

An Investigation into a Career Day on a Student's Choice of Profession

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Abstract

The rationale of this study was to investigate whether high school students felt that a university-sponsored career day provided them with enough information about accounting in order to make an informed decision about a potential career in the field. Students from five, Northeast Ohio high schools attended a career day at Ashland University, Ohio, USA. After several presentations and activities, students were questioned about their future career plans as well as their view of the most valuable presentations. Results indicate the career day provided students with valuable information to make informed decisions. Although this study involved the field of accounting, the purpose was to focus on the impact a career day has on the intent to enter any particular profession.

Keywords: career day, future career plans, accounting, enrollment, college costs

1. Introduction

A major concern for high school and college students involves their future career plans. They have presumably not encountered a wide variety of occupational opportunities and often wonder what occupation best suits their interests (Mauer & Gysbers, 1990). During one of the most exciting and potentially rewarding portion of their life, they instead encounter anxiety and stress (Corbishley & Yost, 1989; Picklesimer, Hooper, & Ginter, 1998).

It has been suggested that students have a tentative career plan by their junior year of high school (Lane, 2000). While this is undoubtedly ideal, students in their late teens may not be aware of the career options available to them. Instead, students are pressured by parents, guidance counselors, and teachers to find a career quickly to save time and money. Additional anxiety is added knowing that stress can be alleviated if students identify a career purpose early (Kearns & Gardiner, 2007). However, this nearly always results in a conundrum. Students cannot efficiently find a career if they are simply unaware of what they want to do. Students being told to efficiently manage time and quickly find a career are only bringing on more stress. If a student does not cope well with this added stress, his/her grades may suffer as well (Struthers, Perry, & Menec, 2000). A university sponsored career day targeted toward high school students is a chance to alleviate their stress while additionally benefiting the university and/or college.

The primary purpose of most university sponsored career days is to increase enrollment in a specific field or major. Opportunities in the field and daily job responsibilities are customarily highlighted using professional speakers and hands-on activities consistent with the abilities of high school upper-classmen. Professional speakers allow students to hear from individuals currently in the field thus giving students an opportunity to learn about daily job functions, career paths, and academic requirements necessary to be successful in the career (Macera & Cohen, 2006). In addition, hands-on activities can be supplemented to not only give students a break from the monotony of sitting and listening, but to actually perform job duties representative of the profession. While university administrators clearly anticipate a day filled with amusing activities and student enjoyment, the overall goal of hosting the event still entails increased enrollment.

Recent trends indicate a decline in higher education enrollment. Statistics from the U.S. Department of Education (January, 2011) indicate that between 2008 and 2009, 214,000 less high school students attended college after graduation. While some believe rising higher education costs are to blame (Vedder & Gillen, 2011), others contribute the decline to the decreased earning potential caused by an increase in the supply of college graduates (Trostel & Philip, 2010). Potential students are left questioning whether college benefits outweigh the costs.

Regardless of the cause for decreased enrollment, colleges and universities are ultimately competing for students. While students have a variety of reasons for choosing a university or college, perceived quality relative to other universities is a large factor (Rindova, Williamson, Petkova, & Sever, 2005). Bringing high school students to campus allows them the ability to experience a university first hand and evaluate for themselves whether the value of a degree outweighs the cost. A career day is one way to entice students to visit. However, not all universities have a single goal to increase enrollment. Many individuals feel that they have an obligation to the community and to society to steer students in a direction that best suits their desires (Berger, 2009).

University-sponsored career days provide a community service for both the student and society. Supplying students with information necessary for them to decide on whether they would enjoy a profession saves students both time and money. Switching majors during college can have a damaging effect on a family's financial condition. According to the U.S. National Center for Education Statistics (2011), average loan amounts and percentage of students requiring borrowed funds for public four-year institutions averaged \$6,600 and 37.8% respectively for the 2007-2008 academic year. For private four-year institutions the financial need is even greater with loan amounts averaging \$9,100 with 48.5% of undergraduates requiring borrowed funds.

