"The Career Consciousness among Youth and Career Development Support: A Study Focusing on University Students¹"

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1. Introduction

The problem of career decision among Japanese university students has become increasingly serious in recent years. The job placement rate for university students who graduated in March 2005 was 59.7%. The figure shows a sign of improvement, but it still remains at a low level. Moreover, 17.8% of them did not find employment or did not have any plan to receive further education at the time of graduation. In other words, roughly one out of every five students is facing graduation without having any future plans. The career decision problem goes beyond the time of graduation. According to a study by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, the proportion of new university graduates hired as regular employees who quit their job within the first three years has been staying high at around 30% since 1995. About 30% of those students who manage to find a job will quit it within the first three years, and this situation presents another serious problem.

Behind these problems is the fact that the overall opportunities for new university graduates have been diminishing amidst a wave of employment adjustments carried out by companies in response to the prolonged recession. Even if young people manage to secure employment in the difficult job market, it has also been pointed out that few professional positions now offer them a sense of personal growth or professional fulfillment (Genda, 2001). There is also the problem of an oversupply of university graduates. According to the *School Basic Survey*, the ratio of those who enter university or junior college reached an historic high of 51.5 % in 2005. The increase in university entrants has created a glut of university graduates causing an increasing number of students to be squeezed out of the regular recruitment path for university

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graduates. Under such circumstances, university students can no longer make career choices as smoothly as they once did in the past.

However, the inability or unwillingness of young people to work cannot be attributed entirely to these environmental factors. As many researchers point out, the psychological characteristics of young people, such as immature career consciousness and lack of pro-activeness, are also linked to the problem. In other words, the mentalities and attitudes characterizing today's Japanese youth, such as inability to relate to society in a proactive manner and tendency to equate personal interest with career, seem to lie at the base of the problem of career indecision. Bearing the theoretical considerations above in mind, this article will examine the factors hindering the career decisions of young people from a psychological perspective and explore the direction of career assistance toward resolution of the problem.

2. Career Consciousness among Japanese Youth: Recent Trends and Analysis

Through the ages, career choice has always been a challenging problem, and young people have tried to overcome the problem through various efforts. In Japan recently, however, there is a widely shared concern that young people have a weak sense of career consciousness and underdeveloped attitudes toward work. Such concern also applies to the highly educated, and many adults criticize what they see as the underdeveloped career consciousness of university students. It is suggested that the career consciousness of young people today is marked by the following tendencies: *"tekishoku shinko* (belief in the idea of a perfect vocation)," *"ukemi* (passivity)," and *"yaritaikoto shiko* (inclination toward personal interests)." Do young people today really have such career consciousness? Moreover, does such career consciousness really contribute to the problem of career indecision? This article will address these questions based on the results of a survey.

The survey targeted 405 university students, 62 junior college students, and 121 vocational school students without any work experience as a regular employee. They were all Japanese nationals. The male/female breakdown was 352/333 (2 unspecified), and their average age was 19.66 (SD = 1.05). The questionnaire for evaluating career consciousness consisted of 38 items. Respondents were asked to give a score for each item using a five-point rating scale ("Completely Agree/5 points" – "Completely Disagree/1 point"). Table 1

shows the lower structure of their career consciousness derived by a factor analysis. Let us examine the characteristics of their career consciousness by each factor.

Table 1: Results of Factor	Analysis on C	Career Attitudes of	f the Japanese Youth

