Investigating Agricultural Communications Students' Educational Experiences and Identity Development at a Co-Curricular Activity

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative content analysis was to explore agricultural communications students' educational experiences and identity development at a co-curricular activity. We analyzed reflection data using a qualitative content analysis. We conducted an analytic induction with Chickering and Reisser's (1993) theory of education and identity serving as an analysis framework. Their theory outlined seven vectors of students' psychosocial development supported by environmental influences (e.g., co-curricular activities). Although the conference facilitated development in all seven vectors, students' development more closely aligned with developing competence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, and developing purpose. Attending the National Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow (NACT) Professional Development Conference (PDC) facilitated students' movement toward becoming career-ready graduates as they sought to gain networks, define their purpose and goals, and explore interests and opportunities. They used their PDC experience to connect their coursework, personal values, and sense-of-self—initiating development of their professional identity. PDC was an example of an educationally-sound environment, which included structured and unstructured learning opportunities designed to promote students' networking and skill development and prepare them for the workforce. Further research needs to be conducted to determine if students' participation in professional development activities impacts their career success and achievement in the workforce.

Keywords: professional development, psychosocial development, ACT

Introduction

The U.S. labor force is expected to reach 167 million by 2018 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013) as a result of the growing population and influx of millennials. The 46 million Americans classified as millennials "are predicted to be the next great generation" (Pardue and Morgan, 2008, p. 74). They are confident, conventional, team-oriented (Howe and Strauss, 2000), optimistic, accustomed to structure, and accepting of authority (Johnson and Romanello, 2005). Yet, even with successful workplace characteristics, college instructors and employers negatively stereotype the millennial generation (McLester and McIntire, 2006). For example, Eckleberry-Hunt and Tucciarone (2011) noted college instructors labeled millennials as lazy and selfish, wanting a career and work life that fits their personal schedule, while lacking work ethic and self-motivation in the classroom. Further, employers noted millennials entering the workforce lack career readiness and professionalism (McLester and McIntire, 2006).

Career readiness and professionalism "seem[s] to be intertwined" with identity development (Lairio et al., 2013, p. 116) and can be enhanced through outcomes-based instruction, focusing on the big picture and demonstration of knowledge (McNeir, 1993). At the center of outcomes-based instruction is the application of soft skills (McNeir, 1993), a characteristic employers seek when hiring entry-level employees (McLester and McIntire, 2006). Thus, focusing more on hands-on experiences and the application of skills in real-world settings would more effectively prepare graduates to meet employers' expectations (Hart, 2007).

Outcomes-based instruction is ever-present in agricultural communications. Instructors use outcomes-

based instruction to unite theory with application when "prepar[ing] students to effectively enter the workforce" (Doerfert and Miller, 2006, p. 28). Doerfert and Miller (2006) argued instructors should consider the changing communication needs of the industry stakeholders, the increase of scrutiny in the agricultural industry, and the decrease in response time allocated for communication-related activities. From a different perspective, freshmen agricultural communications students sought theory and application-based courses as part of their curriculum. Teamwork, communication, conflict resolution, and writing topped the list of skills they saw as important to their course portfolios, which could be more fully developed with learning opportunities outside of the classroom (Watson and Robertson, 2011).

A component of outcomes-based education is professional development— *"facilitated teaching and learning experiences that are transactional and designed to support the acquisition of professional knowledge, skills, and dispositions as well as the application of this knowledge in practice"* (National Professional Development Center on Inclusion, 2008, p. 3). Employers seek graduates who have engaged in professional development activities (Hart, 2007) because such opportunities help students see skills in action and make connections to the real world. Carraway and Burris (2016) noted that professional development workshops should "engage students in learning" and "assess student knowledge" (p. 31). As an example, agricultural communications students can engage in professional development activities by attending academic career fairs, completing internships, and participating in student organizations. In a 2000 study, Sagen et al. found a positive relationship between involvement in professional development and employment success. In a Gault et al. (2000) study, students were more likely to have higher starting salaries and secure jobs after college if they participated in at least one internship. Professional development is a large component of undergraduate curriculum, so much so that student development theorists (e.g., Chickering and Reisser, 1969, 1993; Erikson, 1968; Perry, 1970) have included such co-curricular activities in their understanding of students' psychosocial development.

