

## **Professional Career Readiness in Undergraduate Business Program**

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*The purpose of this research is to analyze the influence of three elements of student immersion experience (discovering your options, sculpting your plans, and marketing yourself) on activating student plan. A total of 82 students from a university located in the southeast part of Texas participated in the analysis. Results from partial least squares show that sculpting your value proposition and marketing yourself positively and significantly influence activating your plan. Also, a non-significant relationship between discovering your options and activating your plan was found. Discussions and implications for future research are presented.*

*Keywords: immersion experience, activating your plan, social-cognitive theory*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Today's generation of undergraduate students is motivated by professional career-related reasons to earn a college degree. To help undergraduate business students land their first job after graduation, business schools have added professional career development programs that work along with career services to assist students in connecting their career interests and developing contemporary professional career readiness skills.

The professional career readiness of college graduates is an important issue in higher education, in the labor market, and in the public arena. In 2019, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) empowered a task force consisting of employers and academic professionals to identify the competencies associated with career readiness. These (eight) competencies include critical thinking and problem solving, oral and written communication, teamwork and collaboration, contemporary technology, leadership, professionalism, ethics, global citizenship, and career management. Meyer (2014) pointed out that at the heart of the modern trend in the US, the educational system is the student's preparation "for postsecondary

learning and careers.” Formally acquired knowledge in a collegiate education is not very effective unless students learn how to apply it and practice it through integration and experience in a professional setting.

To help undergraduate students to find their first job, our college of business created a professional development (*immersion*) experience that works in concert with students’ business discipline-specific preparation. It helps undergraduate business students develop career strategy skills, including how to understand and adapt to organizational structures (Kelley, 1992; O’Briant, 2000; Mood et al., 2002), how to network in an organizational setting (Lazorchak, 2000; Wresch and Pondell, 2015), and how to build professional social capital (King, 2004; Kelley & Bridges, 2005; Bridgstock, 2009; Bear, 2016). In this paper we extend a practical framework (1) self-development – career readiness, (2) on-campus development – networking, and (3) applied development – immersion experience) and a step-wise construct process of student professional development introduced by Delcoure et al. (2018) on undergraduate business student preparation for a successful work-related experience, as well as a rewarding professional career of their choosing.

We begin by reviewing the background literature to identify the research question. Next, we provide a detailed overview of the study methodology including the step-wise framework as well as the construct model. Then, we discuss key study findings and conclude with a discussion of implications, limitations, and suggested avenues for future research and practice.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Professional schools, more than other colleges on university campuses, have long recognized the educational value and relevance of career readiness (Delcoure et al., 2018) since undergraduate students often have limited ideas about how to acquire career-readiness skills and develop successful professional career, and they may frequently lag in fostering career strategy skills (Perrone & Vickers, 2003). Arthur and Rousseau (1996) suggested as students are developing such skills, they also need to understand and become comfortable that it is the nature of careers to change and that lifetime employment with a single organization has been replaced by careers that involve movement across different organizations and industries. These changing of careers puts the individual employee in charge of planning and career management (Mirvis & Hall, 1994).

Present career readiness activities in higher education include on-campus and workplace learning activities and experiences. This includes work placement, shadowing, internships and practicums, project-based learning and service learning, and many others. This integration of academic knowledge into real-life practice represents a collaborative effort between higher education and industry (Jackson, 2013). Currently, it is common for business schools globally to offer general career support services including career assessment and counseling, career workshops or/and panels, resume and cover letter workshops, mock interviews, career fairs, and internship searches (Wessels & Sumner, 2014). At the same time, many business schools supplement career readiness activities on the institutional level with specialized career-related for-credit and not-for-credit activities and/or academic courses (Bear, 2016).

Integration of work-related learning in higher education has attracted considerable attention as a means to enhance professional career readiness in new graduates. Work-related learning activities integrate theory with practice in academic learning programs (Jackson, 2013). Jackson (2013) found these activities (e.g., internships, practicums, project-based learning, and service learning) to be flexible and easy to adapt to different disciplines and organizational contexts.

Martin et al. (2011) found that work-related learning is considered a point of difference in enhancing graduate employability. Billet (2011) argued that different types of work-related activities lead to different outcomes. In some professions, work-related training and professional career readiness are required for accreditation(s). Recently, it has become increasingly important that business graduates be ready for the labor market in terms of both academic knowledge and marketable skills. Institutions of higher education are faced with growing demands for accountability and transparency by current and prospective students, their parents, government entities, accreditation and funding bodies, employers, donors, alumni, and other stakeholders. Thus, educators are taking a close look at their pedagogies and integrating work-related

learning into their curriculums to boost the professional career readiness of their students (Bates, 2011; Yorke, 2011).

