Preparing Students for the Transition from College to Work

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceived preparedness of college students for the transition from college to full-time employment. The study was concerned with the interest and rationale behind developing a required Exit Course for college students in order to improve the college to work transition. As well, possible content of an Exit Course was evaluated. The importance of addressing college to work transitions is highlighted by two phenomena. First, there are specific employability skills that employers in Canada are seeking in newly hired employees. Second, the provincial government in Ontario is determining college funding based on graduate employment statistics which are measured by graduate satisfaction, graduate employment, and employer satisfaction.

The research concentrated on the following stakeholders involved in the transition from college to work: (a) current students, (b) recent graduates, (c) support staff who assist students in college to work transition (Career Educators), and (d) employers. Through qualitative research, including focus groups and interviews, these stakeholder groups participated in the research to determine if the Exit Course was a viable solution to facilitate the transition from college to work. Focus groups were conducted with current students, while one-on-one, semi-structured interviews were conducted with recent graduates, Career Educators, and employers.

Common themes elicited from the participants included the following: (a) although students were perceived by the participants of this study to be technically prepared for employment, they were perceived to have weak job search skills and
unrealistic expectations of the world of work unless they had received the benefits of a Co-operative Education experience; (b) an Exit Course was seen as a viable solution to the issues involved in college to work transition; (c) an Exit Course should be comprised of skills necessary to obtain and succeed in a job and the course should be taught by individuals with extensive qualifications in this area; and (d) there is a need to develop college and business partnerships to ensure that students are connected to employers.

Educators within post secondary institutions, specifically colleges, can benefit from the information provided within this study to gain a better understanding of the perceived level of preparedness of students for the transition from college to work. Suggestions with regard to how to improve this transition were made, with specific reference to the addition of an Exit Course as one possible solution.
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CHAPTER ONE: THE PROBLEM

Introduction

For the past ten years I have been employed in a community college where I have had the opportunity to work closely with full-time students. It has been my experience that students are apprehensive and confused about how to cope with the college to work transition. There seems to be a gap between what is taught within the academic programs and the additional skills students need to obtain full-time employment within their field of study.

In my role as a Co-operative Education Coordinator, I became aware of how beneficial the “Co-op preparation course” was for students in their quest for work-term employment. It occurred to me that perhaps a required Exit Course would be beneficial to all students graduating from college, particularly those who do not have the benefit of a Co-operative Education experience. As a result, I undertook this qualitative study (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; McMillan & Wergin, 1998; Rubin & Rubin, 1995) to examine the perceived preparedness of students for the transition from college to full-time employment and the interest and rationale behind developing a required Exit Course for college students in order to facilitate the college to work transition.

Background of the Problem

Post secondary education can be an extremely valuable asset for potential employees as they attempt to enter the Canadian labour market. At the college level,
students are trained to become technical specialists in their field. One would think that succeeding in the academic setting is enough to secure a full-time job. However, this is not the case. In today’s highly competitive labour market, students need to bring to the table more than their educational background. They need their academic qualifications, relevant work experience, and, equally important, they need to be able to market themselves and sell the soft skills that today’s employers are seeking (Conference Board of Canada, 1993). These skills are known as “employability skills” and they are enhanced through specific training and the provision of information on how and where to find employment. Currently the colleges address the development of generic skills by following provincial academic standards which connect the development of generic skills to the core curriculum (Seneca College, 1997).

Because the college provides the academic component of the student’s employability, it seemed logical that the college could also play a role in further training students in employability skills in order for them to be able to compete in the global marketplace. One possible solution which was explored in this research is how this training could occur through the addition of a required Exit Course for all post secondary students in their final year of college. It would be in the best interest of the college, the students, and the community for the college to make provisions for an Exit Course to be a part of the curriculum. Below, some possible components of an Exit Course are suggested as well as potential advantages of the Exit Course to the primary stakeholders involved in transition from college to work.
Components of an Exit Course

I believe that there are three components that an Exit Course should address. Firstly, the soft skills that students need in order to compete for jobs is of primary concern. Students need to be given the opportunity to assess their personal characteristics, interests, values, and their generic and specific skills to develop a concrete concept of themselves as potential employees (Kitagawa, 1998). They also need to learn which of these skills they possess and then become educated on how to market them. Employers from across the country have stated that the critical skills they look for in applicants include generic employability skills such as: academic skills (ability to communicate, think, and learn); personal management skills (positive attitudes and behaviours, responsibility, and adaptability); and teamwork skills (ability to work with others) (Conference Board of Canada, 1993).

Secondly, students need to be aware of job search techniques including identifying the hidden job market (unadvertised jobs), preparing a clear and strong resume and cover letter, and learning and practicing interview techniques.

Finally, students need to become familiar with the resources that are currently available to them within the college system so that they can begin the job search process before they graduate and continue to access these resources until they have secured full-time employment in their field of study and perhaps, whenever they are considering a change of employment.
Primary Stakeholders

One of the primary stakeholders with regard to college to work transitions is the college itself. It seems obvious that the college should be concerned about its reputation within the community and should be continuously attempting to create partnerships with employers who may be able to provide full-time work opportunities for college graduates. The provincial government along with Ontario's 25 colleges created what they call the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to see what current students, graduates, and employers who hire college graduates think of their college education. This information is used to draw a picture of how well the colleges are preparing students for the workplace. By 2002, colleges with poor KPI results could see their provincial funding grant affected by as much as 6% (Gordon, 1998).

Based on the KPI pressure, it is clearly in the best interest of the colleges to address the issue of the transition from college to work. The more successful students are in the college to work transition, the better the KPI result will be. In the end, the results will affect provincial funding as well as an educational institution's reputation compared to other colleges. Because the KPI results will be made available to the public, their impact could ultimately affect future enrollment. Through the KPIs the provincial government is making a statement that the colleges need to be accountable for the product that they produce and that they need to make connections from the classroom to the workplace.

Another stakeholder in college to work transitions is the student. Many students attend post secondary education with one primary goal in mind: to be able to secure a
full-time job in their field of study once they have graduated. Without question, the student must take responsibility for his or her own success within and beyond the post secondary institution, however, there are many things the institution can do to increase the chances of student success. Through an Exit Course, students could become familiar with all of the critical resources available to them within the college. Access to Career Educators (support staff who assist students in the college to work transition), as well as training on how to use the systems that exist to help students find a job, are elements of the course that would enhance the student’s chances of obtaining a full-time job after graduation. The course would encourage each student within the college to address the college to work transition prior to graduating, giving them a head start on their job search.

Currently, where I work, at Seneca College of Applied Arts and Technology in Ontario, there are only two full-time staff in Employment Services available to assist approximately 2,000 graduating students who are seeking full-time employment (Seneca College, 1998). These Career Educators also provide seminars on resume writing and job search strategies. It is my understanding that the response they get to their seminars is minimal. In fact, the percentage of students who use this service is so small that the Career Educators are moving towards offering these sessions only by specific request from faculty. As well, I am aware that the current system primarily being used to find work for graduates is through Campus WorkLink, a common Internet site used by five colleges in the Greater Toronto Area. When an employer calls the college seeking a graduate from our institution, instead of connecting them with our students, they are directed to the Campus WorkLink Internet site. My concern is further compounded when
I talk to students nearing graduation who have never heard of WorkLink and employers who are disillusioned because they have posted a job on WorkLink and have had no response. In my opinion, the connection between students and employers is weak and would be significantly improved by the addition of an Exit Course.

The final stakeholder is the community in a general sense, and potential employers in a more specific sense. The college needs to develop close links to the business community in order to keep abreast of the needs of employers, and to continuously ensure that programs are adapted to meet those needs. Through the Exit Course, employers could make guest appearances to provide real-life information to students as well as recruitment opportunities. The participation of employers in this type of activity could encourage a close connection to the college, its programs, and ultimately to its students. This could potentially result in a greater chance that the employer would provide a work opportunity to a college graduate if a hiring opportunity presented itself. The Exit Course could also be a means for providing a connection for each student in their final year with someone within the college system who has access to jobs and current placement information.

With the ever-increasing competition for jobs it is critical that the college develop and maintain close ties with the business community to ensure that its students have the best possible opportunities to make the college to work transition. The college cannot afford to lose potential employers and their job opportunities. Instead, it should be opening its arms to all of the resources within the business community and providing the maximum service possible to accommodate the needs of employers. I believe that the
college where I work needs to have an integrated, on-line job posting system that all students can access in order to look for jobs. Students can be trained to use this system during their Exit Course and employers will benefit from having an efficient system in place at the college that will support their hiring needs. The easier the college makes this system for the employers, the more likely they will continue to use it and support the work-related needs of the students, as opposed to becoming frustrated with a system that does not work well and going elsewhere for their hiring needs.

In summary, there are many steps that can be taken within the community college in order to increase the employability of its graduates. By being aware of the stakeholders who each comprise a critical element of the college to work transition, the college can strive to improve its services and address everyone’s needs. The addition of a required Exit Course in the final year of a college student’s academic program is one possible step toward addressing college to work transitions. It should be noted, however, that the most appropriate timing of the “Exit” course (which implies being at the end of a student’s program) may not be in the final semester of study, but rather at an earlier time in the student’s academic career. The timing of the Exit Course will also be considered within this study.

Statement of the Problem Situation and Purpose of the Study

Evidence suggests that a required Exit Course is one possible solution worth exploring. To investigate the Exit Course idea in further detail, through qualitative research, current students, recent graduates, college Career Educators, and employers
were asked to assess the viability of an Exit Course as one possible solution to the difficulties of the college to work transition. There is a need to investigate the college to work transition as well as the Exit Course as one possible solution in order to clarify the difficulties in this area and to explore solutions to these difficulties. The findings of this study could significantly impact upon the strategies used in community colleges to assist graduates in finding full-time employment.