Theoretical Framework

"Where do I fit?" and "What is my purpose?" are questions plaguing college students (Branand et al., 2015). The essence of college student development is students' ability to undergo different experiences, learn from the results, and positively act on them (Sanford, 1968). Theorists (e.g., Astin, 1984, 1993; Bilodeau and Renn, 2005; Chickering and Reisser, 1969, 1993; Erikson, 1968; Perry, 1970; Zambrana and Dill, 2009) have studied college student development throughout decades and have noted the significance of a college education on students' psychosocial development. Psychosocial development, as defined by Brown (2004), is the *"what (content) of development and refers to the issues, tasks, and events that occur throughout the life span, the given pattern or resolution of these issues and tasks, and the adaptation to these events"* (p. 143).

Chickering and Reisser (1993), authors of Education and Identity studied students' psychosocial development as seven vectors aiding in "the discovery and refinement of one's unique way of being" (p. 35). The environment influences the vectors— (1) developing competence, (2) managing emotions, (3) moving through autonomy toward interdependence, (4) developing mature interpersonal relationships, (5) establishing identity, (6) developing purpose, and (7) developing integrity—that span several aspects of development (Evans et al., 2010). The environmental influences cause students to experience the vectors at various stages of their development (Chickering and Reisser, 1993; Evans et al., 2010).

Developing Competence

Developing competence, in the context of psychosocial development, is tri-modal—intellectual, physical and manual, and interpersonal (Chickering and Reisser, 1993)—and is "essential to the possession of purpose" (Green, 1981, p. 544). Students demonstrate intellectual competence as they acquire "a repertoire of skills to comprehend, analyze, and synthesize [information]" (Chickering and Reisser, 1993, p. 45), develop physical and manual skills through "artistic and manual activities" (Evans et al., 2010, p. 67), and establish interpersonal competence through communication and interaction (Chickering and Reisser, 1993). Students' competence depends on public recognition of their skills, feedback from their influencers (Green, 1981), and confidence in their abilities (Chickering and Reisser, 1993), all of which are enhanced through continuous reflection (Scott et al., 2015). Confident students are more likely to have a "strong[er] sense of competence" than students who are not confident (Coombs, 2013, p. 2). Yet, competence is more than being good at something—it is also *"one way of determining the kinds of persons we are and, therefore, the kinds of purposes we may adopt"* (Green, 1981, p. 545).

Managing Emotions

The college environment forces students to manage and process emotions— positive and negative— accompanying life's challenges and successes (Chickering and Reisser, 1993). Students moving through vector two learn to acknowledge, accept, and respond to positive and negative emotions alike (Evans et al., 2010). The managing emotions continuum begins with "little control over disruptive emotions" and continues to "flexible control and appropriate expressions" of emotions (Coombs, 2013, p. 2). While students move along this continuum, they become more aware and accepting of their emotions and develop the "ability to integrate feelings with responsible action" (p. 2). An emotionally intelligent individual has the *"ability to monitor one's own and others' emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use the information to guide one's thinking and actions"*

(Mayer and Salovey, 1993, p. 433). Learning to properly embrace emotions will ultimately aid in students' overall identity development (Chickering and Reisser, 1993).

Moving Through Autonomy Toward Interdependence

In college, students move through autonomy—*"developing self-sufficiency, taking responsibility for one's personal goals, and being less swayed by the opinions of others"*—toward *"interdependent relationship[s] between equal partners"* (Foubert et al., 2005, p. 463). Students who show development of interdependence have moved past emotional dependence and gained "freedom from continual and pressing needs for reassurance" (Coombs, 2013, p. 2). An interdependent student has established a "balance between serving the needs of the self and depending upon others" (Foubert et al., 2005, p. 463). Development in vector three requires students to experience emotional and instrumental independence (Chickering and Reisser, 1993), which is evident through students' aptitude to solve problems with "inner direction, persistence, and mobility" (Coombs, 2013, p. 2). An essential component of becoming interdependent is recognizing and accepting its role in the development of identity (Coombs, 2013). Learning to be interdependent involves *"learning to get from one place to another without having to be taken by the hand or given detailed directions, and to find the information or resources required to fulfill personal needs and desires"* (Chickering and Reisser, 1993, p. 47). Fluid movement through the vector signifies students' self-sufficiency, responsibility, and confidence without the influence of others (Chickering and Reisser, 1993).

Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships

The development of healthy and unhealthy relationships significantly impacts students' identity achievement (Chickering and Reisser, 1993; Erikson, 1968; Muuss, 1996). Relationships fostering deep connections are extremely crucial to one's development of their sense-of-self (Evans et al., 2010), and students often use professional conferences to network and develop relationships with others (Arnold et al., 2011). Interpersonal loyalties evolve as a part of self-authorship, which is an instrumental college achievement (Kegan, 1994; King and Baxter Magolda, 2005). For example, one student in a Robinson and Glanzer (2016) study noted *"the relationships and the experiences you have in college determine what you want and don't want to happen again. And you try to draw your life around that"* (p. 5). Early in the meaning-making process, students "defer … to others in relationships" (Baxter Magolda et al., 2008, p. 18) because they lack the ability to internally understand relationships. Students experience mature interpersonal relationships they accept others, respect and appreciate their differences, and ignore stereotypes (Chickering and Reisser, 1993).

Establishing Identity

Development of identity depends on one's sense of self—a person's self-concept, self-confidence, self-esteem, and stability (Chickering and Reisser, 1993)—and one's ability to take responsibility for his or her thoughts and actions. Socially constructed, identity is *"one's personally held beliefs about the self in relation to social groups (e.g., race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation) and the ways one expresses that relationship"* (Daniels and Brooker, 2014, p. 577). Students' sense of identity is a major academic outcome (Astin, 1993; Benjamin and Hollings, 1997) and is shaped, modified, and adapted throughout the undergraduate experience (Daniels and Brooker, 2014). For example, sense of identity is positively correlated with GPA (Lounsbury et al., 2005a) and life and college experience satisfaction (Lounsbury et al., 2005b) but negatively correlated with students' desire to withdraw from college (Lounsbury et al., 2004). Thorough reflection and confidence enhances students' ability to be open and honest with themselves and others about their personal identity, leading to *"clarity and stability and a feeling of warmth for this core self as capable, familiar, [and] worthwhile"* (Chickering and Reisser, 1993, p. 50).

Developing Purpose

Students seek life's purpose (Hodges and Denig, 2014), and they use college to develop purpose related to "avocational recreational interests, style of life, and vocational interests" (Coombs, 2013, p. 75). Higher education is designed to facilitate career readiness and professionalism, but students often overlook the significance of life skills gained and the importance of college in their quest to become lifelong learners (Chickering and Reisser, 1993). College *"enables students to become practitioners with a sense of self and purpose both as members of a given community and as global citizens"* (Trede and McEwen, 2012, p. 27). Foubert et al. (2005), in their longitudinal study, found students showed significant development of purpose during their freshman year even though developing purpose was an important component throughout their college experience. College offers students a variety of ways to develop purpose. Some students use college to gain networks, define their purpose and goals, and explore interests and opportunities (Coombs, 2013). Students who develop purpose have the ability to be intentional in seeking career options, clarify goals, commit to achieving career and personal goals, and be conscious of their actions throughout the process (Chickering and Reisser, 1993).

Developing Integrity

Chickering and Reisser (1993) believed students develop integrity as their values become congruent with society's values and they seek responsibility for themselves and others. Shivpuri and Kim (2004) identified integrity as a top performance dimension employers seek when hiring new graduates. Establishing a sense

of integrity is an important component of self-awareness (Komives et al., 2005). The demonstration of developing integrity may be as simple as understanding core concepts within a discipline or making the right decision when faced with moral issues (Daniels and Brooker, 2014). But, as students get closer to graduation and move along the continuum of developing integrity, their values and integrity decisions will be more aligned with learning outcomes and successful "graduate attributes" (Daniels and Brooker, 2014, p. 73). In a humanized value system, students must move past dualistic thinking and rigid beliefs and become more congruent and authentic (Chickering and Reisser, 1993; Evans et al., 2010). Development in vector seven results from students' development of congruence, in which their *"values and actions become congruent and authentic as self-interest is balanced by a sense of social responsibility"* (Evans et al., 2010, p. 69).