In addition, educating students on the benefits of obtaining a college degree improves society. College educated worker demands and wages have increased steadily since the 1980s. High demand is often attributed to information and/or computer technology substitution and cognitive skill requirements (Steelman & Weinberg, 2005). These skills are most often obtained in college. Even though recent information on wage differentials between high school and college graduates shows a slowdown in growth, college graduates still earn a higher wage than high school graduates (Lemieux, 2007; Tierney, 2011). Higher wages equate to economic growth. In addition, more education equates to a less likely chance of unemployment for an individual. In 2010, high school graduates experienced a 10.3% unemployment rate while bachelor's degree graduate unemployment rates were 5.4% for individuals aged twenty-five years and older (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). Educators have an obligation to prepare the younger generation to be productive citizens.

From the standpoint of the university, a high school career day appears useful. The event held at Ashland University expended minimal costs and time. Still, no event should be conducted when costs exceed benefits. However, the true question that arises is how to measure success of a high school career day. Does a student's perceived knowledge gain of the profession signal success? The foundation of this study focuses on the impact a career day has on student's career choices and knowledge of the profession. Although this study involves the field of accounting, the focus of this study is a career day. Any college major can be substituted with assumedly similar results.

1.1 Research Objectives

Three research questions were used in this study to determine whether the Accounting Career Day held at Ashland University changed the minds of high school students to consider a career in accounting and are:

1. Do high school students feel an accounting career day provides them with an adequate amount of information to be content in their career choice decision?
2. Does a career day educating high school students about the accounting field change their opinion about entering a career in accounting?
3. Which specific presentations do students feel provided them with the most valuable information about accounting?

2. Methodology and Research Design

Students listened to four presentations throughout the day. All presentations were intended to give high school students a glimpse into the various aspects of the accounting field. Both college students and accounting professionals were used during the one day seminar.

The first presenter, Mr. Steve Martin, primarily introduced students to the rigor of the CPA exam. Mr. Martin owns a CPA exam review course and although he was extremely valuable and informative, his primary goal was to sell his course. His skills as a salesman as well as his use of captivating presentation materials kept the students engaged and interested.

The second presentation included a panel of current Ashland University students. Each student briefly presented information on their backgrounds, including high school information, graduation status, and involvement in extracurricular activities. The panel ended with Ashland University students answering questions while enjoying lunch in small groups.

The third presentation's attempt at showcasing the life of a fraud investigator used an exercise in check kiting and provided a video on the life of an IRS Special Agent. Unfortunately, students were not able to effectively work through the check kiting exercise. The exercise was too advanced for a high school student's level of comprehension.

Lastly, one public accountant, one government accountant, and one corporate accountant gave a presentation on their typical days. Each professional highlighted the advantages and disadvantages of their career. Their session ended with questions and answers followed by a campus tour led by admissions department representatives.

2.1 Data Sample

A total of 48 students from five Northeast Ohio high schools participated in the event at Ashland University in Ohio. The students in attendance were enrolled in their high school bookkeeping class. The group consisted of 27 females and 21 males ranging in age from 16-18. Seniors represented 71% of the participants whereas juniors represented 29%. While age and rank were not considered a variable for this study, it should be noted that the students included were near high school graduation and thus assumedly considering possible career options.

3. Results of the Survey

Since the sample of 48 students is considered small, the study has the potential to lack representation of the population and statistical power. As a result, only the responses listed as percentages are provided. Statistical tests were not conducted.

As indicated in Figure 1, 94% of students felt that the accounting career day provided them with a better understanding of accounting in order to make an informed career choice. While this question does not determine whether students will advance their career choice in accounting, it does support and validate the work involved in making the event occur. If students did not believe they obtained sufficient knowledge from the day's events, future accounting career day programs may have been abolished.

To answer research question 2 and determine whether students would consider a career in accounting after attending the career day, two questions were asked and differences were noted. The first question asked students whether they considered majoring in accounting before attending the career day. Results indicate that 27% replied positively while 63% replied that they did not consider a career in accounting before attending the accounting career day. To determine effectiveness of the program, responses from figure 2 were compared with responses from figure 3. The results indicated that while 27% of students arrived at the career day considering a career in accounting (figure 2); 69% of students left with the possibility of considering a career in the field (figure 3). The 42% increase indicates that a substantial portion of students became interested in accounting after attending the career day and may consider an accounting degree in college.

