

The Students' Career Development Association in a Chinese University: A Qualitative Study

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This qualitative study investigated key features of the Students' Career Development Association (SCDA) in a Chinese mainland university. This university has been recognized for its pioneering achievements in career guidance. The operations and development of the SCDA were explored to determine how career guidance provided by the association enhances students' career competencies. Results provided a paradigm that other universities could use for reference when developing career guidance services operated by students. The study contributes to the exploration of career guidance in university contexts.

Keywords: career competencies; career development; China; student association; university

In the Chinese university described in this study, career guidance is provided through three main channels: the Students' Career Development Association (SCDA), the Career Center, and the faculties. Of these three channels, the SCDA is the most prominent. It represents a distinctive approach to career guidance that reflects an emerging trend

of involving students themselves in implementing aspects of career guidance.

The SCDA is a non-profit consortium operated independently by students. It was the first formal SCDA run in a Chinese university and played a leading role that many colleges and universities later followed. The SCDA was established in 2003 by the combined efforts of the Career Center, Youth League Committee, Students Affairs Office, and Postgraduates' Administration. To date, it is the only student consortium set up jointly by four university departments/units. The SCDA has developed well for over ten years, from a small beginning to a large organization. It has become the largest consortium in the university and has played a vital role in the South China Universities' Career Association Union.

The unique features of a student-operated unit provide a fertile ground on which to investigate the issues involved, the advantages and disadvantages, and any problems that have arisen, in order to recommend how such a system could be made applicable in other institutions and contexts.

Theory

There is currently a lack of international and local literature concerning student active involvement in career guidance activities in universities. The key areas in which some connections were found included: vocational student organizations (e.g., Camp, Jackson, Buser, & Baldwin, 2000), college consortiums (e.g., Miao & Liu, 2008) and extracurricular activities (e.g., Rubin, Bommer, & Baldwin, 2002). These domains do represent career-related activities identifiable in the SCDA.

Vocational student organizations (VSOs) in the West have existed formally since 1928. Domestic and overseas research has identified extracurricular activities implemented by these organizations as beneficial to students in a number of ways. Most local literature refers to such organizations as “college consortiums.” They were formed to help provide students with more than simple basic job skills. The goals of VSOs include providing students with ways to explore their interests in occupational fields, and develop a greater understanding of a free enterprise system. They also aim to build students’ self-confidence, self-acceptance, occupational competencies, leadership potential, and citizenship skills (Cahill & Brady, 1999; Chen, 2014; Davis, 1987; Harris & Sweet, 1981; C. D. White, 1982; Zhang, 2014). According to Vickers (1994), the basic philosophy of VSOs is to “... provide a vehicle for individual improvement through organizational activities” (p. 43). Participation in activities organized by VSOs is now a common experience for students, and such activities can enhance their career competencies and motivate their interest in vocational and occupational issues (Hamilton, Norton, Fardig, Harrington, & Quinn, 1977a; Rubin et al., 2002; Li, 2011; Yang, 2011). The general belief is that such extracurricular activities promote students’ personal, educational, and vocational development (Holland & Andre, 1987; Miao & Liu, 2008). However, Wegner (1980) has pointed out that there is a lack of research on the true effectiveness of extracurricular activities in increasing students’ career competencies. More recently, in a Chinese context, Feng, Luo, Chen, and Xia (2011) have similarly observed a paucity of in-depth empirical studies into the relationship between student associations and *career* competencies. Current Chinese research tends to focus more generally on the overall role and significance of student associations (e.g., Lu, 2009; L. Wang, 2014). Camp et al. (2000) suggested that “cross-VSO” research should be conducted to identify “what works” in VSOs, with the aim of then building on obvious

strengths. Previous studies have only documented that positive outcomes result from extracurricular activities — but not why or how they occur, or what problems are encountered. There is a need for more qualitative approach in order to understand the processes involved in extracurricular activity participation (Miller, Sabo, Farrell, Barnes, & Melnick, 1998).

Competencies in any field of endeavor are defined as the knowledge, skills, and positive attitudes that are required of individuals as they learn, work, and live. These competencies are acquired through school and community-based learning opportunities (Drier, 1995). DeFillippi and Arthur (1996) identified three key career competencies. First, individuals need to understand themselves and their underlying motives, interests, and values in order to effectively pursue a career (“knowing why”). Second, they must accumulate portable skills and knowledge (“knowing how”). Third, they must develop and sustain their social capital through a broad array of interpersonal networks both inside and outside the organization (“knowing whom”).

