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Evaluating First-Generation Students' Career Readiness

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Evaluating First-Generation Students' Career Readiness

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Abstract

Research shows that first-generation students have historically had less guidance and resources to support their educational attainment and career development (Tate et al., 2015). This has resulted in considerable growth in the amount of support systems, programs, and services implemented by educational institutions across the United States to help first-generation college students thrive in higher education and their future careers. This study sought to improve my understanding of the career readiness of first-generation students at USD. By engaging with and gathering data from first-generation students, I have greater insight about ways of supporting first-generation students' career readiness and vocational confidence through heightened support from the Career Development Center in navigating career resources and processes. Themes that arose include social and familial pressures, uncertainty, and unfamiliarity. Recommendations include demystifying the meaning of career readiness, tailoring programming and outreach efforts, and implementing resource-specific workshops.

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Evaluating First-Generation Students' Career Readiness

Identifying as a first-generation student, I often worried about my own career preparedness as I navigated higher education and planned for my future job search. I completed my undergraduate career at the University of California at Santa Barbara (UCSB), a large, public institution with a total enrollment of almost 26,000 students in 2018 (University of California - Santa Barbara, 2019). I believe I would have personally benefited from participating in a career-readiness program (CRP) program like those required at USD. Through CRP, I would have gained skills to better express the value of my Communication and Global Studies degree, the competencies I acquired through my work-study jobs, and extracurricular involvements. CRP would have provided me with training and guidance to more effectively promote my skills and incorporate them in networking or job interviews, but instead I relied on the advice of my peers, advisors, and the Internet.

While I did not participate in a CRP because it was not offered at my undergraduate institution and I did utilize the social capital I gained at UCSB to incorporate my passion into my career. Other first-generation students might not share this experience without a CRP. A CRP not only provides students with resources to bridge the gap between their studies and the job market, but encourages them to partake in events geared to developing their career competencies and skills through the vast range of events and experiential learning opportunities offered.

Additionally, liberal arts and humanities degrees are sometimes questioned by society and even the students themselves. These degrees are perceived to have less value than degrees pertaining to more "linear" career paths, such as business or engineering. Given that first-generation students have generally less support and resources throughout their pursuit of higher education (Tate et al., 2015), it is pertinent to assess the possible impact of a CRP on first-

generation students' development because CRP has become a graduation requirement at USD for all incoming undergraduate students. It is intended to be a valuable resource for students who might not have been otherwise exposed to the career development opportunities offered at or through USD.

Since USD's Career Development Center has implemented their three CRP's, this action research project was intended to elucidate their impact on first-generation students in addition to other career-related initiatives across campus. In the future, I would like more first-generation students to have improved or greater feelings of career readiness and confidence in the value of their higher education to reach their desired vocational goals. I also would like to foster an increased participation of first-generation students in programming and initiatives aimed to grow their career skills and competencies. The Career Development Center can further promote these outcomes by continuing to provide first-generation students through targeted programming and outreach, career guidance, and support for them to explore enriching experiential learning or vocational opportunities such as internships.

Background

First-generation students come into higher education possessing unique needs relative to their continuing-generation peers. It is evident that there has been a considerable growth in the amount of support systems, programs, and services created by educational institutions to encourage first-generation college students' educational attainment. In addition, they aim to help them thrive throughout the duration of their college career and beyond.

One theme in the literature about first-generation students is their perceptions and use of career services and career readiness programs. Russo's (2015) action research project analyzed how USD's Career Services' (now the Career Development Center) programming efforts and

initiatives engaged students in order to best prepare them for their future careers. These methods allowed Russo (2015) to collect data that revealed areas of improvement for the center, which included student engagement early on, intentional programming, and improved marketing efforts. Since I conducted my research in collaboration with USD's Career Development Center I assessed the effectiveness of our branding and student engagement with first-generation students. I was particularly interested in seeing how the center impacts first-generation students' overall feelings of career readiness and how focus areas such as early engagement and networking, especially via the CRP requirements, might impact their career paths.

The National Association of Colleges and Employers describes career readiness for college students as an acquired range of competencies to enter the workforce and also acknowledges that the term has been largely undefined until recently (NACE, 2020). This is also how USD's Career Development Center defines career readiness and promotes students' attainment of these core competencies. Career readiness has also been coupled with college readiness in vast literature, affirming that students' career readiness begins prior to attending college and therefore stressing the need for high schools to prepare students to complete high school, attend college, and excel throughout the process (Hooker & Brand, 2010). Specifically, the American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF) sought to define this complex process of college and career readiness as:

Students are prepared to successfully complete credit-bearing college coursework or industry certification without remediation, have the academic skills and self-motivation necessary to persist and progress in post-secondary education, and have identified career goals and the necessary steps to achieve them (Hooker & Brand, 2010, p. 76).

Hooker & Brand (2010) elaborated on this and explained how college-going low-income, first-generation students know about the importance of attaining a higher education but lack the social capital and counseling to better understand the range of career options out there, as well as processes which include completing college and financial aid applications; the lack of college knowledge could be detrimental to their higher education retention and completion in the long run. These factors are important to address when preparing first-generation students for college.

Furthermore, Vogel (2014) describes how low-income, first-generation high schoolers sought to obtain a degree that was directly related to a career because otherwise they did not consider them to be a worthwhile investment. Vogel (2014) aimed to understand ways in which these students could better understand the value of a Liberal Arts degree and how this degree would be more valuable aside from the purpose of obtaining a career and would still provide them with career-readiness skills. This article was particularly relevant to my research because one of the Career Development Center's Career Readiness Programs (CRP), titled COMPASS, was implemented in partnership with USD's College of Arts and Sciences. COMPASS has a workshop component that specifically aims to help our students in articulating the value of a Liberal Arts education, which would help correct the perception that these first-generation high school students have. I was interested in whether this has had its intended effect on increasing students' understanding of their degrees' value as well as how the increased partnership between the school and the center has provided students with greater vocational confidence.

The theme of first-generation students' overall educational attainment as it relates to academic achievement and pursuit of graduate or professional school was also heavily prevalent. Kniffin (2007) explored how first-generation students are an underserved population and that they obtain a graduate or professional degree, particularly doctorate degrees, at a lower rate

compared to their continuing-generation colleagues. Kniffin (2007) concluded that several social class barriers negatively impact students at various stages in their academic careers. Further, this can have long-lasting consequences which include causing them to not pursue further education. Carlton (2015) also found that first-generation students were indeed less likely to pursue graduate degrees when comparing the rates of continuing-generation students even when controlling for variables such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status, and GPA. Similarly, Tate et al. (2015) discuss how underrepresented first-generation, low-income (UFGLI) college students' self-efficacy and family influence attaining graduate degrees. Thus, it is important to address how the intersectionality of students' identities such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and first-generation status, can make educational attainment more challenging due to oppressive systems and lack of adequate support to help them apply for graduate school.

