

“NO PLAN B WHATSOEVER”:
STUDENT PERCEPTION OF
VOCATIONAL PREPAREDNESS
WITH CAREER AMBIGUOUS
MAJORS

by

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ABSTRACT

Organizational socialization is the process of “becoming” within a defined group. This process begins with Anticipatory Socialization and the initial exposure to norms, behaviors, culture, and expectations of a defined organization. For the majority of individuals, an academic major relating to a future career is the first step in this journey; but how do students with a career-undefined major make sense of the skills learned in college and attribute them to future vocations? This dissertation uses Weick’s (1993) theory of Organizational Sensemaking, Jablin’s (1985) theory of Organizational Assimilation, and Knapp et al.’s (1981) concept of memorable messages to understand what employable skills students in career-undefined major feels they are learning, and what skills they feel they are lacking.

Participants confirmed the sources of anticipatory socialization as described in Jablin’s 2001 work and identified a new source of “nonfamilial adults.” Messages and lasting impressions were gathered from intentional conversations as well as actions observed and deemed memorable by the participant, providing a context of Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977).

Student-defined employable skills learned in the career-ambiguous major open the possibility for an additional stage in the Organizational Assimilation process that proceeds Vocational Anticipatory Socialization. Building on the ontology of the phrase “real job,” these messages obtained by vocational osmosis fit into the realm of “work socialization” (Clair, 1996, p. 265), which provides a space for messages outside of the specific organizational context.

The stage of Workplace Anticipatory Socialization is where liberal arts majors and soft skills can have the most impact on student development, prior to encountering a specific organization or occupation. Recommendations are also presented for curriculum and assessment of career-ambiguous academic programs, based upon the information presented by students.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all the girls that ever felt stupid in class.
You can do it. Because I did it.

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*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens
can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.*

---Margaret Mead

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
DEDICATION.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
LIST OF TABLES.....	viii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	viii
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	9
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS.....	41
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS.....	50
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION.....	143
REFERENCES.....	162
APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL SHEET.....	177
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL.....	180

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Sources of VAS.....	49
Table 2: Location of Application.....	85
Table 3: Memorable Messages.....	99
Table 4: Perceived Skills Learned.....	115
Table 5: Skills Lacking.....	135

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Participant Demographics by Year in School.....	45
Figure 2: Participant Demographics by Self-Identified Ethnicity.....	46
Figure 3: Participant Demographics by Self-Identified Gender.....	46
Figure 4: Participant Demographics by Program Affiliation.....	46
Figure 5: Model of Organizational Assimilation.....	146
Figure 6: Reconceptualized Model of Organizational Assimilation.....	147

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

As an institution, higher education seeks to diversify learning opportunities, enhance employability, offer qualifications, and stimulate innovation for the benefit of learners and society (EURASHE, 2014). Liberal arts-focused education was the original heart of higher education in America with the founding of Harvard in 1636 (Harvard.edu). However, subject areas within the liberal arts have suffered in enrollment over the past five years (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019), as many institutions have been transformed into career training grounds instead of solely incubators for free-thinking, as they were in Socratic times (Delbanco, 2014). Additionally, most four-year institutions of higher education are not devoted exclusively or primarily to liberal arts degrees; they instead offer select courses in more specific fields like philosophy, logic, linguistics, literature, history, political science, sociology, and psychology. While some research institutions offer full courses of study in these areas, they tend to be overshadowed by subject areas that provide a more definitive job market upon graduation, such as accounting, business management, marketing, or sales (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

The skills developed during study of the liberal arts and social sciences, such as leadership, problem-solving, analytical and rhetorical skills, and lifelong learning (Knotts, 2002; Urciuoli, 2003), have been identified as primary needs for future employers (Carnevale et al., 2020; Drewes & Giles, 2002; Poliakoff, 2020). With career in mind, then, regardless of major program, familiarization and socialization with these skills are critical for college graduates to

become gainfully employed. Also critical is the *articulation* of these skills by the graduates themselves. For graduates of social science programs that do not have titles or ideas that match a particular industry (e.g., psychiatry, human development), students may look for a job in any number of industries but must have a clearly defined vocational goal (e.g., high-paying job, job close to home, job with flexible hours), and more importantly, an ability to articulate and demonstrate the vocational skills needed to match a company's needs. This dissertation seeks to explore the ways students gain these skills through anticipatory socialization processes.

Socializing as part of the assimilation process aids individuals in personal development and the career transition process; during this process, students gain information about their environments, fit new information into these schemas, and join an organization upon completion of their formal education (Jablin, 1985; Schein, 1967). Maslow's hierarchy of needs places love and belonging in the middle of the hierarchy, suggesting that individuals need to be a part of something before they can reach their full potential (Maslow, 1943). Organizations, vocations, occupations, and careers are conceptualized as that "something" as larger identities can be reached and joined in order to aid in the progression to an individual's full potential.

This dissertation seeks to understand the vocational assimilation process students in these academic fields follow by focusing on students in Communication Studies, a field which merges the liberal arts and social sciences. Utilizing in-depth interviews with students majoring in Communication Studies, this dissertation expands current understanding of the socialization process in academia for areas not focused specifically on career training while still developing key skills desired by employers. The findings may also be used by liberal arts program faculty and administrators as they seek to develop curriculum and improve pedagogy to promote vocational assimilation tactics for graduates; additionally, these findings may be utilized by

higher education support staff, such as career centers, as they work with a variety of students with varied interests and experience.

Anticipatory Socialization and College Life

Anticipatory socialization is the process of individuals gathering information from their environment about occupational skills, requirements, and expectations (Jablin, 2001). This socialization process begins in childhood and is tested, challenged, and expanded during the academic experience (Barnett, 2012; Schein, 1967). This anticipatory stage of socialization can be an introduction to the larger context for working life, preparedness, and expectations of work (Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). Understanding anticipatory socialization as a unique factor is important to organizational or company life as well as the components of organizational identification, organizational fit, acceptance of organizational culture, and work meaningfulness (Powers & Myers, 2017; Scarduzio et al., 2018).

Jablin's (1985) original work proposed two stages in anticipatory socialization: (a) vocational choice/socialization and (b) organizational choice/entry. The first stage, Vocational Anticipatory Socialization (VAS), explains how individuals learn about and develop interests in education and career pursuits (Myers et al., 2011) and establish beliefs concerning how people communicate in particular occupations (Jablin, 2001). The concept of VAS has been applied to a variety of vocation areas, such as science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) (Buzzanell et al., 2011; Corsaro & Eder, 1990; Jahn & Myers, 2014; Jahn & Myers, 2015; Myers et al., 2011), military and law enforcement (Amer & Jian, 2018; Charles, 1982; Howe & Hinderaker, 2018), business (Barnett, 2012; Jones, 1986), information technology (Bird, 2007), public relations (Bowen, 2003; Daniels & Fears, 2006; Waymer et al., 2018), healthcare education (Carter et al., 2000; Noland & Carmack, 2015), and blue collar work (Gibson & Papa, 2000;

Lucas, 2011; Myers & McPhee, 2006). However, unexplored are the vocational anticipatory socialization tactics of students in these majors of *undefined* vocational areas, such as the liberal arts and social sciences. Thus, this dissertation seeks to understand how the VAS process extends to general liberal arts education students in majors that do not have as much of a career preparatory focus.

As individuals mature from childhood to young adulthood, they intentionally and unintentionally gather occupational information from the environment, comparing this information against their self-concept and the beliefs they hold about themselves, while “weighing the factors and alternatives involved in choosing an occupation and finally making a series of conscious choices which determine the direction of [their] career” (Van Maanen, 1973, p. 82). New information helps to anticipatorily socialize individuals about what might be next. For example, for a student who majors in accounting and intends on being an accountant, this process might include a standardized curriculum as defined by industry standards and a specific accreditation body, an expected internship within an accounting firm, advanced degrees in order to pass licensing exams, and job search keywords that include “accountant,” or “finance.” But what messages do students gather when there is no clear vocation pathway and no career schema on which to place the value of skills they have gained in liberal arts education? This dissertation addresses this current gap in the anticipatory socialization literature to expand understandings of how social sciences help prepare students for various career paths.

Why Communication?

The field of Communication Studies falls into the areas of liberal arts and social sciences, where graduates are not necessarily directed to a tangible career. However, employers continually identify communication skills as the most desired soft skill in candidates. In its top

11 “most sought-after employability skills that hiring managers search for in candidates” list, popular hiring website Indeed.com names “Communication skills” at the top of the list (“Top 11 Skills Employers Look for in Candidates,” 2020).

In addition, when the NACE Center for Career Development and Talent Acquisition asked employers which skills and qualities they most want to see on students’ résumés, 82% of employers indicated communication skills (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2018). For students struggling to define “communication skills”, Indeed.com also provides an entire blog page devoted to “What are communication skills?” (“10 Communication Skills for Career Success,” 2020). Examples given include verbal communication, nonverbal communication, active listening, empathy, respect, volume, and clarity.

This hiring website, with “over 250 million unique visitors per month” (indeed.com/about), has inadvertently described a common curriculum for majors in Communication Studies; nonverbal, interpersonal, listening, organizational, small group, and conflict/risk communication are all college course titles in a typical Communication department. Therefore, for the purpose of this dissertation, a case study of the Communication Studies major is conducted. This major is selected as a case study because of the goals of the major to evaluate social issues and express opinions, and its ability to provide graduates with the most desired soft skills for various industries. This dissertation topic is also significant because future researchers can utilize information gleaned from interviews and adapt potential research tools created for all areas of social science and liberal arts.

The Importance of College Students as a Study Population

College students are a valuable population to study, not only for their position in the developmental process, but also for the diverse populations they have come to represent. College

student development theorists (e.g., Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991) posit that college may foster higher-stage thinking given the conflicting perspectives available on a college campus when diverse populations come together. Additionally, college is the primary time for students to develop and learn the leadership and communication skills that have been defined by employers as so important. Students begin to develop a leadership identity within the higher education space that shapes their self-concept as they develop their individuality within an organization (Jablin, 2001; Komives et al., 2009). Communication skills are first learned in the educational setting (Jablin, 1985) and are developed as students interact with increasing levels of diverse individuals and ways of communicating.

School is typically the first socializing establishment in a child's life that institutionalizes status differentiation and the hierarchical division of labor (Buzzanell et al., 2011). While this initial exposure to education occurs prior to college, experiences such as group work and specific job responsibilities are carried from preschool into upper-level college coursework (Monk-Turner & Payne, 2005; Walker, 1996). For example, Corsaro and Eder (1990; Corsaro, 1990) discovered that children attending preschool know how to avoid “work” (e.g., cleaning up) by enacting a variety of communication strategies, including pretending not to hear the request, pleading a personal problem, or leaving the immediate area. In grade school, children learn that the teacher has the power in the classroom (Manke, 1997) and determines rules. Both lessons of work and hierarchy are carried into higher education. College is also a time where the messaging of ranking or hierarchical division is defined, seen in the nomenclature of “smart kids” or “brains” and in the positive reinforcement during the formal awarding of academic honors (summa/magna/cum laude) at commencement ceremonies (Astin, 2016; Greene & Lepper, 1974).

College is a transitional institution between childhood and full-time work. Some students come to college with prior part-time work experiences but are exposed to job or job-like opportunities, such as internships or experiential learning, that provide new context for vocational socialization (Carver, 2010; Kolb, 2014). In a study of student perceptions of part-time work prior to and during college, Clair (1996) delved into the colloquialism of “a real job” as one that is defined as full-time and held after the college experience, further solidifying college as a transition period in the vocational assimilation process.

Lessons from the classroom, such as interpreting information in ambiguous situations and following directions, become valuable skills that students carry forward into the workplace. Even the dreaded group work assignments expose students to standards of professionalism and the realities of teamwork (Monk-Turner & Payne, 2005). Additionally, practices of maintaining established deadlines or meeting expectations of an instructor and/or supervisor can be learned in the college classroom setting (Daniels & Fears, 2006). Learning strategies developed in the classroom may be related to the strategies students later employ in the workplace (Kolb, 2014).

Conducted Study

Upcraft and Shcuh (1996) defined research as “any effort to gather evidence which guides theory by testing hypotheses” and assessment as “any effort to gather, analyze, and interpret evidence which describes institutional, departmental, divisional, or agency effectiveness” (p. 21). The distinction between the two lies in the implications for practice; assessment is focused on a singular case, where research is focused on generalizability. For the purposes of this dissertation, I am focusing on the phrase “assessment” in this qualitative case study to address the circumstances of resource limitations, time limitations, organizational

contexts, design limitations, and political contexts that frequently plague research design (Upcraft & Schuh, 2002).

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore how college students in a social sciences major with undefined vocational paths (i.e., Communication Studies) are socialized into future careers and the skills obtained in the social science major. In Chapter 2, a review of the current literature is presented, followed by the methods for this study in Chapter 3. The results of the study are presented in Chapter 4 before the discussion of the study implications in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

To best understand the components of how college students in a social sciences major with undefined vocational paths are socialized into future careers and the skills obtained in the social science major, I rely on the theories of Organizational Sensemaking, the stages of Organizational Assimilation, specifically the substage of Vocational Anticipatory Socialization, the sources of Anticipatory Socialization, and the concept of Memorable Messages. A review of the literature that informed this study is provided for each of these areas.

Organizational Sensemaking

The theory of Sensemaking was originally proposed by social psychologists in the 1970s. Sensemaking is best described as a behavior that occurs when observed information does not fit the previously constructed mental schema and the subsequent reactions and processing undergone by an individual to reconcile identity with the new information. Karl Weick applied and expanded sensemaking to the area of organizational communication in 1993. The theory has been applied to patterns of businesses and organizations, as well as their employees, customers, and stakeholders, and opened the door to the subjects of strategic change (Anderson & Morgan, 2017; Ericson, 2001; Weick, 1993; Whitbred, 2005). Organizations are created and recreated through the sensemaking of their members, as well as external influences, in a mutually constitutive relationship and fundamentally social process (Bird, 2007). Weick's theory is comprised of seven properties: grounded in identity construction, focused on and by extracted

information or cues, enactive of sensible environments, social, ongoing, driven by plausibility over accuracy, and retrospective (Weick, 1995).

The first property of sensemaking is **grounded in identity construction**, or the shaping of a person's values, beliefs, practices, discourses, and knowledge through cultural systems and individual actions. During this process of identity construction, the individual is constantly asking, "What is going on? What is the story here? And what should *I* do about it?" This component of Weick's sensemaking theory is focused on the *self* as part of a larger whole; how we define ourselves individually within the context of social structures (such as organizations or professions) affects how we interact *with* the larger whole, as well as the legitimacy of the individual's self-perception within the context (Bird, 2007). Individuals are creating their own reality by taking information from the environment around them and fitting themselves into the equation *or* adapting the equation to fit their needs for self-enhancement, self-efficacy, and self-consistency (Degn, 2015; Weick, 1995). In the specific environment of an organization, the individual reviews all of the information gathered with the primary objective of inserting themselves into the environment. The question of "How does all of this affect *me*?" is further probed by questions of "What are the pieces of the profession?" and "Do I identify with these pieces?" resulting in the questions "Am I **THIS** profession, a **PART** of this profession, or is this just a job?" As individuals make sense, they also produce sense; they author their own 'reality' and the 'reality' they project onto their environment – and the organization (Degn, 2015).

The grounding in identity is a large part of the "why" individuals enact sensemaking practices, but the second tenet of sensemaking, the "how", comes from the **informational cues extracted** by the individual from a given environment. In order to aid with the sensemaking process, the individual processes cues or pieces of information in brackets (Ericson, 2001).

Bracketing is a common phenomenon in everyday life. For instance, memorizing a telephone number, social security number, or student ID number is often done through bracketing; large pieces of information are broken into smaller, attached pieces. Instead of attempting to memorize the number 123456789, the information is bracketed into 123-45-6789. Similarly, the process of sensemaking of extracted cues takes the large observation and breaks it down into definable pieces. Observation of an entire day in an organization is too much to process and recall, so *pieces* that are perceived as important to the individual undergoing the sensemaking are selected and connected back to the larger environment (Noland & Carmack, 2015). These smaller pieces can help make sense of abstract concepts of hierarchy, organizational behavioral norms, expectations, or performance. For example, an observation of “how the coffee is made” in the breakroom is only minimally concerned with the technical process of *making* the coffee. Of deeper concern to the individual is how the *making* affects them: is the act of making the coffee something that is seen as essential by the staff, and therefore a valued position? Or is the act of making coffee something done only by lower-ranking members of the organizations, and therefore a *devalued* position? These cues help the individual understand hierarchy in the organization, and actions they can take to assume organizational roles.

The third property of Weick’s sensemaking is the **interaction with the environment**. Pieces of information make sense in different ways given the context of the situation. Information given at the level of management may be decoded and interpreted differently as it progresses through the organizational hierarchy down to those working on the factory floor. This process involves “talking it out” (Weick et al., 2005). The individual creates a narrative to reduce the event to definable terms at all levels, not just downward, similar to a translation process from one language to another or from a higher to lower reading comprehension level. Interaction with

the context or environment greatly affects the sensemaking process. In a study conducted in different regional areas, Buzzanell, Berkelaar, and Kisselburgh (2011) found that even children use environmental cues and informational resources available to them to make sense out of what work they might do in their lives and why. “These processes foreground children’s agency and sensemaking: designing their careers, extracting cues for sensemaking, articulating meaningfulness, and participating in families’ concerted cultivation and/or natural growth practices” (p. 160). All interpretations are ways of making sense of the action and creating a narrative, each in specific contexts to the environment and other pieces of information that surround the individual.

The process of talking it out and creating a narrative does not happen *only* internally. In the fourth component, Weick defined sensemaking with properties of **social processing**, even if the end goal is for individual application. Constructed narratives or stories are shared with others to gain feedback and receive validation. Social sharing can be done verbally, nonverbally, or experientially (Ericson, 2001). The social process extends beyond a shared narrative: the information cues received come from other individuals in the environment, and each action has a ripple effect as behaviors are changed or not changed. The pidgin-style saying “monkey see, monkey do” is a simple way of describing the social phenomenon of mimicking behaviors, responding to behaviors, responding to lack of behavior, or response to perceived behaviors. Sensemaking uses the social cues of behaviors in conversation within the organization in formal and informal capacities: the participation or lack of participation in informal or formal conversation, the length of time in conversation, the topics chosen or avoided, the frequency of conversation, and the information that comes after these conversations help end ambiguity of hierarchy, expectations, and self-as-a-part-of-the-whole. Organizations often use visions or

shared meanings (Ericson, 2001), or shared symbols (Gioia et al, 1994) to create collective sense as a unifying force in the face of strategic or organizational change.

Sensemaking is not a one-and-done encounter, but an ongoing process. Information is received in **constant feedback loops** (Weick et al., 2005). This means the information is always being processed, applied, observed, and adapted in a cyclical fashion. Meanings previously established are challenged and can be changed as sensemaking is enacted depending on the changing concept of environment. As sensemaking is also a social endeavor, there is an ongoing process of action → interaction → reaction that requires information to be continuously processed and bracketed. In a study by Gioia, Thomas, Clark, and Chittipeddi (1994), the researchers observed that in the midst of organizational change, organizational members had to make sense of the situation for themselves *as well as* others, while “simultaneously acting as both influenced and influencing actors” (p. 377). They concluded that sensemaking and influence act in a distinct interrelationship.

As meanings change, sense previously made has the potential to unravel. In the aftermath of the famous Mann-Gulch disaster, Weick (1993) was able to analyze the personal accounts of the event to better explain the process of sensemaking in a contextual reality. As reality changes (a fire previously expected to be under control did not meet expectations) social, power, and role structures have the opportunity to change (the leader of the crew and his power to give orders). These feedback loops create power vacuums and changing roles that contribute back into the environment from which the information was collected.

Just because narratives are built to make sense of information received does not mean the narrative is reflective of reality, and narratives may be different across an organization.

Sensemaking simply is *making sense* of the information, not processing what actually occurs.

When people are called upon to enact some change in their existing patterns of thinking and acting, the proposed change must make sense in a way that relates to previous understanding and experience (Giola et al., 1994). **Plausibility is placed higher than accuracy** in Weick's fifth component of the sensemaking process, as sense can only be made within the given environment and context. Weick (1995) suggested,

Accuracy seldom dominates the discussion of sensemaking. Accuracy is defined by instrumentality. Beliefs that counteract interruptions and facilitate ongoing projects are treated as accurate. Accuracy...is project-specific and pragmatic. (p. 59)

Stories are also adapted as they are retold in order to use more of the observed information; narratives will also frequently be presented with conflict and criticism (Bird, 2007; Suspitsyna, 2013). Repetition leads to permanence (Salasoo et al., 1985) and continuous retelling of a narrative solidifies the story in reality, even if the reality is constructed imperfectly (Rosenberg, 2018).

Finally, the sensemaking process is conducted **retroactively**. An individual can see what they've done, but not until they've done it. This does not mean the process is over, just that perspectives at the end of an action provide clarity and new information. As mentioned above, there are many incoming cues within a single incident to process, and these occur within a series of events throughout the span of organizational life; retrospection can provide prioritization of that information. The gravity of a situation is often not fully understood until the event has passed (Bullis & Bach, 1989; Weick, 1995). Retrospection is also a social process; multiple people in a situation can remember the situation differently and can remember different parts of a situation. Individuals can contradict or support each other in the act of retrospective

remembrance as the information individuals choose to remember can be different. Each individual decides what information to prioritize and remember.

Clearly, Weick's (1995) theory of sensemaking as applied to organizational communication suggests the sensemaking process is both internal and social, ongoing and retrospective, dependent on cues and environment, and driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. Scholars can use these seven properties to draw concepts and relationships for further study on organizational communication and the sensemaking process.

Stages of Socialization

Socialization is the process of learning the norms and ideologies of society or organization, encompassing both learning and teaching that takes place from “womb to tomb” (Van Maanen, 1984, p. 213). Assimilation encompasses the entire process of ‘becoming similar’, where an individual’s beliefs and ideas start to resemble those of the dominant group (Kopaneva, 2019). In the context of an organization, the process can be deepened to include the reciprocal relationship between the organization and the individual as information is exchanged and interpreted (Bullis & Bach, 1989). Fredric Jablin (2001) created a model of organizational socialization as a life-span developmental process that includes early socialization to work and workplace expectations (anticipatory socialization), first experiences as a member of the organization (entry/encounter) through the end of the newcomer status, and alignment of personal values with institutional values (metamorphosis), and the eventual separation of person and organization (exit). While these stages do not exist in a linear fashion, there is a common progression as knowledge is gained. These stages are explained below.

Anticipatory Socialization

As stated previously, anticipatory socialization is the process by which individuals gather information from their environment about occupational skills, requirements, and expectations (Jablin, 2001). Anticipatory socialization provides individuals with expectations of a vocation and occupational environment. Jablin's (1985) original study explored the communication behaviors individuals learn during the process of vocational socialization regarding organizational/occupational roles. As is implied by the term *anticipatory*, many individuals develop a set of expectations and beliefs concerning how people communicate in particular occupations and in formal and informal work settings *prior to entering any particular organization*.

Jablin's (1985) work proposed two stages in anticipatory socialization: vocational choice/socialization and organizational choice/entry. The first stage, Vocational Anticipatory Socialization (VAS), explained how individuals learn about and develop interests in education and career pursuits (Myers et al., 2011) and establish beliefs concerning how people communicate in particular occupations (Jablin, 2001). Vocational choice normally precedes organizational entry as an individual will learn about the job type prior to how the job is performed within a specific context or organization. In the second stage, Organizational Anticipatory Socialization (OAS), individuals seek jobs in organizations that will align with the values and expectations that have formed about the vocation (Jablin, 2001). These two stages are discussed further in depth later in the chapter.

Entry/Encounter

During organizational entry, an individual is exposed to the specific culture of an organization and either becomes integrated into the culture or adapts the role and attempts to

change their environment to suit their individual goals and needs. This process is not entirely linear, and newcomers can experience ups and downs (Bullis & Bach, 1989). The encounter phase is also identified as the “reality check” stage because it is a cognitive and behavioral battleground of sorts, in which previously held expectations are tested within the reality of the organization and within the job or occupation.

New organizational members obtain information about expectations and ways of being through direct information shared by the organization, such as orientation, memos, or rules, and information seeking tactics employed by the individual. Tactics of information seeking in the stage of organizational entry include overt questions, indirect questions, third parties, testing limits, disguising conversations, observation, and surveillance (Miller & Jablin, 1991). Processes of orientation, establishing routines and behaviors, meeting co-workers, and learning memorable messages fit into this stage. The length of time in this stage depends on the individual and the organization. Bullis and Bach (1989) defined this as the “identification” stage and highlight “turning point” experiences that contribute to this process: moving in, settling in, socializing, sense of community, receiving informal recognition, gaining formal recognition, jumping informational hurdles, approaching formal hurdles, representing the organization, disappointment, protecting one’s self, getting away, alienation, and doubting one’s self.

Metamorphosis

Once an individual feels their goals and values align with that of the organization, they progress into the metamorphosis stage. This process is internally identified, as the newcomer becomes an established organizational member (Kramer, 2010), and because of that, it is difficult to define when the entry phase ends, and metamorphosis begins. This stage includes actively adopting norms, rules, and behaviors so as to become an accepted group member. In essence, it

is a transformational process of turning from being in the out-group to an in-group member (Gibson & Papa, 2000).

Metamorphosis looks different in each organization, as organizations are made up of not only new members, but standing members, transfer members (Jablin & Kramer, 1998), volunteers (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008; Hidalgo & Moreno, 2009; Studer & von Schnurbein, 2013), and as new members function within such diverse groups as totalitarian organizations (Hinderaker, 2015), and organizations of which individuals do not desire to be a part, such as unemployment personnel or a support group for loss (Gist, 2016).

Exit

The last stage, the end-of-life exit from an organization completes the assimilation cycle. This stage accounts for disengagement alone, but is also presented as cessation of organizational membership (Hinderaker, 2015), ending paid employment (Jablin, 2001), or ending of volunteer experiences (Kramer, 2011). Substages include preannouncement sharing with peers, announcement, and post-exit sensemaking. This stage expands to include not only the individuals leaving, but also those left behind (Waldeck & Myers, 2007).

Anticipatory Socialization, Expanded

Assimilation involves a chain of events, activities, message exchanges, interpretations, and related processes—essentially “links”—in which individuals use what they have learned in the past (the extant chain of sensemaking moments) to understand new organizational situations and contexts, and realign, reshape, reorder, overlap, or fabricate new links as appropriate so they can better adapt to their own and their organizations’ requirements in the present and future (Van Maanen, 1984).

Anticipatory socialization focuses on the assumptions and attitudes prior to entering a situation. Multiple sources of information aid in the socialization process; more pre-hire knowledge results from the use of multiple versus single sources, and combinations of sources may include mixes of formal and informal sources (Jablin, 2001). Inconsistencies in information from multiple sources complicate the sensemaking process, requiring deepening individual understanding of functions and roles within a specific organization.

Inconsistencies of expectation to reality are individually recalled retroactively. A study by Amer and Jian (2018) showed the significant schism between what female military members thought it would be like to serve in the military compared to their actual experience. When asked how female recruits to military service compared their “positive expectations” of service to their actual experiences, participants recalled events that contradicted their anticipations. Every participant emphasized the frequency and depth of sexist treatment they endured, which they believed communicated their identity within the organization and defined the negative reality of serving in the military as a female (Amer & Jian, 2018). Along these lines, Dallimore (2003) found that not only do women in the military experience socialization differently, but their experiences are treated as the “other” compared with the more dominant male experience.

Vocational Anticipatory Socialization (VAS Model)

Returning to the VAS Model introduced earlier, specific vocations have specific messages and socialization experiences. Carver (2010) explored *how* students form professional and career-related maxims, behavior, tactics, and expectations. Carver discovered that while students are anticipatorily socialized to careers in which they are interested, students also formed ideas about careers they are *not* interested in pursuing. In order to reduce uncertainty in the messages received (Weick, 1995), students used this frame of what they *did not want* to help

make sense of the careers they *did want*. While students did not deliberately seek out this information (Carver, 2010), they still received information from individuals (professors, advisors, parents, friends, etc.) as well as the media (advertisements, television programs, etc.).

