Honors Research Project
Approval

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Life-Style Aspirations: Possible Selves Proposed by Undergraduates for Their First Years Following Graduation

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Abstract

This study looked for trends in student beliefs about the life styles they will live during the first years following graduation. A ten-item survey was used to gauge the expected involvement in and perceived importance of activities related to civic involvement, personal health, and personal well-being. Participants were undergraduate students \((N = 99)\) who had chosen at least one major course of study. Tests for independence found that possible selves differed significantly between College samples and between participants intending to graduate before 2011 and those expecting to graduate later. Limitations and applications of the current research are discussed.
Life-Style Aspirations: Possible Selves Proposed by Undergraduates for Their First Years Following Graduation

A self-concept contains every fact, fiction, fear, emotion, and contradiction that we relate to ourselves (Cameron, 1999; Friedman & Haaga, 2007; Gergen, 1965; Hoyle & Sherrill, 2006; Markus & Nurius, 1986; McInerney, 2004). This information is stored in the unconscious, with portions available for retrieval when there is need (Cokley, 2002; Kaufman, 2006; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006; Showers & Zeigler-Hill, 2007). A classic example of this is a study conducted by Gergen in 1965 with 54 female undergraduates attending Harvard University. During the course of a 30-minute interview, participants in the experimental condition received positive feedback for positive self-descriptors (e.g., “Yes, I think you are very accepting and approachable.”) and negative reinforcement for negative self-descriptors (e.g., “You don’t strike me as the type to be resentful of others.”). In a subsequent questionnaire, participants receiving this form of reflective reinforcement described themselves more positively than did those participants not receiving feedback from the interviewer. Case and field studies of psychiatric patients, especially those who experience dramatic shifts in affect and self-esteem, support the proposition that both internal and environmental signals are important factors for the salience of self-concepts (Carlson, 2006; Friedman & Haaga, 2007; Showers & Zeigler-Hill, 2007; Taylor, Morley, & Barton, 2007). The complexity and power of the self-concept is also found in the effects that social expectations can exert over the performance of members of socially defined groups (e.g., Hispanics, men, youths) in the areas of leadership, academic performance, and creativity (Cokley, 2002; Davies, Spencer, & Steele, 2005; Kaufman, 2006; Krendl, Richeson, Kelley, & Heatherton, 2008; Vandello, Bosson, Cohen, Burnaford, & Weaver, 2008).
The type of self-concept that concerns who one will become at some future time is the *possible self* (Markus & Nurius, 1986). In the first published study of possible selves, Markus and Nurius (1986) used an open-ended survey to ask students to "tell us about what is possible for you". Markus and Nurius coded the responses into six categories: descriptive adjectives (intelligent, selfish), physical descriptives (wrinkled, athletic), general abilities (bad cook, good navigator), life-style possibilities (active social life, health conscious), occupational possibilities (accountant, jobless), and possible opinions of others (appreciated, unpopular). A follow-up study that employed the questionnaire asked 210 participants whether they had ever considered the item as a future outcome for themselves. Markus and Nurius found that participants had considered, on average, 80 of the 180 listed possible selves (endorsements ranged from 32 to 147). In contrast, when the same participants indicated which items described their present selves and which items described their past selves, the average number of selves identified in both instances decreased to 51 (ranging from 28 to 93 in each case). The relatively higher frequency of reported possible selves was most likely a result of the presence of conflicting possible selves (e.g., successful business woman, homeless). When a person acts to become (or to avoid) a possible self, the person has become goal-driven (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

Possible selves have become closely associated with *self-regulation* processes, the ways in which we act or do not act in order to either achieve or avoid particular outcomes (Hoyle & Sherrill, 2006; McInerney, 2004). In this model, possible selves are only one motivational factor for performing or avoiding a behavior; a possible self provides a point of comparison between present circumstances— including the affective, cognitive, and behavioral aspects of the situation—and a potential future. The judgments made on the discrepancies between the two states, such as whether or not the possible self is desirable or likely attainable, provide the basis for goals,
projects, and aspirations that then create the standards that the individual will apply to future behavior. In one instance of this, a team at The University of Michigan (Oyserman et al., 2006) tracked the academic performance of 264 eighth grade students who were members of low-income, Hispanic or African American households. Researchers developed an intervention program that taught detailed strategic planning and personalization of goals. When compared to 123 students who did not participate in the intervention program, the 141 students who completed the training demonstrated higher test scores and attendance, as well as decreased misbehavior and depression. Additional studies (Cameron, 1999; Pizzolato, 2006) of college students support the claims made by Oyserman and colleagues concerning the importance of using possible selves in long-term planning.