There have also been strategies and interventions designed to help first-generation students seek resources to support their career development. Schwartz et al. (2018) focused on evaluating the experiences of incoming first-generation college students who completed a summer remedial program and the effects of a training titled the "Connected Scholars Program" (CSP). This four-session intervention aimed to teach students skills and discuss strategies about how to create informal mentoring relationships with faculty, staff, and others through discussions, interviews, and roleplay. They found that after the intervention, first-generation students had increased confidence and knowledge about seeking support and developing relationships with faculty, and also showed improved outlooks about their future educational attainment.

Context

This Action Research Project was conducted at the University of San Diego in San Diego, CA. It is a private, non-profit, Catholic university with approximately 9,000 total enrollment (University of San Diego, 2019b). I used USD's definition of first-generation students which states that students are considered to have first-generation status if their parents or guardians had not earned a bachelor's degree or higher by the time the student graduated from high school or completed high school equivalency (University of San Diego, 2019c). According to Hoffman (2019), the percentage of first-generation undergraduate students at USD was 18% in 2018, which is a significant portion of USD's overall student population and warrants a need for resources catered to promoting their success. The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) also recently recognized USD as a "First Forward Institution," meaning it is dedicated to advancing research, knowledge, resources, and overall success for first-generation students (University of San Diego, (2019c). My positionality during this study was as a Graduate Assistant (G.A.) for USD's Career Development Center through which I primarily held individual counseling appointments and drop-in advising for students primarily from undeclared majors and the College of Arts and Sciences. I also assisted with large-scale events each semester such as the Job and Internship Fair and Career Café. Additionally, in my second year as a G.A. I became involved with the campus First-Generation Action Team as well as the First-Generation Student Association.

USD's Career Development Center has three CRP's: PASSPORT in the School Business, COMPASS in the College of Arts and Sciences, and CONNECT for the Shiley-Marcos School of Engineering (SMSE). Students must complete their respective CRP in order to graduate. They aim to provide students with career readiness information and skills related to their field of study and interests. In particular, to obtain these skills they must acquire a certain amount of points by

attending career-related events and workshops, as well as participating in experiential education opportunities such as an internship or one of the Career Development Center's Torero Treks.

The development of CRP aligns with USD's Envisioning 2024 Strategic Plan, particularly the goal of "Enhancing Student Learning and Success" (University of San Diego, 2019a). Within the Career Development Center's Strategic Plan, the implementation of CRP campus-wide is incorporated into Strategic Priority 1 and includes educating faculty and administrators along with students about the programs, specifically COMPASS and CONNECT since they have been recently implemented (University of San Diego Career Development Center, 2017). The Career Development Center also assesses senior's career outcomes after graduating by surveying graduating seniors annually and I reviewed this data to find patterns among first-generation and continuing-generation students since first-generation students have differing experiences than continuing-generation students related to finances, their families, and career expectations.

Being first-generation, I had to independently figure out the logistics of applying for and attending both an undergraduate and graduate program. Graduate school was initially out of question for me for the majority of my undergraduate time at UCSB. I was unsure about the resources available to me to determine the next steps in my career and the biggest factors limiting me from considering graduate school were finances and the pressures of finding the "right" program for my future. I personally did not have the knowledge about the recommended steps to take if I wanted to work in the university setting as a higher education practitioner. However, I received support from various internship advisors along the way who were doing the kind of work that I sought to do and they prompted me to consider graduate school.

My values of academic achievement, equity, persistence, and relationships have been pivotal to my accomplishments thus far and motivate me to help first-generation students in higher education succeed. Since CRP has become a graduation requirement for all incoming USD undergraduates, the Career Development Center prioritizes reaching USD's diverse student body, particularly the students who it may have not connected with prior to the implementation of CRP. The Career Development Center must work to be equitable in its range of CRP approved events and experiential offerings in order to intentionally cater to all students' lived experiences and needs.

Research Question

My research questions relate to my positionality as a Graduate Assistant at USD's Career Development Center, my liaison role for the First-Generation Student Association, and my personal interest in supporting first-generation students in higher education. The question was:

1. How can I better understand the career readiness of first-generation students at USD?
 - a. How do first-generation students interpret and approach career readiness?

Ultimately, these questions were aimed to improve my own and the Career Development Center's understanding of first-generation students' experiences at USD and career readiness needs. They were also aimed at gauging their awareness and use of our career resources as well as their attendance at career-related events on campus.

Theories Informing Topic

Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth Model

Several theories inform this research including Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth model. Yosso (2005) explains the capital Communities of Color have using critical race theory which is often looked over by other theoretical frameworks' "blindspots" causing a perpetuation

of the perception of People of Color through a deficit lens (p.73). This framework's consideration of various forms of capital contrasts deficit thinking and its underlying oppression, which is prevalent in our society. In the context of the U.S. education system students who are underrepresented minorities are seen to be lacking resources. Yosso's theory serves to rectify this by capturing a holistic depiction of Communities of Color's cultural wealth far beyond their income and material assets.

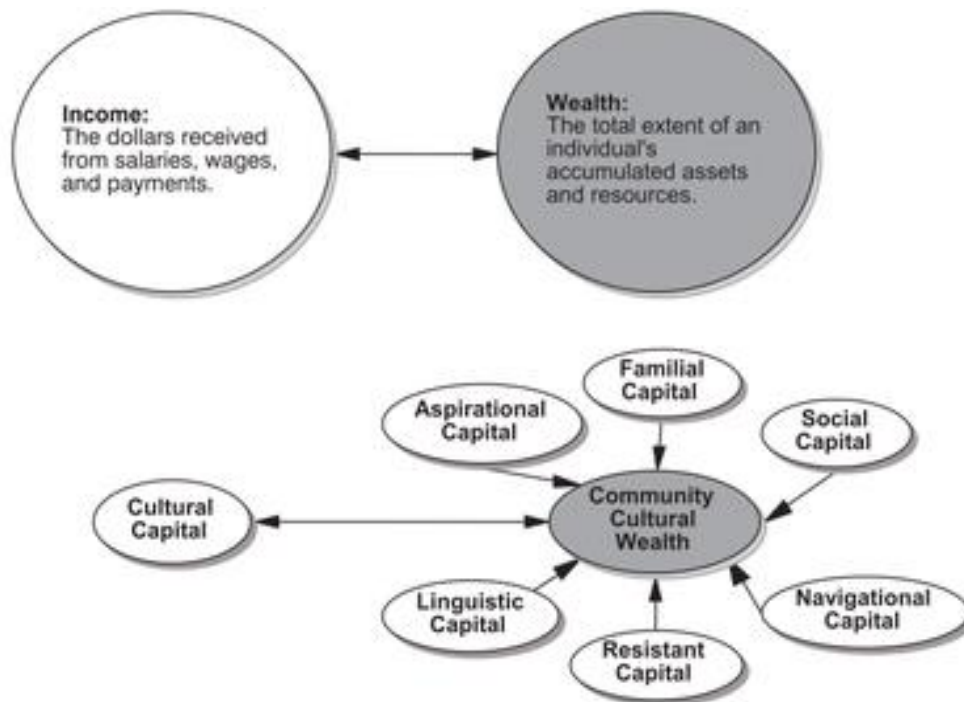


Figure 1. Yosso's (2005) model of Community Cultural Wealth.