Providing learners with the necessary tools to embark on new careers is one of the main goals of the student development programs adopted by many schools (Delcoure et al., 2018). Of equal importance, and as empirical evidence is drawn from a meta-analysis of more than 100 cases over the last 20 years shows, is the self-efficacy portion of Bandura's social-cognitive theory (Robbins et al., 2004.)

The importance of business internships in a collegiate education is well documented in the literature. Internship programs have existed for over a century, dating back to 1906, and is now global, culminating in a large body of extant research that documents diverse aspects of internships (University of Cincinnati Co-op, 2016). This research can be broadly divided into three categories: (1) descriptive studies of what individual schools have achieved (Johnson & Hancock, 1983; McCaskey & Fedo, 1985; Hite & Bellizzi, 1986; Dommeyer et al., 2016); (2) studies outlining the pros and cons of internship programs in general (Nevett, 1985; McCarrier, 1986; Krohn, 1986; Henry et al., 1988; Coco, 2000; Rothman, 2007; Divine et al., 2007; Weible, 2010; Green et al., 2011); and (3) descriptive surveys that are national in scope (Dovel & Dayan, 1982; Clithero & Levenson, 1986; Kelley & Bridges, 2005; Swanson & Tomkovick, 2011; Wresch & Pondell, 2015; Cook et al., 2015).

## BACKGROUND

Texas A&M University-Kingsville (TAMUK) is located in south Texas approximately 100 miles north of the US-Mexico border. Established in 1925 as South Texas State Teacher's College, TAMUK draws its student population primarily from south Texas, and the Coastal Bend, Houston, Dallas/Ft. Worth, San Antonio, and Austin metropolitan areas. TAMUK is designated as a Hispanic- and minority-serving institution. Of the total TAMUK student population, 70% are Hispanic, 6% are non-Hispanic, 14% are white, and 10% are international students.

TAMUK has six academic units: College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, College of Arts and Science, College of Business Administration, College of Education and Human Performance, College of Engineering, and Honors College, collectively offering over 100 degrees. TAMUK offered its first business courses in 1925 and established the College of Business in 1929. Ethnically, students attending the College of Business Administration (the College) reflect area and university demographics. The College offers five undergraduate degree programs in business and a Master of Business Administration.

TAMUK business majors are required to broaden their education by gaining career readiness skills and global competencies through mandatory participation in an *immersion experience* (students can choose from internship, study abroad, or faculty/student collaborative research projects). Students must first successfully complete the Student Professional Development Program (SPDP) as a prerequisite for the immersion experience. The SPDP and the immersion experience have been non-credit graduation requirements for all College undergraduate majors since 2010. However, they were routinely enforced starting spring 2014.

The SPDP was designed and iteratively revised to provide learning experiences that help students develop personal and professional career readiness skills, with the end goal of giving students a competitive advantage in the contemporary job market and beyond. College SPDP has traditionally been instructional and interactive in nature, focusing on development of student skills in four workshops: Career Planning (becoming a business professional), Professional Appearance (dos and don'ts of business professional attire), Job Campaign (developing professional public profile), and Professional Etiquette (dinner, networking, and social opportunity). These not-for-academic-credit workshops are completed in addition to the student's degree plan and were originally designed and taught by the College faculty and professional staff. However, the increasing importance of developing career readiness competencies as an introduction to the workplace and enhancing student understanding of workplace and culture led the College to re-design the format of its SPDP workshops and outsource some of them (i.e., Professional Appearance and Professional Etiquette) to the University Career Services. At the same time, the College redesigned the Job

Campaign workshop to add networking aspects as a result of indirect program assessment, the Dean’s Leadership Board feedback, employers’ feedback, and alumni survey results.