	Ι	Π	Ш	IV	Mean	(SD)
I. Career Indecision $(\alpha = .93)$						
1. I cannot make a decision about my future	.91	05	.05	01	2.60	(1.16)
 I cannot decide what my goal should be I do not know which occupation I should 	.91	10	.01	02	2.84	(1.20)
choose	.90	01	.06	.02	2.80	(1.24)
4. I do not know what I want to do clearly	.84	01	.02	07	2.65	(1.24)
 I need more time before I make a career decision 	.79	08	.17	.00	3.47	(1.12)
6. I cannot have any outlook on my career	.78	10	01	.04	3.04	(1.05)
I do not know what type of occupation I am suited for	.77	07	07	.06	2.99	(1.07)
8. I cannot have a future goal	.69	.14	08	03	2.49	(1.15)
9. I have not been able to start working toward my future occupation	.65	.09	.03	.07	3.12	(1.16)
10. I want to postpone choosing a career if I could	.48	.16	.05	.10	2.82	(1.21)
II. Passivity (α =.87)	-					
11. I can think about my future when that time comes	07	.85	.01	.04	1.94	(0.89)
12. There is no use in worrying about the future from now	10	.74	.14	04	2.04	(0.99)
13. I believe that my future will be fine somehow	05	.70	.07	.10	2.64	(1.16)
14. I believe that my future career will be fine somehow	12	.68	.20	05	2.45	(1.09)
15. How my future will turn out is contingent upon circumstances	.04	.65	.07	.09	2.71	(1.11)
16. I try not to think much about my future	.10	.62	05	.06	2.19	(1.02)
17. I do not think about taking any special actions for my future	.06	.61	10	04	2.16	(0.92)
 It is a nuisance to take special actions now for my future 	.19	.51	17	.16	2.32	(1.06)
19. I do not have any future vision	.32	.48	02	13	2.15	(1.03)
III. Tekishoku Shinko ($\alpha=.82$)	-					
20. I have a feeling that I will encounter some big chance in the future	.08	.03	.91	12	3.50	(1.04)
21. I might come under the spotlight for some reason in the future	.07	.04	.87	09	3.34	(1.04)
22. I believe that I have a talent I am still unaware of	.17	08	.75	07	3.60	(1.01)
23. I am thinking of accomplishing something big	04	15	.55	.12	3.47	(1.11)
in the future 24. I will find a good job someday	.04	.41	.51	.04	2.89	(1.03)
25. I will encounter a work which will make me						. ,
say "This is it"	.01	.26	.50	.09	3.29	(1.03)
 I feel that my dream will come true if I go at with determination 	09	.07	.48	01	3.23	(1.12)
27. I have an ambition to realize my personal goal	15	26	.45	.13	4.02	(0.87)
28. I can think about what to do then if my dream does not come true	06	.32	.37	.16	3.41	(1.10)
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	Ι	Π	Ш	IV	Mean	(SD)
IV. Yaritaikoto Shiko (α =.82)					-	
29. I want to be in an environment where I can do what I want to do	.13	21	10	.76	4.23	(0.73)
30. I just want to do only the things I like	.04	.19	12	.68	3.33	(1.04)
31. I want to live a free lifestyle without being constrained too much	.11	.18	18	.67	3.79	(0.85)
32. I want to value my time and world	03	.08	.04	.61	3.64	(0.91)
33. I want to make a career out of what I like	01	20	.08	.54	4.19	(0.79)
34. It is my life so I think I should live it the way I want to	.03	.14	.03	.52	3.63	(1.00)
35. I give the top priority to my personal goal in my career decision	07	09	.12	.52	3.89	(0.88)
 I want to be very uncompromising about my personal goal 	13	07	.20	.51	3.84	(0.89)
37. I want to maintain my character in doing my job	.04	20	.09	.50	4.07	(0.76)
38. I don't have to do the things I don't want to do	07	.22	01	.32	2.73	(0.94)
Eigenvalues	9.55	4.16	2.56	1.73		
Mean	2.88	2.29	3.42	3.73		
(SD)	(0.91)	(0.73)	(0.67)	(0.54)		
Factor correlation	1.00					
	.52	1.00				
	43	33	1.00			
	22	21	.49	1.00		

2.1 Career Indecision

Factor I is career indecision, which is a tendency to be unable or unwilling to make a decision about the future career. Finding a job is a decision based on economic and social considerations. In contrast, Factor I is concerned with measuring the psychological dimensions of decision-making. It is measured by ten variables, and the overall mean was 2.88 (SD=0.91), a figure slightly below the theoretical median of 3.00. Variables for assessing how the respondent needs time before making a decision, such as "5. I need more time before I make a career decision" or "9. I have not been able to start working toward my future occupation" tended to have a high mean score. In contrast, variables assessing extremely negative states of the respondent, such as "4. I am not certain about what I want to do" or "8. I cannot have a future goal" had a low mean score. The indecisiveness of the respondents, therefore, can be interpreted as a tendency to procrastinate and require time before making a decision rather than a fundamental inability or refusal to make a decision.

