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Perceived Benefits of an Undergraduate Degree

Cole Norton

Brock University, cole.c.b.norton@live.com

Tanya Martini

Brock University, tmartini@brocku.ca

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Perceived Benefits of an Undergraduate Degree

Abstract

Canadian university students tend to endorse employment-related reasons for attending university ahead of other reasons such as personal satisfaction or intellectual growth. In the present study, first- and fourth-year students from a mid-sized Canadian university reported on the benefits they expected to receive from their degree and rated their relative importance. These open-ended responses suggested that both groups of students placed a greater emphasis on benefits related to career preparation and economic advancement than those associated with learning and self-improvement. However, when asked to evaluate the importance of a comprehensive list of degree-related benefits both groups of students endorsed the value of many of them, including those related to learning and self-improvement. Our results suggest the importance of methodology in gathering data about this issue, and we consider them in light of current concerns with helping students to understand the full value of their degree.

Les étudiants des universités canadiennes ont tendance à accepter les raisons qui se rapportent à l'emploi pour justifier les études universitaires avant d'autres raisons telles que la satisfaction personnelle ou la croissance intellectuelle. Dans la présente étude, des étudiants de première année et de quatrième année d'une université canadienne de taille moyenne ont indiqué les avantages qu'ils s'attendaient à obtenir avec leur diplôme et les ont classés par ordre d'importance. Ces réponses ouvertes suggèrent que les deux groupes d'étudiants ont attribué une plus grande importance aux avantages liés à la préparation de leur carrière et à l'avancement économique qu'à ceux liés à l'apprentissage et à l'amélioration personnelle. Toutefois, quand on leur a demandé d'évaluer l'importance d'une liste complète d'avantages liés à l'obtention d'un diplôme, les deux groupes d'étudiants ont reconnu la valeur de plusieurs d'entre eux, y compris ceux qui se rapportent à l'apprentissage et à l'amélioration personnelle. Nos résultats suggèrent que la méthodologie employée pour recueillir les données sur cette question est importante et nous les prenons en considération à la lumière des préoccupations actuelles pour aider les étudiants à comprendre la valeur globale de leur diplôme.

Keywords

learning, degree benefits, undergraduate, students, expectations

Undergraduates pursue higher education for a variety of reasons. Some of the perceived benefits are closely connected to the personal growth that is associated with a university experience while others are more pragmatic, and include the need to obtain credentials that will render students more employable (Kennett, Reed, & Lam, 2011). Though both types of benefits are clearly important, recent changes in the Canadian economy have contributed to a stronger focus on employability from the students' perspective (Lehmann, 2009). This perspective is made particularly evident in the oft-repeated sentiment that undergraduate degrees – regardless of their subject and specialization – are a basic requirement for meaningful employment in the 21st century (Lehmann, 2009; Vivas & Hevia, 2009). One question that remains unanswered, however, is whether student perceptions concerning these various degree-related benefits change with time. Put another way, researchers have failed to address whether graduating students focus on different benefits than those that are salient to first year students. The current study was designed to further investigate the benefits that Canadian undergraduate students see as connected to a university degree, and to explore any potential developmental changes in the types of benefits that are most salient to students while completing their undergraduate coursework.

Degree-Related Learning Outcomes

While higher-education qualifications are often seen by students as a requirement for a successful career in Canada (O'Keefe, Laven, & Burgess, 2011), these pragmatic, employment-focused attitudes and beliefs about the value of a degree are not necessarily reflected in university curricula, which exist to ensure a basic standard of knowledge and skill development for graduates (e.g., Ontario Council of Academic Vice Presidents, 2007). Learning outcomes are typically developed by faculty without reference to students' stated motivations for attending university. As a result, there may be a failure to address the breadth and complexity of students' learning goals and expectations (Lehmann, 2009). Researchers have suggested that there may be negative consequences for student learning and performance if their expectations concerning university education differ from those of professors and the university administration; thus it is important to strive to understand the breadth and complexity of students' motives in this regard (Wilson, Howitt, Roberts, Åkerlind, & Wilson, 2013).

Student Learning Goals and Expectations

A small body of research suggests that students pursue a university degree for a variety of reasons. Extant research originates from multiple countries and a variety of university disciplines. One particularly relevant study was conducted by Kennett et al. (2011), who asked 69 first-year and 63 upper-year Ontario undergraduates about their reasons for attending university. The authors addressed this question using an open-response question and coded the answers as representing either internal reasons (i.e., intrinsic motivations that are internal to the self, such as wanting to grow as a person) or external reasons (i.e., extrinsic motivations that are external to the self, such as being able to secure a better-paying job or to meet the expectations of parents) (Kennett et al., 2011). Students tended to endorse external reasons more often than internal ones, and the most frequently endorsed reason for completing a degree was "career/money," followed by "family expectations." Internal reasons were listed less frequently, but in this category the most common reasons were "self-improvement," "fulfilling a major goal/dream," and "for a love of learning." First-year students listed fewer reasons overall than

did upper-year students; however, reports of internal vs. external reasons did not significantly differ between the two groups (Kennett et al., 2011).

