New Research Examines How Career Dreams Die

(PhysOrg.com) -- A new study shows just what it takes to convince a person that he isn't qualified to achieve the career of his dreams.

Researchers found that it's not enough to tell people they don't have the skills or the grades to make their goal a reality.

People will cling to their dreams until they're clearly shown not only why they're not qualified, but also what bad things can happen if they pursue their goals and fail.

"Most people don't give up easily on the dreams. They have to be given a graphic picture of what failure will look like if they don't make it," said Patrick Carroll, co-author of the study and assistant professor of psychology at Ohio State University at Lima.

The findings are especially relevant now as students prepare for an uncertain job market and they, along with their teachers and guidance counselors, try to find the best career choices for them.

"Educators are trying to lead students to the most realistic career options," Carroll said. "You want to encourage students to pursue their dreams, but you don't want to give them false hope about their abilities and talents. It's a fine line.

"This research is important to understanding how students make revisions in their career goals and decide which career possibilities should be abandoned as unrealistic given their current qualifications. They can then zero in on more realistic possible selves that they actually are qualified to achieve," he said.

Carroll conducted the study with Robert Arkin, professor of psychology at Ohio State, and James Sheppard, professor of psychology at the University of Florida. Their results appear in the current issue of the journal *Social Cognition*.

The research included two similar studies involving separate groups of 64 and 70 upperclass business and psychology students at Ohio State.

The students signed up to meet with a career advisor to learn about a supposedly new master's degree program in business psychology that would train them for "high-paying consulting positions as business psychologists."

However, the program didn't actually exist. The goal was to get the students interested in the program, and see how they reacted when faced with varying levels of threat to their new dreams of becoming a business psychologist.

All the students filled out information sheets which included their current grade point averages.

The students were then separated into four groups. Students in the control group were given an information sheet indicating no GPA requirement for the program.

The other three groups were given sheets indicating the GPA requirement was .10 above whatever they had listed as their own GPA.

In one of these groups, the "career advisor" - who actually worked with the researchers -- simply pointed out that the students' GPA was lower than the requirement.

In another group, the threat was raised slightly: the advisor told the participants that they weren't what they were looking for in the program and that it was unlikely they would be admitted. But the advisor encouraged these participants to apply if they were interested, because they might be reviewed by a lenient admissions committee.

The last group received the strongest threat to their hopes of becoming a business psychologist: they were also told they were not qualified, but might sneak in with a lenient admission committee. But the advisor added that if that happened, the student would probably struggle with the high demands of the program and ultimately end up with no job prospects if he or she somehow managed to graduate.

To add to the threat, the advisor mentioned that he or she knew of cases at other schools where unqualified students couldn't get placed in jobs after graduation and often ended up in low-paying office jobs unrelated to business psychology.

"In this case, the students were given a very vivid picture of what might happen if they failed," Carroll said.

In both studies, the results were similar and striking. The students in the control group and those who were simply told their GPA was too low for the program didn't give up the dream. In tests given after their meetings with the career advisor, these participants actually showed declines in the amount of self-doubt they had about their abilities and showed higher levels of commitment to pursing the degree.

"We have a brilliant ability to spin, deflect or outright dismiss undesired evidence that we can't do something," Carroll said. "We try to find reasons to believe."

However, students given the most vivid threat had higher levels of self-doubt immediately after meeting with the advisor, lower expectations and lower commitment to pursuing a business psychology career.

Carroll said anxiety played the key role for getting these students to drop their interest in becoming business psychologists.

Those who received the strongest threat began with high levels of doubt about their abilities. But they then also experienced much higher anxiety levels as they considered the vivid prospects of failure presented to them.

This led them to lower expectations about getting in to the program, and finally lower anxiety when tested later as they dropped their dream and accepted the fact that they would not become business psychologists.

Carroll said he sees the relevance of this research nearly every day, as students seek his input about career plans or the possibility of graduate school. Sometimes these students have not gotten good enough grades or shown the work ethic they would need to succeed at higher levels, he said.

Still, Carroll said he doesn't often use what he knows to bring these students back to reality.

"I'm very cautious about using what I know with students," he said. "You're dealing with people's dreams and hopes, and with that awareness comes great responsibility.

"The dreams of who you could become are a very important part of how you define yourself, yet they are very vulnerable given that they exist only in our mind's eye as the best possible guesses from current evidence of what we could become in the future," he said. "We need to learn more about how those career dreams are constructed and revised."

In new research, Carroll and his colleagues hope to do just that. The new focus is on what happens when

people have to reject certain goals for the future, and whether this process hurts them or helps them find new goals.

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