Many first-generation students face deficit approaches not only for that identity but for their racial, ethnic, and other social identities. Thus, it is important to acknowledge this intersectionality and recognize the various forms of wealth that first-generation Students of Color carry even beyond the resistant, aspirational, and navigational capital that they use to persevere as minorities at predominantly White institutions.

Baxter Magolda's Self-Authorship Theory

Baxter Magolda (2001) describes the process of self-authorship emerging adults undergo, such as traditionally aged college students, highlights how they know the world, and how they begin to develop their own sense of self. They do so by moving away from external factors that have been their primary resources for meaning-making. Throughout their journey to self-authorship, they begin to question authority and the status quo in order to develop their own identities and futures. This theory informs my research on first-generation students because the pressure they receive from relatives to succeed and their knowledge about higher education from these external sources, including their communities and the media, influences their decision-making and career paths. I was interested in discovering where my participants are in their journey and what factors have influenced them to reach a crossroads stage to question their preconceived notions about the world to move towards self-authorship.

Abes, Jones, & McEwen's Model

Abes, Jones, & McEwen's (2007) revised version of the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI) provides another way to understand first-generation students' lived experiences holistically by considering their intersectional identities and how they make meaning. Specifically, Abes et al. (2007) outline students' meaning-making as a process by which they filter the inputs they receive from their external environment, such as societal influences and interactions they have with others, to then develop their self-perception as it relates to the multitude of identities they hold.

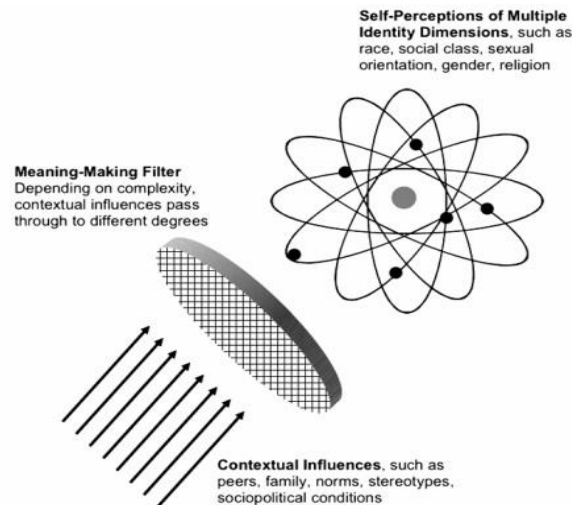


Figure 2. Abes, Jones, & McEwen's (2007) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity.

It is important to consider how first-generation students' identities such as their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and others influence their student experiences. The multitude of these identities can create different forms of oppression and/or privileges for these students in the context of USD. Depending on how inclusive they perceive their environment to be for them, this influences the ways they interact with their peers, faculty, staff, and other resources on campus, depending on how inclusive they perceive their environment to be for them.

Methods

I used a mixed methods approach for my data collection and follow McNiff & Whitehead's (2011) action-reflection cycle throughout my research process. McNiff & Whitehead (2011) delineate this process as a cyclical process of "observe – reflect – act – evaluate – modify – move in new directions" and assert that knowledge is consistently derived throughout by the new questions that arise (p. 5). This method is recommended for practitioners and McNiff & Whitehead (2011) do not recommend it when assessing correlations or causal relationships.

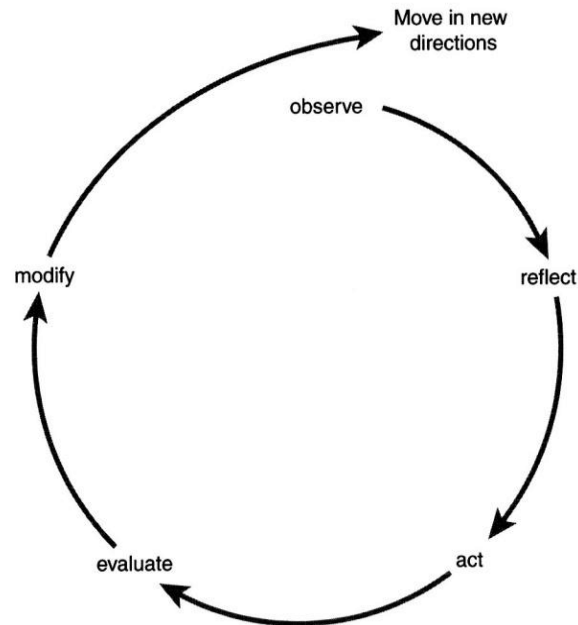


Figure 3. McNiff & Whitehead's (2011) Action-Reflection Cycle.

I selected this form of action research because it allowed me to evaluate my own positionality and practice within the Career Development Center, specifically regarding our support of first-generation students. This is important because I can directly assess and improve my understanding of the impact that I am having on our first-generation students within the larger context of the center and USD. Through the action-reflection process, I took action after observing and reflecting on first-generation students' career readiness and the process of each cycle. For example, I offered participants career resources in cycle 2 when their interviews concluded after receiving appreciation from students about the resource workshop in cycle 1. However, a limitation of this method is that it is more difficult to take an objective, balcony approach because I am integrated in the research. McNiff & Whitehead (2011) refer to this as the "outsider" approach to research which measures a situation being personally removed from the research context and is a method commonly utilized in the social sciences (p. 2). Nonetheless, this research framework was valuable for my study because since I was immersed in it I

personally connected with the students who participated and it was easier to give them career development resources after each cycle, making it more individualized. This framework's reflective component also allowed me to better understand their experiences at USD and when I related to them in my experience as a fellow first-generation student.