2.2 Passivity

Factor II is passivity. Students with passive attitudes will not treat career choice as their own problem while entertaining such thoughts as "My future

will be okay somehow" or "There is no use in worrying about the future." A survey by the Japan Institute of Labour² (2000) on *freeter*³ also collected many responses reflecting the passive career attitudes of *freeter*. Students with passive attitudes toward the future cannot be expected to explore, contemplate, or plan their future career, and hence they end up distancing themselves from career decision. Nine variables were used for measuring passivity. The overall mean was 2.29 (SD = 0.73), which was far below the median. In other words, it is not that the respondents have decided not to take any action while entertaining highly optimistic and nonchalant attitudes toward their career. In particular, the mean for "11. I can think about my future when the time comes" was 1.94, and the mean for "12. There is no use in worrying about the future now" was 2.04. They both had a very low mean score. As these figures clearly show the students are far from being indifferent toward their career or optimistically leaving everything to fate. Rather the unexpectedly low scores seem to signify how uncertain and concerned they are about their future.

2.3 Tekishoku Shinko (Belief in the Idea of Perfect Vocation)

Factor III, *tekishoku shinko*, was measured by nine variables. Those with this tendency will wait for an encounter with the perfect vocation while entertaining hope and optimism about their future and believing that they will somehow find a suitable job and their natural calling. While such a tendency among the youth should not be dismissed altogether, it is true that many students become incapable of bridging the gap between their idea and reality because they have too much faith in the idea of finding the perfect vocation. Such students will end up overlooking job advertisements right under their nose, becoming unable to consider alternatives, or ceasing their job search altogether if they cannot have their first-choice or second-choice jobs (Tsubaki, 2002).

Moreover, believing in the idea of a perfect vocation excessively can also cause university graduates to quit their current job prematurely because they feel that their job is not the right fit and believe that they will be able to find a more fulfilling vocation. Among the nine variables for measuring *tekishoku*

² Currently, the Japan Institute of Labour Policy and Training.

³ Young people between the ages of 15 and 34 (excluding students and housewives) who are working as part-time workers or temporary workers (including dispatched workers) or who are unemployed but willing to work.

shinko, "24. I will find a good job someday" was the only one which received a mean below the median of 3.00. The overall mean was 3.42 (SD = 0.67). Such results indicate that a substantial portion of the students believe they will be able to encounter a job that is a perfect fit some day. "27. I have the ambition to realize my personal goals" received a very high score of 4.02, followed by 3.60 of "22. I believe that I have a talent I am still unaware of." The results clearly indicate a tendency among the students to be fixated on something that is special.

2.4 Yaritaikoto Shiko (Inclination toward Personal Interests)

Factor IV, yaritaikoto shiko, is a tendency to link career with favorite activities or personal interests. This tendency is often discussed in studies on freeter (Shimomura, 2002 and Aratani, 2004). In the survey by the Japan Institute of Labour cited above, respondents frequently made such comments as "I believe everything is fine as long as I am doing what I enjoy," "I do not care whether I am a *freeter* or regular employee as long as I can do the kind of work I like," or "I will do what I enjoy regardless of what others might think." Yaritaikoto shiko seems to characterize the career attitude of young people who work as freeter in particular. Yaritaikoto shiko was measured by ten variables, and nine of them received a mean above 3.00, the median. The overall mean was 3.37 (SD = 0.54), a very high figure. Moreover, "33. I want to make a career out of what I like," "29. I want to be in an environment where I can do what I want to do," and "37. I want to maintain my character in doing my job" all had a mean that was above 4.00. Such inclination conceptually resembles "privatism" which is cited as the social consciousness widely shared among the Japanese youth today (Kuse et al., 1988). It reflects their tendency to want to fill their life, including their career, with what they enjoy or what suits their sensibility.