These vocation-specific messages and experiences often complicate and even impede the VAS process. In blue-collar work, the messages may differ from white-collar work, just as military service may differ from government service and civilian service. When studying messaging specific to blue-collar work, Lucas and Buzzanell (2004) identified themes of work, career, and success from the occupational narratives of coal miners in the Michigan area. In this case, workers created their own term, “sisu” (p. 280) to describe the concept of “inner determination”; messages were directly tied to those who had sisu, those who violated sisu, and those who lacked sisu. An outsider or someone with no experience of this organizational culture would not understand the messages disseminated, even if they were socialized within the vocation. However, this language, this “sisu,” allows miners to discursively construct a strong occupational culture that enables them to find dignity and meaning in their work despite outsiders’ perceptions (Lucas & Buzzanell, 2004).

These unique intra-organizational messages and experiences are compiled from a variety of sources. For example, Taylor and Kent (2010) reviewed information sources on the public relations profession and usage of social media and found that students form expectations of social media usage from prior television viewing experiences, college coursework, professional newsletters, and participation in professional societies. But all the sources combined do not paint a clear or accurate picture of how the profession operates or uses technology. For example, the professional societies and newsletters downplay the use of social media in the public relations profession, while the entertainment information sources of television and movies overemphasize

the social aspects of a PR professional (Hocke-Mirzashvili & Hickerson, 2014). Conflicting messages further complicate the sensemaking process as students/individuals are socialized to new professions. These examples make it clear that individuals in the VAS stage often struggle with coherent messages about an occupation.

Vocational socialization messages affect organizational choice and organizational assimilation. In their exploration of socialization messages experienced in blue collar work, Gibson and Papa (2000) identified a concept of “organizational osmosis” (p. 69) that refers to the seemingly effortless adoption of the ideas, values, and culture of an organization. Individuals that were more socialized to the vocation via messages from family and other adults more easily accepted the values and norms of the organization. In this study, almost all of the employees came from blue-collar families, and the majority had previous knowledge of the specific organization before becoming employed there. For these individuals “entry was a relatively effortless absorption of organizational values, beliefs, and understandings” (p. 84).

Organizational Choice/Socialization

Stage two of Jablin’s (1985) proposed two stages of anticipatory socialization is organizational choice, also called organizational entry or organizational anticipatory socialization (OAS). This stage is concerned with the learning content and process by which an individual adjusts to a specific role in an organization (Chao et al., 1994). While organizational socialization and satisfaction within organizations has historically been associated with job tenure (Varona, 1996), this study by Chao et al. (1994) identified content areas that more appropriately make up the construct of organizational socialization: Performance Proficiency, People, Politics, Language, Organizational Goals and Values, and History. These content areas allow researchers to focus on quality of information learned during the socialization experience,

rather than the time span over which socialization occurs. This model contributed significantly to future research as this study showed “people who are well socialized in their organizational roles have greater personal incomes, are more satisfied, more involved with their careers, more adaptable, and have a better sense of their personal identity” (Chao et al., 1994, p. 741).

Interpersonal interactions within the context of the initial employment interview provide insight to an organization’s culture. Applicants relatively high in communication apprehension prepare for and think about employment interviews differently than those low in apprehension; applicants high in communication apprehension also tend to be judged lower by interviewers than applicants relatively low in apprehension. It is possible, however, that interviewer behavior (e.g., displays of “warmth” vs. “coldness”) may interact with applicants’ level of anxiety to affect interviewers’ ratings of applicants (Ayres et al., 1998). How communication apprehension is viewed and presented in interviews is also reflective of the organization’s culture.

Socialization Information Sources

The anticipatory socialization phase focuses on the sources by which individuals form expectations about careers, jobs, and organizations prior to entering them. The expectations provide exposure to and preparation of the roles available within an organization. Anticipatory socialization can be conceptualized as containing two stages: primary socialization and secondary socialization. Jablin (1985) also referred to this information-gathering as “deliberate” or “accidental.” The process is complex and cannot be split into a specific stage or identified by a singular source. Indeed, the sources work together to provide information and socialization (Jablin & Krone, 1987). Jablin (1985) identified these sources in his original work, and further research has used the categories: family members, educational institutions, part-time job experiences, peers and other adults, and media sources. These sources are expanded below.

Family members

Parents teach children about what it means “to work” through direct experiences (“Let’s do housework”), prioritization of time (“I’m going to be at work late”), communicated values (“I work to pay the bills”), and responsibility (“I’m going to work”; Jablin, 2001). Many young children are socialized primarily by parents’ messages (discursive socialization of the direct, indirect, or ambient form), by the things they enjoyed doing or were given to them (material socialization), and by their own sense of what is realistic and meaningful for them (personal sensemaking socialization; Buzzanell, et al., 2011). Families range in their communication with very young children about careers. They differ as to who communicates what about careers, what children’s possibilities are for work, and how individual family members communicate with children.

Gibson and Papa (2000) found that parents, other family members, and adults in the community provided information to children considering joining them in a local factory, the major employer in town. The messages of standards were communicated in parents not wanting to be embarrassed by their children failing to meet the physical standards of the work, as well as expectations to work through illness in order to not let down coworkers. Of the 51 interviewees included in the study, 42 (82%) identified a parental figure as being responsible for their work ethic and decision to pursue a career in that industry. Similarly, Workman (2015) examined the narratives of college students at a Midwestern institution and their parental support or pressure regarding choosing a college major. The study found a majority of students were children of alumni or children of faculty members at the Midwestern institution, and that parental influence led most of the students to their choice of college and subsequent major (Workman, 2015).

Levine and Hoffner (2006) took the approach of examining VAS influencers through the use of an ego network analysis and by identifying the sources actively pursued rather than passively received. In their study conducted in 2000 on 64 college students, four categories of content received by students through parents were identified: (a) general requirements of work, (b) positive aspects of work, (c) negative aspects of work, and (d) advice/information about work/jobs. Nearly half of the sample reported learning one or more requirements for performing a job from their parents. Examples of messages included:

responsibility and working hard/doing a job well (“It is a large responsibility”—#22; “Go above what you are expected to do”—#31)... the positive aspect [of] earning money (“It gets you the money to have food, house, clothes, etc.”—#35) or making a good living, and...negative aspects that work is difficult and stressful (“That it is hard and it’s not very fun”—#49). A few parents reportedly told their children that working is a necessary part of life and gave general advice about work and careers (“A job is what you make of it”—#21). (p. 659)

Even among college-age students, parents remain the most influential source when it comes to career choice (Levine & Hoffner, 2006; Workman, 2015).

Medved et al. (2006) took a similar approach to coding memorable messages received by college students from family members regarding work socialization. In an analysis of more than 900 messages, three message categories were defined: (a) work, (b) family, and (c) balance. While college students were often advised by parents to find a type of work that would provide them enjoyment or fulfillment, they were also simultaneously told that work would make them happier or allow them to lead more enjoyable lives in the long run. This research also provided an important contribution to gendered communication. Young men and women received

relatively similar messages about the role that work and family should play in life; however, young women recalled received messages of work-life-balance more often than men, as women were more often advised to leave the paid work force and make career choices based on anticipated family responsibilities. Many parents assign, label, and discuss tasks in terms of “boys” or “girls” work, thereby reinforcing traditional sex role stereotypes. Family members’ influence over career choice, and what is deemed appropriate, is even seen in selecting toys/roles to play. By taking a stroll through the toy section of a store (Jones-Brodie, 2016), one can identify gendered toys showing early childhood socialization tactics to various career opportunities.

Family members also communicate these values, expectations, and opportunities through conversation as well as questions (“What do you want to be when you grow up?”) and task-oriented playsets (doctor’s lab coat, chef’s hat and tools, ballerina tutu, toolbox, etc). Children may also learn communication-related work principles from listening to adult family members tell family stories in which “work” is the central theme and morals or lessons are learned by performing work (Buzanell et al., 2011).

Parents teach the concept of ‘responsibility’ through task-organizing activities such as the assignment and performance of household chores. Ahlander and Bahr (1995) suggested that the manner in which family members, and especially parents, talk about household work can devalue it and make it drudgery or value it and use it to reinforce a sense of identification and community within the family. Thus, what household work means in any particular family is produced and reproduced in the everyday discourse of family members. Although children may implicitly learn about the communication characteristics of work relationships by participating in family-related

organizing activities, discussions with their parents and other family members about work and careers provide such information in a more explicit fashion (Gibson & Papa, 2000).

Educational institutions

As Jablin (1985) suggested, schools and school-related activities are important sources of vocational information for children because (1) educational institutions have an explicit mandate to socialize people; (2) school is typically the first socializing institution in a child's life that institutionalizes status differentiation and the hierarchical division of labor; (3) for most individuals, school is a transitional institution between childhood and full-time work; (4) school provides students with standards so they can compare their competencies with others and develop realistic career aspirations; (5) school is probably the first formal context in which a child interacts in regular organizing activity; and (6) the learning strategies developed in the classroom, and in particular the ways in which students learn to seek and interpret information in ambiguous situations, may be related to the strategies they later use to reduce uncertainty in the workplace.

Educational institutions include nursery school through college, after which individuals often enter the workforce (Levine & Hoffner, 2006). Corsaro and Eder (1990) discovered that children attending preschool know how to avoid "work" (e.g., cleaning up) by enacting a variety of communication strategies, including pretending not to hear the request, pleading a personal problem, or leaving the immediate area. "By the time students are in high school and college, they are acquiring distinctive forms of information about occupations in the specialized classes in which they are enrolled" (Jablin, 2001, p. 8). Teachers and professors may be their best source of information about the career environment and how the students' skills and other abilities will contribute to the students' success in a role (Powers & Myers, 2017).

For many individuals, college is that critical point where individuals grow, mature, and transition into adulthood. Students are exposed to diverse peoples, alternative ways of thinking, critical problems, new fields of occupation and unexplored opportunities for enjoyment. Age notwithstanding, the college experience is a pivotal point in the occupational socialization process of an individual (Scholssberg, 2011). Students are exposed to numerous messages as they experience changing environments in college. As hiring processes continue to change (recession, aging workforce, reliance on technology) students' conceptualizations and expectations of occupations are changing (Aley & Levine, 2020; Barnett, 2012; Carver, 2010).

Students take General Education and Introductory courses and learn more about desired fields of vocation or available careers. For example, Daniels and Fears (2006) identified that college students at the beginning of their education of a specific vocation (public relations) had a limited view of what it means to work in the field. However, after taking an introductory mass communication course, the 236 students in the study were able to identify more career opportunities within the profession. Introductory courses can provide vocational socialization experiences with a learned guide (instructor). In a study of messages received on STEM careers, Jahn and Myers (2014) found that students described their career interests as originating with enjoyment of coursework. Similarly, lack of enjoyment in math and science acted as a framework that turned students away from STEM careers. Recommendations from the researchers provide guidance to teachers of STEM subjects regarding how they can provide career-detailed VAS messages by making more linkages between classes and STEM occupations (Jahn & Myers, 2014; Myers et al., 2011).

With the move in higher education from a focus on liberal arts to a focus on career preparation (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2018; Omilion-Hodges & Ptacek,

2019) studies such as Omilion-Hodges, Shank, and Packard (2019) emphasized the importance of talk *about* work, rather than a primary focus on talk *at* work.

Given the influence communication about work possesses in shaping assumptions prior to job market entry, and the fact that higher education is increasingly becoming the context through which young adults grapple with work–life and work–education discourses, understanding how students visualize future interactions with supervisors becomes a value-rich opportunity. (p. 514)

The work of Lair and Wieland (2012) on college students and their interpretation of the colloquial question “What are you going to do with this major?” further supports the idea that college is a place of vocational anticipatory socialization. Of the 110 students asked, *all* of them (100%) reported being familiar with the question, and all but one ($n = 109$) reported being asked the question at some point in their college education. And while some students say that the question provided them with an opportunity for broader self-reflection (p. 435) some saw the question as helping them figure out their own answer to the question by exploring other plans to use their majors in finding employment post-college.

Pre-vocation job experiences

More and more frequently, new individuals in an organization do not come in “*tabula rasa*” or as a blank slate; they carry prior experiences with them (Van Maanen, 1984) into a new organizational culture. For some individuals, this prior experience constitutes a majority of the training in a position. As Van Maanen related in his anecdote of a new employee and subsequent orientation:

Most promotional passages are ceremonial rites where warm handshakes and hearty pats on the back pay homage to the past accomplishments of the newly promoted. Recruits so

welcomed are then ushered to new offices and left...to do whatever it is they feel they must...Cognitively, the only recourse many newcomers have is to fall back on their cultures of orientation by seeking out explicit similarities (and dissimilarities) between the old and the new tasks. (p. 239)

As low-risk temporary job opportunities, internships allow for both anticipatory socialization as well as organizational encounters and help to reduce the expectation-reality gap of college students (Barnett, 2012; Dailey, 2016). Several studies have also shown that co-op experiences and internships help students clarify ideas about their fields, assess their competencies and interest in particular occupations, and develop basic protocols for interacting and communicating in the workplace (Feldman & Weitz, 1990; Staton-Spicer & Darling, 1986; Taylor, 1988).

The findings of a study by Barnett (2012) indicated that as a result of the internship experience, student interns construct new, more realistic meanings about work and work life (vs. their original expectations) and that these new meanings form the basis of their advice messages about internships. Two overarching categories of students' socially constructed work realities emerged as a result of the data analysis of the first question: "What did you learn about working in the real world that surprised you or that you did not know before your internship experience?" These categories are the following: (a) realizing the importance of communication in the workplace and (b) understanding workplace cultures are different from campus cultures. Internships also provide opportunities to experience an organizational climate different from the educational climate. When asked what they learned about work or what surprised them, interns interviewed in Barnett's study (2012), answers were related to the culture of work environments including (a) organizational climate, (b) time commitment, and (c) autonomy. The work

responsibilities interns are given by supervisors and coworkers at the internship location provide students with many new work experiences and interactions in which they have not previously engaged. These experiences allow students to develop new, more realistic work expectations, thus narrowing the work expectation-reality gap (Horton, 1991).

Barnett's (2012) study of college student internships as important vocational socialization tools emphasizes the opportunity to form realistic expectations during the socialization process as opposed to unrealistic expectations incurred by talking to current employees or job recruiters (Amer & Jian, 2018). Dailey's (2016) work builds on this by looking at the first full-time employment experience of college students who completed internships by testing their comfort levels with the organization at pre-internship and post-internship time points. Dailey also talked about the re-assimilation process that students must undergo after they transition into a full-time role with the organization or if they change organizations.

Measurements of success of these types of socialization are frequently percentages of short-term employment that lead to full-time employment. While only 68% of internships and 70% of temporary employment jobs result in later full-time employment with the same organization (Koc et al., 2020; Smith, 2012), we cannot discount the individual knowledge gained that helps students make future career decisions. An internship in a veterinarian's office may not lead to a future career as a veterinarian; in fact, this educational opportunity may be a determining factor in a student's decision to pursue other areas of health or agriculture, or they may decide the field is not for them altogether. Additionally, docent opportunities with a museum may reinforce a desire to stay within the chosen field (example: archeology) but emphasize the need to change organizations if the individual does not align with the mission of an organization (non-profit to for-profit organization).

Peers, friends, and non-familial adults

Peers provide valuable information on occupational experiences. Peer interactions, though not career focused, assist in providing practice for skills needed to be successful in the workplace. Aley and Levine (2020) conducted a study with approximately 250 college students at a large Midwestern university, exploring the networks college students use to gather information about careers. Peer influencers also provide career approval or disapproval, illuminating which careers are socially acceptable (Levine & Hoffner, 2006). Peers are second only to parents in providing influential messages that impact career decisions (Aley & Levine, 2020). This study advanced Jablin's theory by identifying how the networks build off each other instead of acting as a stand-alone information source, and supports the previously identified sources of parents, peers, teachers/schools, part-time jobs, and the media.

Expectations on speed of communication during the employment process are gathered by prior conversations with employees, peers, and other adults. Rynes et al. (1991) showed that delays in an organization's post-interview communications with job candidates are perceived negatively by applicants and often "signal" to them that something is wrong with the organization. But this information does not come as a single fact; this nugget of information builds to complete the entire socialization picture of pre-entry into an organization or vocation.

Non-familial adults provide information about vocational opportunities. In particular, coaches have a lasting effect on college-age athletes. In a study by Cranmer and Myers (2017) topics of the memorable messages that Division-I student-athletes received during their anticipatory socialization were identified; inquiry revealed two general categories of topics of student-athletes' memorable messages. The first category is the *characteristics* of a collegiate student-athlete, which consists of three topics: desired attitudes, hard work, and physical skills or

abilities. The second category is the *experiences* of a collegiate student-athlete and consist of seven topics—opportunities, pride, inclusion, challenges, athletes as symbols, the importance of education, and the duration of collegiate athletics. Other memorable messages noted the financial assistance that student-athletes receive (e.g., tuition waivers, stipends), the potential to be a successful athlete and make a name for oneself, or the potential to create a career path after graduation.

Speaking with persons currently employed within a field or organization can provide socialization experiences for students. Interactions with organization-specific recruiters provide information on expectations, culture, and daily functions within a job. One-on-one interviews provide an opportunity for two-way conversations and more information gathering; at least one study has also shown that previews allowing for two-way communication (after initial interviews with recruiters) between job incumbents (high-credibility sources) and applicants may be more effective in reducing turnover than written previews (Colarelli, 1984). It is essential that applicants and recruiters share accurate information with one another in the interview. However, it has been suggested that job candidates' expectations of organizations are unrealistic because organizations tend to follow traditional recruitment strategies in which they focus on primarily communicating the positive features of organizational membership to applicants (Rynes, et al., 1991). The desirability of potential recruits developing inflated job and organizational expectations is problematic, because the more inflated the job candidates' pre-entry expectations are, the more difficult it usually is for them to meet these expectations once on the job.

An investigation by Jahn and Myers (2014) addresses the shortage of STEM workers in the United States. The results emphasize students must have opportunities to learn about STEM careers either through experience, exposure, or VAS messages to give them a context for math

and science coursework. However, adolescents report difficulty in accessing STEM career information unless they have a personal connection with a career insider. Connections with STEM career insiders were crucial sources for information and mentoring, listed above general education courses in math or science (Jahn & Myers, 2015), but many students had to venture beyond parents and everyday experiences to learn about STEM careers, what the career paths entail, and why these careers are rewarding (Jahn & Myers, 2014).

Media

Media are one of the key sources of work-related information in the process of anticipatory socialization. Stories are received through television shows, books, movies, and other forms of entertainment. While stories emanate from many sources (organizational literature and promotional materials), television and movies have been the primary focus of researchers as media sources of information.

Unfortunately, research suggests that television programs often transmit distorted, stereotypic images of occupations and how people communicate in them (Woo & McDermott, 2019) and that children's beliefs about these images may well persist into adulthood (Jablin, 2001). Communication within organizations is often portrayed as social or relational rather than task or work related; even dramas that focus on how the characters do their jobs (crime dramas, hospital dramas, etc.) exclude the tedious and mundane aspects of work and glamorize the depicted occupations and frequently portray persons who are successful in their occupational roles as involved in exciting and glamorous activities (Signorielli, 1993).

These distorted occupational portrayals may cultivate inaccurate perceptions of the workplace (Levine & Hoffner, 2006). In a content analysis conducted in 1993, underrepresented populations include women, those unemployed, and those in entry-level or blue-collar jobs.

Overrepresentation in jobs in criminal justice (judge, lawyer, law enforcement officers, etc.) as well as jobs in science (medical professions, scientists, etc.) can lead to distorted views on jobs available to students after college graduation (Signorielli, 1993). In their study of unethical and unvirtuous behaviors depicted on television, Woo and McDermott (2019) found that while adolescents are socialized to these negative behaviors, they bring prior knowledge to the proverbial table when enacting in the sensemaking process.

While television may entertain young people, it also selectively reinforces certain types of communication (Moore & Moschis, 1983). However, research by Hoffner et al. (2008) showed that this incorrect information may be offset by the combined influence of educated parents. Their findings suggest that both parents and television play a role in young people's development of work-related values and aspirations, but that the two sources contribute in different ways. In this study, young people with more educated parents reported relatively less dependence on television relative to parents than did those whose parents had less education. A similar study by Hoffner et al. (2006) followed how the occupational portrayal of favorite characters contributes to the wishful identification to have a job similar to that character. Research into the types of TV characters that appeal to these young people and how the characters are perceived can assist in understanding and reducing self-limiting career decisions in young people, but also in how media can be used as a constructive tool to broaden horizons of opportunity for individuals who have been traditionally marginalized.

While entertainment media may not be an accurate source of career information, Internet-based research can provide more realistic socialization. Job seekers typically acquire information that may affect their job/organizational expectations from two basic sources: (1) organizational literature (e.g., job advertisements, annual reports, training brochures, job preview booklets,

professional websites, organization websites), and (2) interpersonal interactions with other applicants, organizational interviewers, teachers, current employees, and other direct and indirect social network ties.

Research shows that students/job candidates use the internet for directly seeking out career information (Fetherston et al., 2018). However, college students' *confidence* in their ability to use the Internet for career information is critical for taking an active role in career preparation by seeking information online. Internet experience exerts the strongest influence on college students' Internet self-efficacy and was the strongest predictor of perceived information carrier characteristics. Gaining relevant Internet experience and building self-efficacy are especially important for driving career information searches online. Use of technologies such as LinkedIn, Google+, Twitter, Facebook, and job-boards can provide a more realistic expectation of hiring processes, pay scale, and location availability (Carmack & Heiss, 2018; Fetherson et al., 2018).

Levine and Hoffner (2006) examined the interplay among these socialization information sources rather than observe them as separate sources that do not work together in the socialization process. Individuals utilize their social networks to search for career influencers, but also the specific network characteristics that increase confidence in their career choice. The findings of this study confirm that the five socializing message influencers are, in order of influence, (1) parents, (2) peers, (3) teachers/schools, (4) part-time jobs, and (5) the media. A study by Gist-Mackey, Wiley, and Erba (2018) followed first-generation college students in the socialization process to school and found the role played by *multiple* forms of social support in helping students move through the different phases of socialization is most effective. By using social support (family, adults, peers) as an additional theoretical underpinning of this study, we

can more clearly articulate the way communication focuses not only on information-seeking, but also on more relational aspects of socialization such as impression management, appraisal, emotional support, and peer interactions.

Critiques of Assimilation/Socialization Theory

Assimilation Theory is a multi-phase/multi-stage process (Bullis, 1993). The components of organizational encounter predate Jablin's original publication of the stages concept in 1985. As this theory has developed, it is important to recognize critiques of the shortcomings of Organizational Assimilation Theory. Some scholars criticized developmental or stage models because they may inaccurately depict assimilation processes as linear (Bullis, 1993; Clair, 1996; Kramer, 2011). Stage models do not adequately demonstrate how transition from one phase to another occurs; a common problem faced by researchers is determining when one stage of assimilation is ending and another beginning. However, Kramer (2011) argued, "these phases do not represent a rigid, linear process, but rather a generalized description of the process; the boundaries between phases are often unclear and individuals may fluctuate between phases" (p. 53).

Although the developmental theory of assimilation stages has been controversial within the field, Kramer and Miller (1999; Miller & Kramer, 1999) defended this process of socialization, and a number of important seminal authors in the field of organizational research (e.g., Feldman, Katz, Kahn, Jablin, Schein, Van Maanen) have relied upon this framework as a useful tool to understand what members face as they assimilate (Waldeck & Myers, 2007). Because assimilation experiences can focus on so many issues, occur across the life span, and become framed by organizational culture, it may be impossible to understand particular assimilation activities according to chronological or predetermined linear stages. Therefore,

Jablin's model is used in this research project for the value it provides in defining the general progression towards assimilation and the anticipatory socialization stage.

Memorable Messages

Memorable messages have been mentioned in this literature review, but the concept has not been clarified. These "messages" are those that newcomers gather to address uncertainty in new roles. Orally transmitted, rule-structured, and formal or informal, these verbal messages are stored in long-term memory and are continuously recalled in the assimilation process (Knapp et al. 1981). Memorable messages provide newcomers with the tools necessary not only to address the everyday actions and conversations of organizational life, but also to navigate surprising and disconcerting events and conversations that arise during the entry process (Barge & Schlueter, 2004; Knapp et al., 1981). Memorable messages convey information to newcomers about the norms, values, expectations, and rules of the organization (Noland & Carmack, 2015) and are communicated in myths, legends, stories, and one-off comments (Stohl, 1986).

This dissertation explores the complexities of the vocational anticipatory socialization process for college students when a projected vocation is undefined. Based on work from previous scholars and theories of sensemaking, memorable messages, and socialization, the following research questions were asked:

RQ1: How are college students socialized into future careers (VAS)?

RQ2: How do Communication Studies students make sense of the communication skills learning process?

RQ3: What messages do students gather during VAS?

Current Measurement Tools

Measurement tools are utilized by researchers to operationalize theories and determine their applicability in a given situation. Procedures exist that measure *components* of these theories but there are not ways to measure to what level someone has been anticipatorily socialized. Analysis on the subject speak mostly of support available as the measurable variable (Jokisaari & Nurmi, 2009), messages obtained during the socialization process (Carver, 2010), and intrinsic levels of organizational identification (Myers & Oetzel, 2003). Bullis and Bach (1989) identified this in their work as research focuses on the individual relationships within the organization. These variables do not assess the degree to which an individual feels they have an understanding of the topic or have been socialized. Additionally, current measures of organizational assimilation (Myers & Oetzel, 2003) utilize a combination method of all stages of the transition process. These measures are valuable to understanding the background and current practice of studying VAS. However, these measures do not serve to answer the research questions posed in this study. For the purposes of this research, I used qualitative inquiry that has been *informed by* these quantitative measurement tools.

Organizational Identification Measures

Original work by Cheney (1983) began with the concept of “organizational identification” and how an individual’s identification with the corporation influenced their decision-making processes within the job. Organizational identification had already been linked to outcomes and attitudes (motivation, satisfaction, performance, etc.) and Cheney’s contribution to the field of organizational identification aided scholars in explaining the impact of organizational policies and activities, including socialization. While Cheney was also concerned with power and individuality (1983), the resulting *Organizational Identification Questionnaire*

(Cheney, unpublished) identified three components of organizational identification: membership, loyalty, and similarity.

In 2000, Miller, Allen, Casey, and Johnson published a reconceptualization of the Organizational Identification Questionnaire (OIQ) in order to determine the dimensional properties of the questionnaire, the extent to which the dimensions remained constant over time, and if the number of items in the OIQ could be reduced without negatively affecting the integrity of the measurement tool. Using confirmatory factor analysis techniques with survey data taken across four sites, Miller et al. (2000) were able to determine that the OIQ scale was unidimensional (although not all items were equal in quality; p. 640) and maintained the one-dimensionality over time, but the original 25-item instrument could be reduced to 12 items and quality could be *improved* rather than maintained or degraded. This study is therefore informed by both the original OIQ and the Shortened Organizational Identification Questionnaire (SOIQ).

Organizational Assimilation Measures

Exploring the dimensions of organizational assimilation, Myers and Oetzel (2003) created the *Organizational Assimilation Index (OAI)* to describe the process of mutual acceptance of newcomers into the organization. The OAI uses three scales to test construct validity: job satisfaction (Brayfield & Rothe, 1951), organizational identification (Cheney, 1983), and propensity to leave (Lyons, 1971). The authors of this scale predicted that job satisfaction and organizational identification would correlate positively with organizational assimilation and that propensity to leave would correlate negatively with organizational assimilation (p. 441, 2003). After phase one interviews, the researchers constructed a 61-item questionnaire that covered six dimensions of organizational assimilation: familiarity with others, acculturation, recognition, involvement, job competency, and adaptation and role negotiation.

However, a limitation to their study was the utilization of participants that were current members of the organization. As has been previously established, assimilation occurs prior to organizational entry or encounter in the anticipatory socialization stage.

Further reconceptualization of the Organizational Assimilation Index (OAI) was conducted by Gailliard, Myers, and Seibold (2010) utilizing a sample of 656 employees. This extension provided a seventh dimension of assimilation, accounting for group differences in gender, hierarchy and responsibility, and organizational tenure. Gailliard et al. used a modification of the Myers and Oetzel OAI to create a 36-item scale to “improve reliabilities, to reflect potential group differences in organizational assimilation experiences as identified in previous research, and to better specify the multiple processes associated with assimilation” (2010, p. 560).

