RESEARCH ARTICLE

Research on the Formation Path of Students' Career Choice Intention in the Context of Higher Vocational Education

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Abstract: The formation pathway of college students' employment intentions is crucial for clarifying their employment logic, refining higher education vocational policies and methods, and enhancing their career competitiveness. Based on a review of domestic and international literature, this paper uses the Theory of Planned Behavior as a framework, combining interviews and sentence completion techniques, to investigate the formation pathways of employment intentions among Chinese college students.

Keywords: planned behavior theory, a happy career, self-efficacy, slow employment

I. Introduction

In recent years, with the deepening of mass higher education in China, the employment situation for college students has become increasingly severe. At the same time, the improvement of the national standard of living has continuously raised the requirements and positioning that college students have for their careers. Confusion, indecision, and delayed employment are widespread among college students. In response to this issue, China has issued many policies to encourage and support college student entrepreneurship and employment. As the frontline in cultivating college students, higher education institutions have successively launched training courses and programs that are conducive to college student entrepreneurship and employment. Despite these measures, phenomena such as the "civil service examination" and "postgraduate entrance examination" among college students, which delay employment, are still common. There is also no shortage of news about the irrational pursuit of certain popular positions, with "thousands bravely crossing the bridge." The vocational education cause for Chinese college students remains a long and arduous task.

Focusing on the formation pathways of college students' employment intentions, this study explores their career decision-making. Using Ajzen's "Theory of Planned Behavior" as a foundation, and through methods such as interviews and sentence completion, it constructs the formation pathways of college students' employment choices. It also uses this perspective to explain and predict the formation pathways and behavioral logic of college students' employment choices, providing a reference for the development of higher education career planning and innovation and entrepreneurship education.

2. Theoretical Background and Research Hypotheses

(1) The theory of planned behavior

In 1985, Ajzen introduced the construct of perceived behavioral control to the Theory of Reasoned Action, forming the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). Over the past three decades, the TPB has been extensively applied and well-received across psychology, sociology, and education.

When it comes to college student employment,

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the TPB has been widely used to explore the decision-making process and mechanisms behind their employment behavior (Zhang et al., 2022; Chen, 2020; Gong, 2021).

The TPB comprises three main components. Firstly, behavioral attitude refers to an individual's preference for a specific behavior and an evaluation of its outcomes. Secondly, perceived behavioral control is about an individual's perceived ease or difficulty in performing a particular behavior. Lastly, subjective norms involve the social or group-based influences on performing a specific behavior. These three factors jointly shape one's decisions and actions (Duan & Jiang, 2008).

A meta-analysis by Armitage and Conner revealed that behavioral attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control can explain 27% of behavioral variance and 39% of behavioral intention variance. This highlights the theory's strong explanatory and predictive power. Consequently, this study will examine how these three factors impact college students' employment intentions and construct the corresponding formation process and mechanism.

(2) Research hypotheses

Drawing on the TPB and a wealth of literature, we link its three dimensions (behavioral attitude, perceived behavioral control, and subjective norms) to three observable indicators (career values, self-efficacy, and social environmental pressure). Based on this, we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Individuals' career values determine their employment preferences.

Hypothesis 2: Vocational self-efficacy affects individuals' employment choices, especially regarding delayed employment behaviors.

Hypothesis 3: Social environmental pressure influences employment directions.

These hypotheses aim to construct a mechanism for the formation of college students' employment intentions in higher education institutions.

3. Research Analysis and Conclusions

3.1 The influence of career values on employment intentions

The concept of career values is reflected in the career-choice process. It fully demonstrates an individual's preference for a career and explains one's ultimate pursuit in their professional life. Feuerbach stated, "All healthy pursuits are directed towards happiness." Huang Xiting posits that "The ultimate human goal is the pursuit of happiness" (Xin & Jin, 2006; Huang et al., 1994). The essential pursuit of career values is happiness, with differences in career values among individuals representing different paths to achieving happiness.

Given this, college students share the common goal of pursuing a fulfilling life, but their career paths to achieve this goal vary. This diversity gives rise to different interpretations of a "successful career" among college students. Therefore, by defining and generalizing college students' perceptions of a "successful career," we can predict and explain the impact of their career values on employment intentions.

