



Journal of Vocational and Technical Education

Editor:Kirk Swortzel: kswortzel@ais.msstate.edu

Volume 13, Number 1

Fall 1996

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PERCEPTIONS OF SELECTED URBAN BUSINESS EDUCATION STUDENTS TOWARD WORK AND CAREER-RELATED ISSUES

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Abstract

Many urban school districts are disadvantaged in terms of resources and facilities, and may serve students who are at-risk economically, socially, and academically. Demographics trends suggest that in the next 20 years employers will depend on a workforce drawn from urban communities (Lytle, 1992). This suggests a need to understand and provide for educational, work, and career-related needs of urban youth. Perceptions of urban secondary students enrolled in business education courses toward work and career-related issues were examined. Findings suggest students are positive about work and career-related issues and may form perceptions toward work and career-related issues based on three factors, school awareness and work expectations, work awareness and supports, and career choice and work preparation. Grades earned in school, current employment, educational level of mother, and post-graduation plans were significant variables in explaining students' perceptions toward work and career-related issues.

According to [Marshall and Tucker \(1993\)](#) more than a quarter of American students drop out of school, and little is done to recover or retain them. Very few future front-line workers are enrolled in college bound academic tracks or in vocational tracks for school-to-work preparation. Many of these students leave high school with academic and vocational skills that fall below those of other mature industrialized countries.

Urban youth experience considerable difficulty securing employment and developing careers. Many urban youth see no relationship between academic performance and employment ([Oakes, 1987](#); [Rosenbaum, 1989](#)). This suggests a need to better understand and provide for career preparation needs of urban youth. The likelihood that urban youth will become successful, contributing members of society is enhanced through appropriate guidance and instruction. Opportunities to develop self-knowledge and healthy work attitudes, and plan and explore careers also improve chances for success of urban youth.

Business Education for Work and Careers

The business services sector is one of the largest, fastest growing service-producing industries in the United States. Job opportunities, which include computer and data processing services are expected to increase. Business services jobs (e.g. receptionist) will be available to non-college bound students, but some form of education beyond high school will be required for most business services jobs even if a four-year college degree is not required ([Fintel, 1993](#)).

A study of national trends in the use of vocational curriculum by high school students identified business programs as the most popular vocational programs in 1982 and 1987 ([Hoachlander, 1993](#)). If business programs remain popular among high school students, and job opportunities in the business services sector continue to grow, the tasks for business educators seems clear--provide quality education and training needed for work and careers.

Information about perceptions of urban students toward self, school, work, and careers is needed to assist educators in developing programs that will positively impact the work and career futures of urban youth. Learners can serve as sources of information about how the business education program impacts students preparation for future work, expectations for work and careers, and sources of support for school and careers.

Purpose and Objectives

In response to the current era of school reform, the purpose of this study was to provide information to educators that will assist them in enhancing the employment readiness and career preparation of urban youth. The primary objective of this study was to investigate student perceptions toward work and career-related issues. Selected variables were examined to determine possible influences on student perceptions. Specific research objectives for this study were to:

1. describe characteristics of secondary students enrolled in business education courses in urban school settings (e.g., gender, grade level, post-graduation plans);
2. describe perceptions of secondary students enrolled in business courses in urban school settings toward work and career-related issues;
3. identify underlying dimensions that comprise perceptions of secondary students enrolled in business courses in urban school settings toward work and career-related issues; and
4. examine the relationship between selected variables and secondary students enrolled in business courses in urban school settings toward work and career-related issues.

Methods and Procedures

Population and Sample

The target population for this study included all secondary students enrolled in business education courses in a large urban school district in the southeastern United States. A purposeful sampling of intact classes in four urban high schools was used in order to minimize disruption to students and ensure that a variety of courses was represented in the sample. The final research sample consisted of 254 students enrolled in business courses. Of the 254 questionnaires distributed, 201 were returned representing a response rate of 79.1%. Incomplete questionnaires (34) were discarded, therefore, the final research sample consisted of 167 useable responses from students enrolled in at least one business education course.