Kennett et al.'s (2011) finding that students tend to endorse career-relevant reasons is mirrored by several other studies, supporting the idea that students tend to have a relatively pragmatic and employment-based focus when they decide to attend university (e.g., Buchta & Lisicki, 2011; Gedye, Fender, & Chalkley, 2004). For example, a recent study of Canadian working-class students' expectations suggested that the dominant view of university education is one of job training and the acquisition of essential credentials, rather than educational enrichment (Lehmann, 2009). Many students in this study indicated that they believed university education to be a basic requirement for success, and the results suggested that students were urgently concerned with the employment value of their education, with all other educational considerations receiving secondary consideration. Some students even suggested that they would not attend university at all if an undergraduate degree was not a requirement for their intended career, although this opinion tended to emerge most frequently among those seeking professional careers such as doctors, lawyers, and dentists (Lehmann, 2009).

Similar attitudes about undergraduate education were demonstrated in a study by Gedye et al. (2004). In this study, geography majors (both current undergraduates and those who had recently graduated) were surveyed to better understand their expectations of the value of their degree. They provided reasons such as gaining life experience and developing new relationships, but the dominant reason they chose to study for a degree was to improve their job/career prospects. In total, 84% of current undergraduates and 72% of graduates listed this as one of the reasons that they pursued higher education. Furthermore, comments relating to enhanced employment opportunities were by far the most frequent opinion expressed in the open-ended responses (Gedye et al., 2004).

Though the findings documented by Gedye et al. (2004) were based solely on geography students, other studies carried out with university students from diverse disciplines (e.g., Millican, 2014; Troiano & Elias, 2014) also suggest that students perceive a university degree as conferring a variety of benefits. Millican (2014), for example, noted that undergraduates emphasized the importance of both a positive academic experience (with an emphasis on the need to feel challenged) and a rewarding social life. However, these studies also indicated that priorities have shifted globally towards employment over the last decade, as jobs for graduates have become more scarce (Millican, 2014; Troiano & Elias, 2014).

Taken together, then, the reviewed literature suggests that there are a variety of goals and expectations that students have for their degrees and their university experiences, although the theme of employability is particularly important. To date, however, much of the literature has focused on qualitative methods of inquiry. While this has been tremendously helpful in terms of providing a window into the student perspective, a more quantitative approach would allow for an examination of the *relative* importance of perceived degree-related benefits. Moreover, given that students appear to believe that there are a variety of advantages associated with university degrees, an interesting question concerns the stability of student perceptions regarding these benefits. In other words, do students who are approaching graduation view the benefits of a degree similarly to those who are just beginning their degree? This question has not yet been addressed in the research literature.

Developmental Change in Student Beliefs about Degree-Related Benefits

While the literature certainly supports the idea that students endorse numerous benefits of an undergraduate education, existing research suggests that employment-related benefits are

particularly salient to students. However, researchers have not yet established whether the employment-related benefits conferred by a degree are more salient for students early in their degree or when they are closer to graduation. There are two competing bodies of literature that could inform hypotheses on this issue. The first, which has its roots in work related to personal epistemology, would suggest that students might be more focused on employment benefits in the early years of their degree. The second, which is based in developmental theories related to goal pursuit, suggests that employment-related benefits will be uppermost in undergraduates' minds as they approach the end of their degree. We discuss each of these in turn.

Developmental Theories of Personal Epistemology

In a now classic study of male Harvard undergraduates, Perry (1970; Perry & Chickering, 1997) used qualitative methods to examine developmental changes in students' thinking about knowledge and learning across a four-year degree. His findings, which have since been replicated with other more representative samples, suggested that students' understanding of knowledge (and knowing) often becomes increasingly complex during the completion of a post-secondary qualification. In very broad terms, there is evidence that students move from *dualist* thinking (knowledge comes from external authorities; assertions are either right or wrong) to a *multiplist* perspective (knowledge is generated by human minds and may be uncertain; assertions are akin to opinions, any of which may be "right" if a person chooses to believe it), to an *evaluativist* orientation (knowledge is generated by human minds and may be uncertain, but can be evaluated against existing data; assertions are judgments that can be argued and subjected to appraisal vis à vis accumulated evidence) (Hofer, 2001; Kuhn, 2003).