To achieve this, we administered a single-item sentence completion test to 420 college students, posing the question, "A career that brings happiness should be _____." Our analysis of the responses revealed distinct patterns in how college students associate their happiness with career characteristics, which are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 Perceptions of a "Happy Career" Among 420 College Students

Security and Health	1. Stable income with low risk. 2. Social security benefits are guaranteed.
Status and Prestige	1. Gaining social recognition and respect through public-sector or teaching jobs. 2. Earning societal and others' respect. 3. Working for large companies enhances social favorability, benefiting marriage and children's education.
Material Satisfaction	1. Achievement of financial freedom. 2. Jobs that significantly improve the family's financial situation. 3. Entrepreneurship due to high profits.
Needs-based Satisfaction	1. Unrestricted freedom. 2. Proving one's abilities and value. 3. Flexible control over work and life schedules.

As shown in Table 1, college students' perceptions of a happy career can be divided into four categories. Through interviews, it was found that those who associate a happy career with safety, health care, status, or prestige are more likely to seek employment. Specifically, they tend to pursue stable positions or those with high social recognition, such as civil servant, teacher, lawyer, or engineer roles. On the other hand, students who link a happy career to material or hedonistic satisfaction are more inclined toward entrepreneurship. These findings are consistent with the Theory of Planned Behavior, which highlights that behavioral attitudes significantly impact employment intentions. Job seekers who link a happy career to safety, healthcare, status, or prestige often exhibit a stronger desire for stability and social recognition. They tend to prefer established professions that offer security and respect. In contrast, those focused on material or hedonistic satisfaction seek the autonomy and innovation of entrepreneurship, aiming for personal fulfillment and freedom. These results align with the Theory of Planned Behavior, underscoring how behavioral attitudes steer employment intentions.

3.2 The influence of self-efficacy on employment intentions

As mentioned above, career values impact individuals' employment decisions. However, even when individuals have a clear employment direction, they may still hesitate or delay employment. This is because if they feel unable to qualify for a specific job or achieve the desired results, they may avoid or delay taking up that job. Self-efficacy is thus a key factor influencing employment decisions (Bandura, 2001).

Given that the research subjects are college students from diverse academic and employment backgrounds, this study aims to identify common deficiencies in vocational self-efficacy among contemporary college students. This is to provide a reference for future vocational education in higher education institutions. We used a single-item sentence completion test on 420 college students to assess their self-efficacy in employment or entrepreneurship decisions. For employment - related self - efficacy, the test question was, "If you encounter setbacks in the early stages of employment, what do you think is the most likely cause?" Through this, we summarized the common challenges faced by contemporary college students in the

employment-selection process and explored the different dimensions of vocational self-efficacy, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Components of Career Self-Efficacy Among College Students

Dimension	Examples of Responses
Interpersonal Relationships	1. I don't know how to handle relationships with colleagues. 2. I'm not good at communicating with others.
Knowledge and Skills	1. I feel like I can't do anything. 2. I need a specific qualification certificate.
Stress Resistance	1. Performance pressure is overwhelming. 2. I'm not ready for the transition to a professional role and can't become a workplace person yet.
Practical Experience	1. I have internship experience and believe I can handle it. 2. My friends have hands-on experience and say it's not difficult.

As shown in Table 2, the career self-efficacy of college students from different majors mainly focuses on four dimensions: "interpersonal relationships," "knowledge and skills," "stress resistance," and "practical experience." When career self-efficacy is insufficient, students are more likely to cope by engaging in "protracted employment" activities, such as "postgraduate entrance examination preparation," "training courses," "part-time jobs," or "study-travel programs." While some students may simply be "avoiding employment," others hope to enhance their employability and address their lack of career self-efficacy through protracted employment. This finding suggests that higher education in China should not only focus on teaching knowledge and skills but also place equal importance on cultivating vocational practice, social skills, and psychological resilience.

We also conducted a survey on entrepreneurial self-efficacy among college students with entrepreneurial intentions. Through interviews on the topic of "whether they could start a business independently," we summarized the components of entrepreneurial self-efficacy among college students, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Components of Entrepreneurial Self-Efficacy Among College Students

Element	Examples of Responses
Experience and Skills	1. I don't understand operations and management. 2. I'm not familiar with market and industry conditions.
Risk-Taking Ability	1. I can't bear the economic losses. 2. I can't handle the pressure.
Information-Processing Ability	1. I can't find good business opportunities or projects. 2. I can't judge the value of market information.
Social and Capital Resources	1. Lack of connections makes it difficult to obtain certain resources. 2. Without resources, having ideas is useless.

