Peer paraprofessional programs in career services: Value, impact, and opportunities for growth
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The Value of Paraprofessionals
Paraprofessional programs staffed by undergraduate and graduate students have long existed in career services with a reputation for being “invaluable” to the offices they serve (Lenz & Panke, 2001). Student paraprofessionals bring specialized areas of expertise, new ideas and energy, peer-to-peer connections, and additional staffing (Feehan & Wade, 1998; McDaniels et al., 1994). Assertions are also made that student paraprofessionals gain “valuable learning experiences” (McDaniels et al., 1994, p. 97) resulting in enhanced leadership skills, empowerment, and an improved sense of self-worth.

Despite these assertions, the literature on peer paraprofessional programs is quite dated, and achievement of expected learning outcomes for student paraprofessionals is rarely assessed. This study addresses the gap, examining the value of paraprofessional programs by tracking students’ experiences over one semester, using career decision-making self-efficacy and career readiness competencies (NACE, 2015) as frameworks.

Research Questions
1. Can an increase in perceived career decision self-efficacy be observed across the academic term as students serve as career services paraprofessionals?
2. When students reflect on their on-the-job experiences, how do they demonstrate career readiness competency development?
3. Based on student reflections of on-the-job experiences, what potential areas can we identify to enhance student paraprofessional training experiences?

Method
A pre-post survey design was used to measure development of career self-efficacy of paraprofessional students at The Career Center at The University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign (TCC). Prior to their Spring 2017 training, TCC invited 27 paraprofessional students to complete a pre-survey, including the Career Decision Self-efficacy Scale (CDSE, Betz & Taylor, 2001) and demographic questions, and then to repeat a post-survey in the final week of the semester. Additionally, throughout the semester, they responded to 12 brief, weekly writing prompts related to the NACE career readiness competencies, providing insights into their learning and experiences in these areas.

| January 2017 | Pre-survey with CDSE and demographic questions |
| May 2017 | Post-survey with CDSE |
| 12 Weeks | Brief, weekly writing prompts related to NACE career readiness competencies |

A total of 25 paraprofessional students participated in the study, with 17 students (68%) completing the self-reported pre- and post-survey of CDSE. Of the responses, there were more females (65%) than males (35%) and more domestic (88%) than international students (12%). Most respondents had worked for TCC for at least one semester (82%). Most respondents were graduate students (35%), followed by juniors (29%), seniors (24%), and sophomores (12%).

Of this group, 22 students (88%) responded to weekly NACE competency reflection questions. Four students (18%) replied to all 12 reflections, 12 students (55%) respondent to at least three-quarters of the reflections (9 - 11). This resulted in 73% of participants providing a strong reflection response rate. The remaining 6 students (27%) provided less than half of the requested reflections (between 1 and 6).

Example Findings

Q1: Career Decision Self-Efficacy
The CDSE scale contained 25 items describing tasks required to make good career decisions, which were divided into 5 subscales. Respondents indicated how confident they felt performing those tasks on a scale of 1 (no confidence at all) through 5 (complete confidence). Except for one sub-scale, goal selection, the other four sub-scales showed statistically significant improvement, with students moving from “Moderate Confidence (3)” to “Much Confidence” (4) as noted in the following graph.

![Career Decision Self Efficacy (CDSE)](chart)

\[ n=17; \ *p<0.05; \ **p<0.01 \]
Cohen’s \( d \) effect sizes: CDSE All \( d =0.40; \) SA \( d =0.42; \) GS \( d =0.11; \) Plan \( d =0.50; \) OI \( d =0.48; \) PS \( d =0.32 \)

Q2: Career Readiness Development

**Self and Options Knowledge**

- “I have learned that I really love working with other students and being able to be a guide and resource for them. In terms of my future I think that it has given me a broader sense of the workings of the institution of academia.”
  - Participant 19: Undergraduate Student Paraprofessional

**Job Search Knowledge and Skills**

- “Working at TCC has helped me become more confident in my abilities for finding a job…Working at TCC has opened my eyes to the fact that a career isn't only about your academics, but also about how you present yourself to the world.”
  - Participant 16: Undergraduate Student Paraprofessional

**Professional Development**

- “I think I've gained more knowledge of professional development through the Career Center…Before working here, I don't think my communication, public speaking, professionalism, and teamwork skills were as good as they are now. These are skills I often speak about and convey in interviews. Beyond that, they are necessary skills to perform well in a workplace setting. I think the fact I've extensively developed such skills speaks to how the Career Center impacted my career path.”
  - Participant 15: Undergraduate Student Paraprofessional

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Q3: Enhance Student Paraprofessional Training:  
Example Competency – Oral / Written Communication

Reflections of Skills Encouraged in Training

• "I helped students see their strengths before telling them anything about their resume. I give them a compliment. Whether it is about the format, or their bullet points, something that will make them feel confident before I tell them what to make corrections on or change."
  - Participant 11: Undergraduate Student Paraprofessional