Instrumental to students' fluid movement through the seven vectors is the educational environment (Evans et al., 2010), "a system or a totality of interacting parts" (Chickering and Reisser, 1993, p. 279). An educationally sound environment encompasses co-curricular activities (Chickering and Reisser, 1993), which are the activities extending beyond the degree being pursued (Andrews, 2013). Students engaging in co-curricular activities, such as professional development, have the resources for lifelong learning (Chickering and Reisser, 1993).

Purpose and Research Questions

This qualitative study used Chickering and Reisser's theory of education and identity (1993) to explore agricultural communications students' educational experiences and identity development at the 2015 National Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow (NACT) Professional Development Conference (PDC).
Three research questions guided this study:
1. How did students begin to develop purpose to become career-ready graduates?
2. How did students begin to develop their professional identities?
3. How did students make meaning of their experience?

Context of Study

NACT is a "leading collegiate organization" designed to provide agricultural communications students with "professional growth opportunities and educational programs" extending beyond the classroom setting (NACT, 2015, para. 1). As such, NACT hosts nationwide events throughout the year to provide its members with networking and skill development opportunities (NACT, 2015). Because knowledge and skills gained through hands-on experiences are equally, if not more, important than knowledge gained in the classroom (Hart, 2007), students participating in ACT activities may be more career-ready than students who have not participated in professional development activities.

The Texas A&M University ACT Chapter is an extension of NACT, has between 50 and 70 members each year, and seeks to *"build relationships among agricultural communication professionals, college students and faculty; to provide professional and academic development for members; and to promote agriculture through communication efforts"* (Texas A&M University, 2015, para. 2). Students pay dues to the local and national organization to have the opportunity to participate in local, regional, and national professional development conferences, fundraisers and internships. Therefore, to attend national events, students must be registered members of the local and national chapter. As registered members, students receive scholarships to offset costs for attending professional development conferences, such as PDC.

The 2015 PDC, "Make mAGic happen!" was hosted by the University of Florida in Orlando, Florida. The conference activities ranged from "Speed Dating with Professionals" to group games facilitating interaction between students to tours showcasing Florida agriculture. Throughout the activities, students networked with agricultural communications industry leaders and participated in hands-on experiences (tours of an alligator farm, strawberry farm, nursery, winery, and citrus processing plant). In addition, students attended the business meeting and three 45-minute professional development sessions. These activities facilitated students' development of skill and professional identity and laid the foundation for networking and developing connections with professionals.

Method

Qualitative research methodologies rely on the researcher as the human instrument used to explore phenomena (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011). The effectiveness of qualitative analysis largely depends on the "human factor" defined by Patton (2002) as *"the great strength and the fundamental weakness of qualitative inquiry and analysis—a scientific two-edged sword"* (p. 276). Researchers conduct qualitative research studies to understand human experience because such lived experiences can only be provided by participants within a specific context of reality (Bradley, 1993). Thus, we chose qualitative research paradigms to explore Texas A&M University's students' experiences and development at the 2015 NACT PDC, a co-curricular activity. The Texas A&M University Institutional Review Board approved the study protocol.

Population

The population for this study included undergraduate and graduate students who attended the 2015 PDC (N=19). All students were active members of the Texas A&M University ACT Chapter. Most students were females (n=17) studying agricultural communications and journalism. Of the 19, 17 were undergraduate students (two freshmen, six juniors, and nine seniors) and two were graduate students. The participants were

diverse in the sense that they represented a large agricultural communications program and ACT Chapter. All the students had participated in at least two professional development activities before attending PDC. Many of them did not grow up in the agricultural industry and, prior to the conference, had not been exposed to agricultural commodities and practices beyond Texas. Furthermore, many students were not seeking jobs within the agricultural industry before attending PDC.

Procedures

We investigated students' experiences and development using preflection and reflection exercises. The week before attending the conference, students completed a preflection exercise in Qualtrics. The questionnaire included open-ended questions that related to the students' professional development experience before the conference and their expectations of the conference. For example, we asked students about their learning objectives for the experience, how they intended to connect the experience to their academic coursework, the challenges they expected to face, and the skills they planned to use at the conference. When students returned from the conference, they completed a reflection exercise in Qualtrics. The questionnaire included open-ended questions related to students' experience and development at PDC and were developed based on Gavigan (2010). For example, we asked the students if they accomplished their learning objectives, what activities connected to their academic coursework, what activities challenged their views of diversity, what challenges they faced, how they handled the challenges, if they connected with individuals from other institutions, and how they plan to maintain their skills.