Coinciding with figures 2 and 3, figure 4 indicates that the accounting career day did not influence many students away from a career in accounting when they anticipated entering the field prior to the event. Two percent of students who had decided to enter the field of accounting prior to attending the career day felt that the field would no longer be their intended career choice. Contrarily, eighty-five percent indicated they had not decided to change their major from accounting based on the information they received at the career day.

Finally, to determine which session(s) impacted students most, each session was ranked on a scale from one to five. The results demonstrated that students were drawn to sessions conducted by professionals in the field of accounting. CPAs with an Edge ranked highest closely followed by the session led by professionals.

4. Conclusions

Upon completion of the career day, university administrators asked whether the event was worthwhile. While it did not expend considerable time, money, and effort, events should be discontinued if not meaningful and valuable. The decision of whether an event is worthwhile depends on the goals for the day.

If the goal of the career day was to educate students on a specific field, such as accounting, then yes it accomplished that goal. 94% of students replied that the career day provided them with a better understanding of the field. This community driven goal exceeded expectations.

In regards to the specific field, it should be noted that 63% of the students did not want to major in accounting before they attended the career day. However, 69% replied that they would consider accounting as a potential career choice after attending the day's events. This goal of helping the accounting department at Ashland University was satisfied only if these same students attend Ashland University. Plans to track the attendee roster to Ashland University applications and attendance are currently being gathered.

Lastly, 2% of respondents stated that they decided to change their major from accounting to something other than accounting based on the day's events. While this result seems unproductive toward the university's goal, it was productive for the community. Since the career day helped students improve their understanding of the profession and hence their futures, an educator and administrator should feel satisfied that they aided students and the community. It is both noble and benevolent to host an event that saves students time and money regardless of their college choice.

In addition, by modifying the program each year the goal is to increase the field's awareness while presenting a day engaging students with enjoyable and stimulating presentations and activities. Upon reflection, although each presentation scored well, the presentations conducted by professionals outscored the presentations conducted by students. Of course various possible reasons exist for this occurrence. Possibilities may include professional's public speaking abilities, increased credibility, or simply because the audience enjoyed the professionals more than the students. Regardless of an explanation, it appears that an emphasis on professional speakers over student speakers should be encouraged.

5. Recommendations

The author recommends an extension of the study to include enrollment information. Comparing career day attendees to Ashland University applications and enrollment will provide information on whether the career day increased enrollment for the university. This extended information will assist in the decision to support or reject continuation of the program.

Additionally, survey results from guidance counselors, teachers, and/or parents may provide insight into the day's usefulness. It is difficult to ascertain usefulness of an event based solely on a high school student's opinion. Since counselors, teachers, and parents have different views from students on what constitutes important career information, their feedback should prove valuable.

There is also consideration of inviting a more diverse population to the event. By solely including high school bookkeeping students, the university is missing the opportunity to introduce the campus to all potential accounting majors. It can be assumed that there are students outside the high school bookkeeping class interested in accounting or would like to learn more about accounting.

Lastly, this study involves one event. The sample size will increase after several years of data gathered from subsequent career days. The larger sample size will provide a better representation of the population and ample statistical power.

6. Tables and Figures

Figure 1: Has today’s program provided you with a better understanding of the accounting profession so that you can make an informed decision regarding your future career choice?