Progression in this field has determined that organizational identification is multi-faceted and occurs at multiple stages. However, current measurement tools do not account for this complex process. This study utilizes qualitative inquiry, informed by pieces of each of these pre-established measures to better understand the anticipatory assimilation process, specifically vocational anticipatory socialization of college students. Thus, the following research questions are posed:

RQ4: What employable skills are Communication Studies students learning?

RQ5: What are skills Communication Studies students feel they are lacking?

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

This dissertation explores how college students in a social sciences major with undefined vocational paths (i.e., Communication Studies) are socialized into future careers. While vocational anticipatory socialization (VAS) has been studied quantitatively in the past (as discussed in Chapter 2), it has not been studied extensively in the qualitative manner in higher education. Further, given the bridge that higher education serves between high school and career, with college students not yet embodying employee as an identity, it is not necessarily appropriate to administer the same VAS instrument in this population for this purpose. Additionally, given the nature of knowledge being socially constructed through language and interaction, and reality as connected and known through society's cultural and ideological categories, it is more appropriate to qualitatively approach this study. Therefore, this study will use qualitative inquiry to answer the "what" and "how" of the research questions presented.

Qualitative Inquiry

Qualitative approaches were selected as the primary method for this dissertation because I sought to investigate how colleges students in a social sciences major with undefined vocational paths (e.g., Communication Studies) are socialized into future careers, as well as what skills they develop, what skills they believe are useful, and how they make sense of the skills acquisition process. Because qualitative communication scholars typically focus upon "how" social experience is generated and given meaning (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), a qualitative approach was deemed suitable for these types of questions. A qualitative and interpretive lens

toward a social phenomenon such as the vocational anticipatory organizational socialization processes allowed students to explain their process of VAS as well as the paths contributing to or serving as barriers to future careers.

According to Tracy (2013),

Paradigms are preferred ways of understanding reality, building knowledge, and gathering information about the world. A researcher's paradigm can differ on the basis of ontology...epistemology...axiology...or methodology. Because people take different stances on these issues, it is important to understand the primary arguments and points of view that make up the paradigms. (p. 38)

I, as the researcher, view knowledge as socially constructed through language and interaction, and reality as connected and known through society's cultural and ideological categories (Cooper et al., 1997; Weick, 1995). Therefore, I utilized an interpretive approach in the further investigations of social phenomenon such as the vocational anticipatory organizational socialization processes.

Additionally, a qualitative study allows for the investigation of sensemaking processes (see Weick, 1995, 2005). Sensemaking is a process that occurs in communication that allows individuals to explain (or make sense of) the world through communicative interactions with others (Weick, 1995, 2005). A qualitative study of how colleges students in a social sciences major with undefined vocational paths are socialized into future careers adds another perspective to the cumulative research and may provide insight into broader trends, and answers the questions:

RQ1: How are college students socialized into future careers (VAS)?

RQ2: How do students make sense of the communication skills learning process?

RQ3: What messages do students gather during VAS?

Case Studies in Qualitative Research

Just as the first role of the researcher is to identify appropriate methods, qualitative or quantitative, of examining the hypotheses and research questions, the second role is to determine *which* qualitative method best achieves the goals of the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Qualitative analysis results in a different type of knowledge than does quantitative inquiry, as qualitative study views research from the underlying philosophical nature of each paradigm while enjoying detailed interviewing (Golafshani, 2003). This analysis can be further supported through the utilization of case study. I employed qualitative inquiry, as mentioned above, and used the *method* of semi-structured interviews. However, because I realize that data gathered during interviews of one singular discipline cannot be comfortably generalizable, I treated this study as a case study *in framework*.

I subscribe to the approach of qualitative case study as defined by Merriam (1998) and Stake (1995). Stake (1995) defined case study as “the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances... We study a case when it itself is of very special interest. We look for the detail of interaction with its contexts” (p. xi). To study the experiences of students from all social science disciplines would be a grand endeavor, one outside the scope of time available to myself as a researcher. Therefore, I explored the socialization messages and experiences of a single group of students – those pursuing degrees in Communication Studies – as a case study.

An *instrumental* case study is used when the case is being studied to shed light on a larger, more generalizable phenomenon, rather than to deepen our understanding of the case itself (Stake, 1995). This method of case study begins with the desire to understand the

interaction, action, phenomenon, or effect, and then identify a suitable sample. Instrumental case study design best fits my proposed research questions and intent to create a client feedback report in a model that can be broadly applied to other cases. A suitable sample from social science majors has been identified (Communication Studies or Arts) in order to shed light on a larger phenomenon of how college students in majors with unidentified career fields experience vocational anticipatory socialization. Therefore, this framework answers the questions:

RQ4: What employable skills are Communication Studies students learning?

RQ5: What are skills Communication Studies students feel they are lacking?

Procedures

Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited from a pool of freshman, sophomores, juniors, and seniors currently enrolled in Communication courses at a single university, classified as a Very-High Research institution. Voluntary response sampling was also utilized with a digital copy of the recruitment statement and flyer posted to social media websites as well as recruitment emails sent to faculty at the school. Students also learned about the study from university SONA postings, information shared by instructors/ professors, word-of-mouth, and recruitment emails sent through NCA COMM Notes. Students who were interested in participating in the study were instructed to contact me using the information provided on the flyer.¹

To participate in the study, students were required to meet specific recruitment criteria: (a) must be 18 years or older, (b) can participate in face-to-face or video conferencing interviews, (c) be a declared or intent-to-declare major in the area of communication, Communication

¹ 9 of the 32 students (28%) I had previous relationships with through teaching and work with peer consulting. After analysis of responses and comparison with participants with whom I had no prior relationship, it was determined the prior relationship did not influence depth or length or responses.

Studies, or communication arts, and (d) have completed at least one semester in the Communication curriculum.

Participant Demographics

Thirty-two college students participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews to investigate how colleges students in a social sciences major with undefined vocational paths (Communication Studies) are socialized into future careers. All participants were full-time students at the university, and every academic year (freshmen, sophomore, etc.) was represented in the data: 3% first year ($n = 1$), 13% sophomore ($n = 4$), 13% junior ($n = 4$), and 69% senior ($n = 22$)². Ages ranged from 19 years to 24 years with a median age of 21. Students were asked to self-identify ethnicity as an open-ended question, resulting in a participant pool of 88% white/Caucasian ($n = 28$), 6% Black/African American ($n = 2$), 3% Hispanic ($n = 1$), and 3% Japanese-Greek-European ($n = 1$). Female participants made up 81% of sample, and male participants 19% of sample. The majority of students ($n = 28$, 88%) were Communication Studies majors; the remainder of the group ($n = 4$, 12%) were completing a Communication Studies minor. Visual representations of participant demographics are below.

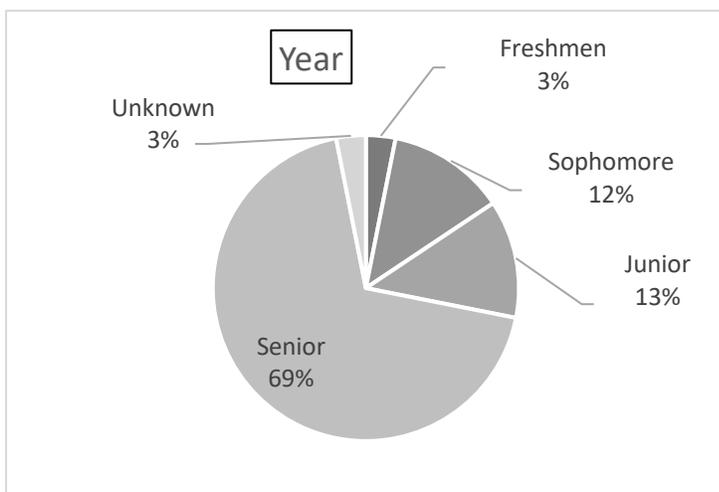


Figure 1. Participant demographics by year in school.

² One student did not report year in school ($n = 1$) which accounts for missing 3%

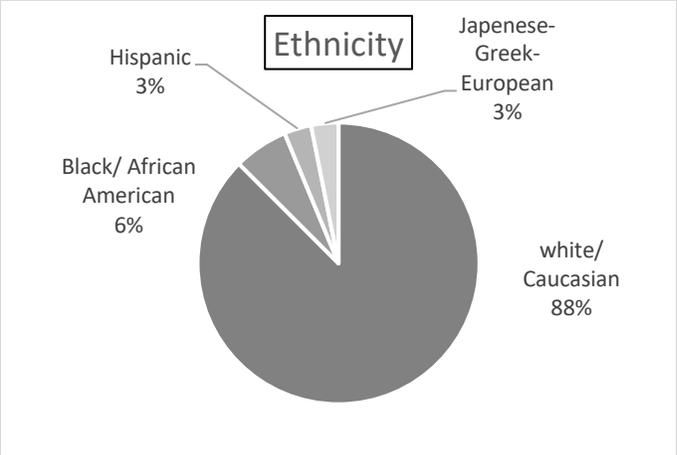


Figure 2: Participant demographics by self-identified ethnicity

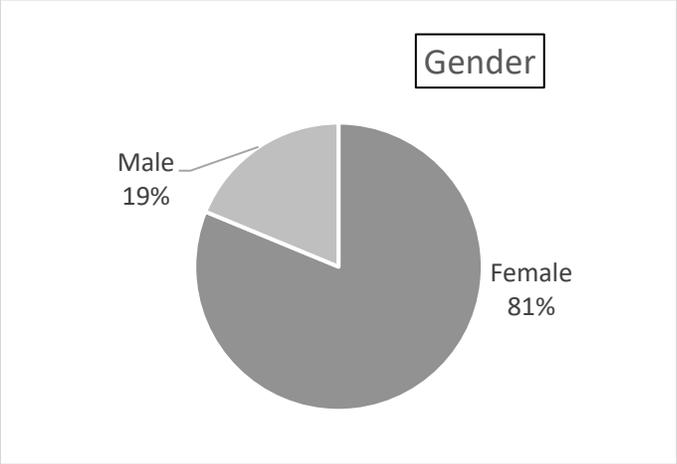


Figure 3: Participant demographics by self-identified gender

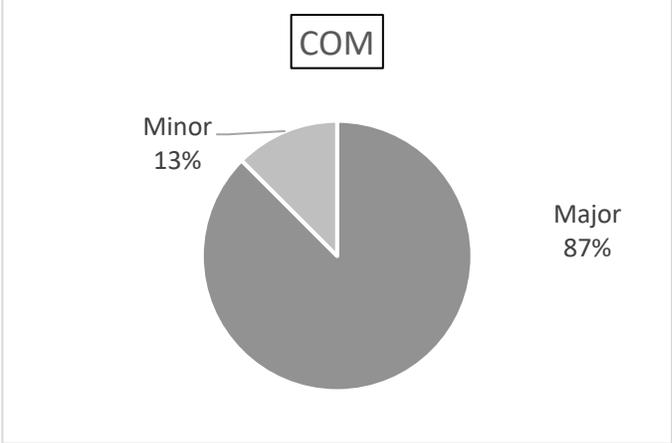


Figure 4: Participant demographics by program affiliation

Data Collection

In-depth interviews were utilized to better understand the participants' descriptions, explanations, conceptualizations and sense-making processes. A specific qualitative method that addresses "how" and "why" questions is found in the process of interviewing. These questions allow for communicative explanations and a better understanding of sensemaking. Lindlof and Taylor (2019) stated, "Interviews are particularly well suited to understand the social actor's experience and perspective" (p. 173). Additionally, the authors suggest that interviewing allows a researcher "to gather information about things or processes that cannot be observed effectively by other means" (p. 173). The perceptions and conceptualizations of the sensemaking process undergone by college students and the underlying "hows" and "whys" of their vocational assimilation cannot be directly observed and therefore need to be articulated by the individual experiencing the phenomenon (Tracy, 2013).

Although there were many options when conducting interviews, the semi-structured interview provides the best versatility for this type of research. The versatility of semi-structured interviews comes from conversation that allows the researcher/interviewer to build rapport with a participant, gather meaningful data, allow for clarification, and provide space for a natural flow of questions (Galletta, 2013) as well as provide flexibility to let the interviewees co-construct the content of the conversation (Anderson & Morgan, 2017). Quantitative measurement tools, however, can inform the qualitative questions and interview protocol of a study. Measurement tools offer a variety of options to the researcher, each with strengths and weaknesses. The actual level of VAS cannot be determined, as this concept is self-constructed. For this dissertation, interview questions were informed by the Organizational Assimilation Index (Myers & Oetzel, 2003), the reexamination of the Organizational Assimilation Index (Gailliard, Myers, & Siebold,

2010), and prior qualitative research (Carver, 2010) on anticipatory vocational socialization in college graduates. The interview protocol was used as a guide and not as a constraint during the interview process, allowing for the clarification of comments and for participant-directed conversation. The interview protocol can be found in Appendix B.

Informed consent was confirmed prior to the interview. The interviews were conducted via video recording software (Zoom) for consistency. Time for each interview ranged from 28 to 74 minutes (M = 45 minutes). The interviews were audio and video recorded and transcribed through transcription software and clarified by me as the researcher. Additionally, field notes were taken immediately following each interview resulting in 280 pages of transcription data and field notes. For the purposes of clarification, filler words (e.g. “like,” “um,” “you know”) that did not contribute to the sentence construction were replaced with asterisks (*) and ellipses (...) were used to indicate pauses in speech and to designate a new thought or topic of discussion.

Of note is the time frame in which these interviews were conducted; during the time of data collection (Jan 2021 – Feb 2021) the global population was experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic. This current time led to student responses and concerns specific to the pandemic but were not directly connected to the research questions asked.

Data Analysis

The in-depth interviews were transcribed and analyzed using an iterative analysis approach to see what themes emerged. Iterative analysis requires returning to the data for comparison and reading (Galletta, 2013) so the researcher is steeped in the meaning of the data. Similar to the constant comparative method, (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) iterative analysis is an ongoing process of examining the data to allow for time and reflection by the researcher so suitable themes and relationships are identified.

Interview transcripts were open coded for each research question, allowing me to create a coding scheme for each question and simultaneously recognize the relationships across the coding schemes (Galletta, 2013). During the open coding process, the data were analyzed for patterns and themes, and preliminary conceptual categories were created by grouping together words, phrases, or ideas that seem to be similar (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). These preliminary categories were open to modification or replacement throughout the multiple stages of analysis, as suggested by Galletta (2013).

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

This dissertation explores the ways students in the Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, specifically Communication Studies or Arts, gain applicable and employable skills through anticipatory socialization processes. Thirty-two college students participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews to investigate how colleges students in a social sciences major with undefined vocational paths (Communication Studies) are socialized into future careers. All four academic years were represented in the study, but the majority of the population were in their senior year. Additionally, the majority of participants were Communication Studies majors or double majors, while the remainder of students were Communication Studies minors. Vocational anticipatory socialization (VAS) processes, the first part of anticipatory socialization, are specifically studied in this instance as students are gaining exposure to vocations and opportunities before direct exposure and assimilation to organizations. Five research questions have been posed to advance understanding of these socialization processes:

RQ1: How are college students socialized into future careers (VAS)?

RQ2: How do college students make sense of the communication skills learning process?

RQ3: What messages do college students gather about careers during VAS?

RQ4: What employable skills are Communication Studies students learning?

RQ5: What are skills Communication Studies students feel they are lacking?

These questions explore the processes and sources by which college students are socialized, the sensemaking process of information gathered, the memorable messages attained, the particular skills learned in the Communication Studies program pertaining to future employment, and the skills they feel are lacking before going into a vocation. This major is selected as a case study because of the goals of the major to evaluate social issues and express opinions, and its ability to provide graduates with the most desired soft skills for various industries.

RQ1: Sources of VAS

Students indicated they gathered information about future careers from various sources, such as parents, coaches, professors, classmates, peers, and siblings, as well as professional experiences with bosses, customers, clients, and co-workers. Building on Jablin’s (1985) categories of five anticipatory socialization sources (e.g., family members, educational institutions, part-time job experiences, peers and other adults, and media sources), participants in this study identified six types of vocational anticipatory socialization sources: immediate adult family, educational institutions, pre-professional vocation, peers and friends, non-familial adults, and media. These categories and subcategories are displayed in Table 1, below. Participants differentiated messages from “peers” and “non-familial adults” by the nature of the message, characteristics of the message sender, and lasting effects of information received. This is further explained in the next section, which addresses each of these six categories in more detail.

Table 1		
<i>Sources of VAS</i>		
Source	Method	SubCategory
Immediate Adult Family	Actions Observable Intentional Connections Suggestions	
Educational Institutions		Academic Affairs

	Professors/Instructors Graduate Teaching Assistants Course Curriculum Student Affairs Negative Experiences Positive Experiences
Pre-Professional Vocations	Bosses Part-Time Work Internships
Peers and Friends	Same Age Older Students
Non-familial Adults	Mentors Parents of Friends Friends of Parents
Media	Digital Media Broadcast Media

Table 1

Immediate Adult Family

Students valued information received from their source of earliest exposure: their caregivers. For participants, “caregivers” are *immediate adult family*, encompassed by parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles. Caregivers are a primary source of socializing information (Gibson & Papa, 2000; Workman, 2015), and the value of this sources differs from other family members, such as siblings, cousins, or more distant relations. Vocational anticipatory socialization is facilitated by immediate adult family through three methods: actions, connections, and suggestions.

Actions. The act of observational learning (Bandura, 1977) is a specific way to learn by example rather than learning by direct experiences. Observations of actions performed by parents provide students with another socialization tool. The impact of an immediate adult family’s actions on the learner is influenced by the importance given to the performer (parent) by the observer (student) (Bandura, 2008). Actions mentioned here have been identified by students as memorable because the immediate adult families helped shape their early understandings of

professionalism. Actions in this study are differentiated by those that are observed and those an adult immediate family member modeled intentionally.

Observable Actions. Actions observed by students at varying ages made an impact on how students learned about work. Primarily, students learned about work by watching *how* their parents worked: overheard conversations (e.g. “Just what I’ve heard my dad say on the phone” [Participant 2]; “I learned a lot hearing [my mom] actually work” [Participant 10]), work schedules and work-life boundary negotiations (“People will be calling her constantly up until like 9 or 10 o’clock at night” [Participant 5]), verbalized enjoyment (“My grandfather has this passion, he loves the food industry, he thinks it’s so much fun” [Participant 6]) or dissatisfaction with their job (“He’s had struggles with his job ...that’s another thing he’s warned me of” [Participant 6]). Similar to studies conducted by Ahlander and Bahr (1995), as well as Jablin (2001), these findings suggest moments of learning for students about the professional world come from observing the actions of immediate adult family and their prioritization of time, not necessarily direct conversation and discussion.

Participant 5 says observational learning of her parents, who are small business owners, shaped her own desire to own a small business in fashion retail:

My mom actually used to be in women’s fashion. She didn’t do design, but she worked at a department store, and she managed a couple of them in the Northwest...I’ve seen them work really long hours, have to give up things, especially when it was starting out, and their hard work and dedication have allowed them to keep the lifestyle that we knew about...They work longer hours than anyone’s parents. I know because my mom will still be answering emails, and people will be calling her constantly up until like 9 or 10 o’clock at night. And it’s just because she wants the business to be successful that she’ll

answer them and take care of situations and whatnot. And my mom's probably been up since 7 [a.m.] answering emails, taking care of things, so I think just that it takes a lot of time and dedication... I've learned that if they can do it, you just have to put your mind to it, and be dedicated enough... Being around my parents, I have seen my dad have to do several licenses with his companies... [So, right now] I'm not applying for jobs, I'm looking for my business license.

This student was able to learn about a potential vocation, that of a small business owner, through observations of her parents' daily actions of being small business owners. This example allowed the student to connect vocation as a small business owner with something she is passionate about: fashion. The connection between passion and practice is not solidified for every student prior to vocational training but is a contributing factor in the entire Organizational Assimilation process. Previous studies have shown that enjoyment and satisfaction are significant contributing factors in an employee's assimilation within an organization (e.g., Cheney, 1983; Chao et al. 1994; Myers & Oetzel, 2003). This student has identified something she enjoys at a pre-organizational stage, therefore pushing her through the successful pathway to future assimilation and metamorphosis within an organization and potential industry.

Like Participant 5, many students expressed an interest in career fields in which they had prior exposure from immediate adult family members. Comments ranged from "I guess it's always what I've seen my dad do" (Participant 2), and "So I think I just chose that because that's what my mom [is]. That was her job, and it was what I was most familiar with" (Participant 23), to more extensive vocational lineage: "My mom was actually a counselor so it kind of runs in the family, and my grandma was a social worker..." (Participant 15) and "My granddad was a minister, so it is in the family" (Participant 28). These findings mirror previous research that

parental and familial demonstrations help expose young adults to vocational opportunities (e.g., Ahlander & Bahr, 1995; Gibson & Papa, 2000; Buzanell, 2011; Scarduzio et al., 2018). These realistic expectations (Horton, 1991) narrow the work expectation-reality gap and provide for a smoother transition from pre-vocation (VAS) to organizational encounter.

Another important part of VAS is learning what careers students *don't* want to pursue (Carver, 2010). For example, Participant 11 observed the work that went into his father's small business, which cultivated a different vocational desire:

I would see my dad doing what he does, and he'd asked me sometimes, "Do you want to do this, one day?" because he was thinking about passing down the business to me. But I figured I wanted to do my own thing and go [to college] instead of taking over the car wash.

Many students focus on learning what careers or subjects they enjoy, but equally as valuable to the socialization occurrence is learning what careers or subjects would *not* be enjoyable. By observing immediate adult family members' vocations, students decide what they like and don't like about the experiences they witness. Those individuals who dislike aspects of the immediate adult family members' jobs are able to redirect energy and focus away from draining topics or activities and explore unknown vocational options.

It is important to note that not every student will have immediate adult family with observable vocational actions. Some children may have parents who do not work; others do not have an opportunity to observe their parents' work. For students without clear, observable actions from immediate adult family members, early VAS development may be hindered (Scarduzio et al., 2018).

Intentional Actions. Intentional actions are defined as experiences provided by immediate adult family members to the child in order to develop employment proficiencies. Actions taken by parents included clear demonstration of their profession, cultivating passions in a child's area of interest, and actively involving the child in the family business. One student recalls his exposure to his father's business having a lasting effect:

He kind of made all of us [siblings] intern because he just wanted us to have an experience, see what he did, and because it's a family business. And so he was very prideful on having us come to the office or going on business trips with him...(Participant 8)

Participant 8 goes on to say that this was an experience he "didn't like." Similar to work by Carver (2010), this comment builds on the importance of experiences that provide a variety of positive and negative experiences related to a vocation, allowing students to continuously build their strength in the VAS stage.

A common theme of the study included memories of immediate family members who helped students find professional footing early on in life. As succinctly stated by Participant 30, "[The Business Communication class] was so boring! Everything, I knew it. We worked on résumés, and my dad's a recruiter so I've had a résumé since I was four!" While not every participant had a résumé as a toddler like Participant 30, the professional actions of immediate adult family provided *general* employment support to students in a career-undefined major. The action of creating a résumé is not specific to a vocation, but career-prep activities like these provide insight in how to present as a pre-professional and cultivate student expectations of professional performance.

Intentional actions taken by parents outside of their own career experiences also provided socialization for students. For example, Participant 17, who wants to be an archivist, learned about this type of work through opportunities provided by the immediate adult family:

In first grade, we learned about the Revolutionary War, and I learned about Paul Revere. Then, that summer my cousin lived in New Hampshire, and we went to her high school graduation. And so then, we got to go to Boston for the day and go to Paul Revere's house because I talked about Paul Revere all the time, and yeah, that was just the "Aha" moment for me, and I knew I wanted to do.

Here, Participant 17's immediate adult family cultivated her young passion for history through intentional exposure to careers and opportunities in *her* interest area. These influential events and actions observed at a young age develop into early vocational assimilation guides (Gottfredson, 1981), which suggests occupational aspirations could begin as young as three years old. As occupational experiences increase through intentional actions taken by immediate adult family, children can form a more concrete image of vocational prospects (Brown, 2002). Overall, actions, both observed and intentionally generated, of immediate adult family can be a critical part of VAS processes for career-ambiguous majors.

Connections. Immediate adult family also highlight important connections that inspire further inquiry into specific vocations or internship opportunities. When asked about how they found out about a specific internship with a large retailer, Participant 9 responded, "My aunt works for Walmart, and she said maybe I should apply." A similar comment was provided by Participant 10 when asked about her internship opportunities: "My dad, he knows some people who work with PR so he's trying to contact them to see if there's any available things."

While familial connections like these two can lead to additional VAS opportunities (in these cases, an internship), connections from immediate adult family can also hinder growth or spoil an opportunity. Participant 21 shared:

I kind of I feel like it was a skewed experience because I got [my internship] through my dad, so [there was] already a connection. They weren't having me do the work that the other interns were doing... I felt like I got a special treatment type of experience.

This student recognizes her anticipatory socialization situation, while having some merit, was skewed by the family connection and preferential treatment she felt. She noted she “didn't think she learned much” from the experience. This double-edged sword of using connections to obtain a job and the potential for improper preferential treatment (and potential resentment) due to nepotism or human capital transfers could create problems for students as they make decisions about pursuing future careers (Padgett et al., 2015; Plug, van der Klaauw, & Ziegler, 2018).

Suggestions. In addition to actions and connections, many participants recalled direct conversations with immediate adult family about vocation possibilities. Many students were advised to follow career-specific paths due to participants' inherent personality or behaviors, mostly exhibited as children. For example, Participant 1 noted, “My parents told me I would make a good lawyer because I argued back.” This vocational suggestion, even if offered in jest, created a thought pathway of opportunity for the student. Even in college, the student recalled the comment and was therefore considering pursuing law school after graduation.

For two participants, their careers in music were established early. “My mom would always say that I could sing before I could talk,” Participant 26 says; as of the time of data collection, Participant 26, a senior in college, is still pursuing a career in the music industry. Participant 28 had a similar experience, speaking of his family involvement at church which led

to exposure in the industry: “My first time leading worship was when I was 13.” Participant 28 goes on to say that his current job search is specific to careers in leading a worship ministry. Many participants talked about early childhood stories that belied an early aptitude or passion for a career, stories their immediate adult family members would repeat often and fondly. This was illustrated by Participant 30:

Since I was old enough to talk, I would stand on the stoop of our fireplace and pretend to be the ESPN sideline reporters, or the commentators and I would be like “Booyah!”³ And that’s my nickname, “Booyah,” because I would run around the house saying that and then I would pretend to interview my family after, so they kind of knew then I was going to go into some sort of news media.

These narratives of their childhood aptitude repeated frequently by immediate adult family became foundations upon which many participants build their career aspirations. These memorable messages (Knapp et al., 1981) gain strength as they are repeated and create a knowledge pathway for the learner.

For students who did not have these stories about early aptitude or previously identified passions prior to college, conversations surrounding the college major selection and then vocation selection choice helped in the decision-making process. Some parents researched the communication field to provide suggestions as to what vocation students could pursue after graduation. Participant 14 says, “She looked up what I could do with a Communication degree and suggested applying to Disney, so I did that.” Other participants also reported in-depth conversations with immediate adult family specific to their talents and future opportunities. Participant 15, a Communication major with an undefined career field, has a maternal legacy of

³ Popular catchphrase of late Stuart Scott, American sportscaster, and anchor on ESPN.

counseling and social work, which she says influences her anticipatory socialization and brainstorming of potential career paths.

My mom was like, “Maybe you could try and find a way to create trainings, HR trainings and stuff like that, and do sexual harassment or discrimination trainings and stuff like that” since I’m so passionate about those things.

The suggestions provided by her mother were a combination of professional knowledge, as well as knowledge of her child’s passion. This exposure plus encouragement may be one of the many reasons that parents are the primary sources of anticipatory socialization (Jablin, 2001; Tey, Moses, & Cheah, 2020).

Other participants noted important conversations with immediate adult family were often subtle, a regular part of everyday conversations, not intentionally about vocational preparation.

