

Experiential Learning Practices and Career Courses: Predictors of First Destination Outcomes

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Abstract

This study examined connections between experiential learning practices, mandatory career courses, and positive first destination outcomes of graduates from a large public institution prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The rising cost of education and competition among universities has led to consumer demands for information pertaining to their return on investment. Universities have been encouraged to provide first-destination outcomes for graduates as a way to show the value of their degree programs. To strengthen these outcomes, many programs encourage or mandate experiential learning known as high-impact practices (HIPs) and career courses to prepare emerging adult learners for the transition to employment or further education. However, little is known as to the impact these practices have on the first-destination outcomes of these graduating students. This study identified specific experiential practices which proved beneficial to securing employment or acceptance to continued education, with an important caveat that career courses added only limited benefit for some respondents. These findings will better inform the allocation of university teaching resources and are a basis for further study of career practices in higher education.

Keywords: career courses, emerging adult, experiential learning, first destination outcomes, high-impact practices (HIPs)

1. Introduction

As exemplified by the famous Yale Report of 1828 and the decades of discussion that have followed, defining the full purpose of higher education and the academe is a hotly debated topic (Herbst, 2004). Certainly, higher education's focus on the pursuit of, and transfer of, knowledge remain as core elements. Yet, the purpose of higher education to instill subject matter expertise into learners is no longer enough. The evolution of societal demands has moved universities to the much broader arena of preparing well-rounded adults who are competitive in the global job market (Gerstein & Friedman, 2016). Universities are expected to create career-ready global citizens, who can effectively navigate the transition from the classroom to the workplace. Connecting the knowledge learned in the classroom to the world of work is now a necessity and academic programs are being asked to assist in this effort to support the positive career outcomes of job obtainment or continued education acceptance for their students.

Effectively preparing learners to transition into the workforce requires higher education administration, especially those in career services, to examine best practices that support capability and success. Campbell, Cooper, Ruechert and Smith (2019) described this as, "Instead of viewing employability as an 'add-on' to higher education, this emerging position views employability as the frame for successful curriculum design and pedagogic practice in higher education" (p.503). This intentional focus on skills needed for employment is important when the economy is strong, but even more crucial in times of economic uncertainty. Understanding how to best transfer skills needed for emerging adults to confidently attain employment, enter the workforce, or pursue further education, is an area ripe for exploration and research (Tanner, Arnett & Leis, 2009). The array of skills needed for employment in individual career fields is varied and complex, and the diversity can make effective cross-discipline curriculum design and teaching difficult. Moreover, to justify the rising cost of education there has been a demand for universities to account for the outcomes of students. Thus, universities are finding themselves striving to prove a positive relationship between a degree earned and a positive career

outcome or risk lower student enrollments.

Although institutions have tracked their students after graduation for decades, the lack of specific guidelines or definitions has made it difficult to accurately compare information or analyze the research. To standardize reporting of these outcomes, in 2014, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) created the First-Destination Survey (FDS) and called for universities to report their findings (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2019). The FDS uses consistent language and questions to determine the job search status, graduate school acceptance, or military status of graduates up to three months after graduation. NACE compiles the data from all participating schools and publishes the national trends to better understand the current climate for graduates nationwide. Although participation is not required, universities who report their student outcomes receive recognition from NACE in the publication and a free copy of the report. Universities use their institution findings to showcase student successes by publishing them on their websites and media outlets in the hopes of driving future enrollments.

1.1 COVID Impact

In 2020, the world faced a global pandemic, that has greatly impacted the economy and job market. Economic uncertainty and changes in business operations brought about the cancellation of many high-impact practices (HIPs) in the higher education curricula, including internships and co-ops, specifically during summer of 2020. This left higher education students without the required and needed experiences to land a job, and in some cases, unable to fulfill curriculum or graduation requirements (Gallup, 2021; Stansell, 2020). Glassdoor reported a 52% drop in internship openings between March and April 2020 (only 1 month) due to COVID-19 (Stansell, 2020). The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reported an unemployment rate of 8.4% in August 2020, which showed no immediate signs of dramatic improvement at that time in the economy. Thus, many higher education students near graduation experienced high anxiety about the climate of the job market (Gallup, 2021). Some students decided to enter graduate programs as a means of putting off their job search (Gallup, 2021). In fact, the National Student Clearinghouse (2021) found a 4.3% growth in graduate enrollments during spring 2021 compared to spring 2020, despite a decline in undergraduate enrollment in higher education.

