Chapter One

Introduction

One historic mission of higher education has been to produce good citizens (Whitt,

1997). Good citizenship involves being an independent, educated, and employed member of

society. Student affairs professionals believe that by teaching students to be productive

individuals who make positive contributions to society, these students will become good citizens.

To ensure that students develop into productive citizens, institutions of higher education

aim to educate the whole student. To achieve this goal, universities strive to develop various

capacities within each student. These capacities include the development of intellectual abilities,

an understanding of oneself, development of an ethical and spiritual meaning in life, and an

exploration of career interests (Whitt, 1997).

Development of students' intellectual abilities is a main goal of institutions. Institutions

require that students meet specific requirements before they are admitted to the school. However,

not all students are equally and adequately prepared academically when they enter college.

Often, the students who are not prepared struggle with academics. Institutions of higher

education have a responsibility to provide services that promote the intellectual development of

students. Schools need to offer academic support services in areas such as tutoring, guidance on

study habits, and workshops to promote personal motivation (Whitt, 1997).

Another capacity of students that universities strive to develop is an understanding of

oneself. Since every student is different, the process of coming to understand oneself is also

different. Students explore and develop their interests, abilities, and limitations. The result of this

process is the ability to make long-range life plans, deal with personal challenges and dilemmas,

and make positive contributions to society. As this process unfolds, students need access to

various resources, such as testing services and counseling programs. The institution's duty is to provide these services (Whitt, 1997).

Universities also need to provide services that enable students to develop an ethical and spiritual meaning in life. As students gain knowledge about academics and themselves, they may begin to question their spirituality. They may question the beliefs and principles of a specific faith and how those fit with their personal beliefs and values. Schools need to offer services, specifically counselors and ways to become involved in programmed religious activities, to help the students make a decision about an ethical and spiritual meaning in life (Whitt, 1997).

The last area of developmental concern for institutions of higher education relates to career exploration. Some students have a definite idea of what career path they want to follow when they matriculate. Other students continue to explore many career paths as they learn more about specific occupations, their personal skills and interests, and the needs of society. A university's obligation is to make sure students have access to adequate resources that will assist them in discovering and planning for a career that matches their interests and goals (Whitt, 1997).

Universities understand that if they can help develop students' career interests, then students will pursue gainful employment upon graduation. Once individuals become gainfully employed, they are able to support themselves and positively contribute to society. When individuals are independent and law-abiding citizens, others view those people as positive contributors to society and therefore good citizens. But, before students can become employed they must conduct a job search process. This process allows students to present themselves to companies and allows the companies to evaluate students' skills, knowledge, education, and experience.

When evaluating students, employers look for certain skills, knowledge, education, and experience (Seeking Employment in the '90s, 1996). Employers today look for a broad array of skills, knowledge, education, and experience that do not focus specifically on students' academic performance. Some of the skills, knowledge, education, and experience employers focus on include presentation skills, being a team player, and personal computer knowledge (Mangum, 1996). Others include integrity, motivation, and proven people skills. Employers are interested in applicants who are mature yet do not have a know-it-all attitude. Aggressiveness without pushiness and self-confidence without arrogance are also important attitudes. Recruiters do not expect to persuade applicants to work for the company, so initiative and ambition are crucial (Allen, 1998).

One of the first opportunities applicants have to display their initiative and ambition is during an interview. Applicants who have researched the company and developed intelligent questions prior to the interview show great initiative and ambition and are viewed favorably by the employer (Allen, 1998).

Employers also favorably view applicants with strong communication skills (Ilkka, 1993; McDowell & Mrozla, 1987). During a job search process, communication takes two forms. One form is written and one form is oral. Written communication usually consists of the cover letter and resume the students have prepared for the employer. Students use these two documents to advertise themselves and their skills. Cover letters and resumes each serve certain purposes (Editors of Career Press, 1992; Kennedy, 1996).

The function of a cover letter is to express the student's interest in a position, explain the student's qualifications for the position, and ask for an interview. Cover letters can be formatted

in various ways depending on the individual and the position (Seeking Employment in the '90s, 1996).

Resumes are used to list and further explain job experiences and skills that relate to the position mentioned in the cover letter. As with cover letters, resumes can be prepared in various formats. Students must decide what format best advertises their experiences and skills (Seeking Employment in the '90s, 1996).

The first chance that an employer has to evaluate students' verbal communication skills is during an interview. During the interview, the employer is evaluating the written and oral communication skills of the applicant. Employers believe these skills are vital to career success (Donofrio, 1997). To evaluate written communication the employer looks at the cover letter and resume. The actual interview is used to evaluate oral communication.

Employers have reported that students conducting job search processes and participating in interviews display several shortcomings (Magnum, 1996). One shortcoming is unrealistic expectations of the job. College graduates' expectations of job factors such as starting salaries, salary raises, performance evaluations, and tenure at a company are frequently incorrect. Often college students' starting salary is below what they anticipated. Future employees in fields such as engineering, education, and communication more accurately predict their starting salaries than future employees in fields like business, liberal arts, and agriculture. For the most part, students entering a business, liberal arts, or agriculture positions expect a higher salary than they actually receive once employed (Gardner & Lambert, 1992).

Students also falsely anticipate salary raises. Many new employees will receive a raise once a probationary period or a training course is completed. However, the salary increase that students receive is usually less than what they expected (Gardner & Lambert, 1992).

Supervisor feedback is another area that students incorrectly anticipate. Many students assume they will receive frequent feedback from a supervisor. Many organizations provide only annual or bi-annual feedback. Other organizations never provide feedback (Gardner & Lambert, 1992).

Tenure at a company is yet another unrealistic expectation of students. Turnover at companies occurs more frequently than students expect. Job dissatisfaction, inability to socially relate with co-workers, and differences in beliefs about the job or the company all contribute to an employee leaving a position earlier than presumed (Gardner & Lambert, 1992).

Another major shortcoming among students in the job search process is a lack of communication skills. Students do not express themselves well in written and verbal communication efforts (Klopf & Cambra, 1981). This is unfortunate because communication is the most important skill employers seek in applicants (Allen, 1998; Kirkwood & Ralston, 1996; Perry & Goldberg, 1998).

It would seem that there is a clear distinction between the communication skills that employers seek and the communication skills that students offer. The evaluation of communication skills is an important part of a job search process. Employers report that students are not meeting basic standards with respect to communication skills. They believe that students lack the basic skills of speaking and listening. The insufficient writing skills of applicants is a major complaint of recruiters and employers (Donofrio & Davis, 1997).

Colleges aim to graduate students who are good citizens. One part of good citizenship is being gainfully employed. Before individuals can become employed they must conduct a job search. During this process employers set certain expectations of applicants and look for specific skills, knowledge, education, and experience. Among those skills are strong written and oral

communication abilities. However, employers report that students are lacking these communication skills. Employers are basing this criticism on the communication skills that they observe in students during the job search process. For this reason, it is important to examine the written communication skills used by college students during their job search process. The present study sought to do that.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the written communication skills used by college students in the job search process. For purposes of this study, written communication consisted of cover letters and resumes. Additionally, data by gender, race, and academic college was gathered.

To evaluate written communication skills, the researcher conducted a document analysis of cover letters and resumes used by 50 students in their job search process. Documents were scored using ranking sheets developed by the researcher.

Research Questions

This study was developed to explore the following research questions:

1. How effective are the written communication skills used by college students in the job search process?

2. Does the level of effectiveness of written communication skills used by college students during the job search process differ by gender?

3. Does the level of effectiveness of written communication skills used by college students during the job search process differ by race?

4. Does the level of effectiveness of written communication skills used by college students during the job search process differ by academic college?

Significance of the Study

This study had significance for both future professional practice and future research. Several groups of people may benefit from the results of this study. For example, students may find the results of this study useful. Students may gain information about written communication skills used during the job search process. Given this information, students may be able to assess their own written communication skills used during the job search process.

Another constituency that may benefit from this study is employers. The results of this study may help explain to employers the level of communication skills used by students during the job search process. This knowledge may help employers better evaluate the communication skills of college applicants.

Finally, Career Services staff might also benefit. This study identified the level of effectiveness of communication skills used by college students during the job search process. These data could be valuable to career services staff because they may be able to develop or improve upon seminars, sessions, or classes they offer that focus on communication skills used during the job search process.

This study also had significance for future research. The present study explored the communication skills used by college students during the job search process. Future scholars may wish to replicate this study to examine if a student's participation in a co-operative education program affected the communication skills used during the job search process. Students who have participated in a co-op program have been exposed to a job search process. As a result, their communication skills related to a job search process might be stronger than students who have not participated in a co-op program. A future study could investigate if there

is any difference in the communication skills used by co-op students and non co-op students during their job search processes.

This study looked at the communication skills of college students at a Research 1 institution. Other studies might examine communication skills among college students at various types of institutions (e.g. community colleges, liberal arts colleges, and single-sex colleges). Such a study may reveal differences in communication skill levels among students at various types of institutions.

One specific factor that this study investigated was race. This study assigned the race of respondents to two groups, majority and minority participants. Other studies may wish to look at specific racial groups (e.g. Hispanics, African Americans, Asian Americans). These results may indicate whether the specific race of a student has an impact on the level of effectiveness of communication skills used during a job search process.

Limitations of the Study

This study, like all research, had several limitations. One limitation related to the sample. This study was conducted at a Research I institution. The admission criteria for the institution were high. For example, one criterion for admission is test scores. The average test score for the students entering the institution where the study was conducted in the fall of 1999 was 1171. It is possible that students with high test scores already possessed strong communication skills. If so, this might have influenced the results of the study.

A second limitation dealt with the definition of written communication used in the study. Written communication consisted of cover letters and resumes. There may be other forms of written communication that relate to the job search process. Had those other forms of communication been examined, the results might have differed.

The qualitative nature of this study was also a limitation. Findings from a qualitative study are often specific to an institution. Therefore, the degree to which the results are generalizable to other institutions is limited (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996).

A fourth limitation of this study related to the analysis of the data. A single researcher conducted the analysis of data in this study. It was possible that the researcher had personal experiences or beliefs that influenced the way in which the analysis was conducted. If that occurred, the results may have been influenced (Gall et al., 1996). Despite these limitations, the present study was valuable because it offered some initial insights into the communication skills used by students in the job search process.

Organization of the Study

This study is organized around five chapters. Chapter One introduced the general topic to be studied, the purpose of the research, and the research questions. Chapter Two describes literature on communication skills used during the job search process and differences in communication skills by gender, race, and academic college. Chapter Three explains the methodology of the study, including the sample selection process and the data collection and data analysis procedures. The fourth chapter presents the results of the study. Chapter Five discusses those findings and their significance for future practice and research.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

This study was designed to explore the written communication skills students used during the job search process. Given the topic, it was necessary to examine the literature on the skills employers seek in applicants during the job search process. Next, literature on the differences in communication skills by gender, race, and academic college are discussed. This literature is discussed because the study analyzed differences in communication skills by these characteristics. Finally, literature focusing on the forms of communication used during the job search process (cover letters and resumes) is presented.