I asked my mom one day, “Who are the people that are telling us about these events and the significant people? And how are they getting this information? What career path, or what job is that called?” and she was like, “Oh, you want to be a broadcast journalist” and I was like “Yes, I love that, and that’s what I want to do.” (Participant 25)

Vocational socialization provided by media is discussed later in these findings, but the conversations between parent and child around this instance of media exposure provides an opening for verbal processing as an additional sensemaking tool. Co-watching media with family members provides opportunities for these discussions. During a conversation with his father, Participant 31 was provided a realistic view and possible alternative to a career in sports entertainment:

I think my decision to go to law school was more of my dad telling me, “Hey, I respect what you want to do, just maybe not the ways you’re going to go about it.” Because I

really want to be on TV doing sport analyst stuff, and he was completely true. I mean, it's hard to do that when you either don't play the sport, or you don't have crazy connections right off the bat. He gave me an alternative way to achieve the same goal that I wanted, and then I just took that and ran with it, and now it's interesting because I no longer want to be on TV talking about sports. I now want to kind of do some more...serious stuff, actually litigation or policymaking.

As previously noted, many students come into their college experience without having had these familial discussions, especially first-generation students or those seeking an alternative career path than members of their family (Tey, Moses, & Cheah, 2020). Without these conversations, students must use additional effort in their sensemaking process, relying more heavily on other sources of VAS, some of which are discussed below.

Educational Institutions

A second source of VAS, the college experience, is a pivotal point in the occupational socialization process of an individual (Scholssberg, 2011). Students are exposed to numerous messages as they experience changing environments in college. However, as noted by Lair and Wieland (2012), "the work–education intersection... has been remarkably absent from the growing body of literature exploring the meaning of work from a communicative perspective" (p. 424). Yet, many participants identified educational institutions as sources of vocational anticipatory socialization. This source is demonstrated in two divisions: academic affairs and student affairs.

Academic Affairs. The classroom structure itself offers knowledge to students about career opportunities and gainful employment after earning a college degree. Components of academic affairs mentioned by participants included the professor or instructor (used

interchangeably by students), graduate teaching assistants (named separately from ‘professors’ or ‘instructors’ by participants), and course curriculum (within or outside the major of Communication Studies).

Professors/Instructors. Conversations with professors provided students insight into possible careers, opportunities for graduate school, as well as suggestions of what not to do. Participant 1 spoke of the encouragement in networking and value of connection by her professor: “We would have speakers come in. And my professor would always tell us ‘Just go up in the end and introduce yourself’.” The value of networking and connections was a common thread through all interviews, and participants believed getting that information from multiple sources solidified the message in their minds. Some professors even went as far as to send out emails to current and former students still enrolled at the university on “ways to find internships and how to get involved on campus” (Participant 10) to support the value of networking.

Student participants often expressed regret in not utilizing the knowledge and connections available to them through their professors. Citing the turmoil brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, Participant 12 says, “I hoped I would be able to have more of those conversations with [my instructor], but then we all got sent home.” Others noted similar concerns about being disconnected from instructors, saying “I don’t know who I would go to” (Participants 12, 15, and 27) regarding opportunities in networking. Participant 10, when asked about reaching out to professors for support, said students had no one to blame but themselves for a lack of initiative: “No, I have not, but I probably should.” This suggests confusion in how to investigate sources and motivation to connect are significant to the VAS sensemaking process. Students can articulate gaps in their knowledge that they know *could* be filled by a specific source but are unsure *how* to go about it.

For students who were able to have exchanges with instructors, they expressed thanks and value at the individual feedback given. Faculty discussions were especially important for career-ambiguous programs to provide clarity and help students “see what I actually like to do” (Participant 27). For a student with a double major, both in the Liberal Arts, these conversations opened new doors.

I started talking to this professor, and we started talking about my goals and where I wanted to be. He said, “You need to go to grad school. You need to keep researching and thinking about these ideas, and once you’ve had more time to do that, you’ll be great in a museum, you’ll be a great archivist, you’ll be a great public historian, whatever you want to do,” and so that was kind of how that went. (Participant 17)

Many students focused on learning what careers or subjects they enjoy, but equally as valuable to the socialization occurrence was learning what careers or subjects would *not* be enjoyable. Conversations with professors who suggest what *not* to do professionally provided clarity on a participant’s future plans.

I remember talking to [professor about law school], and she said, “don’t do it, it’s not worth it” because her husband went to law school... and then also [my supervisor] kind of mirrored that, and so I talked to him about it, and he said, “There’s better things to do with your life.” (Participant 31)

Similar to conversations with parents, conversations with education mentors regarding careers or subjects that would *not* be enjoyable to the student were helpful in making decisions about future careers or vocations.

Faculty conversations with students outside the classroom are important to student development (Astin, 1993). But observational learning (Bandura, 1977) of these

instructors/professors as a form of social learning is a strong component of vocational anticipatory socialization.

What I've noticed from the majority of my professors—and people can't believe me when I say this—but I have never had a bad professor in my personal opinion... *They come and they enjoy their work*, which I think is something that's super important to do, and that's why I'm so excited to be a Comm Studies major...I feel like you have to be good at what you do and you have to thoroughly enjoy it. What I've noticed from my professors is that they thoroughly enjoy what they're doing, and I think that has taught me a lot about work and about where I want to go because I want to do something that I enjoy and something that I'm good at, at the same time. (emphasis added, Participant 3)

Observing joy in work, or job satisfaction, is an important socialization factor. This aligns with messages found by Levine and Hoffner (2006) that a positive aspect of work is “work is enjoyable or fun” (p. 654). Most often heard from parents, this message gathers intensity as students observe other sources (professors) demonstrating enjoyment in their chosen profession.

In addition to seeing the job of Communication Studies instructor or professor as a vocational example, the world of higher education was opened to Participant 12 when she recognized similar personal characteristics between herself and the instructor.

I loved COM 101 with [Instructor] just because I really adored her as a professor...I think first class, I was sitting with my freshman year roommate, and [the instructor] walks in, and she's doing her little introduction, and my roommate says to me “That's you”... When I look at her, I think “She doesn't have her doctorate, and she is a professor...If there's any person that I aspire to be, it is [her].”

Participant 12's identity connection to their introductory course instructor underscores how "faculty attitudes and beliefs and behaviors can play a role in creating a culture that fosters student learning" (Umback & Wawrzynski, 2005, p. 174). Interestingly, in this context of a student observing the instructor's behavior as a vocational sensemaking tool, emotions demonstrated by the instructor not only help the student learn the content of the class, but provides a framework for her to consider professional opportunities as she sees similarities in the person completing the action (teaching) and herself.

Teaching Assistants. Identified separate from professors or instructors, student participants learned about future vocations by watching and listening to graduate teaching assistants (TA) in the Communication Studies program.

I just remember my TA for Public Speaking was a grad student here. She was getting her master's, and she always joked about how she was just getting her master's and going for her doctorate so that she could be a professor. She would say, "But nobody needs to know that...I'm just going to do research to satisfy them because in order to get into academia, you need to do research but really, I just want to be a teacher." (Participant 12)

Through the admission of their own vocational experience and plan for future endeavors, the teaching assistant offered a suggestion to the undergraduate student of what they can do with their Communication Studies degree. Stradling the gap between "teacher" and "student," the teaching assistant provides approachability to an undergraduate student who may feel intimidated by the power difference in student and professor.

Teaching assistants provide similar guidance given by professors to undergraduate students about pursuing graduate school as a next step in vocational assimilation.

I wrote my final, big eight-page paper on President Trump’s little Bible display outside of St John’s and ideological and generative methods. And [my TA] said, “You should use this for your law school or grad school application” and I said, “I’m not going to law school.” And he said “Well, you should use it for grad school if you’re going to do that, for your writing sample.” (Participant 26)

In this example, the TA provides encouragement to a student about future vocation ideas (continuing studies in communication or law school), as well as connects an in-class assignment back to “real world” (Clair, 1996; Carver, 2010) application. Because of their status as both students and teachers, graduate teaching assistants provide unique insight for undergraduate students about vocational processes, particularly in terms of whether continuing education is necessary or recommended for vocational pursuits.

Course Curriculum. The third way that higher education becomes a source of VAS is through the curriculum itself. Higher education curriculum is part program-specific and part General Education. The original concept of General Education was posed by Angel Quintero in 1949 and is a foundation of Liberal Arts education today (Aldegether, 2015; Erie, 2013). In addition to a knowledge base in the liberal arts, General Education provides a framework for socialization for major exploratory college students. Even for those who have a career in mind, General Education provides a “rounding out” of vocational training, giving alternatives especially when majors don’t align with students’ talents or interests. Multiple students expressed their desire upon entering the university to pursue education in the fields of Broadcast Journalism, Engineering, Education, Business, Fashion Design, and Healthcare, but say they were disillusioned when they discovered the curriculum was “not what I thought it was” (Participant 17). As Participant 32 explained,

I came in as a News Media major because throughout all middle school and all of high school, even in college, I have always loved public speaking so much, and so I kind of went into News Media thinking, “Oh, I would love to become a broadcast journalist. I just think that’d be great.” But then, as I learned more about that, I kind of started to figure out it wasn’t just about public speaking, but you also had to work technology. And you have to know how to operate a camera, and I was like, “No. I can figure out how to do public speaking in other ways,” which is how I landed in Communication Studies.

The General Education courses and core curriculum of the academic collage encompassing Journalism, Creative Media, Public Relations, and Communication Studies at this specific institution provides students with an alternative to their original route without losing credits in the major change. For Participant 22, she began her education within the college, but changed majors as she took core courses in the college that provided exposure to new fields. In this exposure, she found new subjects that she loved more than her original path.

My entire life, I found myself writing, and I didn’t want to do English. I wanted to do Journalism actually, and I have a lot of experience with newspapers and all that stuff. So, the closest thing to [that major] was Mass Communications and Creative Media. Creative Media is kind of the main platform for that, and I ended up doing it, but then I ended up taking Public Speaking my first semester, and I was like “Oh, I love rhetoric” and then I took Interpersonal Communication and said, “Oh, I love people” and I just went from there.

Some students early in their major expressed anxiety at this wide base of knowledge, connecting the broadness of the field of Communication Studies with career ambiguity.

However, students closer to graduation and more exposed to the curriculum valued the flexibility and exploratory nature of the field.

I came in not knowing what I was going to be when I grow up...there's a wide variety of classes that we take...I did find things that I didn't even know I was going to like. And they show you a lot of different parts of this field, and a lot of different things you could do within it, and I think that's helpful for somebody who might not know what all is out there and what all they could do with this major. (Participant 30)

This student identifies the curriculum of the Communication Studies program as providing vocational socialization through each course; she is learning how to connect future vocations with her current major by exploration within the classroom.

Student Affairs. An educational resource outside the classroom, the realm of student affairs in college encompasses many student support and social services. The services mentioned by students as integral to their vocational anticipatory socialization are grouped into negative and positive experiences; job titles and student services divisions appeared in both camps, so this polarization was determined to be the best demonstration of experiences.

Negative Experiences. In a study that applied control theory and the negative-feedback loop to how college students navigate a new environment, Nazione et al. (2011) made the argument that these memorable negative experiences can encourage students to decrease the dissonance between current state and ideal. The primacy of these negative experiences became socialization resources for students as they learned about career prospects through support they *did not* receive. This was captured by Participant 1

This past fall wasn't a very good semester for me. I ended up having to take a semester off from school. And I felt like, no offense to the department, but my advisor just wasn't

super helpful...I would like to take my experience and hopefully help someone in the future not have that same issue.

This desire for peers to *not* have the same negative experience is a strong motivator for students who empathize with others. This *lack of* an experience presents itself as a socialization tool; students identify a future vocation they can improve upon (academic advising) by simply being a part with these negative interactions (lack of guidance) in mind.

This negative advising experience was not unique to the department and college that houses the Communication Studies program, but was mentioned by students who encountered similar “bad advising” through other academic departments. The bad feelings surrounding hands-off advising were also mentioned as Participant 27 was thinking about the value of connections post-college.

I kind of wish I would have had that opportunity within the college getting to know that one person [academic advisor], because it might have helped. You never know...

Honestly, I just feel with this industry, it really is all about meeting people [and] networking. It's not necessarily about those key skills—I mean, that's important—but I just feel to find a good job in this industry it's more about people, and what you bring.

Separate from academic advising, a student service that exists to support students in their future professional endeavors is the university career center. Many students mentioned utilizing the online job board hosted by the office, but very few mentioned the in-office services of vocational exploration and connection to a subject area. Some students mentioned not using the Career Center at all for vocational exploration. Instead, the Career Center was identified as the mechanism that diverted students from *another major* into Communication Studies:

I stayed an extra week at the end of sophomore year and had a lot of appointments with the Career Center trying to figure out what the heck to do, because I said “I’m not doing anything with Math, I’m not doing anything with Science, and I don’t want to do Education” so it’s basically Communication or Business was essentially what it was, and then [I] landed on Comm Studies. (Participant 23)

This default-into-the program approach was identified by many students as their introduction to Communication Studies. Recognizing this subject area may be a second option for some students offers insight into curriculum design and strengthens the argument for Communication Studies to be a part of the General Education curriculum (generaleducation.xx.edu).

As mentioned in the previous section of curriculum, students mentioned the desire for vocational socialization *to be part* of the major curriculum, as they felt the resources provided by the Career Center were not informative (e.g., “She gave me a list of jobs I already knew about” [Participant 22]) or were too broad to apply to their subject area.

I know you can go to the Career Center, but I feel there should be a class—and it could be the Capstone [course], I don’t really know, I’m not all the way in that—that kind of helps you figure out what you want to do inside the communications realm... maybe have a class that’s set up every week, you have a different client come in, they talk about their job, they talk about maybe the things they did before the job, maybe they talk about how they got the job....just have a class that’s set up to help you, kind of guide you, into what kind of jobs you could get... I mean, I feel like I don’t even know the communication jobs out there that I could get. (Participant 7)

These comments on ambiguity and lack of helpful guidance provide rich information on how students in career-ambiguous majors are socialized into future careers: they don’t feel they are.

By unveiling problems in the current system, the organization with the mission to socialize students into future careers can find areas of improvement (Kilmann & Mitroff, 1979). These opportunities are further discussed in Chapter Five.

Positive Experiences. The overall opinion of the university was positive, from initial interaction with admissions counselors to students considering the university as a location for future employment: “I also look on UA’s job site just to see openings that are happening there, because ...I could also see myself working in higher education administration, working with college students” (Participant 20). These positive interactions led students to investigate further into these jobs. As Participant 23 explained,

[I’m looking at] something to do with recruiting for college or university, because I know that whenever I was going through the college process, Alabama’s recruiter was definitely the most involved and persistent and personable and I really enjoyed that.

Initial exposure to university staff also steered Participant 28 to declare a major in Communication Studies.

I’m doing a tour of the school, the advisor at the time with him was guiding me around the school and we end up in his office at the end of it, and he said, “Here’s all the majors, and communication, all this stuff...” And he listed them off and then got to Communication Studies and he said “Now, if you want to do something like ministry-” and I said “Stop. Stop right there, mister. Sold. Done. That’s all I want.” So, that was that.

Absent from the literature on organizational assimilation and the role of the educational institution is how students are socialized by their participation in student organizations. Part of the student experience in college, student organizations are both social and professional tools.

Participants identified the student newspaper, the student magazine, departmental organizations, and campus-wide organizations housed at the college level as organizations that “help fill that Communication Studies-workforce gap.” (Participant 17)

Participation in Greek life allowed students to apply the skills learned in Communication Studies coursework and see the fruits of their labor, while providing vocational anticipatory socialization.

[In my leadership position] a lot of what I did was organizing events and reaching out to companies and contracts and event planning and communication—social media type stuff. And speaking in front of large groups of people, and basically stuff that kind of relates to my major or *things I want to do...in the future* (emphasis added; Participant 23).

Involvement in student organizations like Greek life allowed students additional socialization sources of guest speakers, clients, or guest lecturers. These professional adults outside of the academic sphere afforded realizations of “what I can do with this major” for Participant 29 who had an interest in politics with a love of rhetoric, and a desire to work in the White House Communications Office.

When I started getting really involved on campus with a bunch of clubs and organizations, we had a speaker who came. This past congresswoman came from Florida, she came and spoke to one of our clubs. And she said, “You don’t need to be a Poli Sci major to be in politics, we take people from all over. We take Bio majors, we take this, that, the other thing...” and I realized, “Holy crap, I can do this, I can... I can actually do this!”

The sender of this message was an adult outside the academic or personal network, but *access* to the message was available through membership in a student organization; these support networks

would not be available to college students outside student affairs backing, therefore providing additional exposure and vocational anticipatory socialization.

Pre-Professional Vocations

In Jablin's (2001) assessment of literature that studied part-time job experiences of adolescents, he concluded that not all job experiences are beneficial in terms of anticipatory socialization. He posited that the extent to which the part-time job contributed towards the adolescent's communication style determined the value of the experience. However, participants in this study expressed value from *all* previous job experiences, from bosses they interacted with, broadly defined part-time jobs, or internships *even if* the internship or job was outside of their post-graduation vocation.

Bosses. In a category separate from immediate adult family and non-familial adults, bosses are included in the environment of pre-vocation experiences. As part of the anticipatory socialization process, bosses provided feedback on behaviors ("We would joke around, but when there would be serious things happening, our managers and our boss would be like 'this is very serious'" [Participant 8]), expectations on speed and quality of work ("She probably yelled at me on the sandwich line three times a day for a year and a half" [Participant 9]), as well as unintentional examples of what *not* to do in the workplace (e.g., "She was so disorganized" [Participant 29]; "He was an alcoholic and had a drug problem" [Participant 22]; "They were trying to be our friend instead of our boss and it failed" [Participant 5]). When asked about possible careers open to Communication Studies majors, Participant 1 spoke of a conversation with her current supervisor.

I feel like you can have a lot of different careers, which I like. You can have an office type of job, an office manager or marketing or media. I feel it kind of depends on what

classes you took and then what's relevant to your career at the end...My boss has told me I could go and work for her full time when I graduate.

This participant identifies the diverse nature of the field but sees a future vocation due to her current work and added direction from her supervisor. Feedback on professional behaviors that can be attributed to any field is an early part of the socialization process (discussed in Chapter Five), but this student is closer to vocational and organizational assimilation with the encouragement given by a source of authority.

Part-Time Work. Part-time work is identified by students as low-risk positions which allow them to earn money and gain exposure to teamwork, timeliness, and tensions at work without the pressure of a “big girl job” (Participant 23). Outside of interactions with supervisors, students identified pieces of their low-risk jobs that provided valuable knowledge: professional dress, respectful and accommodating communication, timeliness, customer service, and human relations.

Some students were able to draw direct connections from on-campus part-time jobs and future career options: “I’m thinking of majoring in Marketing. I think especially maybe the dean’s office job, I’m marketing myself... I’m representing the college when I sit there, just making sure I look presentable” (Participant 4) and “I’m glad for the experience that I have had working on campus for the past three years, so that would definitely be something I think I would enjoy” (Participant 20). For two students interested in fashion merchandising, part-time jobs provided development they could not attain in the communication classroom.

I’ve always kind of wanted to have a store of my own, like a clothing store with beauty things, household things, kind of combination, and so I think aspects of each of my jobs up to this point have shown me little glimpses of what that would be like (Participant 18).

Each of these “little glimpses” are allowing the student to construct a mental image of what she desires and expects in a vocation post-college. Socialization happens both in the monumental events as well as the everyday minutia. Part-time jobs allow for exposure to new fields and potentially new passions.

A second job in high-end retail allowed this student to experience a specific vocation not expressly available to her as a Communication Studies student.

I actually had a second job in the evenings, working at a higher-end boutique which was really nice. And that’s kind of where I found my love for fashion (Participant 27).

This experience gave the participant a frame of application for the general professionalism skills (discussed in RQ4 Results) she learned as part of her major program.

From each source of socialization, students also identified experiences they *did not* want to repeat, further adding to the value of the experience. Participant 23 provided a vivid description of her part-time job, saying “I work in an elementary school doing after school care... it’s literally nothing and I hate it.” Participant 22 articulated a general desire for a professional job that does not interact with irate customers saying, “I want an office job where I sit, and I do my thing, and I don’t have to get yelled at by middle-aged women.” These statements build into the recurring theme of how students value the learning experiences that come from learning what they *don’t* want to do.

While not an internship or part-time job, one participant found that skills and experiences gained through hobbies can mirror those gained through employment.

There was a lot of trial and error of what I wanted to do. I just realized I am very passionate about like cars and automotive. It was a skill that I not really studied, but it

was kind of just like a hobby and so, being able to combine that hobby with my what I am studying was how I come about it (Participant 8).

The unique position of hobbies, outside of part-time jobs and the organizational involvement of educational institutions, is not addressed in previous VAS literature. Hobbies or other pastimes can be furthered explored as opportunities for vocational and organizational socialization.

Internships. Students differentiated between part-time jobs and internships not by pay but by title given upon employment and the perception of how the internship would fit into their post-graduation career path. While an internship is not a graduation requirement within the department, the internship as a requirement before full-time employment was mandated by the students themselves, stating “I haven’t learned as much” (Participant 23) because of the lack of this exposure. This unofficial requirement was so prevalent that graduating seniors who did not have solid job prospects shared they would be looking for an internship rather than full-time employment: “If I’m being honest, I know I’m not ready to get a job yet. I need to get an internship first. I need to get some student-real-life experience before I get some real-real-life experience” (Participant 32).

This “student-real-life experience” provided students exposure to new fields, such as the broad vocation of public relations by activities within a firm, or with a specific organization (in this case, Anheuser-Busch) and exposure to and eventual passion for the food and beverage industry. Some of this exposure solidified students’ ideas that they *did not* want to continue in a particular area: “I got a job the first summer at a law office for one of the City Councilwomen, which was fun. I’m not interested in law, but it was still good” (Participant 9).

Most experiences were trial runs of full-time employment that students were able to build on for their future vocations. Participant 9 used the internship experiences for organizational

socialization with a specific company (Walmart) while a similar experience for Participant 29 provided vocational socialization to a broad field: “I did a mini-internship with athletic training and that led to being involved with the media and I decided I liked that.” Self-directed students identified their vocational desires and applied it to internships available to them by using their available network.

I’m gonna intern with [company]...they make car parts. My neighbor is actually the head of that plant... and he’s looking for a communication intern. And I told him I would also want to ... get my news media stuff in there, or journalism as well. I asked, “Could I write your weekly emails or anything like that, or just let me—on my own—do stories within the company?” And he was like “We actually need somebody producing film announcements to play on all the televisions in the facilities.” So, I’m thinking about interning there (Participant 30).

The boldness with which this student approached a potential supervisor is an attribute that would not be available to a new full-time employee, but the low-risk/low-stakes environment of an internship provides vocational anticipatory socialization directed by students who have begun to explore a specific career field.

Peers and Friends

Students identified sources of socialization from classmates, friends, roommates, and older organizational members. These messages were differentiated by those who had the same age and perceived level of expertise, and those who were older and therefore perceived as more experienced. Observed actions and characteristics of communication majors were cited as the reason Participant 7 began her study in communication: “I just didn’t know what I wanted...I picked [this major] because the people I knew that were COM majors I had so much in common

with. They were always very outgoing.” The familial connection of a sister provided exposure to the program for Participant 8: “My sister did communication and she said she really liked it, so I tried it out in my time here.” Following someone else’s experience (social learning, Bandura, 1977) allows for a knowledge pathway to be created through vicarious learning, adding to the vocational anticipatory socialization experience.

Some occupations were explored because of conversations with peers surrounding possible interest in a part-time job: “One of my best friends here had worked there the previous summer, and when they were doing their recruiting, she said, ‘Hey I think you’d really like this’” (Participant 12). Participant 11 showed interest in a related field when talking a peer about their desired vocational goals: “...one of my buddies...he’s going to pharmacy school there and so me and him talk about all that different kinds of stuff since I’m interested in the sales side of it.”

Vocational socialization, if not organizational socialization, occurs when listening to older classmates and older organizational members talk about their own path in applying the Communication degree, as well as “tips and tricks” (Participant 29) during the job-hunting process: “I think a lot of people do sales or recruiting, I’ve seen a lot of people recently that graduate and work for recruiting companies...I think people do marketing and PR type things or you can go into management” (Participant 18). This reflection method completes the process of experiential learning (Kolb, 2014) and allows for more complete understanding of the ambiguity in a Communication Studies major.

Unique to each student was the actual experiences *with* peers and how that influenced their decision to pursue a specific occupation. For Participant 12, the act of “hanging out in the coffee shop with my friends” inspired her to pursue a job in a coffee shop and develop a love for

communicating with customers as a barista. For Participant 30, a more painful experience shaped her desire to apply Communication Studies.

In COM 123 and we gave our elevator pitches, and [My professor] asked, “Why do you like public speaking...tell me the ‘why’.” And [I said] “When I spoke at my best friend’s funeral, I gave a eulogy when I was 15, and it was the worst day of my life, but it was also when I realized the power that lies in words. And I had the ability to make all of these bleeding hearts come together with what I was saying. I couldn’t take this pain away, but I could give hope, and I could give reassurance, and we could be together in this moment sharing this grief and my ability to bring people together and to be able to give hope or reassurance or comfort, just through my ability to string words together in a meaningful way, and that’s when I realized how powerful that actually is, and I knew that’s something I want to do the rest of my life.”

This powerful act of delivering a eulogy for a best friend at the age of 15 allowed for a socialization experience of learning inadvertently from a peer. Combined with the secondary experience of addressing this talent or event in the classroom allows for further exploration into application of the communication skill of rhetoric, and ultimately drives the student further in the anticipatory socialization stage.

Non-familial Adults

Separate from immediate adult family members, students identified non-familial adults as directors on the path of vocational anticipatory socialization. Different from messages obtained from their peers (Jablin, 2001), these sources were viewed with more respect and valued at a higher level than messages obtained from peers, siblings, and friends. Parties identified were mentors, parents of friends, and friends of their own parents.

Mentors. Academic and non-academic mentors have a positive effect on college students as they progress through their undergraduate career (Kalbfleisch, 1997; 2002a; 2002b; 2008; Kalbfleisch & Davies, 1993; Kalbfleisch & Eckley, 2003). Interviewees in this study identified formal academic mentors (specific program and mentoring society at the university) and informal mentors (high school administrators, pastors, and counselors) as sources of VAS. Academic mentors from the identified mentoring society were paired with students based on the desire to continue in a specific profession within the academic college. The value of these mentors was mentioned in general (e.g., “I’ve had a mentor through (Named) Society here on campus, so he’s helped me a lot” [Participant 8]) as well as specific to vocational knowledge.

She gives me a lot of good advice about...how to handle contracts, how to negotiate them how to talk and... voice certain opportunities that I want to do within my station and then she helps me with my résumé and just how to brand myself” (Participant 25).

This formal pairing of mentor and mentee through the college empowers and encourages students through the opportunity to connect with an industry professional. Formal mentoring programs such as this have been shown to increase persistence into multiple fields (Kalbfleisch, 2002; Myers et al., 2011; Omilion-Hodges & Ptacek, 2019).

Even students outside the formal society, who are still driven to make connections through the college as part of coursework, were able to network and learn of new vocational areas.

I’ve tried to talk with a bunch of people and to see what kind of jobs are out there, and how they got the job and what they do...[Someone I spoke with] works with this agency ... and I loved what she had to say. She did social media, and I was learning more about what it was like... I had no idea what influencer marketing was, and she also did that, so

then I realized “oh that’s a job, and I could do that and it sounds really cool” so then I’m talking to more people who did that, and then it just kind of got the ball rolling (Participant 21).

Informal mentors are those outside of academia who provide guidance in all areas of life and in doing so, demonstrate an example of what a communication major could potentially be. For Participant 15, her relationship with her therapist inspired her to use the interpersonal communication skills she gleaned through the Communication Studies program and apply them to graduate school in counseling “so I can help someone else.” Participant 19 had chosen to pursue graduate education in education administration after completing his undergraduate coursework in rhetoric and argumentation, largely due to the support of his high school “principal and student affairs guy” and the impact they had on his development. For Participant 28, the Communication Studies major is a means to a pre-determined end, further confirmed in conversation about his mentor’s own educational track.