The research sample contained more female (72.6%) than male students (27.4%). In terms of ethnic composition, a majority of students were African American (97.6%), reflecting the general population of the urban school district, also largely African American. The remainder of students (2.4%) were Asian, Hispanic, or other ethnic origins. The largest percentage of students (39.6%) were 10th graders, and the next largest percentage (31.7%) were 9th graders. Almost 16% of the students were 11th graders and the remaining 12.8% of students surveyed were 12th graders.

Instrumentation

A review of literature was conducted to assist in developing a two-part, self-report questionnaire to obtain descriptive information from students and to determine their perceptions regarding work and career-related issues. The questionnaire was previously used in a study of secondary students enrolled in vocational courses (Womble, Jones, & Ruff, 1995). The first part asked students to supply demographic and background information such as gender, grade level, reason for enrolling, and plans after graduation. The second part of the questionnaire used a Likert-type scale (4 = strongly agree, 3 = agree, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree) to establish ranges of difference for responses to statements relating to work and career-related issues.

The questionnaire contained 26 statements designed to determine student perceptions toward work and career-related issues. The 26 statements emanated from themes established by a thorough review of the literature, and reflect current trends in school-to-work transition, career preparation for youth, and school reform. For example, research involving at-risk youth and school restructuring issues seems to suggest increased parental involvement (Davies, 1991; Kleese & D'Onofrio, 1994; Lontos, 1991) as an element of programs effectively addressing at-risk populations. Statements such as I wish my parents would take more interest in my school work, were included to further explore this theme from the urban students' perspective. Statements were revised after administration to 20 vocational students who provided feedback concerning items that might be misinterpreted or left blank.

Validity was established through a review process using a panel of 5 vocational educators (Long, Convey & Chwalek, 1985). A reliability coefficient alpha of .80 was obtained for the entire Likert-type scale.

Procedures

A list of secondary schools in a large urban school district in the southeastern U. S. was obtained from the state's department of education and used to select schools. To minimize disruption to students and classes a purposeful sample of four urban high school was conducted. Vocational supervisors at the high schools were asked to identify business education courses offered at their schools and the number of students enrolled in the courses. Three courses, comprehensive business education, cooperative business education, and data processing were offered at each of the schools and, therefore, were selected for the study.

Questionnaires were distributed to at least one business education teacher of each course available at each of the four schools. The business teachers were asked to select one day to administer the questionnaires to all students in attendance during each class period on that day. To eliminate student fears related to teacher knowledge of the responses, students were provided an envelope in which to seal completed questionnaires. Business education teachers at each of the schools distributed questionnaires to all students in attendance.

Analysis of Data

Factor analysis identified latent dimensions underlying the 26 scale items that measured student perceptions. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was employed to determine if there were significant differences between or among select demographic and background variables on identified dimensions of student perceptions. A .05 level of significance was established for all analytic procedures.

Findings

The primary objective of this study was to examine perceptions of youth served through vocational education in urban settings toward work and career-related issues. The sample of the study was taken from students enrolled in business education courses in one large urban school district, therefore, caution should be taken in generalizing to larger populations of youth in urban settings. Certain demographics may not be representative (e.g., students enrolled in other vocational courses, the disparate distribution between male and female students).

Characteristics of Students

The first objective of this study was to describe characteristics of students enrolled in business education courses in urban school settings. Belief that the course would help them get a good job (30%) or help them in college (22.9%) were the two most important reasons for enrolling in the course. Over half of the students (57.1%) indicated that their immediate plans were to attend a four-year college or university. Almost one-third of students (32.9%) were employed. Student characteristics are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of Students Enrolled in Business Education Courses in an Urban School Setting

Characteristic	Percent
Most important reason for enrolling in the current business course:	
Thought it would help me get a good job after high school	31.4
Thought it would help me in college	22.9
Liked the teacher	1.3
Thought it would be easy to pass or get a good grade	2.0
Needed the credits and nothing else was available or appealing	6.5
Friend recommended it to me	0.7
Guidance counselor recommended it to me	3.9

Wanted to get out of school early by enrolling in a cooperative on-the-job training experience	5.2
Interested in the subject	12.4
Other	13.7
Prior completion of other business courses	
Yes	16.0
No	69.9
Not sure	14.1
Grades usually earned in school:	
As and Bs	35.2
Bs and Cs	51.2
Cs and Ds	13.0
Ds and Fs	0.6
Involvement in a cooperative on-the-job training experience (n = 55):	
Yes	37.7
No	37.7
Not sure	24.6
Currently employed (n = 55):	
Yes	33.5

