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Closing the Gap between College Students' Professional Attire Needs and Career Readiness

Abstract

With the rising cost of college, many students face a range of economic challenges, including the professional attire required for job and internship interviews. In response to this problem, the University of North Carolina offers a career-readiness program that allows students to “shop” for free professional clothing at its on-campus Food Pantry. The program is called Attire for Hire (AFH) and the purpose of this study was to examine its impact on participants in need of professional interview clothing. Participants were asked to complete a survey regarding their satisfaction, confidence, and knowledge of career development after the implementation of the AFH event. All participants reported to have acquired career branding skills, professionalism skills and at least one item of interview-ready clothing. Due to the lack of existing literature, the findings presented in this study provide preliminary support for the value of on-campus programs like AFH. More research is needed on this topic as colleges and universities consider innovative ways to prepare all students for the successful transition into the workplace.

Introduction

The poverty cycle is the ongoing continuation of poverty throughout generations of a family, leaving them with progressively lower levels of education and training, which then leads to higher rates of unemployment, underemployment, and other negative economic and social effects (Gofen, 2009). Research shows that increasing the number of low-income students who

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earn a degree is an effective way to end the poverty cycle and promote social mobility (Teachers College, 2008). First, education pushes young adults to get good jobs and keep and sustain steady, industrious lives which seems to continue to the next generation. Furthermore, as society becomes more complex, higher education is needed to keep up. Thus, higher education is often identified as the key to ending the poverty cycle due to creating opportunities for students to enter the workforce and increasing social mobility.

However, research also shows that the expense of college means that college students are at higher risk for poverty, and its associated problems, than the general population of Americans. For instance, national data estimate the prevalence of hunger and food insecurity to be about 15% overall, but for college students it is estimated to be much higher--ranging from about 20% to as high as 60% across the higher education landscape (Buch, Langley, Johnson, & Coleman, 2016). A survey created by the University of Wisconsin's Harvesting Opportunities for Postsecondary Education (HOPE) Lab in March 2017 was a multi-state survey of more than 33,000 students enrolled in 70 different colleges and it found that two-thirds of students are food insecure (Blumenthal, 2018).

As economic hardship and food insecurity become a prevalent issue on college campuses, it follows that students may lack financial resources to obtain professional clothing necessary to obtain and maintain internships and employment opportunities. A student socioeconomic survey (CASE) by MIT done in October 2017 found that 1 in 10 MIT undergraduate students couldn't afford essentials for school such as course supplies, transportation to visit home, or professional clothing at some point of their time at the university (Blumenthal, 2018). First impressions are always important and are often based upon what a person is wearing. This is especially true when it comes to job interviews.

In response to the growing problem of financial hardship facing college students, colleges and universities are responding with a range of new services, including on-campus food pantries and clothing closets (Buch, et. al, 2016). The purpose of this article is to describe the efforts of one university to provide both professional development and professional clothing through a creative partnership between the university career center and the on-campus food pantry which serves at-need students. The article describes the partnership and shares preliminary data from program participants on its impact. First, we provide a literature review on the growing use of these services by other campuses.

The Need for Professional Clothing and Campus Responses

In the state of North Carolina, it was found that fewer than 10% of all institutions provide

professional clothing to their students. The majority consists of larger institutions that are part of the University of North Carolina (UNC) system, but a few community and technical colleges also offer these services. While the goals of these closets are the same across the state, the details on what exactly is offered, to whom it is offered, and how the program is implemented vary considerably. Most closets give away clothing permanently, while other closets “rent” items (for free) that must be returned after the interview. Most closets offer only professional clothing, though a few (e.g., Appalachian State University) also provide other types of clothing. Most closets serve only enrolled college students, while others (e.g., University of North Carolina Chapel Hill) also serve faculty and staff (“Food Bank & Free Store”, 2017).