I figured out from my pastor that he took Communication as a major. [laugh] That’s what he did, and then I just recently figured out that my college pastor did that. I didn’t even know that, but he mentioned it in last week’s sermon. So, the major kind of came from I knew that was what he’d done, and so I go in [to school] with only that knowledge.

These mentors hold a special designation different from “peers and friends” in Jablin’s 2001 original sources of VAS; these mentors bridge the gap between “friend” and “adult” and provide guidance in vocational pathways by relating their own experiences.

Parents of Friends. Peers provided opportunities for VAS, and as an extension of that connection, students gleaned information from friends’ *parents*. A participant planning on pursuing the field of pharmaceutical sales who mentioned a conversation with his friend about

the possibility, also says, “One of my friends’ mom is [a pharmaceutical salesperson] as well” (Participant 8). The extended familiarity, while not as powerful as the direct observational learning chances with immediate family members, still provides socialization awareness of future vocations. Extended familiarity also aided in the organizational socialization process (second part of anticipatory socialization) for a student who recognized the value in networking.

My boyfriend’s dad works for GM, he’s really high up in GM, which that would also be—I mean any Fortune 500 company to work for—that would be really awesome. I sent him my résumé, he looked over it and sent it to a couple people that he knows in the Communication Department for GM and stuff (Participant 27).

In addition to the network of connections created in college through instructors, organizations, guest speakers, and friends, this student used extended networks of her boyfriend’s father to aid her accessibility to future employment.

Friends of Parents. In an extended network, students commented on the information they learned through connections made by their parents. While not as emotionally powerful as knowledge gathered from immediate family actions or suggestions, these connections still provide vocational anticipatory socialization. After speaking to one of her mother’s clients, Participant 4 was exposed to the field of marketing and social media influencers. For Participant 8, the connection with community members, met through his father, provided general knowledge of future vocational paths: “I’ve been with my dad, going to the yacht club and meeting with different members of our yacht club just talking about ‘Oh, what do you do?’ [to find out about their jobs].”

Brief mentions of these connections were revealed as students placed emphasis on the *value* of the connection rather than the connection *itself*: “I also think [when] getting internships,

it helps having connections... I can find someone through someone. I know if my dad has friends who work somewhere, [he] can try to find the connections that will help” (Participant 10). For a student who made the networking connection of “one of my dad’s best friend works for Coca-Cola” (Participant 27), the value of the connection was explained as: “I just know if you can find that person to put in a word for you, it makes a world of difference.” A recurring theme through these interviews was how students generally referred to the importance of networking and connections but did not specifically identify these ambiguous networks as a source of VAS.

Media

Previously established sources of VAS (Jablin, 2001; Levine & Hoffner, 2006; Powers & Myers, 2017; Myers et al. 2011) included print materials such as books, magazines, and promotional materials, but students identified only digital and broadcast media as resources of information. For participants, digital media included career and job boards (LinkedIn, Handshake, Indeed, Purple, etc.) as well as search engines (Google). Broadcast media include political dramas, sports and entertainment news programs, current events news, and entertainment movies.

Digital Media. Third-party job boards were the primary sources of socialization for students (mentioned by 15 participants) although students did not identify how they learned of these resources. The online business services of Indeed.com and LinkedIn.com were used to search for career ideas by matching interests and occupation-specific internship opportunities, as well as general internship opportunities. Participant 1 mentioned using a job site specific to an industry (WorkInSports.com), while Participant 24 mentioned the web matching service Ripple Match (<https://ripplematch.com/>), designed for college students searching for internships and college graduates looking for entry-level jobs.

The job board supported by the university was the second most popular source for students (mentioned by 10 participants). Handshake, an online recruiting system operated by the Career Center, although not associated with the student services department by students, was used for searching local internship and job opportunities (e.g., “I’ll just get on Handshake and look” [Participant 23]) and applications for internships (“I applied through the school they had a bunch of different ones, so it was actually pretty neat”).

Students also took to internet search engines (specifically, Google) when there were wildcards, such as location, job title, and industry, in their searches. Popular search terms included “jobs near me,” “jobs in ____ area,” “communications jobs in this area within this many miles,” “what jobs are good for people that like college-setting communication jobs,” “I like this, what job would I be good at,” and “jobs as a communication specialist.” In a specific case, Participant 3 is pursuing a career path as a lawyer and “literally created” her degree combination and path due to this wildcard search approach.

So, the way that I found out [about being a lawyer] is literally by research... it was literally as easy as a Google search and just knowing that I didn’t have to have a Political Science degree and I didn’t have to be trapped into that...

This use of digital media as vocational socialization has also been documented in previous studies (Carmack & Heiss, 2018; Aley & Levine, 2020) but the degree to which these sites aid students in securing a specific job is unexplored. In this study, students exclusively use digital media to become more familiar with *options* in a career field, which is a part of vocational anticipatory socialization.

Broadcast Media. Consistent with other research on how students gather occupational information from television shows, participants articulated new and current events as reasons for

applying their Communication degree. The current turmoil of immigration law and immigrant status in the United States drew Participant 31 to use his Communication degree to pursue future education in law school: “I’m more interested in constitutional law; really immigration law, because that’s a major issue in this country.” The ‘major issue’ is identified due to the amount of news coverage given to the current political climate and changes posed to immigration law. This same turmoil of politics spurred Participant 13 to pursue a self-designed study.

I guess you could say I created it ... I think, in order to better serve people as a social worker or lawyer, we need to learn to understand people more, and that was something in Social Work I wasn’t learning as much as I wanted to...It was a lot more about policy and background work, which I think is important, but I also think it’s very important for us to learn to understand people and the way we communicate, and why we communicate.

This student identified a problem (immigration) as presented in broadcast media (news) and the designed an educational pathway that would provide her the knowledge to address the problem. She identified the vocation (law) as a process of elimination from other studies (social work) and the skills learned in the Communication Studies program

Political dramas such as “The West Wing” and sports news programs like “Inside the NBA” began the journey for some into Mass Communications combined with Communication Studies, while entertainment new programs provided an observational learning experience for Participant 25.

I was in high school and there was a show... kind of like Entertainment Tonight, those shows—I used to be obsessed with them and watch them all the time with my mom... I just felt watching them, I thought “Oh, I can definitely do that and, if not just like that, then better.”

This experience is an example of a combination of socialization sources, both media and parental facilitation. While literature exists on the importance of these sources separately, no work has been done on the power attributed to a single message that comes from multiple sources.

Most intriguing was the lasting impression, left specifically on female participants, of the 2006 American comedy film, “The Devil Wears Prada.” In this work of fiction, a recent female college graduate lands a job at a prestigious magazine as the assistant to a demanding and demeaning editor. Her personal life changes as she prioritizes her job over family and friends. Many narrative parallels can be drawn from the characters in this movie and how collegiate females internalize the information (Sutherland & Feltey, 2017); also, researchers in the retail industry have studied this film’s impact on perception of retail supervisors (Gunn et al. 2020). Participant 24 referenced the set design as socialization of future employment locations: “I can imagine being in a big building with their own floor with cool glass doors or whatever.” The character portrayal of the authoritarian boss created a typification used by Participant 15: “[I would leave] if the boss was a complete bitch and just awful and ‘The Devil Wears Prada.’” The combination of set design and character strength left a lasting impression of fear in Participant 23.

The first thing that comes to mind right away, is a scary boss in a large corporation in some high-rise building. Literally. It’s just the stereotype and I’m some wide-eyed white girl from friggin’ South Alabama that gets thrown into this terrifying environment and has no idea what’s going on and everyone is yelling at me.

While television and movies often depict over-the-top or stereotypical portrayals of occupations (Carmack, 2016; Steinke, 2005; Levine & Hoffner, 2006), these media sources still impart messages that students take with them through the sensemaking process of socialization.

Encounter experiences within the new vocation or organization can serve to reinforce these ideas or open new pathways of thought.

These interviews helped to answer the question “How are college students socialized into future careers?” by identifying sources of socialization information. Presented were immediate adult family by actions, connections, and suggestions; educational institutions, both academic and student affairs; pre-vocation opportunities of part-time jobs and internships, as well as messages from bosses; learning from peers, friends, and siblings or the same age or older and more experienced; media sources of digital and broadcast media; and a new division in the list of sources as non-familial adults, such as mentors, parents of friends, or friends of parents.

RQ2: Sensemaking

This research question asked, “How do students make sense of the skills learning process?” The sensemaking process is undergone when an individual is presented with information within an environment and must process how this information pertains to them. The information learned by students in this study were communication skills gathered in the classroom location. The communication skills learning process varied student to student, but all shared instances of how they made sense of their coursework and skills outside the given setting. Communication skills learned were categorized during this sensemaking process by location of application: skills for work, skills for general life knowledge, or skills applied only while in school. Table 2, presented below, provides a snapshot of this location of skill designation as well as the subcategories under each location.

Table 2	
<i>Location of Application</i>	
<i>Location</i>	<i>Subcategory</i>

Work	General Work Knowledge Skills-based Knowledge
Life	Current Cultural Divisiveness Informed Consumerism Interpersonal Relationships
School	Graduate School Self-expression
Senseless	

Table 2

Work

Students placed their learned communication skills as important to the setting of work more than in the application of societal knowledge or use as a student. Comments were both on *general* workplace skills of accommodation, project management, and confidence when speaking, as well as *job-specific* skills of written communication (email and résumés), interviewing, and persuasive speech.

General Work Knowledge. Communication accommodation theory (Giles & Ogay, 2007) focuses on the adjustments made during conversation in order to minimize differences. Motivations may vary, but participants identified these adaptations as simply “how to be a good communicator” (Participants 3, 21, 25, and 30) given the pretense that “Communication is key” (Participants 5, 19, and 31). Students also mentioned flexible skills of “being intuitive” (Participant 10) as well as “Jack of all trades...I’m able to fit in anywhere” (Participant 7) and “a fast learner” (Participant 22) as important to all vocational areas. Accommodation was also identified as necessary to the workplace given the structure and hierarchy within the organizations (Participants 17 and 18) with which they interacted. Participants 17, 23, 27, and 32 all shared “working with people” skills as valuable to future integration into a workplace or as skills admirable in a supervisor.

Skills such as time management, project management, and recognizing long-term versus short-term tasks were also mentioned by students as transferable from the classroom to the office. Participant 7 identified time management as a skill she developed over the course of her tenure in the Communication Studies program. She later identifies this skill as something she anticipates using in a full-time job.

In class, you get a job for the week and you have to be consistent on getting that job done for the week. I'm good at that...

Given that communication courses are more "flexible" than other courses and frequently do not abide by the "lecture/ test/ quizzes format" (Participant 7), students had to develop their own methods for staying on top of assignments. This skill was something that began as essential for Participant 7's (above) success in college but is a tool that she realizes will be used in a future vocation.

Most students cited the Public Speaking course as being responsible for their increase in confidence in oral communication, applied when speaking to a supervisor, to a client, or when admitting they need help.

I felt some of my Comm Studies classes not only gave me confidence, but they also reassured me that... sometimes if you don't know anything, that's okay. But there's a way to say that you don't know something without saying "I don't know what you're saying" ...there's a way to articulate that sentence without saying it so abruptly or so honest.

(Participant 25)

Confidence gained in the classroom in the area of public speaking was translated to vocational socialization with the realization that a lack of knowledge in a subject area is not restricted to experiences in higher education. By being presented with situations of "I don't

know,” this student is able to communicate articulately with those that have knowledge in order to manage uncertainty.

The most complete synthesis and application of broad communication soft skills was provided by Participant 26 who is intending to pursue a professional career in the music industry. While recognizing her own talent in a vocational area and her acquisition of hard skills (vocal talent), she equated the Communication Studies program as supporting her pursuits.

I have found that in the Communication Studies major at XX, I’m constantly defending an argument of some sort. I’m constantly defending my side or whatever I think through research, and they’ve taught me how to conduct proper research ... and I’ve done that through papers and speeches and debates... So, if I’m... walking into a record label company and they ask, “Why should we sign you?” I’m just going to take the skills that I learned from comm to defend myself and convince them to join my team or let me be a part of their team. And I feel it’s caused me to learn how to market myself. When I’m writing a paper for comm, I always ask myself, “What’s the goal? What’s the most important part of this? What is my main point?” And then I build everything else up around that. I feel for me, it’s the same thing when I’m speaking to somebody or trying to convince them to let me help them anywhere, ask them to help me record a song...I feel I’ve learned how to defend myself and my case and somewhat convince people that I’m worthy to be a part of their cause.

Participant 26 parsed out the skills of persuasive speaking, public speaking confidence, and rhetorical analysis (documents and speeches) and applied them to her new environment of talent acquisition and management.

Skills-based Knowledge. Students identified transferrable skills from the Communication Studies program by the activities they underwent as part of course assignments. Written communication, interviewing, and persuasive speech were all exercised and recalled as moving from the context of school to the new context of vocation. These tangible skills, or hard skills, are defined separate from general work knowledge, or soft skills.

Course assignments as well as interactions with advisors advanced student understanding of professional computer-mediated communication. Participant 17 celebrates, “If there’s anything I can do, it’s write a darn good email!” Emails are primary forms of business communication and can be applied in a variety of vocations. This student further articulated the skill as being useful in her future career of fundraising, stating she needed to sound confident and articulate through email rather than a “scared 19-year-old.”

Translation of classroom projects to the résumé (aided by her faculty advisor) helped Participant 27 when looking for employment opportunities with a perceived lack of experience: “I talked about [the class] when I did the interviews and stuff, so that way I had it [on my résumé] looks I had some sort of skill.” Rather than look for an experience outside of school to fill a perceived gap in her résumé, this student was advised to dig into classroom experiences that could be added to her résumé. This process of sensemaking provided the student with the application of “interviewing” to a vocational scenario. Skills of interviewing and interpersonal communication were also helpful for Participant 25 when pursuing a career in investigative journalism, as the skills “helped me talk to people.”

Communication skills were also identified as helpful when the need for persuasive speech arose. Categorized as “sales” or “public relations,” these skills gave students a vocational field in which to apply their knowledge. For Participant 23, his persuasive speech experiences made

sense as a skill of “how to talk to specific groups of people in different waysto get what I want.” Participant 16 identified the use of persuasive communication skills in her internship when designing public health campaigns:

When I worked for the USDA in the public affairs position, that really helped me in terms of that because we had to convince the American public—who a lot of the time is kind of against welfare programs—we had to convince them that this is worth their time and worth their tax dollars, so you really just have to read people and know who you’re talking to.

By identifying the skills of “reading people” and “know who you’re talking to” this student is making sense of the analysis and rhetorical skills learned as part of the academic curriculum. Participant 24, a Public Relations (PR) major with a Communication Studies minor, spoke of how her Liberal Arts minor and coursework in Communication Studies (persuasion) connected with and supported her occupation-specific major:

I feel there’s a way people can say stuff and I feel like, especially in PR, you kind of have to sell yourself and create a good image and being able to kind of make the right decisions when you’re speaking, especially [when] you’re doing a press conference or something really important.

The persuasive skills valued by this student were mentioned as verbal, as opposed to the written persuasive skills identified by Participant 16. The nebulous topic of “persuasion” was given meaning and place through the interactions with customers in the context of “sales” and “campaigns.”

Life

As mentioned in Chapter One, college students view college as the training field for entering the workforce. However, many students still found ways that their communication skills benefitted them in daily life, not just in a future career. Skills learned in class help students make sense of current cultural divisiveness, become better informed consumers of news and information, and provided relationship clarity with family and friends.

Current Cultural Divisiveness. As students gained more knowledge in the realm of Communication Studies, they found more application in the cultural divides present in media. Movements such as Black Lives Matter and the recent prejudice against the Asian-American population provided a location outside the classroom where students could apply cultural diversity and understanding discussed inside the classroom.

Participant 17 spoke of the personal reflection undergone when reading the course text by Ijeoma Oluo (2019).

The communication and diversity class—again, really timely class for the moment we’re at in history right now—we’re reading books like “So You Want to Talk About Race” and you know you turn on the TV and there’s protests and stuff happening all over the place about race, so I definitely saw a lot of rhetoric and stuff popping up in my daily life. While Participant 17 did not state she had learned a skill of effective communication in diverse settings, she did say that exposure to new topics through the communication lens provided her with more insight and ability for constructive conversations on divisive topics. Additionally, Participant 7 mentioned topics from assigned course readings interconnecting with her daily life and broadening her thinking.

I remember taking my diversity class, and all of our books that we read...and especially in right now, the Black Lives Matter movement, things were intertwining, and I was like “Wow. This is really cool to live in this era and also have a class that is feeding me these really good knowledgeable things to learn.” Without that I probably wouldn’t have read any of those books... I probably wouldn’t think like I do now.

The categorization of these “really good knowledgeable things” as applicable to daily life provides VAS not within a specific vocation, but in general information on interacting with co-workers, clients, and how to approach diversity as a professional. Students did not comment on how familiarity with diverse ways of thinking would benefit them in future jobs, but they did comment on the fact that they benefitted “in general.”

I feel just because I’ve gotten to know my classmates better, I feel I’ve developed greater empathy for people in general. Just because we learned a lot about humans and the way they think. I just think having a universal understanding of the human race kind of just makes me have more empathy for people in general. I’ll talk to people more, say good morning now, because communication is important (Participant 4).

The student makes sense of this skill when classifying “understanding of the human race” as the emotion “empathy.” She equates *increased* communication (“I say good morning now”) with *important* communication.

Informed Consumerism. Students referenced consumerism not just in the economic sense but also informed consumers of both news and marketing messages. Paying homage to a course in Truth, Ethics, and Deception, Participant 24 says, “I’ve learned so much about just analyzing the way people work and the way people can explain themselves to be more persuasive and kind of over exaggerate the truth.” Participant 10 recalls her Political

Communication class and the current political climate outside the classroom: “It kind of makes me think of a Black Mirror episode⁴ when I consider how intertwined our media and politics are with the way that we communicate as people.” These participants were able to identify the exaggeration in entertainment television and political presentation while also identifying the communication devices used to create the lasting imagery.

Original exposure to rhetorical criticism of classic writings engaged students’ thinking of persuasion techniques. Participant 30 commented on her skills of rhetorical analysis and rhetorical strategy as she crafts messages within the framework of a public relations professional.

Some of the ways in which writers convey messages for us to subconsciously perceive them without even knowing it, I thought that was so mind blowing. I went back and I watched all these presidential speeches and stuff, and I was like “Hey I know what you’re doing!” It’s so important to not only be able to recognize what’s going on, but also be able to learn how to write that way yourself and be able to convey messages using those powerful rhetoric strategies. Not just “ethos, pathos, logos” but taking those to a whole new level: establishing credibility without people even realizing that’s what you’re doing, just throwing in subtle words and phrases, how you even place your sentences, the order of them, establishes credibility. Emotions, I’ve always been good at that, but this showed that you want to take your listener or reader on an emotional roller coaster almost, and that’s really important to be able to invoke a wide variety of emotions. And then logos is super important because, in this day and age, everyone’s fake, fake, fake, and being able to incorporate and find evidence that people will believe and agree with is difficult.

⁴ Dystopian science-fiction anthology television series on popular streaming service Netflix

By identifying these techniques of persuasion in the rhetorical triangle, this student is making sense of information, sources, and how to employ these skills as a writer of media, as well as be a more informed consumer of media herself.

Interpersonal Relationships. Skills of interpersonal communication made the greatest impression on students as translating outside the classroom but not into a specific vocation. Participants referred to class discussions as a “therapy session” (Participant 27) or “group therapy” (Participant 12) and relational communication as a subject “I go home and talk about at the dinner table or tell my family and my friends about” (Participant 18).

Students found interpersonal skills and intercultural awareness improved their relationship with family members. In the case of Participant 15, this awareness helped her understand the behaviors of an Italian immigrant father.

One thing I can remember was we talked about misunderstandings between cultures...I talked about my dad and how I would always get really embarrassed of him because he’s from Italy, and I never really understood why he acted or did the things he did, so I would always be super embarrassed by him and stuff because I was like “Can you just be normal? Why are you acting like this?” But then as I got older, I realized, “Oh, obviously this is a cultural difference, he grew up in a different culture than me, so he has different cultural norms than I do.”

Understandings of differences in cultures is important in the workplace and an important part of anticipatory socialization, but this student used classroom knowledge to improve personal relationships. Interpersonal and relational communication skills also helped Participant 16 identify the differences in her upbringing and interactions with family compared to that of her roommates:

That just kind of showed me that the way I was raised and the way I approach relationships isn't how the people around me approach relationships...sometimes my friends and my roommates handle things differently than I do...when I was in high school or something I wouldn't be as understanding, but now I just think "You just take things differently than I do."

These "random little things that I learned" (Participant 10) from class were identified by multiple participants as active listening, the fallacies of mind-reading, code switching, conflict management, argumentation, and generally uncomfortable conversations. Again, students talked about these skills in interpersonal relationships, but interpersonal relationships occur in the workplace setting as positions and responsibilities become more integrated and less siloed.

School

Students also made sense of the communication skills learned in class by applying them in coursework outside the Communication Studies program. These skills aided students when applying for graduate school and navigating self-expression. Additionally, some students were very open to admit there were parts of their learning that *did not* make sense.

Graduate School. Professional and written communication skills were identified as helpful outside the original classroom learning experience when students were filling out graduate school applications, writing professional essays, conducting research, emailing professors, or composing fund-raising emails to potential donors. Says Participant 17, "when I'm writing an email, I can hear [my professor's] voice going through my head." Participant 31 found that Communication Studies was a way to set himself apart from the other students entering law school.

I wanted to separate myself from the masses. I knew that so many people that are going to law school are going to be in College of Arts and Sciences, specifically Political Science, and I need to be different and special to myself, my own way. And I realized real quick that Communication Studies is such a great major to have if you want to go to law because we literally study so much rhetoric and argumentation, these core skills that you need to be successful in law school.

Students who viewed their undergraduate program in Communication Studies as a steppingstone into a graduate program are still making sense of the skills gained in the vocational anticipatory socialization process. For these students, post-graduation meant re-enrollment and a vocation as a graduate student. As sensemaking is a constant feedback loop (Weick et al., 2005) these skills learned in Communication Studies will continue to fit into new schema as locations environments, and vocations change.

Self-expression. In the process of self-discovery and “learning what I like to do” occurring in college, students used the *intrapersonal* nature of Communication Studies to place themselves in a career trajectory that would create personal and financial fulfilment. Participant 21, a double major in Women’s Studies and Communication Studies, says “Communication Studies is more for my enjoyment and also to give me the ability to pick [a job].” Compared with a previous path in Engineering, Participant 12 found Communication Studies resonated with her curious nature.

I was going to be an engineer and use innovation and creativity in Engineering, but that was a very dry place to try and use creativity and curiosity. Whereas with Psych and COM I’m able to ask “Why do people do that? Why do we talk like that?” and then I’m able to research it and I’m like “that’s so interesting!” and I feel they very much go

together, because even in COM [we ask] “Why did we talk like that, why do we think like that?”

General coursework and exploration in the major provided these students a chance to define new fields of interest and “break up” the categories of Social Sciences and behavioral Sciences, and continue the academic process of exploration via coursework that will lead towards a degree and vocational placement.

Senseless

It would be negligent to not include the comments and processes of sensemaking when students had not yet made (or could not make) sense of the coursework and degree they were pursuing. However, the process of sensemaking is conducted retroactively and in constant feedback loops (Weick, 1995). For the students that do not have a frame of reference for the skills learned as part of their Communication Studies program, they may simply not have been exposed to the environment where the skills are needed.

For example, the skills necessary to complete course assignments of reviewing and analyzing research articles were met with strong negative opinions from Participant 23 regarding the *usefulness* of such a skill.

I hate looking at research articles...I don't feel it's been beneficial at all; it causes me a lot of stress and I hate doing that. I hate creating a research proposal, I hate doing things like that, I hate having to search and find scholarly articles, I despise it, I don't want to do it, I don't want to read them because they make me—it's too stressful.

When prompted, the student explained that the “stress” of article analysis stemmed from a lack of understanding the academic writing, and the admittance that she did not see herself using the skills of article analysis in her future career. Therefore, she did not put the effort into

learning the skill of analysis of research articles and could not apply the skills outside the specific environment of the classroom. The process of sensemaking was completed, and the skill of analysis was relegated to the schema of ‘never-to-be-used-again.’

A small number of students were unable to identify *any* skills learned from their coursework in Communication Studies that could not be obtained through other experiences. Participant 12 relied on experiences obtained in her part-time job at a coffee shop to aid her VAS and expressed her dislike at not being able to easily connect her major with a future career.

I think the problem is if I was to go into the job market, it wouldn't be with my degree, it would probably be working in a small business or some sort. Or continuing with the coffee shop and maybe becoming a manager or something like that... I just don't see myself using my degree. And I want to because I have spent time doing it, and I enjoyed learning everything, and now I want to be able to apply it.

This student has progressed through stages of sensemaking and has concluded that the major of Communication Studies is inseparable from soft skills learned. Consequently, as the *major* does not have any place in her future, she does not parse out the *skills* as applicable, supporting the component of sensemaking that plausibility is placed higher than accuracy. In a similar situation, Participant 31, a graduating senior who is using his Communication degree to apply for law school, admits to not knowing how else his degree could be applied other than his chosen field (law) or in academia, where he has seen a demonstration of work from program alumni.

I've learned so many different things, but what I what I feel is, if I were to go into work and use the things I've learned through coursework, then my major is probably look like

me going to academia and being an instructor in some capacity, which I don't really want to do. I've never really felt I'd be a good teacher.

These comments shine light on the gaps in sensemaking of communication skills. The gaps present as opportunities for in-time interventions or benchmark assessments along the major path in academic affairs, in student affairs, or in both areas. In a drastic case, Participant 31 shared that he didn't feel he could rely on his major, should his given choice of law school not work in his favor: "I'm screwed because I have no I have no Plan B whatsoever." However, the majority of student participants were able to identify soft skills (communication) and a location of applicability in work, life, school, or a combination of these locations.

RQ3: Memorable Messages

Memorable messages provide frameworks for those in the sensemaking process and allow them to address uncertainties in their upcoming roles. For students in a career-ambiguous major, there is more uncertainty to be addressed. Students gathered messages under the umbrella of *professionalism* rather than vocation- or organization-specific. These memorable messages supported the importance of hard work, the importance of presence, place and movement in the workplace, and work as relational space (Table 3, below). Additionally, messages of exigency were identified as important, but were not considered memorable.

Table 3
<i>Memorable Messages</i>
Importance of hard work Characteristics Inspiring messages Conflicting messages
Importance of presence Physical Mannerisms

Place and movement in the workplace Degree required Internship required Hegemony
Work as relational space

Table 3

Memorable messages of the importance of hard work. Students gathered messages of characteristics they needed to have to be successful in their career. Some characteristics were modeled by immediate adult family and other characteristics were simply communicated as valuable. Additionally, non-familial adults provided inspiring messages that were identified as memorable or lasting.

Hard work was communicated to Participant 1 as valued above other skills: “My dad’s always told me that you don’t have to be that smart, but if you’re a hard worker, you’ll be all right.” Despite the communication from a parent that “hard work” was valued more than “smart,” this student still felt she needed to complete her undergraduate degree in order to be hireable into a future vocation. In a separate narrative, the imagery of owning a luxury item (beach house) left a more lasting impression on Participant 2 than platitudes.

[My teachers] always taught us “do something that you like it’ll make it a lot easier” and “do something that you’re good at.” And then one of my teachers said, “If you want a beach house, you’re going to have to work for a beach house because you’re never going to be happy with your job if you don’t get a beach house” and that sticks with me because I want a beach house.

This message of “achieving the beach house” provides a tangible goal for the student. By valuing an object as a symbol of financial attainment, she is validating the “hard work” required in a job that could *not* be easy or enjoyable.

Messages spoke to the inevitable nature of work as students heard they were “going to have to get a job someday” (Participant 4) and “there’s things that suck about work but you still have to do it” (Participant 1). Participant 15’s mother equated this job requirement with the pieces of life that required payment.

I was getting my driver’s license and so my mom was like “you need to get a job, because if you’re going to get a car, you need gas, and you need to pay for your gas and you’re not going to have money to go do things when you do have your license.” So, I got a job.

This message was heard from parents as well as educational institutions in the form of a faculty member. As part of course instruction, a Business Communication professor provided an exercise demonstrating how essential payment from a full-time job would be to sustaining life post-college.