This progression of students' thinking would suggest that as students move toward the end of their degree, their awareness of, and ability to think critically about, their own knowledge and learning evolves and becomes more sophisticated. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that this type of metacognitive awareness does improve with time among university students (Kuhn & Dean, 2004). If this is the case, one might hypothesize that senior students would be more likely than incoming students to be able to reflect on the importance of education and recognize that its benefits extend far beyond the ability to simply secure a job upon graduation.

Developmental Theories of Goal Pursuit

A person's consideration of a particular goal can be linked to the means by which the goal will be accomplished (*process focus*) or the outcome if the goal is achieved (*outcome focus*) (Freund, Hennecke, & Mustafić, 2012). In the context of an undergraduate degree, an outcome focus could be directed towards the potential gains in knowledge, experience, and employability that the pursuit of an undergraduate degree is expected to provide. Although prior literature would suggest that students appear to be primarily outcome-focused with respect to their goal of completing a degree (e.g., owing to their apparent focus on employability), this is not to suggest that they never assume a more process-focused perspective (e.g., cultivating their knowledge of course topics and enriching themselves educationally).

In regards to developmental change, there are several factors that are important in determining which focus is adopted. For example, closeness to a deadline increases the likelihood of individuals adopting an outcome focus towards their goals (Freund et al., 2012). Given this finding, one might predict that students who are nearing graduation – and their subsequent search for meaningful employment – would be more likely than first-year students to

have an outcome-focused (i.e., career-focused) orientation with regards to their beliefs about the benefits of completing their degree.

The Present Study

The purpose of this study was to explore what Canadian undergraduate students see as the benefits of an undergraduate degree. There are at least three reasons why this topic is worthy of study. First, students' anticipated benefits from their programs are strongly correlated with their actual reported gains at the end their degree (Wilson et al., 2013). In fact, the returns that students report achieving from their degree appear to be constrained by their prior expectations of these gains. Second, students often appear to lack the language and awareness that are needed to talk about the benefits of their degree, particularly those associated with career-related skill development (Martini, Rail, & Norton, 2015). It would be useful to know if this is indeed the case, as it would suggest that more needs to be done to help students to articulate the full range of advantages associated with their degree. Finally, possessing a better understanding of students' goals and expectations could be helpful for professors seeking to better engage with, and foster the intellectual development of, their students. Student disengagement is becoming a serious issue in universities (D'Antonio et al., 2010), and knowledge of student expectations might help instructors design courses that will improve student participation (Voss, Gruber, & Szmigin, 2007).

The present study adds to the existing literature in two ways. First, it extends Kennett et al.'s (2011) research with a larger sample and a quantitative method of evaluating student perceptions concerning the relative importance of several degree-related benefits. Second, we investigated whether there were developmental changes in the relative importance that undergraduates place upon the career-related benefits conferred by a degree. The primary research questions for the present study were as follows:

- What do Canadian undergraduate students see as the benefits of a university degree, and which benefits are perceived to be most important? Based on the research reviewed, *we hypothesized that students would indicate that a university degree was associated with a variety of benefits, but that employment-relevant benefits would be endorsed more frequently than other types.*
- Do first-year and upper-year students differ with regard to their beliefs about degree-related benefits? In regards to this question, *we tested the competing hypotheses offered by developmental theories of personal epistemology and goal pursuit.*

Method

Participants

Two groups of participants were recruited from a mid-sized Canadian university. Students were required to complete a questionnaire as a homework assignment in their respective classes, though participation in the current study (i.e., allowing their responses to be analyzed for research purposes) was optional for both groups. No compensation was offered to the students in either group.

Participants in the first group consisted of fourth-year psychology majors ($n = 96$). Nine students (11%) who completed the survey did not give permission for their responses to this homework assignment to be analyzed, leaving a sample of 87 participants. The group included

individuals between the ages of 20 and 51 years ($M = 23.1$, $SD = 4.8$). The sample was 71.4% female, 27.3% male, and 1.3% male-to-female transgender.

Participants in the second group consisted of students enrolled in an introductory psychology course ($n = 742$). Sixty-seven students (9%) who completed the survey did not give permission for their responses to this homework assignment to be analyzed. To enable appropriate comparisons with the fourth-year sample, only first-year students who agreed their data could be used and reported psychology as their major were included in the analyses ($n = 243$). Forty students in this sample failed to complete the questionnaire and were excluded, leaving a final sample size of 203. This group included individuals between the ages of 17 and 45 years ($M = 19.6$, $SD = 3.2$). The sample was 83.1% female, 16.2% male, 0.3% female-to-male transgender, 0.3% male-to-female transgender, and 0.1% unspecified.