Skills Employers Seek

Employers usually look for and evaluate applicants on certain skills, knowledge, education, and experiences. Among these skills are leadership, a strong work ethic, teamwork ability, interpersonal skills, and communication skills (Donofrio & Davis, 1997; Mangum, 1996; Scheetz, 1996). Communication skills are often rated as one of, if not the, most important attribute that employers look for in applicants. (Allen, 1998; Hultz & others, 1988; Kirkwood & Ralston, 1996; Perry & Goldberg, 1998).

For example, a survey conducted by the Indiana Commission for Higher Education asked 274 personnel directors what 10 factors were most influential when hiring college graduates. Communication skills ranked number one with a score of 100 % (Klopf & Cambra, 1981).

A similar investigation revealed results that support the Indiana study. In the fall of 1997, the National Association for College and Employers (NACE) distributed a survey to 421 employers. The results of this survey stated that on a five point scale, where five equaled "extremely important", oral communication and written communication scores were rated 4.53

and 4.12 respectively (Allen, 1998). These high ratings for communication skills suggest that employers seek applicants with strong written and verbal skills.

Along with these two studies, research conducted in the Midwest found that employers identified communication skills as one of the major influences on hiring decisions. An overwhelming 98.33% of respondents indicated that verbal and nonverbal communication skills are important in the hiring process (Peterson, 1997).

As these findings suggest, employers are clearly looking for candidates with strong communication skills. Unfortunately, college students do not always meet employers' expectations (Evers, Rush, & Berdrow, 1998; Scheetz, 1996).

In the job market of the 1990s, there was a clear difference between the expectations of employers and the skills applicants are demonstrating. Employers are seeking a wide array of applicant skills. These skills include presentation skills, computer knowledge and communication skills. Over a three-year period, four studies were conducted that determined the most frequent shortcomings of applicants. A lack of communication skills was reported in the top three rankings in all four studies (Mangum, 1996).

For example, one study focused on employers in the business field. These employers were asked to identify the largest problem they had with respect to skills among potential employees. A number of the participants responded by saying that a lack of written skills was their biggest problem (Donofrio & Davis, 1997).

Dench, Perryman, and Giles (1998) reported on a study that discovered parallel results. This study focused on the importance of skills and employees' competence level in terms of these skills. Similar to other studies, this research found students lacking in certain skill areas. The data showed that oral communication skills are a widely needed skill for employment. The

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data also indicated that individuals are not performing oral communication skills at an adequate level (Dench, Perryman, & Giles, 1998).

Collectively, these findings suggest there is a gap between the communication skills employers are seeking in applicants and the level of communication skills potential employees are demonstrating to employers. But are there differences in communication skills by demographic characteristics such as gender? Given the focus of the present study, it was important to examine the literature on gender and communication skills.

Gender and Communication Skills

Communication is an important aspect of the job search process. Males and females vary in several ways in their written and oral communication styles. Males have a negative attitude about writing. This attitude has been linked directly to a poor writing performance. Males prefer writing situations that are less structured. Given a choice, males would elect a less formal writing style or not write at all (Boser, Wiley, & Clark, 1991). The oral communication styles of males and females also have unique characteristics.

One such characteristic has to do with the verbal communication styles used by men and women. Males often engage in report talk and females most often use rapport talk (Boser, et al, 1991). For example, men are likely to engage in communication that is confrontational, joking, and playful while women are more likely to avoid confrontational communication and engage in speech that is supportive and comforting (Page, 1996). Males typically try to establish status in conversation while females are comfortable sharing on an equal level. Males frequently offer solutions when a problem is presented. On the other hand, females look for and offer understanding (Boser, et al, 1991).

Another characteristic of verbal communication is the difference in confidence levels between men's and women's speech. Women try to not come across as presumptuous. They often include disclaimers at the beginning of their sentences, speak in a low voice, apologize, and criticize in a delicate manner. In addition, women's speech is usually very succinct so it does not take up too much time (Page, 1996).

On the other hand, males' speech is usually described as confrontational. Men often issue commands and take sides during communication. These actions indicate that men are more confident in their communication abilities and power status (Page, 1996).

For many years, there was an assumption that women possessed stronger verbal skills than men. However, this assumption has been refuted in recent studies. Longitudinal research has suggested that there is no significant difference between men and women's average verbal SAT scores. More recent studies have shown that women's verbal SAT scores are approximately 2 to 3 points below the average verbal SAT scores of men (Greene, 1997).

Research has also reported a link between nonverbal communication and gender. Women are viewed as more empathic than men, due to their concentration on the relationship component of communication. Often, women adjust their nonverbal behaviors to be more compatible with men instead of meeting the needs of the communication situation. On the other hand, men are more inflexible with their communication style. They are usually committed to using a proactive style of communication and do not adjust their speech to meet the needs of the other person or the situation (Ostermeier, 1997).

The communication characteristics and styles of men and women vary considerably. Women engage in speech that is non-pretentious, supportive, and emotionally focused while men engage in speech that is confrontational and status setting (Page, 1996).

These findings suggest differences in communication skills by gender. But the present study also examined differences in communication skills by race. Therefore, it was important to review the literature on this aspect of communication as well.

<center>Race and Communication Skills</center>

Very limited research has been conducted that explores the link between race and communication skills. Literature on this relationship addresses the fact that culture, government, world views, traditions, and teaching and learning can have a direct influence on communication skills displayed by members of various races (Byrd, 1995).

A study conducted by Byrd (1980) looked at the relationship between vocal activity and race of the applicant and what impact that relationship had on applicants' interview evaluations. A total of 301 introductory management course students participated in Byrd's study as part of a class activity. Data were gathered in classrooms during regular class periods. Students viewed a slide of an applicant and listened to a tape-recording in which that applicant was interviewed for a manager position. Next, the students were asked to complete the Interviewer Rate Form (IRF).

The IRF was used to measure interviewer evaluations. This was a 12- item form that focused on four aspects of attraction. Two items measured attraction on the social dimension, two others measured attraction on the physical dimension, and two items measured attraction on the task dimension. In addition, two items focused on the applicant's ability to work with others. The final two questions rated the interviewer's behavioral intentions towards the applicant. A check for manipulation of variables (two items) was also included in the survey. Scores on the IRF reflect a combined evaluation of vocal activity and race of the applicant (Byrd, 1980).

Three conclusions were drawn from this study. First, applicant behaviors are more important than applicant characteristics. The behaviors exhibited by applicants have a greater

impact on employers' perceptions of them than do the applicants' characteristics. Second, an interviewer's evaluation of an applicant decreases as the amount of vocal activity from the applicant decreases. Third, the interviewer's evaluation scores are based on a combination of vocal activity and race of applicants (Byrd, 1980).

This study has one main implication for applicants, of both majority and minority races. Applicants can overcome perceived negative effects (i.e. race) by displaying adequate amounts of verbal communication during the job search process. However, applicants must understand that in some interview situations the amount of vocal activity displayed by the applicant will not cancel what an employer views as a negative effect (Byrd, 1980).

The correlation between race and communication skills is an area that is not well explored. Literature suggests that cultural influences directly effect individuals' communication skills (Byrd, 1995). Literature also suggests that applicants' vocal activity and race influence employers' interview evaluations (Byrd, 1980). However, no research has been identified that studies the relationship between race of applicant and effectiveness of communication skills used during an interview.

Academic College and Communication Skills

The third analytical category that was investigated with respect to communication skills in the present study was academic college. Within each academic college, students gain valuable job related skills. All of these skills can be rendered useless if, during the job search process applicants cannot express the skills they have learned (Donofrio & Davis, 1997).

Recruiters have noticed a lack of communication skills in applicants and have linked this deficit to applicants' college education. Employers have expressed enough concern about the lack of communication skills among applicants that institutions of higher education have taken

action. The American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business' (AACSB) accreditation requirements state that curricula should include development of written and oral communication skills. Other institutions, such as Indiana University, have also implemented courses that incorporate the development of written and oral communication skills into class assignments and teamwork activities. As an extension of this, some colleges and universities use a method of communication across the curriculum. This method provides students the opportunity to practice and develop communication skills in all areas of their studies (Donofrio & Davis, 1997).

In conjunction with the cross-curricular approach, some schools offer laboratory classes. These classes provide students who are not communication majors opportunities to further practice and develop communication skills through interaction and feedback (Donofrio & Davis, 1997).

Limited research has investigated the relationship between academic discipline and communication skills. Astin (1993) conducted a national study using data from various instruments, such as Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), Graduate Record Examination (GRE), and National Teacher Examination (NTE). Eighty-two outcome measures were examined. These measures included personality and self-concept, attitudes, values, and beliefs, behavior patterns, competency and achievement, career development, and satisfaction with college environment.

The results of this study found that students majoring in academic disciplines such as education, engineering, and physical sciences do not feel confident in their public speaking skills. Results also showed that students majoring in humanities, psychology, and social sciences reported higher levels of confidence in writing and listening skills (Astin, 1993).

One implication of this study deals with academic and professional pursuits of college students. When students feel they are capable and competent in certain skill areas, they are more

likely to pursue courses and employment that enhance and use those skills. If they feel they are not strong in specific skill areas, they will not be as motivated to pursue courses or employment that focus on those skills (Astin, 1993).

While there is research on communication skills in general, and differences in communication skills by gender, race, and academic college the present study focused on communication skills used by applicants in the job search process. It was important, therefore, to examine what those specific communication skills that the job search process entails.

Communication Skills Used in a Job Search Process

Communication skills used during the job search process can be described in two categories, written skills and oral skills. Written skills typically consist of a formal cover letter and resume while oral skills normally consist of the dialogue between an employer and an applicant. Both the written and oral components of the job search process play an important role in whether an applicant is offered a second interview or a job (Ilkka, 1993; McDowell & Mrozla, 1987).

Written Skills

Employers look for strong written skills in applicants. Two of the main sources employers use to evaluate applicants' written skills are their cover letter and resume (Virginia Tech Career Services Manual, 1998-1999).

Cover letters are used to accompany and introduce a resume (Virginia Tech Career Services Manual, 1998-1999). The purposes of cover letters are to identify the position in which the applicant is interested, to explain the applicant's qualifications, to convince the employer to read the applicant's resume, and to ask for an interview. Each of these attributes is addressed within specific components of the cover letter (Seeking Employment in the '90s, 1996).

The components of a cover letter are an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. An introduction should address the position the applicant is applying for, explain how the applicant learned of the position, and present basic information about the applicant. The position of interest needs to be specifically and explicitly stated in the introduction. Employers do not want to guess about what position applicants are inquiring about (Virginia Tech Career Services Manual, 1998-1999).

Applicants also need to explain specifically how they learned about the position. Available jobs are often advertised on flyers posted around campus, through family members or friends, or through a directory at a Career Services office. Employers are interested in knowing how applicants became aware of a job opening (Virginia Tech Career Services Manual, 1998-1999).

The introduction is also the section of the cover letter in which applicants should introduce basic information about themselves. This information may include anticipated degree and graduation date as well as academic major. Applicants may also wish to indicate when they will be available for employment (Virginia Tech Career Services Manual, 1998-1999).