Based on the analysis above, a comprehensive exploration of VSOs in a Chinese context has practical significance for providing an operational model for career guidance that could be implemented in other universities, in particular, the value of using a student-operated model. In order to explore key aspects of the SCDA, qualitative research is the most appropriate method (Atkins & Wallace, 2012). The focus of the study was to develop a better understanding of identifiable components, approaches, operating systems and contextual factors inside and outside the university, and the enhancement of students’ career competencies. Problems encountered in the operation of the SCDA were also to be identified.

Theoretically, the study of the SCDA expanded the existing knowledge in this field. It is relevant to explore how students' career competencies have been improved through participation in extracurricular activities provided by the SCDA, and when students occupy leadership roles in the SCDA. It is the first study to use as its basis the theory of "three key career competencies" (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1996) in a Chinese university setting.

Qualitative studies are valuable for investigating deeper meanings — how people make sense of their lives, what they experience, how they interpret their experiences, and how they structure their social world. It is assumed that meaning is embedded in all experiences, and is then mediated through the investigator's own perceptions (Merriam, 1988). In the study reported here, qualitative methods enabled the researchers to explore perceptions of university students, graduates, administrators, and career practitioners concerning career guidance services provided by the SCDA. Informants were interviewed, observations were conducted during career activities, and document study was used to collect supplementary information.

Research Questions

Within the context of a single university, the research questions explored in this study were:

1. What is the identifiable content of career guidance in the SCDA, and what approaches are used?
2. What contextual factors inside and outside the university influence career guidance in the SCDA?
3. From the perception of the people involved, what is the effect of career guidance in the SCDA on enhancing students' career competencies?

4. From the perception of the people involved, what are the problems in delivering and receiving career guidance in the SCDA?
5. From the perception of the people involved, how can career guidance in the SCDA be strengthened and improved?

Method

Design

The qualitative and descriptive data in this study were collected through interviews, observations, and document study (Table 1). Among the documents studied, the most important item was the recorded history, titled *The Growth Process of Students' Career Development Association of Sun Yat-sen University — A Phylogeny Handbook* (Sun Yat-sen University, 2009). Information and evidence from these different sources provided the researchers with an in-depth perspective on the case university. The qualitative data for analysis included: detailed descriptions of situations, events, people, interactions, and observed behaviors; direct quotations from people about their experiences, attitudes, beliefs and thoughts; and excerpts or entire passages from documents, correspondence, records, and case histories.

Interviewing was the major method used. Individual interviews were conducted with an administrator, three career practitioners, and a university graduate. Five focus groups were also conducted. Four to five students from different majors in the same year level were classified into one group — Group 1 to Group 4 included students from Year One to Year Four. Group 5 represented a cohort from different grades and different majors used for follow-up interview to help validate data. These groups provided an effective way for students to express their ideas and share their opinions freely. As suggested by Hitchcock and Hughes (1995), the moderator for each group used open-ended questions to probe and expand the participants' responses.

Table 1. A Summary of the Research Questions and the Research Methods

Research questions	Individual interview	Focus group	Non-participant observation	Documents
1. What is the identifiable content of career guidance in the SCDA, and what approaches are used?	✓	✓	✓	✓
2. What contextual factors inside and outside the university influence career guidance in the SCDA?	✓		✓	✓
3. From the perception of the people involved, what is the effect of career guidance in the SCDA on enhancing students' career competencies?	✓	✓		
4. From the perception of the people involved, what are the problems in delivering and receiving career guidance in the SCDA?	✓	✓		✓
5. From the perception of the people involved, how can career guidance in the SCDA be strengthened and improved?	✓	✓		✓

In order to understand how the SCDA operates — especially how it implements career guidance — the principal researcher made observations of a number of typical situations that reflected reality. The aim of observations was to provide more information for data

triangulation and to ensure that a comprehensive picture of the total situation was constructed.

Extant documents provided the researchers with some detailed information about the history of the SCDA and its services, career activities, resources, and systems. Some of this information was useful when integrating with data from other sources.