The questionnaire generated by Markus and Nuruus (1986) contains both general adjectives and specific physical descriptors. Modern psychologists (Marmarosh, 1999; Oyserman et al., 2006) suggest that the concreteness of possible selves influences the strategic planning and goal making processes. Explicitly detailed possible selves (e.g., “I may end up working at McDonalds my first year out of college.”) are a precursor to creating specific behavioral standards which are then acted upon to either avoid or achieve the possible future. In contrast, abstracted possible selves are more likely to generate global standards (e.g., diligence; Friedman & Haaga, 2007).

The current study briefly examined the possible selves of undergraduates of The University of Alabama in Huntsville (UAHuntsville), specifically for the first five years after graduation. Participants evaluated ten possible selves related to life-style opportunities that were currently available to students at the university. Because possible selves are instrumental to goal making and achievement processes, possible selves of students with a declared major were
expected to resemble those of other participants pursuing the same or similar degrees within the affiliated College more closely than those that characterize participants enrolled with another College. For instance, Engineering participants were expected to evaluate the possible selves presented differently than Nursing participants. Also, because upperclassmen have been enrolled in university for longer and therefore had more experiences to draw on when generating possible selves, there was an expectation that the possible selves of participants who have almost completed their studies would more closely resemble those of other upperclassmen than those of participants who were still far from graduation.

Method

Participants

Undergraduate students \( (N = 99) \) at The UAHuntsville were recruited from introductory psychology and Peer Assisted Study Section (PASS) classes via emails to course instructors and student mentors. Students recruited through entry-level psychology classes received one activity point towards course completion in exchange for their participation. Thirty-six men and 63 women took part in the study. All participants were enrolled with one of the five UAHuntsville colleges: Business \( (N = 13) \), Engineering \( (N = 29) \), Liberal Arts \( (N = 36) \), Nursing \( (N = 13) \), Science \( (N = 8) \). Of the total sample, 48 students intended to graduate before 2011 and 51 students expected to graduate later. Students reported their ethnicities as African American \( (14.1\%) \), Caucasian American \( (78.8\%) \), or Asian American \( (5.1\%) \). The average age of participants was 22.23 \( (SD = 4.91) \). The responses of participants who did not supply both a graduation date and major area of study, or were under 18 years of age were excluded from the study and no penalties were incurred.

Materials
Participants completed two questionnaires (see Appendix) concerning the importance and amount of social involvement ascribed to 10 listed possible selves: Involvement in neighborhood/community events, Political activism, Volunteerism, Physical exercise, Psychological well-being, Personal development, Additional formal education, Non-degree skills, Business travel, and Home maintenance. Three examples provided elaboration on each item. Items used for the study were intended to correspond to areas of student life at UAHuntsville in order to ensure that all participants had equal access to the activities. By using immediately available opportunities and providing examples, interference was reduced for language and social barriers that could affect comprehension and evaluation of items.

At the start of the first questionnaire, participants received the following instructions: “Indicate the importance you expect to place on each of the following categories of activity”. Importance was expressed through use of a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Very Important) to 4 (Not Important). To create a binomial distribution for use with Chi-Square analysis, responses of 1 (Very Important) were combined with 2 (Rather Important); responses of 3 (Somewhat Important) were grouped with 4 (Very Important). The second questionnaire began with the printed directions: “Indicate the typical group size you expect to work with on each activity”. Participants expressed expectations of social involvement through use of a 3-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (Individual) to 3 (Large Group). Both items not rated by participants and rated “Not Applicable” were excluded from analyses.

In addition to the activity points offered to participants enrolled in psychology courses, all participants had the opportunity to receive current information related to employment of recent college graduates. Featured information included common areas of job satisfaction, job dissatisfaction, turnover rate, and skills that those in the work force wished they had improved
while still in college (Carlson, 2006; Cramer, 2001; Kressel, 1990; Lunneborg, 1985; Lunneborg & Wilson, 1982).

Procedure

Participants received a web address for the “Plans After Graduation” study (SurveyMonkey.com Corporation, 2008) where a consent form was presented for participants 18 years of age or older. Participants then completed two questionnaires. The first questionnaire assessed the importance of listed possible selves. The second questionnaire assessed the preferred social context of listed possible selves. Both questionnaires used the same list of possible selves. At the end of the session, students provided demographic information (age, ethnicity, major area of study, expected date of graduation) and indicated whether they wanted to receive 1 activity point, an email concerning factors of job satisfaction of recent graduates, or both the activity point and the mailing. Participants could withdraw participation at any time prior to completion of the study without incurring any penalties.

The only identifying information collected was students’ university email addresses. To preserve participant anonymity, email addresses were separated from the data file and shuffled after download from Survey Monkey (SurveyMonkey.com Corporation, 2008).