I remember my Business Communication Professor, on the first day of class, went through all the expenses that we’re going to have to start [paying], like rent and car insurance, all that stuff, and then she said, “When you get a job, you’re gonna have to pay for all this stuff every month” and I was like “Wow that’s intimidating” (Participant 4). These messages say that work is a *requirement* of life, but actions and examples given speak more to the nature of financial stability and *provision* of life that are provided by employment. Students are equating the have-to nature of employment with financial independence.

While balancing the value of hard work in professional life, many immediate adult family members added the condition of focusing on school *while in* school and not getting a perceived head start on the job market. For Participant 8, this encouragement meant that she intentionally didn’t have a part-time job so she could “focus more on school,” and Participant 30 mentioned

her grandfather was so adamant she “put grades and career first than have a job” that he paid for her degree and provided her additional spending money. When Participant 13 decided to get a job, it resulted in a conflict with her father.

My dad didn’t like the idea to begin with because he wants me to focus on school and do well, because he knows that I want to go to law school. He’s happier that I only work every other weekend now; that’s a lot better for him. So that was a little challenging, but he’s okay with it now because I kind of demonstrated that I can manage both things.

This parent places emphasis on the current position of a student as more valuable to the future position of a lawyer, rather than the part-time job as a precursor to full-time employment responsibilities.

Many students expressed this conscious choice influenced by parents. Tension between “you need a job” and “focus on school” and the anxiety caused by those tensions was clearly expressed by Participant 20.

My parents literally said to me—I was talking to them about all the different things I’m trying to manage right now—and they said “Well, remember that your job is to be a student right now, to finish up the semester strong.” And, yes, it is, but there’s also all the stress and their other previous commentary that is “Make sure that you’re searching for a job, you don’t need to miss out on anything” but then there’s *this* contradictory commentary that’s “Remember just to focus on school right now, we’ll figure that out later.”

Other studies have revealed contradictory messages and practices during socialization processes (VanMaanen, 1973; DiSanza, 1995) and the additional sensemaking efforts that must be put forth by the employee in order to process through the stages of socialization. In this case, the

student must put forth additional mental effort in reconciling the conflicting messages from a single valued source (parents) in order to move through VAS.

Memorable messages of the importance of presence. Messages received in this category centered around how a professional should “look.” While no jobs were specified with this dress code, students made references to heels, suits, “business casual” (Participant 2), and “I won’t be wearing a bathing suit” (Participant 2). Participant 3 had a clearer message delivered by her mother when going for an interview at a local tavern: “My mom told me to dress for the job I want, and not the job I have, so I showed up in heels and a business casual dress.”

However, benefits in mentorship provide aid in the process of navigating these professional uncertainties. Participant 25 was faced with a situation that combined organizational power, hegemony, and unaddressed racial differences. As an intern at a local news station, she was approached by a supervisor about a personal style choice: her nose ring.

There was one instance where my news director, he asked me if I could take out my nose ring because he wasn’t sure how that would appear to our viewers and our watchers. And he said, “We have more traditional set of viewers” and he also was saying, “and this might help you when you go to other jobs and the news director looks at your reel, but they are distracted by your nose ring” or something like that. And...I kind of thought it was [nonverbal eyeroll] yes, because a nose ring, [but] mine is very... tiny it’s not a hoop, I don’t have the lip piercing or something shooting out of my eyebrow ...so I went to my mentor and she told me “You have to decide when you want to, and what you want to fight for”... and I felt I’ve had this nose ring for years, it’s never been a problem or an issue in any of my jobs. And it’s also a part of me, so why would I kind of stop being me to fall under this traditional view for our viewers and audience when no one really is

complaining about it either? So, I ended up, I don't take it out at all ...and then he actually never mentioned it to me again and I still wear it and he says nothing about it, so it obviously wasn't a big deal. But it's just things like that, where she told me, "Sometimes you're going to have to fight for or just defend certain things that you do, that's a part of you." So I feel she helps me with kind of being more confident in expressing how I've been treated or how I feel.

Mentorship such as this is *vital* for underrepresented students to work through the sensemaking process of new and uncomfortable situations (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005; Myers et al., 2011; Cranmer & Myers, 2017) as mentors provide low-risk access to institutional or vocational knowledge (Kalbfleisch & Davies, 1993). This student received guidance from a mentor in navigating a complex professional situation and took away the message of "You have to decide when you want to, and what you want to fight for" as a way to prioritize when to address conflict in the workplace.

The message of presence was not only how one looked, but also the manner in which one should act. Or, in the words of one participant: "My mom always said, 'fake it 'til you make it' and that's what I did in COM studies" (Participant 25). While the "it" or achievement level is undefined, the idea of persistence as an admirable quality can be extrapolated from this statement. For Participant 14, working at a kid's entertainment center, she made sense of customer interactions early in her first job in the interest of self-preservation, and created her own defense mechanism of "faking it."

That [job] was not necessarily a good experience for me, but it was valuable to me when I learned that...people coming into a store...they don't really care if they hurt your feelings sometimes...And sometimes you can't get really upset about that...there are so many

times when I was working at my first job, people were very rude, parents were very rude, I'd come home and cry about it and then at one point I was like "these people just don't understand that I'm also a human being so we're just not going to freak out about that anymore," and that was something that really kind of helped me later.

Students performing roles that were primarily customer-facing suffered the most verbal abuse at the hands of customers. Negative experiences and messages such as these are unfortunate pieces of the "real world" (Clair, 1996) but resilience on the part of the student led many to identify these as "valuable experiences" (Participants 9, 10, and 14) or "learning experiences" (Participants 1, 13, 18, and 19).

The importance of presence and presentation were also communicated through observable demonstrations of confidence. Upon recalling things she learned from her parents, Participant 12 mentioned risk-taking as a memorable *skill* translated into a lasting message.

My dad showed me how to take a risk, because when he started his business, he had to take a big loan out and he didn't know how it was going to go, he just bought the land and built the building just straight up. And that also resembles resilience to me in a way, that he took something that was nothing and made it into something and just kept pushing through. (Participant 12)

Both "resilience" and "risk taking" are not considered hard-skills but are soft-skills that can be acquired during VAS and applied to any vocation. This student is learning through observation, creating a message out of observational learning, and applying it to her future career goals in a separate vocation from where the action was originally observed.

Memorable messages of place and movement in the workplace. Messages of place included place in organizational hierarchy, opportunity for mobility within the hierarchy, and the

location of the workplace as joyful spaces. Parents chiefly identified a college degree as the great mobilizer (NCES.ED.GOV) and gateway to higher economic status. For Participant 25, her mother encouraged her to leave the state in which she grew up for her college experience (“She has always kind of been like, ‘There’s more than where we are.’”) and facilitated her geographic move in order to provide opportunity for her economic move.

Many students identified the college degree as an understood requirement to obtaining entrance to the professional world. In the words of Participant 23, a “big girl job” was one that was full-time and required a college degree to find. This message was also heard by Participant 15 when her mother stated that the steps to obtain a job were to “figure out where you would want to go first, and then figure out what type of degree you would need.” In Participant 15’s desire to be a counselor, she reached out to friends in graduate school about their path and received similar information of determining a career path (“counselor, not school psychologist”), following the trail back to degree requirements (“definitely a master’s degree”), and then school selection. The necessity of this plan for college attendance, or plan for life post-high school, was additionally impressed upon Participant 12.

My parents were like “look, if you want to go to college, go for it, if you don’t want to go to college, then you need some sort of plan otherwise.” For me, coming to college - especially with my dad going immediately to the Air Force and my stepdad going immediately into a trade - going to college is not an excuse to avoid work. You are still going to have to work hard to get there, you’re going to have to do your research and where you want to apply, you need to do the work in school so that you can get in, and they said “We need to figure out a plan for how we’re going to pay for it and what you’re going to do afterwards.”

In order to obtain the mobility afforded by a college degree, students viewed internships as required training to entering the full-time, post-collegiate workforce. The pre-vocation experience is not required in any formal capacity (by the university or identified employers), but messages of requirement from parents created additional stress on students.

I think my dad still has it in his brain that if I don't get an internship, I'm never getting a job... He's very like "get an internship" and I say "Okay, but also, no company is going to hire an intern when they just laid off all of their workers."⁵ (Participant 12)

Mentioned above in pre-vocation experiences as sources of socialization, the perception that "everybody has one" regarding internships was stressful for those who had yet to acquire the experience.

I feel I should have had at least one already, especially compared to people that are my age, my friends and stuff. I mean, all of them have had them, so I just feel I should have had one from the pressure of what my friends have done. But then also, just in the world, I feel I need one definitely before I get a job. Or *to get* a job, is just what I've been told, so it stresses me out that I have not had that experience (Participant 23).

These messages and situations combine to make a nerve-wracking situation for the students like Participant 23. Being told a college degree is needed for full-time employment, she joins a major that has popular student and employer reviews – Communication Studies. Upon completion of the major, she has not obtained an internship (not required for the program, but "required" for a full-time job) nor does she have a defined career area, both of which cause her great stress.

⁵ Referencing the economic downturn related to the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020.

Organizational hierarchy and the power of the established employee compared to the new hire struck fear into Participant 4 when her Communication Studies instructor reportedly said, “If you say something wrong at a board meeting, you could get fired.” These messages begin to bridge the gap from vocation/general messages into organizational/specific messages. The construct of a board meeting may not be present in all occupations, but the vocational message of “power is given to those with tenure” can be applied across multiple careers.

When remembering their first part-time job experiences, female students spoke of retail, customer service, food service, or lifeguarding jobs before belatedly adding childcare as a lesser-than employment option. “I got my first job I was 16 years old. Besides babysitting, of course, because everyone does that, *especially if you’re a female*” (Participant 22). No male students spoke of childcare experiences, supporting the message that childcare was relegated to young females. Referencing an earlier comment by Participant 23, her job in after-school care at an elementary school was “literally nothing and I hate it.” This equation of childcare or after-school care as “nothing” indicates the demeaning view directed at a primarily female-dominated field, completely unconnected to “real world” and a “big girl job.” On the other end of the scale, the vocation of advertising was perceived as a male-dominated field by Participant 21, who spoke of her nervousness to interact with higher-level managers as a new employee: “I do get intimidated, just because I know that [men are] probably the majority voice in the business world.” She continued to speak of her nerves when addressing someone “higher up,” but did not express these concerns with her direct supervisor, a female, and other females in the organizational structure.

However, the male view of this hegemonic structure and the changes in equal opportunity employment to include females in underrepresented fields was communicated in a much more negative way to Participant 6 by her father.

He's had struggles with his job...just the hierarchy because there's always somebody above somebody, or else they're all very biased...that's another thing he's warned me of, but he's like "you're a cute little girl, and so you'll be fine," but he's like "I'm just another man in the bunch." I may not have to encounter that as much as him, but we'll see.

Sources of these messages were identified as parents, but ambiguity surrounded the other perceived placement of gender roles in vocations, as students did not identify the *where* or *why* they had formed these preconceptions.

When faced with the juxtaposition of "have to get a job" and "it might suck," Participant 1 was provided this piece of advice: "Try to find a job that [you] enjoy because it makes it better." This message of the workplace as a space for joy became a theme in both verbalized message and observed actions. For Participant 6, this message came in the form of an observed action by her grandfather, who is a restaurant owner and her supervisor.

My grandfather has this passion, he loves the food industry, he thinks it's so much fun.

The best thing I learned, especially working with people I loved, was that it's very important to enjoy what you're doing. Because if you don't enjoy what you're doing, it's going to be miserable.

For this student, she saw work as a place of enjoyment and comradery rather than work as a requirement for sustaining life (as previously mentioned). Similarly, work was presented to some students as a place for more than just the task itself. Participant 12 spoke of a conversation with

her supervisor who led her to find a higher purpose or higher meaning in her menial job in kitchen prep at a summer camp.

I'm really grateful for the experience. It was just really neat to get to work with other college students and build those relationships, especially because I wasn't a counselor. The way it was phrased to me when I was like "Cook? You want me to be a cook? I don't cook anything! What do you mean?" They said, "Don't think of it as your purpose being here in the food that you're making. Yes, you're making food, so that we can all eat and that's awesome, but your purpose in being here is to really build the relationships with the people that are the same age as you and to be there for each other and minister to one another." That was just really neat for me and my faith to sort of recognize "Okay, maybe I'm not interacting with the kids as much as I thought I was going to, but I am interacting with these people and that's who I can focus on and that's who I can build those relationships with."

The message of work as a religion mission field was mentioned also by Participant 28 who spoke of his desire to work in worship ministry, but that his broad area of skill development in Communication allowed "...God to put me anywhere. I know I'm not that important." By viewing the vocation itself as a higher purpose, this student used his soft skills learned in the program to provide himself more mobility in his chosen field.

Vocation as an opportunity to express joy was seen in the *actions* demonstrated by a person of influence that translated to a memorable experience for the student, as the students themselves generated the message from actions observed. For example, a General Education professor outside of Communication Studies made an impact on Participant 5 with how he demonstrated passion in his job.

I had one professor freshman year that really made an impact on me. It was just a general ed, 100-level class, but he absolutely loved what he did! This was his second career coming back and being a professor. But he was so hungry to instill in us that work can be fun and you can love what you do and it doesn't have to be just a boring nine-to-five day all the time. He was like, "I get to do so much by working at this university and no day is ever the same." He was like, "You have to find something that you love, or else it is going to get boring and just the same thing, day in and day out." He was so passionate about what he did; he was always excited to share things with us and just to teach us.

Observational learning, as part of social learning theory (Bandura et al. 1966) speaks to the skill development in social modeling and observation of skills modeled by others. In the case of this professor, they are *modeling* desired qualities (joy, happiness, job fulfillment) that reinforce messages previously acquired by students of "find a job that you enjoy." Psychological theories have traditionally emphasized learning from direct experience as natural endowment provides humans with enabling biological systems but few inborn skills. These skills must be developed over long periods and altered to fit changing conditions over the life course. If knowledge and skills had to be shaped laboriously by trial-and-error experiences without the benefit of modeled guidance, human development would be greatly hindered, not to mention exceedingly tedious and hazardous. This translation of *action* into *message* has not previously been defined in academic work and will be discussed more in Chapter Five.

Memorable messages of work as relational space. Work may be a way to earn a life-sustaining wage, and potentially find enjoyment, but it is also a place that requires interpersonal skills. Consistent with the theme of observed actions translated as memorable messages, students

recognized the power of “knowing people” by watching their parents build their own careers and navigate life changes.

My mom really taught me how to stay determined and focused and to be patient. She was there 35 years, at [company], and she was seeing how the employees were getting fired and she was seeing how the whole place worked. And she went through times where she was just loaded with work, and time where work was a breeze, and she showed me how to stay really resilient. (Participant 11)

The actions of this parent provided an example of company loyalty, persistence, and resilience that translated as beneficial qualities necessary for professional work for Participant 11. The strength of networking and connection was identified by Participant 12 as she spoke of the demise of her mother’s personal training business when her family relocated: “I guess the exercise industry is a lot based on connections... at home, she was super connected to everybody in town, whereas now she’s in Florida [and doesn’t know anyone].”

Connections did not always equate with longevity in a specific company, but the ability to adapt to change by utilizing a support network. Participant 1 recognized the difference in how her parents approached their jobs and the use of networking in an industry.

Both of my parents are in the food industry. They both have a lot of mutual people that they’ve worked with. My dad’s been at the same company, but my mom has been at probably six different places. So, all those people that she’s met helped her all along the way. The relationships you make are really important because they might help you.

The value of partnerships, networking, relationships, and connections were communicated through named sources of parents, but also unnamed sources. Participant 24 commented on “that saying,” not giving a source, but implying that everyone knew the phrase.

You know how there's that saying, "It's not about what you know, it's about who you know," and I feel by being able to make good connections, make a good impression, I feel that could get you pretty far in life.

Participant 4 referred to the ubiquitous "it's who you know" mentality when speaking of her first job as a page at the Rhode Island State House: "I got that through a connection. I knew someone who knew someone—*obviously that's how it goes a lot*—and then when I worked there again, it's because I knew the people" (emphasis added). These word-of-mouth references were more valuable than "having to blindly trust something off LinkedIn" (Participant 30). College provided more opportunities to expand the network of students who were out-of-state.

I have friends that are from Alabama and then you go home with them, you meet other people. It's just all *about knowing people* because it can really help you out later on, if you end up somewhere where you need someone to put in a good word for you (Participant 1) (emphasis added).

However, negative messages based on stereotypes and colloquialisms resonated with students just as much as positive messages. As a part of Gen Z (Parker & Igielnik, 2020), these students face stereotypes from faceless sources of the internet, social media, and pop culture in general. However, Participant 16 saw no problem with this new operation.

That's something they say about the younger generations: "They don't care, they'll just find a new job when they're unhappy." And that is kind of how I feel. If I'm unhappy, I'll stay there as long as I'm getting paid, and as long as I don't have something else; and then I'll find something else and leave.

Not as confident in how to address a situation of unhappiness in her first job after graduation, Participant 18 saw value in company dedication as well as prioritization of self.

I know people who have experienced [not liking their job], and they've quit, and I don't really think that's the right thing to do. But I see both sides. I see wanting to be happy with what you're doing, but I think it's your first job—you might just need to stick it out a little bit. So, I probably would try at least a year, and if I'm still not happy, then move on to something else.

These messages of professionalism and “what makes a good employee” aid students in the vocational anticipatory socialization process as they are able to adapt general messages (hard work, dedication, loyalty, resilience) to future specific organizational encounters.

The most vivid experience and communicated message to students of the job world post-college was simple: People are mean. From part-time job experiences in customer service (Participant 15) and floral design (Participant 16) to the “suck it up buttercup” world of a barista (Participants 12 and 19), students were told to expect the harsh reality of inconsiderate customers, co-workers, and supervisors, and unfortunately, several had already experienced this personally. For Participant 2, she made sense of the inconsiderate actions of her supervisors as a learning experience in what to look for in future employment.

I feel like the most important lesson I learned was my very first job. I didn't realize the bosses were just horrible. I didn't have a car, I was 14 or 15, and they'd call me and they'd be like, “I need you here for a shift in 20 minutes” and I'd say “I can't get there in 20 minutes.” It wasn't my shift. And I didn't know that was wrong. I learned very quickly “do not get a job like that; do not have a manager like that.”

This student created her own message of “do not get a job like that” by observing the actions of supervisors at her current job. She is taking experiential learning opportunities and forming her *own* memorable message from the interaction. This one-sided communication allows

for a message *decoder* and no room for message *encoding*. While this presents chances for misinterpretation, the process of sensemaking and utilization of memorable messages relies on the previous schema constructed by the individual *doing* the sensemaking and what makes most sense *to the individual*.

RQ4: What employable skills are Communication Studies students learning?

All students who participated in this study were located at a single university, allowing for commonalities across classroom experiences. While catalog descriptions and sample syllabi provided insight on communication skills as planned learning outcomes, this study focuses primarily on the students’ perceived learned skills. Many students identified their skills in generalities, such as “good communication skills” and “more well-rounded.” Students’ perceived learned skills are grouped as three primary areas: (1) business and professional skills, (2) interpersonal skills, and (3) content creation skills. These areas and specific skills are detailed in Table 4.

Table 4	
<i>Perceived Skills Learned</i>	
Business and Professional	Public Speaking Audience Analysis Intraorganizational communication Small Group communication Client communication
Interpersonal	Impression Management Cultural Awareness Listening
Content Creation	Professional written communication Social Media campaigns Creative media

Table 4

Business and Professional. Students saw many parallels in the content and skills learned in class and future vocational application, despite the occupation-ambiguous career paths for

Communication Studies majors. A small number of students had vocations in mind, but all participants spoke of skills that would be applicable in a number of professional settings, allowing them entrance and setting them up for success in the working world. For example, Participant 24 was confident of her major choice at the end of her academic career, saying, “Honestly, I feel with any career that I go into I will definitely carry out all of the skills that I’ve learned in all these classes, regardless of what it is.”

The soft skills of Communication Studies were a part of what drew students to enroll the program. Participant 8, interested in the automotive industry, was unable to find a specific major at the institution that served his career needs. He opted for the soft skills of communication that he knew would be widely applicable: “I know that a lot of future employers do like communication majors because our major is very versatile.” Participant 30 spoke from her perspective as an undergraduate communication consultant and the occupational versatility of communication.

I think that every single job you have, you need to be able to communicate and communicate well. I give so many workshops to students in so many different majors and classes about the importance of being able to communicate.

While learning and applying content from her Communication classes, Participant 30 received validation of her knowledge from outside sources: clients who told her these skills were valuable and who wanted to learn more. Outside validation increased her confidence and clarity in skills learned within the major.

Skills learned as part of the communication coursework, specifically mentioned in the course of “Business and Professional Communication,” were applied to professional jobs and professional behavior as a whole instead of a vocation-specific area. Participant 8 mentioned she

was able to take away knowledge of “certain things I didn’t think about when I would have to go into the professional world, little things like email etiquette or how you should act in an interview.” These “little things” such as interviews are not specific to career areas but are entry requirements for all professions. These general professional skills highlight the area of *anticipatory* socialization prior to the choosing of vocation or occupation, in which students delineate between professional and unprofessional behaviors (Clair, 1996). Of these behaviors, the interview experience is a required event.

In order to deepen understanding of these broader behaviors and defining professionalism, I explore more specific categories of public speaking, audience analysis, intraorganizational communication, small group communication, and client communication.

Public Speaking. The learned skill most commonly associated with the Communication Studies program is the ability to speak clearly and confidently in a public setting. As public address is not limited to a specific vocation, students found the skill “speaking in front of large groups” (Participant 23) as applicable to their as-yet-undetermined future career goals. Participant 29 highlighted the importance of the public speaking class, even outside of the requirements of their major.

I definitely think I have some extremely valuable skills that I don’t think I would have gotten in another department, especially public speaking. Public speaking is a huge thing. Even though that course isn’t required⁶, it just helps so much.

For some students, this public speaking ability was defined within the broader sense of *confidence*. Participant 11 defined these skills as “being able to speak confidently in front of a

⁶ While the public speaking course mentioned is required for some degree programs at the university, it is also offered as a general education or core curriculum choice, allowing students from disciplines outside Communication Studies to gain the skills of public address.

crowd. Even just one-on-one, being able to speak confidently.” For Participant 20, confidence was related to “outgoingness.” But confidence in the ability to speak publicly was also clearly articulated as being different from *liking* the act of public speaking:

Public Speaking was my first COM class ever, and I was terrified of the class. But from then to now, definitely, I’ve just become more comfortable speaking with people about really anything. I definitely have seen it grow... It’s not fun, because I still don’t love it, but it’s gotten better. (Participant 23)

Confidence was additionally demonstrated as transferrable skill when speaking to others with positional authority. Addressing her skills learned in the Communication program, Participant 17 says:

I can definitely make a mean presentation! I have gotten a lot better at public speaking, and not just public speaking, but just *speaking*. I’m typically very anxious when I’m speaking to my superiors and stuff that, and I still am anxious, but I know how to portray confidence instead of looking an anxious 20-year-old.

Within this statement, the student is able to identify their own apprehension, but also how to “act” around the personal anxiety when addressing audiences with power differentials, taking this skill out of the classroom and into the occupational realm.

Participant 4 identified public speaking and confidence in public address as skills assisting her with other major coursework. When asked what skills she learned from the Communication program, she replied:

I think just developing my public speaking skills and my public speaking confidence. At the beginning of freshman year, giving presentations to my Poli Sci classes, I was deathly afraid. I think the public speaking course was my steppingstone because for our final

speech I went up, completely blanked, had to leave the room, and come back and do it again, which I think is the most scarring experience of my college. After that, nothing can faze me anymore. I'm always participating in class now, and I'm not afraid to give presentations, and I think that is definitely such an important skill.

By experiencing the worst that could happen in a communication studies classroom setting, the student was able to reduce uncertainty and build skills for future public speaking experiences. The public speaking activity in her Communication coursework allowed her to address apprehension and fear of speaking that was required in other classes.

Different mediums of public speaking were mentioned, as students identified new challenges presented by mediated communication and technology.

I've learned how to be a more confident speaker, even through Zoom. Sometimes the audience won't have their cameras on or anything so they can't see my face. So I really have to convey and project myself through my voice only, which is a weakness of mine. I'm not a strong vocal communicator, so making sure I do that has also been really important for me to focus on. (Participant 21)

Participant 5 commented on the difficulties in her online Public Speaking course, stating she was *more* nervous communicating through computer-mediated communication "because I feel like it was very easy for you to hide behind like your Zoom camera." The format of this video communication platform (Zoom) meant the student had a more distracted audience to entertain ("I could see them looking off screen") and more nonverbal language to combat ("I didn't want it to look like I was reading").

Additionally, Participant 21 mentioned the speaking skills they used by doing classes through mediated contexts assisted them with an internship, showing direct impact on

professional socialization. This awareness of vocal limitation (strong speaker) and the visual limitations of technology in the classroom provides the environment for the student to gain confidence working against these limitations and apply the skills professionally.

Public speaking was identified in conjunction with other skills, such as small group communication (Participant 21 - below), critical decision making (Participant 6 – “having to debate as a team”), or professional dress (Participant 31 – “first impression of professionalism, if I’m dressed nice”). Participant 21 recognized the likelihood of team presentations in her future career:

Public speaking classes I think are really helpful, and we are always going to have to do presentations or pitches or something like that. A lot of it is collaborative work, even small group communication; that’s really important as well. I also learned what business casual attire is through all these presentations and stuff, which is also really helpful for me.

The student identifies the value of learning a skill in coursework that she will use in her career (presentations), as well as collaborative work common in team environments and the expectations of formal dress in a professional setting.

Outside of the ability to portray confidence, multiple students mentioned the nonverbal trait of “making eye contact” during presentations and conversations to enhance delivery (Participant 1, 6, 9) and “intentional movement” (Participant 9). For Participant 9, he expands this practice of eye contact from formal presentations to individual conversations and future staff meetings.

I started thinking about when I speak, making a conscious effort - if I’m speaking to multiple people - to really focus in on each person and almost have 100 mini-

conversations with each of them, and really try to engage them. Because it goes a lot better. You can learn a lot about how you're doing, I think, just by looking at people. That translates to one-on-one... I'm terrible and I'm trying to get better... but eye contact in one-on-one conversations I think is very underrated. That's what I have learned, just being very intentional about the little things when communicating with other people. Because they go a long way, I think. Posture and body language - if you're sitting in class kinda slumped, it says a very different thing than if I'm here with my notes out, ready to go when teacher walks in. I don't know if they always notice that, but I think there's a chance that they do. And I think that that'll translate to the real world as well. It's one thing to be in a meeting and kind of not making eye contact with people and sit on your laptop and just check your email and whatnot and but I think especially as a new hire that if you're sitting there with your notepad and your notes and you look presentable and you're sitting up straight and looking at everybody who's talking, I think that goes a long way.

This student makes cognitive leaps between eye contact during speaking to eye contact during listening and how both skills are seen as a professional. He alludes to the limitation of inexperience in an organization and how it can be overcome by confidence in these communication skills. These responses collectively support the idea that one key skill from communication studies courses gained and applied towards professional socialization is public speaking, widely applied in professional contexts.

Audience Analysis. Communication accommodation was identified as a learned skill in the program as well, applicable to areas outside of public address. Articulated by Participant 20, the skill of “considering your audience” increased the likelihood of a well-received message: “I

need to consider the background of an individual or group that I'm communicating with and how can I accommodate my communication so that this audience is going to best receive what I'm trying to say."

For Participant 20, still career-undefined, the skills of analyzing the audience and accommodating communication was a key to success. Other students had direct vocational application of this skill and mentioned politics, sales, law, history, and education administration as fields where this skill could be put to use. For Participant 17, she began developing this skill through courses of rhetorical analysis:

I've taken a lot of rhetoric classes, which comes in handy when you're reading newspaper articles all day every day, and trying to make sense of them and put them in context. So I definitely think that it's been useful for me, especially if I want to enter into the public history realm where I'm taking all this super technical research and then trying to present it to a 5-year-old who walks in the museum.