Research Questions

The focus of the study is the preparedness of students for the transition from college to work. The following specific questions served as the framework for the study:

1. Do the participants of this study (current students, recent graduates, Career Educators, and employers) perceive that students are prepared for the college to work transition?
2. Do the participants of this study (current students, recent graduates, Career Educators, and employers) perceive a required Exit Course as a viable solution to the college to work transition?
3. If the Exit Course is perceived as a viable solution, when should it be offered, what would be the major components of the course, and who would teach it?
4. Are there other solutions and/or improvements to facilitate college to work transition?

Rationale

As I stated earlier, currently there is a great deal of pressure on community colleges to rationalize their existence as a result of the monitoring by the Key
Performance Indicators (KPIs). Future funding will depend on KPI results which leads one to believe that the satisfaction level of students and graduates should be investigated, problems should be identified, and relevant solutions implemented. The transition from college to work has been identified as one component of this KPI measurement. This transition also serves as an important link in building and maintaining positive relationships between the college and the business community. It seems reasonable to assume that the more successful the college is in preparing students for the college to work transition, the greater the return will be for the college with regard to its reputation within the community, its provincial funding, and ultimately its continued enrollment within the years to come.

Importance of the Study

This study is important because it provides an opportunity for four different stakeholder groups to review the transition from college to work and evaluate one possible option, an Exit Course, that could potentially be used to facilitate this transition. If an Exit Course was perceived to be one viable solution in the college to work transition, the following potential benefits might occur. Students could leave the college system with a greater level of preparedness for the world of work and have a greater chance at gaining full-time employment. Employers would be able to access graduates more easily and have the benefit of interviewing students who know what their skills are and how they can benefit the company. The college would reap the rewards of a higher
student placement rate, better KPI results, increased provincial funding, and a more positive reputation within the business community.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

This study focused on the transition from college to work from the perspective of current students, recent graduates, employers, and college Career Educators. Administrative perspectives were not represented. I decided that for this study it would be more reasonable and useful to focus only on Career Educators since they have the most direct contact with college to work transitions and related issues pertaining to employers and students. Employers’ perspectives were considered because it was felt that they could provide useful insight into the current labour market and the skills that new graduates need in order to look for and obtain full-time employment. Current students and recent graduates provided a critical perspective from the point of view of the stakeholders personally involved in this transition.

This study may have been limited by the fact that when I gathered all of the data I relied on the honesty of the participants and their willingness to share information related to the topic. As well, the study may have been limited by my presence in the interviews and focus groups, which may have been intimidating for some participants because of the fact that I am an employee of the college. It is possible that some participants were providing answers that they believed I wanted to hear.
Definition of Terms

1. **Students**

   Individuals who are currently studying in a full-time program in the college system.

2. **Graduates**

   Individuals who have successfully completed a full-time college diploma within the past two years and are working or seeking employment.

3. **Career Educators**

   Those support staff within a community college who assist students in the transition from college to work.

4. **Employers**

   Individuals who work in the business community and regularly hire recent college graduates.

Outline of the Remainder of the Document

In Chapter Two, a Literature Review examines the background of the transition from college to work and reviews many programs in Canada and the United States that have attempted to address this issue.

In Chapter Three, the Methodology is described for the qualitative research including the research design, pilot studies, and research procedures, followed by the methods of data collection and analysis.

The results of the analysis are outlined in Chapter Four, with common themes from the qualitative research presented.
In Chapter Five, a summary of the results and conclusions is presented, addressing implications and possible future areas to address.
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Organization of the Present Chapter

The literature reviewed in this section was an overview of topics related to the college to work transition. First, employment trends in the 1990s were examined in order to identify the qualities that employers who hire college graduates are seeking. Next, the roles and responsibilities of community colleges in Ontario were discussed so that a reference could be made to how much responsibility they bear in the preparation and placement of college graduates into full-time jobs.

In the third section, some solutions for the college to work transition were identified through an examination of research conducted in Canada and the United States. This was followed by a section that reviewed examples of Exit Courses as potential facilitators in the college to work transition. The final section describes three specific courses currently being offered at Seneca College of Applied Arts and Technology in Ontario where the research for this thesis was undertaken.

Employment Trends in the 1990s: What Are Employers Looking For?

Employment in the 1990s is reflective of a “Technological Revolution” (Foord Kirk, 1996) which is described as the dramatic increase in technology through electronics and access to information. This reality has been fueled by the following trends in the Canadian labour market: an increase in technology in daily work life, an astronomical surge in access to information, globalization and access to the global marketplace, and an
increase in the pace of change (Foord Kirk, 1996; Yate, 1995). Finding work in the 1990s means being able to adapt to a changing job market. To be successful, people need to change and enhance their job search strategies. “In such a world, where the only constant is change, it is necessary for career counsellors to coach their clientele in the need for personal flexibility in the widest possible sense” (Campbell, 1999, p. 1).

Prior to the 1990s, individuals looking for work in Canada could get a job using the “three Es”: education, experience, and endorsements (College Co-operative Educators of Ontario [CCEO], 1993). One could graduate from a post secondary institution, create a resume to highlight his or her educational accomplishments and any previous work experience, and back these up through the provision of references. Today, requirements for obtaining employment have changed. Employers are still looking for the three Es, however, they are looking for other components as well. These components can be summarized with the acronym “D.A.T.A.”: desire, abilities, temperament, and assets (CCEO, 1993). This D.A.T.A. can be described as “a set of needs and expectations that cuts across all occupations and professions to define universal skills — skills, in other words, that make people trainable; significant skills that give people the foundation to grow throughout their lives” (Foord Kirk, 1996, p. 74).

In 1993, the Conference Board of Canada created a document called The Employability Skills Profile to present a summary of what qualities Canadian corporations felt were held by the ideal employee. It was essentially a blueprint of the generic skills required of the Canadian workforce. These skills include academic skills (the ability to communicate, think, and learn); personal management skills (positive
attitudes and behaviours, responsibility, and adaptability); and teamwork skills (the ability to work with others) (Conference Board of Canada, 1993). Employability skills are developed in school and through a variety of life experiences outside school, and as a result, "the student, the family, and the education system, supported and enhanced by the rest of society, share the responsibility of developing employability skills" (Altman, 1995, p. 90).

In their 1982 article, "Campus to Career: Bridging the Gap", Feitler-Karchin and Wallace-Schutzman express the concerns of employers who feel that "new employees just out of college lack career direction, motivation, and confidence while maintaining high and unrealistic expectations about job content, promotability, responsibility, and salary" (p. 59). This description reflects a gap between the expectations of students and the realities of the world of work. Training students in the employability skills mentioned previously could be a means to closing this gap.

Community Colleges in the 1990s: Roles and Responsibilities

In a 1988 study, Dennison and Levin examined the goals of community colleges across Canada as perceived by two key groups, Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and government personnel who were responsible for college development. Dennison and Levin (1988) restated the mission of community colleges in Canada as post secondary educational institutions designed to provide increased access for those seeking broadly-based preparation to enter the job market or to pursue further education in a variety of fields. Through their research, they found that the three major roles of colleges were to
expand accessibility to post secondary education, to train for employment, and to incorporate an educational component into the curriculum. Within Ontario, the CEOs and ministry personnel who were participants in the study showed general agreement that the primary goal of Ontario colleges should be preparation for employment.

Many other researchers concur with the idea that colleges play an integral role as facilitators for effective transitions to work (Ader, 1997; Bragg & Griggs, 1997; Ellibee & Mason, 1997; Green & Foley, 1997; Kisner, Mazza, & Liggett, 1997; Laanan, 1995). At the local level, within the community college used for the research of this thesis, the mission of the college is to “provide career-related education and training that enable our students to succeed in the global economy” (Seneca College, 1999, front insert).

As described earlier, in Ontario the Ministry of Education and Training established the Key Performance Indicator Project in 1998. Quoted below are two goals for the college system, which are measured in five performance objectives or Key Performance Indicators (KPIs).

Goals:

1. Excellence: to offer high quality programs that meet the needs of students and employers.

2. Accountability: to demonstrate excellence through the achievement of specific outcomes.
Performance Objectives:

1. Post-College Outcomes (Graduate Employment): A high rate of graduates who sought employment, found it and perceived that their education was useful in gaining employment.

2. Graduate Satisfaction: A high rate of graduates are satisfied that their college education equipped them to achieve their goals after graduation.

3. Employer Satisfaction: A high rate of employers are satisfied with the graduates’ preparation, program relevance, and the colleges’ ability to meet emerging employer needs.

4. Student Satisfaction: A high rate of students are satisfied with the quality of their learning experience, support services, and educational resources.

5. Student Success: A significant percentage of students who enroll in their college successfully complete their program of study (retention).

(Gordon, 1998, pp. 3-4)

It is clear that the provincial government in Ontario has stated that colleges need to be accountable for their graduates and provide assistance to them in their transition from college to work. The Key Performance Indicator Project (Association of Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology of Ontario, 1998) which measures the colleges’ ability to meet the goals and objectives outlined above is still in progress and major findings are not yet available.

Currently, at Seneca College, all courses are offered using outcomes-based learning. Course descriptions must reveal to the students what specifically they will learn
(learning outcomes), thus providing a guarantee of the content and quality of a course. Individual learning outcomes are like the pieces of a puzzle which together create the overall program outcomes. The intent of using outcomes-based learning is to try to improve the satisfaction a student feels with regard to their educational experience. This has a direct impact on the KPI measurement where students are given the opportunity to evaluate and state their satisfaction level with their academic program and, in effect, the outcomes-based curriculum.