Participants

I recruited 16 total participants for this study with some participating in both cycles. They were all undergraduate students at USD and ranged in academic years from freshmen to seniors. The majority identified as first-generation and 3 allies participated in cycle 1. I recruited participants through various means. First, I developed interpersonal relationships and collaborated with USD's First-Generation Student Association (FGSA) as a liaison and peer advisor. Thus, I was able to incorporate my cycle 1 data collection into a career development workshop during one of their bi-weekly meetings of Fall 2019. They promoted this workshop through their social media page and I incorporated it into the Career Development Center's weekly newsletters to all USD undergraduate students. For recruitment of cycle 2 participants, FGSA sent a mass email to the students enrolled in their listserv and other professional staff forwarded the email to their students. Lastly, I utilized a PowerPoint slide advertising participation for cycle 2 that was incorporated into the Career Development Center's COMPASS Orientations.

Prior to the start of each cycle, I introduced myself and explained my role as a Graduate Assistant in the Career Development Center. I then explained the consent forms I asked them to sign, which delineated the purpose of the study and use of data, their role as participants, and additional resources such as USD's Center for Health and Wellness (Appendix A). To maintain confidentiality, participants will be referred to by pseudonyms in this paper.

Needs Assessment

I decided that I wanted to focus on this specific constituent group for my action research project because of my personal identity as a first-generation student and the significant proportion of first-generation students in USD's student body. As I became integrated in the Career Development Center as a Graduate Assistant throughout the school year, I began to question how we were catering our programming and services to first-generation students. Seeing how intertwined college and career readiness programs were with fostering the success of low-income, first-generation and other underrepresented student populations it became clear that I wanted to know how the Career Development Center is meeting first-generation students' needs and the improvements that can be made in order to do so more effectively.

Cycles

This study consisted of 2 cycles based on McNiff & Whitehead's (2011) action research framework. Prior to beginning my research, I conducted a pre-cycle to become better informed about the Career Development Center's engagement with first-generation students through appointments and events, as well as other forms of on-campus engagement such as through FGSA. Afterwards, I hosted a focus group in the first cycle which was integrated into an FGSA bi-weekly meeting in which there were 8 participants. I conducted individual, structured interviews of 8 participants for the second cycle.

Pre-Cycle

I conducted a pre-cycle to obtain information about the impact of Career Development Center's and other on-campus initiatives on first-generation students' career readiness. This included events such as the recurring Job and Internship Fairs and Torero Treks. I had an informal meeting with Tim Novara, the former Career Development Center's Assistant Director

of Assessment and Planning for permission to obtain and summarize pre-existing event data in this study. Overall, the data showed that first-generation students are engaged in our programming efforts and based on attendance tracking there were no significant differences between the participation of continuing generation students and first-generation students. Interestingly, they are slightly overrepresented in Torero Trek participation which indicates they are aware of this resource and take advantage of those opportunities to explore companies in various industries. This information was important to consider as this study's participants responded to questions about their attendance at career-related events, so I wanted to see if those also correlated with this data.

I also reviewed the statistics presented at the spring 2019 First-Generation Student Summit held for the USD community to learn about their first-generation students' overall experience. This included information about their career outcomes and salary comparisons to continuing generation students after graduation. Similar to the Career Development Center's event participation outcomes, there were no significant differences between the career attainment of USD's first-generation students and continuing-generation students. Additionally, the co-presidents of FGSA, undergraduate students, who I have collaborated with throughout my study, provided me with insight about a survey they conducted in 2018-2019 to inform FGSA's 2019-2020 programming goals. They sent the survey to USD first-generation students to gauge their demographics, their reasons for attending USD, their experience to that point, their extracurricular involvement, and their general interests. Recurring themes in their responses included breaking into a higher income level and helping their family financially (First-Generation Student Association, 2019). Also, the USD department that had the highest reported levels of awareness was the Career Development Center, followed by the Center for Wellness

and Health Promotion. The resources that were reported as helpful for their success at USD included the Career Development Center once again, as well as Student Support Services, faculty, and mentors. Lastly, the main themes that arose as a response to what these students wanted to gain from the newly founded FGSA included information on campus resources, community, and networking. This information was beneficial for me to know as I became more familiar with the experiences of first-generation students at USD and it informed my approach. Specifically, I anticipated that these themes would also emerge in my own study.

Kelsey Schultz, formerly the Career Counselor for the College of Arts & Sciences as well as my supervisor during my Graduate Assistantship at the Career Development Center, was a critical friend of mine for this project. Throughout the process, I met with her individually to discuss my action research for validation and critiques. She offered insight into my approaches and created the connection for me with FGSA as a collaborative opportunity. We discussed my progress as I would inform her of the themes that would arise throughout the cycles in order to obtain an outside perspective, while recognizing our individual involvement within the Career Development Center. She was a helpful resource through the process of my action research project, helping me look at representation and broadening my perspective regarding intersectionality.

Cycle 1

Observe. Cycle 1 began in the fall of 2019. I met with the co-presidents of FGSA prior to the beginning of the 2019-2020 school year to discuss the possibility of my involvement in their organization and to ask them if I could incorporate my action research along with career development support. They agreed and I became their official liaison from the Career Development Center, which is also a practice for the department in order to ensure that

collaboration and outreach is occurring across other departments and student organizations. As we mapped out the goals of the organization moving forward and incorporated the feedback they had received in the spring about first-generation students' interests, we determined that I would present a workshop on career resources at one of their October meetings and conduct my focus group at that workshop.

Reflect. In cycle 1, students were incentivized to participate in the workshop I provided after my data collection and I wanted to be able to start connecting them to career resources in hopes of boosting their feelings of career readiness and confidence. Since this workshop was held mid-semester and I had been regularly attending their bi-weekly meetings, I noticed a handful of students in the room who I already recognized. There were also a couple of newcomers at the meeting which was encouraging since FGSA was trying to boost their membership and expand their reach. Due to this, the workshop was also promoted in the weeks prior through the Career Development Center's weekly newsletters to all students. There were also 3 allies in the room who did not identify as first-generation students. In order to not be exclusionary, I took note of their responses to distinguish them during my data coding and assess similarities or differences.

Act. I went to the front of the room and introduced myself, proceeding to ask the participants to do a brief introduction of themselves, including their years at USD and majors, in order to ease them into the activity. Afterwards, I began my data collection through a mixed-methods approach. First, I collected consent forms (Appendix A) and I facilitated a 15-minute icebreaker activity in which there were 11 questions that asked them to shuffle around and step on the letter on the floor of the first word of their response. Questions ranged from how they felt about being a first-generation student, their career paths, and the Career Development Center.

Additionally, I asked about their awareness of and attendance at career development events in order to gauge their general interest and career development needs (Appendix B).