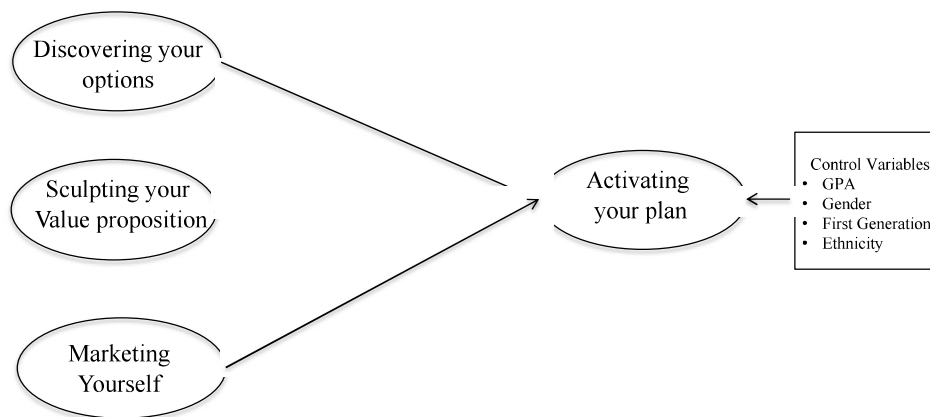
Beginning in the fall of 2016, the College of Business Administration rolled out an online self-development component of SPDP—four online modules that must be completed prior to attending face-to-face workshops. These four modules are from an online program named “Explore Your Potential” and the variables are named after the names of the four courses presented in the program (<https://exploringyourpotential.com/>). The program is described on the website as:

“Exploring Your Potential” is a career readiness program that inspires young adults to take control of their future today by crafting a life and career that’s personally customized to them. This groundbreaking program is organized into four courses in which students identify their talents, passions, and goals; create a value proposition that reflects who they are; learn how to market themselves; and put their career plan into action. Students are motivated to think outside the box and create their own definition of success.

As a result, undergraduate business majors participate in professional development through a combination of online module (“Explore Your Potential” online portal), “Etiquette Dinner” facilitated by the University Career Services and the “Job Campaign,” an interactive culminating experience with a panel of leaders from a diverse mix of business organizations.

The four modules are composed of a total of 24 questions (six per module) measuring the student’s immersion experience. Based on the questions, four latent variables were created and used for this study. The first one was named *discovering your options*, the second was named *sculpting your value propositions*, and the third was named *marketing yourself*. All these three latent variables were used as predictor constructs. The fourth latent variable was named *activating your plan*, and it was used as the criterion variable. Figure 1 presents the proposed model. Since, students enter this program without much experience and limited career plans, it is expected that all the processes involved in discovering their options, sculpting their value propositions, and activating their plans will have an influence on how students prepare and activate their career plans.

**FIGURE 1  
PROPOSED MODEL**



Based on the data, we formulated the following hypotheses:

**H1:** *Discovering your options (post module 1) will have a positive and significant influence on activating your plan (post module 4).*

**H2:** *Sculpting your value proposition (post module 2) will have a positive and significant influence on activating your plan (post module 4).*

**H3:** *Marketing yourself (post module 3) will have a positive and significant influence on post activating your plan (post module 4).*

## **DATA AND METHODOLOGY**

### **Sample size**

A total of 82 students participated in the study. Initially, the students created a profile in a portal called “Exploring Your Potential” where they were able to complete four modules. Students took a pre-test and a post-test for each of the modules. All the students were required to take these four modules as part of their student professional development program (SPDP). The modules are one hundred percent online, and students completed them at their own pace. For this study, the analysis was conducted after the students took the four modules, which were utilized as latent variables.

### **Scale**

The scale consisted of a set of four latent variables: *discovering your options*, *sculpting your value propositions*, *marketing yourself* and *activating your plan*. The first three were used as independent variables and the fourth as the dependent variable. Some of the questions used for the fourth latent variable are presented below:

1. I have a documented plan of action to get where I want to be.
2. My plan of action includes aspects that will increase my earning potential when I achieve my goals.
3. My plan of action considers how to give back to society as I grow personally through volunteering.
4. I can build my personal and professional network through referrals and volunteering.

Structural equation modeling was used as the analysis tool. Partial least square (PLS) was the statistical technique used for the pre and post analysis. One of the advantages of using PLS is that it does not require the data to have a normal distribution, and it is recommended for both exploratory and confirmatory analysis (Bullock et al., 1994; Gefen et al., 2000).