Campbell's (1999) research looked at the skills that Canadian workers need today and ten years from now. He surveyed 640 employers, adult students, and educators and concluded that the following job skills were needed: (a) the ability to visualize up to six careers and/or self-employment; (b) the ability to develop new skills and adapt to the changing job market; and (c) the motivation and self-efficacy to prosper amidst anticipated changes in the world of work. Campbell also suggested that the following qualitative skills are vital to the employment environment: (a) skills of problem recognition and definition; (b) skills for handling evidence; (c) analytical skills; (d) skills of implementation; (e) human relations skills; and (f) learning skills.

In contrast to the limited Canadian research, a significant number of papers and studies are available from American researchers. These studies were included in this review for the purpose of learning from our educational partners across the border who offer similar post secondary programs and who can provide meaningful information on the college to work transition.
In her article, “The Role Community Colleges Should Play in Job Placement”, Adler (1997) reviewed five successful school-to-work projects. Once the programs were in place, a multi-year student follow-up program was used to evaluate each program’s success. A follow-up study using paired control groups to analyze data over a five-year period identified five common elements: (a) the programs were organized as partnerships with employers; (b) they utilized resources from a variety of agencies and businesses; (c) they used unpaid work-site learning opportunities and business-based classrooms; (d) they offered transition activities from unpaid work-site learning experiences to paid jobs; and (e) they had staff specifically designated for job development.

Bragg and Griggs (1997) described a new U.S. federal policy called the School-to-Work Opportunities Act (STWOA), whereby, the primary goal was to establish a national framework to encourage individual states to coordinate school-to-work transition systems. These systems would be designed to help students gain meaningful work experience while they are still in school as well as identify and obtain rewarding work after completing their education. Bragg and Griggs identified three factors that need to be present in any setting: (a) school-based learning (career exploration and counselling, for example); (b) work-based learning (paid or unpaid work experiences, workplace mentoring, and instructions on workplace competencies); and (c) connecting activity components of a school-to-work system (designed to ease the transition from school-to-work by matching students’ interests and competencies to the work-based opportunities offered by employers through career counselling, professional development, workplace mentoring, and job placement services).
Several other authors also concurred with the role that the college plays in the college to work transition. The establishment of transition programs can help develop relationships with local business and industry (Kisner, Mazza, & Liggett, 1997; Laanan, 1995; Stanley, 1994), develop employability skills within the graduating students (Bell, 1995; Boulmetis, 1997; Laanan, 1995), and provide structured learning activities to promote the development of these skills (Boulmetis, 1997).

Potential Solutions for the College to Work Transition

The research indicates that there are a wide variety of initiatives that colleges have taken in order to assist with the transition from college to work. In Texas, the Collin County Community College District conducted a project to develop, implement, and evaluate a model career laboratory called a “Future Shop” (Floyd et al., 1989). The laboratory was set up to let users explore diverse career options and job placement opportunities. The lab had three major components: (a) career assessment and exploration, including a career resources library, career interest assessments, a mentor program, a job fair, and employee education; (b) job transition and grooming, including interview coaching, seminars in resume writing, and a video library; and (c) placement and transition support, including a computerized job referral system, college-affiliated job listings, and employer contact resources (Floyd et al., 1989). Over 15,000 community college students used the Future Shop services at one or more of the 11 participating colleges. Several means of evaluation were employed, including a user feedback questionnaire, comments from the participating institutions through Exit Reports and a
survey, advisory committee evaluations recorded through an advisory committee meeting, and assessment by an external consultant who reviewed the extensive written documentation and made an on-site visit. Overall, the evaluations were supportive of the Future Shop concept. There were a few concerns, however, which included intake, career exploration processes and resources, and the unclear role of peer counselors who had responsibilities elsewhere in the college (Floyd et al., 1989). With regard to intake, it was identified that the initial contact person greeting students must be extremely knowledgeable about the services available at the Future Shop and be completely adept at determining the exact nature of the student need. This is the point at which the entire system could break down if the student was left with the impression that he or she was not assisted properly, or was not made aware of all of the available services. As well, there was no system for tracking and following up with students who used the Future Shop for evaluation of the success of the program.

In 1993, the Student's Ultimate Career Coursework, Employment, & Student Services (SUCCESS) Handbook project was undertaken to identify student support services available through the California Community Colleges and to identify common barriers to employment. The study surveyed 100 students to determine their perception of training received, student service availability, and placement assistance (Foothill-De Anza Community College, 1993). Although the results of the study were not entirely clear, the authors did present a useful "wish list" for what would be important resources to provide students with regard to job placement. These included: (a) providing a handbook that would assist students in achieving their educational goals by presenting the
availability of support services in an easy-to-use format; and (b) establishing linkages between the various student services, job placement activities and educational programs, and industry (Foothill-De Anza Community College, 1993).

During the fall of 1993, the Placement and Career Information Center (PCIC) at Central Michigan University undertook a self-assessment to determine user satisfaction with and need for services. Data were collected from students, faculty, and employer users. This was a clear and comprehensive study where the results indicated that students were generally satisfied with how they were treated and would recommend the Center to others. However, they were unaware of many services available and did not realize the importance of early career planning (Adams et al., 1994). The strongest element of this study was the many recommendations that could be used to improve the PCIC. These included the following: (a) the development of outreach activities specific to identified target audiences to inform students, faculty, and others of the appropriate use of Center services; (b) the development of a full-scale effort to educate incoming students about the importance of using PCIC services throughout their student career; (c) the education of faculty and staff about all the services offered by the PCIC in order to allow them to communicate this information to the students more effectively; (d) the development of strategies to systematically educate academic advisors, counselors, parents, family, alumni, residence hall staff, and others about PCIC services and career development issues; (e) the reinstatement of the Counseling, Advising, and Placement group; and (f) regular evaluation of service and customer satisfaction (Adams et al., 1994).
Stanley (1994) described in her article the development of a model to assist in the transition from school to work through her research at Orange County College (OCC) in California. As a result of the study, the following college-to-career options were developed for OCC students: (a) worksite-based internships; (b) a comprehensive career development program; and (c) a “skills guarantee” program for graduates that assured employers of well-prepared employees (Stanley, 1994). Other unplanned benefits resulted from this project, including outreach to other segments of education, business, industry, and the community at large, creating many partners in the college to work transition.

Cuseo (1997) described how the goals of the Senior Year Experience (SYE) at the University of South Carolina and its affiliated colleges included the following: (a) to bring integration and “closure” to the undergraduate experience; (b) to provide students with an opportunity to reflect upon the meaning of their college experience; and (c) to facilitate graduating students’ transition to post-college life (Cuseo, 1997). The SYE movement pursued nine specific goals, three of which were directly related to the transition from college to work. These included: (a) promoting integration and connection between the academic major and the work world (employers and alumni as guest speakers, advisory committees, internships); (b) explicitly and intentionally developing important student skills, competencies, and perspectives which are incorporated into the college curriculum (for example, leadership skills, character and values development, teamwork); and (c) improving seniors’ career preparation and pre-professional development by facilitating their transition from the academic to the
professional world (practical experience through internships, work-shadowings, learning specific employment-preparation skills) (Cuseo, 1997).

Though most of the programs and studies described above indicate positive outcomes in the college to work initiatives, in many cases, regardless of the quality of the service offered to students, a potential breakdown would likely occur if the students were not aware of the services provided by the college or if they chose not to use them (Adams et al., 1994; Floyd et al., 1989; Foothill-De Anza Community College, 1993). Because colleges have a stake in the success of their students in transition from college to work, it would be in their best interest to develop a more formal means for ensuring that each graduating student is provided with specific transition preparation. The following section describes one possible approach to accomplish this.

An Exit Course as a Specific Solution in the Transition from College to Work

Several American colleges have created what they call a “capstone course” which is offered to students in their final year of post secondary education (Bell, 1995; Cuseo, 1997; Troutt & Isberger, 1988). At Kennesaw State College in Georgia, administrators experienced great success with a freshman experience program and this encouraged them to look at creating a “Senior Seminar” to bridge the gap between a student’s senior year and his or her professional career (Siegel, 1992). This Senior Seminar would incorporate exercises to increase self-confidence by expanding self-knowledge and would provide an emphasis on teaching students to form positive relationships by being personally and
professionally inviting with self and with others. As well, students would be taught how to balance professional goals with personal needs.

At Albuquerque Technical-Vocational Institute (T-VI) in New Mexico, administrators developed and integrated into the curriculum a course on employment skills to help their graduates secure and retain employment (Bell, 1995). An important reason for adding the course to the curriculum was that employer feedback indicated that graduate’s resumes all looked the same and graduates lacked interview skills. Along the same lines as the Employability Skills Profile (Conference Board of Canada, 1993) developed in Canada, the New Mexico State Department of Education identified Employability Skills of their own. Employability Skills were grouped into three categories: academic, personal management, and teamwork skills. These categories encompassed goal setting and personal motivation, appropriate attitudes towards work and work habits, listening and oral communication, problem solving, teamwork, adaptability/flexibility, interpersonal relations, comprehension/understanding, and writing (Bell, 1995). A required, one-hour-per-week credit course dedicated to teaching job seeking and job retention skills was created and implemented. The mission/purpose of the course was as follows:

Using a team approach, develop and implement a course that will satisfy the needs of business and industry. Create a relationship between T-VI, the student, and industry in the development of a student’s knowledge, skills and attitudes towards pre-employment professionalism as well as in the creation of student citizens as future employees and leaders. (Bell, 1995, p. 5)
Core components of the course included a self-assessment, job search and networking skills, job description analysis, employment portfolio (resume, cover letter, follow-up letter), interview techniques, and job retention skills (Bell, 1995).