In the body of the cover letter, employers look for an explanation of applicants' qualifications, a description of their education and work experience, and an explanation of how that education and work experience relate to the position for which they are applying. The body is the section of the cover letter where applicants should explain their qualifications for the position. Some qualifications applicants may want to list are education, leadership, and work experience. Each qualification should be relevant to the job for which they are applying. Applicants should be as specific as possible by offering examples of how their particular

educational or experiential background relates to the particular position for which they are applying (Virginia Tech Career Services Manual, 1998-1999).

Finally, in the conclusion of the cover letter, an employer looks for a reminder about the applicant's qualifications, an indication of further contact, and a request for an interview. All of these can be combined into a short paragraph. Applicants should briefly restate their qualifications and how they relate to the position (Seeking Employment in the '90s, 1996). They should also include a sentence inquiring about an interview and indicate that they will be in contact with the employer to set up an appropriate interview date and time (Virginia Tech Career Services Manual, 1998-1999).

Resumes are the second form of written communication employers study when assessing the skills of applicants. A resume represents the applicant to the employer. Since each applicant is unique, each resume is also unique. However, the purpose of a resume is to make a positive impression that results in an invitation to interview for a position (Nelson, 1982).

The format of a resume may vary by applicant and position type. Even though each resume is unique, each still contains common information that employers look for. This common information can be conceptualized in two categories. The first category is usually referred to as Personal Information. Employers would look to find applicants' name, address, e-mail address, and telephone number. The second category is called the Body of the Resume. Under this category, employers look for information on topics such as career goals, educational background, work experience, honors and awards, and activities. Even though there are two standard categories of information on resumes, applicants can determine what resume format is most conducive for them given the position they are seeking (Seeking Employment in the '90s, 1996).

There are several formats typically used to develop resumes. The formats vary by individual and position type. Applicants most often use either a chronological or functional format. Applicants use a chronological format when most of their employment positions relate to their career objective. Applicants list their work experiences in descending chronological order. They state dates of employment and specific duties they performed for each position. Within a chronological resume, applicants may also list their educational background in descending chronological order (Seeking Employment in the '90s, 1996; Virginia Tech Career Services Manual, 1998-1999).

The other type of resume is referred to as a functional resume. Functional resumes are used when applicants want to emphasize their career-related work experience. For example, applicants may list internships and co-op positions that they have had or are currently completing. Jobs applicants have held that are unrelated to the position they are seeking are listed in a separate section of the resume. A functional resume also lists jobs in descending chronological order (Seeking Employment in the '90s, 1996; Virginia Tech Career Services Manual, 1998-1999).

Employers look not only at the content of a resume but at the appearance of the document as well. Fifty percent of employers believe that an attractive resume is important (Reha, 1982). A correlation has also been found between the size of a company and the attractiveness of resumes. Larger companies, more often than smaller companies, state that an attractive resume is important (Reha, 1982).

Oral Skills

As with written skills, oral skills and verbal behavior are critical during a job interview (Ilkka, 1993). Often, employers prefer that applicants do more talking than listening (Reha,

1982). Within verbal behavior, employers look for specific communication traits. Employers rate applicants more favorably when those applicants respond appropriately and speak intelligibly and at length to the questions posed during the interview. (Ilkka, 1993).

Employers also evaluate the amount of verbal communication displayed by applicants during an interview. There is a significant difference in the evaluations of applicants who talk too little and those who show appropriate amounts of talking (Byrd, 1980). Employers predict that applicants who are thought to have spoken too little during an interview will be less satisfied with their employment, less able to function professionally, and less likely to develop positive relationships within the work environment (Byrd, 1980).

In summary, employers rate communication skills highly when evaluating applicants (Allen, 1998; Hultz & others, 1988; Kirkwood & Ralston, 1996; Perry & Goldberg, 1998). Additionally, research has suggested that there are differences in general communication skills by gender, race, and academic college (Astin, 1993; Byrd, 1995; Page, 1996). Communication skills in the context of the job search process include cover letters, resumes, and verbal communication during interviews. However, there is no research that examines these specific skills and analyzes the results by gender, race, and academic college. The present study sought to address this existing gap in the literature by examining differences by gender, race, and academic college in the written communication skills used during the job search process.

Chapter Three

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore the communication skills used by college students when conducting a job search. Specifically, this study examined written communication skills used during the job search process. Cover letters and resumes were evaluated using a ranking scale developed by the researcher. This study examined the following research questions:

1   How effective are the written communication skills used by college students in the job search process?

2   Does the level of effectiveness of written communication skills used by college students during the job search process differ by gender?

3   Does the level of effectiveness of written communication skills used by college students during the job search process differ by race?

4   Does the level of effectiveness of written communication skills used by college students during the job search process differ by academic college?

Sample Selection

The population for this study included students involved in the job search process at the institution where the study was conducted. These students were seniors who were looking for permanent employment upon graduation. Approximately 5,807 seniors are enrolled for the 1999-00 academic year at the institution where the study took place. Of those 5,807, about 2,180 participated in the On-Campus Interview program offered through the Career Services Department.

Students who were in the job search process were recruited for this study. Each student was a participant in the On-Campus Interview program offered through the Career Services Department at the institution where the study was conducted.

On-Campus Interview Program

At the institution where this study was conducted, the Career Services Department provided a service called On-Campus Interviewing. This service was available to all students who are enrolled in the university. Each semester, staff members in Career Services advertise the On-Campus Interview program and encourage students to take part.

To participate in this program, students must follow certain steps. The first step involved creating and uploading a resume. Students must upload their resume using a computer based program titled "CareerConnections". Through this service, students can upload and submit resumes for the consideration of those coming to campus for candidate interviews; learn about employment opportunities and companies; and schedule, modify, and check on interview appointments. Employers can use this program to post job announcements; review students' resumes; and schedule, modify, and check on interview appointments.

Once an interview had been set up, the student was responsible for researching the company and developing relevant questions. These questions were then discussed during the actual interview.

Each interview was conducted in one of several designated interview rooms within the Career Services Center. On the day of the interview, students were expected to dress professionally and arrive a few minutes prior to the interview time. Upon arrival, the students were asked to sit in a designated waiting area. When employers were ready, they entered the waiting area and called the candidate's name. At this point, the employer and student went to a

designated interview room and conducted an interview. Students were encouraged to take the appropriate follow-up steps (e.g. sending a thank you note) after the interview.

Sample Selection

This study required that respondents be participants in the On-Campus Interview program offered through Career Services during the spring, 2000 academic semester. This study also required that the participants be undergraduate seniors with American citizenship and that they be looking for permanent employment upon graduation. Overall, the researcher sought 120 subjects who met certain criteria with respect to gender, race, and academic college. Among the 120 participants, the researcher sought: 60 men, 60 women, 60 majority students, 60 minority students, 40 students from the college of Arts and Sciences, 40 students from the college of Engineering, and 40 students from the college of Business. The researcher purposefully selected these three colleges because data from the Career Services Department showed that the largest percentages of participants in the On-Campus Interview program are enrolled in these colleges. To fill the categories and keep the sample at 120, all participants met the criteria for more than one category.

To obtain the sample of participants, the researcher took several steps. First, the researcher obtained the overall On-Campus interview schedules for several weeks from Career Services staff members. The schedules listed all candidate interviews during any given week. The researcher reviewed the sheets and identified eligible students. This was done by looking at the degree and major listed beside each student's name. Second, the researcher made a note-card for each eligible student from the interview schedule. The name, phone number, and major for each eligible student was recorded. Once all note-cards had been made, the researcher then looked up the students' e-mail addresses through the campus' web page.

Next, the researcher created an e-mail message that briefly explained the study, the incentive for participation, and the informed consent process. The message asked potential respondents if they would be willing to participate in the study. Students who were interested in participating in the study were asked to contact the reseacher via e-mail to submit a cover letter they had prepared in conjunction with a job they had sought or were seeking and to complete a brief demographic survey indicating their gender, race, and academic college. A copy of this message can be found in Appendix A. Using the e-mail addresses obtained from the university's web page, the researcher sent the e-mail to eligible students. Students were given three days to respond to the original message and submit their Cover letter. Submission of a cover letter authorized the researcher to obtain the participant's matching Resume from Career Services staff.

To collect Resumes, the researcher completed two steps. First, the names of consenting students were recorded. When students replied to the researcher's e-mail request and submitted a cover letter, the researcher wrote down the students' names. After the three-day period, the researcher took the list of participants to Career Services. A staff member in that office then printed off the resumes of all participants. The researcher and staff member arranged a day and time for the researcher to pick up the printed resumes.

By responding to the e-mail, students were consenting to participate in the study. This process continued until 120 qualified participants who met the criteria for participation (e.g. 60 men, 60 women) were selected for the study or until the potential sample pool was exhausted.

Instrumentation

It was necessary to create and review two protocols to analyze the data in this study, one each for cover letters and resumes. Each protocol consisted of a ranking sheet. These ranking

sheets were used to record data and calculate scores for each participant.

After the ranking sheets were initially drafted, experts working with the study reviewed them. The panel of experts included an Associate Director of Career Services and two Associate Professors of Higher Education. All three experts had extensive experience in research design. The experts were asked to evaluate the ranking sheets to ensure that they would gather data relevant to the research questions posed in the study. The ranking sheets were revised based on suggestions made by panelists.

Cover Letter Ranking Sheet

The first protocol was a ranking sheet used to evaluate cover letters (see Appendix B). In the upper right hand corner of this sheet, the researcher recorded the participants' name, gender, race, and academic college. The literature suggests that a good cover letter consists of four goals and four components. Each goal can be found within the four components of the cover letter. The four goals of a cover letter are to identify the position of interest and point of reference (how they learned of the position), explain how the students' related skills, knowledge, and experience will benefit the company, refer to an enclosed resume, and mention the next step for contact with the employer. The four components of a cover letter are the Introduction, the Body, the Conclusion, and the Aesthetic Value. Generally speaking, goal 1 is found in the Introduction of the cover letter, goals 2 and 3 are found within the Body of the cover letter, and goal 4 is located in the Conclusion. The format of each cover letter may vary slightly depending on the individual and the position (Seeking employment in the '90s, 1996). The researcher designed the cover letter protocol around these components and goals.

The cover letter ranking sheet was divided into three sections. The first section of the cover letter ranking sheet scored the four goals that are found within the four components. Three

of the four goals (goals 1, 2, and 4) were scored on clarity, language, and spelling/grammar using a four point Likert scale where 3 equaled above average, 2 equaled average, 1 equaled below average, and 0 indicated that the desired information was omitted. The last goal, goal 3, was rated using a scale where 1 equaled Yes and 0 equaled No.

Section two of the ranking sheet was used to evaluate the Aesthetic Value of the cover letter. Using the same four- point Likert scale, this section rated the neatness, overall layout and format, and font size and style of the cover letter. Section three was used to record the total score of the cover letter.