Informants

Informants included university students ($n = 23$), a university graduate ($n = 1$), an administrator ($n = 1$), and career practitioners ($n = 3$). While the administrator was in his 40s, the age of other informants ranged from 18 to 25.

The university students had experienced some career activities or service offered by the SCDA. The university graduate was involved in SCDA's career activities when he was a student of the university. The administrator was the staff member of the Career Center in charge of providing support and guidance to the SCDA. The career practitioners were leaders in the SCDA who know the organization well and organize various activities.

Data Collection

Data collection was carried out over a period of almost two years. The researchers visited the university many times to conduct observations, interviews and collect documents. The principal researcher was granted the permission from the SCDA to observe relevant career guidance activities, including talks, workshops, programs, and internal training. This researcher acted as an outsider and non-participant to avoid any subjectivity affecting the interpretation of information and observations. Observations were conducted to collect data on resources, organizational arrangements, processes, and participants of career

development activities. A protocol based on these four aspects was used for taking notes during the observations.

The interview guides for individual interviews and focus groups were developed by the researchers, based on relevant literature and document review necessary for understanding the situation of the SCDA in the university. Before the guides were used, some “critical friends” familiar with the SCDA were invited to give comments and, if necessary, revise any items.

The researchers asked questions about the following areas: (a) identifiable components of career guidance in the SCDA; (b) approaches used to deliver career guidance; (c) problems in delivering the service; (d) problems in receiving the service; (e) perceptions about the effect of career guidance on enhancing students' career competencies; (f) contextual factors inside and outside the university that influence career guidance; (g) suggestions for the improvement of career guidance. In order to match different informants' background and knowledge, four interview protocols were designed for (a) career practitioners, (b) administrators, (c) university students, and (d) university graduates (see Appendices A to D).

Before conducting individual interviews and focus groups, the researchers outlined the purpose of the study. An individual interview lasted for 40 minutes. Each focus group lasted for one hour. Normally the interviews took place in the meeting room of the SCDA, or in other locations chosen by the informants. During the focus groups, the principle researcher acted as a facilitator to guide discussion by asking questions that enabled informants to express and expand upon their thoughts. All sessions were conducted in Mandarin and audio-taped. To ensure validity of the information, all discussions, questions and answers were carefully transcribed verbatim in Chinese. If some information was

not clear or was missing, the researcher would contact the interviewees for clarification.

In addition, after the interviews or observations, the principle researcher requested informants to provide any relevant documents related to career guidance (e.g., regulations, career activity proposals, evaluation reports, plans of workshops and career talks). Extant documents also provided the researcher with detailed information about the operation system, activities, resources, and manpower in the SCDA. Some of this information was useful in triangulating with data from other sources. However, documentary study has its limitations in that documents present only one perspective at a particular period of time, and may not truly reflect the current situation or opinion. Interviews and observations were necessary to supplement and verify document analysis.

Data Analysis

Using the principles recommended by Simons (2009), analysis of the data pool involved coding, categorizing, connecting, and “theme generation,” to organize and make sense of the data to produce meaningful findings. Coding and categorizing data are systematic ways of building an understanding or explanation for phenomena. In qualitative research of this type, theme generation has three phases: (a) making initial sense of the data; (b) reducing observational and interview data to issues, themes or areas for further exploration and explanation; and (c) comparing and summarizing the data (Parlett & Hamilton, 1976; Simons, 2009).

On the basis of the interview questions and responses, several tentative domains were created to represent the meaning of each unit of information. Every unit was then classified with a code. Data collected from observations and documents were also coded, and data with the

same codes were used to corroborate across sources. Some inaccurate information was corrected in this way. According to the five research questions, domains of interest included: “identifiable content and approaches of career guidance,” “enhancement of students’ career competencies,” “problems encountered in delivering the service,” “contextual factors influencing career guidance,” and “suggestions for improving career guidance.” The themes generated from the data thus addressed the five questions. The principal researcher conducted the analysis, but “critical friends” were invited to discuss the relevance of categories and themes, based on their own knowledge and experience. Small adjustments were then made to the coding system.

Results

In this section, data collected through interviews, observations and documents are presented. Data from multiple angles revealed four emergent themes, namely (a) independent operation by students, (b) factors influencing career guidance in the SCDA, (c) enhancement of students’ career competencies, (d) problems and further development direction. When discussing these themes, verbatim comments from informants have been included where relevant in support of various points and opinions.

