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THE NEED OF CAREER COUNSELLING IN UNIVERSITIES: A COMPETENCIES – BASED APPROACH

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Abstract: *Studies of the characteristics of universities students suggest a diversity of needs for career counseling and guidance programs. Research has consistently shown that almost one-half or more of university students' desire help with educational and vocational planning. University affects students' career choices and development by providing career mobility and advancement and by increasing career aspirations. The benefits of higher education can also lead to a fulfilling lifestyle and the capacity to make appropriate judgments over the lifespan. This paper is aimed to focus on the status of career counseling approach as is perceived by the academic strategies and educational policies at the universities level, in order to improve and facilitate the successful universities graduates' insertion on the job market.*

Keywords: *career counseling, competencies, graduates, job market, career planning, soft skills*

1. INTRODUCTION

Studies of the characteristics of universities' students suggest a diversity of needs for career guidance programs. Formal research shown that almost one half or more of students investigated in seven of the most prestigious Romanian universities (from Bucharest, Brasov, Sibiu, Cluj, Iasi) recognizes the need of help with educational and vocational planning. On the other hand, the reality reveals a different face of the coin, confusing and contradictory, in terms of students' interest and desire to benefit from specialized services about career choices and development. A few little students, probably

one out of five students comes, at least once during the university studies, in a career counseling or planning center.

There is a huge discrepancy between the formal answer to a questionnaire exploring what the students would like to have or benefit from, in terms of learning facilities or specialized services, like counseling and guidance for a job or career, and the real situation in universities, in terms of students' determination and motivation to attend a career guidance program/session, for instance. We are all, experts in education or counseling, teachers in higher education system, employers, used to explain this lack of students' interest for anything else, but

academic performance, by saying that career counseling/planning/guidance has no longer tradition in Romanian education system. The truth is that students themselves, and the society at a large, have no culture of supporting professions like psychologist, counselor, etc., they are not customized to go easily to a counselor for specialized help. One of the explanations of this situation is closely related to the understanding of cultural influences on career development in Romania, during the former communist regime.

According to the U.S. Library of Congress Study of Romania (Bachman, 1989), the Romanian academic system was highly competitive, with very restricted numbers for admissions to university. Choosing a college was equivalent to choosing a career with that decision completed by the end of high school at the age of 18. "Despite an impressive network of universities, technical colleges, academies and conservatories, only 8 percent of those eligible for higher education were permitted to enroll. The central government allocated slots based on predicted demand for given occupations". With this restricted opportunity for admissions, competition became very intense at an early age. Because entrance exam scores were the sole criterion used for acceptance into higher education programs, students began planning their area of specialization as early as the eighth grade, so they would be able to devote a significant portion of their high school education to this academic focus. This practice required career choice and decisions to be pushed to the age of 16, or sometimes even as early as 14.

With this early age for career decisions, it is not surprising that family had a strong influence on career orientation. Families acquired private tutoring for their children many years prior to the highly selective and demanding entrance exams. These families were attempting to ensure success in the chosen career arena. The cost of a private tutor was prohibitive for many workers and peasant families, and rural-urban differences in education exacerbated their differences. For students who gained successful admission to the competitive and selective university programs, the Romanian state provided generous financial support, including low-cost housing and meals, free tuition, book

subsidies, and monthly stipends. The financial package awarded depended on various factors, like socioeconomic background and area of specialization.

From this socio-cultural and political perspective, it is easier to understand why the tradition in counseling field is so vague and inconsistent for the period before 1990, and why it is a still slowly on-going process with small developments in the years after.

Trying to analyze the reality existing now into the universities environment, over the couple of past years from where the legal framework for Career counseling and guidance Centers functioning has been legitimated through a ministerial ordinance (2005), we can realize that some efforts have been done and few organizations have been involved in specific activities in the field, but not systemic and significant enough to impose an educational policy, at the national level. In order to have a better understanding of this issue, we need to start with the year 1991, when the Ministry of Education established the Psycho-pedagogical Guidance Centers for teachers, students and parents, at the pre-university education level. This action was followed by the common regulations elaborated in 1998 by the Ministry of Education in cooperation with the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection, referring to the establishment of the Information and Vocational Counseling Centers, at the counties' level for pre-university education level. We can't deny the important steps towards, but they have taken too long, in a slowly process, sometimes without any strategically systemic view in order for this counseling approach, at the school or university levels, to produce the expected results.

Nowadays, we have established the career counseling and guidance centers in universities, but only few of them are really implementing specific activities they are meant to do, supporting students, graduates and interested employers. The Career Guidance and Counseling Center from University Politehnica of Bucharest is one of many other universities' centers which, at five years from establishment, is still working on promoting their services in counseling field in the largest technical Romanian university,



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trying to convince more and more students to participate in specific activities, according to the mission statement the center is aimed to put in place. Needless to say that is a difficult process, in small steps, a long way involving different levels of development among students and graduates.

2. THEORETICAL DETAILS ABOUT CAREER COUNSELING

Career counseling is a systematic approach to analyzing a worker's skills, abilities and work habits, using information obtained on their education, work experience and general interests. This information is then organized into general categories of people, data and things, and further analyzed to fit into the occupational requirements of other jobs. Career counselors should have specialized training in career counseling and career development. They may also have additional training in personal counseling as well as in group counseling. They may facilitate career development groups for students or counsel students individually. Counselors can assist students in various areas. Some examples include increasing self-awareness, decision-making, goal-setting and establishing a plan of action.