• “A lot of times when I am at the [drop-in desk], I feel empathetic. I always reflect on the times when I was in undergrad or even now. Everything seems confusing. You’re not quite sure what you want to do. Everyone seems to have their life together and you’re struggling to write a resume. You just want to breathe but you can’t. You have to struggle taking care of your responsibilities back at home, find yourself here, and then figure out the next steps of your life. I summarize a multitude of situations. I just refer them to a staff member for a 30 minute appointment…”
  - Participant 8: Graduate Student Paraprofessional

Expressions of Tension

• “I feel that the consistent problem with the career center staff (as students) are very disconnected from each other. Each staff member does their own work and only comes together when they need to for presentations or events. This can cause each CSP trying to present more than the other. I think that bonding during shifts and events might be a good idea, as well as bi-weekly meetings.”
  - Participant 12: Undergraduate Student Paraprofessional

• "I wish that we learned more about cultural competency in this position. To have two 8-hour intensive trainings but only take 30 min of that training to talk about "diversity."… When students of color and queer students are the people who have the hardest time finding jobs because of discrimination, how is it that we don’t receive the proper training to be able to assist them?"
  - Participant 19: Undergraduate Student Paraprofessional

Missed the Mark

• “The last interaction I had with a student at The Career Center when I taught them something new was when a study came in and was studying Psychology and Communications. Being both a psychology and communications major, I instantly asked them if they were going into Human Resources and were thinking about going to the Labor and Relations school here and U of I. The student looked at me like I had three heads and had no idea what Labor and Relations was and they were just going to get a job fresh out of college working in communications and I told them to look into HR. I do not know if this student is actually going into HR, however, I hope that they just researched the idea of going into HR.”
  - Undergraduate Student Paraprofessional

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Example Implications

Positive impact of the peer paraprofessional role on students’ career readiness. (RQ 1&2)
Initial CDSE scores provided little room for growth. This could be impacted by self-selection bias – are those who choose to become career paraprofessionals likely to agree with items on the CDSE scale?

The brief reflections provided by students demonstrate a variety of benefits ranging from hands-on experience in career fields of interest, to confidence in personal job search tasks, to transferrable skill development, to the ability to express the development of these skills in the interview-like prompts that were offered by the research study. Students have opportunities to build career readiness skills, and can articulate this when given an interview-like prompt.

Complex roles provide growth opportunities, yet require boundaries & continuous support. (RQ 3)
The paraprofessional role is complex. Student workers are in dynamic environments where they are responsible for providing assistance in a timely, knowledgeable manner to their peers.

Many of their responses demonstrated that they had understood and were applying skills taught in paraprofessional training (e.g., the “sandwich approach” to providing feedback, strategies for making referrals). Other responses demonstrated that continued support and training is needed to help students stay within the boundaries of their training (e.g., using caution with self-disclosure, making referrals when help is needed beyond the immediate service), as well as to acknowledge that it is okay to not be able to provide immediate answers to peers’ questions. Managing feelings of inadequacy within the helping relationship has become a part of training dialogs.

Managing expectations within the paraprofessional role. (RQ 3)
There are many ways that paraprofessionals feel a desire to move beyond the roles that they are trained for (e.g., resume reviewing, basic workshops). For example, some paraprofessionals asked for additional training in how to discuss complex issues such as multiculturalism, multiple identities, and marginalized student experiences in the job search (see “Expressions of Tension” quote, participant 19). However, we also need to recognize the limitations of the training that can be provided to our paraprofessionals, and the various stages of cognitive and identity development that they are working from. For example, while some are recognizing the experiences of marginalized students, others reflected that:

“Everyday you will experience an interaction with someone who has a different identity than yours. It really does not influence how I act or communicate with the person because ultimately they are there to seek help with their professional development. It should not play a factor when communicating with an individual and therefore it does not influence my communication approach or effectiveness.” – Undergraduate Student Paraprofessional

Balancing this with the primary need to provide basic job search review and workshop services, there is a limit to how much we can ask undergraduate students to focus on issues of identity. Rather, we focus the training on referral to full-time career coaching staff when identity discussions emerge or they observe signs that students are struggling. Yet, perhaps we could be more explicit about the limitations of the training, and provide recommendations for places where interested paraprofessionals could go to learn more when ready.

Concluding Remarks

In 2016-2017, paraprofessionals conducted 59% of individual contacts and 37% of workshops at The Career Center. These individuals are an essential part of our operation and outreach. This role also clearly offers opportunities for professional development. This study richly identified the contributions of paraprofessionals, in addition to examples of the learning and skills gained from these experiences. Areas to enhance our programs have been identified, and are currently being explored. Future research on the outcomes of peer paraprofessional programs is encouraged to provide insights on how to design and implement these programs, connected to the mission and needs of unique career services offices.

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