As shown in Table 3, the entrepreneurial self-efficacy of contemporary college students mainly includes four dimensions: "experience and skills," "risk-taking ability," "information-processing ability," and "social and capital resources." College students believe that all four dimensions are essential. Due to insufficient entrepreneurial self-efficacy, they tend to delay entrepreneurship, either by postponing the startup or adopting a wait-and-see attitude.

Therefore, self-efficacy, which is an individual's belief in their capability to organize and execute the courses of action required to achieve specific goals, is undoubtedly an important factor influencing college students' employment and career-choice behaviors.

3.3 The influence of environmental factors on employment intentions

According to the Theory of Planned Behavior, subjective norms are an important factor influencing individual behavioral decisions, that is, the impact of significant others or social groups on individual behavior. Considering the living environment characteristics of college students, this study has analyzed the influence of family, campus environment, and the Internet on individual employment intentions.

Family Environment: Through interviews, we have profoundly felt the significant influence of the family as a source of subjective norms for college students. During the interviews, responses such as "We have such examples in our family" and "I don't want to follow their old path" were frequently heard. This finding is consistent with domestic and international research on the impact of family.

Campus Environment: The social environment constructed on campus is relatively young in terms of age. On the one hand, most students are in the early stages or exploration phase of their careers, and it is difficult to obtain practical and valuable influences within the circle of college student friends. On the other hand, the phenomenon of "herding" for postgraduate entrance examinations or civil service examinations is common, reflecting the susceptibility of young college students to "herd mentality."

Internet Environment: As of June 2023, China had the largest number of Internet users in the world, with a total of 1.079 billion people. Therefore, the influence of the Internet environment cannot be ignored. Given the sharing and openness of the Internet, there are opposing views or personalized examples regarding employment choices, making it difficult for college students to identify information that truly suits them. Instead, due to the operation of

big data algorithms on some social media or platforms, personalized recommendations amplify certain opinions, reinforcing and validating some of the individuals' existing notions. Therefore, we believe that the influence of the Internet environment often does not change individuals' thoughts but rather promotes and solidifies certain specific values or behavioral logics that individuals already hold.

4. Development and Strategies for Vocational Education in Higher Education Institutions

4.1 Integration of ideological and political education to lead the cultivation of career values

"A scholar cannot but be determined and resolute, for his burden is heavy and his journey is long." Integrating ideological and political education (IPED) into vocational education in higher education institutions is crucial. Through curriculum design and social practice activities, IPED can help students transcend the limitations of pure self-interest and focus on the social value and significance of their careers. This is a key task for vocational education in higher education institutions. While cultivating contemporary college students' sense of national identity and social responsibility, it guides them to bravely contribute to society through their careers and achieve their life goals.

In particular, in vocational education related to employment and entrepreneurship in higher education institutions, there should not be a one-sided pursuit of quantifiable teaching evaluation indicators. The fundamental purpose of IPED should be the cultivation of students' intrinsic qualities. It guides college students to face employment competition pressure and form a positive and optimistic career mindset. They should correctly view setbacks and difficulties, avoiding the negative impact of excessive utilitarianism or incorrect perceptions on their active career choice and career development. For example, it is crucial to hold alumni career experience-sharing sessions, faculty-student employment-related seminars, expand the scope and content of industry-education integration, and enhance students' career awareness

through such vocational education activities.

4.2 Personalized career needs leading the development of higher education models

With the continuous progress of national science and technology, economic development, and changes in the career environment, new requirements have been put forward for the vocational education model in higher education institutions. Therefore, the transition from the "traditional three-center teaching model" to the "anchored teaching model" is imperative, especially for local applied universities where this issue is particularly prominent. Unlike research-oriented universities, local applied universities focus on cultivating applied talents to meet the needs of production, construction, management, and service front lines. Therefore, in addition to cultivating students' professional knowledge and abilities, it is crucial to enhance elements such as interpersonal relationship-maintenance skills, psychological resilience, information-processing abilities, and even the accumulation of social resources. This is also the necessary path to help students overcome deficiencies in career self-efficacy.