Many other researchers agreed with the importance of the course content described above by Bell in 1995 (Bolt & Swartz, 1997; Cuseo, 1997; Kitagawa, 1998; Price, Graham & Hobbs, 1997; Troutt & Isbemer, 1988). Troutt and Isbemer (1988) discussed a program at Southern Illinois University’s College of Technical Careers called “Professional Development”, whereby, they addressed the need students have for job search skills to compete successfully in the job market. In their study of 98 junior and senior technical students, the topics of resumes, cover letters, and interviewing were rated as highly useful by the students (Troutt & Isbemer, 1988).

Related Courses Currently Offered in an Ontario College

Currently, at Seneca College of Applied Arts and Technology where the research of this thesis took place, several courses related to the college to work transition are in the curriculum of various academic programs. All of the Co-operative Education students are required to enroll in the Co-op “Professional Practice” course which prepares them to obtain a four month Co-operative Education placement (Seneca College, 1999). The curriculum includes detailed information related to preparing resumes, writing job search letters, developing job search action plans, and preparing for job interviews (Kitagawa, 1998). As well, a course called “Job Skills” is offered as a mandatory course within the one-year Accounting Clerk Microcomputer Program and a course called “Career Planning
and Job Search” is offered in the final semester of the three-year Business Administration Program (Seneca College, 1999). Within all of these courses, the following topic areas are addressed: a self-assessment, current market trends, company research techniques, networking, resumes, cover letters, practice interviews, follow-up techniques, and workplace etiquette. It is clear that for these program areas, the college has identified the value of including an employment preparation course as a mandatory component of the curriculum.

The personal feedback I have received from students who have experienced one of these courses as a mandatory component of their program indicates that they think extremely highly of the added value they are receiving. The downside is that these students represent a very small percentage of the total number of students enrolled within the college. With the addition of a required Exit Course, all students could reap the benefits of being formally assisted with the college to work transition.

At Seneca College, the 1998 Graduate Employment Report boasts an 88% total graduate employment rate for that year (Seneca College, 1998). However, a closer look at the numbers reveals that only 65% of graduates available for employment perceived that they were employed in a program-related job. Perhaps a required Exit Course would be a means to improving this figure.

Summary of Literature Reviewed

I presented the Review of Literature in a global to local format. The first consideration was employment trends in Canada to provide a frame of reference as to
what employers were looking for from college graduates. This can be summarized using the term “employability skills.” At a local level, I reviewed the role of the community college in Ontario with particular emphasis on the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). The KPIs have recently been created and are identified as the tools with which the provincial government will evaluate the success colleges are achieving with respect to graduate employment, student satisfaction, and employer satisfaction among other things. Some school to work programs were reviewed to establish the role that educational institutions in the United States and Canada play in the transition from school to work.

Next, potential solutions to the issue of the transition from college to work were presented. These were reviewed from a more global perspective through examples of general college-wide initiatives that had been used throughout various colleges. Then the focus moved to the discussion of an Exit Course as a specific element offered through the colleges as a viable solution to the transition from college to work with reference to specific examples of course content. Finally, three courses were identified at the college where the study took place in order to identify that this institution has already placed value on having an Exit Course as a mandatory element of its curriculum, but for only a limited number of programs.

In the next chapter, the Methodology is described for the qualitative research including the research design, pilot studies, and research procedures, followed by the methods of data collection and analysis.
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODS

Overview

The research conducted was qualitative in its methodology (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). In this chapter I will discuss this research approach and procedures used for gathering data. Pilot studies will be described as well as how the data were collected and analyzed. Methodological assumptions and limitations will also be identified.

Description of Research Methodology

This study was an inquiry into the preparedness of college students for the transition from college to full-time employment. It was a qualitative study (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; McMillan & Wergin, 1998; Rothe, 1994) that examined the interest and rationale behind developing a required Exit Course for college students in order to improve the college to work transition. Qualitative research places an emphasis on conducting the research in natural settings, using mostly verbal descriptions that result in stories rather than statistical reports (McMillan & Wergin, 1998). Two methods were used to collect data in order to explore emergent themes. These two methods included interviews (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; McMillan & Wergin, 1998; Rothe, 1994) and focus groups (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). These methods were seen as the most appropriate tools to use in order to encourage participants to share their thoughts in a participative, comfortable atmosphere.
Pilot Studies

A two-part pilot study was conducted in a community college setting. The purpose of this study was to determine if there were any problems or concerns with the research procedures and to determine if the questions being asked by this research were worthy of future consideration. The two parts of the pilot study took the form of a focus group and an interview.

The focus group participants consisted of ten, second-year students from Seneca College of Applied Arts and Technology. The group included a combination of male and female students with one year of college experience who were given a verbal description of the procedures and on that basis, volunteered to participate. The students represented a common academic program and all expected to graduate within one year of the focus group date. Focus group participants were asked the questions listed in Appendix A.

At the completion of the pilot focus group, participants indicated that they were very comfortable with the format used, particularly since they were not being video taped, only audio taped. I used a numbering system to track different students on the audio tape which worked extremely well and made the anonymity of the focus group very obvious to the participants.

The students also felt that the questions they were asked were clear and appropriate to the topic area and did not make them uncomfortable in any way. I was adjusting the questions as the focus group progressed and right from the start it became apparent to me that questions that elicit a “yes” or “no” response were inappropriate for focus groups because they did not create any type of discussion. Open-ended questions
were far more effective at getting the group talking and sharing information. This was documented and noted for future focus groups and interviews.

The participants also appreciated the fact that they were interviewed alongside other participants who were in the same academic program because this increased their comfort level and helped to stimulate conversation. Many commented that there were things that they would not have discussed if students from other programs had been present. This was a very critical element for me to discover because I had initially considered having the focus group consist of a broader cross-section of students from various programs across the college within one focus group. However, based on the feedback from the focus group participants, I decided that the added benefits to limiting each focus group to a specific academic program outweighed the disadvantages of not using a cross-section.

One other issue that I became aware of was that it was very important to clarify at the beginning of the focus group that we were addressing the transition from college to work from a general perspective as opposed to a program specific perspective. Because the participants all represented the same academic program, I found that many times the focus group moved off topic and students discussed academic issues and concerns instead of the general transition from college to work and what the college could do to facilitate this. In future focus groups, I would make this point extremely clear so that it would be easier to keep the participants on topic.

The results of the focus group pilot study indicated clear support for the Exit Course proposal and also provided me with many valuable suggestions for course content
and other related services that the college could provide in facilitating the transition from college to work.

The second part of the pilot study was an interview with a faculty member from a College of Applied Arts and Technology who was previously a Co-operative Education Coordinator and who is currently involved with graduates in their final year. In the interview I referred to the interview questions listed in Appendix A. The interview was audio taped and became a discussion between the researcher and the interviewee.

The interviewee indicated that the objective of the study was clearly laid out at the beginning of the interview and, as a result, she was able to almost anticipate the questions. The questions asked were perceived to be very clear because they were within the context described so she found it quite easy to respond. Because of her passion for the subject, she found it very easy to discuss.

As an interviewer, I participated somewhat in the discussion because of my knowledge and interest. The interviewee regarded this as a positive element of the experience because she felt that my input helped to build the discussion and lead to increased information being shared. Points that she had forgotten to mention were triggered by our discussion. "The goal is to achieve some empathy, but not so much involvement that you cannot see the negative things, or if you see them, feel that you cannot report them" (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 13).

The results of the pilot interview also indicated clear support for the creation of an Exit Course as an essential element in the transition from college to work. Specific
elements of an Exit Course were discussed, as well as the timing and the follow-up support that could be provided to students.

Selection of Participants

Participants for the study were selected and requested to participate on a voluntary basis. I tried to find participants who were involved a variety of roles in the college to work transition. For example, the following categories of participants were recruited: current students in an Ontario College of Applied Arts and Technology, recent graduates from a College of Applied Arts and Technology (within two years of graduating), professional Career Educators within the community college setting (support staff), and employers who recruit college graduates. Focus groups were conducted with the current student groups, while one-on-one, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the recent graduates, employers, and Career Educators.

The current student groups were selected based on accessibility, with a conscious attempt to form focus groups from individual academic program areas. This was accomplished by approaching three specific academic classes and presenting the opportunity for them to volunteer to be a part of a focus group. Several focus groups represented a variety of program structures within the college. These included a 1-year post graduate program, a 3-year diploma program using students in their second year who had a Co-operative Education option, and a 1-year certificate program where students had taken a “Job Skills” course. As well as being the focus group facilitator, these students were aware of my position at the college as Co-operative Education Co-ordinator.
The recent graduates were selected based on the ability to locate these students and find willing participants. I accessed a list of recent graduates from the Graduate Placement Office, contacted many participants by telephone and proceeded to set up meetings with those who were interested in participating. Employers chosen for interviews were those who were identified through the Graduate Placement Office as employers who had consistently hired college graduates over the past several years. Finally, support staff were chosen who had worked in the position of Professional Career Educator at Seneca College and who were interested in participating in the research.

I felt that these four groups represented a well-rounded sample of participants who were all associated with the college to work transition in a significant manner. I did not place any relevance on the gender mix when considering my participants for this study. However, the following was the breakdown of gender mix for the participants: focus groups: current students 10 males, 44 females; interviews: Career Educators 1 male, 4 females; employers 1 male, 3 females; recent graduates 1 male, 4 females.

Procedures

Following approval from the Brock University Ethics Committee and the permission of my supervisor at Seneca College, I created information packages for the research participants. Prior to participating in the research, each participant was provided with the information package which included an Information Letter (see Appendix B), two copies of the Brock University Informed Consent Form (see Appendix C), and a Thank You Letter (see Appendix D). The information package and the procedures for the
focus group or interview were reviewed with the participants and they were promised complete confidentiality. Once they felt comfortable with all of the proceedings, they were asked to sign and return one copy of the consent form to me.