Procedure

Materials for the homework assignment were developed using the online survey tool Qualtrics. Teaching assistants (for first-year students) or the instructor (for fourth-year students) emailed the students with an explanation of the assignment and this study as well as a link to the questionnaire. Students completed the questionnaire during a one-week period at a time that was convenient to them. Though surveys for fourth-year students contained only those questions relevant to the present study, the questionnaire for first-year students asked for additional information that will not be analyzed here. Completion of the study questions took between 5 and 10 minutes.

After basic demographic information was collected, student participants were first asked the following open-response question: “What do you hope to gain from your undergraduate degree? What do you think you will get out of this experience at the end of your degree?” After answering the open-response question, participants moved on to the second question, in which they were asked to distribute 100 points across 15 “typical” benefits that undergraduate students associate with a university degree. Specifically, students were given the following instructions: “The list below represents many of the ‘typical’ benefits that undergraduate students associate with a university degree. Please imagine that you have 100 points to distribute across the benefits on the list. Assign points to each benefit to illustrate how important it is to you in your decision to attend university. If a benefit is more important to you, you should assign it more points; if it is less important to you then you should assign it fewer points. For each benefit you may assign values that range from 0 (if it is not important to you at all) to 100 (if it’s the only benefit that you feel that you will get from your degree). You must use all 100 points, and you cannot use more than 100 points.”

The 15 items were selected based on a review of existing literature (e.g., Gedye et al., 2004; Kennett et al., 2011; Millican, 2014), and Qualtrics presented the items in a randomized order to reduce systematic order effects. Students were asked to award points to each of the benefits in proportion to its importance in their decision to attend university. Participants were instructed that if a benefit was more important to them, they should assign it more points and vice-versa. They were forced to use all 100 points by entering values ranging from 0-100 beside each item. This method allowed us to extend prior research by examining how students evaluated each of the benefits *relative to one another*. The fifteen degree-related benefits included:

Employment-related Benefits

- My degree will allow me to get into an interesting and satisfying career.
- My degree allows me to develop career-related knowledge that will allow me to succeed.

- My degree allows me to develop career-related skills that will allow me to succeed.
- My degree will allow me to earn more money.
- My degree will allow me to gain upward social mobility (i.e., it will help me to be a member of the middle or upper class).
- My degree will allow me to provide a better life for my own family (my spouse/partner/children).
- My degree will allow me to help my parents/siblings financially.

Other benefits

- My degree will allow me to gain status and the respect of others.
- My degree will allow me to contribute/give back to society.
- My degree will allow me to become more educated, and I believe that this learning and knowledge has intrinsic value.
- My degree will provide me with personal satisfaction/fulfillment.
- My degree will allow me to better understand the complexities that I will encounter in life.
- My degree will allow me to develop and improve myself.
- My degree will allow me to develop my personal skills (e.g., independence, assertiveness).
- My degree allows me to have the social experience of university (i.e. meeting people).

The open-response question was asked first to avoid the “prompting” that might have occurred if participants had completed the point-distribution question first. As such, it provided an important window into students’ spontaneous thinking regarding the benefits of their degree and those benefits that are most salient to them. In addition, this open-ended question provided an opportunity to note any unforeseen perceived degree benefits that were not captured by the point-distribution question.

Results

Qualitative Responses Concerning Degree-Related Benefits

We developed a coding scheme to evaluate the degree benefits endorsed by students in their open-ended responses (see Appendix A). We began with codes representing the 15 common degree benefits from the point distribution question, and then added codes as needed to appropriately reflect the content of students’ responses. Inter-rater reliability was established by having a second person code 60 student responses; Cohen’s kappa was calculated to be .99. In general, the expected benefits that emerged from student responses mirrored the list used in the point-distribution question. Each student’s response was assigned as many codes as were present. Percentages of endorsed benefits across all students are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Open-ended Response Code Frequencies

Degree benefit code	# of endorsements	% of students citing benefit
Employment-related Benefits		
Get into an interesting and satisfying career	437	64
Develop career-related knowledge	379	56
Develop career-related, academic, or personal skills	235	35
Networking opportunities	18	3
Earn more money	36	5
Provide a better life for my family	4	< 1
Other Benefits		
Contribute or give back to society	49	7
Meet the expectations of others	1	< 1
Required for further education	172	25
Have the social experience of university	4	< 1
Personal satisfaction or fulfilment	36	5
Gain status and respect	7	1
Understand complexities of life	73	11
General personal improvement	83	12
Become more educated, as I believe that learning is valuable	74	11
My degree has no benefits	7	1

In keeping with our hypothesis, employment-related benefits were by far the most commonly noted by students in this sample, and made up the top three reasons provided (see Table 1). Such benefits included “get into an interesting/satisfying career (64%) and develop career-related knowledge” (56%). A smaller proportion also spontaneously mentioned other career-related benefits such as “earning more money” (5%) and “networking opportunities” (3%).