1.2 Problem Statement

Career courses have been found to be effective in relation to learner self-efficacy and competence in specific degree programs. Yet, research exploring the longitudinal impact of these courses related to first-destination outcomes (FDOs) is lacking. Similarly, HIPs have increased in higher education courses and curricula due to positive correlations with retention, yet little is known as to how they influence the success of students outside of the university (Johnson & Stage, 2018). The COVID-19 global pandemic and its broad effects on the economy and higher education provided a unique timeframe to research the impacts on FDOs and HIPs participation.

2. Methods

2.1 Research Questions

This study explored the relationship between mandatory career courses and HIPs on the outcomes of graduates at a large public university in the southeast. The research questions guiding this study were:

1. Did enrollment in a mandatory career development course add value above and beyond high-impact practices when predicting first-destination outcomes?
2. Did enrollment in a mandatory career development course add value above and beyond high-impact practices when predicting first-destination outcomes during the COVID-19 global pandemic?

2.2 Data and Sample

Data were obtained from a sample of graduating seniors who responded to the First-Destination Survey (FDS) and the Campus Engagement and Experience Survey (CEES) at a large, R1, public university located in the southeastern U.S. The university's undergraduate population is primarily emerging adults, traditional college-aged students (age 18-24) with 89% being full-time enrolled students. The surveys were given as part of a mandatory non-credit graduation course and compiled by an institutional research area under the Provost's office. To compare participation in HIPs, completion of mandatory career courses, and FDOs before and during COVID-19, this study examined responses of 2,550 graduating seniors completing their final semester. Of the 2,550 participants, two distinct cohorts were examined, those who graduated just before the pandemic hit in December 2019 (n = 1,213), and mid-pandemic in December 2020 (n = 1,337). This sample of students was chosen due to their position of graduating seniors at the time of the surveys, which would most accurately represent outcomes. Proportions of respondents identifying as female or male were roughly similar at 45% and

55% percent, respectively. Seventy-two percent identified as white, 12% as a non-resident alien, and 6% as black or African American.

Using the standards and protocols outlined by NACE (2019) for reporting and best practices, the FDS was created and administered as an assignment in the mandatory online course using a Qualtrics™ survey. The FDS included questions about intended plans for after graduation, including if a job or educational program offer had been made or accepted, or if the student was still looking or applying. Results of the FDS were linked to a student management platform, which automatically connected the student responses to their personal information, including race, gender, age, first-generation status, college, major, and GPA. Since the surveys were administered prior to graduation, a multi-faceted approach was used for follow-up data collection through phone calls, LinkedIn data, and the National Students Transcript Clearinghouse. The research office used the data to update employment statuses and continued education acceptance to represent student outcomes most accurately within the six months of graduation.

Used to collect data specifically related to HIPs, the CEES included participation related questions for all students and supplemental questions from specific colleges. In addition to identifying HIPs experienced during college, respondents were asked details of the experience(s), including how many of each HIP the student participated in, and the impact of the experience(s). The CEES was again implemented and administered using Qualtrics™.

2.3 Variables

Survey options for future plans after graduation included full-time or part-time employment, military career opportunities, continued education, volunteerism, and other. For each option, students were asked to select if a position had been secured, still applying, not looking, or if any offers have been received. The research office narrowed the options for responses on the CEES to five choices: internships, cooperative education (co-op), study abroad, undergraduate research, and ePortfolio. Elective career development courses were offered by the university, but only mandatory career development courses were examined in this study to minimize the impact of self-selection bias that would be present if the course was optional. It was determined that these mandatory career courses were only part of the curriculum for the College of Business and College of Liberal Arts.

The dependent variable of positive graduation outcomes was categorical with three levels. The independent variable, or factor, was the presence of a mandatory career development course in the curriculum. Demographics were controlled for in this analysis and remained constant covariates. However, each HIP, including No HIP, was added separately as binary categorical independent variables during the analysis. The presence of a career course remained dichotomous and binary, with each HIP was also categorical and binary to account for multiple HIP experiences. Controlling for this variable in the logic regression was necessary to more accurately measure the likelihood of each FDO based on HIP participation without this as a confounding variable.

2.4 Data Analysis

To determine if there was a correlation between HIPs and FDOs, multinomial logic regressions were conducted for each graduation cohort using the IBM SPSS™ Statistics (Version 28) program. Analyses were then performed using multiple multinomial logic regressions to examine if mandatory career courses added value above and beyond each HIP. Demographics were examined and controlled for when significant differences in outcomes were observed.