No	66.5
Number of hours worked per week reported by students (n = 55):	
10 or less	21.2
11-20	44.2
21-30	15.4
31-40	15.4
Over 40	3.8
Job sources reported by students enrolled in business courses (n = 55):	
Business teacher	24.1
Friends or family	48.3
Newspaper	3.4
Other	24.1
Educational level of students' parents:	
Mother/Father	
Did not finish high school	11.7 / 5.6
High school graduate	33.1 / 31.2
Two-year college graduate or some college	32.6 / 6.3
Four-year college graduate	12.9 / 31.2
Not sure	31.2

Immediate plans upon graduation from high school:	
Work full-time	5.1
Attend a two-year college or vocational school	10.9
Attend a four-year college or university	57.1
Work full-time and attend school part-time	4.5
Military	5.1
Undecided	14.1
Other	3.2
Where the most information about careers was obtained:	
Parents	22.9
Business teachers	15.9
Other teachers	10.2
Other adults	9.6
Friends	0.6
Guidance counselor	5.1
School career center	7.0
Books	8.3
Magazines, newspapers, or television	13.4

Other	7.0
Career objective (What job (occupational category) would you like to have 10 years from now?):	
Executive, administrative, managerial, administrative support, clerical, and computers	16.7
Health (diagnosing, assessment, treating, technologists, technicians)	21.8
Lawyers and judges	9.0
Technologists (except health)	7.7
Visual/performing arts	3.85
Teachers, librarians, and counselors	3.85
Specialty-Athlete	3.85
Professional specialty (engineering)	2.6
Social scientists and urban planners	2.6
Other	7.05
Undecided	21.2

Note: Totals may not equal 100% due to missing data or rounding error.

Student Perceptions Toward Work and Career-Related Issues

The second objective of this investigation was to describe perceptions of secondary students enrolled in business education courses in urban school settings toward work and career-related issues. On the 4-point Likert scale (4 = strongly agree; 1 = strongly disagree), student perceptions were generally positive. Mean scores for the 26 individual scale items ranged from a high mean of 3.59 (I expect to make a good income when I complete my education) to a low mean of 2.52 (If I decide not to go to college, high school is preparing me to locate permanent job opportunities). Table 2 provides the means and standard deviations for

each scale item used to assess students perceptions toward work and career-related issues.

Table 2. Perceptions of Urban Students Enrolled in Business Education Courses Toward Work and Career-Related Issues (n = 167)

Rank Order	Item No.	Item Statement	Mean	SD
1	10	I expect to make a good income when I complete my education.	3.59	.53
2	26	I believe I will be successful after I graduate from high school.	3.55	.60
3	4	I think high school is a waste of time for me.*	3.49	.65
4	1	My parents want me to go to college.	3.46	.67
5	5	I believe going to college is the wrong choice for me.*	3.44	.68
6	7	I have thought about dropping out of school.*	3.43	.74
7	9	Getting a good job later in life depends on how well I do inschool now.	3.32	.72
8	8	I believe I have been pushed into low-level, non-academic types of classes by teachers or guidance counselors.*	3.30	.67
9	16	I understand how academic subjects such as math, science and English are used in the workplace.	3.28	.61
10	3	I need to learn more about different careers in which I might be interested.	3.27	.58
11	17	I feel prepared to choose a college major/career field in which I will be satisfied and successful.	3.26	.67
12	22	I see the need to obtain education and job training throughout my lifetime.	3.21	.54
13	6	My teachers do not encourage me to go to college.*	3.20	.71