Tables 2 and 3 provide background information on informants in individual interviews and in focus groups.

Theme 1: Independent Operation by Students

One of the strong features of the SCDA is that the whole operation (sustainable development, planning and implementation of various career activities, connection with society) is maintained independently by students. This independence in operation received support from the university, and was a result of the enlightened thoughts of its leaders.

Table 2. Background of Informants in Individual Interviews

	Informant of individual interviews				
	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5
Gender	• female	• male	• male	• male	• male
Year of study/ status	• postgraduate student	• junior student	• junior student	• alumni	• Career Center staff
Identity	• career practitioner	• career practitioner	• career practitioner	• university graduate	• administrator
Role in the SCDA	• president	• vice- president	• vice- president	• former president	• adviser

Table 3 Background of Students in Focus Groups

	Focus group				
	G1	G2	G3	G4	G5
	(S1, S2, S3, S4)	(S5, S6, S7, S8, S9)	(S10, S11, S12, S13, S14)	(S15, S16, S17, S18, S19)	(S20, S21, S22, S23)
Gender	• 3 male, 1 female	• 3 male, 2 female	• 4 male, 1 female	• 3 male, 2 female	• 3 male, 1 female
Year	• Year 1	• Year 2	• Year 3	• Year 4	• Years 2, 3, & postgraduate Year 1
Career activities	• internal training • talks and lectures • employment forum	• analysis reports of industry • recruitment talks	• competitions • talks and lectures • talent festival	• recruitment talks • talent festival • employment forum	• faculty career curriculum • career competitions

Students’ active involvement in the SCDA has strong official backing, as indicated by an SCDA advisor (one of the founders):

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I think it is necessary to let students guide themselves and make efforts for their own development. We prepared for about ten months. According to the media, the SCDA is the first formal Students' Career Development Association in a Chinese college. At the time, the Association played a leading role in our own university, and then many colleges and universities followed in setting up similar student associations. (R5)

There are many and varied services and activities provided by or through the SCDA. The students organize activities and programs such as: career-related investigations; providing employment information; offering testing and evaluation activities to identify students' aptitudes; assisting campus job fairs and recruitment talks; lectures; internal training; competitions; publishing magazines and reports on career and employment matters; holding career activities focusing on career ethics, career planning, career competencies, and interview skills. The content and delivery of these activities vary according to the actual situation and students' needs. There are some traditional annual activities and programs, such as Employment Forum, Talent Festival, and analysis reports from industries. In the document *A Phylogeny Handbook*, the Director of the Career Center described the SCDA in these terms: "The influence of the SCDA has exceeded the effect that a student consortium can get" (Sun Yat-sen University, 2009, p. 2).

Through participating in some activities of the SCDA as outsiders, the researcher observed that student members in the SCDA took responsibility for preparing and organizing the activities. There were one or two leaders taking charge of the whole arrangement on the scene. Each student had a clear-cut assignment of responsibility in advance. Some students came to the activity venue early to get prepared; some were in charge of receiving guests; others were busy distributing materials, decorating, and testing machines.

Theme 2: Factors Influencing Career Guidance in the SCDA

Contextual factors inside and outside the university influence the implementation of career guidance in the SCDA. Some of these factors can be seen as providing a stimulus, while others may impose restrictions on what can be achieved. On the positive side, a founder of the SCDA suggested that:

Five main factors contribute to the short-term rapid development of the Association: guidance from the teachers in the Career Center; administrative resources from the Career Center; cooperation from other departments in the university; the establishment of the Association in accordance with modern development trend; the efforts of founders (Sun Yat-sen University, 2009, p. 17).

