

The Impact of COVID-19 on College Students' Career Preferences and Response Strategies

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on college students' career preferences. Based on a survey and literature analysis, the study reveals that the pandemic has prompted students to place greater emphasis on job stability while also increasing their attention to flexible employment forms and emerging industries. However, the research also identifies several prevalent issues, such as insufficient career planning, significant career anxiety, and limited access to information. To address these challenges, the following strategies are proposed: (1) at the societal level, improve career guidance and counseling systems, build employment information-sharing platforms, and enhance psychological support services; (2) at the university level, deepen practical education, optimize career planning courses, and encourage students to clarify their career goals and strengthen their sense of social responsibility; (3) at the individual level, strengthen professional skills and practical experience, expand information channels, and adopt a positive and rational approach to employment challenges. This study provides scientific reference for college students' career planning and aims to help them achieve the balanced integration of personal development and social value in a complex employment environment.

Keywords: COVID-19; Career Preferences; College Students' Career Outlook

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, which emerged at the end of 2019, had a profound impact on public health and the economic and social development of China. After significant pandemic control efforts, China successfully managed the crisis in Wuhan and Hubei; however, subsequent outbreaks across the country followed. The strict "silent" control measures implemented in 2022

effectively curbed the spread of the virus and laid the foundation for the implementation of "Category B management". However, these measures also created significant disruptions to economic and social development, causing many small and medium-sized enterprises to face existential crises, with some even going bankrupt. While government agencies and public institutions were not at risk of closure, their staff still faced substantial pressure and reduced compensation during the pandemic. The impact of the pandemic on the employment environment has undoubtedly influenced college students' career preferences, and the change in career preferences has, in turn, further affected their job-search behavior. Promoting employment among college students has become a critical task for both the government and universities. Analyzing the state of college students' career preferences post-pandemic and formulating corresponding strategies will contribute to the effective advancement of university employment initiatives.

2. Literature Review

Numerous scholars have delved into various factors that influence college students' career preferences. This section further explores the evolution of career preferences among college students and their underlying mechanisms, focusing on the following three aspects: (1) different types of college students' career preferences, (2) the changes in career preferences, (3) the internal and external factors influencing career preferences.

2.1 Different Types of College Students' Career Preferences

Dong et al. [1] conducted research at Zhejiang University, revealing three key characteristics of college students' career preferences: equal emphasis on "self-development" and "health-related" factors, a greater focus on job stability, and less emphasis on the prestige and

status associated with a profession. Tuohati Aimiati [2] surveyed college students born after 1990 in Xinjiang and found that the top three most desirable industries were oil, education, and healthcare, with expected income for their first job generally higher than the local employment market reality.

2.2 Changes in College Students' Career Preferences

The academic community currently holds a unified definition of career preferences. Notable viewpoints include those of Hu Weifang [3], who defines career preferences as the values formed or held during the process of selecting and engaging in a specific type of work, consisting of cognition, emotions, and behavioral tendencies. You Minhui [4] considers career preferences as an individual's evaluation and attitude toward various professions and job choices. Chi Chengyong [5] sees career preferences as the embodiment of one's world outlook, life view, and values in the context of career choice.

2.3 Factors Influencing Career Preferences

Wang Lihong [6] conducted empirical research on college graduates with 0-3 years of experience and found that both internal and external factors significantly influence students' career preferences. External factors include societal influences, university structures, and personal factors such as gender, internship experiences, interpersonal skills, and technical abilities. The role of education, employment guidance systems, and media in shaping career preferences is also significant, with universities often failing to provide sufficient support for students' career development.

3. Results and Discussion

Through an empirical investigation of students from a university in Shanghai, several deficiencies in current career perspectives among college students were identified.

3.1 Lack of Systematic Career Planning and Unrealistic Expectations

Under the "Class B and B Management" policy, many college students set overly ambitious career goals without accurately assessing their capabilities and limitations. This lack of clear self-positioning and a tendency towards unrealistic expectations lead to a "job-hopping

mentality" and noticeable trends of "delayed employment." A significant number of students prefer staying at home to prepare for postgraduate or civil service exams rather than actively seeking employment opportunities. This behavior not only hampers their professional development but also exacerbates the overall employment pressure.

Additionally, students generally lack effective career planning, resulting in insufficient autonomy and susceptibility to external influences. Without clear employment objectives, many are unaware of their strengths and weaknesses, relying heavily on external opinions during the job search process. Consequently, high expectations coupled with a lack of planning awareness create considerable challenges for students navigating the employment market.