For purposes of this study, the researcher defined clarity, language, and spelling/grammar as the variables to be evaluated. Clarity was defined as how clearly the goals were presented and explained. Language was defined as the use of appropriate and professional language that included key words. Literature has shown that employers expect to find certain words within the text of applicants' cover letters and resumes (Virginia Tech Career Services Manual, 1998-1999). Some of these key words include "experience", "education", "knowledge", and "skills and abilities" (Virginia Tech Career Services Manual, 1999-1999). Spelling/grammar was defined as spelling all words correctly and using appropriate English grammar throughout the text.

The researcher identified a consistent way to rate the goals of each cover letter. For example, to rate the first goal (indication of the position), the following represents a sample of a possible statement participants might make in their cover letters:

This letter is to apply for the Eighth Grade Science Teacher position we discussed at the seminar held on September 10 at State University. (Example 1)

This letter is to follow up on the teaching position we discussed at the seminar. (Example 2)

This letter is to follow on our discussion. (Example 3)

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In the first example, the letter would receive ratings of 3 (above average) for all three criteria (clarity, language, and spelling/grammar) because the letter clearly stated what position the candidate was referring to and did so in a professional manner with no spelling or grammatical errors. In the second example, the letter would receive ratings of 2 for clarity, 3 for spelling/grammar, and 2 for language. The letter does not clearly state which teaching position (Eighth Grade) is being sought nor when or where the candidate discussed the position with the employer. However, the spelling/grammar was correct. In the third example, the letter would receive ratings of 1 for clarity, 2 for spelling/grammar, and 1 for language. The clarity rating is based on the fact that the candidate referred to the position but without sufficient detail. The spelling/grammar rating is based on the fact that a word (up) is missing rendering this sentence less meaningful. The sentence should read "This letter is to follow up on our discussion". The language rating is based on the candidate's omission of professional terms in the sentence. Had a letter contained no reference to the specific job for which the candidate was applying, all three categories would have been rated as 0.

The second goal of the cover letter is to demonstrate the applicant's skills, knowledge, and experience that would benefit the organization. The following are examples of what participants might have written if they were applying for a retail sales position:

> While working towards my master's degree, I was employed as a store manager with a privately owned clothing store. I increased my sales volume and profit margin appreciably while at Clothing Unlimited, and hope to couple that success with the challenges and rewards of the fashion industry. I have a strong academic background in fashion merchandizing and marketing and think that I could combine that knowledge and my experience to benefit the fashion industry. (Example 1)

> While working towards my master's degree, I was employed as a store manager. I helped advance the company. I have taken several courses in fashion merchandizing, and could use that with my experience to be a good employee. (Example 2)

I worked as a store managier and like it very much and did a good job. My grades are high in my major and this would help me in the job. (Example 3)

In the first example, the letter would receive a rating of 3 (above average) for all three rating criteria (clarity, spelling/grammar, language) because the letter clearly and professionally stated the skills the applicant possessed and how those skills would relate to the fashion field. The applicant used key words like "manager" and " success". Also, there were no spelling or grammatical errors in the sentence. The second example would receive ratings of 2 (average) for clarity and spelling/grammar because the letter does not clearly indicate where the individual was employed as a store manager or how they advanced the company. There also is a misspelled word (employeed) in the letter. However, language received a rating of 3 (above average) because the letter used professional language to describe the applicant's skills and background. The final example would receive ratings of 1 (below average) for all criteria (clarity, spelling/grammar, language). The rating of 1 for clarity was based on the fact that the letter does not clearly explain what the applicant achieved while working as a store manager. The spelling/grammar rating was assigned due to the fact that the letter contains a misspelled word (managier). The letter received a rating of 1 for language because the letter did not use any professional terms in the sentences. If a letter had omitted any mention of the applicant's skills and how they would benefit the company, the letter would have received a rating of 0 for all three criteria.

Goal three, Reference to an Enclosed Resume, was rated on whether or not it appeared in the cover letter. If an applicant included a statement like the following, then goal three would receive a rating of 1 or Yes.

Enclosed is a copy of my resume which more fully details my qualifications for the position of sales representative to the eastern region. (Example 1)

If there was no mention of an enclosed resume, the cover letter received a rating of 0 for Goal 3.

The researcher also evaluated the fourth goal (goal 4- mention of the next step for contact). Applicants may have made the following statements in their cover letters to address goal 4:

> I am very interested in working for Anderson Construction Company and look forward to an opportunity to interview with you. I will be in the area during the week of April 12th and would be available to speak with you at that time. In the next week, I will contact you to answer any questions you may have and further discuss an opportunity to interview with your company. (Example 1)

> I am very interested in working for Andreson Construction Company and want to interview with you. I will be in the area during the week of April 12th and can talk you then. I look forward to hearing from you about my status. (Example 2)

> I am interested in this company. I will be around town next week and could talk then. Please let me know what time is convenient for you. (Example 3)

Clarity, spelling/grammar, and language would all receive ratings of 3 (above average) in the first example. The letter clearly and professionally expressed the applicant's interest in the company and his/her desire to interview with a representative of the company. All words in this example are spelled correctly and grammar is used correctly throughout the text. The second example received ratings of 2 (above average) for clarity, 2 (average) for language, and 1 (below average) for spelling/grammar. In this example, the applicant has clearly indicated an interest in interviewing with the company. However, the request is not written in a professional manner and there is no indication of what further steps the applicant will take. The rating of a 1 (below average) for spelling/grammar in example 2 is based on the fact that there are several misspelled words (e.g. interview) and a word (with) was omitted from the letter. Example 3 was rated 1 (below average) on clarity, 3 (above average) on spelling/grammar, and 2 (average) on language. This example received a rating of 1 (below average) for clarity because it does not specifically request an interview or mention further contact. A 3 (above average) was assigned to

spelling/grammar because all words were spelled correctly and sentences were complete. However, a rating of 2 (average) for language was assigned because the letter did not include sufficient professional language. Omitting goal 4 (asking for an interview) entirely would have caused a cover letter to receive a rating of 0 in all categories.

The second section of the ranking sheet focused on aesthetic value of the cover letter. In this section, the researcher was rating the cover letter on neatness, overall layout/format, and font size and style.

If applicants used cover letters that were organized, presented information in a logical and comprehensive manner, and used an appropriate font size and style they received a score of 3 (above average) for all criteria (neatness, overall layout/format, font size and style). However, if a cover letter was well-written but did not present the information in a logical order and used a very small font, the letter received a 3 (above average) for neatness, and a 1 (below average) for overall layout/format and font size and style. Finally, if the cover letter was completely unorganized, used a poor layout, and size 12 font, the researcher assigned a 1 (below average) for neatness, 1 (below average) for overall layout/format, and 3 (above average) for font size and style.

The third and final section of the cover letter ranking sheet was used to record the total score of the ranking sheet. This section was titled scoring. The researcher summed the scores for components/goals and aesthetic value to calculate the total score for each cover letter.

Resume Ranking Sheet

The second ranking sheet that the researcher developed was used to evaluate resumes (see Appendix C). This ranking sheet was similar to the one used for cover letters. In the upper right hand corner the researcher recorded the name, gender, race, and academic college of the

participant. The ranking sheet was divided into four sections: Personal Information, Body of the Resume, Aesthetic Value, and Scoring.

As with the cover letters, the resumes were scored on a four-point scale where 3 equaled above average, 2 equaled average, 1 equaled below average, and 0 indicated that the desired material was omitted. Similar to the cover letter ranking sheet, the resume-ranking sheet evaluated Personal Information and the Body of the Resume on clarity, language and spelling/grammar, and completeness. For the purpose of evaluating the resumes, clarity was defined as how clearly the desired information was presented. Language was defined as use of professional key words such as "coordinate", "supervise", and "assist". Spelling was evaluated by looking to see if words were spelled correctly. Grammar was evaluated by looking to see if grammatically correct English was used. Finally, completeness was evaluated based on whether the resume provided a sufficient amount of information such as career objectives, coursework, skills, education, work experience, and activities. Within these sections, items such as degree, major, position, employment dates, name of organization, and offices held were evaluated.

The first section of the resume ranking sheet evaluated Personal Information that employers expect to see on a resume. Personal Information includes name, address, e-mail address, and telephone number. Depending on the individual preference, the format of this section of the resume may vary (Seeking Employment in the '90s, 1996).

The researcher looked to see if the Personal Information was easily identifiable and clearly stated at the top of the resume. Some resumes separate the Personal Information from the rest of the resume by bolding the information or drawing a horizontal line under the Personal Information section. If this was done, or another method that clearly identified the Personal Information was used, and all the information was presented and spelled correctly, the Personal

Information section of the resume received a 3 (above average) for clarity, language, spelling/grammar, and completeness. However, if some of the Personal Information was not available (e.g. telephone number) but everything was spelled correctly, then the letter would receive a 2 (average) for completeness and a 3 (above average) for spelling. A score of 0 was assigned to resumes that did not include any Personal Information or those in which the Personal Information section was lacking more than one element (e.g. missing both an area code and a zip code).

The researcher also evaluated the Body of the resume. In this section, the researcher looked for information about the applicant's career goals, work experience, education, honors and awards, and activities. If a resume included key words, and provided complete information in each section, the resume received a rating of 3 for all criteria (clarity, language, spelling/grammar and completeness). However, if there was no mention of employment dates or degree, and the writer used only a limited number of key words, then the resume was assigned a score of 1 (below average) for Completeness and 2 (average) for Language. A rating of 0 was assigned to resumes that omitted information from the Body of the resume section.

The next section of the resume-ranking sheet was used to record points for aesthetic value. Aesthetic value consisted of neatness (use of lines, symbols, or logos), overall layout/format, and font size/style. Some resumes use bold headings along the left margin to indicate what categories will be addressed in the Body of the resume and then list in bullet format the information relevant to that section. A resume that was well-organized, used bold headings, and used appropriate font size and style received a rating of 3 (above average) for each component of aesthetic value. If the resume was not well-organized, but used bold headings and

an appropriate font size, then it was rated a 1 (below average) for neatness, a 3 (above average) for overall layout and a 3 (above average) for font size/style.

The last section of the resume-ranking sheet was used to record scores. In this section, the researcher recorded the total score of each section of the resume-ranking sheet. These scores were then added together to calculate the total score for the resume.

<div align="center">Data Collection Procedures</div>

In order to gather data for this study, it was first necessary to receive approval from the Institutional Review Board for Research Involving Human Subjects (IRB) at the institution where the study was conducted. Once IRB approval was granted, the data collection process began.

The time frame in which the On-Campus Interviews and data collection for this study took place was during the months of March and April 2000. Prior to these dates, the researcher took several steps.

The first step involved collecting the On-Campus Interview schedules. Second, these lists were used to identify 120 potential participants. Next, each potential participant's name, major, and phone number were recorded on a note-card. Finally, each student's e-mail address was obtained through the university's web page. Once 120 students had been identified and their e-mail address obtained, the researcher contacted them via e-mail. In this message, participants were invited to submit a copy of a cover letter they would use to apply for a position. Students were also asked to consent to allowing the researcher to access their resume through the Web Resume Book, a web based resume storage site. A reply to the researcher's e-mail was used as the students' consent to participate.