14	12	Talking to my teachers about my career plans is helpful.	3.19	.59
15	2	Talking to my parents about my career plans is helpful.	3.16	.65
16	25	Spending time with an adult role model who shares my career interests is important to my career future.	3.13	.64
17	13	I don't look forward to being a full-time worker.*	3.07	.80
18	11	Talking to my friends about my career plans is helpful.	3.02	.68
19	23	It will be difficult for me to get a good job after I complete my education.*	2.86	.67
20	18	I am concerned about being able to handle both a career and family/household responsibilities.	2.80	.78
21	24	I wish my parents would show more interest in my school work.*	2.73	.81
22	20	Career choices are not limited by a person's gender (male/female).	2.69	.79
23	19	Career choices are not limited by a person's ethnic background.	2.66	.84
24	15	Most jobs in our society are unpleasant.*	2.65	.67
25	14	Most jobs in our society require an unreasonable amount of work.*	2.60	.71
26	21	If I decide not to go to college, high school is preparing me to locate permanent job opportunities.	2.52	.68

Notes:

1. Statements 4-8, 13-15, and 23-24 were recorded to reflect positive responses.
2. Scoring Scale: 4 = Strongly Agree; 3 = Agree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly Disagree

Factors Identified in Student Perceptions

The third objective was to identify underlying dimensions that comprise perceptions of secondary students enrolled in business education courses in urban school settings toward work and career-related issues (see Table 3). Based on an exploratory factor analysis, a three-factor solution was adopted and accounted for

37.8% of the total variance. The first factor entitled, School Awareness and Work Expectations, contained nine statements. Seven of the items on this factor were related to how students identify with and relate to school, and the other two items focused on student expectations about work after school. The second factor contained 5 statements. This factor was entitled, Work Awareness and Supports. Two of the items were related to how students identify with and relate to work, and the remaining three items focused on sources of support for school and careers. Four items loaded on the third factor entitled, Career Choice and School Preparation. Two of the items related to limitations on career choice with respect to gender and ethnicity, and the other two items related to how students connect school preparation to future work.

Table 3 .
Factor Loadings by Varimax Rotation for Perceptions of Urban Students Enrolled in Business Courses
Toward Work and Career-Related Issues

Perception Scale Items	School Awareness and Work Expectations	Work Awareness and Supports	Career Choice and Work Preparation	h²
4	.776(.59)a	.006(.00)	.026(.00)	.59
5	.711(.51)a	.144(.02)	.092(.00)	.53
1	.632(.40)a	.123(.02)	-.218(.05)	.47
10	.599(.36)a	.076(.01)	-.002(.00)	.37
7	.512(.26)a/	.134(.02)	-.000(.00)	.28
23	.457(.21)a	.064(.00)	.165(.03)	.23
3	.451(.20)a	.103(.01)	-.227(.05)	.26
8	.441(.19)a	.364(.13)	-.172(.03)	.35
6	.429(.18)a	.298(.09)	.184(.03)	.30
15	.069(.00)	.621(.39)a	.050(.00)	.39
14	.062(.00)	.563(.32)a	-.212(.04)	.36
11	.149(.02)	.560(.31)a	.059(.00)	.33

2	.257(.07)	.528(.28)a	.307(.09)	.44
24	.014(.00)	.427(.18)a	-.046(.00)	.18
19	-.127(.02)	.083(.00)	.743(.55)a	.57
20	-.155(.02)	.049(.00)	.658(.43)a	.45
16	.340(.12)	-.097(.00)	.534(.29)a	.41
21	-.058(.00)	-.028(.00)	.530(.28)a	.28
Eigenvalue	3.15	1.78	1.87	6.80
% of variance	17.5	9.9	10.4	37.8
% of trace (common variance)	46.3	26.2	27.5	100.00

Influence and Comparison of Select Variables

The final research objective was to examine the influence of select variables on perceptions of secondary students enrolled in business education courses in urban school settings toward work and career-related issues. The three factors were used as dependent variables in an ANOVA that examined influences and compared differences of select variables (see Table 4). Results of the ANOVA revealed that the independent variable, grades usually earned in school, generated significant differences in student perceptions toward school awareness and work expectations (factor 1) and work awareness and supports (factor 2). On factor 1, students earning mostly B's and C's were more positive toward school awareness and work expectations issues than students earning mostly C's and D's. On factor 2, students earning mostly A's and B's were more positive toward work awareness and support issues than students earning mostly C's and D's.