3. Results

3.1 Respondents Demographics

Demographics may play a role in outcomes and thus, were included in the examination. Age was dichotomous with traditional college-aged students (< 24 years old), emerging adults, being compared to non-traditional (≥ 24 years old). Additionally, gender was coded as dichotomous, with females being compared to males as the reference group. First-generation status was also dichotomous with non-first generation being the reference group. Race was categorical with eight options. GPA was divided into five ranges to be categorical beginning with <2.09 and the reference group of 3.6 - 4.0 on a 4.0 scale. The 2,550 participants in this study consisted of two distinct cohorts who graduated just before the pandemic hit, in December 2019 (n = 1,213) and mid-pandemic, in December 2020 (n = 1,337). Females made up 44.7% of the total population (2019: n = 528; 2020: n = 611) and males 55% (2019: n = 677; 2020: n = 726). The largest racial identities included 72% white (2019: n = 844; 2020: n = 991), 11.7% non-resident alien (2019: n = 79; 2020: n = 157), 6.3% black or African American (2019: n = 87; 2020: n = 74). Among the participants, 15.3% identified as first-generation college students (2019: n = 186; 2020: n = 205). The largest percentage of graduates in both cohorts had a cumulative

GPA between 2.6-3.09 on a 4.0 scale comprising 28.5% of the sample (2019: n = 370; 2020: n = 358). The largest colleges represented were College of Business 24.6% (2019: n = 300; 2020: n = 327), College of Engineering 19.6% (2019: n = 238; 2020: n = 262), and College of Liberal Arts 17.7% (2019: n = 219; 2020: n = 232).

First-Destination outcomes included 16.9% of the total graduates were accepted to continued education (2019: n = 211; 2020: n = 222), 51.1% were employed (2019: n = 646; 2020: n = 660), and 31.5% still seeking employment or continued education six months after graduation (2019: n = 348; 2020: n = 455). Of the respondents, 42% had completed a mandatory career course as part of their curriculum (2019: n = 519; 2020: n = 559). The most common HIPs completed were working while enrolled at the University with 64.7% (2019: n = 794; 2020: n = 855) and completing internships with 46.9% (2019: n = 615; 2020: n = 581). 31.7% of the total sample (2019: n = 306; 2020: n = 502) reported not having completed a HIP of any kind.

3.2 Pre-COVID Graduates (2019)

The 2019 cohort showed a significant difference in FDOs based on age range. Non-traditional-aged students (>24) who graduated before the COVID-19 global pandemic were significantly more likely to be employed within six months of graduation and less likely to be still seeking in comparison to their traditional-aged peers ($\chi^2_{(2)} = 11.796, p = .003$). Consequently, a multinomial logic regression was run to observe the impact of HIP participation while controlling for age. As shown in Table 1, those who completed undergraduate research experienced a significantly greater likelihood of getting admitted to continued education ($B = 1.135, p = .006$) with 3.11 times greater likelihood. No significant differences were observed between the completion of a mandatory career course and admission to continued education as shown in Table 3.

Table 1. The Likelihood of Positive First-Destination Outcomes based on High-Impact Practices while Controlling for Age (December 2019 Graduates)

Variable Controlled	95% CI					
	B	SE	Est(B)	LL	UL	P
Continued education acceptance						
Age ^a	.451	.436	1.571	.668	3.693	.301
Co-op ^b	-.316	1.155	.729	.076	7.010	.785
ePortfolio ^b	.469	.469	1.598	.638	4.004	.317
Internship ^b	.290	.393	1.337	.619	2.887	.460
Study abroad ^b	-.349	.485	.705	.273	1.824	.471
Undergraduate research ^b	1.135	.415	3.110	1.378	7.021	.006
Working while enrolled ^b	-.073	.404	.929	.421	2.052	.856
Employment						
Age ^a	.621	.321	1.861	.991	3.494	.053
Co-op ^b	2.042	.569	7.703	2.525	23.501	<.001
ePortfolio ^b	-.181	.313	.834	.452	1.540	.834
Internship ^b	1.004	.264	.834	1.627	4.580	<.001
Study abroad ^b	.070	.290	1.072	.608	1.892	.810
Undergraduate research ^b	-.467	.329	1.346	.329	1.195	.156
Working while enrolled ^b	.798	.286	2.221	1.268	3.889	.005

Note. $df = 1$ Total $N = 1,213$. CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit.

^a1 = <24 years old, 2 = ≥24 years old. ^b 1 = yes, 2 = no.