Instrumentation

Both the interviews and the focus groups used in this research were semi-structured in nature. As an interviewer and a focus group facilitator I introduced myself to the participants and described the study and the events to follow. Once all questions from participants were addressed I began the research which was structured by several open-ended questions (see Appendix A). These questions were designed to stimulate discussion only. Once the participants began to discuss the issues presented, I tried to be very flexible in my approach, using additional probing questions to stimulate further responses. All questions were designed to determine if the participants felt that college students were prepared for the transition from college to work, whether they felt that the Exit Course was a viable solution, and what other ideas they might be able to present with regard to this issue.

Data Collection and Recording

Data were collected as the participants became available for research over a two month time period. During both the interviews and focus groups, data were collected through detailed notes as well as using a tape recorder so that no content would be missed. During the focus group sessions, each participant was given a number which
they cited each time they contributed to the discussion so that their anonymity was maintained. The tape recorder was specifically chosen as opposed to a video camera, which I thought would be intimidating to the participants. Within two days of each interview or focus group, I transcribed the tapes onto a word processor.

Three focus groups were conducted with 54 current students, five interviews were conducted with recent graduates, four interviews were conducted with employers, and five interviews were conducted with Career Educators.

Data Processing and Analysis

Data analysis consisted of a systematic process of coding and categorizing the data from the interviews and focus groups (Rothe, 1994). After a great deal of consideration, I decided that rather than looking at all of the differences between the research participants, it would be more worthwhile to focus on only those themes that were clearly visible within each group of participants and seen as common threads across all groups. I felt that what would be gained by analysing the data in this way would be a final product that was a very clear and crisp analysis that could be of benefit to interested parties and of value for future academic planning. The need for consensus across the stakeholder groups is a requirement to be able to move forward with new initiatives in this area. However, I was also aware that what could be lost by looking at the data this way was an individual representation of each participant’s separate thoughts on the variety of topics which were discussed. However, with over 60 participants and two methods of accumulating data (interviews and focus groups) it seemed that representing
each individual position on each individual topic would spread the data thin and show little substance to the topics that arose. I concluded that the value achieved in looking for common threads across all of the participants far outweighed the cost of not representing all of the differences between participants. However, I also took the opportunity to highlight salient differences which were clear among all of the participants and these were discussed where they arose within the individual theme areas.

I started the task of data processing and analysis by making a list of theme categories discussed in the pilot studies. Then, as each interview and focus group of the actual study progressed, I fine tuned the theme categories as the volume of data increased. I found that the best method for categorizing the data was to use a coding system of coloured highlighters. Each piece of information was colour coded according to what theme area it fell under. Eventually it became clear that all of the common data could be represented under three primary categories. From this point, several themes were identified within each category. Each theme was identified by a number and these numbers were inserted beside each related quote in order to sort the data. Then, I literally cut my transcribed notes into individual pieces based on the coding. I sorted each piece according to the category and subsequent theme that it was coded under. In preparation for writing the Findings section of this paper (see Chapter Four), I selected a few quotations from each theme that I felt best represented all of the participant’s comments on a given topic, being careful not to saturate my final write-up with too many quotations (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).
Following the data analysis, I used a peer debriefer to ensure the accuracy of my transcription and theme analysis. My peer debriefer was another student within the Master of Education program. I felt that she was an appropriate person to review my data and analysis because she is currently conducting qualitative research of a similar nature and has done extensive reading in this area. As a peer debriefer, she read through my findings and compared these to my transcribed notes to determine if they appeared to be accurate. As well, she compared my direct quotes to the transcriptions to ensure their accuracy.

Methodological Assumptions and Limitations

It was clearly stated during each interview and focus group that all information would be treated with anonymity. Therefore, it was assumed that all participants would answer the questions with complete honesty and openness based on their personal perspectives. However, it is possible that some participants could have had personal biases and hidden agendas which affected the information that they provided to me. As well, some participants may have been telling me what they thought I wanted to hear as opposed to providing their true views. It is assumed, however, that since the participants are the actual stakeholders with regard to this issue, their comments are of great value.

As a person who is directly involved in the placement of students into full-time jobs, I brought my own opinions and biases to the study. I have worked with many graduating students and I have my own ideas about how well prepared these students are for the world or work, and how receptive employers are to hire them. Knowing this, I
tried to utilize my expertise in this area only in a manner which would initiate discussion and probe further into the issues discussed. Perhaps my presence in the focus groups and interviews was intimidating for some participants, however, I tried to assure them that I was only investigating the issues and truly wanted their honest perspectives on the subject matter.

Because I hand selected the participants for this study, it is possible that I overlooked potential participants who could have provided alternate opinions and perspectives to the college to work transition. Perhaps future research could be done with a much larger scale qualitative study, or perhaps a quantitative study where the results could be represented numerically. A variety of surveys could be conducted with the college student population, with employers who have hired within the last two years, with graduates of the past two years, and/or a broader scope of Career Educators within the Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology.

Restatement of the Problem

This study examined the perceived preparedness of college students for the college to work transition as seen through the eyes of the stakeholders, including current students, recent graduates, Career Educators, and employers. The primary questions addressed were, “are college students prepared for the college to work transition?” and “would a required Exit Course be a viable solution to improve this process?”.

In the next chapter, the results of the analysis are outlined with common themes from the qualitative research presented.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Overview

As stated, the purpose of this study was to examine the perceived preparedness of students for the transition from college to full-time employment and the interest and rationale behind developing a required Exit Course as a possible facilitator for this transition. All four participant groups (current students, recent graduates, Career Educators, and employers) saw the transition from school to full-time employment as an important life event characterized by change, learning, development, and adaptation. Their perceptions of the main issues involved in this transition showed a great deal of overlap which is described through the emergent themes outlined below. As stated in Chapter Three, Research Methods, only those themes that were clearly visible within each group of participants and seen as common threads across all groups were included in the findings. Salient differences, which arose among all of the participants were also highlighted where they arose within the individual theme areas.

Findings

Though a great amount of data were collected, representing four stakeholder group's viewpoints on the topic, three primary categories of common threads emerged from the analysis: (a) the perceived level of preparedness of students for the college to work transition; (b) the perceived availability and utilization of transitional resources; and (c) transition solutions. Each of these categories and their associated themes are
described below. Although each participant group agreed with the categories represented, for the sake of simplicity, only a few representative quotes are provided for each theme to clarify their content and to ground the analysis in the data (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

Areas of tension, which I refer to as "salient differences" are discussed within the individual themes where they arose. Specifically, salient differences refer to instances where the participants were clearly in disagreement with respect to a specific issue.

Category 1: Perceived Preparation for Employment

   Theme 1: Strong Technical Preparation. Although I was not researching the topic of technical preparation for employment, this theme was clear and reflected by most of the participants in the research. There was a general consensus that students graduating from college programs were well equipped with current and up-to-date technical expertise within their field of study. Participants agreed that students leave the educational institution with specific technical skills and if they can get the message across to employers that they have these skills, then they will not have any difficulty finding employment. Lisa (Career Educator) described how "I have been so impressed by the quality of the curriculum and the dedication of the faculty which contributed to the readiness for the workplace" while others concurred by saying that "technically most students in most programs are pretty well prepared to handle the challenges of the job" (employer). Students and graduates also supported this theme. "My academic program was excellent and prepared me well for this career" (graduate). "I feel prepared to work in my field of study" (student).
Theme 2: Weak Job Search Preparation. This theme reflected two areas related to obtaining a full-time job. The first was a concern that students in the school to work transition are lacking in specific skills necessary to obtain a job. “In terms of how...the tools to get a job...students have no idea of what their strategy is going to be and if they do have a strategy it isn’t usually a good one...for example, mass mailing of resumes” (Career Educator). Identified skills that students lack are that they “have no idea how to interview” (student), they have “weak resumes and cover letters” (employer) and they are “immature in their attitude” (employer). The second concern was that transitional students need a “reality check” about what the world of work is really like. Students are “idealistic ...and do not understand their status as an entry level candidate...their expectations are high and they are often disappointed as a result” (employer). “Students have unrealistic expectations regarding salaries, promotions and putting in extra effort to get the job done” (employer). “As a graduate, I had an unrealistic picture of the real work environment” (graduate). Students concurred by saying that “the college needs to provide skills for looking for a job” (student) and “non-co-op students have no idea how to interview and no idea what it takes to keep a job once you get it” (student).

Theme 3: Value of Co-operative Education. All participants were in agreement that Co-operative Education plays a significant role in preparing students for the transition to work. Participants cited a number of benefits of Co-operative Education. Firstly, Co-operative Education offers a preparatory course which is intended to provide students with the skills necessary to obtain their work placements. “Co-op students get the benefits of the CPP100 course...other students need this more because they have no
work experience...they need resume writing, cover letters, interview skills” (student). “I believe that students missing out on such a program are often not as prepared to look for a job, or at least interview for one” (employer). “The edge that co-op students have also extends to the job search process where they know more or less what to expect from an interview and how to conduct themselves appropriately” (Career Educator).

Participants also agreed that Co-operative Education provides students with valuable work experience. According to one student, “employers want experience, that’s the number one thing” (student). It was agreed that employers “prefer to hire people with co-op experience as well as other work experience” (employer) and that Co-operative Education provides graduates with “anything from four to twelve months of hands-on experience” (Career Educator).

Finally, Co-operative Education was perceived to be valuable in terms of “the contacts it allowed me to make and the specialized experience that I gained” (graduate). One graduate summed up the value that participants placed on Co-operative Education by stating that “the co-op course was worth the entire cost of my tuition” (graduate).

