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## The Effect of Brief Staff-Assisted Career Service Delivery on Drop-In Clients

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**The Effect of Brief Staff-Assisted Career Service Delivery on Drop-in Clients**

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### **Abstract**

Brief-staff-assisted career counseling services based on Cognitive Information Processing theory were evaluated via 138 drop-in clients who completed pre-post -interventions on self-report measures of knowledge about next steps, confidence in making next steps, and feelings of anxiety about their career concern. Significant changes occurred in each dimension, and were significantly associated with the quality of career advisor interaction. Participants rated the experience as highly positive. Decreases in anxiety were unrelated to the intervention.

Implications include that a brief-service delivery model yields positive outcomes for many, but require adjustments in organizational culture, the physical environment, practitioner approaches, and client expectations. Future research should examine relational variables related to decreased anxiety with a brief service delivery model, the degree to which this approach works with specific career needs, and client attributes leading to successful versus non-successful outcomes with this model.

*Keywords:* career counseling, drop-in services, program evaluation, cognitive information processing theory, career services

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### **The Effect of Brief Staff-Assisted Career Service Delivery on Drop-in Clients**

Clients seeking career counseling ideally should be seen as soon as they reach out for help (DiMino & Blau, 2012). Yet, increasing numbers of clients seeking services coupled with reduced resources often leads to longer wait times (Gabriel, 2010; Gallagher, 2010).

Comparisons of national career center surveys (National Association of Colleges and Employers 2012-13 and 2013-14) show student-to-professional ratios increasing from 1,889 to 2,370:1, with the non-personnel median annual operating budget decreasing almost 50% from \$69,887 to \$34,000.

Responding to increased student demand for career services, one university career center has implemented a differentiated service delivery model (i.e., self-help, brief staff-assisted, and individual case-managed services) for over 40 years

(<http://www.career.fsu.edu/Tech-Center/Designing-Career-Services>), based on Cognitive Information Processing theory (CIP; Sampson, Reardon, Peterson, & Lenz, 2004). Self-help services, different than “counselor-free” (Kronholz, 2015), are designed for more independent use, in that counselors are relied upon in a time-limited format for referring users to appropriate educational and occupational information. Individual case-managed services provide the same type of services as brief staff-assisted but on an extended basis due to the client’s low readiness, as evidenced by low decision-making capability and high complexity, and possible mental health issues. The goal of this differentiated service-delivery model is to maximize the number of people who can be served by providing an optimal amount and type of assistance that meets client needs.

The present study examined the experience of brief-staff assisted career counseling based

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on CIP Theory. Three objectives guided the study to examine (a) the effects of brief staff-assisted career delivery interventions on drop-in clients, (b) client attitudes about the quality of brief staff-assisted career counseling, and (c) the strength of relationships between the endorsement of selected counseling process variables and changes in outcome variables with regard to client perceptions of their knowledge of next steps, confidence, and anxiety.

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

Participants were 138 volunteer clients of a career center (60% women) within a large southeastern university presenting with varied concerns. They ranged in age from 17 to 39 years, with an average age of 21. Sixty-one percent were White, 17% Latino, 12% African American, 6% Asian American, and 6% Other. Twenty-six percent were seniors, 23% sophomores, 22% juniors, 17% freshmen, 4% graduate, and 4% 5<sup>th</sup> year or more. Career center statistics during the year in which this study was completed indicated 10,639 drop-in clients out of 13,966 were female (70%), with 54% seniors, 20% juniors, 12% sophomore, 10% graduate students, 3% freshmen, and 1% alumni or community members. Race and ethnicity data were not available.

#### **Setting**

The career center in this study provides services designed to meet the needs of college students and community members by self-directed, brief-assisted, or individual case-managed interventions. Career advisors are trained in general counseling skills in a graduate counseling program, and receive up to 90 hours of specific training in CIP theory, plus career information and counseling skills. Each receives up to one hour per week of counselor supervision by senior staff members, and supervision of supervisors by certified or licensed senior staff and faculty.

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The physical facility is conducive to brief staff-assisted career counseling, consisting of a large open space with large circular tables partitioned by reference shelves.