As shown in Table 1, there was a significantly greater likelihood of predicting employment established for those who completed a co-op ($B = 2.042, p < .001$), an internship ($B = 1.004, p < .001$), or worked while enrolled at the University ($B = .798, p = .005$). Those who completed a co-op were 7.703 times more likely to be employed than those who did not complete a co-op. Graduates were .834 times more likely to be employed if they completed an internship and 2.221 times more likely if they worked while enrolled when controlling for age. No significant differences were observed between the completion of a mandatory career course and employment while controlling for age. No significant differences were observed between the completion of a mandatory career course and employment while controlling for age as seen in Table 4.

3.3 COVID Graduates (2020)

For the December 2020 graduates, results from the survey were strikingly different. Significant differences in FDOs were observed and established by the demographics of age ($\chi^2(2) = 9.738, p = .008$), gender ($\chi^2(2) = 21.384, p < .001$), race ($\chi^2(16) = 87.199, p < .001$), first-generation status ($\chi^2(2) = 45.025, p < .001$), and GPA ($\chi^2(8) = 68.739, p < .001$). These variables were controlled for in the multinomial logic regression. Only

completion of undergraduate research was found to have a significant increase in the likelihood of being accepted to continued education ($B = .739, p = .001$) as seen in Table 2. Internships, however, showed a negative impact on the likelihood of being admitted to continued education at an almost significant level ($B = -.398, p = .052$).

Table 2. The Likelihood of Positive First-Destination Outcomes based on Completion of Specific High-Impact Practices while Controlling for Age, Gender, Race, First-Generation status, and GPA (2020)

Variable Controlled	95% CI						95% CI					
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Est(B)</i>	<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Est(B)</i>	<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>	<i>p</i>
Continued education acceptance						Employment						
Age ^a	-.433	.452	.649	.267	1.574	.339	-.817	.292	.442	.249	.782	.005
Gender ^b	.702	.204	2.017	1.353	3.007	<.001	.087	.145	1.091	.821	1.449	.549
Race ^c	-.031	.068	.969	.848	1.108	.969	-.105	.049	.901	.818	.992	.034*
First-generation ^d	.278	.268	1.321	.782	2.232	.298	-.090	.178	.914	.644	1.295	.612
GPA ^e	.521	.093	1.684	1.404	2.021	<.001	.059	.062	1.061	.940	1.197	.339
Co-op ^d	.336	.424	1.399	.609	3.213	.429	.742	.293	2.099	1.183	3.726	.011
Age ^a	-.407	.452	.665	.274	1.614	.368	-.790	.290	.454	.257	.802	.006
Gender ^b	.703	.204	2.021	1.354	3.015	<.001	.001	.146	1.001	.752	1.334	.993
Race ^c	-.031	.069	.969	.848	1.109	.651	-.103	.049	.902	.819	.993	.035
First-generation ^d	.293	.268	1.340	.793	2.266	.274	-.084	.178	.919	.649	1.303	.637
GPA ^d	.523	.093	1.687	1.405	2.024	<.001	.075	.061	1.077	.955	1.215	.225
ePortfolio	-.191	.312	.827	.448	1.524	.542	.147	.221	1.158	.751	1.788	.507
Age ^a	-.472	.454	.624	.256	1.518	.298	-.731	.294	.482	.271	.857	.013
Gender ^b	.688	.201	1.990	1.342	2.951	<.001	.017	.145	1.017	.766	1.351	.906
Race ^c	-.040	.069	.960	.838	1.100	.561	-.094	.050	.911	.826	1.004	.060
First-generation ^d	.324	.269	1.383	.816	2.343	.228	-.136	.181	.873	.613	1.243	.450
GPA ^e	.538	.093	1.712	1.426	2.056	<.001	.040	.062	1.040	.921	1.176	.525
Internship ^d	-.398	.205	.671	.449	1.003	.052	.776	.142	2.172	1.644	2.870	<.001
Age ^a	-.424	.453	.654	.269	1.590	.349	-.787	.290	.455	.258	.803	.007
Gender ^b	.535	.093	2.012	1.423	2.050	<.001	.023	.143	1.023	.773	1.355	.871
Race ^c	-.032	.069	.968	.847	1.108	.640	-.103	.049	.902	.819	.993	.036
First-generation ^d	.307	.268	1.359	.804	2.299	.252	-.078	.178	.925	.652	1.311	.661
GPA ^e	.535	.093	1.708	1.423	2.050	<.001	.072	.062	1.075	.953	1.213	.240
Study abroad ^d	-.427	.352	.653	.328	1.300	.225	-.025	.248	.975	.600	1.586	.920
Age ^a	-.511	.456	.600	.245	1.467	.263	-.755	.291	.470	.266	.831	.009
Gender ^b	.653	.202	1.921	1.293	2.854	.001	.034	.143	1.035	.782	1.370	.810
Race ^c	-.038	.069	.962	.840	1.102	.578	-.102	.049	.903	.820	.995	.039
First-generation ^d	.258	.268	1.294	.765	2.189	.337	-.073	.178	.930	.656	1.318	.683
GPA ^e	.508	.093	1.662	1.385	1.995	<.001	.077	.062	1.080	.958	1.219	.209
Undergraduate research ^d	.739	.232	2.095	1.328	3.304	.001	-.405	.203	.667	.448	.994	.047
Age ^a	-.442	.253	.643	.265	1.562	.329	-.834	.292	.434	.245	.769	.004
Gender ^b	.664	.202	1.942	1.306	2.887	.001	-.014	.145	.986	.743	1.309	.925
Race ^c	-.031	.069	.969	.847	1.108	.648	-.105	.049	.901	.818	.992	.033
First-generation ^d	.282	.268	1.325	.784	2.239	.293	-.081	.178	.922	.651	1.306	.648
GPA ^e	.533	.093	1.704	1.419	2.046	<.001	.082	.062	1.085	.962	1.225	.184
Working while enrolled ^d	.109	.205	1.115	.746	1.666	.595	.246	.148	1.279	.956	1.711	.097