To collect resumes, the researcher followed two steps. First, the names of consenting students were recorded. When students replied to the researcher's e-mail and submitted a cover letter, the researcher wrote down the students' names. After the three-day period, the researcher took the list of student names to Career Services. A staff member in that office then printed off the corresponding resumes. The researcher and staff member arranged a day and time for the researcher to pick up the printed resumes. Corresponding cover letters and resumes were then matched.

There was an incentive provided to participants in the study. Each participant in this study received a $5 compensation. Once the researcher received students' cover letters and resumes, the compensation was paid to the participants.

Data Analysis Procedures

In order to assure that the researcher was drawing reasonable conclusions from the data, the researcher decided to test her ability to rate the cover letters and resumes. A small sample of cover letters and resumes was provided to an Associate Director with extensive experience in qualitative research. This expert and the researcher then independently completed rating sheets on the sample of materials. Finally, the expert and the researcher compared their independent ratings and discussed how the researcher could be assured of rating the materials consistently and reasonably. After completing this inter-rater reliability training, the researcher commenced the data analysis process.

Prior to analyzing the data, the researcher took one step to ensure confidentiality and a non-biased analysis process. As cover letters and resumes were received and printed, the researcher assigned each participant a number. This number was also recorded on a separate sheet of paper that contained demographic information (i.e. name, gender, race, academic

college) on the participant. Then the researcher blocked out the name of the participant on the cover letter and resume. By taking these steps, the researcher eliminated the possibility that she might be biased when evaluating the materials. For example, the name or race of the participant might be identifiable from that person's name. By blocking out all names on materials, the researcher was reasonably certain that the analysis was conducted as objectively as possible.

To begin the data analysis, the researcher compiled a packet of ranking sheets for each participant. The packet consisted of the respondent's cover letter and resume, and cover letter and resume ranking sheets. These materials were used to rate every cover letter and resume.

Next the researcher analyzed the data, based on the proposed research questions. The first question posed in the study related to the overall written communication scores of college students in the job search process. To address this question, the researcher took four steps. First, the total scores for each section (e.g goals 1-4) of the cover letter ranking sheet were calculated. Then the researcher computed the total score for all participants on each goal. This total was then divided by the total number of participants to calculate the average score for all participants on each section of the cover letter and resume sheet. The same process was employed to calculate the mean total score for all resumes. To respond to the research question, the researcher examined the range of scores on the cover letters and resumes, as well as the mean scores on both sets of data. These results were used to assess the written communication skills of all participants.

The second research question in this study examined whether there were differences in the written communication skills of applicants by gender. To analyze this question, the researcher divided the ranking sheets into two groups, data from men and data from women. Next, the researcher used the total scores on each section of each ranking sheet to calculate a

total score for each component of cover letters by gender. This number was then divided by the total number of participants of each sex to calculate the mean score for each section of cover letters submitted by men and the mean score for each section of cover letters submitted by women. The same steps were followed to calculate the mean total score for resumes by gender. The researcher examined the range of scores on the cover letters and resumes for men and women as well as the total mean scores for each data set for each group to respond to the research question. The results were then used to assess the written communication skills of participants based on gender.

The next research question posed in this study investigated whether there were differences in the written communication skills of applicants by race. The researcher first divided the ranking sheets into two categories, data from majority students and data from minority students. The majority group included data from all participants who indicated their race as Caucasian. Those participants who indicated their race as anything other than Caucasian were assigned to the minority group. Next, the researcher used the total scores on each section of each ranking sheet to calculate a total score for cover letters by section and race. This number was then divided by the total number of participants in each category of the study to calculate the average score for each section of the cover letters submitted by majority students and the average score for each section of the cover letters submitted by minority students. The same steps were followed to calculate the mean total score for resumes for each group. The researcher examined the range of scores on the cover letters and resumes for majority and minority students as well as the mean scores for each data set to assess the written communication skills of participants based on race.

The final question posed in this study explored whether there were differences in written and oral communication skills of participants by academic college. In order to determine if differences existed, the researcher took several steps. First, the researcher divided all ranking sheets into groups by college. The researcher then calculated the total scores for each section on cover letters for each group. The researcher then divided each total score by the total number of participants from each academic college in order to calculate the mean scores of each section of cover letters submitted by the participants from different colleges. These steps were then repeated to calculate the mean scores for resumes. The researcher examined the range of scores and mean scores on the cover letters and resumes to assess the written communication skills of participants based on academic college.

<center>Trustworthiness and Authenticity</center>

Trustworthiness and authenticity are important elements to consider when conducting qualitative research like the present study. Trustworthiness refers to the truthfulness of the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Trustworthiness in the present study was enhanced in two ways. First, the researcher examined cover letters and resumes to obtain data for this study. These two data sources are used by most students in their job search process. Therefore, it was possible for any number of students conducting a job search to participate in this study and provide the same data. As a result, the data were reasonably truthful and not specific to the sample used for this study.

The second way trustworthiness was enhanced was through the use of inter-rater reliability training. The researcher and an experienced rater independently rated a small sample of cover letters and resumes and compared their individual ratings. This step helped ensure that the researcher was analyzing the data in a reasonable and appropriate manner.

Authenticity refers to the value of the research data. It assesses whether the findings make sense, whether they are credible to the subjects and readers of the study, and whether the researcher had a good understanding of the study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The authenticity of the present study was enhanced in two ways.

The first way authenticity was enhanced was through the process of peer review. Experts reviewed drafts of the ranking sheets to ensure that the information gathered was pertinent to the research questions posed in the study. The ranking sheets were revised to reflect the suggestions offered by the experts. This process, known as peer review, is a standard process used to enhance authenticity in qualitative studies (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The second way authenticity was enhanced was verification with participants that the cover letters and resumes were theirs and reflected what they believed to be their best efforts. This step enabled the participants to ensure that the data accurately reflected their skills. Known as participant review, this approach is another way to enhance authenticity (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

In conclusion, this study was designed to explore the communication skills used by college students during the job search process. The methodology described in this chapter was deemed sufficient to elicit data relevant to the research questions posed in the study.

Chapter Four

Results

To examine the communication skills that students use in their job search process by

gender, race, and academic college, data were collected using students' cover letters and resumes.

Ranking sheets developed by the researcher were used to record the scores for each cover letter

and resume. Results from the study are presented in this chapter. The chapter begins by

describing the changes made in the data collection procedures. Next, a description of the sample

is provided. Finally, the results from the data analysis are provided. The findings are reported

according to the research questions posed in the study.

Changes in Data Collection Procedures

There were two changes made to the original data collection procedure due to

circumstances beyond the researcher's control. The original study sought to gather data from 120

participants. Each potential participant received an e-mail from the researcher asking him or her

to participate and detailing the requirements for participation and incentive monies that were

offered. To participate in the study, students were required to submit a cover letter to the

researcher. Submission of a cover letter allowed the researcher to gather the corresponding

resume from Career Services Staff. These data collection methods were not initiated until the

week of March 6, 2000 because of unexpected complications with the e-mail designed to request

participation.

Once the researcher had begun data collection, another unexpected complication arose.

After gathering several weeks' worth of interview schedules, names of potential participants

began to appear on more than one schedule. The researcher contacted each potential participant

until the pool of potential participants was exhausted. For these two reasons, the sample size for this study was 50 and not 120.

The second change in the data collection procedures related to the academic colleges of the participants. Originally, the researcher sought respondents from the Colleges of Arts and Sciences, Business, and Engineering. However, the delay in the start of data collection limited the number of potential participants from those three colleges. As a result, the researcher elected to solicit participants from all colleges on the campus where the study was conducted. Once all data were received, the researcher reviewed the participants by college and analyzed differences for the those colleges with sufficient representation in the sample to render meaningful results.

Description of the Sample

The final sample included 50 respondents who were graduating seniors, seeking permanent employment, and participants of the On-Campus Interview program during spring semester 2000. Of the 50 participants, 28 (56%) were male and 22 (44%) were female. The participants were also grouped by race (majority versus minority). Forty one (82%) of the participants were majority students and nine (18%) were minority students. Finally, the respondents were assigned to groups based on academic college. The 50 participants were associated with five academic colleges. Those academic colleges were represented as follows: 23 (82%) students were from the College of Business; 19 (38%) students were from the College of Engineering; 5 (10%) students were from the College of Arts and Sciences; 2 (4%) students were from the College of Human Resources and Education; and 1 (2%) student was from the college of Agriculture. Table 1 describes the sample by gender, race, and academic college.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (N=50)

Characteristics	N	%N
Gender		
Male	28	56
Female	22	44
Subtotal	50	
Race		
Majority	41	82
Minority	9	18
Subtotal	50	
Academic College		
Arts and Sciences	5	10
Agriculture	1	2
Business	23	46
Engineering	19	38
Human Resources	2	4
Subtotal	50	

Results

This study collected data to answer four research questions. The four questions focused on the level of effectiveness of written communication skills used by college students in the job search process. Specifically, it explored differences in levels of communication skills by gender, race, and academic college.

The researcher addressed the research questions posed in the study by examining the cover letters and resumes of participants. On the cover letters, four components were evaluated. The evaluation of three of the four goals (Indication of Position; Related Skills, Knowledge, and Experience; and Future Contact) could have yielded a maximum score of 9 points each if all elements of the component were rated at the highest level. The fourth component, Aesthetic Value could have also scored a total of 9 points. The evaluation of the fourth goal (Reference to Enclosed Resume) could yield a maximum score of 1 point. Overall, then, the maximum score a cover letter might receive was 37.

There were three components of resumes that were evaluated. The maximum score possible on two of the three components (Personal Information, Body of Resume) was 12 points while the maximum possible score on the third component (Aesthetic Value) was 9. The total maximum score that might be assigned to any given resume, therefore, was 33 points.

To explore the research questions posed in the study, the researcher examined the range of scores for each component of the cover letters and resumes as well as the mean score for each component. Additionally, the range of total scores and mean total scores were calculated. For example, the first research question posed in the study examined the written communication skills of students in general. To explore this question, the researcher calculated the range of scores and mean scores for each component of the cover letters and resumes of all participants.

She also calculated the range of total scores and mean total scores for both cover letters   and

resumes for all participants. These results are reported in Table 2.

In terms of cover letters, mean scores on the four 9-point components ranged from a low

of 5.6 for Related Skills, Knowledge, and Experience to a high of 8.0 on the Aesthetic Value

component. On the final component, Reference to Enclosed Resume, the mean score was 0.7

(maximum score 1.0). The total scores for cover letters ranged from a low of 21 points to a high

of 36 points, and the mean total score was 28.2 (out of a maximum of 37 points).

The results of the resume analysis of all participants revealed mean scores on the two 12-point

components of 11.1 (Body of Resume) and 11.9 (Personal Information). The mean score for

Aesthetic Value was 8.0 (out of a possible 9 points). Total scores on resumes ranged from 25-33

and the total mean score was 31.0 (out of a maximum of 33 points).

