the benefits of your major, what would you tell him/her? (RQ1)
What does your major provide that is unique from other majors?

As an undergraduate student I majored in psychology and communication studies; people were always asking me "what are you going to do with your major?" Does this happen to you? (RQ3)
How do you respond?
Do you think people would ask you this question if you were majoring in engineering or education? Why/why not?

What specific skills are you developing in this major? (RQ3)
How will these skills be useful to you in the workforce?

What types of jobs does your major prepare you for? (RQ3)

What do you wish you were learning in college that you haven't yet learned? (RQ2/RQ3)
If you could change one thing about the academic part of college (coursework) what would it be? Why?

Connecting College to Work

Tell me about your career goals when you graduate from college (thinking about the first job you want to obtain) (RQ3)
Have your career goals changed, or did you always want to pursue this career?

We often hear people talk about getting out into the "real world" after college. What does it mean to have a "real job"? (RQ2)
What makes a "real job" different from other jobs?

What criteria will you use to determine whether or not to accept a job? (RQ2)

How much do you expect to earn in your first job after graduation? (RQ1)
    What do you think you deserve to earn in your first job?
    How much to you need to earn for you to feel that your investment in your degree was worth it?

Tell me about how your education at KU is preparing you to achieve your career goals. (RQ2)
    What specific skills are you developing at KU that you will use in the workplace?

Tell me about how confident you are in securing a job you want after graduation. (RQ3)
    How certain are you that you will be offered a position that is desirable to you?
    What makes you certain (or uncertain) that this will happen?
    What will you do if you are not able to find a job after graduation?

What will you do between now and graduation to help you feel more confident that you will be offered a desirable job upon graduation? (RQ3)

How do you deal with the fact that your future job is still unknown to you? (RQ3)

Finding Meaning in Work

How do you imagine your career trajectory (how your career will develop) over your working career? (RQ2/RQ3)

How do you define "success" in a career? What does a "successful" career look like? (RQ2)
    Who do you know that has achieved career success? What makes them successful?

Describe what you think your typical day will be like in your first job after graduation. (RQ2)
    What skills will you need to succeed in this job?
    How do you think you will use the skills gained in college in this job?

Describe what you think your typical day will be like when you have been working for 10 years? (RQ2)
    What skills will you need to succeed in this job?
    How do you think you will use the skills gained in college in this job?

Tell me about your dream job. (RQ2)
    How did you learn about this job?
    What appeals to you about this job?
    Do you personally know anyone who has this job?
    What steps will you need to take to get to your dream job?
    What will the daily tasks be in this job?
    How has your time in college prepared you for this job?
    How much money do you think you can make in this job?

Which is more important- the money you make or enjoying your job? (RQ2)
    Why? Do you know people who seem to value one over the other?

Studies of incoming students have shown that people report that they attend college in order to obtain a "good job." For you, what counts as a "good job"? (RQ2/RQ4)

       What makes a job desirable to you?

Do you think you have to attend college to get a "good job"? Why/why not? (RQ4)

Conclusion:

Thank you again for taking the time to meet with me today. The information you provided will be extremely valuable to my study. As I mentioned in the informed consent, all of your identifying information will be removed from the data. May I contact you in the future if I have any questions about your responses?

Appendix G: Employer Recruitment Email

Dear (name),

I am a PhD student at the University of Kansas and am interested in interviewing you as part of my dissertation research. My research is about the skills employers look for in new college graduates and how these new employees perform at your organization. I am especially interested in the hiring of liberal arts graduates. This interview should last approximately 1 hour and can occur at a time and place of your convenience.

If you are wiling to participate, please contact me at lobarrett@ku.edu so we can schedule the interview.

Thanks for your time.

Laura O. Barrett
GTA Communication Studies
University of Kansas

Appendix H: Employer Informed Consent Document

Exploring the Return on Investment of a Liberal Arts Degree

_____

INTRODUCTION
The Department of Communication Studies at the University of Kansas supports the practice of
protection for human subjects participating in research. The following information is provided for you to
decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You may refuse to sign this form and not
participate in this study. You should be aware that even if you agree to participate, you are free to
withdraw at any time. If you do withdraw from this study, it will not affect your relationship with this
unit, the services it may provide to you, or the University of Kansas.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY
The purpose of this study is to explore the skills employers seek in new college graduates and how
college prepares students for the workplace.

PROCEDURES
Interviews will be conducted in person and will be audio taped using a digital recorder (with your
consent). You will be asked questions about recruiting new college graduates to work at your organization
and how college prepares students to enter the workforce. The interview should take no more than 60
minutes.