Through the process of document analysis, research synthesis, and audience analysis, this student combines her skills learned in order to communicate with different stakeholders about her "super technical research" and create understanding in the ambiguous field of public history. Participant 19 additionally connected audience analysis and rhetorical analysis:

I focus primarily on rhetoric. Presuming I'm in education administration, I will be in position where I will be engaging with others frequently, but for the most part, it will largely be me addressing an audience. Rhetoric is obviously crucial to that, and understanding how my words influence others and how my specific choices of words and delivery and all of that will influence others is key.

By the focus on “rhetoric” instead of “public speaking,” this student is emphasizing the art of persuasion and public address, rather than the individual components that portray confidence or consideration of the audience. Participant 3 defined this as “knowing how people work” so they “know what people want to hear, how to listen to them, and how to understand them” and therefore expanding the situation of public address to audience reciprocation and interaction as components of effective communication. Participant 23 sums up all of these components:

It’s important to learn different ways to cater what I’m saying to specific audiences so that whatever it is, they can understand it better or so that I get the point across. I think that is probably one of the biggest things that I have learned that will help me in the future, just because no matter what your job is, literally anything, you can use that principle. And you probably will need to use it, and if you already know it before you enter the professional world, then it’s going to be a lot better for you.

Identifying public speaking, audience analysis, communication accommodation, and the importance of these skills in broad vocational terms creates the space for this student to combine skills and facilitate complex learning and applications. Overall, many participants felt accommodation was a professionally applicable skill learned during the communication studies program that they felt could help them in their careers and ease the process towards assimilation.

Intraorganizational communication. Skills in the intraorganizational category encompassed those that were beneficial to functioning within an organization and communicating to others within that organization. These skills are more suited to organizational encounters than anticipatory socialization; however, because students identified these skills outside a specific vocation, they are considered part of the workplace anticipatory socialization process. Identified within this subtheme were anticipated common miscommunication errors in

the workplace, differentiation between work/peer relationships and appropriate communication behaviors, and the communication involved in supervisor/subordinate relationships from both power perspectives.

Workplace miscommunications present as a variety of issues (sexual harassment, deadlines, responsibilities, etc., as mentioned by participants) but Participant 22 specifically mentioned sexual harassment language awareness as pertinent to her future in human resources.

Sexual harassment is a big issue because a lot of workplaces have a lot of miscommunications that go on... it's definitely an issue. It was so interesting actually to learn about it [in class] and how to deal with sexual harassment, or how to talk to someone who looks like they're in distress, how to talk to your superiors...

Sexual harassment training and awareness is a component of many courses in the Communication Studies curriculum, although this student spoke of her experiences from an organizational communication approach. By approaching "miscommunication" as the problem, she is able to apply her knowledge of organizational communication in a tense environment that could occur in any workplace.

Awareness of workplace-appropriate conversation topics was also mentioned by Participant 12 as a skill as part of her Communication coursework. She applied concepts from her interpersonal class in the context of the interoffice relationships she currently encountered:

It is pretty interesting to think about my interpersonal class and identifying the difference between the relationships of them being a manager versus them being my friend. Sort of thinking about, "Well, yes, this is my friend, but also, this is my coworker..." Sort of needing to-- not draw the line, but understand when I'm at work, "Yes, they are my

friend, and I enjoy talking to them, but sometimes I just need to talk to them as my coworker.”

Participant 12 goes on to talk about the differences in personal conversations that build comradery in the workplace and work-specific conversations that were task-oriented. By separating out these types of conversations, she is more prepared for the differing relationships in a professional setting. Participant 6 further defines these differences in her experience working in a family-owned restaurant: “personal” is how she interacts with the customers, providing a friendly and welcoming atmosphere while “chatting and goofing off” is how she interacts with co-workers. These designations between conversations help the cognitive divide of “workplace” and “social.”

Participants 18 and 25 spoke to the differences in personal and professional communication. For Participant 18, the “level” of respectful communication expected in a workplace is different than outside of the workplace: “How you would talk differently to your best friend than you would to your employer or your co-workers...there’s just a different level of respect or formality.” Participant 25 defines this difference as a line instead of level: “COM Studies kind of made me realize how there should be a line between being professional and being friendly, and you have to know where to draw that line and how you communicate with people.” Both of these students recognize differences in communication and identify the specific awareness of setting and appropriateness as a learned skill.

Participant 28 recognized the different relationships in the context of his place of future employment: a church with multiple departments and stakeholders.

I think [I will be] in constant communication with those in charge, and knowing that “I am the employee here, I am not as high in the pecking orders as they are.” And just being

in communication with them, and then being able to communicate well with the church [congregation].

This student speaks to the expectation of hierarchy in the organization and that he will be charged with communication information to multiple directions. When addressing this concern, the student goes on to say that the awareness of the different stakeholders changes how he delivers information, a skill that he learned in a communication class.

Relationship differences were identified from the superior/subordinate perspective as well as the peer-to-peer perspective. Power differentials between roles of supervisor and subordinate were identified, as well as experience within the company and demographic age in the peer-to-peer relationship. Participant 16 spoke of knowledge learned in her course on organizational communication and management styles, translating it to skills of organizational role awareness.

That class definitely helped me understand my bosses a lot more, and how they approached me. Especially always being the youngest person in a workplace environment, even when the people around you maybe don't have degrees or stuff like that, they will approach you differently. So it's just like, 'How you can be a part of an organization' and what role you play in everything. I think that really opened my eyes to that...I actually tell I tell people when I'm in interviews that I took a class on that, and they're like 'Oh!' [laughs]."

This particular student had a defined career path of public and environmental service, but identified skills learned in her communication coursework that would permit her to assimilate more smoothly into a specific organization once she understood the role structure.

Power differences of supervisor/subordinate were also identified as students saw themselves in the role of the supervisor. Upon revisiting their decision to pursue Communication Studies as a major, Participant 5 said:

It stuck out to me to do COM studies because I thought it'd be an important one day to have people working under me, and I should be able to understand how to defuse a conflict between employees or be able to accurately communicate effectively with my staff and manage people in a better way.

Instead of identifying a field of human resources or human management, this student classifies conflict resolution as a communication skill, generalizing that a key point of management is “to be able to accurately communicate effectively with my staff” (Participant 5).

Role transitions within an organization are events that require reorientation or socialization while a part of the same organization (Jablin, 2001). Changes such as leadership transition are specifically identified. Participant 28 applied intraorganizational communication and interoffice relationships by envisioning the anticipated situation of leadership transition.

There was something in class about transitioning leadership to somebody else, which was a season I thought I was going to find myself in around this time, but it's looking like that's not going to happen, thankfully. But that was the thing that I thought I was going to have to be doing as far as transitioning and giving somebody else the keys and, “What does passing the baton look like?” I think that was just a big thing for me, as far as letting go of pride, and realizing when the time comes for me to step away, to learn how to do that with grace and do that with dignity. And that part of that course kind of show me practical ways in which to do that.

Identifying the “practical” skill of leadership to the action of organizational communication provides the application of soft skills to a specific career area, in this case, ministry and pastoral transition. Overall, many participants felt a strong skill gained during their communication studies courses was how to gauge and practice appropriate intraorganizational behavior.

Small group. Vocational skills learned regarding interaction in the workplace also focused specifically on small-group interaction. Students referred to this as “working with others” (Participant 4), “working in teams” (Participant 29), and “collaboration with co-workers” (Participant 11). These skills focus on working with others, while other skills were learned *as a result* of working with others. Participant 11 cited “critical decision making” as a skill that would help during this collaboration, while Participants 21 and 28 cited “time management” as a skill for team communication: “If you are having trouble, you’re not gonna be able to perform as well if you don’t communicate that, or if you can’t get something in on time, you can communicate that and have it not be a problem” (Participant 28).

Even the often student-dreaded assigned group projects were mentioned as effective tools for learning applicable skills. Participant 29 learned how to work “effectively” with others, stating, “There’s nothing I hate more than working on group projects, but [class] really helped me just focus on that and be able to pull theories and my skills and knowledge.” However, the feeling of dread when working with others in an assigned team was viewed as an internal struggle; Participant 4, who used emotion management when working with teams, wrestled with this struggle:

If I was having a bad day or if I didn’t really want to [be there], I’ve kind of worked on hiding that or being in a good mood for work or whatever. I kind of worked on... I learned to handle my emotions in a professional setting.

These students all referenced the separation of emotion and workplace and identified separation, or face management, as a skill learned in the classroom that could be practiced in a professional setting. Small group communication and functional communication as a group member was a primary skill students cited in their socialization during their major courses.

Client communication. Skills in this area expanded past intraorganizational communication and included techniques for creating effective communication climates with clients by utilizing verbal and nonverbal awareness. While these skills (eye contact, public address, etc.) were identified in the larger context of general professionalism, these comments specifically place the skills in the environment of client interaction. Participant 1 cited both eye contact with client and awareness of body language of customer as important in the sales relationship, while Participant 27 spoke of interviews and observations as “actual skills you can use in the future.” Participant 20 identified “being able to talk to people” as a learned skill that valuable enough to brought up in a job interview.

Being able to talk to people, I feel that’s so important, and I feel that’s something that can be especially helpful in interviews. I feel a main facet of a successful organization in general is just being able to communicate within the organization, but then also this effective communication outside of the organization, so that you can connect with clients.

(Participant 20)

The student shows awareness of the importance and differentiations of both intraorganizational and extraorganizational communication with stakeholders. Similarly, Participant 21 identified learning “life skills” of maintaining relationships, saying it affects professional interaction “when I’m making these connections, not to *just* make that connection, and then leave it, but make sure you keep the relational aspect going and maintain it with them.”

In line with the theme of learned skills that are applicable outside a specific vocation, Participant 14 identified the learned skill of conversation.

Being in these classes has kind of made me more comfortable with talking to people. I feel like in any business, you have to be able to just openly talk to people about things that you're doing in whatever career. And I didn't necessarily learn that from a book, but throughout learning about all of it has just kind of opened me up with communicating. “Comfort” in communication, or communication apprehension, is an oft-studied topic, given in this instance as conversation, small-talk, or relationship-building communication, instead of formal public address or written communication.

By viewing all experiences in a range of communication classes, Communication students built an awareness of conversation topics, audience analysis, and communication accommodation. Overall, students felt these skills would benefit them in any profession. These categories – public speaking, confidence, audience analysis, intraorganizational, small group, and client-facing communication – were the most frequently mentioned business and professional skills gained in the communication studies program by participants.

Interpersonal Skills. Interpersonal skills are the means by which human relationships are formed, navigated, negotiated, and conflict is resolved (Knapp & Daly, 2011). Students mentioned broad skills of “being a good/effective communicator” and “well-rounded” as skills learned that could be applied in future vocations. These nebulous concepts were further defined in terms of interpersonal communication, and skills that sometimes expanded outside of the workplace. Students were able to identify skills of impression management, cultural awareness, and listening.

Impression Management. In this context, first impressions involved both verbal and nonverbal communication awareness. First impressions were considered “very, very valuable” (Participant 7), a feeling that was shared by a number of students. Interviews were given as the context for first impressions, and the skills of conversation and etiquette when “going into the professional world” (Participant 8). Participant 7 identified these skills as “good conversation.”

Like, when you’re meeting people that you don’t know, learning how to approach people or learning how to greet them, and not have this not-so-short conversation to where they feel like you don’t want to talk to them, but have a *good* conversation. (Participant 7)

Participant 30 echoed this sentiment of effective communication as a tool for power and connection, as well as in the context of the interview.

Being an effective communicator, I think, will always set you apart, and people are going to remember you. When they walk away from an interview with you, or just a networking opportunity with you, they’re going to remember. Sometimes they’re like “Wow, that person’s a really good communicator; they speak well; they hold themselves well.” How we show up verbally and nonverbally is going to be so beneficial. If you can do it well for any job that you want... I truly believe that’s going to be a thing that sets me apart, my communication. And not just knowing how to write a news story, or have my camera angle, or what rhetoric is but, in any space that I’m in, communicating verbally and nonverbally very well, I think, will set me apart.

This student valued the skill of effective communication, a soft skill, *above* the hard or technical skills learned in her vocation-specific classes.

Cultural Awareness. The positionality and perspective that comes from an individual’s background, beliefs, cultural upbringing, racial identification, and socio-economic status has an

effect on their professional interactions. Popular events and popular culture shape this perspective and how young professionals bring this knowledge into the workplace. At the time of this data-gathering, the Black Lives Matter movement, as well as hate crimes against Asian-Americans, were frequent topics of conversation in classroom settings due to their prevalence in media. Students recognized the application from classroom discussions to being culturally aware in everyday life. Awareness of self in the cultural context was a skill learned by Participant 18, who said, “I really think that my intercultural communications class last semester was really timing-wise important for me to take, and also, just the way that I grew up...it was really important for me to take it.” Participant 7 spoke of the critical listening skills learned when studying diversity, unsure how to classify her skill: “I don’t know that can go into the category of white fragility or racism or things like that, but I feel I can pick up on those things a lot more now.”

Cultural awareness also included gender diversity and inclusion. Participant 13 comments, “I’ve learned to be gender neutral... so instead of saying, ‘She, who made the coffee,’ you would say, ‘The barista’ and talk about their position.” Classifying this as “academically phrasing things,” the student goes on to say this language choice is better suited for the workplace and equates this selection with professionalism. Participant 17 says the controlled classroom environment, facilitated by a faculty member, allowed her to “have these open conversations about race, gender sexuality, all these things that are typically really, really tense conversations” and provided her with a vocabulary and knowledge of how to approach these tense conversations in her professional life, should they arise.

Listening. Interpersonal skills learned were not limited to verbal communication but included the conversation skills of listening. Different from the physical act of hearing, where

information is received, this skill refers to the active process of receiving and decoding information from a sender. For Participant 5, listening and comprehension are critical skills: “It’s important to be able to comprehend what someone else is saying. Rather than just listen all the time, you need to actually *understand* what they’re saying.”

Leadership skills tend to lean towards those that are proactive and aggressive (indeed.com) but Participant 20 considers the skill of listening as a key piece of leadership that will be essential for her professional goals.

I feel like I’ve learned a lot about how to conduct interpersonal communication well, specifically with one other individual. I feel I can actively listen and also formulate a response that is thoughtful and really acknowledges everything that they have said. And I feel I’ve learned how to lead with...I don’t know if I want to use the word ‘personality’, but with this form of leadership that can be well-received, and people are willing to listen to someone who is also willing to listen to them.

Participant 3 speaks of listening as a *professional* skill that must be developed over time, relating experience to the skill: “I think that’s a developed process that takes probably most of our lives to completely develop.” The professional goal of counseling is where Participant 15 found the direct application to the skill of listening.

I feel COM has really helped me a lot better understand people and better analyze people ... I really love how it kind of helps you just understand people and get why people are the way they are. I feel that if I was to end up being a counselor, listening to people and analyzing their situation could help...it’s kind of helped me to become a better listener and a better advice giver.

Participant 20 and 15 identified interpersonal skills that have helped them personally as well as have the chance to be applied in a future workplace.

Content Creation. Students expressed more confidence in their ability to create content as they gained both hard and soft skills from communication coursework and course interaction. Most students referred to written communication as social media or email etiquette. Participant 16 said, “Communication Studies professors are also very uptight about what your email should look like to them, so email etiquette isn’t a problem.” Through this exposure to high professionalism standards, the student feels prepared for written professional communication in the workplace setting.

When asked about his ability to work outside his chosen field (worship ministry), Participant 28 identified written communication skills learned:

To be perfectly honest with you, most of the assignments we had in COM Studies - aside from in the public speaking class – weren’t really speaking; it was a lot of writing.

Having to do all these assignments that require writing has made me a much better writer over the years, and so if I was to lose the voice box or something where I wasn’t able to verbally communicate, I think I could still hold my own just fine in a written medium.

Recognizing the value of oral communication in his chosen field is important, but confidence in other skills learned provides a backup plan for this student.

Written communication was a secondary skill learned in classes according to students. Participant 4 spoke of her Research Methods course. She says, “[I] could tell my writing is getting better, especially now I’m in the Capstone class,” where major writing assignments were required.

Content creation skills also spanned creative media and campaigns for Participant 1:

I've learned more about social media. I try to apply that when I'm making posts...I've learned about keeping them simple and trying to have something like a call to action on there to get people to not just scroll past it.

This student utilizes her skills of content creation, not just creative media, to create persuasive customer messaging and can articulate this skill for future employers.

Even content analysis was a skill learned by Participant 15, stating "I feel I can very much analyze not only people a lot better but also, artifacts movies, songs, works of writing, stuff that, essays... I feel I can understand the meaning of it more." This skill does not translate to a specific vocation but shows widely applied analysis techniques that build on the foundations of rhetoric. Overall, students felt being able to effectively and persuasively create content was another skill set they gained from communication studies that would assist them in future careers.

RQ5: What are skills Communication Studies students feel they are lacking?

Students were predominately satisfied with the skills learned as part of the Communication Studies curriculum but were able to identify skills they wished they had learned more about. These have been divided into soft skills, or those included in the departmental curriculum, and hard skills, or those skills that are outside the current departmental curriculum (Table 5, below).

Table 5	
<i>Skills Lacking</i>	
Soft Skills	Confidence Listening Conflict Management
Hard Skills	Technology Occupation/Organization-specific

Writing
Supplement Outside Curriculum

Table 5

Soft Skills. Students were asked about perceived gaps in their education or how they felt unprepared for life after graduation. While the majority of participants stated no concerns in life as a soon-to-be Communication Studies alumnus, a few students mentioned soft skills they felt were underdeveloped. Participants 2, 6, and 7 mentioned a lack of *confidence* in their abilities. Participant 2 was “not read to go out into the world and get a job yet” while Participant 7 said “I feel every time I look at jobs, I just don't feel qualified” but followed up her statement with the realization, “I have to remind myself, ‘A lot of times they're going to train you to do these things.’” Both participants connected this lack of confidence with the broad nature of the Communication major, citing struggles with where to begin the job search process. For Participant 6, a lack of confidence was related to speaking in public: “I think the one place that I personally struggle is just my confidence level, learning how to be confident in my abilities, learning how to be confident when I’m speaking.” These comments were interesting, given that other students (for example, Participants 4, 17, and 23) cited “confidence” in public speaking, content creation, and professional writing as learned skills, in direct contradiction to the participants above who did not feel they gained these skills. This dichotomy further emphasizes that students develop at different paces (Chickering’s Theory of Identity Development, in Evans et al. 2010). This dichotomy is expanded by Participant 3 who wanted to develop more skills in listening and understanding; these skills were specifically mentioned by Participants 5, 15, and 20 as skills *learned*, further illustrating the point that not all students develop skills at the same degree.

Conflict management was the only skill specifically mentioned as not learned by Participant 5 (“I want to learn more about how to defuse like a conflict between employees or be able to accurately communicate effectively with your staff and manage people in a better way”) who viewed conflict management *in the context* of work, and Participant 14 (“I kind of would like to learn more in-depth about communicating in hostile environments... where if you're in this situation, and it is not going right, what you can do to alleviate that situation”) who viewed conflict management and negotiation *as a profession* of work.

Hard Skills. The discipline of Communication Studies focuses primarily on soft skills (persuasion, listening, teamwork, etc.) that can be transferred to any vocation. However, students in the Communication Studies program at the specific institution studied felt they needed *hard skills* to complete their education and be competitive in the job market. Comments are grouped into themes of technology, occupational and organization-specific, and writing.

Never explicitly defined, students used the word “technology” to describe software programs they had seen or been exposed to, and assumed they would need knowledge of, during their higher education. Participant 13 broadly stated, “I want to get a better understanding of technology and learning how to use it all more efficiently,” while Participant 20 identified “Excel” (Microsoft Office product) as a skill expected to be used in her profession: “I don’t know how to use Excel. I took a whole class on it, and I don’t remember how to do it! I have this fear of being expected to already be skilled in these things.” Participant 20 had yet to identify a vocation field post-graduation, but already had the expectation that this software skill was going to be needed and was scared of her deficiency. As training in this software is outside the Communication Studies curriculum, it is unclear as to how this student formed this expectation,

but as she equated her major with preparing her for the workforce, she felt this hard skill was a significant gap in her education.

Ultimately, Participant 4 captured the reason for this deficit: “[I’ve developed] all the interpersonal skills, clearly the public speaking skills, not much the technology, because *that’s not really what we do* (emphasis added).” Although Participant 4 acknowledged that learning these skills is not the purpose of the Communication Studies program, the desire to learn these hard skills was still present.

Students also referenced software programs that were specific to occupations or organizations. Participant 27 spoke of a desire to improve specific skills in Adobe Creative Suite and “all the different software” to help complete his education in the “technical aspects” of his perception of the field of communication. Similarly, Participant 22 spoke of social media marketing software (Hootsuite), client management systems (MailChimp), and software analytics (Google analytics) - all software that are specific to marketing and sales. This student went on to say that those skills were needed to be a “Communication Specialist,” an occupation that utilizes content creation for marketing messaging.

Lastly, some students felt they needed more skill development in speech writing. Most participants felt their public speaking acumen was a skill *gained* in their program of study, but these participants spoke specifically to message or content creation as skill *lacking*. Participant 4 felt a need to “learn how to prepare speeches more, because...I feel I’m not really grabbing the audience's attention or writing a good speech,” while Participant 20 acknowledged she was lacking general writing knowledge “outside of research summaries and literature reviews.”

Outside the curriculum. A few students found clarity in the option of a double major or additional minors to supplement their communication learning and provide vocational direction.

The curriculum in Communication Studies (Business Communication, Relational Communication, Rhetoric, etc.) is a helpful add-on for students who initially found meaning in the Sciences, Humanities, Business, or Mass Communications.

I'm able to communicate what I'm doing in Geography, so I love Communication Studies...I loved that part of my degree, but it's just...to me it was more giving me skills, and then the Geography was really more specialized in what I want to do and what's more special to me. (Participant 16)

Participant 16 could clearly identify value in her Communication Studies degree but felt that a program of study in a hard-skill area (Geographic Information Systems) would give vocation-specific skills. This sentiment was also discussed by Participant 11, who saw how Communication Studies courses complimented other areas of study.

When I was taking Interpersonal [Communication] and I was taking Marketing 300 I would see overlaps of how to talk to people, of what to expect... The Marketing class would help me with a prompt for whatever I want to sell, and then I would see things within that prompt come out in the Interpersonal class. (Participant 11)

By attaining experience in multiple subject areas, students diversify their knowledge. The concrete job opportunities offered in other fields (geographic information systems specialist, archivist, pharmaceutical rep, etc.) contribute to the vocational anticipatory socialization of Communication Studies students by moving students through the cycle into Organizational Anticipatory Socialization.

These findings suggest navigating the diverse nature of the Communication Studies field is not a directed part of the sensemaking process experienced by students. In fact, students expressed the desire for the navigation to come *as part of the curriculum*. However, per the

departmental curriculum and university catalog, the Capstone course taken during senior year “gives advanced students an opportunity to integrate and synthesize knowledge, reflect on the value of the major, and apply coursework to career and life goals” (catalog.xx.edu). Kolb (2014) would identify the essential missing piece as the last stage in experiential learning: the *analysis* and *reflection* of the learning event.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Many studies show college degree earners make more money over the course of their life than those who do not have a degree (bls.gov, 2020). Even state K-12 curriculums are prepared with “College and Career Readiness” standards (ALSDE.edu) where students are encouraged to attend college from a young age. However, it is important to remember that in order to earn more money, students need to be able to *get* the job post-college. Higher skilled jobs equate to higher pay, and students expect these skills to be gained during the course of higher education. Do students who pursue education in the liberal arts and social sciences and who do not have a career-defined path obtain the professional skills that will help them secure a job and eventual financial stability?

This dissertation explored the process by which students are socialized into vocations (VAS) through the examination of students’ perceptions about the sources of socialization, messages received, their organizational sensemaking patterns, skills attained, and skills lacking in their collegiate experience. The theories of organizational sensemaking (Weick, 1993) and socialization, (Jablin, 1985; Van Maanen, 1984) highlighting memorable messages (Knapp et al., 1981) and experiential learning (Kolb, 2014), created a complex lens from which to examine these student experiences and perceptions. In this chapter, I will first discuss the theoretical implications of these findings as they pertain to VAS sources and memorable message literature. Second, I will discuss the practical implications of the findings as they pertain to networking,

experiential learning, and curriculum design. Third, I will address limitations of the study and future research opportunities based on the dissertation's findings.

Theoretical Contributions

Anticipatory Socialization. Organizational socialization begins with anticipatory socialization, the process by which individuals learn about the group and begin identifying as a group member. During the process, new group members (college students) sift through information received by multiple sources.

Sources of VAS. In his original work, Jablin (1985) identified five sources from which people acquire vocational information: family, peers, educational institutions, part-time jobs, and media. Later iterations of his work expanded the category of "peers" to "peers and friends and nonfamilial adults." However, this study provides support for the division of this source and creation of "non-familial adults" as a separate category, an extension of the theory that may add nuance to the sources of VAS. Examples within this category include mentors, parents of friends, and friends of their own parents. Students valued them at a higher level than messages obtained from peers, siblings, and friends.

The messages created by non-familial adults did not contradict other sources, but students suggested they pursued connections with these sources in order to acquire different or difficult-to-obtain information. One participant mentioned the value of having a mentor who has "been in the industry for five or 10 years" (Participant 25) and the ability to ask vocation-specific questions, such as negotiating contracts, speaking up for additional opportunities, and how to handle harassment or prejudice in the workplace.

Additionally, non-familial adults could provide information from a vantage point of experience not available to peers. These mentors were often met through family connections,

community members, educational institutions, or pre-vocation experiences such as internships. While these sources mirror the sources of socialization, it is important to note that in this case, the sources provide a *connection* to new information rather than the information itself.

Another unique source of vocational assimilation information identified in this study also extends the definitions of Jablin's original categories: hobbies. As interests outside of work or school, hobbies provide additional learning opportunities for many career-ambiguous degree students. For Participant 8, his interest in cars led him to pursue a career in the automotive industry with his college degree. Even Participant 24 used her interest in brewing and distilling to pursue a part-time job at a local brewpub, as well as an internship with a major alcohol retailer. Driven by the memorable message "Do for full-time work something you love," these students used hobbies to explore new areas of employment.

VAS and OAS. Delving further into the anticipatory socialization stage, Jablin defined two sub-stages: vocational anticipatory socialization (VAS) and organizational anticipatory socialization (OAS). VAS provides exposure to new *career fields* and *job titles*, while messages gathered in OAS are specific to how that field of job title presents within *an organization*. Majors in the liberal arts and social sciences, often career-ambiguous fields of study, felt they had obtained *soft* skills (listening, teamwork, leadership, communication) and applied those skills within the context of a general vocation (VAS).

However, many students identified the skills lacking as *hard* skills (Adobe Software, Microsoft Applications) specific to a career or organization (OAS). These comments support the position of Communication Arts and other liberal arts majors as important to the VAS process; while communication and liberal arts careers do require certain hard skills that these career-ambiguous students will need to learn prior to or while on the job (as a part of their OAS),

participants reported their acquired soft skills were more important to assist them across multiple professional areas and contribute to higher-learning function critical to all careers. Additionally, they felt these skills were harder to learn on the job than most hard skills. Thus, the university’s description of the Communication Studies major is met, as the courses in the discipline are meant to:

...offer the knowledge and skills that are essential to becoming a leader in a complex world. Students learn to analyze, evaluate, and critique human communication practices in a variety of contexts. They also develop the intellectual resources needed to articulate their own ideas and to communicate them effectively with others.

None of the skills listed in this description are applicable to one specific career field, as “human communication” occurs in all fields. So how does liberal arts education contribute to either *vocational* anticipatory socialization and/or organizational assimilation?