Table 4. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for Student Perceptions Toward Work and Career-Related Issues

F-Value	df	Factor 1	Post hoc comparison	Factor 2	Post hoc comparison	Factor 3	Post hoc comparison
Independent Variable							
Gender	1	.617	-	.352	-	.2.19	-

Grade level	3	2.48	-	.304	-	.795	-
Grades usually earned in school	2	11.5**	2 > 3 1 > 2,3	4.46*	1 > 3	1.48	-
Currently employed	1	5.35*	1 > 2	1.89	-	1.15	-
Hours worked per week	3	.835	-	1.73	-	.573	-
Job held is used to earn co-op hours	2	.168	-	.469	-	.773	-
Reason for enrolling in course	7	1.97	-	1.73	-	.439	-
Educational level of mother	4	2.43*	1 > 5	1.36	-	1.33	-
Educational level of father	4	.798	-	1.29	-	.568	-
Career information source	7	1.69	-	1.18	-	1.46	-
Post-grad. Plans	4	6.97**	3 > 4,5	4.43**	3 > 4	.915	-

*p<.05; **p.<01

Tukey HSD

Note: See Table 1 for numbers corresponding to post-hoc comparisons data (e.g., post-graduation plans generated significant differences in student perceptions toward factor 1: 3>4,5). For this posthoc comparison, 3 = attend a four-year college or university, 4 = work full-time and attend school part-time, 5 = military.

The independent variable, currently employed, revealed a significant difference in student perceptions toward school awareness and work expectations (factor 1). Students who were employed identified with and related more positively to school, and had more positive expectations toward work after school, than students who were not employed.

The variable, educational level of mother, also revealed significant difference in student perceptions toward school awareness and work expectations (factor 1). Students whose mothers did not finish high school seemed to identify with and relate to school in a more positive manner, and seemed to have greater expectations regarding work after school than students who were not sure about the educational level of their mothers.

The independent variable, post-graduation plans, generated significant differences in student perceptions toward school awareness and work expectations (factor 1) and work awareness and supports (factor 2). On factor 1, students with plans to attend a four-year college or university were more positive about how they identify with and relate to school, and had higher expectations about work after school than students who plan to work full-time and attend school part-time. On factor 2, students with plans to attend a four-year college or university identified with and related more positively to work, and were more positive about their sources of support for school and careers than students with plans to work full-time and attend school part-time.

No significant differences in student perceptions toward career choice and work preparation (factor 3) were identified with respect to any of the independent variables explored. Although 72.6% of the students surveyed were female, no statistical evidence was generated to indicate gender-based differences regarding either of the three factors. However, the disparate distribution between male and female students suggests a need for caution in generalizing results to populations with higher numbers of males. Other variables such as grade level and hours worked per week also had no significant impact on students' perceptions (see Table 4).

Implications for Business Education Programs in Urban Secondary School Settings

The findings of this study provide a better understanding of students enrolled in business education courses in urban school settings. The extent to which these students identify with and relate to school and work, exhibit expectations about work after school, rely on sources of support for careers and school, set limitations on their career choice based on gender and ethnicity, and connect school preparation to future work is shown. Implications for business education programs in the urban secondary school are discussed in the following sections.

Student Characteristics

Students in this study felt their business education teachers were doing a fairly good job of providing information about careers; however, students received most of their career information from family and friends. Also, a considerable percentage of students indicated being undecided about a future career or college major. This finding supports the view that career counseling for urban students should be given more consideration (Winborne & Dardaine-Ragguet, 1993) and suggests that teachers of business education courses may need to devote more time to career exploration and other developmental activities.

Although urban youth are often characterized as potential drop-outs or non-college bound (Oakes, 1987; Rosenbaum, 1989), a majority of these urban students indicated they will seek some form of further education. Many students reported enrolling in the business education courses because they thought the courses would help them in college or help them locate good jobs after high school. These findings strongly support a need to integrate academic and business education preparation into classroom instruction (Kazis,

1993). It also appears that meeting the expressed needs of these urban youth will require delivery of business education as school-to-school preparation as well as school-to-work preparation.