Note. *df*=1 Total *N*=1,337. *SE* = standard error; *CI*=confidence interval; *LL*=lower limit; *UL*=upper limit.

^a1 = <24 years old, 2 = ≥24 years old. ^b 1 = female, 2 = male. ^c1 = American Indian, 2 = Asian, 3 = Black or African American, 4 = Hispanic, 5 = Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 6 = Non-resident alien, 7 = Two or more races, 8 = White. ^d 1= yes, 2=no. ^e 1 = 3.6 – 4.0, 2 = 3.1 – 3.59, 3 = 2.6 – 3.09, 4 = 2.1 – 2.59, 5 = < 2.09

Upon further exploration, the completion of a mandatory career course showed a significantly greater likelihood of being admitted to continued education ($B = .595, p = .003$) for those who graduated during the global pandemic in Table 3. Completion of a mandatory career course increased the odds of being admitted to a continued education program by 1.813 times above and beyond the completion of one or more HIPs.

Table 3. The Likelihood of Continued Education Acceptance based on Mandatory Career Course Completion, while Controlling for Completion of Specific High-Impact Practices and Significant Demographic

Variable Controlled	December 2019 Graduates						December 2020 Graduates					
	95% CI						95% CI					
	B	SE	Est(B)	LL	UL	p	B	SE	Est(B)	LL	UL	p
Continued education acceptance												
Age ^a	.498	.300	2.211	.913	2.964	.098	-.431	.455	.650	.266	1.584	.343
Gender ^b							.695	.204	2.004	1.342	2.991	<.001
Race ^c							-.033	.068	.968	.846	1.106	.630
First-generation ^d							.274	.268	1.315	.778	2.224	.307
GPA ^e							.520	.094	1.683	1.401	2.021	<.001
Co-op ^d	.083	.454	.332	.447	2.644	.854	-.168	.429	.846	.365	1.959	.696
Mandatory career course ^d	-.086	.180	1.141	.645	1.305	.632	.572	.203	1.771	1.189	2.639	.005
Age ^a	.494	.301	1.638	.908	2.956	.101	-.405	.454	.667	.274	1.624	.372
Gender ^b							.733	.205	2.082	1.392	3.113	<.001
Race ^c							-.034	.069	.967	.845	1.106	.623
First-generation ^d							.290	.268	1.337	.790	2.263	.279
GPA ^e							.517	.094	1.676	1.395	2.014	<.001
ePortfolio ^d	-.053	.254	.949	.577	1.560	.836	.300	.316	1.350	.727	2.509	.342
Mandatory career course ^d	-.085	.179	.918	.647	1.305	.635	.613	.203	1.847	1.240	2.750	.003
Age ^a	.507	.301	1.660	.921	2.995	.092	-.472	.455	.624	.255	1.523	.300
Gender ^b							.702	.202	2.018	1.359	2.997	<.001
Race ^c							-.043	.069	.958	.836	1.098	.536
First-generation ^d							.308	.270	1.361	.802	2.309	.253
GPA ^e							.535	.094	1.707	1.420	2.052	<.001
Internship ^d	.374	.186	1.454	1.011	2.091	.044	.378	.206	1.459	.975	2.184	.066
Mandatory career course ^d	-.079	.179	.924	.650	1.313	.659	.586	.203	1.797	1.208	2.674	.004
Age ^a	.501	.301	1.651	.916	2.975	.095	-.426	.455	.653	.268	1.594	.350
Gender ^b							.713	.202	2.039	1.373	3.028	<.001
Race ^c							-.034	.068	.966	.845	1.105	.618
First-generation ^d							.297	.269	1.346	.755	3.001	.245
GPA ^e							.530	.094	1.699	1.414	2.042	<.001
Study abroad ^d	.088	.255	1.092	.662	1.801	.731	.409	.352	1.506	.755	3.001	.245
Mandatory career course ^d	-.086	.179	.918	.646	1.304	.631	.583	.202	1.791	1.206	2.661	.004
Age ^a	.456	.302	1.578	.872	2.852	.131	-.515	.459	.597	.243	1.467	.261
Gender ^b							.672	.203	1.958	1.317	2.913	<.001
Race ^c							-.038	.069	.963	.841	1.102	.583
First-generation ^d							.250	.269	1.284	.758	2.173	.352
GPA ^e							.505	.094	1.657	1.379	1.990	<.001
Undergraduate research ^d	-.718	.212	.488	.322	.739	<.001	-.671	.234	.511	.323	.809	.004
Mandatory career course ^d	-.115	.180	.891	.626	1.269	.523	.529	.204	1.696	1.137	2.531	.010
Age ^a	.389	.428	1.476	.637	3.416	.364	-.446	.455	.640	.262	1.562	.327
Gender ^b							.676	.203	1.967	1.321	2.927	<.001
Race ^c							-.033	.069	.967	.846	1.106	.627
First-generation ^d							.273	.268	1.313	.777	2.221	.309
GPA ^e							.528	.094	1.696	1.411	2.039	<.001
Working while enrolled ^d	-.194	.400	.824	.376	1.805	.628	-.107	.206	.899	.600	1.345	.604
Mandatory career course ^d	-.234	.295	.791	.444	1.410	.427	.585	.202	1.794	1.208	2.665	.004