Nationally, professional clothing closets appear to be proliferating. Our web search identified dozens of professional clothing closets on college campuses throughout most states. While all closets share the same purpose, and all closets provide free clothing to qualified students, we noted a wide range of practices across institutions. Some schools have requirements that must be met to receive clothing such as Southern University and A&M (Career Clothes Closet). These requirements include having a student ID and an unofficial transcript, fill out an application request and bring an updated resume, and schedule a mock interview and attend two information sessions. Other schools are more lax with their closets such as Indiana State University and Mansfield University. Although they limit the number of clothing students may take they encourage students to come once a month. At Texas A&M University-San Antonio, they limit their students to two takeaways each semester but the clothing is also available for rental (Career Services 2018). Several schools also do rentals instead of letting the students keep the clothing. Mansfield University and Yale have their closets partnered with local stores that donate professional clothing (Mansfield Professional Clothes Closet). This helps to address sizing issues and variety for both males and females. Another way Mansfield University copes with sizing issues is by partnering with local discount stores to get a voucher that is worth one item in the student’s size. Fresno State works with local thrift stores to swap clothing to make sure they have enough sizes in stock for all students (Baik, 2016).

Method

Attire for Hire Professional Development Partnership

In the beginning weeks of the Spring 2017 semester, Psychology Learning Community students who were enrolled in a Citizenship course were grouped together in relation to their interest in various service learning projects. Each team was required to volunteer at the Jamil Niner Student Pantry (JNSP) on UNC Charlotte’s campus, where they would gain a minimum of 25 service hours by volunteering during pantry open hours, and by working to complete their

chosen service project. The chosen initiatives among each team had to heighten awareness or bring in donations and supplies in support of the pantry. One of the teams, after volunteering regularly at the JNSP, noticed a need for affordable professional clothing for students who visited the pantry for food. An awareness of this new potential project led the students to reach out to the University Career Center and receive guidance on how to create an event that connects the need of professional attire to professional development, personal branding, and preparation for the workforce. Due to the University Career Center's obvious role in helping students in the areas previously mentioned, it was a very clear and easy decision for the Career Center to partner with the JNSP to make this new initiative happen.

The students coined the project 'Attire for Hire' (AFH) and, within the next few weeks, had their first event at the pantry. Alternating by gender every month, the students who participate in AFH are required to sign up via the University Career Center Portal, called 'Hire-A-Niner' to RSVP. On the date of the event, participants are welcomed by volunteers at the door when they arrive at the JNSP, and guided to the conference room where the beginning of the program takes place. The first portion of the AFH events include a workshop facilitated by a career counselor from the University Career Center. During this time, students introduce themselves, their projected career paths, and learn the importance of professional dress in the workplace, personal branding, and create an elevator speech to use with potential employers. While this workshop is taking place, volunteers are pulling items from the clothing closet inventory based off of the participants varying sizes, and place the items on racks in preparation for the 'shopping' portion of the event. After the workshop is complete, participants are paired with a 'personal shopper', a volunteer who helps participants pick out as many professional clothing items in their size, to help them select, try on, and take home free professional clothing items. Every student that participates in the AFH events leaves with at least one free professional clothing item to use for their future jobs and interviews, but many students leave with multiple items.

Before participants leave, they are asked to complete a survey that asks questions about their overall experience, confidence level, and how they heard about the AFH event. These surveys are collected and used for research on the impact and effectiveness of the AFH initiative.

Participants

Participants were recruited through the Hire-A-Niner website administered by the University Career Center. The population of interest was at-need college students at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Participants were not separated into groups based on any attributes. Each event had an average attendance of 10 participants. Based on the information collected and analyzed from 121 participants, 65.6% of the participants were male and 34.4% were female.

Measures

The intention was to measure the effect that offering these career development events has on the students who are able to attend. A questionnaire was developed by the researchers and given to participants at the close of each AFH event. The questionnaire measured how satisfied participants were with the event and how confident they felt because of their new skills and new clothes. Open ended questions consisted of class year, major, how they heard about the event, and why they were interested in attending. Participants were asked true or false questions including if they learned aspects of career branding and professionalism, learned aspects of professional dress and how to select professional dress items, and if they were able to obtain at least one item of professional clothing that would allow them to succeed during their career search. Lastly, participants were asked to rate their confidence level in their professionalism, brand, and career search after this event on a scale of one to five, one being not confident and five being very confident.

Procedure

The questionnaire was administered in the traditional pen and paper format by a career counselor from the University Career Center. It was issued to participants upon completion of the shopping portion of the Attire for Hire event. Participants were expected to answer the questions on the questionnaire honestly and anonymously.