### **Data Analysis**

Several tests were conducted in order to verify the validity and reliability of the model. A reliability test is usually conducted in order to verify that the measures present similar results when they are repeated (Hair et al., 1998). An acceptable approach is looking at the Cronbach’s Alpha value. It has been noted that, in terms of reliability, a model is acceptable when it presents values of 0.7 or higher (George & Mallery, 2003). In this case, all the variables present values higher than 0.7. Regarding validity, two approaches were conducted for both models. The first implied a factor analysis in order to test for convergent validity, which is encountered when the variables measure the same phenomenon. A model has acceptable convergent validity when the loadings of the indicators that belong to the same variable present values of 0.5 or higher (Hair et al., 1998). Table 1 presents the results for reliability and convergent validity.

**TABLE 1**  
**FACTOR LOADINGS FOR PREDICTOR AND CRITERION VARIABLES**

<i>Discovering your options</i>	(0.924)
I understand my expectations for personal and professional achievement	0.890
I am able to recognize the challenges related to my personal and career goals	0.884
I am able to associate my personal experiences and strengths with opportunities when presented to me	0.875
I know how to ask the right questions and how to research information in order to determine if a particular industry is right for me	0.884
I am able to determine what skill sets are needed for a specific industry	0.844
<i>Sculpting your value proposition</i>	(0.920)
I know what my strengths and weakness are and can determine how my strengths will bring value to my desired industry	0.874
I understand how to compare various aspects of different industries.	0.893
I understand the difference between hard and soft skills and can determine what steps to take to improve my weak points.	0.866
I have a plan to supplement my formal education as it relates to a new career	0.882
I am able to recognize and cultivate key people in order to build a network of professional connections	0.837
<i>Marketing yourself</i>	(0.873)
I can adapt my pitch presentations (selling myself) appropriately based on the media type I am using	0.859
I can measure my personal skills so I am able to take on new opportunities for growth	0.772
I am able to describe my unique skills and attitudes that set me apart from others	0.835
I can research social media to see how others are promoting themselves and use the best practices to build my identity	0.784
I can evaluate major life decisions based on how they will affect my career path	0.822
<i>Activating your plan.</i>	(0.907)
I have a documented plan of action to get where I want to be	0.836
My plan of action includes aspects that will increase my earning potential when I achieve goals	0.889
My plan of action considers how to give back to society as I grow personally and professionally	0.922
I can build my personal and professional network through referrals and volunteering	0.891

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Cronbach's Alpha in Parentheses

The second approach implied a test for discriminant validity, which evaluates how variables differ from each other (Hair et al., 1998). One way to test for discriminant validity is by looking at the average variance extracted (AVE) value of each construct. It has been proposed that the values should be higher than the ones below it (Kline, 2005). In this case, one indicator from discovering your options, one from sculpting your value proposition, one from marketing yourself, and two from activating your plan were removed since they did not meet the AVE criteria; Table 2 presents the results for the AVE analysis. In addition, a multicollinearity test was conducted. This approach takes into consideration the variance influence factor (VIF). A model has no problems of multicollinearity when it presents values lower than 5 (Hair et al., 1998). Table 3 presents the results for the VIF assessment.

**TABLE 2**  
**CORRELATIONS AMONG VARIABLES. AVERAGE VARIANCE EXTRACTED (AVE) ARE REPORTED IN PARENTHESES**

	DO	SVP	MY	AP	GPA	GENDER	ETH	FG
1. DO	(0.875)							
2. SVP	0.761***	(0.871)						
3. MY	0.708***	0.797***	(0.815)					
4. AP	0.670***	0.758***	0.806***	(0.885)				
5. GPA	0.002	0.035	-0.008	-0.044	(1.000)			
6. GENDER	-0.047	0.028	0.077	0.026	-0.326**	(1.000)		
7. ETH	-0.130	-0.031	-0.005	-0.003	0.079	0.217	(1.000)	
8. FG	0.067	0.183	-0.125	-0.037	-0.017	-0.070	0.388	(1.000)

DO= Discovering your options ; SVP= Sculpting your value proposition; MY= Marketing yourself; AP= Activating your plan; ETH= Ethnicity; FG= First generation; Notes: \*\*\*, \*\*, \* indicate significant level at .1%, 1% and 5% respectively