2.5 Passivity, *Tekishoku Shinko*, and *Yaritaikoto Shiko*: Their Links with Career Indecision

Do the career attitudes which are said to characterize today's youth, such as passivity, *tekishoku shinko*, and *yaritaikoto shiko* really contribute to career indecision? This section will address this question. Figure 1 shows the results of a path analysis which treated the three career attitudes (passivity, *tekishoku shinko*, and *yaritaikoto shiko*) as independent variables and career indecision

as a dependent variable. What do the results indicate? *Yaritaikoto shiko* did not show any statistically significant path (male =-.032, ns; female =-.033, ns) or demonstrate either negative or positive influence on career indecision. It seems that linking career with personal interests per se does not lead to career indecision. Many studies in Japan suggest that the simplistic attitude of linking personal interests with career leads to career indecision, but the results of this analysis do not substantiate such a direct correlation between the two. Shimomura (2002) points out that an inclination toward doing what one enjoys characterizes the career consciousness of *freeter* and also notes that such an attitude is widely supported by half of the non-*freeter* of the same age group. In other words, the tendency to link career with personal interests is widely shared among the youth in Japan, and it does not necessarily lead to career indecision.



Figure 1. Relationships between Passivity, *Tekishoku Shinko* (Belief in the Idea of Perfect Vocation) and *Yaritaikoto Shiko* (Inclination toward Personal Interest) and Career Indecision.

Let us look at *tekishioku shiko*, a belief in the idea of being able to encounter the perfect vocation someday. Interestingly, it showed a negative path (male = -.240, p<.001; female = -.173, p<.01), and it was functioning as a constraining factor on career indecision. Why did such results come about? Both *tekishoku shinko* and career indecision were measured by a psychological indicator. *Tekishoku shinko* is a positive outlook in which one expects to encounter some perfect vocation in the future. Career indecision is a negative psychological state in which one is unable to make any decision, know what to do, and set any goals. Therefore, it is not too difficult to

understand the fact that there is a negative correlation between the two. In other words, those who have a positive future outlook tend to score low on career indecision while those who cannot entertain such an outlook tend to score high. Based on these results, it can be concluded that *tekishoku shinko* is functioning as a constraining factor on the psychological indecision among the youth rather than having a negative influence on their career decision.

Which of the career attitudes does contribute to psychological career indecision then? In the present analysis, "passivity" showed a positive path (male = .464, p< .001; female = .477, p< .001). Having a passive attitude such as "Things will work themselves out," "Things are all up to the circumstances of that moment," and "There is no point in worrying" leads to indecisiveness. Having a passive career attitude, that is, refusing to engage the problem of career decision proactively and treating it as something psychologically and temporally distant, has a high potential of leading to career indecision. Students cannot expect to see any change, let alone find a job, if they decide to be passive and do not take any action in the face of a difficult job market. In order to change the passive attitudes of young people, we need career education that will encourage young people to engage career development as their own issue in a proactive manner.

3. Implementing Career Education Programs and Evaluating Their Effectiveness

Career assistance for university students in Japan has been mostly provided by university job placement sections (*shushoku-ka*). It has focused mostly on the practical aspects of job search such as providing job postings, holding job-search seminars, and providing tips on how to handle interviews and fill out job applications. Lately, however, schools are making efforts to support individual career development at an early stage instead of just assisting student job search right before graduation. In addition to the traditional educational and research functions, facilitating the school-to-work transition of students is becoming an increasingly important function of universities.

However, career assistance programs offered at many schools are often a mere amalgam of disparate activities because Japanese universities have not sufficiently accumulated research data on career education. Some schools have imported career counseling theories and techniques from the United States, but it has been pointed out that their career assistance programs are not functioning effectively because programs are being introduced without any principles or conceptual underpinnings (Watanabe and Herr, 2001). In addition, methods for measuring and evaluating the effectiveness of career education programs are yet to be developed. In the first place, a career is something each individual creates and strives for. There is no single right answer or textbook solution concerning career, and the effects and goals of career education are multiple. At the same time, however, career education should accomplish more than self-satisfaction for those who provide it. It is necessary to develop guidelines for evaluating and improving career education efforts at universities and a basic system for sharing information about the goals and problems in implementing programs. The next section will discuss a career education program introduced in a small class at a university. The goal of the program was to raise the awareness of students about career decision by having them engage the three basic elements of career choice.

3.1 Implementation of the Program

The program focused on the three elements of career choice: 1) self-understanding, 2) understanding of the professional world, and 3) summary and review (decision-making). Twenty-three third-year university students participated in the program. The outline of the program is shown in Table 2.

