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Winter 2015

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Repository Citation

Career Planning & Adult Development Journal . Winter2015, Vol. 31 Issue 4, p64-68. 5p.

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Chapter 6

THE CASE of a RETURNING VETERAN with ATTENTION DEFICIT HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER

by Rob Bahny, Abiola Dipeolu, and Jessica L. Sniatecki

Abstract

Authors discuss the case of a returning veteran with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder whose goal was to pursue a degree in business, but he was unsure of the specific area. This lack of clarity caused some difficulties moving forward in college. In identifying areas of dysfunctional career thinking, several career counseling issues became apparent. A description of the process his counselor employed as well as an exploration of the considerations that allowed for effective results are included.

More than two million troops have been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan since September 11, 2001 (United States, 2011). Employment has been identified as a primary concern of many returning veterans (Redmond, Wilcox, Campbell, Kim, Finney, Barr & Hassan, 2015). Yet, research on previous military conflicts has indicated that combat involvement is associated with higher rates of unemployment and job loss (Prigerson, Maciejewski, & Rosenheck, 2002). Such findings suggest that veterans may face greater challenges than civilians in finding and maintaining satisfactory employment.

What follows is a case study focused on a veteran of the war in Iraq, who has chosen to return to college in the hopes of obtaining satisfying, lucrative future employment. Analysis of the career counseling considerations and challenges relevant to this case as well as the steps that were taken in assisting this client are discussed.

The Case of Steve*

Steve is a 26 year old African American male, first generation college student pursuing his associate's degree after serving in the US Army during Operation Iraqi Freedom. He has been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and was attending a junior college which is very supportive in accommodating his disability. He wanted to enter the business field though he wasn't quite sure what area of specialization in the business field he wanted to pursue. He earned good grades and was planning to transfer to a four year school and pursue a bachelor's degree in business after completing his associate's degree. He had his sights set high and felt that his veteran and minority status, along with his role as the student body president at his college, would be very helpful when applying for transfer admission. At the same time, the ambiguity of his interest in business was causing him some difficulty because after graduation he wanted to go right into the workforce, and he was concerned that a generalized degree in business will not offer him that opportunity. He wanted to transfer to a college with strong connections in the

business field so that he could participate in top notch internships to add to his record of military service.

Career Intervention Focus

Steve approached the Transfer and Career Office trying to narrow down his specialization in the business field, along with seeking guidance about which colleges he should be applying to. The counseling intervention began with an exploration of his interest in the field of business as a whole, and an exploration of why he came to the conclusion that he should pursue this field. The answers Steve provided displayed a level of uninformed, flawed career thinking that may be typical of some returning adult students. *“Business is the way of the world”*, *“I liked my Intro to Business professor”*, *“I want to be able to make a decent living”* were all reasons given for pursuing this major. Upon further discussion, it was apparent that Steve was unaware of the amount of math courses he would have to take (especially at the high end business schools he was hoping to attend after earning his associate’s degree). Due to his disability, Steve reported that he struggles with math and indicated that he was fearful that he would not be able to pass the requirements. He was also unaware of the fundamental nature of a business program and turned out to not be very interested in many of the required courses.

In the course of the career counseling sessions, Steve also spent some time completing selected career inventories measuring his interests, values and personality type. Based on his uninformed statements of why he’d like to a pursue business major he was asked to complete the Career Thoughts Inventory (CTI; Sampson, Peterson, Lenz, Reardon, & Saunders, 1996) to measure his level of dysfunctional career thinking. This inventory provides students with concrete examples of career difficulties they may be experiencing, and because it is easy to understand, most students with learning disabilities (LD) and/or ADHD are able to complete the inventory (Bahny & Dipeolu, 2012). He also completed the Self-Directed Search (SDS; Holland, 1994); the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI; Briggs-Myers, Briggs, & McCaulley, Quenk, & Hammer, 1998) and the O*Net Career Values Inventory (US Department of Labor, 2012).

Steve was able to quickly assess his situation and determined that he needed a new plan. He had not taken many business courses which meant that he could change his major easily, so he decided to switch from business to liberal arts and take classes that were of interest to him and would also not require him to perform an inordinate amount of tasks that were impacted by his ADHD, namely math and large volumes of reading. This provided some degree of breathing room but did not do anything to assist Steve in progressing toward his career goals.