**Theme 4: Required Employment Skills.** Participants agreed that there are a host of skills that employers are looking for in their new hires. “We hire for attributes and train for competencies. We are looking for learners for life, team players, initiative, self-motivated, enthusiastic, dedicated, and mostly the drive and desire to do an excellent job” (employer). The skills most often reported were the “soft skills” including communication skills, interpersonal skills (attitude, enthusiasm, honesty, sincerity, social skills, team work, work ethic), organization and time management skills, problem solving
skills, and the ability to learn. “Someone with a good attitude, good interpersonal and communication skills and common sense is far more workable than a very technically competent person who lacks these skills” (employer). “Communication is the number one skill we need” (student). “Developing the soft skills is equally as important as having that diploma...employers tell us over and over again how they can train the technical skills areas, but they cannot train the soft skills” (Career Educator). “A proven ability to organize time, workload, and contribute to a winning team...a no nonsense work ethic and organizational commitment” (graduate).

Category 2: Perceived Availability and Utilization of Transitional Resources

Theme 1: Underutilized Career Centre. A common theme that emerged was the perception that the Career Centre had poor exposure within the college and, as a result, it was underutilized. It seemed that students did not make use of the centre either because they were not aware of the services offered, or they felt that they were not in need of the services offered. “I am not aware of what student services offer and what is available...most services in Seneca are not really advertised...we don’t really know what is going on” (student). There was a sense of confusion about this resource which included the question of whether or not it existed, where it was located, and what services it provided. “The central career office has an identity problem...academic and service areas of the college are very separate...academic areas know nothing about service areas and they don’t direct students” (Career Educator). “Nobody is quite sure who offers what and the resources are very underutilized” (Career Educator). “The career counselling services at the schools are not well attended. I have done my own personal, informal
survey on that fact...one out of every 20 students visits the school career counsellor” (employer). “The Career Centre has no link to the programs...it should have more contact with industry - Seneca has lots of corporate and international contacts - why aren’t we connected to this?” (student).

Although some of the employers were unaware of the other stakeholder’s experiences with regard to utilizing the Career Centre, they did express confusion in terms of how to reach the critical contacts at the career centre and how to access students. “I tried to recruit Seneca students and the first person I talked to said there was no placement office...the second person said there was nothing they could do to help and to just post the job on Worklink...I just called another college” (employer).

Theme 2: Desired Connection to Employers. When the participants reviewed all of the potential services which could be provided by the college and/or career centre, the primary theme that arose was that of a desire to connect students to the employers that could potentially hire them in the future. “On-line postings from current employers” (graduate) “having departments that would connect the employers to the students” (student), “having an accessible job posting board” (student) and “providing lists of employer contacts that have previously hired new graduates” (employer) were all seen as valuable ways to assist in connecting students to employers. “Career fairs would increase marketing of students and target specific industries and companies...we could provide incentives for companies to hire our students” (Career Educator). Participants agreed that developing a connection to employers would be a significant factor in improving the college to work transition.
Theme 3: Students Helping Students. Participants also saw students as a valuable resource in the transition process. "Use Human Resources [Management] students to work in the career centre - work with students, develop programs, share their knowledge" (student). Integrating students into the career centre was seen as a way to increase the comfort level for everyone, "a place that students want to go because it is a friendly environment" (student). Other avenues participants suggested that would allow students to help their peers included "grouping students [and forming] student support groups" (graduate) in order to help students in the transition process. As well, "student advisory committees [could provide] input from students on what services they want/need" (Career Educator). "We try to team up our co-op students so that they can help to train each other and share information while they are learning a new job" (employer).

Category 3: Transition Solutions

Theme 1: An Exit Course as a Solution. Because I presented the idea of an Exit Course as a potential solution in the college to work transition, all participants considered the idea and provided feedback on it. Almost all participants agreed that adding an Exit Course to the curriculum of full-time programs would be an excellent idea. One participant, Mary, went so far as to say, "I strongly believe it to be important. In fact, not providing it means doing a great disservice to our students" (Career Educator). "An Exit Course would be beneficial for students who want to further understand the real picture of the work environment and what current employers are expecting from their workers" (graduate). "Absolutely...[it] benefits the students, gives them an edge, employers appreciate this indirectly...the college benefits because of the pressure of the KPIs and
funding issues, and the number one idea of quality education” (Career Educator). “An Exit Course will be very good since most students lack the social skills and communication skills required for employment” (employer). “It is very important to have this course...students need to know how to find a job” (student).

There were some salient differences which arose between participants with regard to the specific details of the Exit Course. There was division among all of the participants, within and among the four participant groups, as to whether the course should be optional or mandatory, when it should be offered, and who should teach it. The quotations listed below are representative of the variety of conflicting comments which arose both within and across the participant groups.

Some participants felt that in order to be effective, the course should be mandatory. “I think that as long as students are in school and job search workshops are offered but not mandated...students are far too preoccupied with their academics to attend ...they seem to think that others might have a problem finding a job but they won’t. The only way to resolve this issue is to have at least one course dealing with all aspects of job search mandatory for all students in their graduating year” (Career Educator). On the other hand, some participants felt that the course should not be mandatory. One student’s comment, “I believe it should be optional...students must take some responsibility” (student) was representative of the participants who felt it should be optional.

Another salient difference was clear where there was a division of participant’s ideas about when the course should be offered. Some felt that the course should be offered in the final semester of study, while others felt it should be available earlier than
that. "I wouldn't wait until the last semester of a program to offer it...students are often then already starting to look for work. Perhaps the second last semester" (graduate). On the other hand, "the 5th [second last] semester would be good in theory, but students would forget about this course by the time they graduate...in the 6th [final] semester they would be doing it as they are learning it so it may be more effective" (Career Educator).

The final debate among participants was with regard to who would teach such a course. Many perspectives were offered, but there were no solutions that all participants agreed upon. Ideas presented by the participants for teachers for the Exit Course included Career Educators, faculty, outside consultants, and employers. Suggestions for possible facilitators included "Career Educators, alumni, graduates, and Human Resources personnel from companies who actually hire" (graduate) or "someone in the field will be more qualified" (graduate). The common theme, however, was related to the necessity for instructors, regardless of who they are, to be well qualified in issues related to college to work transition. "It is critical that they [instructors] possess up-to-date skills, get regular input or participation from representatives of the various industries that the students would be entering upon graduation, and work with the other areas of the college who offer the resources and information to support these courses" (employer). "Someone who knows what resources are available and who is up-to-date on trends in the marketplace and employers' concerns and demands" (graduate). "It is critical that they possess up-to-date skills" (Career Educator) and "be connected to the employers" (student).
Theme 2: Key Ingredients of an Exit Course. Participants were in agreement on the types of ingredients necessary to make an Exit Course worthwhile. These included the following topics: skills assessment and identification of “soft skills”; job search tools and networking skills; labour market trends within targeted industries; resume and cover letter writing; interview techniques; and workplace etiquette. One participant summed up this theme area by saying, “we need to prepare these people to go out there and actually get these jobs...not just the skill sets, but to be able to communicate with people...write an effective cover letter and resume...to present themselves in a manner that is appropriate for a graduate from a post secondary institution” (Career Educator).

“Workplace etiquette and decision-making skills are critical to getting and keeping a job” (graduate). “The college needs to realize that it is these extra skills that are going to land students the jobs, not what they learn in the classroom” (student). Participants agreed that it was not only teaching students the skills listed above, but, on an equal level, teaching students “basic selling techniques and how to market themselves in their job search” (employer). Finally, it was agreed that students need to be taught the realities of the workplace. “It is important for students to know where they are going to start in a given industry...they need realistic expectations about what they can do” (Career Educator).

One salient difference that arose in this area was the level at which the course should be offered. For example, employers and Career Educators seemed very concerned with the primary fact that the course should be provided with the ingredients listed previously and did not see the level of programming as an issue. Current students and recent graduates felt, however, that the course should be catered to the program and the
level of the students. Students with little or no work experience were concerned that the course should include basic topics such as "what to wear on the job, office etiquette, and how to present myself appropriately" (student) and that the course should be offered at a fairly basic level. However, other students who were in a post-graduate program or had previous work experience did not feel that a basic level of programming was relevant to them and they were almost insulted that they would potentially be taught certain basic skills. "The course should address the individual needs of the participants in each program" (student). "I wouldn't want to waste my time with topics that I already understand because of my previous experience" (graduate).

Theme 3: Business Partnerships and Activities. The final emergent theme which related to transition solutions reflected an agreement that there should be many connections between employers and the college. There were many examples suggested of possible connections or partnerships with employers. These included: college representatives who "should approach companies selling Seneca graduates and their skills" (student) "coordinating volunteer placements for graduating students in order to gain hands-on experience" (employer), "career fairs"(employer), "employer visits to the college" (employer), "field trips to companies" (student), and "job-shadowing opportunities" (graduate).

While I believe that co-op is the one educational mode that gives graduating students a definite advantage, I don’t know that all program areas could go that route. However, I think that the college owes it to the students to establish partnerships and relationships that benefit students directly in their quest for
employment. This could be in the form of job shadowing, regular speakers, accessibility for information interviews, and a whole host of other ways. (Career Educator)

Interpretation of Findings

The findings of the interviews and focus groups offered potential answers to the questions posed prior to beginning the study. The following is a review of the questions that directed this study and what I learned about them from the study results.

Question 1: Do the participants in this study (current students, recent graduates, Career Educators, and employers) perceive that graduating students are prepared for the college to work transition?

The findings of this study indicate that college students are perceived to be technically prepared for work through the academic requirements of college programs. However, it is also clear that students have weak job search skills. This indicates that students have the “what,” but not the “how.” Students are perceived to be unaware of how to approach the college to work transition and they have unrealistic expectations about what the world of work is really like and what types of jobs they are qualified to do. This gap was also identified in the research by Feitler-Karchin and Wallace-Schutzman (1982). It is clear that there are a variety of employability skills that employers are seeking. Students not only need these skills, they also need to know how to “sell” them to employers in order to be successful in obtaining full-time employment. This concept
of employability skills was supported in the literature (Campbell, 1999; Conference Board of Canada, 1993; Foord Kirk, 1996).