Students' responses to the preflection and reflection exercises served as this study's data. Prior to data analysis, we downloaded the students' responses from Qualtrics and removed their identifying information. After removing identifying information from students' responses, we randomly assigned each participant a number (01 to 19). Using an Excel spreadsheet (one for the preflection data and one for the reflection data), we divided students' responses to the open-ended questions into units. Each unit consisted of two sentences. For the analysis, we numbered each unit consecutively (01 to 25) depending on the number of units per student (Merriam, 2009). In addition, we assigned the preflection responses a code of 01 and the reflection responses a code of 02. For example, 01.01.01 represented the first unit (two sentences) of student one's preflection response. For the reporting, we noted the exemplars in the narrative with the student number (01 to 19) and the preflection and reflection response number (pre (01) and post (02) data). Therefore, an exemplar from the reflection of student eight would be noted as 08.02.

We analyzed the reflection exercises using a qualitative content analysis—an indirect way to study students' behavior (Fraenkel et al., p. 405), an unobtrusive way to make "inferences by systematically and objectively identifying special characteristics of messages" (Holsti, 1968, p. 68), and a way to understand an author's perspectives (Berg, 2001). Using a content analysis, we made sense of and reduced the data into "core consistencies and meanings" (Patton, 2002, p. 453). Documents, such as students' reflection exercises in this study, must be interpreted within the context, which Hodder (1994) labeled as contextualized interpretation.

The content analysis occurred in two stages using analytic induction— *"generating and proving an integrated, limited, precise, universally applicable theory of causes accounting for a specific phenomenon"* (Glaser, 1965, p. 438). A priori we identified the seven vectors of Chickering and Reisser (1993) as the themes for data analysis because we wanted to identify students' educational experiences and identity development through the lens of a well-known theory. During the first stage, we (two faculty members and one masters' student in agricultural communications) met as a group and read the units of analysis to interpret and analyze the data using the seven vectors of Chickering and Reisser's (1993) theory of education and identity development. Second, we met in a follow-up meeting to review the analyzed data and to ensure we interpreted the data accurately and according to each vector. If the data did not align with the original vector, we reanalyzed the data and assigned it to a more accurate vector. We removed 54 ($n01=23$; $n02=31$) units of data after analysis. We removed 34 units because they consisted of single words or phrases that we could not interpret within the context or categorize by Chickering and Reisser's (1993) vectors. Additionally, we removed 20 units because two questions in the preflection exercise asked students to document specific events or activities that they had participated in as professional development experiences. Therefore, theirs answers to these questions could not be analyzed in the context of Chickering and Reisser (1993). Selected quotes from the exercises provided the framework narrative.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted trustworthiness—established through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability—is important when analyzing qualitative data. Credibility, assurance findings are reality, was achieved through a reflexive journal (Merriam, 2009). Dependability, certainty that results and data are consistent, was achieved through data triangulation using Chickering and Reisser's (1993) theory, circulation of peer debriefing memos amongst the research team, and documentation of analysis trail, which served as the interpretive framework (Merriam, 2009). Transferability, or applicability beyond the research setting, was achieved through thick description of the research results. Last, confirmability, assurance of objectivity, was established through reflexive journals, triangulation, and peer debriefing memos (Merriam, 2009).

Findings

Data illustrated that the 19 students who participated in this study experienced psychosocial development in

Table 1. Frequency of Responses (N = 353) by Vector and Reflection

Vector	Preflection (n = 122)	Reflection (n = 231)
Developing competence	25	52
Managing emotions	13	18
Moving through autonomy toward interdependence	15	15
Developing mature interpersonal relationships	19	44
Establishing identity	7	25
Developing purpose	43	68
Developing integrity	0	9

all seven vectors while participating in the 2015 NACT PDC, which was evident in 353 units of data (Table 1). Much of the 19 students' development aligned more closely with developing purpose, developing mature interpersonal relationships, and developing competence as their experiences strengthened their networks, helped them clarify goals, and prepared them to be more effective agricultural communicators. As noted in the method section, we noted the exemplars in the narrative with the student number (01 to 19) and the preflection and reflection response number (pre (01) and post (02) data). Therefore, an exemplar from the reflection of student eight would be noted as 08.02.