Note. *df* = 1 Total *N* = 1,337. *SE* = standard error; *CI* = confidence interval; *LL* = lower limit; *UL* = upper limit.

^a 1 = <24 years old, 2 = ≥24 years old. ^b 1 = female, 2 = male. ^c 1 = American Indian, 2 = Asian, 3 = Black or African American, 4 = Hispanic, 5 = Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 6 = Non-resident alien, 7 = Two or more races, 8 = White. ^d 1 = yes, 2 = no. ^e 1 = 3.6 – 4.0, 2 = 3.1 – 3.59, 3 = 2.6 – 3.09, 4 = 2.1 – 2.59, 5 = < 2.09.

As shown in Table 2, those who completed a co-op (*B* = .742, *p* = .011) or internships (*B* = .776, *p* < .001) showed a significantly higher likelihood of employment. Completing undergraduate research resulted in graduates being significantly less likely to be employed (*B* = -.405, *p* = .047). A closer investigation of each HIP level revealed additional trends. While controlling for each HIP, as well as age, gender, race, first-generation status, and GPA, for those who graduated during the global pandemic in December 2020, completing a mandatory career course added significant value above and beyond each HIP option for admission to continued education, but not significantly more likely to be employed as seen in Table 4.

Table 4. The Likelihood of Employment based on Mandatory Career Course Completion, while Controlling for Completion of Specific High-Impact Practices and Significant Demographic