It is not required that the interview be audio recorded, however it will allow me to have the most accurate
record of your comments. The recording can be stopped at any time. The audio files will be used to create
transcripts of the interviews, which will be done by a paid transcription service who will not have any
identifying information about you. The audio files will be stored on my computer and only my advisor,
the transcriber and I will have access to the files. The audio files will be deleted once the file has been
transcribed and checked for accuracy.

RISKS
There are no foreseen risks to participating in this this study.

BENEFITS
There is no direct benefit to you, other than the knowledge that you have contributed to an understanding
of how college prepares students for their future career. The researcher will share the results of this with
you, if you wish.

PAYMENT TO PARTICIPANTS
There is no payment made to participants.

PARTICIPANT CONFIDENTIALITY
Your name will not be associated in any publication or presentation with the information collected about
you or with the research findings from this study. Instead, the researcher(s) will use a study number or a
pseudonym rather than your name. Your identifiable information will not be shared unless (a) it is
required by law or university policy, or (b) you give written permission. The researchers may use direct
quotes from your interview using a pseudonym and all information that may identify you will be removed
from the quotation.
Permission granted on this date to use and disclose your information remains in effect indefinitely. By
signing this form you give permission for the use and disclosure of your information for purposes of this
study at any time in the future.

REFUSAL TO SIGN CONSENT AND AUTHORIZATION
You are not required to sign this Consent and Authorization form and you may refuse to do so without affecting your right to any services you are receiving or may receive from the University of Kansas or to participate in any programs or events of the University of Kansas. However, if you refuse to sign, you cannot participate in this study.

CANCELLING THIS CONSENT AND AUTHORIZATION
You may withdraw your consent to participate in this study at any time. You also have the right to cancel your permission to use and disclose further information collected about you, in writing, at any time, by sending your written request to: Laura O. Barrett, The University of Kansas, Communication Studies, Bailey Hall, 1440 Jayhawk Blvd. Room 102, Lawrence, KS 66045. If you cancel permission to use your information, the researchers will stop collecting additional information about you. However, the research team may use and disclose information that was gathered before they received your cancellation, as described above.

QUESTIONS ABOUT PARTICIPATION
Questions about procedures should be directed to the researcher(s) listed at the end of this consent form.

PARTICIPANT CERTIFICATION:
I have read this Consent and Authorization form. I have had the opportunity to ask, and I have received answers to, any questions I had regarding the study. I understand that if I have any additional questions about my rights as a research participant, I may call (785) 864-7429 or (785) 864-7385, write the Human Subjects Committee Lawrence Campus (HSCL), University of Kansas, 2385 Irving Hill Road, Lawrence, Kansas 66045-7568, or email irb@ku.edu.

I agree to take part in this study as a research participant. By my signature I affirm that I am at least 18 years old and that I have received a copy of this Consent and Authorization form.

_____   _____
    Type/Print Participant's Name   Date

_____
              Participant's Signature

Audio Recording Authorization:
Please initial here if you agree to have your interview audio recorded.

_____ I agree to have my interview audio recorded. Only the researchers and transcriber will have access to the audio recording.

Researcher Contact Information

Laura O. Barrett   Tracy C. Russo Ph.D
Principal Investigator   Faculty Supervisor
The University of Kansas   The University of Kansas
Communication Studies   Communication Studies
1440 Jayhawk Blvd.   1440 Jayhawk Blvd.
Bailey Hall Room 102   Bailey Hall Room 102
Lawrence, KS 66045   Lawrence, KS 66045
lobarrett@ku.edu   trusso@ku.edu; 785-864-9877

Appendix I: Employer Oral Consent Document

ORAL RESEARCH PARTICIPATION CONSENT FORM

As a student in the University of Kansas's Department of Communication Studies, I am conducting a research project to explore the skills employers seek in new college graduates and how college prepares students for the workplace. I would like to interview you to obtain your views on hiring new college graduates at your organization. Your participation is expected to take about 30-45 minutes. You have no obligation to participate and you may discontinue your involvement at any time.

Your participation should cause no more discomfort than you would experience in your everyday life. Although participation may not benefit you directly, the information obtained from the study will help us gain a better understanding of how college prepares students for their future career Your identifiable information will not be shared unless (a) it is required by law or university policy, or (b) you give written permission.

**This interview will be recorded. Recording is not required to participate. You may stop taping at any time. The recordings will be transcribed by a paid transcription service. Only I and my faculty supervisor Dr. Tracy Russo will have access to recordings which will be stored on a password protected computer and deleted once the interview is transcribed.

Participation in the interview indicates your willingness to take part in this study and that you are at least 18 years old. Should you have any questions about this project or your participation in it you may ask me or my faculty supervisor at the Department Communication. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may call the Human Subjects Protection Office at (785) 864-7429 or email irb@ku.edu.