PDC provided students with "a real-world outlet and motivation to learn" about agricultural communications, thereby, helping them make connections to their coursework (02.01; 14.02). Through interactions with the industry leaders, one student confirmed what she had "been taught in the classroom or read in the literature" and believed she was more prepared to enter the workforce after the conference (09.02).

Developing Purpose at a Professional Development Conference

How did students begin to develop purpose to become career-ready graduates? As students moved through vector six, developing purpose, they developed professional identity because they were intentional about selecting activities to further their career goals. One student "enter[ed] each session with an open mind and a desire to gain something" (15.01). Being open minded helped other students "become familiar with the different jobs available" and gain a glimpse into future career options (10.01; 14.01). Through the "abundant" networking opportunities offered at PDC, students "develop[ed] a network" of individuals with similar interests and practiced their networking skills (16.01; 17.01). Students also expressed commitment to networking and professional development by seeking professionals' advice and implementing their advice immediately (15.01).

An important aspect of developing purpose is clarifying goals and understanding career interests (Chickering and Reisser, 1993; Coombs, 2013). Central to the experience was the opportunity to "have a better understanding" of career and workforce preparation (18.01). Prior to attending the conference, some students found themselves unaware of the many career options but realized networking prior to graduation was as important as becoming familiar with the industry and its

practices (14.01). However, because of the conference, one student planned to broaden skill sets and seek out diverse career options (09.02) while another gained courage to navigate the job-hunting process and secure a full-time position focused on specific career interests (04.02). The career preparation activities and networking opportunities impacted students' future career choices and strengthened their career endeavors (06.02; 14.02). Interacting with industry professionals helped one student understand her career options and gave another confidence to stick with her plan and move forward in her college career (10.02; 14.02).

Developing Professional Identities at a Professional Development Conference

How did students begin to develop their professional identities? Making connections facilitated students' professional identity development and forced them realize what it takes to be a professional (04.02). As a result of PDC, students began connecting coursework to the conference activities to reach interdependence in their academic careers (03.01; 04.02). One student noted flexibility and adaptability simplified learning to become interdependent (03.01).

Developing self-sufficiency is the core value of moving through autonomy toward interdependence (Chickering and Reisser, 1993). Students sought to develop their professional identities by learning to be self-sufficient and adjusting to challenges (03.01; 09.01). Although some students struggled to communicate with others, being self-sufficient allowed them to open up and be themselves (06.02; 12.01). A characteristic of being self-sufficient is becoming comfortable with traveling and gathering resources for personal needs (Chickering and Reisser, 1993). Time management, travel preparations, early flights, and packing for a variety of weather conditions were travel challenges facilitating self-sufficiency (08.02; 09.01; 16.01). Courage, self-confidence, and preparation were the elements for overcoming challenges and enjoying the PDC experience (02.02; 09.01; 14.02; 18.02).

Developing a sense of self, an aspect of Chickering and Reisser's (1993) establishing identity, was evident during the students' experience (01.02). One student faced challenges in finding where she fit in, but other students stepped out of their "comfort zone[s]" to meet new people and internalize their sense of self (01.02; 09.01). Internalizing sense of self was apparent for one student by "paying more attention to" her behavior—body language, facial expressions, and words—when meeting new people (01.02). Meeting new people encouraged self-acceptance and inspired passion and appreciation for agricultural communications (05.02; 07.02).

Appreciation of culture further enabled students to establish identity. Prior to attending PDC, one student was unaware of the importance of agriculture beyond Texas (19.02). Agriculture "takes on many shapes and forms, and each are crucial to our nation" (17.02). Not only is agriculture different in each state, but it is also

diverse (01.02). Thus, one student attended PDC to "better understand production agriculture in other states" and obtain resources to be an effective advocate and communicator across state lines (03.01).

"Connect[ing]" agriculture to their community and personal values supported the development of integrity, the alignment of values and socially responsible behaviors (18.02; Chickering and Reisser, 1993). Students were fully engaged throughout the farm tours and believed the tours connected to their personal values "because of the honest practices used by the farmers" (10.02). The general PDC activities connected with one student's personal values of "hard work and learning from others" and forced another student to consider "unanimous" values of academic integrity expressed by academic professionals across university systems (06.02; 19.02). Therefore, students developed their professional identity by connecting their values to socially responsible behavior and placed importance on academic integrity and professionalism.