The remaining research questions in the study examined differences in levels of written

communication skills by gender, race, and academic college. To explore these questions, the

researcher followed a similar analytical approach, but divided the data into appropriate groups

before calculating ranges and mean scores. Additionally, differences in mean scores by

component by group were calculated.

To analyze differences by gender, material from participants were sorted into two groups:

materials of male participants and materials of female participants. Ranges and mean scores were

then calculated for each group and are reported in Table 3. On cover letters, the mean score for

men on the 9-point elements ranged from 5.5 to 8.0. For females, scores on the components

ranged from 5.7 to 8.0. On the remaining component (Reference to Enclosed Resume) the mean

score for males was 0.75, as compared to a mean score of 0.64 for females.

Table 2

Results of Analysis of Cover Letters and Resumes for All Participants (N=50)

Item/Component	Range of Scores	Mean Score
Cover Letters		
Identify Position and Point of Reference	3-9	7.0
Related Skills, Knowledge, Experience	0-9	5.6
Reference to Enclosed Resume	0-1	0.7
Indication of Future Contact	0-9	6.8
Aesthetic Value	5-9	8.0
Total Scores	21-36	28.2
Resumes		
Personal Information	11-12	11.9
Body of Resume	9-12	11.1
Aesthetic Value	4-9	8.0
Total Score	25-33	31.0

Table 3

Results of Analysis of Cover Letters and Resumes by Gender (N=50)

Component	Males (n=28)		Females (n=28)		Difference in Mean (Male m – Female m)
	Range of Scores	Mean Scores	Range of Scores	Mean Scores	
Cover Letters					
Identify Position and Point of Reference	3-9	6.9	5-9	7.1	-0.2
Related Skills, Knowledge, Experience	0-9	5.5	4-9	5.7	-0.2
Reference to Enclosed Resume	0-1	0.75	0-1	0.64	+0.11
Indication of Future Contact	0-8	6.6	0-9	7.0	-0.4
Aesthetic Value	5-9	8.0	7-9	8.0	0.0
Total Scores	21-35	27.9	23-36	28.6	-0.7
Resume					
Personal Information	11-12	11.8	11-12	12.0	-0.2
Body of Resume	9-12	11.0	10-12	11.2	-0.2
Aesthetic Value	4-9	7.8	7-9	8.2	-0.4
Total Scores	25-33	30.6	29-33	31.4	-0.8

Overall, female mean scores were higher on 3 of the 5 components, the mean score was higher for men on 1 component, and the two groups reported an identical mean score (8.0) on the fourth component. In terms of total scores, scores for males ranged from 21-35 and the mean total score for men was 27.9 (out of 37). The female scores ranged from 23-36 and the mean score for females was 28.6, or 0.7 points higher than the mean total score for males.

In terms of differences by gender in resume scores, the mean scores for men on the two 12 –point components ranged from 11.0 to 11.8. The mean scores for females on the same two components ranged from 11.2 to 12.0. The final component, Aesthetic Value, revealed a mean score of 7.8 for men compared to a mean score of 8.2 for women.

Overall, women's mean scores were higher on three components than the mean scores for men. For total scores, scores for males ranged from 25-33 and the mean total score was 30.6 (out of 33). The total scores for women ranged from 29-33 with a mean total score of 31.4, slightly (0.8) higher than the male mean total score.

The next research question explored differences by race. In order to analyze the data by race, the researcher sorted the materials into two categories: materials from majority students and materials from minority students. Next, the researcher calculated the range of scores and the mean scores for each group. These findings are reported in Table 4.

In terms of cover letters, mean scores on the four 9 – point components ranged from a low of 5.9 for Related Skills, Knowledge, Experience to a high of 8.1 for Aesthetic Value for majority students. Mean scores for minority students on the same four components ranged from a low of 4.3 for Related Skills, Knowledge, Experience to a high of 7.6 for Aesthetic Value. The 1 – point item, Reference to Enclosed Resume, for majority students revealed a mean score of 0.7 as opposed to a mean score of 0.8 (maximum 1.0) for minority students. Total scores for

Table 4

Results of Analysis of Cover Letters and Resumes by Race (N=50)

| Item/Component | Majority (n=41) | | Minority (n=9) | | Difference in Mean (Majority m – Minority m) |
	Range of Scores	Mean Score	Range of Scores	Mean Score	
Cover Letter					
Identify Position and Point of Reference	3-9	7.1	4-8	6.6	-0.5
Related Skills, Knowledge, Experience	4-9	5.9	0-5	4.3	-1.6
Reference to Enclosed Resume	0-1	0.7	0-1	0.8	+0.1
Indication of Future Contact	0-9	6.7	5-9	7.0	+0.3
Aesthetic Value	5-9	8.1	6-8	7.6	-0.5
Total Scores	21-36	28.5	24-32	25.0	-3.5
Resume					
Personal Information	11-12	11.9	11-12	11.8	-0.1
Body of Resume	10-12	11.2	9-12	10.3	-0.9
Aesthetic Value	4-9	8.1	7-9	7.7	-0.4
Total Scores	25-33	31.2	28-32	30.0	-1.2

majority students' cover letters ranged from 21-36 with a mean total score of 28.5 while minority students' cover letter scores ranged from 24-32 with a mean total score of 25.0 (out of a maximum 37 points).

Analysis of resumes revealed mean scores on the two 12 – point components of 11.9 (Personal Information) and 11.2 (Body of Resume) for majority students. The component of Aesthetic Value showed a mean score of 8.1. For minority students, the same components revealed mean scores of 11.8 for Personal Information and 10.3 for Body of Resume. The mean score for Aesthetic Value equaled 7.7.

In all, majority mean scores on cover letters were higher on three of the four 9 – point components. Minority mean scores were higher on the remaining 9 – point component and Reference to Enclosed Resume. The total mean score was 28.5 for majority students and lower (25.0) for minority students. Majority scores were higher than minority scores on all three Resume components, and the total mean score for majorities (31.2) was higher than the total mean score of minority participants (30.0) on resumes.

The final research question focused on differences by academic college. Once again, the researcher sorted materials from participants into groups. In reviewing the raw data, the researcher realized that there were insufficient numbers and respondents from the Colleges of Arts and Sciences, Human Resources and Education, and Agriculture to render meaningful data. Therefore, only responses from participants in the Colleges of Business and Engineering were considered in this analysis. Materials were divided into two categories: responses from participants in the College of Business, and those from participants in the College of Engineering. Range and mean scores were then calculated for each group and are reported in Table 5. For cover letters, mean scores on the 9 – point elements ranged from 5.7 to 7.9

Table 5

Results of Analysis of Cover Letters and Resumes by Academic College (N=42)

Item/Component	Business (n=23)		Engineering (n=19)		Difference in Mean (Business m - Engineering m)
	Range of Scores	Mean Score	Range of Scores	Mean Score	
Cover Letter					
Identify Position and Point of Reference	3-9	6.9	5-9	7.1	-0.3
Related Skills, Knowledge, Experience	4-7	5.7	0-9	5.4	+0.3
Reference to Enclosed Resume	0-1	0.8	0-1	0.6	+0.2
Indication of Future Contact	5-9	7.9	0-9	6.7	+1.2
Aesthetic Value	5-9	7.9	7-9	8.1	-0.2
Total Scores	23-32	28.1	21-34	28.2	-0.1
Resume					
Personal Information	11-12	11.3	11-12	11.8	-0.5
Body of Resume	10-12	11.1	9-12	11.0	+0.1
Aesthetic Value	7-9	8.1	4-9	7.8	+0.3
Total Scores	29-33	31.1	25-33	30.5	+0.6

for participants in the College of Business and from 5.4 to 8.1 for those in the College of Engineering. On the remaining component, Reference to Enclosed Resume, the mean score those from the College of Business was 0.8 and for those in the College of Engineering the mean score was 0.6. Total cover letter scores for participants from the College of Business ranged from 23-32, with a mean score 28.1. Results for cover letters from respondents in the College of Engineering revealed a range of total scores from 21-34, with a mean score of 28.2.

The results of the resume analysis for academic colleges revealed mean scores on the first (Personal Information) of the two 12 – point components of 11.3 for Business participants and 11.8 for Engineering participants. The second 12 – point component, Body of Resume, yielded mean scores of 11.1 for those in Business and 11.0 for those in Engineering. The mean scores for Aesthetic Value were 8.1 for Business participants and 7.8 for Engineering participants.

Total scores for resumes from the College of Business ranged from 29-33, while for the College of Engineering they ranged from 25-33. The total mean scores, where 33 was the highest score possible, were 31.1 for Business and 30.5 for Engineering.

In general, the results provide some interesting trends with respect to written communication skills of students in the job search process. These trends are discussed more fully in the final chapter of the study.

Chapter Five

The purpose of this study was to examine the communication skills that students use in their job search. Data were collected using cover letters and resumes from the participants. The results and implications are discussed in this chapter. The chapter is organized around four sections. First, a discussion of the findings is presented. Next, the results of this research relative to past studies is offered. Implications for future practice and research are then presented. Finally, the limitations to the study are explored and some general conclusions are drawn.

Discussion

Before discussing the findings of the study in any detail, it is important to examine overall scores. In general, there were variations in overall scores of cover letters by gender, race, and academic college. However, scores for resumes were uniformly high. Total resume scores ranged somewhat broadly, but mean total scores ranged from 30.0 to 31.4 out of a total of 33 possible points. There may be several explanations for these uniformly high scores, but the most logical explanation is the availability of software to create resumes. The lack of variance among mean scores for resumes may be due to the fact that most participants in this study created their resume using a prescribed format printed in the Career Services manual. It is also possible that participants had their resume critiqued by a Career Services staff member prior to submission. Approximately 90% of the critiques that are performed in the Career Services Center are done on resumes. Therefore, the researcher elected to base the discussing in this chapter on the results related to cover letters only.

The first research question posed in this study looked at levels of communication skills of all participants in the study. In terms of cover letters, the results suggest that students are fairly adept at presenting cover letters in an aesthetically pleasing manner (see Table 2). They also are

fairly consistent at identifying which position they are interested in and how they learned of the position. However, they are less adept with the other components of cover letters. The two weakest areas were mentioning future contact between the employee and applicant and connecting previous skills, knowledge, and experience to the job in question. The scores also indicated that students seem to have a good understanding of the importance of mentioning an enclosed resume, but they could do a better job.

There may be two possible explanations for the findings related to cover letters. Consider, for example, the above average mean score on indicating the specific job students were applying for and how they learned of the position. Most students understood that they need to inform an employer about what job they are seeking. However, a number of letters did not inform the employer as to how the student was made aware of the position, as the following examples illustrate:

> I am eager to discover opportunities within a technical environment for an Industrial Engineer. I am currently an Industrial & Systems Engineering student at [name of institution]. I am graduating in May 2000, and am excited to begin my engineering career this summer in the greater Houston area. I am confident that I would make a valuable contribution based upon my technical background and strong interpersonal skills. (Female, Majority, Engineering)

> I am a graduating senior from [name of institution] and am very interested in a future with [name of company]. I will receive a bachelor's degree in Communications on May 13, 2000 with minors in Marketing and Sociology. (Male, Majority, Arts and Sciences)

> I am writing to inquire about entry level full time positions that may be open. A training position would be ideal. I will be graduating in May 2000 from [name of institution] with a bachelor's in aerospace engineering. (Male, Minority, Engineering)

None of these examples tell the employer how the student learned of the opening. That was an important oversight in participant cover letters. Compare the previous examples to the following ones that do include information about the position and how the applicant learned about the position.