Researcher Contact Information

Laura O. Barrett	Tracy C. Russo Ph.D
Principal Investigator	Faculty Supervisor
The University of Kansas	The University of Kansas
Communication Studies	Communication Studies
1440 Jayhawk Blvd.	1440 Jayhawk Blvd.
Bailey Hall Room 102	Bailey Hall Room 102
Lawrence, KS 66045	Lawrence, KS 66045
lobarrett@ku.edu	trusso@ku.edu; 785-864-9877

Appendix J: Employer Interview Protocol

Introduction:
Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. Before we get started, we need to review two forms. The first is an informed consent form. This form states that all of your responses will be kept anonymous; although I may use quotes from this interview, your name and identifying information will never be associated with your responses. Also, I would like to audio record this interview. Only my advisor and I will have access to these recordings. Please take time to review and sign the form, you will keep one copy and I will keep one for my files.

As I mentioned when we scheduled this interview, this is part of a study I am conducting for my dissertation about your experience hiring new college graduates, specifically addressing the skills you want new graduates to bring to your organization. The informed consent we just reviewed indicated that I will be digitally recording this interview. Remember that if you wish you to stop the interview at any time, just let me know; I will stop the interview and none of your responses will be used.

Please feel free to ask me to rephrase any question that is unclear or skip any questions that you are not comfortable answering. Do you have any questions about the interview process before we begin?

First, I'd like to start by getting to know about your career background and then I'll ask about what you look for when hiring new college graduates and how you feel new graduates perform in your organization.

Career Background

Tell me about your educational background. (RQ2/Rapport Building)
 Where did you attend college?
 What was your major? Why did you select this major?

Tell me about your career up to this point. (RQ2/Rapport Building)
 What was your first job after college?
 What other jobs have you held?
 How long have you worked in your current position?

Recruiting College Students

How much of your time is devoted specifically to recruiting new college graduates? (RQ4)
 Do you hire individuals who do not have any college education to work at your
 organization?

Why does your organization focus on hiring new college graduates? (RQ4)
 What do you think college graduates bring to your organization?

What college majors do you recruit to work at your organization? (RQ1a)
 How important is a student's major?

Why do you focus on some majors and not others?
Are there any college majors that you are not interested in hiring? Why?

In general, what types of positions do you hire new college graduates for? (RQ1a)
On average, how many applicants do you have for each opening?

If a student is a liberal arts major, what jobs would be available to them at your organization? (RQ1a)
Why do you hire liberal arts majors for these positions? Are there certain positions that would not be available to a liberal arts major? Why?
When you hire a liberal arts major, what skills/knowledge do you expect them to bring to the position?

Describe your ideal candidate. (RQ1a)
How does GPA factor into your decision making?
How can students stand out in the job search process?

Working with Recent Graduates

What would you like students to gain from their college education? (RQ1a)
What specific skills/expertise do you want college graduates to bring to your organization?

In your experience, what do recent graduates struggle with as they adjust to working in your organization? (RQ1a)
Do you feel that new college graduates are prepared to be successful in the workforce?

In general, what do new college graduates excel at in their roles at your organization? (RQ1a)

What would you like to see colleges do differently as they prepare students for the workforce? (RQ1a)
If you could add a class that all college students have to take before graduating, what would that class cover?

College & Career Connections

Do you feel that you use the skills developed through your college degree in your current position? How so? (RQ2)
How has your college degree been beneficial during your career?

When you think back to your college experience, what do you think could be done to make your time in college more applicable to your career path? (RQ2)
Are you happy with the major that you selected?

Based on your experience with new college graduates, do you think colleges are doing a good job preparing students to work at your organization? Why/why not? (RQ1a)

With the rising cost of tuition and high unemployment rates, there is a lot of talk in the news right now about if a college degree is worth it. Do you think college is worth the investment? Why/why not? (RQ1/RQ4)

> What could be changed about the college experience to make it more valuable to students?

Conclusion:

Thank you again for taking the time to meet with me today. The information you provided will be extremely valuable to my study. As I mentioned in the informed consent, all of your identifying information will be removed from the data. May I contact you in the future if I have any questions about your responses?

Appendix K: Institutional Review Board Approval (Survey)

KU RESEARCH & GRADUATE STUDIES
The University of Kansas

APPROVAL OF PROTOCOL

November 1, 2013

Laura Barrett
lobarrett@ku.edu

Dear Laura Barrett:

On 11/1/2013, the IRB reviewed the following submission:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title of Study:	Student Perceptions of the Connections Between Education and Work
Investigator:	Laura Barrett
IRB ID:	STUDY00000481
Funding:	None
Grant ID:	None

The IRB approved the study on 11/1/2013.