Quantitative Ratings of the Relative Importance of Expected Benefits

The mean point values indicating the relative importance of each of the 15 benefits on the list were initially examined for the sample as a whole (i.e., both first- and fourth-year students; see Table 2).

Table 2
Scores of Relative Importance of Student Degree Benefits

Degree Benefit	Merged	First-year students		Fourth-year students	
	Mean	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Employment-related Benefits					
Get into an interesting/satisfying career	9.19*	9.20*	6.91	9.17*	5.23
Develop career-related skills	6.75*	6.55*	4.31	7.19*	4.75
Upward social mobility	3.85*	3.76*	3.71	4.05*	4.51
Develop career-related knowledge	8.66*	9.17*	6.70	7.51*	5.54
Earn more money	8.30*	8.56*	10.01	7.72*	6.00
Help my parents/siblings financially	4.06*	3.91*	4.11	4.93*	5.13
Provide a better life for my family	8.19*	8.44*	9.05	7.64*	5.32
Other Benefits					
Gain status and respect	3.95*	3.95*	3.47	3.97*	3.67
Contribute/give back to society	6.83*	6.65*	6.11	7.24*	5.74
Become more educated, as I believe learning is valuable	8.64*	8.39*	5.50	9.21*	7.16
Personal satisfaction or fulfilment	7.73*	7.56*	5.49	8.12*	5.02
Understand the complexities of life	6.16*	6.34*	4.79	5.73*	4.71
Develop and improve myself	7.07*	6.82*	4.88	7.63*	5.31
Develop personal skills	6.80*	6.72*	4.63	7.00*	4.62
Social experience of university	4.34*	4.40*	4.01	4.21*	3.82

* Significant at $p < .05$

When students were prompted with this list, we observed that they endorsed a much larger number of benefits than was observed in the open-response data. The mean number of benefits that students endorsed (i.e., gave a non-zero rating to) in the point-distribution question was 12.81 out of 15, whereas no participants endorsed more than four benefits in the open-ended responses. Across the sample as a whole, the data generally supported our hypothesis that employment-relevant benefits would be endorsed more frequently than other types of benefits. Four of the five most highly rated benefits were “get into an interesting and satisfying career,” “develop career-related skills,” “earn more money,” and “provide a better life for my own family.” However, two of the five were not employment-relevant: “become more educated,” and “I believe that this learning and knowledge have intrinsic value.”

Developmental Change in Student Beliefs about Degree-Related Benefits

Due to the fixed-point-total method of data collection for ratings of expected benefits, participants' scores for the 15 items were linearly dependent. As such, testing differences between first and fourth-year students' responses required that we perform 15 independent-sample t-tests (one for each benefit). A Bonferroni correction was calculated, setting the significance value for all t-tests at .003. The two groups of psychology majors did not differ

meaningfully from each other on any of the 15 items; thus neither of the hypotheses derived from theories of personal epistemology or goal focus was supported.

Discussion

In keeping with our hypothesis, students endorsed employment-related benefits more strongly than other types, such as the inherent value of education or personal fulfillment. This trend was observed in both the qualitative and quantitative responses, though it was more pronounced in the former. Contrary to our expectations, there were no meaningful differences between first- and fourth-year students with respect to their evaluation of several degree-related benefits. Each of these findings will be addressed in turn.

Student Evaluations of Degree-Related Benefits

We elected to examine students' perceptions of degree-related benefits in two ways. The first, which was in keeping with other research (e.g., Kennett et al., 2011), employed a qualitative approach and required that students provide open-ended responses about their beliefs concerning the benefits conferred by completing a degree. In this part of the study, we had strong support for the hypothesis that students would be more likely to note employment-focused benefits than those related to other categories (e.g., personal fulfillment; meeting parental expectations). While students did generate a large number of unique responses (many of which were similar to those observed by other researchers; Millican, 2014; Troiano & Elias, 2014), many categories, such as the value of education for its own sake and personal fulfillment, were mentioned far less often.