In my opinion, the responsibility for rectifying the problem of weak job search skills should not be placed solely on the shoulders of the college. Students also need to take responsibility for their future success. However, improving this process could start with the actions of the college, particularly since it is a primary stakeholder with a financial incentive for increased success in this area.

One emergent theme which could be interpreted as a factor related to the weak preparation of students was the availability and utilization of transitional resources within the college. Specifically, the career centre was perceived to be underutilized because of its poor exposure within the college. As well, many students who were aware of these services chose not to use them because they believed that they were not in need of them. This was also supported in the research by Adams et al. (1994). Clearly, the career centre needs to be visible and accessible to students in order to play an integral role in the college to work transition. As well, all students need to be informed about the benefits of these services. The literature notes this as the critical point in which the system could break down if students are unaware of transitional services (Adams et al., 1994; Floyd et al., 1989; Foothill-De Anza Community College, 1993). Certainly, the recent provincial government’s involvement in school to work transitions with regard to the KPIs has added pressure to the academic programming and student services and perhaps changed their focus somewhat. However, now that I have conducted this study, I am more convinced that the stakeholders whom I polled have very high expectations about what a
college education should provide, both inside and outside of the classroom, and how it makes sense that the college experience should open doors to employment. The KPI pressure then, is in many ways providing “checks and balances” for college programming and offers incentive for improved school to work initiatives.

Students who had the advantage of Co-operative Education experiences were seen as significantly more prepared for college to work transition than those students who were not in co-op programs. The primary reasons that co-op was perceived to be an advantage to college to work transition was because of the preparatory course provided with co-op, the valuable work experience gained from co-op work terms, and the networking and contacts made through Co-operative Education experiences. There was an indication that unless students had the benefit of the Co-operative Education experience, they were not prepared for college to work transition. This highlights the need for co-op or other similar programs such as field placements, as well as a preparatory course (Exit Course) similar to the one offered to Co-operative Education Students.

Question 2: According to the participants of this study, is a required Exit Course a viable solution to this perceived problem?

There was overwhelming agreement that an Exit Course would be an excellent solution to the issues involved in the college to work transition. The fact that there was agreement on the inclusion of an Exit Course by the stakeholder groups who participated in this study helps to establish the fact that it is a good solution that makes a lot of sense and is something that these stakeholders would be willing to participate in. Support for a
type of Exit Course was also evident in the literature (Bell, 1995; Cuseo, 1997; Troutt & Isberner, 1988).

**Question 3:** If the Exit Course is a viable solution, when should it be offered, what would be the major components of the course, and who would teach it?

There was little agreement, and a significant amount of debate with regard to the details of how the Exit Course should be offered. Participants made strong cases for mandatory versus optional courses, and where in the final year the course should be offered (second last versus final semester). It was clear that it is of the utmost importance that those teaching the course be extremely well qualified with regard to issues surrounding the college to work transition, although there was no consensus on who specifically would meet these qualifications.

The major components suggested for the course reflect back to the perceived employment skills necessary to not only obtain a job, but to have success in that job. Specifically, these would be the employability skills referred to in the Literature Review, including academic skills, personal management skills, and teamwork skills (Conference Board of Canada, 1993; Kitagawa, 1998) and job search skills (Bolt & Swartz, 1997; Cuseo, 1997; Kitagawa, 1998; Price, Graham, & Hobbs, 1997; Troutt & Isberner, 1988).

**Question 4:** Are there other solutions and/or improvements to facilitate the college to work transition?

Several solutions emerged from the data to provide assistance in the college to work transition. The primary solution was a desire to connect the college and its students
to potential employers. Students need to have avenues made available to them, such as job postings and lists of employer contacts to select from. As well, the college can do many things to improve its connections to employers through career fairs and the coordination of volunteer placements for students, for example. The development of business partnerships would be a major component in bridging the gap from college to work. The development of business partnerships with suggestions including paid and unpaid field placements, job mentoring, and transition programs, for example, was also supported in the literature (Adler, 1997; Bragg & Griggs, 1997; Cuseo, 1997; Kisner, Mazza, & Liggett, 1997; Laanan, 1995; Stanley, 1994).

One other interesting solution that arose from the data was the idea of utilizing student resources within the college in order to help facilitate the transition from college to work. Participants perceived that student involvement in the career centres would make them more user friendly to other students and perhaps increase their usage. As well, student groups and advisory committees would provide continuous opportunity for input and feedback regarding these services. By utilizing student resources in this way and including these activities in the curriculum requirements for students, the college could create an economical solution as well as providing educational benefits to the students who do the work. I did not come across this type of solution in the literature.

The Exit Course could be a means for facilitating the solutions listed above and to individually assist each student with the college to work transition.
Summary

This chapter detailed the findings of this study. Three main categories of common threads were derived from the data, and within these categories a variety of themes emerged. The categories and themes were as follows. Firstly, the perceived preparation for employment category encompassed the themes of: strong technical preparation, weak job search preparation, the value of Co-operative Education, and the identification of required employment skills. Secondly, the category of perceived availability and utilization of transitional resources included the themes of: an underutilized career centre, a desired connection to employers, and students helping students. The final category of transition solutions included the themes of: an Exit Course as a solution, the key ingredients of an Exit Course, and business partnerships and activities.

In the Interpretations section the emergent themes were compared to the specific questions that framed this study in order to tie the results of the observations back to the original purpose of the study as well as comparing them with the literature review. Many consistencies were found between the themes in the study and those reviewed in the literature. For example, the lack of employability skills in graduating students and the benefits of a Co-operative Education experience. The Exit Course was perceived to be a solution to the issues involved in the college to work transition although there was great debate over what the components of the course would be. Another outstanding solution to the college to work transition was to identify ways to connect the college and its students to potential employers.
CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Summary

This study originates from an interest in the transition from college to work and how this process can be improved upon. Through my own experiences working with college students, I felt that it was an area that warranted exploration. The purpose of the study was to examine the perceived preparedness of students for the college to work transition through qualitative research. The study also looked at the interest and rationale behind developing a required Exit Course for college students as a possible approach to improving the college to work transition.

A literature review revealed how the importance of addressing college to work transitions is highlighted by two phenomena. First, there are specific employability skills that employers in Canada are seeking in newly hired employees. Second, the provincial government in Ontario is currently determining college funding based on graduate employment statistics. The presence of these factors indicated that a study of this subject area would be worthwhile.

Two pilot studies were conducted, including one focus group and one interview. Both studies indicated that there is concern over the level of preparedness of students for the college to work transition and there is support for the implementation of an Exit Course. These results support further investigation.

The research concentrated on the primary stakeholders involved in the transition from college to work, including current students, recent graduates, college Career...
Educators, and employers. Focus groups were conducted with 54 current students, while one-on-one, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five recent graduates, five Career Educators, and four employers. All participants were involved on a volunteer basis. Data analysis consisted of a systematic process of coding and categorizing the data from the interviews and focus groups. The results of the analysis revealed that: (a) although students are perceived to be technically prepared for employment, they are perceived to have weak job search skills and unrealistic expectations of the world of work unless they received the benefits of a Co-operative Education experience; (b) an Exit Course was seen as a viable solution to the issues involved in college to work transition; (c) an Exit Course should be comprised of skills necessary to obtain and succeed in a job and the course should be taught by individuals with extensive qualifications in this area; and (d) the need to develop college and business partnerships was identified as a means of connecting students to employers.

Conclusions

The questions which focused this study were designed to examine the perceived preparedness of students for the transition from college to full-time employment and the interest and rationale behind developing an Exit Course in order to facilitate this transition. The specific questions used to guide the study were:

1. Do the participants of this study (current students, recent graduates, Career Educators, and employers) perceive that students are prepared for the college to work transition?
2. According to all participants involved in the study, is a required Exit Course a viable solution to this perceived problem?

3. If the Exit Course is a viable solution, when should it be offered, what would be the major components of the course, and who would teach it?

4. Are there other solutions and/or improvements to facilitate college to work transition?

The interpretations from the data analysis revealed themes that are consistent with the literature on this topic. Clearly, it is common knowledge today that employers in Canada are seeking "employability skills," those soft skills that go above and beyond academic training (Conference Board of Canada, 1993). All participants in the research support the idea that most students lack this employability training and that the college should help students gain these skills beyond the level that is currently mandated through the provincial program standards. The literature further supports this conclusion by describing how the Key Performance Indicators will soon play a role in evaluating the success colleges are achieving with respect to graduate employment, student satisfaction, and employer satisfaction (Gordon, 1998). The results of this evaluation will affect provincial funding and thus provide the incentive for colleges to address college to work issues.

There was also an indication from the data that students who had received the benefits of a Co-operative Education experience are perceived to be significantly better prepared for the college to work transition than those who do not have the benefit of this experience. Although it seems logical then to assume that a solution to the problem is to add Co-operative Education to every program, it is not a viable solution. Through my
experience working in the college, I am aware that within certain academic programs Co-operative Education cannot be facilitated due to programming restrictions. Even in those programs that do provide co-op, it would be impossible to facilitate co-op to every student in every program based on the sheer numbers enrolled within the college. Having said that, data from this study indicates that the benefits from co-op are derived from three areas: (1) the preparatory course; (2) the work-term experience; and (3) the contacts made with employers. The indication that the preparatory course is of great value for Co-operative Education work terms, is further evidence that it would be of value for finding full-time employment and could be pivotal in the college to work transition for all students.