Variable Controlled	December 2019 Graduates						December 2020 Graduates					
	95% CI						95% CI					
	B	SE	Est(B)	LL	UL	p	B	SE	Est(B)	LL	UL	p
Employment												
Age ^a	.793	.237	2.211	1.389	3.519	< .001	-.815	.292	.443	.250	.784	.005
Gender ^b							.084	.145	1.088	.819	1.445	.561
Race ^c							-.105	.049	.443	.817	.992	.033
First-generation ^d							-.092	.178	.912	.643	1.294	.605
GPA ^e							.058	.062	1.059	.939	1.195	.350
Co-op ^d	-1.104	.303	.332	.183	.600	< .001	-.710	.296	.492	.275	.879	.017
Mandatory career course ^d	.132	.138	1.141	.871	1.494	.338	.091	.141	1.095	.831	1.444	.519
Age ^a	.792	.236	2.208	1.389	3.509	< .001	-.789	.290	.454	.257	.803	.007
Gender ^b							.006	.146	1.006	.755	1.340	.969
Race ^c							-.104	.049	.901	.818	.992	.034
First-generation ^d							-.087	.178	.917	.647	1.30	.627
GPA ^e							.071	.062	1.074	.952	1.211	.247
ePortfolio ^d	-.34	.196	.967	.658	1.420	.864	-.124	.223	.883	.571	1.366	.576
Mandatory career course ^d	.073	.136	1.075	.823	1.404	.594	.144	.140	1.155	.879	1.518	.302
Age ^a	.765	.240	2.150	1.342	3.444	.001	-.729	.294	.483	.271	.859	.013
Gender ^b							.019	.145	1.019	.767	1.354	.896
Race ^c							-.095	.050	.910	.825	1.003	.057
First-generation ^d							-.142	.181	.868	.609	1.237	.434
GPA ^e							.036	.062	1.036	.917	1.172	.566
Internship ^d	-1.022	.138	.360	.274	.471	< .001	-.786	.143	.456	.345	.603	<.001
Mandatory career course ^d	.062	.140	1.064	.809	1.399	.656	.187	.141	1.206	.914	1.590	.185
Age ^a	.795	.236	2.214	1.394	3.515	< .001	-.787	.290	.455	.258	.804	.007
Gender ^b							.024	.143	1.025	.774	1.357	.865
Race ^c							-.104	.049	.901	.818	.993	.035
First-generation ^d							-.081	.178	.922	.650	1.308	.649
GPA ^e							.069	.062	1.072	.950	1.209	.261
Study abroad ^d	-.007	.192	.993	.682	1.446	.970	.026	.248	1.026	.631	1.667	.918
Mandatory career course ^d	.073	.136	1.076	.824	1.405	.592	.152	.139	1.165	.887	1.529	.272
Age ^a	.816	.237	2.261	1.422	3.595	< .001	-.751	.291	.472	.267	.267	.010
Gender ^b							.037	.143	1.038	.784	1.375	.794
Race ^c							-.103	.049	.902	.819	.994	.038
First-generation ^d							-.076	.178	.927	.654	1.315	.671
GPA ^e							.074	.062	1.077	.954	1.215	.231
Undergraduate research ^d	.456	.194	1.578	1.080	2.308	.019	.433	.205	1.542	1.032	2.304	.035
Mandatory career course ^d	.087	.137	1.091	.835	1.425	.525	.184	.140	1.202	.914	1.581	.188
Age ^a	.531	.308	1.701	.930	3.112	.085	-.833	.292	.435	.245	.771	.004
Gender ^b							-.012	.145	.988	.744	1.312	.934
Race ^c							-.106	.049	.900	.817	.991	.032
First-generation ^d							-.085	.178	.919	.648	1.302	.634
GPA ^e							.079	.062	1.082	.958	1.221	.203
Working while enrolled ^d	-.539	.272	.583	.342	.995	.048	-.243	.148	.785	.587	1.050	.102
Mandatory career course ^d	-.263	.204	.769	.515	1.147	.198	.148	.139	1.159	.883	1.522	.288

Note. *df*=1 Total *N*=1,337. *SE* = standard error; *CI* = confidence interval; *LL* = lower limit; *UL* = upper limit.

^a 1 = <24 years old, 2 = ≥24 years old. ^b 1 = female, 2 = male. ^c 1 = American Indian, 2 = Asian, 3 = Black or African American, 4 = Hispanic, 5 = Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 6 = Non-resident alien, 7 = Two or more races, 8 = White. ^d 1 = yes, 2 = no. ^e 1 = 3.6 – 4.0, 2 = 3.1 – 3.59, 3 = 2.6 – 3.09, 4 = 2.1 – 2.59, 5 = < 2.09.

3.4 Limitations

The first limitation of this study included the use of established data sets, which consisted of required surveys and self-reported outcomes. These elements can potentially create an inherent risk of inaccurate data due to disinterest or the desire to inflate reality (Bowman & Herzog, 2011). Also, using an established dataset restricted the questions asked of participants to those on the survey and did not allow for clarification. A third area of limitation was that the samples primarily consisted of white, traditional college-aged students (24 years old or younger) in the southeast, and therefore the findings may affect generalizability to other populations or regions of the country. Lastly, career courses in and of themselves do not have standardized content. It is assumed that similar topics were covered in the career courses that are mandated in these higher education curricula. Without reviewing the syllabi, it is unclear if these courses are equivalent in scope, which may impact the internal

validity of the study.