For the most part, these qualitative results align closely with previous findings regarding student motivations (e.g., Buchta & Lisicki, 2011; Gedye et al., 2004). However, one of the ways that this study extended the literature was through its use of a quantitative method that complements the qualitative data. We were particularly interested in examining how students viewed several benefits *relative to one another*. The quantitative data reaffirmed students' emphasis on employment-related benefits (the five most highly ranked benefits included four that were employment-related); however, these data also suggested that students in the present sample perceived there to be a wider variety of benefits associated with completion of an undergraduate degree. Specifically, when asked to apportion 100 points to indicate the relative importance of the 15 designated benefits, students often allocated at least a few points to most of the benefits on the list. Moreover, students provided high ratings for items related to the intrinsic value of education and the need to provide for family. Given the consistent finding from previous studies that students tend to endorse a range of employment-focused benefits ahead of those related to the value of education for its own sake (Gedye et al., 2004), this is a somewhat surprising result. It is, however, likely to be a heartening finding for professors who find themselves frustrated with the career-based orientation of students that is often reported (Buchta & Lisicki, 2011; Gedye et al., 2004).

The primary explanation for the different pattern of findings between the qualitative and quantitative data is likely due to the question format, and underscores the importance of considering potential limitations of existing literature that stem from the methodological choices made by the researchers. While our qualitative data appeared to tap only those benefits that were the most salient to students, the quantitative data provide us with some understanding of students' beliefs when they are prompted to think widely. These data also suggest that students

can consider other types of degree-related benefits (e.g., the intrinsic value of education) when they are explicitly guided to do so.

The reason that students are so singularly focused on their employment prospects may be connected to increased enrollment and the resultant higher numbers of first-generation and working-class students (Troiano & Elias, 2014). A number of studies have noted that working-class students bring to their education a very pragmatic view of an undergraduate degree and its perceived benefits (Lehmann, 2009; Troiano & Elias, 2014). Having said this, recent Canadian data suggest that this job-focused orientation may not be restricted to students of working class families (Academica Group, 2016). Harsh economic realities and high unemployment rates for young adults, coupled with large increases in the perceived cost of a degree, may also underlie the fact that students endorse career-related benefits above all others.

Developmental Differences in Perceptions of Degree-Relevant Benefits

In terms of developmental change in student perceptions of degree-related benefits, we examined two competing hypotheses derived from theories related to personal epistemology (which suggests that senior students would be less focussed on employment-related benefits than incoming students) and goal pursuit (which suggests that such employment-related benefits would be more salient to senior students than those in first year). In our sample, neither of these predictions was borne out; first- and fourth-year students did not meaningfully differ in their quantitative evaluation of employment-related benefits (or, indeed, any of the other benefits we assessed), a finding that is in keeping with the results from Kennett et al.'s (2011) qualitative data.

From a methodological standpoint, it is possible that the absence of developmental differences in our study resulted from the large disparity in sample sizes of the first- and fourth-year groups, which may have compromised our ability to detect between-group differences. An alternate explanation for the absence of between-group differences may be more closely connected to the public narrative concerning university education, which has overwhelmingly shifted in the direction of employment-related benefits of a degree, and graduate employability more generally. In the absence of any explicit reason or opportunity for undergraduates to broadly consider degree-related benefits (including those related to personal growth, or the inherent value of learning), this discourse may simply dominate students' perceptions of their education at all stages of the degree.

Limitations and Future Directions

One of the primary limitations of the current study concerns the fact that the participants came from a single university and were drawn from courses in a single department (psychology). Thus, the findings we observed may not be representative of those that would be found at other institutions, or in courses offered in other disciplines. To some extent, this concern is mitigated by the fact that our results were, for the most part, in keeping with the qualitative data of other researchers at institutions across North America and Europe. Nevertheless, our findings – particularly those derived from the quantitative data – would need to be replicated with a wider sample of students to increase generalizability and promote confidence in our results.

Our effort to bring quantitative analyses to bear on the question of students' perceptions of the benefits of a university degree was one of the key contributions of the present study. So that we might gain clear insight into how students viewed the 15 benefits *relative to one another*, we elected to use a fixed-point system that forced students to allocate only 100 points among all

of the items. Using such a system, however, comes with its own drawbacks; namely that the scores for the benefits are not independent. Such an approach precludes sophisticated statistical analyses that would consider all of the 15 benefits simultaneously. Moreover, this type of linear dependence among scores does not allow for a factor analysis, which would have allowed us to examine whether the benefits could be categorized in a meaningful – and empirical – way. In this study, we were primarily concerned with employment-relevant benefits relative to others; however, future research could employ alternate methodologies for studying relationships among degree-related benefits (e.g., Q-sort) which might help to advance the literature towards an empirically-derived model for classifying degree benefits.