Over a 20-years-period, Pascal and Terenzi (1991) conducted a comprehensive study of research findings on how college/university affects students. The following conclusions were relevant (4):

- students frequently change their plans;
- significant occupational status differences between high school and college graduates are sustained over the life span;

- individuals with a bachelor's degree are more likely to obtain high-status managerial, technical, and professional jobs;
- college graduates are less likely to be unemployed than are high school graduates;
- employers see college graduates as possessing requisite skills and values that make them more desirable for employment and advancement;
- college graduates enjoy significantly higher levels of career mobility and advancement;
- maturity of career thinking and planning can be modestly improved through various career development courses, increasing student occupational aspirations.

The results of this study suggest that benefits of a college/university education are quite significant in the world of work. This conclusion comes as no surprise but does give credence to recommendations counselors have made for years about the influence of higher education on lifestyle and future opportunities for career development. Not only does the college experience provide for career mobility and advancement, but it also increases occupational aspirations. In essence, the benefits of higher education improve the quality of life and the capacity to make appropriate judgments over the life span.

From a theoretical point of view, it is known that career counseling policies are developed and focused on three main directions:

- lifelong guidance, complementary to lifelong learning;
- a professional model, more open, providing a wide range of interventions;
- the active role of individual, as a part involved in career counseling services.

In 1992, National Occupational Information Coordinating Committee (NOICC -USA) established appropriate competencies and indicators for adults to underscore the necessity of preparing students for the work world and for integrating life roles into a future lifestyle. These competencies and indicators present a significant challenge to institutions of higher learning and point out the importance of and need for an effective career guidance program. Not only is the importance of educational and occupational exploration suggested by these competencies and indicators, but also the importance of work as it affects values and lifestyle. To accomplish these goals will require a comprehensive program and commitment on the part of the college or university.

Such an example is presented below (3):

Adult: Competencies and indicators

Self-knowledge

Competency 1: Skills needed to maintain a positive self concept;

Competency 2: Skills needed to maintain effective behaviors;

Competency 3: Understanding developmental changes and transitions;

Educational and occupational exploration

Competency 4: Skills needed to enter and participate in education and training;

Competency 5: Skills needed to participate in work and lifelong learning;

Competency 6: Skills needed to locate, evaluate, and interpret information;

Competency 7: Skills needed to prepare to seek, obtain, maintain, and change jobs;

Competency 8: Understanding how the needs and functions of society influence the nature and structure of work.

Career planning

Competency 9: Skills needed to make decisions;

Competency 10: Understanding the impact of work on individual and family life;

Competency 11: Understanding the continuing changes in male/female roles;

Competency 12: Skills needed to make career transitions.

Based on these competencies, career guidance must meet the needs of students at various stages of career development and from this point of view, understanding the relationships between career choice and educational requirements is essential, as well as career planning and decision-making.

Career guidance activities in institutions of higher education must provide assistance in helping each student understand that career development is a lifelong process based on a sequential series of educational and occupational choices (6).

Moreover, to carry out the specific counseling activities require a comprehensive program and commitment on the part of the university, which refers to the following issues, corresponding to different groups of competencies and indicators (3):

- identify skills, abilities, interests, experiences, values, and personalities traits and their influence on career decision;
- demonstrate skills to manage financial resources; describe how personal motivations and aspirations may change over time; describe short- and long-range plans to achieve career goals through appropriate educational paths; identify information that describes educational opportunities (e.g., job training programs, graduate and professional study etc.);
- describe community and organizational resources to support education and training; demonstrate confidence in the ability to achieve learning activities; identify and use current career information resources;
- describe information related to self-assessment, career planning, occupations, prospective employers, organizational structures, and employer expectations;
- demonstrate skills in preparing a resume and completing job applications;
- demonstrate skills and attitudes essential to prepare for and participate in successful job interview;
- describe how society's needs and functions affect occupational supply and demand;
- describe occupational, and technological trends as they relate to training programs and employment opportunities;



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- describe personal criteria for making decisions about education, training, and career goals;
- describe skills to assess occupational opportunities in terms of advancement, management styles, work environment, benefits, and other conditions of employment;
- develop an individual career plan, updating information from earlier plans and including short- and long-range career decisions.

As a consequence of listed issues above to take into consideration in a career guidance program at the university level, career planning must meet the needs of students at various stages of career development. Understanding the relationships between career choice and educational requirements is essential. University's students must learn to relate their personal characteristics to occupational requirements. Career planning and decision-making skills play an important role, and students need assistance in choosing between career opportunities.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Career guidance activities in institutions of higher education must provide assistance in helping each student understand that career development is a lifelong learning process based on a sequential series of educational and occupational choices (6). Each student should be given the opportunity to identify and use a wide variety of resources to maximize his or her career development potential.

Typical programs offered by career counseling centers in universities include career search strategies, interview skills training, and instructions on writing resume. But the demand for work- and experienced-

based programs is increasing. The mobility on international job market is expected to grow. In this respect, students will need to plan early their career to meet job requirements in the international marketplace.

The career counseling in Romanian education system has no long tradition or experience in developing and conducting specific counseling activities, but we learn by doing! Collaborative working environment and international perspective help us to set up appropriately the general framework for action. New opportunities and approaches in career counseling field are under development and implementation in Romanian educational system.

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