The official support that the SCDA receives emerged as a decisive factor that has influenced its ongoing success. With this, it is easier for the SCDA to get material and motivational support from various circles of society, and thus garners greater recognition from students. Concerning support and resource from the university, the president of the SCDA said:

The biggest resource is the Career Center that manages the Association directly. On one hand, many social networking links are introduced by the Career Center, such as guests for lectures, enterprises. The Association's advisors are teachers of the Career Center; they give us a lot of help and guidance. On the other hand, the major support from the university is providing venue. The fee of the venue would be quite expensive for every activity, but applying for the venue in the name of the Career Center is much cheaper, or is often free. (R1)

Some of the specific support comes from the SCDA's advisors, who give frequent guidance and assistance. As an advisor revealed:

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I think my contribution to the Association can be divided into three parts. First, I play a linking or liaison role between the Association and the university. Second, I help with the construction and development of the Association. Third, I give some directional guidance for the Association's affairs from my personal experience. (R5)

In some large-scale activities, such as the opening ceremony of the Employment Forum, it was observed that the SCDA's advisors who are staff in the Career Center were invited as guests. And the Director of the Career Center gave a speech to appreciate the effort of members in the SCDA and wish the event success. It can be seen that SCDA members have good relationships with advisors and Director of the Career Center; and they communicated actively during and after the event.

The success of the SCDA also appears to hinge on its organizational structure and systems that have evolved over ten years. This departmental structure reflects the SCDA's mission, with each department having its own function and goals in implementing activities and programs. Apart from advisors and leaders, functional departments include the Office, Talent Assessment Department, Consulting and Training Department, Research and Planning Department, Campus Recruitment Department, Occupation Recommendation Department, Emcee Club, and several Corporation Clubs.

One feature of the SCDA is "Corporation Clubs," which do not exist in other student consortiums. Corporation Clubs aim to establish a close working relationship with well-known outside enterprises, and create a more extensive interaction platform for students and enterprises. This is a reciprocal mode of cooperation with mutual benefits. Corporation Clubs promote their brands in the university, make students more aware of the enterprises, and attract more talent. If enterprises consider some cadres in the SCDA excellent, internships or full-time positions may

be provided to them. For example, in the introduction documents of Boeing Corporation Club, it can be seen that the club's organization and activities provide more learning and cooperation opportunities for students who like aviation, and this can build a scientific research platform through connecting the enterprise and the university.

Currently, the four Corporation Clubs in SCDA are of different types: foreign-capital enterprise, private-owned enterprise, commercial company, and technical company. They represent different fields and enable students to learn more about options that can help in planning a future career. A former president suggested:

The current number of Corporation Clubs is appropriate, and their functions are mutually complementary. The expansion of Corporation Clubs should be careful, neither too rapidly nor unnecessarily limited in scope. What must be considered is whether a club is appropriate for students. It is necessary to distribute and arrange resources according to priorities, and to strengthen the standard management of clubs. (R4)

As the SCDA is a large organization and includes about 150 people, the building of an operational system is necessary for its daily management and long-term development. The SCDA has a set of integrated procedures to make sure that it runs in an orderly way and maintains its good tradition. These effective systems include: project manager (PM) system, reporting system, regular meeting system, and working group system. These not only guarantee that various activities are carried out smoothly, but also train cadres' competencies.

The president commented:

The SCDA is different from other student consortiums. In my opinion, the SCDA is an "enterprise" having its own culture. At the beginning, the Association adopts the management mode of enterprises — for example,

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PM system, regular meeting system, and working group system. The Association requires each department to take in hand an activity or a project independently, so all members of the department experience the entire process including planning, implementation, summing-up; this is somewhat similar to systems of enterprises. Students from the SCDA don't just know how to do one step in the process, but can take on the entire project. (R1)

A handbook covering the implementation system was studied, and the researchers found that every system is explained and introduced in great detail, including principles, system instruction, implementation methods, and various forms for reporting.

Another factor that has contributed to the effectiveness of the SCDA over the years is the setting up of a bridge to connect the university, students and enterprises. To a large extent, the progress of the SCDA depends on cooperation with enterprises and support from society. As mentioned above, Corporation Clubs can be valuable resources in this respect. This quasi-business partnership is an important source of funding for the SCDA. The president described the situation thus:

Basically, the university doesn't give funds to the SCDA. The Association has fixed sponsors, so we don't need to worry about money. For one thing, holding a recruitment talk gains RMB 3,000 to 5,000, depending on the amount and scale of the activity. For another, the fixed income comes from enterprises that have Corporation Clubs in the SCDA. (R1)

The researchers collected some contracts showing the details of cooperation between the SCDA and enterprises. The contracts revealed that an enterprise sponsored the SCDA with a certain amount of money, and in return the SCDA guaranteed publicity for the enterprise and implementation of relevant activities. With support from enterprises for

finance and resources, communication seminars, recruitment talks, large-scale competitions are held by clubs every year, thus providing more opportunities for students' self-discovery and enhancement.