Implications and Conclusions

Results of the present study suggest that the employment-related benefits of their degree are very salient for undergraduates, and research has suggested that student engagement is enhanced when students believe that their degree is meeting their needs with respect to their desired learning outcomes (Wilson et al., 2013). If this is the case, then it may be important for instructors to make the career-related transferable skills explicit in the activities and assignments put forward in their courses. This may be particularly important given past research suggesting that students aren't always aware of the skills developed through coursework, or how those skills might transfer to the work environment (Martini et al., 2015).

Having said this, our results also demonstrate that students are capable of thinking more widely about the potential benefits of their degree, and we believe that it is desirable for them to do so. Kuhn (2003) has pointed out that one consequence of students adopting a simplistic means-end approach to their studies (e.g., “I’m just completing this degree so that I can get a job.”) is that education may come to be seen only as a means to a desired end, and without any inherent value of its own. When this is the case, there is little chance that students will commit to intellectual endeavours for their own sake after they leave school and move into adulthood. Mentoring lifelong learners who are intrinsically motivated and self-directed requires that students come to see the value of education in and of itself, rather than viewing its major benefit as being the means to a good job.

Getting students to recognize the inherent value of learning likely requires some scaffolding on the part of university faculty. How might instructors help students to see and understand the benefits of education? How could courses be shaped to facilitate this type of understanding? Kuhn (2003) dismisses the idea that simply telling students that undergraduate education has intrinsic (as well as instrumental) benefits will be adequate in this regard. Instead, she argues for the importance of including activities in the curriculum that will clearly demonstrate to students the inherent value of educating themselves. Such activities are those that more readily allow their intellectual value to be seen as students engage in them. Her research on this topic (e.g., Jewett & Kuhn, 2016; Kuhn & Moore, 2015), has suggested that at least two types of activities might foster such intellectual values (though there are likely others). The first are those that draw upon *inquiry* or research skills, and push students to formulate and systematically investigate the evidence related to questions that are of interest to them. The second are activities that scaffold students' abilities related to *argument*, which require students to examine multiple sides of important issues (and the evidence related to each one), develop and elaborate on their ideas related to those issues and, eventually, articulate their own ideas and beliefs in persuasive ways.

Its limitations notwithstanding, we believe that our study offers some insights into students' thinking about the benefits associated with their undergraduate degree. While it sheds

light on some issues, it also raises some interesting questions and we hope that our findings will provide the impetus for others to pursue additional research in this area.

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Appendix A

Coding Scheme for Open-Form Responses

This list represents all of the known and anticipated **benefits** of an undergraduate degree. In other words, what did you (or will you) **gain** from going to university? This is distinct from “why I went to university”.

Code the first 4 items that appear in each response. One sentence may include several codes.

Notes: Pay attention to the distinction between *gaining career related knowledge and skills* (Codes 1 and 2), and *get into an interesting and satisfying career* (Code 10). These are easy to mix up but are distinct responses. The former speaks to knowledge and skills specifically, while the later speaks to the social/economic value of a degree itself.

Code	Description	Examples
1	<p>My degree will allow me to develop career-related knowledge that will allow me to succeed.</p> <p>Anything to do with knowledge for a future job.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ “giving me all the information I will need to continue” ➤ “learn more French and become an amazing teacher” ➤ “Knowledge and education to be able to carry out my job effectively” ➤ “In my under graduate degree I hope to better understand the vast work of psychology and in specific the spectrum of criminal psychology” ➤ “I hope to learn more that can help me work with children”
2	<p>My degree will allow me to develop career-related, academic, or personal skills that will allow me to succeed (i.e. learn how to do my job). My degree will provide me with work experience (from classes or co-op programs).</p> <p>Anything to do with skills or experience for a future job.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ “I hope to obtain some skills that will help me (reading, writing, note taking)” ➤ “It will help me learn skills to assist me in my future as a successful recreational therapist.” ➤ “I will also have learned how to understand and summarize research. ➤ “I wish to learn people skills” ➤ “I will develop my writing skills as well as my organizational skills”
3	<p>My degree will make me more educated; I believe that this learning and knowledge have intrinsic value.</p> <p>Anything specifically about being educated that doesn’t fall under Code 1, 13, or 14.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ “I will be more educated”. ➤ “I think learning is important”

