

The Work Values of First-Year College Students: Exploring Group Differences

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A sample of 3,570 first-year college students were surveyed regarding the factors they deemed most important to their long-term career choice. Students as a whole identified intrinsic interest, high salary, contributions to society, and prestige as their 4 most important work values. Additional analyses found men more likely to espouse extrinsic values, women more likely to espouse social values, and students from median parental-income groups more likely to espouse intrinsic values. In light of these results, counselors are encouraged to place a greater emphasis on the role of work values in the decision-making process.

Several major career development theorists have recognized that values play an important role in career counseling and in the career decision-making process (Dawis, 2001; Holland, 1997; Super, 1980). *Work values* refer to what a person wants out of work in general and also which components of a job are important to their work satisfaction (Dawis, 2001; Elizur, 1984). Work values have been viewed as critical to the career counseling process with college students (Luzzo, 2000). However, empirical studies examining college student work values have been limited with respect to vocational skills and interests. In addition, specific groups of students, such as those in their 1st year who are at a critical point in the career process, have received surprisingly little attention. The purpose of the current study is, therefore, to explore the general work values of 1st-year college students; to determine how these values differ according to gender, race, parental income, and educational aspirations; and to examine how the resulting findings may be applied to career counseling.

Recent factor analytic studies have supported a stratified approach to measuring work values whereby values have been organized within four basic dimensions: intrinsic, extrinsic, social, and prestige (Ros, Schwartz, & Surkiss, 1999). *Intrinsic values* refer to an importance placed on autonomy and interest; *social values* refer to an importance placed on working with people and making contributions to society; *extrinsic values* refer to an importance placed on making money and having job security; and finally, *prestige values* refer to an importance placed on having a prestigious and respected occupation (Elizur, 1984; Ros et al., 1999). In general, work values have been shown to significantly predict career choice, and the congruence of work values with work environment has been shown to

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significantly predict job satisfaction and job performance (Guastello, Rieke, & Guastello, 1992; Judge & Bretz, 1992; Knoop, 1994; Schulenberg, Vondracek, & Kim, 1993; Vodanovich, Weddle, & Piotrowski, 1997).

Research examining differences in work values among specific groups has most often focused on gender, culture, and race. Numerous studies have found that men typically rate values related to prestige, responsibility, and pay as more important than do women. Conversely, women are more likely to rate social values, such as helping others and working with people, higher than do men (Abu-Saad & Isralowitz, 1997; Elizur, 1994; Perrone, Sedlacek, & Alexander, 2001; Singh, 1994). Work value differences by race have also been examined in a limited number of studies. Black adolescents tend to place a greater emphasis on extrinsic- and prestige-oriented values, White students tend to place a greater emphasis on social values, and adolescent White men tend to report work values focused on economic rewards and job security (Carter, Gushue, & Weitzman, 1994; Johnson, 2002). In light of this previous research, we hypothesized that there would be significant gender differences and racial differences in work values, with men and Black students more likely to espouse extrinsic values, and women and White students more likely to espouse social values. We also examined work value differences among parental income groups and educational aspiration groups.

Method

Participants

Participants were 3,570 incoming 1st-year students at a large mid-Atlantic university. Of the participants, 2,124 (59.1%) were White, 371 (10.3%) African American, 478 (13.3%) Asian American, and 189 (5.3%) Latino/a. There were nearly equal numbers of men (1,782, 50%) and women (1,788, 50%).

Procedure

The data were collected from the University New Student Census, a questionnaire addressing a variety of attitudinal, behavioral, and demographic variables. With their informed consent, students were administered the survey during a 30-minute time slot during their summer orientation program. The purpose of the survey was to attain, for both research and administrative purposes, a general understanding of the attitudes and behaviors of incoming students at the university. Ninety-three percent of all incoming 1st-year students completed this questionnaire.

Instruments

Work values. Work values were assessed by a single item on the questionnaire asking students which of 10 work values was most important in their long-term career choice. Space constraints of the questionnaire prohibited the use of more reliable measures such as the Values Scale (Neville & Super, 1989) and Minnesota Importance Questionnaire (Rounds, Henly, Dawis, Lofquist, & Weiss, 1981). The current instrument was developed to gain a general understanding of how students approach their career, and items were based on previous research identifying values important to college students (Elizur, 1984; Ros et al., 1999). On the

basis of the outcomes of these studies (Elizur, 1984; Ros et al., 1999), students were presented with 10 work value choices: intrinsic interest, high anticipated earnings, contributions to society, prestige, working with people, rapid career advancement, independence, availability of job openings, working with ideas, and the ability to avoid pressure. These values were then placed into four groups: Intrinsic (intrinsic interest, independence), Extrinsic (high anticipated earnings, availability of job openings), Social (contributions to society, working with people), and Prestige (prestige, rapid career advancement). The latter two, working with ideas and the ability to avoid pressure, were not included in a specific group for analysis because fewer than 2.5% of the total student group chose these values.

Parental income. Parental income was assessed by an item asking students to report their parents' combined income based on six possible categories: \$0-\$49,999, \$50,000-\$74,999, \$75,000-\$99,999, \$100,000-\$124,999, \$125,000-\$149,999, and \$150,000+.