Any student consortium in a university has some restrictions to overcome during the process of preparing and implementing activities. Three main limitations and restrictions were identified here: university constraints, organizers' heavy workloads, and insufficient resources. To some extent, these restrictions are obstacles to the optimum development of the SCDA, and they can affect the quality of activities.

Theme 3: Enhancement of Students' Career Competencies

It appears that both SCDA members and regular activity participants found that their self-reflection, career values and university life planning are enhanced. Some SCDA members and other student participants of career activities interviewed spoke of specific instances:

The Association made me more aware of different types of work in society. Also, the activities let me realize that working in research suits me. I am more determined now to pursue a PhD degree. (R4)

After hearing the experiences of the guests at talks, I admired them and reflected on the gap between them and me. I also thought about what career competencies and abilities I needed to improve for future challenges. Also, I learned different life values and career values through communicating with senior students, which made me think deeply about my plans for university and future life. (G1S4)

The depth of enhancement of career-related knowledge and skills varied with each individual. Some SCDA members showed more improvement than others in their career-related skills and organizational abilities — such as leadership and social skills, executive capabilities

and presentation skills. Other participants' enhancements were mainly focused on their working knowledge and skills. Several student members in the SCDA who were interviewed spoke of this in these terms:

What I gained from the Association are skills, social networking and career planning. First, I gained the skill of overall arrangement, through organizing different activities. Second, I learned the skill of communication — we needed to deal with many different people. Third, I learned employment skills and career planning skills. (R2)

My abilities have been improved by this experience, including my leadership skills, and my ability to coordinate and execute projects. As a president, I had many opportunities to make speeches, which greatly improved my presentation skills. (R4)

Regular participants of activities revealed what working knowledge and skills they gained when they took part in various career activities:

I attended a lecture by a national public servant who analyzed the situation of employment and offered skills for written examinations and interviews. Although the nature of it was mainly propaganda, I still changed my previous ideas and got a better understanding of the examinations for National Public Servant. (G2S9)

When compared with activity participants, it is obvious that SCDA members' career-relevant social networking skills are enhanced through being a member, and contributing and taking responsibilities in the SCDA. One SCDA member expressed the view that many members are likely to become elites in the career field. Every year, many of them enter well-known professions while still keeping in touch after graduation. Some informants commented:

Using social networking, I made friends with different kinds of people through the Association. I learned from them and corrected a lot of my thoughts and behavior. (R3)

I have the chance to communicate with people in business because of many kinds of cooperative projects in the SCDA. I learned how to get along with different people. The most important thing is meeting lots of friends, and this is a precious life experience. (R4)

There are many student societies in the university, and the SCDA is merely a representative one, aiming at career guidance. Student members in the SCDA or other student societies can benefit from the improvement in their career competencies through the process of being members and organizing activities. As one SCDA member said:

Although the developmental directions are dissimilar, there is not much difference between members in the SCDA and members in other student societies in terms of the enhancement of career competencies. Career-related abilities like leadership skills, presentation skills, and analysis skills can also be trained in other societies. On the other hand, members in the SCDA have more resources and information specifically about careers. (G5S20)

It has been shown that career guidance in the SCDA enhances students' career competencies in three aspects: self-understanding, career-related knowledge and skills, and career-relevant networking. This is consistent with the theory of a "boundaryless" career, which divides career competencies into three aspects: knowing why, knowing how, and knowing whom (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1996; Nelson & Winter, 1982).

The difference in the enhancement of career competencies between members in the SCDA and participants exists in terms of career-related

skills and career-relevant networking. It is worth noting that holding a position in this student career association can be an important process leading to personal growth (Howard, 1986; Rubin et al., 2002). Consistent with this rationale, Boone, Kurtz, and Fleenor (1988) found that those who became CEOs had experienced considerably higher involvement in extracurricular activities during their college years than other students did. Being a member in the SCDA provides an uncommon opportunity and experience for students to strengthen their career competencies. The experience puts in place some important foundations for later working life.