1. Any significant change to the protocol requires a modification approval prior to altering the project.
2. Notify HSCL about any new investigators not named in original application. Note that new investigators must take the online tutorial at https://rgs.drupal.ku.edu/human_subjects_compliance_training.
3. Any injury to a subject because of the research procedure must be reported immediately.
4. When signed consent documents are required, the primary investigator must retain the signed consent documents for at least three years past completion of the research activity.

Please note university data security and handling requirements for your project:
https://documents.ku.edu/policies/IT/DataClassificationandHandlingProceduresGuide.htm

You must use the final, watermarked version of the consent form, available under the "Documents" tab in eCompliance.

Sincerely,

Stephanie Dyson Elms, MPA
IRB Administrator, KU Lawrence Campus

Appendix L: Student Recruitment Email (Survey)

Dear Coms 130 Students,

Below is information regarding a study that has just been posted on the Blackboard site. If you are interested in participating, please use the link below to complete the survey.

Title: Perceived Connection Between Education and Work

Researchers: Laura O. Barrett & Dr. Tracy Russo

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Participants: All Coms 130 students

Time to complete: 20-30 minutes

Points: 10 research points

Purpose: This study explores how students choose a major in college and how this relates to their career plans after graduation.

Procedure: Click here to take the survey.

Appendix M: Consent Information Statement (Survey)

The Department of Communication Studies at the University of Kansas supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research. The following information is provided for you to decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You should be aware that even if you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty.

We are conducting this study to better understand your reasons for attending college and how this relates to your career goals. This will entail your completion of a survey. Your participation is expected to take approximately 30 minutes to complete. The content of the survey should cause no more discomfort than you would experience in your everyday life.

You will receive 5 points of research credit in Coms 130 for your participation in this study. Additionally, we believe that the information obtained from this study will help us gain a better understanding of the value of a college degree.

Your participation is solicited, although strictly voluntary. Your name will not be associated in any way with the research findings, and is only collected to assign research credit. Your identifiable information will not be shared unless (a) it is required by law or university policy, or (b) you give written permission. Survey responses will be stored on a secure computer and your name will be deleted from the data as soon as research credit is assigned. It is possible, however, with internet communications, that through intent or accident someone other than the intended recipient may see your response.

If you would like additional information concerning this study before or after it is completed, please feel free to contact us by phone or mail.

Completion of the survey indicates your willingness to take part in this study and that you are at least 18 years old. If you have any additional questions about your rights as a research participant, you may call (785) 864-7429 or write the Human Subjects Committee Lawrence Campus (HSCL), University of Kansas, 2385 Irving Hill Road, Lawrence, Kansas 66045-7563, email irb@ku.edu.

Sincerely,

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Appendix N: Student Survey Questions

Open-Ended Questions:

1. What did people (parents, teachers, others) tell you about a college education as you were growing up? Who talked to you about college and what did they say? Please explain.

2. Many jobs require a bachelor's degree. Why do you think employers want to hire individuals who have earned a bachelor's degree?

3. How did you select your major? What factors did you consider when selecting your major? Please explain. If you have not yet selected a major, please indicate what factors you are considering during the process of selecting a major.

4. College is expensive; do you think it is worth the cost? Why/why not?

Demographic Questions:

Age (drop down menu, select current age)

Sex (drop down menu, select Male or Female)

Race (drop down, select one):
• Caucasian
• African-American
• Hispanic
• Native American
• Asian or Pacific-Islander
• Mixed

Class level (drop down menu)
• Freshman
• Sophomore
• Junior
• Senior

Degree seeking (drop down menu)
• Bachelor of Arts
• Bachelor of General Studies
• Bachelor of Science
• I am not sure what degree I will pursue.

Please indicate the college or school you are pursuing a degree in. If you have not yet applied/been admitted to a specific program, please indicate the program you are planning to pursue.
• College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
• School of Business

- School of Health Professions
- School of Architecture, Design & Planning
- School of Education
- School of Engineering
- School of Journalism & Mass Communications
- School of Music
- School of Nursing
- School of Pharmacy
- School of Social Welfare
- I am not sure what I will major in.

Are you the first member of your family to pursue a bachelor's degree?   □Yes   □ No

I am (drop down, select one)
- A Kansas resident
- A U.S. resident, not from Kansas
- An international student

Select the option below that best describes your employment status in the last academic year:
- I work full-time during the academic year.
- I work part-time during the academic year.
- I do not work during the academic year but work during the summer.
- I am not employed.

Please indicate the average number of hours you work per week during the semester:
- 0-10
- 11-20
- 21-30
- 31-40
- More than 40 hours per week