4	<p>My degree will help me gain status and the respect of others.</p> <p>Anything that references respect or status.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ “I will be respected because of my education” ➤ “I’ll be the first one in our family with university degree”
5	<p>My degree will help me meet the expectations of my parents or others.</p> <p>Anything that references expectations or pleasing of others.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ “I will make my parents proud”
6	<p>During my degree I will get the social experience of university (i.e. meeting people, forming relationships).</p> <p>Anything that references friendship, relationships, or social supports.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ “I hope to make lots of friends”
7	<p>My degree will allow me to contribute or give back to society; help people; fight against injustices.</p> <p>Anything that references helping people or giving back to society.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ “My degree will give me the credit and ability to do certain things, such as the knowledge and facts about feminism will help me to fight for rights for women.”
8	<p>My degree will allow me to earn more money; have a secure future (financially).</p> <p>Anything that references making money.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ “I’ll make good money” ➤ “have a higher probability of making more money”
9	<p>My degree will allow me to provide a better life for or to help my family (my spouse/partner/children).</p> <p>Anything that references helping family, spouses, or children.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ “Support the family I hope to have in the future” ➤ “Provide for myself and a potential family.

10	<p>My degree will help me get into an interesting and satisfying career (by providing the qualifications or certification I need). It is basic requirement for success; i.e. you need a degree to get anywhere.</p> <p>Anything to do with careers, jobs, qualifications, or success.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ “It’s merely a stepping stone to something bigger” ➤ “My undergraduate is simply a stepping stone, it's the next logical chapter of my life” ➤ “more job opportunities as most job postings require a degree” ➤ “I’m hoping that I will get a job that I enjoy because of my degree.” ➤ “I want to help children. I always wanted to be a teacher, however the jobs are very sparse. Speech pathology was my only other option.”
11	<p>My degree is required for further education; i.e. getting into graduate school or professional programs (such as law or med school).</p> <p>Anything to do with further education.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ “My undergraduate degree will prepare me for my graduate degree” ➤ “Since I will be moving onto law school one day, I also hope my degree helps me to get there.”
12	<p>My degree will provide me with personal satisfaction/fulfillment.</p> <p>Anything to do with personal satisfaction.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ “Personal satisfaction in terms of achieving a sense of knowledge” ➤ “After completing my degree, I will be satisfied in myself”
13	<p>My degree will help me to better understand the complexities that I will encounter in life (people, situations).</p> <p>Anything to do with learning about the world or people.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ “learn about the world and how it works” ➤ “I was hoping to obtain a greater knowledge of people and the way they act and the reasons they do what they do” ➤ “I will be a smarter person who is able to critically think about a specific topic.”
14	<p>My degree will help me to develop and improve myself (generally); learn about myself.</p> <p>Any generic response about self-improvement, self-exploration, or general personal development that doesn’t fit anywhere else.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ “learning about myself” ➤ “Figuring out who you are and what you may want to do.” ➤ “Gain confidence in my abilities”

15	My degree will afford me networking opportunities.	➤ “it will help me in networking”
16	My degree has no benefits.	➤ “I see no benefit in my degree. I think that getting a university, college, or any other post-secondary education is more of a social norm than it is about education.”

Appendix B

Part A

1) What do you hope to gain from your undergraduate degree? What do you think you will get out of this at the end of your degree?

Part B

2) The list below represents many of the “typical” benefits that undergraduate students associate with a university degree. Please imagine that you have 100 points to distribute across the benefits on the list. Assign points to each benefit to illustrate how important it is to you in your decision to attend university. If a benefit is more important to you, you should assign it more points; if it is less important to you then you should assign it fewer points.

For each benefit you may assign values that range from 0 (if it is not important to you at all) to 100 (if it’s the only benefit that you feel that you will get from your degree).

You must use all 100 points, and you cannot use more than 100 points.

Value Assigned	Goals
	Gaining status and the respect of others because of my degree.
	Being able to get into an interesting and satisfying career because of my degree.
	Being able to earn more money because of my degree.
	Being able to help my parents/siblings financially because of my degree.
	Being able to provide a better life for my own family (my spouse/partner/children) because of my degree.
	Getting the social experience of university (i.e. meeting people) during my degree.
	Developing career-related knowledge during my degree that will allow me to succeed.
	Developing career-related skills during my degree that will allow me to succeed.
	Becoming more educated during my degree because I believe that learning and knowledge have intrinsic value .
	Developing my self-management skills during my degree (such as creativity, open-mindedness, responsibility, initiative, assertiveness, professionalism).
	Developing my teamwork skills during my degree (co-operation, conflict resolution, negotiation, appreciating diversity).
	Developing my communication skills during my degree (presenting, writing, listening, reading).
	Developing my leadership skills during my degree (delegating, decision making, being a role model).
	Developing my critical thinking and research skills during my degree.
	Gaining upward social mobility because of my degree (i.e. it will help me attain a middle-class lifestyle).