Theme 4: Problems and Further Development Direction

There are difficulties that the SCDA has to overcome during the process of preparing and implementing activities. To some extent, problems restrict the development of the SCDA and affect the impact of activities. Three main problem areas are identified: low participation rate, uneven quality of career guidance, and restrictions in activities.

The low participation rate for some activities can be attributed to the existence of other consortiums and faculties on campus that also carry out career-related activities, or other competing attractions. This perhaps reduces the SCDA's uniqueness and attraction for students. As the president said, "Students don't trust these career activities, holding a wait-and-see attitude." (R1) A vice-president suggested:

We have been thinking about what kind of activity is most appreciated, and how to build up the Association's brand. As long as good reputation is built, students will have confidence in attending the activities. (R2)

Some participants complained about the quality of career activities in two aspects: their commercial nature, and the lack of a relevant

position. Two participants of career activities talked about their feelings after taking part in the activities:

The purpose of a few of the activities is to promote a product or a concept. It is a waste of time to participate in these activities. (G1S1)

Some activities are for commercial purposes. I have joined several times and found that the activities were not useful. I don't know how to judge what activities will be good, so now I seldom join. (G2S6)

Some problems also existed in the process of delivery, which had an impact on the effectiveness of career activities. The president said:

Sometimes difficulties suddenly arise during or before an activity (e.g., bad weather, late arrival or absence of a speaker, failure to provide necessary equipment). The organizers then get the blame for lack of adequate planning. (R1)

As the researchers observed in some sessions, the activities did not go well because of low attendance, or sudden adverse factors that upset the arrangements. These are not big problems, and most of them can be solved quickly and smoothly; but undoubtedly, they affect the participants' mood.

With regard to the future development of the SCDA, it needs to become more professional and comprehensive by better integrating resources in the university and society. A vice-president summarized in his summary report:

The Association has two important advantages: specializing in the career field, and rich enterprise resources. Actually, the Association has just helped in the basic recruitment work for enterprises. If recommending specific talents for particular vacancies can be really achieved, this gives

students a competitive advantage. Apart from that, the "employment-oriented" activities should be more closely integrated with higher levels of "career planning." (R2)

Members of the SCDA are making every effort to improve the association, but there is still a long way to go. Since members will change every year, and the mission of the SCDA needs to be reinforced constantly. The advisors and members have confidence that the SCDA has a bright future.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the operation of a student-operated career development association, and to consider its applicability for use in other universities and colleges. The study also focused on the effect of enhancing students' career competencies through implementing and participating in career-related activities. Compared to vocational student organizations in the U.S., the role of students taking part in the implementation and operation of the SCDA is greater in this Chinese university. Hamilton et al. (1977b) pointed out that essential to the operation of any vocational student organization is an informed, well-organized, and motivated advisor. However, the findings of this study suggest that the success of the SCDA lies much more in students' own efforts rather than that of advisors. The main characteristic of the SCDA is the student-directed approach in providing career guidance for all students. Their responsibilities include recruiting members, looking for sponsorship, designing activities, preparation and implementation of programs and events. Students' involvement in implementing career guidance has proved to be effective in other regions, and in research. For example, in Taiwan, student societies, social workers and professors in the faculties are directly involved in career guidance (D. Wang, 2009). Nesheim et al. (2007) suggested that student partnership programs can enhance student engagement by

encouraging campus and academic involvement, and more interactions with student's peers. In future studies, there is a need to explore the motivational and impact differences between this student-directed approach and staff-directed approach.

Apart from students' effort, there are many other factors inside and outside the university that influence the development of the SCDA, including organization structure and systems, cooperation with enterprises, and support from the university. Cooperation with enterprises is a factor that makes the SCDA special. It seems that the SCDA has opened a door that enables students to know employment situations and career information more proactively. Furthermore, with the resources and help of outside enterprises, career guidance is more realistic, and the effect of career guidance is enhanced. Plant (2004) emphasized that coordination and liaisons with school staff and with representatives from outside agencies is crucial. Just as Sutton and Gifford (2011) suggested, collaborating with employers, alumni, and parents to provide experiential opportunities such as job shadowing and internships is a trend that will continue to grow, and will combine academic achievement with better understanding of the world of work (R. White, 1997). Many corporate recruiters specifically target students who supplement their academic achievement with involvement as leaders of organizations or in athletics (Cariaga, 1998; Rubin et al., 2002). Students holding positions in the SCDA have been getting more career competencies and developmental opportunities than other students. Therefore, holding leadership positions in extracurricular activities may enhance students' career competencies and increase their opportunities in career development.