After the icebreaker, they filled out a brief 10-question survey assessing their feelings of confidence in meeting the NACE career competencies on a Likert-type scale from “1 - Not at All” to “5 - Extremely” (Appendix C). NACE is a professional organization that works closely with universities, particularly in their career centers, in order to ensure students are meeting employers' expectations and standard requirements in knowledge and skill sets by the time they graduate to achieve greater employability.

Evaluate. Despite the small sample size in this cycle, I believe that the responses are representative of a diverse group of first-generation students at USD. The sample included participants from each class level, from different majors, and from each USD college except for the Shiley-Marcos School of Engineering (SMSE). This indicates that in the future, a targeted effort can be made to reach SMSE's first-generation students to provide them with career development opportunities as well as opportunities to build their first-generation community through organizations like FGSA. It could also indicate that SMSE students already have these resources through their college.

Responses to direct questions about CDev, such as “What best describes your perceptions of the Career Development Center?” may have been influenced by demand characteristics given I was the interviewer. Since they knew I was a Graduate Assistant, students may not have been completely honest about their opinions and experiences with the center and our staff. This could be especially skewed since I was also about to provide them with a workshop on CDev resources and additional skills. I did not want the questions to dive in too deep into their personal lives and other identities since most of these students did not know one another. They could have been

discouraged from disclosing this information because they were uncomfortable being too open in a group of unfamiliar individuals. I attempted to balance obtaining depth in their responses with being cognizant that there might be sensitive topics they might not have wanted to address in a setting of unfamiliar faces.

The participants stated varied reasons for attending USD, including the small class sizes, the scholarships offered, and the location. However, the trends that emerged from the group regarding their experience at USD included that it was “a difficult time,” “a rollercoaster,” it required “adjustment” and “evolution.” Trends about their feelings of being a first-generation student at USD were that it was “challenging,” arose “pride,” and being the “first.” Elaborating upon these responses, Maggie stated that it is “challenging because it's hard when there's been no path for you to follow and you have to make your own.” Betsy also responded, “I feel fine about it, there's been times it's been harder and other times where people are like coming up to you and offering you resources so that part's better.” Betsy's response reinforces that outreach and connections are valuable to first-generation students, and Maggie's also depicts Yosso's (2005) navigational capital because first-generation students often have to navigate institutions without additional guidance from predecessors which provides them the skills for coping with and overcoming ambiguity and uncertainty. In contrast, the trend in the allies' response to this question was “empowered” and “welcomed” as they interpreted this question to ask about their experience as continuing-generation students at USD. This could be due to the support and guidance they receive from family members in navigating higher education.

Regarding their interpretations of career readiness, the emerging themes were affective states, specifically: anxiety, fear, uncertainty/unknowing, unsure, and confused. Samantha responded that she felt “Confused; I don't really know the definition and what it really is.”

Similarly, Jackie stated “Yikes. I'm a confident person but feel like I don't have any idea what I want to do after this.” Marla also responded, “This career should make me ready for the world.” These responses highlight not only the pressures that first-generation students feel to be ready to face their careers after their time at USD but also the negative perceptions about the required steps in order to feel prepared. Interestingly, allies' responses also aligned with these which suggests that thoughts of career readiness could evoke similar feelings among undergraduate students regardless of their continuing or first-generation status.

Participants had a variety of responses about the career path they foresee for themselves, ranging from helping professions to being uncertain of what career path to take. Two students mentioned pursuing a career in healthcare, while others mentioned working for a nonprofit, at their family's business, or with children. When asked the follow-up question about what influenced their career path, their responses included family, friends, and their experiences at USD including classes they have taken. Betsy stated, “Family, the way that I was raised led me to the career I'm working toward” in regards to helping people. Jackie also disclosed that “others have affected me and given their opinions about what I should do.” Through the lens of Abes et al. (2007) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity, the context of their environment including other people's opinions and their upbringing impacted these students' self-perceptions to the extent of influencing their career options. Additionally, both of these students could be in Baxter-Magolda's (2001) stage of following formulas in their self-authorship process because they are still relying on their authority figures' guidance. Since they seek approval they allow their careers to be dictated by the input of others. Regarding their career paths, they did not disclose having moved toward the crossroads stage of realizing these influences and the need to move into authentic, personal decision-making. Similar to responses about how participants interpreted

career readiness, the overall trends that emerged from their feelings about their career paths included indifference, uncertainty, confusion, but also hope. Some participants mentioned hoping to find what they are passionate about and that time would help them decide.

Lastly, the questions related to the Career Development Center's programming and outreach efforts. The majority reported that they heard about events via email, in addition to word of mouth from friends and peers. Two students reported attending Torero Treks, while four mentioned attending a job fair. Two other students had not been to any events; one mentioned that it would be beneficial to "meet with someone that could help me one-on-one to understand where I am at in the process," while another wished "there was a workshop on how to navigate Handshake because it seems easy but it gives me anxiety." I considered both responses as I presented the resources to them in the workshop afterwards and mentioned how to make individual appointments with a career counselor. These responses also indicate that it is beneficial to have in-person support and to not assume that resources on online platforms are easy for students to navigate.

Overall, they indicated that they perceived the Career Development Center to be "supportive," "helpful," "present," and "overwhelming," while two students also mentioned a former career counselor in the College of Arts and Sciences, Kelsey Schultz, as being particularly helpful. In the last question, the trends that emerged from what they wanted to gain from the workshop included "direction," "knowledge," and "resume". Interestingly, the allies mentioned "networking" and "connections" in addition to "knowledge" which could indicate a contrast in both groups of students' awareness about the importance of building professional relationships as a process of career readiness.

A brief survey followed the icebreaker which asked participants about their feelings of competency in NACE's 8 skill sets on a Likert-type scale from "1 - Not at all" to "5 - Extremely" (see Appendix C for complete survey). Figure 4 below outlines participants' responses and the digits correlate with the number of participants who selected that answer.

Question	<i>Not at all</i>	<i>Slightly</i>	<i>Somewhat</i>	<i>Fairly</i>	<i>Extremely</i>
Critical Thinking/ Problem Solving	0	0	3	5	0
Oral/Written Communication	0	0	1	5	2
Teamwork/Collaboration	0	0	0	4	4
Digital Technology Skills	0	0	3	4	1
Leadership Skills	0	0	2	4	2
Professionalism/ Work Ethic	0	0	3	3	2
Career Management	0	1	5	2	0
Global/Intercultural Fluency	0	1	3	3	1

Figure 4. Responses to Career Competencies Survey, Questions 3-10

The competency areas of Communication, Leadership, Professionalism, and Digital Technology had a range of responses but all participants felt at least *Somewhat* competent or more. No participants reported feeling *Extremely* competent in Critical Thinking/Problem Solving Skills or Career Management Skills regardless of their years and majors. While 5 students responded feeling *Fairly* competent, the other 3 responded feeling only *Somewhat* competent. Therefore,

these are areas that the Career Development Center and academic departments can address so students feel better prepared when asked about these particular skill sets. They could help students define these competencies and engage them in conversations about classroom scenarios, group projects, and internship projects that have required them to use these skills. This will help them feel more competent as well as confident in explaining their qualifications to a recruiter or interviewer.