I am applying for the position of inside sales at your Midwest, OH office, as advertised in the job search on the JOBTRAK website. I will receive a Bachelor of Science degree in Marketing Management from [name of school] this May. (Male, Minority, Business)

I recently visited the [name of company] web-site and found that you have positions open in the Retail Management Program and I am extremely interested. In May 2000 I will graduate with a Bachelor's degree in Marketing Management and I'm interested in obtaining a full-time position on your marketing team. (Female, Majority, Business)

Each of these examples clearly identifies the position and how the applicant learned of the

position.

The weakest component of cover letters was the section where students described their

skills, knowledge, and experiences that were relevant to the position for which they were

applying.

Consider the following examples from the letters:

I consider myself a well-rounded individual and have performed at an above-average level at every position I've had ever since my first job as a paperboy at age six. I was a paper carrier for [name of paper] until age eighteen, when I graduated high school. During high school, I managed my own lawn care business during all four summers, with my most prominent season exceeding 20 customers. Also during high school, I was a lifeguard at an indoor pool for one year, and worked at a grocery store for six months, leaving only to work for the [name of library] for the summer. At the [name of library], I got my first taste of the technical field, working with a mainframe computer database, and honing my typing skills to exceed 30 WPM. I worked for the [name of library]for two summers, as well as performing some accounting work for [name of company] during my Christmas break. Throughout my junior and senior years of college I worked on a banquet staff at [name of resort]15-25 hours per week. Duties included setting up for and catering weddings, large meetings, cookouts, and Oktoberfests. During summer 1999 I spent four weeks visiting businesses throughout Europe spanning six countries, after which I was a business administration intern for the[name of business]. I have taken courses in C++, Visual Basic, HTML, and I am currently enrolled in COBOL. I am proficient in Microsoft Office. (Male, Majority, Business)

I believe that I am a good fit for the position available. I am outgoing and enjoy interaction with others. I have a good sense of other people's expectations and strive to exceed them in any way feasible. (Male, Majority, Engineering)

These examples suggested that students know how to express their skills and experiences,

but did not understand how to relate those skills, knowledge, and experiences to the job for

which they are applying. Perhaps they did not know enough about the position they sought to make the connection needed for this component of the cover letter. If so, they might be well served to research the position prior to composing a cover letter.

Another interesting finding in the results from all participants relates to the component of aesthetic value.

The above average mean scores of this component (see Table 2) indicates that students understand that the appearance of their cover letter is as important as the content. As a result, they are ensuring aesthetically pleasing documents by using proper font size/style, layout, and neatness.

The second research question focused on the differences in the levels of communication skills by gender (see Table 3). Analysis of the cover letters suggests that overall, females have stronger communication skills than men. The scores indicate that women have a better understanding on three of the five components. Women are more adept at identifying a specific position and explaining how they learned of the position. Results also show that women are better at relating previous skills with the available job. Finally, scores show that women are more careful about including a statement about future contact. The only component where men demonstrated a slightly higher understanding than women was when making reference to an enclosed resume. Scores for the last component of the cover letters revealed that men and women have an equal ability to create an aesthetically pleasing cover letter.

These findings suggest that females are relatively more consistent than men in terms of addressing the appropriate components of a cover letter. However, both men and women display an equal understanding about developing a document that incorporates proper font size/style and lay out and is neatly done.

The researcher suspects there may be several reasons for the variation in mean scores by gender. Consider the component of indicating future contact. Both men and women know that a statement to that affect needs to be included. However, men are less likely to incorporate that statement into their letters, as the following examples illustrate:

> I believe that the combination of my education and project experience make me well suited for either of your engineering programs. I have included copies of my resume and transcript for your review. I thank you for your time and consideration. As directed by your web site, I am referencing code 108IINTO. (Male, Majority, Engineering)

> I am very interested in seeking a career opportunity with your company, and I feel that the combination of my education and leadership experiences make me an excellent candidate for a position in Sales Marketing. I look forward to receiving your reply. Thank you for your consideration. (Male, Majority, Business)

These illustrations show that men have a sincere interest in the company and position, but both examples lack a clear statement that indicates what future contact, if any, will be made. Compare these statements to the following ones written by women:

> Please allow me to contact you by telephone in two weeks to arrange an interview for the cashiering systems administration position with [name of company]. Thank you very much for your time and consideration. (Female, Majority, Business)

> I am extremely interested in working for [name of company] and would like the opportunity to discuss a position with you, perhaps in your Customer Relations Management department. I will contact you in a week or ten days to answer any questions you may have and to see if you need any other information from me. Thank you for your time and consideration. (Female, Majority, Business)

In these two examples, the women clearly indicate they will contact the employer in the future. They describe what type of contact will be made (i.e. telephone) and the time frame in which the contact will occur. The previous examples for males did not include any of this information. Possibly male students assume that some type of contact will follow. In this case, male students would be well served to obtain literature that explains the components of a cover letter and what should be addressed in each component.

Another possible explanation for the findings related to differences by gender revolves around the mean scores for aesthetic value. Analysis revealed that both men and women received equal mean scores for this component. One explanation for this may be the classes offered at the university where the study was conducted. Some students, both men and women, may complete a class that focuses on conducting a job search, interviewing, and creating cover letters and resumes. It is possible that all students were instructed to closely focus on the appearance of the cover letter since it is one of the first connections between the student and the employer. This might explain the lack of difference on mean scores by gender.

Next, this study looked at differences in communication skills by race (see Table 4). Results revealed that communication skills used on cover letters are stronger from majority students as opposed to minority students. The trend here was conclusive: scores for majority participants were higher than those for minority participants on three of the five components as well on total mean score.

The scores suggest that majority students more consistently link previous experiences and skills to the position of interest. The majority students also pay closer attention to indicating how they learned of a position and exactly what position they are seeking. This one particular component revealed the most noticeable difference in mean scores suggesting a meaningful difference in understanding. Another area in which majority participants scored higher was the aesthetic value of the cover letter. Majority students presented cover letters that used better lay outs and were more neatly composed than cover letters of minority students.

Minority students scored slightly higher on the other two components. The first component was referencing an enclosed resume. The second was including a statement that indicated future contact. These scores showed that minority students had a good understanding of

these components, but still did not generate cover letters of the same quality of those by majority students.

Several explanations for these findings are possible. Take, for example, the component of linking past experiences with the position of intent. Majority students are considerably more adept at making a connection between past and potential future employment. The following examples typify how majority students addressed this component of cover letters:

> The financial markets have always interested me, and I actively follow both individual stocks and the overall market. I have studied equity and debt instruments including valuation, risk assessment, and statement analysis in my finance courses as well as on my own. I have studied both equity and debt markets in my classes, and am taking several advanced accounting courses. I have also taken quantitative analysis courses that emphasize the use of statistics and computers in analyzing information. These above-mentioned skills will allow me to be a valuable member of the [name of bank] investment banking team. (Male, Majority, Business)

> I am applying for the Project/Process Engineer position in the Automotive product line, requisition number CF0181418, I found on the World Wide Web at [web address]. Although I lack the 3-5 years experience noted in the job description, my bachelor of science degree in industrial and systems engineering has provided me the knowledge of the manufacturing systems used within[name of company], and how those systems integrate with other [name of company] processes. Combined with my experience in dealing with clients, these qualifications meet the requirements of your Project/Process Engineer position; thus allowing me to play a major role in the[name of company]. (Male, Majority, Engineering)

These two examples do a good job of indicating how the applicants' skills relate to the positions for which they are applying. Each example includes a statement that clearly acknowledges the connection. Compare these examples from majority students to ones written by minority students:

> I feel I am qualified because I am motivated and hard working. During my years in college I have been very active. Some of the activities I am involved in are, the [name of society], the Finance Club, and am [sic]a treasurer of the Economics Club for the 1998-1999 school year. Last summer, I was lucky enough to intern with an independent investment broker. (Male, Minority, Business)

My courses in the marketing management curriculum at [name of school] have given me not only the necessary theoretical background but also extensive practical experience. I have worked many case studies and problems, including preparing multimedia overhead presentations for group marketing projects.

My two summers of work experience as an intern with [name of company] in the capacity of sales representative with their Varsity Internship Program has also given me the opportunity to get extensive training and practical experience in the field of sales and customer relations. My job entailed developing a list of prospective customers from the area I worked in, contact sales leads through customer referrals, call on these prospective customers, and make personal demonstrations of the company's products (religious and education books) at their homes. I was also responsible for my own personal bookkeeping and inventory tracking of sales. I relocated and traveled extensively through the states of Arkansas, Mississippi and Tennessee. I was also responsible for all my expenses. (Male, Minority, Business)

In both examples from minority participants, the link between past and future employment is omitted. The letters made reference to past employment and skills gained, but never linked the experience to the particular job the participants sought.

Scores from majority and minority participants suggest that majority students have a much better understanding of how to include statements indicating which position they are interested in and how they learned of that position. The following excerpts are from some of the cover letters:

I learned of [name of business] through one of [name of school] online employment list services. I am currently a senior majoring in Management Science (Decision Support Systems option) seeking a position with your company as a Marketing Intern based in [name of town]. I will be graduating in May of 2000 and am currently available for interviewing. (Male, Majority, Business)

I am writing to inquire about the position with your company in the cashiering systems administration advertised on the NationJob Network on the Internet. (Reference Number 99-0950/NJN) I have enclosed my resume for further review for the position. I will be available July 5, 2000 for employment. (Female, Majority, Business)

These examples illustrate that majority students have a good understanding of how to indicate what position they are applying for and how they learned of the position. Each of these examples includes a specific position for which the applicant is applying and how they were

made aware of the position. Compare these two examples with the following examples from

minority participants:

> I am seeking an entry-level full-time engineering position. The position for a Communications Systems Engineer (Posting ID # 65A/09045048) seems like a perfect place for me to start. The job requirements perfectly match my background and interests. I have educated myself through course material in class at[name of school], and through articles in magazines, journals and Internet about the latest trends and breakthroughs in the Telecommunications field. (Female, Minority, Engineering)

> I am writing to inquire about entry level full time positions that may be open. A training position would be ideal. I will be graduating in May 2000 from [name of school} with a bachelors in aerospace engineering. (Male, Minority, Engineering)

In these two examples, the applicants did not clearly indicate which position they were applying

for or how they learned of the opening. This is in direct contrast to the examples from majority

students in which a position and point of reference were indicated.