**TABLE 3**  
**FULL COLLINEARITY VALUES**

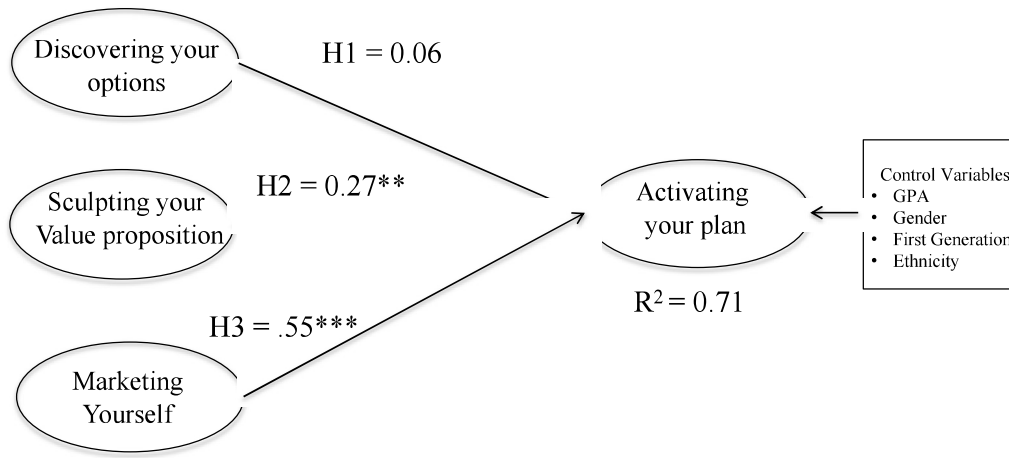
Full collinearity VIF's							
DO	SVP	MY	AP	GPA	GENDER	ETH	FG
2.765	3.957	3.928	3.337	1.182	1.267	1.378	1.339

DO= Discovering your options ; SVP= Sculpting your value proposition; MY= Marketing yourself; AP= Activating your plan; ETH= Ethnicity; FG= First generation

## RESULTS

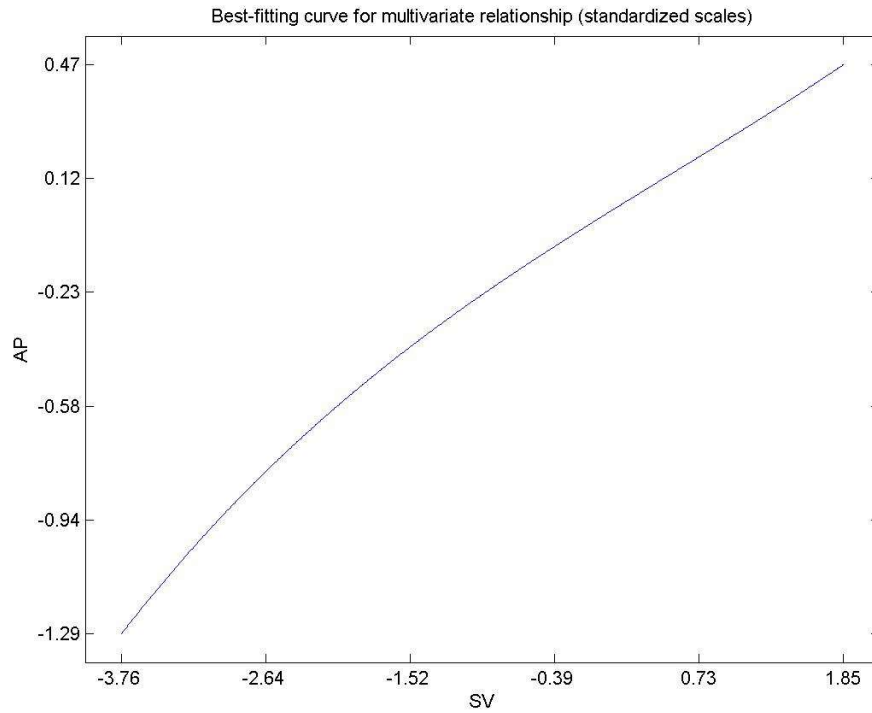
Results of the analysis are presented in Figure 2. It was hypothesized that discovering your options, sculpting your value proposition, and marketing yourself would have a positive and significant influence on activating your plan. Results show that discovering your options presents a non-significant relationship with activating your plan. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 is not supported. Regarding sculpting your value proposition, it presents a positive and significant relationship with activating your plan ( $\beta = 0.27$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Therefore, Hypothesis 2 is supported. Marketing yourself also presents a positive and significant relationship with activating your plan as well ( $\beta = 0.55$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Therefore, Hypothesis 3 is supported. In addition to the hypotheses results, an explanation of the relationships among variables is also presented. WarpPLS allows for the interpretation of linear and nonlinear relationships among all the variables involved by finding and presenting the best fitting curve. Figure 3 refers to the relationship between sculpting your value proposition and activating your plan. The figure presents an almost linear form that confirms the positive relationship between the constructs. Figure 4 refers to the relationship between marketing yourself and activating your plan. The figure also presents an almost linear form confirming the positive relationship between the variables.