There were also some differences between continuing and first-generation students' self-perceptions. Under the Teamwork/Collaboration competency, all 3 allies responded *Extremely* competent while there was only one *Extremely* competent response from a first-generation student. The rest of the first-generation participants indicated feeling *Fairly* competent, which is almost a complete 1 point contrast among groups. Global/Intercultural Fluency was another area for which all allies also responded with 1 point greater than the majority of first-generation students. The allies indicated *Fairly* competent, while there were varied responses between the first-generation students. The majority of first-generation students who responded lower than the allies highlights different levels of confidence and could indicate a contrast in their participation in on-campus organizations or extracurricular activities, which help students gain these skills outside of their classes. In particular, study abroad programs can provide them with higher feelings of competence in Global/Intercultural Fluency. The elements that can influence first-generation students' decision to partake in this include accessibility (finances, paperwork, etc.), receiving mentorship and information about the application process, and hearing about study abroad experiences from peers. This could be another area in which the Career Development Center can provide resources for first-generation students.

Modify. Participants mentioned the influence of others on their career paths, including family and friends. After analyzing the data, I realized that it would have been beneficial to include questions related to seeking and finding mentorship at USD. I would also modify the survey to include the definitions of the competencies because some terms, particularly Career Management Skills can be ambiguous and arise inaccurate responses. Additionally, students' appreciation of the workshop I presented after my data collection activity encouraged me to also provide the students in cycle 2 with career resources after concluding the interviews. There were also 3 allies who participated in the focus group. While their insight was valuable and offered the experiences of continuing-generation students as a possible area for comparison, I verified that the participants in cycle 2 were first-generation students. Before the focus groups participants left the location I recruited participants for cycle 2 and several students signed up to be contacted for an interview. In contrast to this cycle's focus group classroom location, I hosted the interviews for cycle 2 in my office within the Career Development Center so that participants would be introduced to the location, at minimum, if they had not been prior and perhaps be more comfortable in using our services in the future. It was also a helpful change for privacy reasons.

Cycle 2

Observe & Reflect. Through individual interviews in cycle 2, my intention was to further understand USD's first-generation students' personal experiences, backgrounds, and other intersecting identities in order to understand how those factors interact with their first-generation identity and their career development. I also wanted to encourage participation by providing students with an incentive during this cycle. These interviews were advertised as an opportunity to improve our understanding of first-generation students' career readiness and participants were placed in a random drawing to win a \$25 Amazon gift card.

Act. Students began to contact me via email with interest in participating in the study, many of whom were from the cycle 1 focus group. We scheduled appointments in my office during my Graduate Assistantship hours. There were 16 interview questions (Appendix D) that were asked and the interviews ranged from 6 -15 minutes. Questions included asking them to describe their career paths, which identities other than being a first-generation student or other experiences they believe to have influenced their career path, and their experience with the Career Development Center (Appendix D). I also asked about their perceptions of career readiness and how ready they felt based on their definitions of that term. I hoped to gain insight into ways that I could better support their career readiness by understanding their lived experiences and engaging with them about their career goals.

Evaluate. All of the interviewees studied majors in the College of Arts and Sciences, while there were 2 that considered declaring business minors from USD's School of Business. As in cycle 1, participants were also from mixed school years broken down into: 2 freshmen, 2 sophomores, 2 juniors, and 1 senior. Interestingly, they were all female-identifying despite a general recruitment effort. This gender difference could be because females might feel more comfortable being interviewed by another female. When asked what their current career paths were at the beginning of the interview, 3 participants stated they were undecided and Marla explained how it has been helpful to talk with USD's Assistant Director for Community and Leadership Development about different options such as higher education but mentioned that she is keeping an open mind while she finishes her degree.

Another 2 participants were undecided but expressed their desire to pursue a helping profession in a field such as education or medicine. In particular, Nina expressed how she was raised locally in Barrio Logan among her Latinx community which has motivated her to

“improve the lives of low income families and advocate for social justice” with her Environmental Studies degree. The remaining student wanted to take a gap year before heading into graduate school and expressed uncertainty regarding the degree she would seek, considering taking classes at a community college to be more competitive in addition to having a bachelor’s degree. Other experiences that were found to have influenced participants’ career paths include previous or current coursework, racial identities, and their desire to elevate their families’ socioeconomic status. When asked what other identities have influenced their career paths, 5 of the participants indicated that being a Woman of Color has also impacted their first-generation student journey. The themes of social justice, coming from a Community of Color, and giving back relate to Juana Bordas’ approaches to multicultural leadership. Bordas (2007) describes how the collective good is put above individual needs in Communities of Color, emphasizing leadership that “serves and is responsible to his or her community, tribe, and people” which makes individuals people-oriented in their goals (p.77). Since this was revealed to be a significant influential factor for first-generation students’ careers, it is pertinent that higher education practitioners understand this cultural commitment to better understand their students.

When asked how their first-generation student identity has influenced their career path, a response from the previous cycle re-emerged with 3 participants disclosing that they feel they do not have anybody to look up to or provide guidance and a pre-established network, which has created uncertainty for them. There were also 5 participants who mentioned family influence being an influential factor on their career paths, whether it was the opinion from others, or wanting to be their family’s guide into college as they are the “first.” However, the themes of pride and gratitude also emerged from this question. Marla expressed feeling “fortunate to get an education” while Nina wanted to make sure that she was making her family proud. Other

responses included pursuing a “respectable” career and making the “financial investment worth it,” which could be indicators of additional pressures these first-generation students are facing, whether they are self- or other-imposed.

The question about their perceptions of the term “career readiness” had varied responses. The themes related to action steps were: planning, goals, networking, creating application materials, and being ready for the world. The other themes that arose related to associated feelings or states were: nervousness, independence, pressure, and acceptance. A participant also indicated that it meant “too many options.” In the follow-up question about their feelings of being career-ready, the responses included only one participant stating “yes” while others spoke of feeling “behind, uncertain, and nervous.” This indicates a need for clarity and reassurance regarding possible career options.

Furthermore, 6 participants indicated they have interacted with the Career Development Center, either in appointments to get help with their resumes or to secure an internship, as well as attending the various events offered each semester such as the Majors and Minors Fair. The 2 participants who indicated they had not been to the Career Development Center also disclosed the main reason was that they had not found the time yet. This could indicate a need for exploring different times of day other than during Torero Hours, which is the time of the week throughout the year that the majority of CDev’s larger-scale events such as the Job and Internship Fair are hosted.