3.2 Self-efficacy and Outcome Expectations

How does participation in such programs change students? In this study, pre-program and post-program changes in self-efficacy and outcome expectations of the participants were measured as indicators for evaluating effects of career education programs. Self-efficacy is an individual's self-assessment about his or her capabilities to take the actions necessary for accomplishing a given goal (Bandura, 1977). It has been pointed out that self-efficacy can influence the actions of individuals in many ways. It can influence how much effort individuals are willing to make, which areas individuals will choose to invest their efforts in, and how resilient individuals will be in the face of difficulties (Bandura, 1995). Starting with Urakami (1993), who focused on the concept of "career decision-making self-efficacy," many other researchers have also been producing research using the concept of self-efficacy in the career development research field in Japan. An outcome expectation is a personal projection which

Table 2: Overview of the Career Education Program

Session 1	"Goals and Program Outline"
	Approaches to career are introduced and the program is outlined to students in order to clarify the goals of the program.
Session 2	"Gender Equal Society"
	Students study the theme of "gender equal society" by exploring such topics as the difference between sexual (biological) and gender (psychological and social) differences, traditional gender roles and their changes, and diverse ways of living and working.
Session 3	"Self-Understanding 1"
	Students take the Vocational Preference Inventory (Japan Institute of Labour) test and interpret test results.
Session 4	"Self-Understanding 2"
	Students learn about representative career development theories such as Super (1957), Holland (1985), Lent, Brown & Hackett (1994, 1996) and interpret VPI test results based on these theories.
Session 5	"Understanding the Professional World 1"
	Student presentations: Group A on "career paths and career choices of university students" and Group B on " <i>freeter</i> ".
Session 6	"Understanding the Professional World 2"
	Student presentations: Group C on "changes in the professional world" and Group D on "gender equal society".
Session 7	"Summary and Review"
	Students study the social cognitive theory on school-work transition (Lent, Brown & Hackett, 1994) and complete a worksheet exercise for reviewing and reinterpreting their understanding of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and process of how occupational interest develops and changes

Note: Each session is 90 minute-long

an individual holds about the outcome of a given action (Bandura, 1977). In conjunction with self-efficacy, outcome expectations are considered to have a positive influence on motivations and actions. This study focused on two of the three elements of career choice, self-understanding and understanding of the professional world, and measured the changes in self-efficacy and outcome expectations in relation to the two elements.

3.3 Changes in Self-efficacy and Outcome Expectations

This study compared pre-program and post - program changes in self-efficacy and outcome expectations of students by using the t-test. Self-efficacy showed a significant increase in score in relation to both self-understanding (from 3.17 to 3.77) and understanding of the professional world (from 3.32 to 3.55) [Figure 2]. By evaluating these figures in connection with the content of the program, it can be concluded that the program boosted the confidence of participants in handling these two aspects of career decision. By taking the VPI (Vocational Preference Inventory) and analyzing the session 3 and 4 of the program, the students were able to experience a sense of personal accomplishment that they had deepened their self-understanding by exploring their personal interests. Luzzo and Day (1999) also confirm that taking the VPI and analyzing its results can boost self-efficacy. The very act of engaging in exercises related to career decision can generate a sense of accomplishment among students that they have completed a task and boost their self-efficacy. The fifth and sixth sessions consisted of group presentations by students on the workings of the professional world. The students experienced a sense of accomplishment by gathering and organizing career-related information which in turn positively influenced their self-efficacy about their abilities to understand the professional world. The review worksheet exercise implemented in the seventh session probably had the effect of allowing the students to reinterpret their experiences (Lent, Hackett, and Brown, 1999), and this process brought about a change in their self-efficacy.

In contrast, outcome expectations did not show any significant change in score. It was not that the program consciously provided the students with positive information in order to positively influence their outcome expectations. On the contrary, a significant portion of the students who participated in the program were probably forced to look at the hard reality by beginning to explore and think about the professional world. Especially in the student presentations in the fifth and sixth sessions, they discussed such issues as the decline in the job placement rate, the pre-graduation job offer rate for Japanese university students, the trend among companies to set highly selective recruitment standards, the rise of meritocracy, and the fluid employment market. In short, the program offered a significant amount of information that was discouraging for students who were about to enter the professional world. This is perhaps why participation in the program did not boost their outcome expectations while it was able to enhance their self-efficacy in relation to self-understanding and understanding of the professional world. As pointed out by McWhirter, Rasheed, and Crothers (2000), however, the purpose of career education is to guide students so that they will be able to develop a realistic career plan, not to raise their outcome expectations. In this sense, the overall effectiveness of the program should not be negated by the fact that the program



did not result in an increase in the score of outcome expectations.