Student Perceptions Toward Work and Career-Related Issues

Traditional views suggest that urban students do not see a relationship between education and career success (Oakes, 1987). However, students in this study strongly believed they will make a good income and be successful after they graduate from high school. Also, these students did not feel that school was a waste of time, and felt their parents wanted them to go to college. Educators should take note of these apparent differences by designing programs that encourage goal setting, career planning, and academic achievement.

Although many of the students in this study expect to make a good income, the lowest ranked statement was If I decide not to go to college, high school is preparing me to locate permanent job opportunities. This low ranking of this statement suggests that fewer of these students expect high school to adequately prepare them for work. It also suggests that these students recognize they may need additional training to be prepared to work.

Factors Comprised in Student Perceptions

Findings of this study suggest that students may form perceptions toward work and career-related issues based on three factors--school awareness and work expectations, work awareness and supports, and career choice and work preparation. These students appear to relate school and work awareness to career success. They also seem to have and rely on sources of support for careers and school, and do not set limitations on their careers based on gender or ethnicity.

Influences on Student Perceptions

Students earning higher grades in school seemed to have a stronger identification with and relationship to school than students earning lower grades. These students also had higher expectations about work after school. In addition, students who were more positive about their sources of support for work and careers, and students who identified more positively with work usually earned higher grades. These findings also contradict traditional views that suggest urban students do not see a relationship between education and career success (Oakes, 1987). Expectations about work after school were more positive and school awareness was greater for students who were employed. Many of these urban students apparently viewed combining work and school in a positive way. Yet, some students were not sure if they were earning co-op credits. This suggests that educators provide opportunities for work-based learning, and clearly establish the goals and benefits of work-based preparation as well as strengthen connections to the business curriculum.

Potential for the literacy level of mothers to exert influence on their children's academic achievement has been reported (Benjamin, 1993) and is supported by findings in this study. Students whose mothers did not finish high school seemed to identify with and relate to school in a more positive manner than students who were not sure about the educational level of their mothers. Perhaps the fact that their mothers had not completed high school served as a motivator to these urban youth and their mothers. Similarly, students who were not sure about the educational level of their mothers may have come from homes where education was not highly valued. While business educators may have limited ability to influence the educational level of mothers, this apparent influence of mothers on how these urban students identify with and relate to school and work suggests potential benefits to urban youth if more educational opportunities for parents, especially mothers are provided.

As noted earlier, these urban youth cannot be characterized as non-college bound. Almost 73% have plans to pursue some form of further education. However, students with plans to attend a four-year college or university related more positively to school and work, and had higher expectations about work after school than students with plans to work full-time and attend school part-time. Two possible explanations for why

some students' post-graduation plans were to work full-time and attend school part-time are (1) financial difficulties (Solberg, Villarreal, & Kavanagh, 1993; Chaney & Farris, 1991; Sailes, 1993) confronted by many youth, in particular many urban youth, and (2) personal choice. While it may be argued that working full-time while attending school part-time increases stress and decreases likelihood for program completion, it is not suggested that business educators seek to influence students' personal choices regarding plans to work and pursue further education. However, the apparent influence of post graduation plans on student perceptions about school and work suggests that business educators assist students who, due to financial difficulties, plan to work full-time and attend school part-time. One example of how educators can help is to make sure students are aware, and able to effectively pursue, financial aid opportunities such as grants, scholarships, work studies, and loans. In many instances, financial aid equalizes opportunities for students, thus decreasing attractiveness of alternatives (Cabrera, Amaury, & Castañeda, 1992) such as working full-time while attending school part-time. In general, business educators should provide opportunities, preparation, and encouragement for further education for all students.

Summary

This study represents one exploratory approach in clarifying work and career-related issues of urban high school students. Results suggest that urban students see a relationship between education and future success, and expect schools to prepare them for work and further education. In general, the results of this study suggest a need for involvement in the following types of activities (a) analysis of the benefits of co-op, (b) better career information and guidance, (c) involvement of others in career planning such as parents and adults, (d) response to further education needs as well as immediate employment, (e) parental involvement in education, (f) effective marketing and program information, and (g) response to students' need for academic achievement.

The information from this study may be helpful to business educators in promoting and positioning programs to address the career preparation needs of urban youth. More information about how to improve school-to-work preparation of urban youth may be gained through replication of this study in other urban school districts and to other vocational students.

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