Results

A two-tailed Chi-Square Test for Independence was used to examine the hypothesis that students’ reported possible selves would differ across Colleges. Cramér’s $V$ then was used to calculate the strength of the significant relationships. Cramér’s $V$ is interpreted to be a small effect if $V$ is less than .3, a medium effect if $.5 > V < .3$, and a large effect if $V$ is greater than .5, with larger effects indicating a stronger relationship between the examined variables (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2007). The importance of participating in volunteer activities varied significantly
between Colleges (see Table 1), $X^2 (4, N = 98) = 9.923, p < .05, V = .318$. Specifically, there was a medium effect difference ($V = .324$) between the expectations of participants from the Colleges of Engineering and Liberal Arts, $X^2 (1, N = 64) = 6.723, p < .05$. Responses of Engineering participants also differed moderately ($V = .361$) from the replies of participants from the College of Nursing, $X^2 (1, N = 41) = 5.334, p < .05$, with Engineering participants more likely to respond that volunteerism would be important to them after graduation than either Liberal Arts or Nursing majors.

A two-tailed Chi-Square Test for Independence and Cramér’s $V$ were used to explore the relationships between possible selves and the length of time until graduation. As seen in Table 2, participants who were within two years of graduation were slightly ($V = .280$) more likely to place importance on home maintenance activities than were participants with more time remaining until graduation, $X^2 (1, N = 99) = 7.772, p < .05$. This difference was found to be moderately stronger ($V = .373$) within participants from the College of Liberal Arts (see Table 3), $X^2 (1, N = 36) = 5.013, p < 0.05$.

Across the university, participants graduating before 2011 also differed slightly ($V = .282$) from participants graduating during that year or later in how they envisioned social pursuit of non-degree skills, $X^2 (1, N = 88) = 6.982, p < 0.05$; Table 4 shows that there was an increase of interest in small and large group involvement among participants close to graduation. Nursing students closest to earning a degree reported a strong ($V = .684$) preference (see Table 5) for the independent pursuit of personal development, $X^2 (2, N = 13) = 6.086, p < 0.05$. Nursing participants close to completion of degree requirements were also likely to place importance on additional formal education, (see Table 6), $X^2 (1, N = 13) = 5.318, p < 0.05$.

Discussion
The present study supplied information on student expectations for themselves after graduation by having a student sample from each College evaluate ten items relating to their possible selves. Of particular interest was whether undergraduate possible selves would differ across Colleges and by time remaining until graduation. Prior research (Cameron, 1999; Oyserman et al., 2006; Pizzolato, 2006) that investigated the effects that student possible selves have on future action found that unless students consider a behavior to be personally important, part of their current or possible self concepts, students were unlikely to engage in those activities. By exploring possible selves that correspond to opportunities currently available on campus, the current findings provide a foundation for understanding how university-sponsored activities relate to College-specific plans and preferences.

The study found that, in contrast to participants from the College of Engineering, students from the Colleges of Liberal Arts and Nursing were each less likely to consider volunteer activities to be an important facet of their lives after graduation. Volunteerism is a practice that the university has actively encouraged through the establishment and promotion of Service-Learning and Volunteer Services. Various fraternities and sororities across campus, both merit-based and social, require a minimum number of hours in volunteer service; student organizations also conduct fundraisers and item drives throughout the year for charitable causes. These findings suggest that different courses of study chosen by students reflect divergent expectations for life after graduation. It is possible that, by understanding the relationship between possible selves and the relation to the various Colleges, academic advisors would be better equipped to ease the transition of incoming and at-risk students. By understanding the expectations that stand universal across all Colleges, the central administration would also obtain further insight into which issues are considered vital by the student body.
The portrayal of student possible selves is complicated by differences that exist between students early and late in their undergraduate careers. Students approaching the time of graduation indicated increased interest both in performing activities of home maintenance and in social involvement in the acquisition of skills not related to a formal degree. The differences occurred irrespective of College and could represent two ways that student expectations change because of the university life experience. Alternatively, the differences may reflect a maturation process independent of the university or could be sample-specific. Repeated studies would provide a longitudinal perspective that would help clarify the issue.

Differences within the College of Nursing serve as an example of the distinctive College features that could be found through further investigations. When the College possesses a distinctive culture, a student who takes many classes there may adopt some of the expectations endorsed by the College while adopting fewer attitudes of any College that is not included in the curriculum of that student. The current research made use of small samples and discovered relationships that might not recur in a larger study. However, the presence of numerous relationships with robust effect sizes suggests that further study would continue to yield significant results. Findings of future research would provide as an administrative tool-inexpensive in the resources of time, money, and effort-for use in strategic funding of activities tied to the development of students and the enrichment of university life. These studies would be further useful in the documentation of emic changes within the student body in relation to changes in university policy, findings that would be useful during the planning of future policy changes such as in the number of classes a student must take in a particular College.

