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Exploring Alumni Stories Through Qualitative Research

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Abstract

This presentation describes a project designed to connect current psychology undergraduates with alumni from the same program. Purposive sampling was used to recruit diverse alumni following different career paths (i.e., graduate school or straight to work), representing alumni who identified as first generation, nontraditional, Latina/Latino or as a student of color. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand alumni career paths and gather information about decision-making, barriers, supports, and advice for current psychology majors. Interviews were audio-taped and are currently being transcribed. Some alumni agreed to participate in an "Alumni Profile," which highlighted specific alumni by name, shared details of individual's specific story, and were made publicly available. The current presentation will share the experiences of the undergraduate researchers exploring qualitative research, learning about career options available after graduation, and benefits for current students.

Prior Research

- Career advising has become an increasingly important issue (Atchley, Hooker, Kroska, & Gilmour, 2012; Roscoe & Strapp, 2009).
- One of the biggest questions facing undergraduates is what happens after college. Should they get a job or go to graduate school? (Briihl, 2001).
- Alumni are a valuable resource for providing information about jobs, graduate school, and for countering the myth that you can't get a job with a bachelor's degree in psychology (Landrum, Hettich, & Wilner, 2010).
- Alumni assessments of psychology graduates typically provide detailed quantitative data (i.e., annual earnings, the frequency of specific job titles) (Strapp, Granov, & Dixon, 2011), however, information about career paths (i.e., changes in employers and careers across time), as well as practical questions (i.e., how did you find your first job?) are more readily answered with a qualitative approach to assessment.
- When little is known about a phenomenon being examined, qualitative methods allow for an inductive approach (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).
- Qualitative methods are recognized as an essential contributor to career development research, especially when examining understudied populations (Blustein, 2006; Koegel, Donin, Ponterotto, & Spitz, 1995).

Project Goals

- Connect current Western Oregon University psychology undergraduates with alumni from the same undergraduate psychology program.
- Understand alumni career paths, including decision-making, barriers, and supports.
- Develop a tool for communicating information about careers in psychology.
- Provide current Western Oregon University undergraduates with practical experience interviewing, and networking.
- Increase knowledge about diversity of career opportunities, barriers for psychology student career development, and realistic career planning.

Participants

Western Oregon University Psychology Alumni (N = 60) from the class 1999-2013 were purposively sampled. Alumni met one or more of the following criteria:

- Identify as First Generation College Student (N = 25)
- Identify as Latino/Latina or Student of Color (N = 16)
- Completed undergraduate studies (no graduate work) (N = 21)
- Earned graduate degree in clinical/counseling psychology (N = 13)
- Earned graduate degree in something else (N = 25)

Materials

Materials Completed	Semi-Structured Interview: Developed to Elicit Career Story (Sample Questions)
Consent Form: Agreed to be interviewed and have aggregated responses included in study.	Tell me about changes in your work life and your decision-making.
Demographic Questionnaire: Assessed age, gender, racial identity, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability status. Assessed involvement at WOU and current work experience.	Tell me about your experience ending your time at WOU and figuring out your next step. (Anticipated work, plans, preparations for first job, difficulties) .
Additional Alumni Profile Consent Form: A subsample of alumni consented to having career story connected to personal identity.	Where do you see yourself in the next 5 – 10 years?
Alumni Profile Survey: Asked about hometown, hobbies, favorite class at WOU, dream job, influence of psychology on personal life, advice for current students.	What barriers and supports have impacted you in your career development?
	What advice do you have for undergraduates interested in your "_____" (current career) ?

Procedure

Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4
Alumni interviews were conducted by students. Some interviews were conducted in person, over the phone, or via Skype.	Some alumni agreed to an alumni profile. These profiles were put together to highlight their schooling and career paths, as well as advice for current students.	Collected data from interviews will be shared through the department's website.	Transcriptions will be analyzed with consensual qualitative research technique (CQR; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997).
Interviews were transcribed and de-identified. De-identification included removing names, job locations, graduate schools, and other identifying titles.	Interviews were transcribed and de-identified. De-identification included removing names, job locations, graduate schools, and other identifying titles.	Alumni profiles will be displayed to provide a useful tool for communicating information about careers in psychology.	The research team will develop codes, core concepts, and categories; analysis is reviewed and revised to reach agreement.

Results: Alumni Profiles



The collage displays four alumni profiles, each with a photo and a short bio. The profiles are:

- Andrew Davis, MSW, LCSW, MAC, CADC III**: Program Manager, Addictive Medicine. Career path includes being a school counselor, working in addiction medicine, and currently being a program manager.
- Elizabeth Priddy, BS**: Senior Data Architect. Career path includes working in IT, becoming a data analyst, and currently being a senior data architect.
- Denesa Oberbeck, PhD**: Senior Research Associate, Oregon Health Sciences University. Career path includes being a research assistant, working in research, and currently being a senior research associate.
- Sara Winegar Budge, Psy.D.**: Assistant Professor of Psychology, Western Oregon University and Concordia University. Career path includes being a research assistant, working in research, and currently being an assistant professor.

Project Outcomes

Current students develop practical experience working with qualitative research, broaden research skills, networking, increased knowledge about diversity of career opportunities, and increased knowledge about barriers and realistic career planning. Benefits for alumni include the opportunity to mentor current students, and an increased sense of connection to their alma mater. Faculty benefit from increased contact with alumni, and acquire detailed information about career paths in psychology to be shared with current and prospective students.

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