**FIGURE 2  
RESULTS**



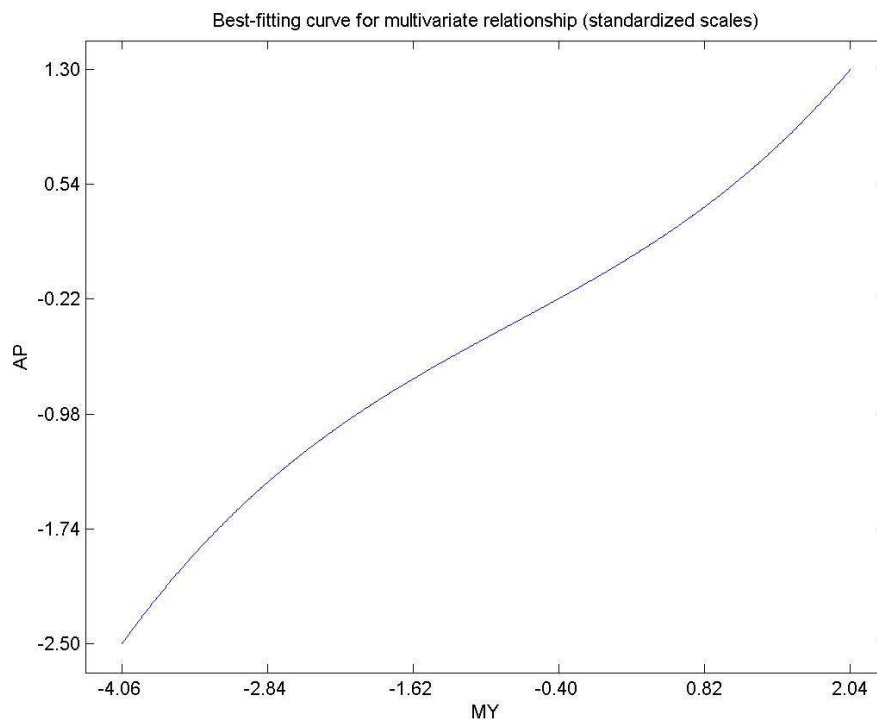
\*\*\*, \*\*, \* indicate significant level at .1%, 1% and 5% respectively

**FIGURE 3  
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCULPTING YOUR VAUE PROPOSITION AND ACTIVATING YOUR PLAN**





**FIGURE 4**  
**RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MARKETING YOURSELF AND ACTIVATING YOUR PLAN**



## DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this research is to study the influence of three elements of the student immersion experience on activating their plans. It was hypothesized that the students' ability to discover their options, sculpt their value proposition, and market themselves would have a positive and significant influence on activating their career plans. Results show that when students are able to understand and recognize their strengths, weaknesses, and key people in their professional careers, they are more able to distinguish, document, and recognize actions that have an impact in their professional careers.

This study reveals that learners are able to apply their abilities on how to distinguish the credibility and appeal of different industries based on their values and how to recognize to cultivate critical people in order to build a network of professional connections and apply them when planning their future. Along the same lines, this study shows that students are able to demonstrate their skills and abilities by marketing themselves using different strategies while creating a plan for the future.

The relationship between discovering your options and activating your plans implies that when students understand his/her expectations, recognize challenges, ask right questions, and cultivate key people, they are more able to document and prepare a plan of action. The non-significant result could be explained by the self-efficacy portion of Bandura's social-cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977). According to this theory, individuals have a belief about their own capabilities to organize and execute courses of action. However, this belief may not reflect the individual's actual capacity to conduct a specific activity. In this case, students could have had the idea that they possessed the knowledge about their career paths, expectations for personal achievement, and could recognize challenges and skills. Still, after taking the module, they realized that they did not, and this, in turn, did not influence their plans of action.

This study is a first attempt to empirically measure some of the non-academic aspects of higher-education on preparing learners to plan for the future, including setting their goals, measure their earning

potential, and even considering to give back to society. Future studies may concentrate on measuring or controlling for self-efficacy on all latent variables to discount these possible effects on the final results.

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