Making Meaning at a Professional Development Conference

How did students make meaning of their experience? Prior to the experience, students believed the experience would be valuable because they could improve their speaking and social networking skills (10.01; 14.01). To accomplish this, they remained engaged to gain new skills and hone old skills (10.02; 14.02; 15.02).

Participating in the farm tours was pivotal to students' development of competence and meaning making during the experience. Hands-on participation facilitated students' realization of farmers' roles in production agriculture and their contributions to the success of the industry (09.02; 14.02). For example, the farm tours prompted one student to "get the story behind production" and allowed her to witness consumers' reactions to food production and animal care (16.02). Such PDC activities "confirmed" students' prior knowledge and provided them with "practical information" (01.02; 06.02; 09.02). One student was excited about the farms tours in hopes of "bridg[ing] a gap" to his current academic coursework (16.01). After the experience, students claimed the farm tours and speaker sessions helped them connect their academics with their experience, contributing to the intellectual aspect of developing competence (09.02; 16.02; Chickering and Reisser, 1993). Looking ahead, the farmer tours encouraged one student to enroll in a "wide variety of classes" to improve skills needed to be an effective communicator (02.02).

Making meaning and appreciating the differences of others is enhanced through developing mature interpersonal relationships (Chickering and Reisser, 1993). Students attended PDC to interact with others from "all over the nation" who had similar interests, despite the difficultness and awkwardness that comes with meeting new people (09.02; 15.01). Some students were "most excited" to work with individuals they met during the conference, realizing that "making connections" provided the opportunity for fresh perspectives and expansion of knowledge (13.01; 17.01). Additionally, movement toward the development of mature interpersonal relationships challenged participants' views of diversity (19.02). "Differences" among participants at the conference were obvious, impacting students' desire to "consider others' needs" when developing relationships (03.01; 05.02). For example, participating in PDC helped one student realize how different the participants were and, yet, they shared a common interest in wanting to make a difference in the agricultural industry (01.02).

Additionally, students managed emotions to overcome challenges. For this study, managing emotions was divided into two categories: challenges faced, and emotions felt. The main challenge students faced prior to attending PDC was "talking to people," even though one student believed PDC would facilitate networking without fear (06.01; 07.01). Students planned to overcome this challenge through "confidence" and realizing uncomfortable situations can turn out to be "wonderful experience[s]" (06.01; 09.02). Even so, some students fear of "meeting and connecting" with strangers and fellow members of their local chapter persisted throughout the conference (01.02; 05.02). Letting down their guard and reaching out was how fearful students overcame this challenge (01.02). In addition to facing challenges, students felt deep emotions toward challenges. Students felt positive emotions—excitement, enjoyment, confidence, and relaxation—throughout the experience and negative emotions—nervousness, shyness, and fear—before the experience (07.01; 09.02; 15.02; 17.01; 17.02; 18.01; 19.01). Students' negative emotions felt prior to the experience were pre-conceived and assumed. However, in the end, positive emotions outweighed the negative, and students enjoyed attending PDC (01.02; 09.02). They refused to let the challenge of meeting others and negative pre-conceived emotions stop them from enjoying the experience.

Discussion

Based on the perceptions of the 19 students participating in this study, they began to develop professional identity and to become more prepared, career-ready graduates through PDC activities. As Chickering and Reisser (1993) predicted, students expressed psychosocial development in all seven vectors—developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity. However, most of their development aligned closely with developing purpose, mature interpersonal relationships, and competence.

Although attending PDC facilitated students' movement toward becoming career-ready graduates, it is important to recognize that the conference was just one activity along a continuum of developmental activities that contributed to their professional identity. Yet, students used the experience to gain networks, define their

purpose and goals, and explore interests and opportunities, which aligns with Coombs (2013). As Chickering and Reisser (1993) noted, students used the co-curricular activity to be intentional in developing a network and seeking career options. Essentially, students built a strong network and learned about the many career options that align with their interests, which is central to their quest of finding life's purpose in their community and their world (Trede and McEwen, 2012).