Specifically, in vocational education courses such as employment guidance and entrepreneurship education, the traditional "teaching - learning" model should be broken. Instead, real-world career scenarios should be constructed. Teachers are no longer merely transmitters of theoretical knowledge but act as guides and referees, leading students to analyze problems, discuss and build solutions, and complete tasks in a virtual environment. According to Resnick's view on the socialization of intelligence, students' core career abilities and qualities are learned autonomously rather than taught by teachers. Vocational education instructors should act as "fences," creating or providing a learning environment or scenario for students. Fully leveraging students' initiative, they can identify their own shortcomings and build career self-efficacy in the process of problem-solving. Respecting students' career dreams and meeting personalized education needs, teaching according to individual aptitude, and

offering targeted career-planning education courses such as "Entrepreneurship Elite Classes" and "Employment Guidance Classes" are essential. In particular, in vocational education courses, evaluation should not be based solely on scores. Cultivating students' comprehensive qualities and "soft skills" is crucial for improving the quality of vocational education in universities.

4.3 Higher education institutions creating an employment-friendly "environment"

Through research and analysis, we have found that the family environment has a significant impact on college students' employment decisions (Li et al., 2012). However, unlike existing research findings, the "occupation type" of family members does not necessarily have inheritability. For example, children of small-scale individual business owners, recognizing the hardships of entrepreneurship, may prefer stable and well-benefited careers. On the contrary, some children from civil servant and teacher families are more interested in challenging, creative, and free careers. On the one hand, in the information age, college students have access to richer and more diversified career information, and their choices are wider than ever. On the other hand, the difference in career values between contemporary college students and their parents is obvious. In addition, the communication characteristics of the Internet have strengthened a particular occupational value, which inadvertently promotes a particular career choice intention and preference. What is more noteworthy is the "herd effect" in the process of choosing a career, for example, the proportion of individual classes applying for the civil service, graduate school or entrepreneurship is particularly high. Through interviews, it is not difficult to find that college students who lack social practice experience are very easily influenced by the group environment and follow the trend in confusion and uncertainty. Therefore, it is urgent for higher education to guide students to correctly perceive the information on the Internet, and organize activities such as symposiums on analysis of employment and entrepreneurship experience and career lectures for alumni to break the blind trend.

4.4 Re-evaluating the applicability of current vocational education theories

Like many social science research fields, the field of vocational education also has many academic schools of thought competing with each other. At the beginning of the survey research, we tried to introduce the current classic vocational type paradigms, vocational personality theories, and vocational education theories into the research analysis. We found that with the Internet technology breaking the shackles of traditional work environments and forms, the career environment and forms have become diversified, fragmented, and virtualized. Some vocational personality tests or vocational education paradigms formed in the last century have gradually lost their effectiveness. This finding also reminds the education community whether traditional vocational education theories and teaching methods are still applicable to today's vocational education in higher education institutions. This situation also provides important inspiration and impetus for the research on building career-analysis theories and tools that meet modern career needs.

4.5 Correctly understanding the "delayed employment" phenomenon

In recent years, with the continuous intensification of employment market competition, the phenomenon of "protracted employment" has attracted high attention from the media, academia, and even the government. Moreover, the issue of "protracted employment" is often regarded as a negative problem that needs to be solved urgently (Jiang & Liu, 2020). For example, scholars such as Ma Li and Deng Yang attribute the causes of "protracted employment" to the quality of higher education and the insufficient personal abilities of college students. Zheng Xiaoming and Wang Dan regard this phenomenon as a result of internal factors such as the loss of self-identity and lack of career planning among college students. However, in our interviews, we found that even some college students with clear goals and career abilities still delay formal employment through postgraduate entrance

examinations, volunteer services, social practice, or even travel.

Conclusion

Through interviews, we have found that the phenomenon of "protracted employment" is not entirely negative. The interviewees hope to compensate for certain social skills and resource accumulation that cannot be obtained in campus settings through market research, practical learning, or targeted training. This is a proactive strategy to cope with the rapidly developing employment market. It also aligns with China's social reality of implementing comprehensive industrial upgrading, shifting from "Made in China" to "Created in China." This is a positive form of "protracted employment." Therefore, university graduation is not the endpoint of vocational education in higher education institutions but rather the beginning of a "new phase." Higher education institutions should actively engage in cooperation with the government, social enterprises, and even community organizations to further extend vocational education into society. We believe that, under the care of the Party and government, and with the joint efforts of the entire society, vocational education in higher education institutions will surely fulfill its historical mission and cultivate high - quality talents with comprehensive vocational qualities that meet the demands of the times for the nation and the ethnic group.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to this work.

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