Longitudinal studies that make use of these surveys would provide a look at how expectations change as the students of The UAHuntsville advance through their respective
Colleges. This information would not only provide an educational resource for educational and developmental psychologists and sociologists; it could also serve as a source of practical understanding of the student body and a way to track these changes in relation to changes in university policy. Data collected on a large scale could also be used to support changes in educational policy. Would more classes in political science increase the perceived importance of civic engagement after graduation? Does participation in certain student organizations or classes increase the likelihood that after graduation, our students will value their physical and mental health? Although the behaviors of UAHuntsville students after graduation may seem to not affect the university, this may not be the case so long as employers seek candidates with certain sets of values and potential students consider campus life when choosing a college. Therefore, The University of Alabama in Huntsville will benefit from a regular appraisal of the possible selves aspired to by its undergraduates for their lives immediately following graduation.
References


Appendix

*Life-Style Choices Appearing Within the Questionnaires*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in neighborhood/</td>
<td>Local events; PTA; community watch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>community events</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political activism</td>
<td>Attend city council meetings; vote; interest groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteerism</td>
<td>Community service; donations; charity drives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical exercise</td>
<td>Strength, flexibility, endurance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological well-being</td>
<td>Self-esteem; spiritual; meditation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal development</td>
<td>Improve abilities; conquer fears; diversify skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional formal education</td>
<td>MA; PhD; specialist certification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-degree skills</td>
<td>Foreign language; first aid certification; workshops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home maintenance</td>
<td>Chores; repairs; improvements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business travel</td>
<td>Conferences; workshops; meetings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* For the first questionnaire, participants were instructed: Indicate the importance you expect to place on each of the following categories of activity. Participants responded using a 4-point Likert scale, where 1 = Very Important and 4 = Not Important. For the second questionnaire, participants were instructed: Indicate the typical group size you expect to work with on each activity. Participants responded using a 3-point Likert-type scale, where 1 = Individual and 3 = Large Group.
Table 1

*Perceived Importance of Volunteer Activities by Students with Different College Majors*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Colleges</th>
<th>Not Important&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Important&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Administrative Science</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Arts</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursing</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* The values represent the frequencies of responses made by participants with majors in the respective Colleges who were asked to rate how important they expected that Volunteerism would be to them during the first five years after their graduation.

<sup>a</sup> Judgments were made on a 4-point scale that was then converted to a binomial scale by combining responses of the first two categories and the last two categories in which 1 = Important and 0 = Not Important.
Table 2

> Perceived Importance of Home Maintenance by Students of All Majors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Graduation</th>
<th>Not Important&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Important&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Before 2011</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011 or later</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup> Note. The values represent the frequencies of responses made by participants putting one or more majors who were asked to rate how important they expected that Home Maintenance would be to them during the first five years after their graduation.

<sup>a</sup> Judgments were made on a 4-point scale that was then converted to a binomial scale by combining responses of the first two categories and the last two categories in which 1 = Important and 0 = Not Important.
Table 3

*Perceived Importance of Home Maintenance within the College of Liberal Arts*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Graduation</th>
<th>Not Important&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Important&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Before 2011</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011 or later</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* The values represent the frequencies of responses made by participants with majors in the College of Liberal Arts who were asked to rate how important they expected that Home Maintenance would be to them during the first five years after their graduation.

<sup>a</sup> Judgments were made on a 4-point scale that was then converted to a binomial scale by combining responses of the first two categories and the last two categories in which 1 = Important and 0 = Not Important.
Table 4

*Preferred Socialization Style during Pursuit of Non-Degree Skills*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Graduation</th>
<th>Alone*</th>
<th>Small*</th>
<th>Large*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Before 2011</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011 or later</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* The values represent the frequencies of responses made by participants actively pursuing one or more majors who were asked to indicate how large a group they expected to take part in during the first five years following graduation when they pursued Non-degree skills.

*Judgments were made on a 3-point scale in which 1 = Individual and 3 = Large Group.*
Table 5

*Preferred Socialization Style during Personal Development*

*Within the College of Nursing*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Graduation</th>
<th>Alone (^a)</th>
<th>Small (^a)</th>
<th>Large (^a)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Before 2011</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011 or later</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* The values represent the frequencies of responses made by participants enrolled in the College of Nursing when requested to indicate which size of group they expected to engage with during activities relating to Personal Development during the five years that followed graduation.

\(^a\) Judgments were made on a 3-point scale in which 1 = Individual and 3 = Large Group.
Table 6

Importance of Additional Formal Education within the College of Nursing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Graduation</th>
<th>Not Important (^a)</th>
<th>Important (^a)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Before 2011</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011 or later</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The values represent the frequencies of responses made by participants from the College of Nursing when they were asked to rate how important they expected Additional formal education would be to them during the first five years after their graduation.

\(^a\) Judgments were made on a 4-point scale that was then converted to a binomial scale by combining responses of the first two categories and the last two categories in which 1 = Important and 0 = Not Important.