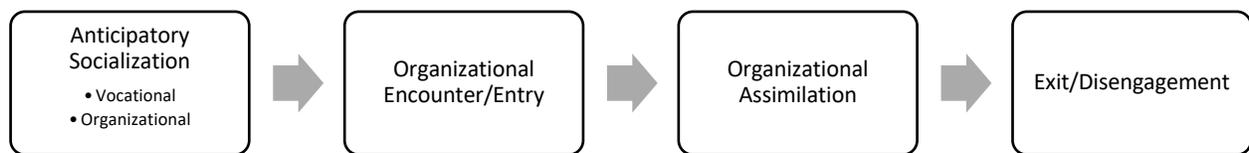


Figure 5. Model of Organizational Assimilation

I posit there is a stage of socialization even *prior* to VAS that encompasses the general qualities of professionalism (Workplace Anticipatory Socialization) that should be included in the broader discussion of anticipatory socialization. Soft skills are applicable to *any* career field, preceding the vocation-specific messages found by Gibson and Papa (2000) and Lucas and Buzzanell (2004). Clair (1996) brought light to this gap in literature of socialization work outside of formal organizations. Building on the ontology of the phrase “real job,” these messages obtained by vocational osmosis fit into the realm of “work socialization” (Clair, 1996, p. 265),

which provides a space for messages outside of the specific organizational context. Clair also provides support for the case that socialization is a “complex expressive practices that include grand rhetorical arguments as well as everyday discourse” (p. 265). Despite this work, a stage prior to Vocational Anticipatory Socialization does not exist in the currently used model of Organizational Assimilation. Participants in this study identified these soft skills as things to be obtained but are not presented in a *specific* vocational area. Just as vocational areas are more broad than specific organizations, these workplace behaviors and actions are more broad than even vocational areas.

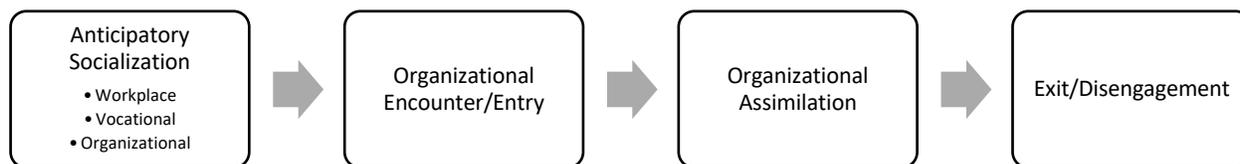


Figure 6. Reconceptualized Model of Organizational Assimilation

The stage of Workplace Anticipatory Socialization is where liberal arts majors and soft skills can have the most impact on student development. This contribution to the vocational assimilation process is critical for all learners, not just liberal arts students. Workplace anticipatory socialization (WAS) would need to occur for all students prior to VAS. Educators and curriculums that focus entirely on hard skills of a profession may be missing a critical aspect of vocational and organizational assimilation by not also helping students focus on these soft skills of communication and professionalism. Collaboration among career-based programs and their liberal arts counterparts may assist students in all areas to be better prepared for the workplace.

Sensemaking. The ongoing process by which individuals give meaning to their experiences is known as “sensemaking.” Students experience this process during college as new

information and careers are presented. Students who had not yet made (or could not make) sense of the coursework and degree they were pursuing as it aligned with future goals were faced with vocational ambiguity. Weick (1995, p. 93) lists many scenarios where individuals are faced with ambiguous, changing situations and how a combination of conflicting information and unclear goals can challenge sensemaking. While some students were still actively making sense of their Communication Studies degree outside the classroom, others had engaged in *strategic ambiguity*. Weick and others (e.g., Eisenberg, 1984; Ulmer & Sellnow, 1997) identify this tool as an important part of organizational life, and it is very clearly part of how students make sense of the skills they learn, as well as those they learn and cannot classify as useful. These findings suggest most students have resolved the differences in their “learned” and “lacking” paradigms by simply “being okay” with the discord enough to move past it and not spend mental energy on the disassociation. Employment of this tool of ambiguity is a concept that may be present in other majors that are not straightforward in job placement, or in areas when students are not provided a direct connection of the skill to life post-classroom. This tool may also be used by students in job-specific majors (e.g. Elementary Education, Accounting, Electrical Engineering) and applied by students to individual skills or lessons that seem to have no “fit” or “meaning” in their professional life, because of or in spite of their occupational direction from the major.

Memorable Messages. The concept of memorable messages has been used extensively in organizational assimilation research as these verbal messages are stored in long-term memory and are continuously recalled in the assimilation process. Knapp et al. (1981), as well as subsequent scholars (Barge & Schlueter, 2004; Cranmer & Myers, 2017; Gibson & Papa, 2000; Lucas, 2011), identify these messages by structure and content (rule-based, enculturation, social network, and importance of specific act or event). However, little research has been done on the

channel of communication. Memorable messages have been studied as *verbal* communication events (Dallimore, 2003) or as *written* communication events (Barge & Schlueter, 2004) where the sender encodes a message for the receiver. Yet, this is limiting because there are many additional ways that messages are received.

Actions. Students identified many memorable *actions* in their vocational socialization process. Actions as a communication form are not encoded, and meaning is given by the receiver only. Messages have thus far been defined as intentional communication, but this introduction of “actions as communication events” in VAS should be explored as both intentional and unconscious processes.

Vocational actions (observable, intentional, and experiential; Bandura, 1977), created lasting messages in students’ minds regarding expectations, rules, or norms of work in the forms of schedules, work-life balance, emotion, longevity, loyalty, or value. These actions, or one-sided messages, support the findings of Gibson and Papa’s (2000) work of “organizational osmosis.” Organizational osmosis is the unconscious adoption by an individual of cultures, norms, expectations, and values due to similar information received from multiple sources (family, friends, neighbors, etc). This osmosis process provides an easier transition through the organizational assimilation process by providing a more realistic expectation and in-depth knowledge based on observed encounters. The observable and intentional actions identified by students are not organizational-specific but are a form of *vocational osmosis*. While students may not be able to identify the specific career field or organization a parent or family member worked for, they internalized the information as part of “work” and carried the information with them through the socialization process.

Additionally, lessons learned from actions contribute to the work on Social Learning Theory. Psychologist Albert Bandura put forth Social Learning Theory in 1977 that states individuals can learn behavior through observation. The lasting impression of observed actions of participants' parents and the frequency of such exposure provided more opportunity for students to learn these behaviors. Behaviors may or may not have been mimicked, but they were translated from physical action into message by the observer and "lessons" or messages were learned.

Contradictions. The receipt of contradictory messages is normally studied within the processes of organizational encounter and assimilation/metamorphosis (DiSanza, 1995; Fielding, 1986; Schein, 1967), or as contributing to organizational exit (Hinderaker & O'Connor, 2015; Kramer, 2011). But students are encountering contradictory messages *before* these stages, within VAS and even WAS. Students were stuck in the sensemaking cycle as they weighed dichotomous messages: "get a job" versus "focus on school," "you need a degree to get a job" versus "you need an internship AND a degree to get a job," "work to earn money" versus "work for something you enjoy," and "hard work is better than smarts" versus "college is non-negotiable." Participants 20 and 23 spoke at length at how conflicting messages from their primary socialization source, parents, caused significant internal conflict and stress on top of daily studies and the sensemaking process.

While previous studies identify contradictory messages from *different* sources, these contradictions experienced by students were from the *same* source. These contradictions can stagnate students in the WAS and VAS processes or can create problems in future organizational assimilation (Amer & Jian, 2018; DiSanza, 1995; Hinderaker, 2015; Schein, 2003). These findings are similar to memorable messages received by first-generation college students in a

study conducted by Wang (2011). Students received contradictory memorable messages from mentors about the focus of college and finding balance with relationships; students “countered” (p. 351) one message in favor of the other through self-reliance and information-seeking to determine the message they would consider memorable. Students in this study had not yet made the decision of which message to value and were therefore stagnated in the process of workplace socialization and vocational discovery.

However, it should be noted that once a resolution is met on these contradictions, students may have stronger understandings of WAS and VAS, being able to handle the real-world conflicts in their future occupations since they have already wrestled with these seemingly opposing values and ideals. Future studies should examine students where this resolution has already occurred to understand its effect on WAS and VAS.

“Real Job.” Almost two decades have passed since the original work by Clair (1996) and the examination of the perception of a “real job” by college students. And while students did not identify a source for this misnomer, they were able to define the components (full-time employment, no longer a college student, job that requires a college degree). By students placing knowledge gained during VAS (pre-college graduation and not in a full-time job) *prior* to the stage of “real,” skills gained during WAS and VAS can be treated as less-than-important as skills gained during the organizational encounter or entry phase. This impacts how we talk about “work” as a concept, because “real job” is a culturally constructed phrase and meaning. Recognizing the cultural limitations presented on socialization studies identifies a need for more clarity in future studies and a possibility for research.

Practical Implications

As anticipated, qualitative inquiry provided rich information on student experiences within the Communication Studies program. Application of these findings to the fields of study is critical to continuing to improve academic standards and expectations of professional development for students. The experiences of participants provide opportunities for further research or organizational intervention in the areas of professional networks, experiential learning, and curriculum.

Networks. In addition to the social networks created in college, students are building professional networks. Students identified educational staff and faculty members as important to their career networks and as sources that could provide job opportunities in the future. These sources were identified as guest speakers, staff advisors, faculty advisors, and instructors. But many students wished they had connected *more* with these individuals, identifying gaps in the network due to shame, perceived risk, and physical constraints of time and location. Kalbfleisch and Eckley's (2003) work in mentoring relationships and utilization of technology provides some insight to this problem, particularly as more students are participating in online learning due to location, financial restraints, preference, or COVID-19 (Hess, 2021; Koksai, 2020). As student-teacher relationships are pushed to the digital classroom, students are disadvantaged by the format, which inhibits relationship formation through limitation of nonverbal expression and fluid exchange of ideas. While work in computer mediated communication suggests online relationships can form over time (Walther & Burgoon, 1992), the construct of *time* is also a disadvantage in online learning situations. Asynchronous courses are created without common meeting times, and even synchronous courses do not facilitate the same in-room comfort as being in the same physical space with an instructor. The fear of approaching mentoring

conversations through Zoom (teleconferencing software) prevented Participant 12 from reaching out and establishing a professional connection with her instructor.

With Zoom, it's definitely a lot more awkward to [start conversation] just because it's not like I can stop after class and it's not casual anymore. Which, I know it doesn't have to be, but in my mind I want it to be like, "Hey, would you mind if we talked some time?" I feel I can't just stay after on the Zoom call without them saying "Are you okay? Do you have questions?" I don't know...I feel the relationship that used to be there isn't the same anymore...

The limitations imposed upon natural relationship development in the online classroom are not unsurmountable. In addition to the work by Kalbfleisch and Eckley (2003), recent studies have provided advice to professors teaching online classes (e.g., Faculty Focus journal) that still provide support in building relationships with students. Departmental workgroups focused on online pedagogy can disseminate best practices to those who are interested in supporting the student VAS process.

As well as the disappearance of available networks, this study brings light to another gap in professional networking: students who do not come to college with career networks already in place. While networks can be built during the campus experience, it is important to note that some students, particularly first-generation or those from lower socioeconomic statuses, may not have immediate adult family who can provide professional connections in their field of choice or who are willing to offer those connections. This may slow the VAS process for these students, who are not provided connections like these (Hoffner et al., 2006). As a solution, educational institutions can provide these VAS opportunities through previously mentioned mentoring relationships, with a particular focus on students from minority or disadvantaged backgrounds.

Formal mentoring programs can provide support to individuals; guest speakers and lecturers, especially when diversity, equity, and inclusion are apparent in the professionals invited, can provide greater access to students to wider professional networks; and involvement in student organizations, particularly those with a focus on professionalism and career opportunities, can provide opportunities for VAS *and* OAS as students are exposed to career fields and specific organizations.

Experiential Learning. Carver's (2010) study found college students are vocal about what they *don't* want out of a career, as much as, if not more so, than they can articulate what they *do* want. These findings are replicated in this study as many participants recounted professional experiences they *did not* want to repeat as a valued part of VAS. These learning experiences were provided at part-time jobs with irate customers and inconsiderate bosses, in the classroom when certain subjects were not enjoyable, when interacting with individuals from a specific field, and through observational learning experiences provided by parents.

Again, the amount of exposure to career-driven opportunities in childhood varies from family to family. While some families provide intentional actions like participating in the family business, creating business writings like résumés, or planning vacations that are focused on the child's potential career passions, some children do not have exposure to these types of opportunities. Additionally, culture plays a large role in the types of vocational assimilation experiences (Shih & Brown, 2000), meaning students from different socioeconomic backgrounds will have differing levels of early VAS prior to their college experience. In their study of gifted Black students' preparation for college, Goings and Sewell (2019) found their participants came from families where they would be the first in their family to go to college and/or their parents were not educated in the United States. This lack of experiences, professional insight, and social

capital did not enable parents to be a “resource” (p. 196), particularly for experiential learning. The same is true for VAS, where some students have immediate adult family who do not have the knowledge and/or financial means to provide intentional career preparation and cultivation experiences. This creates a delay in VAS until early adulthood for those without these intentional actions by immediate adult family, causing some students to need more guidance than others, particularly in non-career focused fields like Communication Studies.

This need for additional guidance is articulated in the assumption, made by most participants in the study, that an internship *must* be had in order to get a job. While experiential learning is a part of the Communication Studies curriculum (catalog.xx.edu), an internship course for credit in the curriculum is not offered; in addition, the Capstone course, which provides synthezation of learning and reflection (Kolb, 2014), is not offered to students until their last semester of the program. The last semester is often too late to aid in the VAS process as students are already in the stressful hunt for a job and struck with “senioritis” (Cushman & West, 2006).

Curriculum. These findings also shine light on the gaps in sensemaking of communication skills. The gaps present opportunities for in-time interventions or benchmark assessments along the major path in academic and/or student affairs. Without them, students often report a sense of hopelessness in the career transition. In a drastic case, Participant 31 shared that he didn’t feel he could rely on his major should his given choice of law school not accept him: “I’m screwed because I have no Plan B whatsoever.”

The intent of this study is not to imply where blame or fault lie, but to identify gaps in the VAS process of students in career-ambiguous majors. By following the foundation of intervention theory (Argyris, 1970) and the consulting/intervention process (Killman & Mitroff,

1979), this study provides insight into sensing and defining problems prior to deriving solutions. A problem identified by Communication Studies students within the VAS process is the perceived lack of hard skills obtained as part of the curriculum. Students can articulate gaps in their knowledge that they know *could* be filled by a specific source, but they are unsure *how* to go about it. This exchange with Participant 17 highlights that a lack of information available may not be the problem:

Interviewer: Is there anything that you wish you learned more about in the Communication program?

Participant: I wish...there's probably classes about group communication...I don't know if there's classes about it, but I wish that I would have learned more theory or practical application to that... I know in COM you work a lot in groups, which is great, you get experience, but I don't know...I could have learned more inside the classroom about group dynamics and stuff.

Interviewer: Okay, got it. Did you know that the Department offers a course called "Small Group Communication?"

Participant: I didn't know! So, there you go, I could have just taken the class!

The "I didn't know" problem is an opportunity for investigation in itself. In order to fully develop skills they perceive as necessary for career developments, students must be informed of the courses availability to fill knowledge gaps and also seek out the information available. It suggests a one-time orientation offered before freshman year, where other, more immediate concerns like housing and meals plan dominate student attention, may not be helping students explore opportunities available on their campus; other events with broader focus on available curriculum options and overviews of course offerings may assist with this. Additionally, this "I

didn't know" issue places a greater need on advisors and mentors to properly explain all options available to liberal arts students as they continue to develop their skills, encouraging students to take more responsibility for finding and asking for information along their academic journey.

Additionally, curriculum structures and course calendars prevent students from getting to take part in the needed information. Participant 29 says there were classes in the department she didn't *get* to take due to availability of enrollment or availability of open places in her degree program; perhaps the problem is not *information* availability but *enrollment* availability.

Killman and Mitroff (1979) stated that providing a solution without properly identifying the problem is a fallacy of consulting work. It is folly to suggest a single solution for such a complex problem without further conversation with all parties, such as advisors, faculty, department head, and curriculum coordinators. Even student-provided solutions were not all-encompassing. Participant 7 recommended a class that could help students "figure out what [they] want to do inside the Communication realm," but Participant 23 admitted that while such a course would be valuable, she wouldn't be able to fit it into her degree plan with other courses already required⁷. The option of a Career-Exploration Workshop series was posed as an alternative to Participant 20; the student agreed with the idea but could not offer solutions on appropriate time offerings or how to encourage students who *needed* the intervention to actually *utilize* the resource.

Potential solutions from participants often came in the form of double-majoring in liberal arts and an applied area, but this solution looks *outside* the discipline to provide answers as an intradisciplinary problem. Introductory courses in communication provide an overview of the field, but these courses are not restricted to specific age levels; a student may have their first

⁷ This specific Communication Studies curriculum includes 15 hours of department electives and students may choose their own path as an area of emphasis is not required.

encounter with the discipline of Communication in their graduating semester, potentially too late to develop skills that can be applied to a future career. Classes like this may be better suited for freshman as a way to career plan, and the university could consider making it a prerequisite to future, more advanced coursework as a way to encourage WAS and VAS within degree plans.

Additionally, it should be noted that within the findings of RQ5, many of the skills students felt they lacked were identified by other students as valuable, already learned skills (listening, conflict management, confidence). This suggests students develop skills at *different levels*, and the VAS process can also be measured on a scale, such as organizational assimilation (Myers & Oetzel, 2003).

Limitations and Future Research

The researcher recognizes limitations within the study. One of the largest constraints on this study, and many other qualitative studies, is time; more time would allow for more student responses, more in-depth analysis of the data gathered, and better, more comprehensive understanding of student organizational assimilation. These limitations are tempered by the fact that I did reach theoretical saturation during data analysis, and additional data collection was not necessary for this study. However, future research could also consider longitudinal studies of Communication Studies graduates to determine the lasting effect of messages on WAS and VAS.

Outside of the constraint of time, this study is limited by colloquialisms and understood definitions. Students were asked to identify skills they learned from their Communication courses but were not provided prompts. Therefore, the definition of “communication skills” varied among participants. This is something researchers must be aware of and take care in their reporting, ensuring terminology of the theory is precise and properly utilized. Careful attention

was paid to terminology in this study, but more in-depth analysis of uses and perceptions of these terms within socialization could prove useful.

Participant demographics were representative of the population studied (Communication Studies at a large, R1, flagship institution) but are still not diverse enough to allow for generalization to all educational institutions. Diversity in race, gender, age, and year in school will provide rich data that can help paint a more in-depth picture of the VAS experiences of students. In addition, the case study design, which allows for a more in-depth understanding of the particular institution studied, also limits generalization to areas outside of this case. Selecting students from a single institution, single college, and single program allowed for participants to share similar experiences than if multiple institutions and programs had been studied. In order to generalize the findings of this work, future researchers should compare experiences at other universities, as well as in other non-Communication Studies disciplines.

All 32 students interviewed had Communication Studies as a major, double major, or minor. As part of the catalog requirements of the university, students are unable to declare Communication Studies as a major without an additional major or minor. Almost one-third (13 out of 32) students chose supporting majors/minors within the same college. This exposure to a different, but similar, field may add to the confusion of what defines a “communication skill.” Students often did not differentiate between skills learned in Communication Studies classes and skills learned in Mass Communication classes. Both disciplines are writing-intensive, and students identified the concept of rhetoric as applied to public relations, oral performance, and news writing. Additionally, the skill of “interviewing” was mentioned in Communication Research as well as Mass Communication. This muddying of terms could potentially change their definitions and the implications of those experiences, so future researchers should consider

examination of programs that do not require interdisciplinary coursework outside of a communication studies major.

Participants in this study relied on social and familial connections to job opportunities or internships. Expanding this study to other geographical and socioeconomical areas may provide responses from students that *are not* well-connected. In their study on STEM interest and career choice, Tey, Moses, and Cheah (2020) found parents and their connections are a significant influence in career choice, but students who did not have familial connections to these fields were less likely to choose a career in STEM due to lack of access to career opportunities. This has the potential to leave many first-generation, international, and minority students without these essential connections for early VAS processes. Future research could target these specific populations or address additional limitations due to geographical location, institution size, and institutional expense.

Concluding Thoughts

An unaddressed tension within this study is the difference in skills students feel they are lacking and the role of the Communication Studies major. Students are able to articulate the soft skills learned as part of the curriculum but identify hard skills as deficiencies upon completion of the program. Is there a breakdown between what students want and what students are getting? The marketing and information available on the Communication Studies program articulates what students will learn: the ability to analyze, evaluate, and critique human communication practices. But Participant 25 voiced a growing divide between her desire for applied education in Communication and the departmental move “towards more of a research and rhetoric type of vibe.”

Looking beyond Communication Studies, liberal arts, and social sciences, the question can be asked, “Why do people go to college?” A non-academic web search of this question provides millions of results (3.8 trillion, as of 5/13/2021) with the top reason as “Make more money.” As stated earlier, information from the Bureau of Labor Statistics is widely circulated that show college degree earners make more over the span of their lifetimes than those with a high school diploma (bls.gov). The logical leap can be made that a college degree equals more money because college provides higher-skilled labor and higher-skilled labor is paid at a higher rate. Whether a Communication Studies program provides these higher skills is a conversation that must be had by academic departments, students, and future employers.

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APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL



December 16, 2020

Hannah George
Communication & Information Sciences
Box 870172

Re: IRB # 20-11-4107: "Vocational Anticipatory Socialization of Students in Career-Ambiguous Majors"

Dear Ms. George,

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research. Your application has been given exempt approval according to 45 CFR part 46. Approval has been given under exempt review category 2(iii) as outlined below:

(2) Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if: (iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

The approval for your application will lapse on December 15, 2021. If your research will continue beyond this date, please submit the annual report to the IRB as required by University policy before the lapse. Please note, any modifications made in research design, methodology, or procedures must be submitted to and approved by the IRB before implementation. Please submit a final report form when the study is complete.

Please use reproductions of the IRB-approved informed consent form to obtain consent from your participants.

Sincerely,

A black rectangular redaction box covering the signature of Carpentato T. Myles.

Carpantato T. Myles, MSM, CIM, CIP, EXCS™
Director & Research Compliance Officer

cc: Dr. Heather Carmack

Jessup Building | Box 870127 | Tuscaloosa, AL 35487-0127 | 205-348-8461
Fax 205-348-7189 | Toll Free 1-877-820-3066 | rscompliance@research.ua.edu

Informed Consent

Please read this informed consent carefully before you decide to participate in the study.

Consent Form Key Information:

- You agree to this interview by clicking “I agree” in the Zoom poll window or the “I agree” check box at the bottom of this form.
- All information will be kept confidential
- The interview will take about 30-45 minutes to complete; you can stop at any time

Purpose of the research study: The purpose of the study explores how colleges students in a social sciences major with undefined vocational paths (such as Communication Studies) are socialized into future careers.

What you will do in the study: Speak with an interviewer about past jobs, future ambitions, and your experiences in communication classes. You can skip any question that makes you uncomfortable and you can stop the interview/survey at any time. The interview will be recorded, with your permission.

Time required: The interview will require about 30-45 minutes of your time.

Risks: There are no more risks or discomforts associated with this research than what is encountered upon discussing future plans.

Benefits: There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this research study. The study may help us understand more about college student perceptions of communication.

Confidentiality: The PI will protect the identity of participants by using pseudonyms or numbers. The real names of study participants will not be included in the findings. All digital files and transcriptions will be stored on UA box and recordings will be transcribed within 2 months after the recordings are made. All transcriptions will be saved on UA box. The PI has a password activated video recording account and will be the only one with access to participant information provided through this channel.

Voluntary participation: Your participation in the study is completely voluntary.

Right to withdraw from the study: You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. To withdraw from the study, simply vocalize your desire to the interviewer. There is no penalty for withdrawing; incomplete answers to the study will be discarded in a confidential manner.

Compensation/Reimbursement: You will receive no payment for participating in the study

If you have questions about the study or need to report a study related issue please contact, contact:

Primary Researcher:
Hannah George
Doctoral Student
College of Communication and Information Sciences
270-792-4918
hkgeorge@crimson.ua.edu

Faculty Advisor:
Heather J. Carmack, PhD
Associate Professor
The University of Alabama
Department of Communication Studies
205-348-2141
hjcarmack@ua.edu

If you have questions about your rights as a participant in a research study, would like to make suggestions or file complaints and concerns about the research study, please contact:

Ms. Tanta Myles, the University of Alabama Research Compliance Officer at (205)-348-8461 or toll-free at 1-877-820-3066. You may also ask questions, make suggestions, or file complaints and concerns through the IRB Outreach Website at <http://ovpred.ua.edu/research-compliance/prco/>. You may email the Office for Research Compliance at rscompliance@research.ua.edu.

Agreement:

- I agree to audio/video recording in the research study described above.
- I do not agree to audio/video recording in the research study described above.

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Vocational Anticipatory Socialization

Introduction:

Hi, my name is Hannah, and I am a PhD student, and I'm interested in exploring how communication majors learn about job skills and what they learn about vocational opportunities.

Please read the Informed Consent Statement and then decide if you would like to participate. Your participation will involve signing a consent form, and then participating in an interview lasting from 30 to 45 minutes. You should not experience any discomfort with this process, and you may skip a question if you feel uncomfortable answering it.

[Students voluntarily sign the Informed Consent Statement.]

First, we are going to begin with some basic demographic questions. Then we will talk about your expectations of communication studies and your future career:

DEMOGRAPHICS:

How old are you?

What is your gender?

What's your ethnicity?

What is your hometown?

Did your father attend college? What was his area of study?

What about your mother, did she attend college? What was her area of study?

(If no to both) Will you be the first person in your family to graduate from college?

When do you anticipate graduating from (your school)? When did you start?

What is your major?

Why did you select that major?

PAST: Previous Work Experience and Messages

Now, let's talk about your past experiences with work.

When you were a kid, what did you want to be when you grew up? Why?

Did that change from year to year? At what age do you first remember thinking "I want to be a _____ when I grow up?"

Tell me about your previous work experience beginning in high school. What jobs have you had?

How did you come to have those jobs?

Was it a good experience? Why or why not?

What did you learn about work from this experience?

What did you learn about work from interacting with your supervisors?

Have you had any work experiences since high school?
How did your previous job(s) relate to what you now want to do?
Tell me your previous volunteer or unpaid work experience.
Tell me about a time during (name most recent work experience) where you learned an important lesson about work?

I'm going to ask some questions specifically about work. This can be experiences in the past or a job you currently hold. I'm interested in what sticks out to you the most.

What was the hardest part about work?
What did your parents tell you about work? How did they prepare you for work?
What did your teachers/profs tell you about work?
What did/do your friends tell you about work?
Do you think that information was positive or negative? Why?
Is there anything about your past work experience that you wished I had asked you that I didn't?

PRESENT:

Now let's talk about your current experiences and expectations about work after you graduate (professional work). I'm going to ask some questions about your communication classes first.

Tell me about your program. What's the first thing you think of?
About how many communication courses have you had?
Which courses did you really enjoy? Why?
Which courses did you not like? Why?
What courses were the hardest? Why?
What is something you've learned that you used in all/most of your classes?
Do you use the knowledge you gained from any classes in your daily life? Describe? If not, why do you think no?
What are some skills you think you've learned from each of your classes?
What skills would you like to have learned more about?
What skills do you think your future employer wants you to have? Why?
Do you think you have the skills an employer is looking for?

FUTURE:

I'm going to transition and talk a little bit about what happens after graduation and while you're looking for a job.

What types of careers can you have with your degree? How do you know that?
What career do you want to have once you graduate? (What do you want to be when you grow up?) Why?
What made you decide that?
What would it be like to be a _____?
Where did you learn about being a _____?
How do you know what to expect?

Where (or from what resource) did you learn about this job?

When you need information about your first job after graduation, where do/did you go? Why?
Was the information you need easy to find? What information have you looked for?
Where can you find the information you need? Have you looked on the web? If so, where?
Are you involved in any student organizations?
If so, do you get information from them?

Is it easy to get a good job right after college graduation?
How long do you think it will take you to find a professional job after graduation?
Are you currently working?
If yes... where?
What do you do?
Does your job relate to what you want to do in the future?
Have you completed an internship?
If so, where?
In what field?
What did you learn about work from your internship?

What do you think will be the most challenging part of your first job after college graduation?
Why?
How will you deal with these challenges?
What will you do if you don't like your job?
How will your first professional job be different than the job you have now?
What if the expectations are ambiguous?
What will you do?

Right now, if you had to list 5 of your top employable skills (or employee skills) on your resume or in a job interview, what would those skills be?

I know I've asked a lot of questions; is there anything else you would like to tell me about your time as a communication/arts/studies major?