3.2 Significant Utilitarianism and Career Anxiety

In the pandemic-era job market, utilitarian tendencies among college students have become increasingly evident. Students place excessive emphasis on factors such as salary, job location, and ease of work, gravitating towards "high-paying, low-stress, close-to-home" positions. This career outlook results in a lack of interest in opportunities in grassroots and western regions, despite the broader development prospects these areas may offer. While prioritizing personal gains, students often compete for scarce positions in major cities, neglecting the potential for self-fulfillment and social contribution in less popular regions. This mindset not only limits individual growth but also disrupts the rational distribution of talent and optimization of societal resources.

3.3 Lack of Psychological Preparation and Limited Access to Information

Amid a volatile employment market and the uncertainties brought by the pandemic, many students lack the psychological preparedness needed to cope with employment challenges. This deficiency often manifests as anxiety and unease, rendering students hesitant in their career decisions. Such anxiety not only undermines their professional choices but also negatively impacts their mental health.

Moreover, many students rely on limited sources for job information and demonstrate a lack of initiative in exploring broader opportunities.

They fail to fully utilize online resources, industry networks, and career counseling services, resulting in a narrow understanding of the job market. This limited access to information creates "blind spots" in their job search, hindering their ability to comprehensively evaluate the opportunities and challenges associated with various roles.

4. Strategies to Improve College Students' Career Preferences

To address these challenges under the "Category B management" policy, colleges and students must adapt to the new pandemic control norms and adjust their employment preparation and career strategies to respond to the ever-changing market environment. The following suggestions are made at the societal, university, and individual levels:

4.1 At the societal level: Establishing a Comprehensive Career Guidance and Counseling Service System

First, the establishment of professional career counseling institutions is essential to provide free career assessments, personalized employment guidance, and tailored career planning advice. Such initiatives can help students gain a clear understanding of their professional strengths and potential. Second, collaboration between social entities and universities should be intensified. This includes organizing regular career planning seminars, employment situation analysis sessions, and mock interviews to equip students with workplace readiness. Additionally, integrating online and offline resources to develop a unified employment information-sharing platform is crucial. This platform would facilitate access to recruitment information and policy consultations for graduates. Finally, the construction of a comprehensive psychological support system is needed to offer employment-related mental health counseling and stress management programs. These measures can foster a positive employment outlook among students, enabling them to better navigate the competitive labor market and ensuring a smoother transition into the workforce.

4.2 At the Institutional Level: Strengthening Social Practice and Volunteer Service to Broaden Career Perspectives

Incorporating social practice and volunteer

service into the academic credit system will encourage higher participation rates among students. Universities should also actively seek to expand partnerships with enterprises, communities, and grassroots organizations, particularly in underdeveloped regions, to provide students with diverse professional opportunities. In parallel, institutions must emphasize career values and social responsibility education, guiding students to prioritize personal growth and societal contributions over preferences for high-paying, convenient, or low-stress jobs. Comprehensive institutional support is also essential. This includes providing training programs, practical guidance, and feedback mechanisms, as well as offering financial assistance through scholarships and subsidies. Such efforts ensure that economic constraints do not hinder student participation. Furthermore, integrating career planning courses into the curriculum can assist students in translating practical experiences into well-defined professional objectives. These initiatives will not only enhance students' practical experience but also nurture their sense of responsibility, preparing them to contribute positively to society.

4.3 At the Individual Level: Enhancing Professional Skills, Gaining Experience, and Setting Reasonable Career Goals

A systematic review of academic knowledge and a focused effort to develop technical and practical skills are essential to seize emerging opportunities as the labor market recovers. Equally important is the establishment of clear self-positioning and realistic career goals. Students should proactively prepare tailored electronic application materials, including resumes and cover letters, to effectively adapt to the processes of online recruitment and virtual interviews. Moreover, maintaining a positive and resilient mindset is vital. Students should seek psychological and career support services when needed to navigate employment-related challenges. To optimize their job search, students should diversify their information channels by leveraging online resources, social media platforms, and professional career counseling. This proactive approach will enable them to comprehensively understand job requirements and employer expectations, reducing the likelihood of missed opportunities due to limited information. By implementing

these strategies, students will be better prepared to face the demands of a rapidly evolving job market and secure roles aligned with their personal aspirations and professional goals.

5. Conclusion

Under the "Category B management" policy, the college student job market faces new opportunities and challenges. The efforts of society, universities, and individuals are critical in improving college students' career preferences and enhancing their employment competitiveness. By improving career guidance and counseling services, enhancing practical education and social responsibility, and adjusting individual career strategies, students can better plan their careers and adapt to the ever-changing employment environment. With a positive mindset, rational choices, and solid capabilities, students can find career paths that align with their development and contribute to both personal growth and societal progress.

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