4. Discussion and Implications

Findings showed that first-destination outcomes differed significantly between those who graduated in December 2019 and those who graduated in the middle of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Specifically, a significantly greater percentage of students were still seeking employment or continued education six months after graduation among the mid-pandemic graduates (December 2020) compared to those who graduated in December 2019. With both graduate cohorts, non-traditional college-aged students experienced significant differences in first-destination outcomes. Non-traditional college-aged graduates were significantly more likely to be employed in the 2019 cohort, however, they were significantly more likely to be still seeking six months after graduation for the 2020 cohort. Significantly more females were enrolled in continued education compared to males in the 2020 cohort.

Participation in HIPs differed significantly between the two cohorts as well with a greater percentage of graduates from the December 2019 cohort completing one or more HIP. When examined individually, there were significantly fewer graduates with internship and study abroad experiences in the December 2020 cohort compared to those who graduated in December 2019. These findings were consistent with the reported drop in internship postings during early 2020 and travel restrictions put in place around the globe (Stansell, 2020).

From the findings of this study, it appears that mandatory career courses may not be equipping emerging adults with the needed skills for employment as effectively as HIPs. However, career courses did prove beneficial for those seeking continued education during the time of economic crisis. These findings supported Kuh's (2008) assertion that universities should encourage students to participate in at least one HIP connected to their field of study. If it is true that HIPs are using experiential learning practices to better prepare adults for the transition to employment or continued education, higher education institutions may need to evaluate how they bring awareness to internships, co-ops, student employment, and undergraduate research. Awareness that experiential learning opportunities are associated with more successful post-graduation goals may encourage student participation and thus, student success. In particular, co-ops, internships, and student employment had the greatest correlation with employment, while undergraduate research appears to have the greatest connection to continued education. These findings demonstrate value to these experiences above what is currently known about the positive impacts on career confidence, retention, and engagement (Savoca, 2018; Jackson & Wilton, 2016). This has long been assumed and encouraged in university settings, but this study's findings provide additional evidence to support these experiences.

The results also support the effort to include student employment on the list of HIPs. The established literature has shown the benefits of retention and better time-management skills in terms of employment, and this study further supports the connection to positive FDOs for those who work 20 hours or less (Zilvinskis & McCormick, 2019; McClellan, Creager & Savoca, 2018; Savoca, 2018). Encouraging specific HIPs that are shown to have a greater correlation with positive outcomes for the student's chosen path will help strengthen positive FDOs, lead to a greater return on investment for the student, and therefore perhaps a stronger reputation for the institution.

Although these findings do not demonstrate significantly positive FDOs for those in mandatory career courses, literature has shown support for these courses in the career decision-making self-efficacy of those enrolled proving a benefit of completion (Reese & Miller, 2016; Conner, Daugherty, & Gilmore, 2012). Freeman, Pierce, and Zoeller (2020) recommended combining a HIP into a capstone course, but adding one into a career course may also prove beneficial to student employment outcomes. Potentially including career exploration in conjunction with a HIP in a course would make for a more robust and effective experience.

5. Conclusion and Future Research

This study was one of the first to fully explore robust FDOs and the impact of HIPs, mandatory career courses, and unanticipated economic troubles. Further study is warranted to understand how higher education can more thoroughly prepare students for success after graduation and how emerging adult learners are acquiring the needed skills to make a smooth transition to the workplace. Further analysis should be done to determine if the quantity of internships or co-ops influences employment outcomes in or out of the field of study. In addition, controlling for college or major may impact the significance of some of the relationships established.

Since mandatory career courses were shown to add limited value above and beyond HIPs, further studies should be conducted to explore the content of these courses, influences in building content, who is teaching, and at what point in the curriculum they are being required for better understanding. These findings may provide insights on how to reimagine the classes to increase rates of employment and graduate school acceptance. Lastly, mandatory

career courses are less common than opt-in career courses, so the FDOs of those who opt-in to career courses warrant further study.

Most importantly, though, expanding this study to additional colleges and universities of varying sizes and demographics would be useful to establish trends that are more likely to be transferable across institutions. Continuing analyses in longitudinal studies will also prove useful to determine the true impact of both HIPs and career courses. The success of emerging adults in their transition to life after graduation is an important variable when evaluating universities, and in addition to what is being taught in the classroom, preparing these students through HIPs and strategic career courses may be essential in securing these successes.

Results of this study can inform practitioners advising students toward career success in both times of economic growth and recession. As the world continues to work its way through new variants of the disease, higher education will continue to grapple with preparing learners for a rapidly changing economic landscape and uncertainty. This study helps lay a better foundation for higher education and the choices for experiential learning in the 21st century.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Informed consent

Obtained.

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The Publication Ethics Committee of the Canadian Center of Science and Education.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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