The data suggests that participants feel that an Exit Course is a good idea. The literature review highlighted many post secondary institutions who placed value on creating some type of exit component for graduating students which assisted in facilitating the transition to work (Bell, 1995; Cuseo, 1997; Troutt & Isberner, 1988). At the local level, the college in which this study took place has already indicated their support for the addition of an Exit Course by currently offering three courses relating to this area. It is safe then to conclude that an Exit Course is one potential solution worth pursuing for all academic programs and that there is reason to believe that the college would support this. One important factor to note is that there is no one clear cut solution that will address all of the issues related to the college to work transition. There are a great many variables associated with this issue and the Exit Course represents only one
potential solution. It should not be assumed that one course will solve all of the problems associated with this issue, however, it could address many.

The potential components of the course are supported by the literature. These include the employability skills necessary to obtain and succeed in a job (Bolt & Swartz, 1997; Cuseo, 1997; Kitagawa, 1998; Price, Graham, & Hobbs, 1997; Troutt & Isberner, 1988). Canadian employers have specifically stated what soft skills they require through mediums such as the “Employability Skills Profile” (Conference Board of Canada, 1993), now it is up to the colleges to use this information and ensure that their graduates are prepared with these skills.

Another important point to remember is that it is not enough just to offer college to work assistance services within the college and expect that the majority of students will be aware of them, make use of them, and reap their benefits. These services must be attached to the academic programs in such a way that all students are aware of them and are accountable for making use of them in order to provide a smoother college to work transition. An Exit Course is a clear facilitator of this process.

It can also be concluded that partnerships between the college and businesses are vital in the college to work transition. Again, this is supported by the literature where many post secondary institutions reported successful business partnerships that enhanced college to work transitions (Adler, 1997; Bragg & Griggs, 1997; Cuseo, 1997; Kisner, Mazza, & Liggett, 1997; Laanan, 1995; Stanley, 1994). Again, the Exit Course could serve as a link between the students, the college staff, and outside employers and be used as a forum to develop business partnerships.
Implications

Implications for Practice

Educators within post secondary institutions, specifically colleges, could benefit significantly from the information provided within this study. The comments provided by the four groups of participants—current students, recent graduates, Career Educators, and employers—have provided valuable insights regarding the weak preparation of students in transition from college to work and the conclusion that an Exit Course is one perceived answer to this problem. The comments provided suggest that an Exit Course be implemented in the final year of all full-time programs. Through professionally trained instruction, the course should focus on employability skills and on the skills required to complete a successful job search. It also makes sense that all services within the college be tied to the Exit Course, so that students are purposefully made aware of what services and facilities are available to them within the college, where to find them, and how to use them. There are also implications where college and business relationships are concerned. The data from the study indicate that creating business partnerships is an extremely worthwhile activity for the college to pursue because of the variety of benefits these partnerships provide to students in transition from college to work. Increasing the number of activities that connect college programs with employers such as Co-operative Education, field placements, job shadowing, and employer visits can only serve to strengthen the connections between students and employers.

This study has provided further evidence in support of research suggesting that there is not only a need, but a desire by many of the stakeholder groups involved in this
transition (current students, recent graduates, Career Educators, and employers) to improve the college to work transition for graduating students. The question then, is how large a role should the college play and how much responsibility should it take in the transition from college to work? Although it is not possible for the college to completely prepare students for every aspect of employment, it is desirable for the college to take measures to prepare students as completely as possible for the world of work because of the benefits not only to the graduates, but to the college itself with regard to an improved reputation and increased funding. Where then on the continuum is it most desirable for the college to be: pumping out volumes of graduates at one extreme or preparing them as completely as possible for employment at the other extreme? This study indicates that there is the desire for the college to lean toward as complete a preparation as possible in order to maximize the rewards for both itself and its students.

Implications for Further Research

Because the findings of this study so clearly support the addition of an Exit Course as one solution to the transition from college to work, it seems logical to investigate this subject further, and attempt to implement an Exit Course in all full-time programs within the community college. Perhaps another study could be completed including a larger sample of participants with the inclusion of college administrators in order to specifically address and fine tune the intricate details involved in offering an Exit Course with the inclusion of administrative support for the implementation of this course. Following that, several pilot courses could be offered within a variety of academic programs in order to allow for a trial implementation of the course prior to full-scale
implementation. The pilot courses could be evaluated and modified as needed in order to ensure that they are meeting the intended goal of improving the college to work transition. KPI results could also be used as a tool to measure the success of these initiatives.

Following this, a comparison study, perhaps quantitative in nature, could be completed to look at the success rates of transitional students coming from different program structures. For example, comparing the success rates of Co-operative Education students to students with a field placement experience and those with an Exit Course experience to determine which route achieved the greatest success and why.

This study has confirmed my belief that taking the steps to implement an Exit Course for graduating students would be an extremely worthwhile endeavor which would lead to numerous benefits for students, the college, and the employers who hire college graduates.
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Press.


Appendix A
Focus Groups
(Current Students)

Questions Asked:

1. In what specific ways do you feel (a) prepared (b) unprepared to look for a full-time job in your field of study?
2. What resources do you feel are available to you within the college? Do you currently utilize these resources? Will you utilize them once you have left the college?
3. Are there additional resources that you would like to have available to you?
4. What is your opinion on having an “Exit Course” added to your program’s curriculum to provide assistance in the transition from school to work?
5. What specific topic areas should be covered in this course?
6. In what semester should this course be offered? How long should the course be?
7. Do you have any other suggestions as to what the college can do to assist you in the transition from school to work?

Interviews
(Recent Graduates, Employers, and Career Educators)

Questions Asked:

1. In what specific ways do you feel students are (a) prepared (b) unprepared to look for and obtain full-time jobs within their field of study?
2. What job search resources are currently available for students within the college? Do you feel that these resources are utilized by current students and/or graduates?
3. Are there additional resources that you feel could be provided to students/graduates?
4. How do you feel about having an “Exit Course” added to program curriculum to provide assistance in the transition from school to work?
5. What specific topic areas should be covered in this course?
6. In what semester should this course be offered? How long should the course be?
7. Do you have any other suggestions as to what the college can do to assist students in the transition from school to work?
Appendix B
Information Letter

Title of Research: Preparing Students for the Transition from College to Work

Researcher: Sue Morrison, Graduate Student, (905) 855-5353

Professor: Dr. John Novak, Faculty of Education, Brock University

Dear Participant:

The purpose of this study is to investigate the preparedness of students for the transition from college to full-time employment. It is a study that will examine the interest and rationale behind developing a required Exit Course for college students in order to improve the college to work transition.

Each participant will take part in either a focus group or an interview in order to acquire data for the project. The duration of each will be approximately one hour. The following are some sample questions that will be used in the focus groups and interviews.

1. In what specific ways do you feel students are (a) prepared (b) unprepared to look for a full-time job in their field of study?

2. What is your opinion on having an “Exit Course” added to program curriculum to provide assistance in the transition from college to work?

Potential benefits to your participation in this study will be that you will be given the opportunity to state your opinion on this issue and perhaps see changes within the transition from school to work as a direct result of your input. As well, you will gain the experience of participating in an interview or focus group. To my knowledge, there will be no risk to you whatsoever.

Your participation in this study will take approximately one hour of your time. Participation in this study is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time for any reason. There is no obligation to answer any question that you may consider to be invasive, offensive or inappropriate. All personal data will be kept strictly confidential and all information will be coded. Your name will not be connected with any published data and only the researcher and research advisor will have access to the data. All data will be kept in a locked filing cabinet and then shredded once the report is completed.

The Research Ethics Board of Brock University has officially approved this study. If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in the study, you may contact the
Director of the Office of Research Services (905-688-5550, ext. 4315). Copies of the project’s final report will be provided to participants upon request.

Sincerely,

Sue Morrison
Appendix C
Informed Consent Form

BROCK UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Informed Consent Form
Title of Study: Preparing Students for the Transition from College to Work.
Researchers: Professor John Novak and Researcher Sue Morrison

Name of Participant: ________________________________

I understand that this study in which I have agreed to participate in will involve having an observer record discussions through an interview or focus group format, based on a list of pre-set questions surrounding the topic of the transition from school to work. I consent to having this conversation audio-recorded.

I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the study at any time for any reason without penalty.

I understand that there will be no payment for my participation.

I understand that there is no obligation to answer any questions/participate in any aspect of this project that I consider invasive, offensive, or inappropriate.

I understand that all personal data will be kept strictly confidential and that all information will be coded so that my name is not associated with my answers. I understand that only the researchers named above will have access to the data.

Participant Signature: ___________________________ Date: ____________________

This study has been approved by the Brock Research Ethics Board. (File # 99-102)

If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in this study, you can contact Sue Morrison at (905) 855-5353.

Feedback about the use of the data collected will be available September, 2000 by calling Sue Morrison. A copy of the final report will be provided to you upon request.

Thank you for your help. Please take a copy of this form with you for further reference.

I have fully explained the procedures of this study to the above volunteer.

Researcher’s Signature: ___________________________ Date: ____________________
Appendix D
Thank You Letter

Title of Study: “Preparing Students for the Transition from College to Work”

Researcher: Sue Morrison, Graduate Student

Professor: Dr. John Novak, Faculty of Education, Brock University

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your participation in this study. By participating in an interview or focus group, you have provided me with valuable information to be used in the investigation of the transition of college students from school to work. When my research is completed, I will forward any conclusions to interested parties within the community colleges so that all of your valuable comments and suggestions will have the potential for practical application.

Your name will remain confidential and will not be connected with any published data. Only myself and my thesis advisor will have access to the raw data which will then be destroyed after I have prepared my report.

If you would like a copy of the final report, it will be available at the Faculty of Education Office at Brock University by September 2000.

Once again, thank you for your participation in my thesis research.

Sincerely,

Sue Morrison