To sum up, the SCDA is an innovative model in a Chinese university for encouraging students to be directly involved in career guidance. The model is still evolving, and participants and organizers

are aware of areas in which improvement is needed. Considering the fairly typical scarcity of resources and professionals for career guidance in universities, a student-directed approach represents a possible way forward.

In the Chinese context, it is necessary to develop an appropriate model which takes into account local conditions, and is different from Western models in organization, operation, and sources of funding. A student-operated system seems to meet this requirement — and at the same time provides university students with more opportunities to develop work-related competencies. The SCDA must still focus on improving the quality and effect of the overall program. This would help address the problem of low participation rate in some activities. Future studies should explore this model when implemented in other universities, and also evaluate the effectiveness of alternative ways of providing career guidance in Chinese settings.

Limitations

Data were collected from only one university, so the findings may not be entirely applicable to career-guidance services and resources in other Chinese universities. Universities differ, for example, in the connections they make with outside businesses and potential employers, and in the policies they have regarding students' involvement in university operations. It is also necessary to point out that the data were collected over a period of almost two years. Over that time, students engage in more experiences related to career development, and their thoughts and opinions may change.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide for Career Practitioners

1. Could you explain the content and means of career guidance provided by the SCDA?
2. What contextual factors inside and outside the university facilitate the implementation of career guidance in the SCDA?
3. Where do the resources of the career association come from? For example, are they provided by the Career Center, or outside enterprises?
4. What is the cooperation mode with outside enterprises? Could you describe the Corporation Clubs in detail?
5. Are there some characteristic operation systems within the SCDA?
6. Please explain how you think the effect of career guidance on enhancing students' career competencies, particularly in terms of self-understanding, career-related skills/knowledge, social networking, career planning and decision-making. Any other aspects? Please provide me with some examples.
7. What are the problems encountered when implementing career-related activities?
8. How do you think the career guidance provided by the SCDA can be strengthened and improved?

Appendix B: Interview Guide for Administrators

1. Could you explain the background and reason for setting up the SCDA?
2. How do you contribute to the SCDA as an advisor?
3. What contextual factors inside and outside the university facilitate the implementation of career guidance in the SCDA?
4. How do you think the effect of career guidance on enhancing students' career competencies? In what aspects? Could you provide some examples?
5. What are the problems encountered throughout the implementation of career guidance in the SCDA ?
6. Do you have some suggestions or ideas to improve career guidance in the SCDA?

Appendix C: Focus Group Interview Guide for University Students

1. Have you participated in any career activities or made use of career services provided by the SCDA? If yes, what are they?
2. Please explain how you think career guidance activities enhance students' career competencies, particularly in terms of self-understanding, career-related skills/knowledge, social networking, career planning and decision-making. Any other aspects? Please provide me with some examples.
3. What problems do you encounter when you receive career guidance provided by the SCDA (such as resources, time, quality or other aspects)?
4. What are your main needs for career guidance ? What career guidance do you expect (or hope) that can be provided by the SCDA?
5. How can the career guidance provided by the SCDA be strengthened and improved?

Appendix D: Interview Guide for Graduates

1. Have you participated in any career activities or made use of career services provided by the SCDA? If yes, what are they?
2. Please explain how you think career guidance activities enhance students' career competencies, particularly in terms of self-understanding, career-related skills/knowledge, social networking, career planning and decision-making. Any other aspects? Please provide me with some examples.
3. What problems do you encounter when you receive career guidance provided by the SCDA (such as resources, time, quality or other aspects)?
4. How can the career guidance provided by the SCDA be strengthened and improved?

中國一所大學的學生職業生涯發展協會：定性研究

本定性研究調查了中國內地一所大學的學生職業生涯發展協會（下稱職協）的主要特點。這所大學因為在職業輔導上成功創新而出名。本文探索了職協的運作和發展，探討由職協提供的職業輔導如何提高學生的職業能力。研究結果為其他學校發展由學生運作的職業輔導服務提供了參考範例。本研究有助於探索大學背景下的職業輔導。

關鍵詞： 職業能力；職業生涯發展；中國；學生協會；大學