Modify. If I could redo this cycle, I would have made the interviews semi-structured with the ability to ask follow-up questions to get more in-depth answers from participants to better understand the complexity and influences behind their experiences. I would occasionally clarify some aspects but did not extensively ask them to elaborate upon different elements in their

answers. While many mentioned the influence of their families, I would have liked to add a specific question about what they believe to be their strongest support system. This could provide more direct insight into mentorship and the influences first-generation students have, especially on their overall impact on their feelings of career readiness. Similarly, I would have also asked about whether they had any role-model figures to better understand additional interpersonal influences on their career aspirations.

Additionally, the last question about CRP confused many, as many of them were not required to complete COMPASS since it was a program that was implemented after they declared their majors. I would also increase my effort to obtain representation from students in SMSE and the School of Business, as this cycle had no respondents with majors from these colleges. Increasing gender representation would be another modification I would implement since all participants were female-identifying and it would be beneficial to capture a more holistic picture of USD's first-generation student population.

Summary of Findings

The key themes that emerged from this study include first-generation students' feelings of uncertainty of their future careers, pressure to succeed, and desire to navigate campus resources, along with explanations of their experiences associated with being the first in their family to go to college and other identities such as being Women of Color. Students perceived and expected support from the Career Development Center, including resume help and networking skills. However, they also reported being overwhelmed and had concerns about not finding the time to do so or having the knowledge of where to begin. The majority of participants also indicated not feeling that they had direction in regards to the next step to take, with the majority of them being uncertain of where their career paths currently stand and their futures.

Along with this, the definition of career readiness was unclear to them as they were asked about their interpretations of the term and how they felt about their current position in the process.

Students' identification of different components of their identities that are influencing their experiences at USD and career paths, including their relatives and the communities they came from, reinforces the usefulness of Abes et al. 's (2007) MMPI as a counseling framework. They filter external inputs to define themselves, which include being a helper and an advocate, and are expected to make decisions about their futures based on these perceptions. While they may also be true to their values, the values of their families and friends may also be imposed upon them and contribute to their career uncertainties as a pressure to appease. In reference to Baxter-Magolda's (2001) self-authorship theory, multiple participants' responses indicated they are still following formulas due to the reliance upon relatives' opinions, which could be preventing them from pursuing their interests due to a fear of disappointment.

Limitations

My part-time role as a GA in the Career Development Center at USD made it difficult to be as immersed in my research within the community as I would have hoped due to time constraints. I believe this resulted in a small sample size which limits my research because the themes are primarily reflective of first-generation student women's experiences at USD. While I relate to this demographic it is not a holistic representation of all undergraduate, first-generation students at the university. This was also the case for representation among the colleges. Since I was a GA primarily for the College of Arts & Sciences and undeclared students, the majority of the students in my study were from these pools. In future research, I would make a greater effort to recruit participants from SMSE and the School of Business to increase representation. Furthermore, this research is limited to the undergraduate first-generation student experience.

First-generation graduate students have their own unique experiences and challenges, which the Career Development Center and myself could also benefit from learning about.

Recommendations

Demystifying Career Readiness

Based on students' responses, career development is an intimidating and formal functional area of their college careers. This perception can discourage or delay them seeking support. It must be communicated to them that it is not just intended for certain majors but for the entire student population. A greater effort to become more accessible and inviting to students would assist in combating this exclusive narrative. It would also be helpful to define career readiness, as many students reported uncertainty and had various interpretations. It is also important for career counselors to be aware of the intersectionality of students' identities in their counseling approaches. Inviting storytelling during appointments or career events could be a powerful tool in understanding first-generation students' identities and related experiences as they have influenced their educational attainment and career goals.

Increased Targeted Programming Efforts and Partnerships for First-Gen Engagement

Similarly, the amount of events that could be implemented to make first-generation students feel a greater sense of belonging is by catering networking and other career readiness events for them. This would also include diversifying the format of some events to make them less formal and continuing to partner with other campus departments and organizations such as The Commons and FGSA. The partnership with alumni and other employers who identify as first-generation would be another strategy to engage students. It would result in first-generation students expanding their network with individuals they relate to and can gain mentorship as a result.

Resource-Specific Workshops

Students expressed concern about navigating career resources and their respective websites and revealed the lack of time they have to dedicate to attending career-related events. A recommendation is that the Career Development Center could offer shorter, thirty-minute workshops limited to exploring one career resource such as Handshake. This could be beneficial to students who reported the challenge of not having enough time throughout the day to attend a full hour-long workshop and still want guidance in boosting their career readiness. Another possible format these can be provided is virtually so that students have greater and prolonged access to these workshops without conflicting with other responsibilities and pressures.

Personal Learning

Throughout this research process I learned more about myself as a professional and first-generation student as well as the students who participated. I resonated with many participants' stories, many of whom were also Latina-identifying like myself. When they mentioned making their families proud, wanting their degree to be worth their families' sacrifices, and desiring to give back to their communities with their college degrees, I thought about how I also experience this as I navigate my own career and pursue my education further. My connections with these students motivated me to continue to advocate for their support and my own in higher education through my work as a practitioner. I also seek to incorporate the recommendations above in my own work with first-generation students. It is crucial that they are seen for who they are holistically and that we make space for them to feel included within the institution by creating community around the first-generation identity. It was also empowering seeing how many professionals at USD who work closely to support our first-generation students are first-

generation alumni themselves. Since mentorship and guidance were also recurring themes in this study, moving forward I wish to provide that for the first-generation students I serve.

Conclusion

Due to the increasing number of first-generation students in higher education, institutions must ensure that they are adequately supporting them throughout the entirety of their career development journeys. This action research project found that first-generation students, particularly those from the University of San Diego, face career-related uncertainty and a high pressure to succeed from themselves and their families. The recommendations provided are various strategies to provide first-generation students with greater career development resource accessibility, understanding, and engagement. My goal as a new practitioner in higher education is to continue to learn and apply ways of supporting and empowering first-generation and other underrepresented students. I seek to help them build their career readiness through the application of MMDDI and Yosso's model as I validate their holistic identities and lived experiences. I also aim to connect them to existing on-campus resources and broader networks of individuals, including peer mentors and alumni.

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APPENDIX A

**Research Participant Consent Form: Focus group
For the Action Research Study:
Evaluating First-Generation Students' Career Readiness at USD**

I. Purpose of this Research Study

My name is Nikki Robledo and I am a graduate student at USD's Career Development Center. I am also a second-year in USD's Master of Arts in Higher Education Leadership program. The activities incorporated into this workshop are a component of my action research project. The purpose of my research is to better understand first-generation students' feelings of career readiness and explore how I along with the Career Development Center can work to meet those needs more effectively.