Educational aspirations. Educational aspirations were assessed by an item asking students the type of degree they planned on pursuing. Students were separated into three groups: bachelor's degree only, master's degree, and a doctoral/professional degree.

Results

Descriptive statistics were used to examine what the total sample selected as the work values most important to their long-term career choice, with the four highest being intrinsic interest (29%), high anticipated earnings (20%), contributions to society (15%), and prestige (12%), followed by working with people (6.7%), rapid career advancement (5.5%), independence (3.7%), and availability of job openings (3.5%). Chi-Square analyses were used to assess work value differences in gender, parental income, race, and educational aspirations (see Table 1). Significant differences and small to medium effects sizes (σ^2 ; Cohen, 1988) were found in each group: gender ($\chi^2 = 154.70$, $p < .001$, $\sigma^2 = .212$), parental income ($\chi^2 = 39.03$, $p < .001$, $\sigma^2 = .127$), race ($\chi^2 = 28.92$, $p < .001$, $\sigma^2 = .097$), and educational aspirations ($\chi^2 = 28.32$, $p < .001$, $\sigma^2 = .092$). Men were more likely to espouse extrinsic values, whereas women were more likely to espouse social values. Students in the group with the median parental income (\$75,000-\$124,999) were more likely to indicate intrinsic values, whereas students in the lower or higher income groups (low, \$0-\$74,999; high, \$125,000-\$150,000+) were more likely to indicate extrinsic values. African Americans and Asian Americans were more likely to express extrinsic values, whereas Whites were more likely to express intrinsic values. Finally, students who sought advanced degrees (master's or doctoral/professional) were more likely to choose prestige values, while those seeking only a bachelor's degree were more likely to choose intrinsic values.

Discussion

An examination of the work value importance in the overall sample indicates how incoming college students make career decisions, which in turn may serve as a guide for college career counselors. Although 29%

TABLE 1

**Work Value Differences Between Gender, Parental Income,
Race, and Educational Aspirations Groupings**

Grouping	Social		Extrinsic		Prestige		Intrinsic		Sig.	σ^2
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%		
Gender									.000	.212
Men (<i>n</i> = 1,702)	258	15	543	32	338	20	563	33		
Women (<i>n</i> = 1,745)	524	30	314	18	302	17	605	35		
Parental income									.001	.127
\$0-\$49,999 (<i>n</i> = 299)	67	22	93	31	70	23	69	23		
\$50,000-\$74,999 (<i>n</i> = 297)	72	24	73	25	51	17	101	34		
\$75,000-\$99,999 (<i>n</i> = 397)	83	21	84	21	68	17	162	41		
\$100,000-\$124,999 (<i>n</i> = 720)	159	22	180	25	137	19	244	34		
\$125,000-\$149,999 (<i>n</i> = 244)	60	25	59	24	47	19	78	32		
\$150,000+ (<i>n</i> = 452)	91	20	141	31	93	21	127	28		
Race									.001	.097
White (<i>n</i> = 2,041)	474	23	476	23	364	18	727	36		
African American (<i>n</i> = 355)	78	22	109	31	72	20	96	27		
Asian American (<i>n</i> = 464)	91	20	145	31	85	18	143	31		
Hispanic (<i>n</i> = 184)	41	22	50	27	42	23	51	28		
Educational aspirations									.000	.092
Bachelor's degree (<i>n</i> = 613)	120	20	161	26	94	15	238	39		
Master's degree (<i>n</i> = 1,439)	297	21	380	26	279	19	483	34		
Advanced/ Professional (<i>n</i> = 1,328)	347	26	296	22	261	22	424	32		

Note. Students who chose not to answer these items or marked "I don't know" as a response were excluded from these analyses. Sig. = significant difference.

of the sample participants were seeking a career consistent with their interests, 47% were seeking careers in line with their values, or outcomes they desired from that career. This is an indication of the power that values may have on decision making and their usefulness in conjunction with traditional measures of interests, skills, and personality. The results of the current study also converged with prior research and with our hypotheses about group differences in work values because significant differences were found among all four groups analyzed.

In particular, it may be important for counselors to consider the role that group membership has in influencing certain work values. For instance,

men may be more prone to receiving messages that reinforce extrinsically oriented goals such as high anticipated earnings, while women may be more socialized to go into careers related to the work values of working with people and contributions to society. Similarly, students whose parents had either lower or higher than average incomes may have been influenced by both the negative and the positive effects of salary on a family environment and thus would have had more extrinsically oriented goals. For students who were seeking advanced degrees, prestige may have been more of a driving force because careers that traditionally are viewed as prestigious often require advanced training. Finally, the tendency of African Americans and Asian Americans to espouse extrinsic work values and of Whites to espouse intrinsic values may have reflected family and environmental influences that students had prior to coming to college (Chung & Sedlacek, 1999; Perrone et al., 2001; Sheu & Sedlacek, 2004). If appropriate, counselors might explore with students how these work values developed and the degree to which these values may be related to their life experiences.

In sum, the results of the current study provide useful insights for career counselors in their approach to working with incoming college students. The data indicate that a focus on work values in career counseling may be useful for many incoming 1st-year college students. However, implications that can be drawn from these results are limited given that the measurement of work values was done with a single item instrument that we developed to conform to the space constraints of the entire survey. Similarly, the full range of variables in decision making, such as skills and personality, were not assessed in the current study.

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