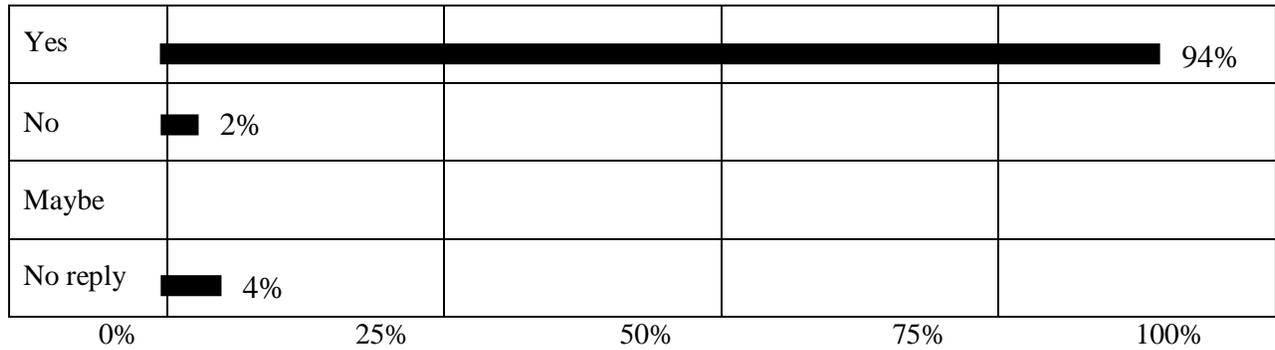


Figure 2: Did you consider majoring or working in accounting before attending today’s event?

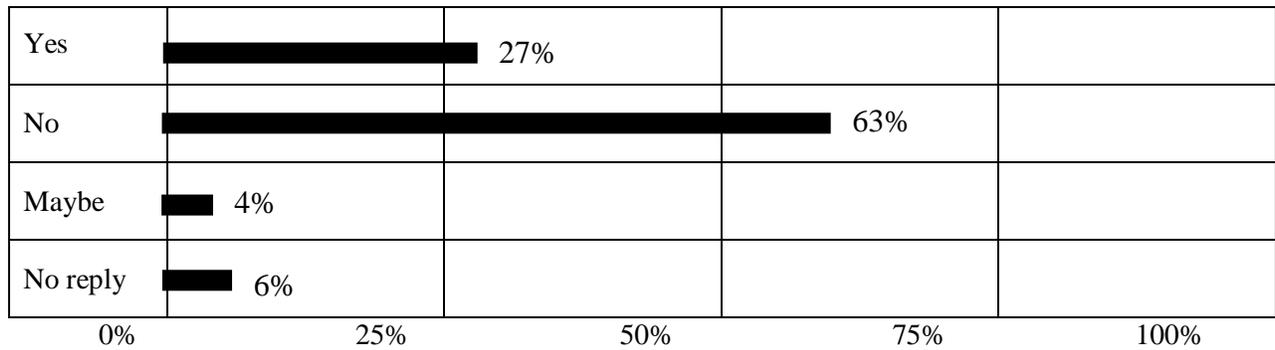


Figure 3: Would you consider accounting as your college major and career choice after attending today’s event?



Figure 4: Based on today’s events, have you decided to change your major from accounting to another major?

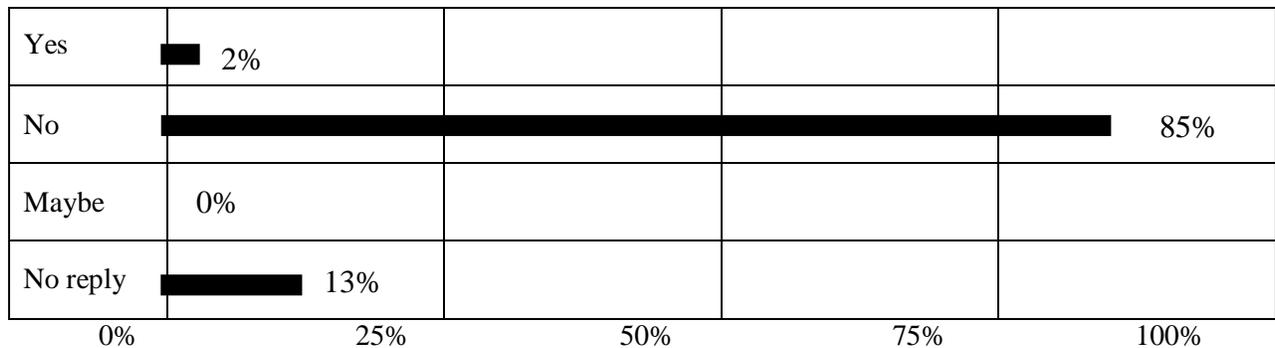


Figure 5: Please rate the following sessions using a 1-5 scale (1=poor, 5=excellent)

	CPAs with an Edge	Professionals Experiences	Student Experiences	Life of a Fraud Investigator
Average score	4.7	4.6	4.4	4.2

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