Drop-in clients first meet with a career advisor to discuss the nature of their concerns and to determine which mode of service delivery may best fit their needs. Those using this service on multiple occasions often meet with different career practitioners over the course of their engagement with the center. Clients may elect to follow up with scheduled, one-hour intensive career counseling sessions to explore presenting issues in greater depth, thus becoming individual case-managed clients. Over 14,000 clients were seen in the past year (2014) by 21 advisors via brief-staff assisted advising, with the average brief-assisted session length of 18.5 minutes (mean,  $SD = 8.3$ ), 17.8 (median), ranging from 7.8 to 30.7 minutes.

### Measures

**Pre- and post-intervention survey.** A pre-intervention survey asked for background data and responses to the outcome questions. Both the pre- and post- intervention surveys inquired about perceived level of knowledge and confidence related to next steps, as well as anxiety related to concern: (a) “I feel I know the appropriate next steps to attain my career goals;” (b) “I feel confident that I can make the next steps needed to attain my career goals;” and (c) “I feel anxious about my career concern;” and employed a 5-point Likert-type scale with 5 = Strongly Agree, to 1 = Strongly Disagree. These were treated as independent constructs with correlations among them,  $r = .38, .10, \text{ and } .08$  respectively.

A post-intervention survey also contained four additional items pertaining to the quality of interaction between the career practitioner and client. The first three questions using a 5-point Likert-type scale with 5 = Strongly agree and 1 = Strongly disagree, included: “I made progress

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on my primary career concern today due to my brief interaction with a career advisor;” “I felt positive about what I accomplished today,” and “I believe the interaction with a career advisor assisted me with strategies to work towards my career concern.” The fourth question was “What are your views about the need for additional services to meet your career concern?,” with 1 = “None needed. I can do this on my own,” 2 = “I need additional brief drop-in meetings with a career advisor over a longer period of time,” and 3 = “I need additional individual career counseling meetings with a career advisor over a longer period of time.”

**Session rating scale.** The Session Rating Scale (SSR; Duncan et al., 2003) included in the post-intervention survey contains four items designed to assess clients’ perceptions about the quality of the interaction with a helper. Respondents rated items using a click and drag approach across 10-point scale, with 10 being the highest positive response and 1 the lowest. The general instruction was “Please rate today’s session with a career advisor by sliding the bar to the line nearest to your agreement.” The four questions included: “I felt heard, understood, and respected,” “We worked on and talked about what I wanted to work on and talk about,” “The career advisor’s approach is good for me,” and “Overall, today’s session was right for me.” Cronbach’s alpha was reported to be .88 (Duncan et al., 2003). The present study alpha was .94.

## Procedure

The present study was approved by the university’s institutional review board. Drop-in clients who indicated willingness to participate in a research study related to their visit completed an electronic survey via a mobile tablet device. They created a unique password on the pre-intervention survey (so that initial responses could be matched to the post-intervention survey), endorsed informed consent documentation and completed the pre-intervention

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assessment. Upon completion of the brief-staff assisted intervention, they completed the post-intervention survey.

### **Data Analysis**

Repeated-measures ANOVAs were conducted to determine if differences existed in pre-intervention and post-intervention knowledge of next steps, confidence in making next steps, and anxiety about career concern. Pearson product-moment correlations examined relationships between individuals' levels of perceived effectiveness of the brief-assisted career intervention and its measured effects in the form of change scores in knowledge, confidence, and anxiety. Change scores were calculated by subtracting pre-intervention from post-intervention scores.

### **Results**

The first objective of the study concerned the effects of brief staff-assisted career counseling. As predicted, drop-in clients reported increased knowledge and confidence, and decreased anxiety as seen in Table 1. Cohen's *d* effect sizes were medium for knowledge and confidence, and small for anxiety. Approximately 30% of participants indicated they experienced gains from their session, 60% remained the same, and 10% or less experienced negative gains. Post-intervention responses indicated that the brief-assisted sessions were well received, with 85% indicating ratings of at least nine on all SSR items. Participants agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements: "progress made on career concern" (84%), "feeling positive about accomplishment" (93%), and "the career advisor assisted them with strategies to work toward their career concern" (93%). Most (67%) indicated wanting additional brief drop-in services, with 26% needing no further assistance, and 6% endorsing a need for individual counseling.