Figure 2 Pre-program and post-program changes in self-efficiency

3.4 Role of the Program

Let's see how the kind of career education discussed in this study can be characterized in relation to the other numerous career support program. The program was based on a method in which the instructor guided students through prepared steps rather than that of providing individual counseling. Another unique feature of the program is its utilization of group dynamics through group activities where students exchange opinions and stimulate one another. The program, in short, fits the conceptual framework of career education discussed by Law (1996).

The overall purpose of the program is to provide students who have never considered their future and career seriously and carefully before with opportunities to contemplate their past and future, to direct their attention to the professional world, and deepen their understanding about career development by linking self-understanding and knowledge of the professional world. Given the above intents of the program, it should be utilized as an orientation targeting students who still have a significant psychological and temporal distance from career decision such as recent university entrants. By approaching such students at an early stage, universities can offer them opportunities to think about the meaning of studying at the university level and how they should spend their four years at university in addition to the problem of career decision. An increasing number of universities and junior colleges are in fact integrating career education into their orientation programs for new students and seeking to foster career consciousness among them at an early stage before providing support at the job search stage. By offering systematic career education which targets all student groups at an early stage, universities can prevent students from polarizing into one group who are able to make successful career choice and another who are not much of the support currently offered by university job placement sections, such as job search seminars, internships, counseling, and other support programs, require voluntary participation by students. Under such circumstances, students are likely to divide into those who can act proactively and those who do not participate in programs at all. As pointed out by Kosugi (2001), there has been an increase in university students who do not engage in job search activities in recent years, and many of them end up without a job or secure regular employment because of their inaction. In order to provide support for these students, it is hoped that universities will integrate career education into regular curriculums and reach out to all types of students

4. Conclusion

The present study has addressed the problem of career decision among Japanese youth and examined the psychological factors behind the problem. It has reached the following conclusions. Young people today tend to believe that they will encounter something that is right for them in the future and desire a career which will allow them to do what they enjoy and like doing. These tendencies should not be rejected immediately as they do not contribute to psychological career indecision. However, there is no guarantee that that all young people can find their natural calling to enjoy self-realization or find an occupation of their choice. Students with such tendencies perhaps will be unable to make a successful transition to the professional world when they continue to make misguided efforts, fail to take necessary actions for finding positions that suit them, or do not establish some middle ground between their career and what they enjoy doing. It is important to encourage students to envision a career path in which they first establish themselves as a member of the professional world and only then begin exploring or creating their perfect occupation and new personal interests while trying to establish some middle ground between their given professional roles and personal goals and values.

The second half of the essay discussed a career education program for university students. The program broke down the process of career decision into three components (self-understanding, understanding of the professional world, and summary and review), and seven sessions were held. By participating in the program, students were able to experience a sense of personal accomplishment and transform their self-efficacy in a positive fashion. In summation, providing students who have never engaged their future and career with a sense of immediacy with opportunities to understand themselves, pay attention to the professional world, and integrate their self-understanding and understanding of the professional world can positively influence their consciousness and attitudes.

Until recently, the majority of Japanese university graduates followed a linear career path. They were recruited directly from universities at once to work under the system of lifetime employment. The main aim of career assistance was to help students find jobs at corporations, and career development after graduation was left to training programs provided by corporations. Today, however, about 30% of university graduates quit their job within the first three years, and finding employment at a corporation is no longer the goal of career decision. In other words, even if universities match students with stable jobs, many of them will either leave or switch jobs. Moreover, more and more companies are shifting from the traditional pattern of recruiting new university graduates at once to mid-career recruitment in recent years (Recruit Works Institute, 2004). In the coming years, it will not be sufficient for university students to simply find a job through standard job search activities before graduation, and they will be required to have the capabilities necessary to develop their career on their own. In supporting the career decision of students, universities must foster the capabilities that young people will need for developing their career - capabilities to understand themselves, understand the professional world, and make decisions on their own - instead of focusing on securing employment at corporations for students.

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