Steve’s main concern (as may be the case with many veterans) was earning his degree quickly and in a cost effective manner. He wanted his degree to translate directly into the workforce and he was open to exploring his options. Consistent with research findings, his CTI scores were in the normal range for college students though his score in the area of Decision Making Confusion was somewhat higher than average (Dipeolu, Sniatecki, Storlie, & Hargrave, 2013). As a result, it was discovered that he was concerned that if he chose “the wrong major” in college, his time and money would be wasted, and he’d be no better off than when he was separated from military service. The concern was mainly financial and so it was discussed that the GI Bill along with the tuition waiver he’d receive as a veteran attending an in-state college in his home state made his

college education quite affordable. He also agreed that a college degree (regardless of major) was better than no college degree in the long run. He indicated that his family would also be extremely proud of him for having served in Iraq and having a college degree.

In reviewing Steve's career inventories it was found that there was a degree of congruity amongst the results. His Holland code was SAI (Social, Artistic, Investigative) and his Myers-Briggs personality type was ENTJ (Extroversion, Intuition, Thinking, Judging) and his work values had a clear tilt toward Achievement, Recognition and Relationships. When previous academic interests were examined, Steve mentioned that he always liked classes where he could write. He regularly received praise for the quality of his writing, though his overall grade frequently suffered due to lateness. When it was suggested that he consider writing and journalism as a career choice, he was initially hesitant due to the lack of a nine-to-five structure for the writing-related work. He was accustomed to a high degree of workplace structure having been in the military, and he was also hesitant due to his disability. Discussion in the session addressed these concerns by assisting Steve in identifying possible compensatory strategies to help maximize his strengths and minimize his disability-related challenges. Upon further consideration, Steve decided this new academic path was manageable and that he would start taking courses in this area. He was also pleased to learn that one of the colleges in his home state offered these majors so he could attend tuition free. He would also still plan to apply to some highly selective colleges along with some historically Black colleges and universities to see what kind of scholarship and transfer credit offers he could receive.

Implications for Career Counseling Interventions

As a returning veteran, Steve had advantages that allowed for successful career counseling intervention outcomes. These can be informative for career professionals considering future work with this population. They include: (a) adaptability learned in the military; (b) a high degree of congruence among interests, values and personality type; (c) a high level of determination and self-efficacy; (d) self-awareness regarding disability-related limitations; (e) being in a supportive educational environment; (f) a career development specialist versed in military student needs; and (g) use of the Office of Career Services early on in his college career.

Examination of Steve's case also resulted in practical suggestions for career professionals, particularly those working with veterans. First, career professionals need to be trained to elicit and recognize dysfunctional career thinking, whether it be subtle or overt, with their clients, especially those with ADHD. Secondly, asking clients to revisit and assess their decision-making processes can be challenging, but is well worth the effort. Finally, asking clients to quantify their limitations is equally as important as knowing their strengths.

The session ended with a discussion with Steve which emphasized that obtaining a job in this field would be less dependent on where he earned his degree and more based on the quality of his writing, the connections he made along the way, and participating in internships at quality organizations, all of which played to his strengths. Steve also indicated that he felt comfortable being judged on his *portfolio* when attempting to re-enter the workforce. Upon enrolling at his next college, he reported that he would immediately focus on getting involved with the campus literary magazine and student newspaper and would pursue opportunities with the local newspa-

per in his hometown. By identifying and addressing the dysfunctional career thinking early on in the relationship, it allowed the career practitioner to quickly establish a course of action with Steve. This was important based on the fact that he'd already accumulated credits in a major that he subsequently determined he no longer planned to pursue. The CTI was particularly useful for identification of non-functional career thoughts; hence the intervention plan was put in place early, well before career difficulties became endemic and resistant to change (Bahny & Dipelou, 2012).

Conclusion

Student veterans with ADHD bring to the career counseling process unique difficulties and strengths that need to be acknowledged and addressed. Sensibly using the CTI as an adjunct intervention can enhance the career counseling and career decision making processes with this population.

*The case represents a close approximation to a real client scenario. A pseudo name is used in place to actual name.

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