Pearson correlations examined relationships between process characteristics and changes

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in outcome variables, i.e., differences between pre- and post-intervention scores. With the alpha level set at .01 to minimize effects of family-wise error, significant gains in perceived knowledge of next steps were associated with making progress on career concern ( $r = .23$ ), quality of advisor interaction ( $r = .30$ ), and overall rating of the session ( $r = .40$ ). Gains in confidence were related to feeling positive about accomplishments ( $r = .26$ ), quality of advisor interaction ( $r = .29$ ), and knowledge of next steps ( $r = .39$ ). Changes in anxiety about career concerns were not significantly associated with any process characteristics.

### Discussion

We sought to examine the effects of a brief staff-assisted career intervention taking place in a career center in a large research university, and found that our data adds to other findings that support the effectiveness of brief career interventions (Brown & Ryan Krane, 2000; Whiston, 2002). Participants also highly rated their encounter with a career advisor, and perceived gains in knowledge and confidence were significantly associated with the quality of interaction with the career advisor. These echo previous findings about the importance of the career counseling relationship (Anderson & Niles, 2000; Elad-Strenger & Littman-Ovadia, 2012), and suggest that a therapeutic, warm relationship can occur within a brief session format.

While individual appointments with professionally certified career counselors are a standard way of providing career services, the clients that can be seen through such an approach is considerably less than with a center utilizing a multi-modal service delivery staffed with career advisors (Sampson, 2008). For high-demand career centers in higher education settings, reaching all clients would not be possible if individual counseling appointments were the only mode of service delivery. Our study provides evidence that a brief staff-assisted career service delivery

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model as described in CIP theory (Sampson et al., 2004), while certainly achieving efficiency, can also be highly effective in meeting the needs of a large number of clientele.

### **Limitations of the study**

One threat to the internal validity of this study is the nature of the design itself, a quasi-experimental pre-intervention/post-intervention only design. Without a control group, such threats could include maturation, testing effects, and demand characteristics. Nevertheless, these data were obtained in a field setting with actual clients who had reason to answer the questions honestly. The researchers do not believe the ratings were inflated, as most experienced no difference with respect to intended outcomes, and a small portion indicated negative effects. A second limitation pertains to quality of measures. Outside of the SSR, the measures were single-item questions with unknown reliability, sensitivity to detecting experimental effects, and response-set influence. Third, generalizability of the results may be limited to large research universities with a career center with sufficient resources and quality of staff and training.

### **Implications for Practice and Research**

With increasing demand for career services, the brief-assisted model presented in this study offers a viable and effective approach to increasing the diversity of service offerings at reduced cost per client. Practitioners using this approach may need to adjust from a traditional one-hour session to a briefer session, and attend to both emotional and cognitive aspects of a client's career decision. In addition, a career advisor should be sensitive to and attend to clients' initial feelings such as anxiety, as these emotions may influence career counseling outcomes and perceptions about the session (Peterson et al., 2002). Further, the service organization itself must support the interventions offered under this mode through training, supervision, and physical

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resources as well as a culture that values the potential benefits of immediate, short-term career counseling to drop-in clients. In addition, findings from this study suggest that a brief staff-assisted approach does not yield gains for everyone. Future research should explore the possible reasons why clients experience different outcomes. Additional research is also needed to explore the effectiveness of other aspects of the CIP service-delivery model, in particular, the self-help approach. Finally, using more robust measures could enhance the validity of future studies. On balance, future work could help determine if applying the CIP service-delivery model achieves positive career decision-making outcomes and offers an efficient and effective approach to meeting the career needs of otherwise overwhelming numbers of clients.

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Table 1

*Comparisons between Pre-intervention and Post-intervention Scores on Brief Staff-Assisted Outcomes (n = 138)*

Dimension	Pre-intervention		Post-intervention		F	d	Percent of Change Scores <sup>c</sup>		
	M	SD	M	SD			Positive	Neutral	Negative
1. Knowledge of next steps	3.40 <sup>a</sup>	1.04	3.90	.81	36.22**	.51	38.4	55.8	5.8
2. Confidence in next steps	3.77 <sup>a</sup>	.89	4.01	.71	13.29**	.31	26.5	64.0	9.6
3. Anxiety about concern	3.46 <sup>b</sup>	1.10	3.20	1.03	9.20*	-.26	10.8	57.2	31.9

\*p < .01

\*\*p < .001

a. 5-point scale, 5 = Strongly agree, 1 = Strongly disagree

b. 4-point scale, 1 = not at all anxious, 2 = A little anxious, 3 = Moderately anxious, 4 = Very anxious

c. Change score = (post-intervention minus pre-intervention)