II. Data Collection Procedure

You are being asked to participate in an activity designed to gather information about my perceptions of career readiness. Your participation will be less than an hour.

III. Potential Risks or Discomfort

If participation in this study arises feelings of sadness or anxiety, you can call the toll-free 24-hour hotlines below at any time:

- University of San Diego Center for Health and Wellness: 619-260-4618
- San Diego Mental Health Hotline: 1-800-479-3339

IV. Confidentiality

The student researcher will keep the data gathered in their possession in a confidential, password-protected device and a locked file cabinet for a minimum of 5 years. An audio recording and notes of today's activity will be taken. A paper survey will also be collected. The uses of this research may include a final paper and presentation. No personal name identifiers will be utilized by the researcher when reporting the data.

V. Benefits

While there may be no direct benefit to you from participating in this activity, the indirect benefit of participating will be that you have contributed to the researcher's understanding of how to better meet first-generation students' needs at USD.

VI. Compensation

You will not receive compensation for your participation in this study.

VII. Voluntary Nature of this Research

Participating in this research is entirely voluntary. If you agree to participate, please read and sign this consent form. If you choose to exempt yourself, there will be no penalty. You may also withdraw from this study at any moment.

VIII. Additional Contact Information

Please direct any questions about this research to:

Nikki Robledo

Email: mrobledodelatorre@sandiego.edu

Phone: 909-273-1111

Cheryl Getz

Email: cgetz@Sandiego.edu

Phone: 619-260-4289

Consent

I have read and understand this form, and consent to the research it describes to me. I have received a copy of this consent form for my own records.

Signature of Participant

Date

Printed Name of Participant

Researcher's Signature

Date

APPENDIX B**First-Generation Student Association Meeting Activity Protocol**

Introduction: My name is Nikki Robledo and I am a graduate student at USD's Career Development Center. I am also a second-year in USD's Master of Arts in Higher Education Leadership program. The activities incorporated into this workshop are a component of my action research project. The purpose of my research is to better understand first-generation students' feelings of career readiness and explore how I along with the Career Development Center can work to meet those needs more effectively.

Directions: We will first be doing an activity called the ABC shuffle, which will take approximately 10-15 minutes. In this activity, I will ask a series of questions and, if you are able, you will step on the letter of the first word of your answer to each question. Your answer can be one word, a phrase, or a sentence. If you are unable to step on the letters, you may remain in your seat and participate by answering the questions.

For the second part of this study, you will be asked to fill out a short 10 question survey aiming to measure your career readiness.

Informed Consent: There will be no name identifiers reported in this study to ensure confidentiality. If you agree to participate, please read and sign the consent form that is being passed around the room. If you choose to exempt yourself, the alternative will be sitting back and observing the activities or you can choose to step out of the room. Does anybody have any questions for me about the study before we begin?

Part 1: Qualitative Questions

1. Why did you choose to attend USD?
2. How would you describe your journey so far as a student at USD?
3. How do you feel about being a first-generation student at USD?
4. What comes to mind when you hear the words "career readiness"?
5. What is the career path you currently foresee for yourself?
6. What factors, personal and external, have influenced your current career path?
7. What are your general feelings about your current career path?
8. What is the most frequent way you become aware about on-campus events?
9. Which career development events have you attended? If none, which type of career development event do you think would be most beneficial for you to attend in your current career stage?
10. What best describes your perceptions of USD's Career Development Center?
11. What is one thing you hope to gain from today's workshop?

APPENDIX C

Part 2: Career Readiness Competencies Survey

1. What year are you at USD?

2. What is your major, major(s), or intended major if you have not yet declared?

On a scale of 1-5, how competent do you feel in your...

1. Critical Thinking/Problem Solving Skills:

1-----2-----3-----4-----5
Not at all Slightly Somewhat Fairly Extremely

2. Oral/Written Communications:

1-----2-----3-----4-----5
Not at all Slightly Somewhat Fairly Extremely

3. Teamwork/Collaboration:

1-----2-----3-----4-----5
Not at all Slightly Somewhat Fairly Extremely

4. Digital Technology Skills:

1-----2-----3-----4-----5
Not at all Slightly Somewhat Fairly Extremely

5. Leadership Skills:

1-----2-----3-----4-----5
Not at all Slightly Somewhat Fairly Extremely

6. Professionalism/Work Ethic

1-----2-----3-----4-----5
Not at all Slightly Somewhat Fairly Extremely

7. Career Management Skills:

1-----2-----3-----4-----5
Not at all Slightly Somewhat Fairly Extremely

8. Global/Intercultural Fluency:

1-----2-----3-----4-----5
Not at all Slightly Somewhat Fairly Extremely

APPENDIX D**Interview Script and Questions**

Introduction: Hi, my name is Nikki Robledo and I am a graduate student at USD's Career Development Center. I am also a second-year in USD's Master of Arts in Higher Education Leadership program. This interview process is a component of my action research project. The purpose of my research is to better understand first-generation students' feelings of career readiness and explore how I along with the Career Development Center can work to meet those needs more effectively. I am using USD's definition of first-generation students, which indicates they are students who graduated high school or achieved high school equivalency before either of their parents or guardians completed a bachelor's degree or higher (University of San Diego, 2019).

Informed Consent:

This interview will take approximately 30 minutes. If you would like to excuse yourself from participating, you will not be penalized and can go ahead and do so. If you agree to participate, please sign the consent form provided. You will also be entered into a random drawing to win a \$25 Amazon gift card. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Interview Questions:

1. Are you a graduate or undergraduate student?
2. What year are you in your program?
3. What is your major, major(s), or intended major if you have not yet declared?
4. Can you describe the career path you currently foresee for yourself?
5. Can you describe any experiences you have had that influenced your career path?
6. How has your identity as a first-generation college student influenced your career path?
7. Are there any other identities you hold that you believe influenced your career path?
8. Have you visited the Career Development Center?
9. If yes, can you describe what you gained from that experience? If no, can you describe the reasons you have not visited the Career Development Center?
10. Have you attended career development events?
11. If yes, can you describe what you learned from the event(s). If no, can you describe the reasons you have not attended career development programs?
12. What comes to your mind when you hear the term "career readiness"?
13. Based on that definition, how career ready do you feel?
14. Why?
15. If you are required to complete a Career Readiness Program, have you attended any Career Readiness Program-approved events? (If no, conclude interview)
16. If yes, can you explain what you gained from that event? If no, why is that?

That concludes our interview. Thank you so much for your participation.