Results

Participants represented five colleges at the university. Represented with their respective percentages are the College of Computing and Informatics, 25.8%, College of Engineering, 14.5%, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, 19.4%, College of Arts and Architecture, 1.6%, and the Belk College of Business, 38.7%. When analyzed by class, the majority of participants hailed from the junior and senior class with each representing 37.7% of the participants. Sophomores, graduate students and freshmen trailed behind with 13.1%, 6.6%, and 4.9%, respectively.

The majority of participants, 66.1%, were informed about the Attire for Hire event through an email blast from the University Career Center. The Hire-A-Niner website was responsible for informing 24.2% of participants. Word of mouth was responsible for 6.5% and the remaining 3.2% heard about the event through Instagram or the University Center of Academic Excellence.

Reports show that 85.7% of participants were interested in the Attire for Hire event because they needed and could not afford professional clothes and they knew that they would receive some at the event. The remaining 14.3% reported that they primarily attended the event because they

wanted to receive professional development and interview tips. One hundred percent of participants responded that at the event they learned aspects of career branding and professionalism and that they were able to obtain at least one item of professional clothing that would help them to succeed during their career search. The average level of confidence in professionalism, brand, and career search as a result of the event was 4.3325 out of 5 with 5 being very confident.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of the AFH program on participants in need of professional interview clothes. These events were implemented to provide students who are in need with clothing and information regarding career-readiness. The implementation of AFH events was found to be beneficial for those in need of professional attire as well as guidance in developing a career-readiness mindset. AFH events also involve students and faculty on campus, and grant them the opportunity to engage in service learning. Volunteers gain a new understanding of food insecurity and the need for professional development advice and events like AFH for all students as a result of their participation. While students from the UNC Charlotte campus and staff from the University Career Center are volunteering and serving students in need, they are also gaining a better understanding of the impact of professional clothing insecurity on their campus. Seeing this need first-hand allows for volunteers to become more invested in the cause and could potentially increase awareness around the issue. As more members of the UNC Charlotte community become aware of the needs for programs like AFH, the likelihood of increased empathy and mutual understanding are almost certain. With the continuation of AFH events, students who experience food and clothing insecurity will no longer have to remain isolated, and have a chance to receive the help and support that they need from their campus. It is proposed that having other college campuses participate in similar events will generate the same positive outcomes, resulting in a larger number of students who are better prepared in regards to career success. Implementing events similar to AFH will also further raise awareness for the current issue, which may generate more solutions as the number of people involved increase.

Because AFH events were created with the mission of assisting students who are in need of clothing, generalizing the percentage of students who are unable to purchase their own professional clothing to the entire campus population may be inaccurate. The percentage of male and female participants reported in the data are not consistent with the campus-wide male and female student percentages. This also limits the ability to generalize the results found in the data. Another limiting factor was the inability to serve more than ten participants at each event, which resulted in an average of ten students having to be put onto a waiting list. It is suggested that the

number of participants per event be expanded, so as to accommodate more students and gain a bigger sample size for research purposes. Because this research topic is new and is limited in the amount of previous research, the opportunity for growth in future replications are numerous. The original format of the assessment limits the number of conclusions that can be drawn from our research. For instance, the average confidence rating reported among participants does not take into account the potential for unchanged confidence scores. It is not certain that the high confidence ratings reported are a result of the AFH event. In the future, using a pre and post-assessment could help minimize other factors that may contribute to the participant ratings of self-confidence, interview-readiness, and knowledge of appropriate workplace attire. AFH events are held once a month, on the same day of the week and at the same time. Increasing the number of events and creating new day and time options will simultaneously increase the sample size, further refine the data that is collected, and provide more students with the opportunity to participate in the future.

To conclude, current findings suggest that events such as AFH have many benefits for colleges and universities. First, they serve the clothing insecurity needs of students and help raise their confidence for pursuing and attaining career opportunities. Second, they bring university career services to a new setting (the on-campus food pantry) that may reach more at-need students. Third, these events engage many students, staff, and faculty as volunteers in service to their campus community. Together, these all help to raise awareness about the problem of food and clothing insecurity among college students, which may motivate the community to work together toward innovative solutions. It is in the hopes that as more knowledge of this topic is attained, college campuses all over the nation will develop similar events to prepare students for successful transitions from college to workplace.

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