Students used their PDC experience to connect their coursework, personal values, and sense-of-self—initiating development of their professional identity. Overcoming obstacles related to travel promoted students' movement toward interdependence (Chickering and Reisser, 1993) and their development of sense-of-self, self-acceptance, and mobility (Coombs, 2013). In establishing their identity, students sought to understand their beliefs about and appreciation for agriculture and ACT in relation to the larger social group (Daniels and Brooker, 2014). This appreciation was achieved first by becoming aware of their values and second by connecting them to socially responsible behavior—an aspect of developing integrity (Chickering and Reisser, 1993).

Students made meaning of their experience by participating in hands-on experiences, seeking networking opportunities, and facing challenges. Students developed interpersonal and intellectual skills through hands-on PDC activities, e.g., farm tours, which is an important aspect of developing competence (Chickering and Reisser, 1993). Because competence is instrumental in determining purpose (Green, 1981), students used hands-on experiences to confirm their purposes and understand agriculture. Furthermore, development of interpersonal skills provided students with self-confidence and allowed them to network comfortably, a key aspect of developing mature interpersonal relationships (Chickering and Reisser, 1993). Through this experience, students identified networking and developing relationships as instrumental parts of college and of co-curricular activities (Robinson and Glanzer, 2016). Throughout their experience, students continually interacted with their peers, learned to embrace diversity, managed emotions, and faced the challenges of meeting new people without fear.

Perhaps, students began to develop their professional identity at PDC and gained confidence in their communication abilities because of the educationally sound environment (Chickering and Reisser, 1993). Providing students with environments inclusive of professional development opportunities promotes psychosocial development. Doerfert and Miller (2006) noted theory- and skills-based curriculum is important when preparing career-ready graduates, which should extend into planning co-curricular activities. For example, PDC, a co-curricular activity, was an educationally sound environment that promoted psychosocial development.

Recommendations

Because this study was conducted using the perceptions of 19 students from the Texas A&M University ACT Chapter, findings are only applicable to the study population. Yet, it is important to consider how the findings could be applied to future professional development opportunities and contribute to further research. For example, academic programs in agricultural communications could begin to require students to attend a set number of professional development conferences during their program, which would be like internship requirements. This would provide students an understanding of how to navigate conferences and how to interact with others. Recognizing that funding is an issue, we recommend conference attendance becomes part of a course to allow instructors to charge a field trip fee. Doing so would allow students to pay conference expenses using their financial aid. At a local level, faculty serving as ACT advisers could include professional development opportunities throughout the semester. Such opportunities could include business and industry tours, guest speakers, career preparation workshops, and community service. Additionally, understanding why millennials attend professional development events can provide guidance for the creation of appropriate promotional materials and help host universities design sessions and workshops that engage participants.

From an industry perspective, millennials and their predecessors enter the workforce every day and continue to encourage change because of their diverse backgrounds and interests. Employers can use the findings of this study as a base to design and deliver professional development workshops that serve the purpose of the organization and engage the participants. The days of daylong sessions with a presenter and a listener are over. New graduates seek interactive, hands-on sessions that confirm their prior knowledge, provide networking opportunities, and help them gain an appreciation for culture and diversity.

Additionally, future research should include a similar study that includes a sample of students participating in PDC. The sample would include students from various cultures and backgrounds to explore the types of students who seek professional development opportunities. Also, a follow-up study with graduates who engaged in PDC, or similar ACT activities, is needed to determine if their perceptions of their experiences align with their real-world application of such experiences and if their experiences have long-lasting effects. Another follow-up study could determine their application of the experience to the workforce, which could include a longitudinal study tracking graduates periodically for several years. Little evidence was found indicating a correlation between participating in professional development activities and career success and achievement, even though Hart (2007) concluded employers seek graduates who have engaged in professional development opportunities.

Summary

Career-ready graduates who have interacted with professionals and understand the industry are important to agricultural communications. However, many professional development experiences are rooted in practice and developed based on personal experience, rather than well-documented theory that promotes changes in students' thoughts, behaviors, feelings, values, and relationships. Therefore, looking at professional development through the lens of a well-documented theory not only focuses on students' psychosocial development but also provides students with greater opportunities for career success and achievement.

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