Perhaps in the examples from minority participants, the jobs they were applying for were

not in line with their major, therefore the applicants were not completely sure what positions

were available at a particular company. It is also possible that the applicants were not aware that

they needed to include a statement of how they learned of the position. In either case, the

students would benefit from meeting with a Career Counselor and discussing various job options

that are within their major and the appropriate method to use when writing the opening

paragraph of a cover letter.

The last research question examined differences by academic college (Business and

Engineering). In terms of cover letters, results suggest that students from the College of

Business, as compared to those from the College of Engineering, have a better understanding of

how to prepare a cover letter. Participants from the College of Business scored higher on three of

the five components. Business students demonstrated a better understanding of relating past

skills with the job of interest. These participants also showed that they are more adept at

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including a statement that makes reference to an enclosed resume. Mentioning future contact between the student and employer is the last area where respondents from the College of Business demonstrated stronger communication skills.

Scores indicate that participants from the College of Engineering scored higher on the remaining two components. That is students in the College of Engineering are more practiced at identifying the exact position they are seeking and how they learned of that position. The results also pointed out that the aesthetic value of cover letters from students in the College of Engineering were higher than from students in the College of Business.

Participants in the College of Business are stronger in some components while participants in the College of Engineering are stronger in others. For example, respondents from the College of Business are more careful about indicating an enclosed resume as the following statement illustrates:

> Enclosed is a copy of my resume, which more fully details my activities and past work experience. I hope to hear from you about any possible openings. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me, either by E-mail or telephone. My E-mail address is [address] and my phone number is [phone number]. Thank you very much for your time and consideration. (Male, Minority, Business)

In this example, the student specifically mentioned that a resume was included with the cover letter. Compare the previous statement to one from a participant in Engineering:

> I am very interested in speaking with you regarding an Industrial Engineering position. I may be reached at [phone number]. Thank you for your consideration, I look forward to your call. (Female, Majority, Engineer)

This example makes no mention of an attached resume. The applicant comments that she appreciates the employer's consideration, but she does not entice the employer to review her resume by mentioning that it is enclosed.

Scores also revealed that students from the College of Business are more adept at linking their previous skills and experiences to the job for which they are applying. The following examples suggest that Engineering students are not proficient in this area:

> During my Co-op terms at [name of company}, I worked in various capacities across several different departments. My first term was in DMS-10 Customer Engineering where I served both as a System Application Engineer and assistant on the ISO9000 audit preparation. My second term was in the same department as a Field Engineering, working with CADRA II and in the EDMS and Pedmis databases. My third term was in XPM Product Test where I went through PM/CC and Peripheral Maintenance Tests in addition to a project on ARCHIDs. My last term I worked in Sprint Field Operations, serving as technical support as well as helping with the ISO9001 audit. Since then, I have moved on to become the Network Coordinator for a local [name of school]. (Male, Majority, Engineering)

> Last semester in my Civil Engineering Measurements course, one of my labs required me to use a program called INTEGRATION, a traffic simulator to minimize travel time. This lab challenged me to use different variations of signal cycle length and phase splits to find the minimum average delay. This lab sparked my interest in transportation. As a result I am currently taking Introduction to Transportation Engineering. In this class, I am learning geometric design, elements of traffic analysis, signalized intersections, and transportation networks. In the spring semester, I am enrolled in two classes that will add to my transportation knowledge: Planning Transportation Facilities and Infrastructure Condition Assessment. I am eager to learn more about transportation by applying my education in real life situations. (Male, Majority, Engineering)

In both examples, students offered long lists of their experiences and skills. In neither case, however, did they relate those experiences or skills to the job they were seeking.

Another component where Business students scored higher than Engineers was mentioning future contact between the student and employer. Most students were aware that they are responsible for indicating that future contact will be made, however, it was not clearly mentioned in cover letters from Engineering participants, as the following examples reveal:

> I believe that the combination of my education and project experience make me well suited for either of your engineering programs. I have included copies of my resume and transcript for your review. I thank you for your time and consideration. As directed by your web site, I am referencing code 108IINTO. (Male, Majority, Engineering)

It is my hope that you agree that this position would be a perfect fit for my background and personality. I looked [sic]forward to speaking with you directly on this matter. (Male, Majority, Engineering)

These examples suggest that Engineering students are not indicating that they will initiate any future contact. Neither statement makes reference to any type of follow up that will be initiated by the applicant. Compare the Engineering students' statements to those of Business students:

I am very interested in working for the[name of company], and would like the opportunity to discuss a position with you. I will contact you in a week or ten days to answer any questions you may have and to see if you need any other information from me (i.e. company application form, transcripts, etc.). Thank you for your consideration. (Male, Majority, Business)

I am extremely interested in working for [name of company] and would like the opportunity to discuss a position with you, perhaps in your Customer Relations Management department. I will contact you in a week or ten days to answer any questions you may have and to see if you need any other information from me. Thank you for your time and consideration. (Female, Majority, Business)

These statements show that students from the College of Business have a clear understanding of the need to indicate future contact. These two illustrations do a nice job of mentioning future contact and being specific as to what type of contact will be made and when.

These examples suggest that Engineering students do not possess the strong written communication skills needed to compose a powerful cover letter. This may be due to the type of writing assignments completed by Engineering majors. Engineering students are enrolled in curricula and classes that are very analytical and rely on projects rather than papers. Assignments in this curriculum often entail statistical analysis as opposed to narrative reporting. Engineering students may benefit from researching and reviewing examples of cover letters and participating in sessions/seminars that focus on how to write a cover letter.

Relationship of Findings to Prior Research

It is interesting to examine how the findings of this study relate to results reported in previous studies on communication skills. A number of previous studies have been conducted that examine the communication skills used by students in general. The majority of these studies have one of two foci. The first focus examines the verbal communication skills used by students in their job searches. The second focus is on employer concerns about the lack of communication skills demonstrated by college students. Limited research has investigated written communication skills based on gender, race, and academic college. The research that has been conducted found that students are lacking strong communication skills (Allen, 1998; Donofrio & Davis, 1997; Klopf & Cambra, 1981; Mangum, 1996; Peterson, 1997).

Consider the series of studies that examine employer perspectives on applicant skills. These studies are categorized into two groups: factors that influence the hiring of college students, and employers' concerns about applicants' weak communication skills. Three studies explored factors that influence the hiring of college students. The National Association for College and Employers (NACE) conducted a study in the Fall of 1997 in which 421 employers were surveyed. The results found that on a five-point scale, where five equaled "extremely important", oral and written communication skills received ratings of 4.53 and 4.12 respectively (Allen, 1998).

A survey conducted by the Indiana Commission for Higher Education asked personnel directors to identify the 10 most influential factors when hiring college graduates. One hundred percent identified communication skills as the most influential factor (Klopf & Cambra, 1981).

Communication skills are one of the most influential factors involved in hiring decisions. A total of 98.33% of respondents to a study of employers reported that verbal and non-verbal communication skills are crucial to the hiring process (Peterson, 1997).

The remaining two studies focused on the lack of communication skills displayed by students during the job search. One study employed professionals in the business field. The employers were asked to identify the largest problem with applicants' skills. Participants responded that a lack of written skills is applicants' largest problem (Donofrio & Davis, 1997).

Over a three-year period, four studies were conducted that explored the most frequent shortcomings of applicants. A lack of communication skills ranked in the top three in all four studies (Mangum, 1996).

The present study supports these employers' concerns. Results show that students have low scores in some critical areas of cover letters. Overall, participants demonstrated only an average understanding with respect to written communication skills. Students need to improve on several components of cover letters.

For example, results revealed that students have an average idea about how to relate previous experience with the positions they are seeking. However, they have a better understanding of the importance of a statement that mentions a specific position of interest and how they were made aware of that position. On resumes, they clearly showed that they understand the importance of including their name, address, phone number, and e-mail address. It can be concluded, from the relatively high scores for the aesthetic value of both documents, that students clearly understand how to present a well-organized and laid out document. These findings suggest that, overall, students have an average understanding of the components and importance of a cover letter, yet they seem to more clearly understand the components of

resumes. Specifically, students are very adept at presenting aesthetically pleasing cover letters and resumes that include information such as name and address, but they need to improve upon components such as relating previous experiences to the position they are seeking.

Studies related to communication skills and gender were also examined. Males prefer less structured writing assignments or to not write at all (Boser, Wiley, & Clark, 1991). The current findings seem to support this pattern. Of the five cover letter components, men scored slightly lower on 3, higher on 1, and were equal to women on the remaining component. The resume analysis revealed lower scores on all 3 components for men. These findings support previous research and suggest that men do not perform as well on structured writing assignments.

Finally, this study investigated communication skills by academic college. Limited research has been conducted on this topic and it focuses primarily on participants from the fields of humanities, psychology, and social science. Due to the small sample sizes for participants in some colleges in the present study (Arts and Sciences, Human Resources and Education, and Agriculture) the results cannot be used to confirm or contradict previous research.

Implications for Future Practice and Research

The current study may be beneficial to several groups or individuals working directly with students who are conducting a job search. One group of people this study has implications for are employers, or those responsible for hiring college students. These findings suggest that while students seem to have an understanding of how to lay out a cover letter, they do not know how to relate their skills to the skills the company seeks. This may be due to a lack of information students have about positions. Employers may wish to address this issue by providing job descriptions that clearly indicate what skills, knowledge, and experience are required for the job. Providing such information may help applicants see exactly what the

company and position require and assist the students in addressing those items in their cover letters.

The findings from this study revealed that, overall, women have stronger communication skills pertaining to cover letters. Employers may want to keep this in mind when interviewing and reviewing male candidates. Perhaps employers could evaluate male applicants on different characteristics than female applicants. For example, males may have stronger analytical skills than women, so the interviewer could gear certain aspects of the interview towards analytical problem solving.

Race of the applicant is another area that employers need to consider when interviewing a potential employee. Once again, the findings of this study suggest that majority students have stronger written communication skills than minority students. Employers would benefit from having a complete understanding of various customs and cultures. In some cultures, it is unacceptable to discuss ones' skills and accomplishments. As a result, when minority applicants prepare a cover letter, they may not feel comfortable discussing their experiences and skills that relate to the position. However, employers, expect that a cover letter will address these issues. Employers may need to take this cultural difference into consideration when evaluating minority applicants' cover letters. An understanding of various cultural customs and beliefs may help employers better evaluate potential employees. With this knowledge, employers may wish to reword interview questions so as to not ask applicants to boast about themselves. For example, an interviewer could ask minority students to discuss their responsibilities at a previous job. The employers could also ask applicants to explain what aspects of the position they liked and disliked. This information can give employers good insight into applicants' skills and interests

without asking them to discuss their strongest skills and abilities directly. Minority students may be more comfortable with such an approach.

Results of this study also revealed that students from the College of Business scored higher than students from the College of Engineering on three of the five components for the cover letter. It may benefit companies to consider the curricula of these two colleges in order to understand what classes, assignments, and projects these students complete. This knowledge might enable interviewers to direct questions that are more relevant to the applicants' abilities and accomplishments. If employers have a general idea of what coursework, classes, and experiences students from these two colleges have, they may be better able to assess the content of cover letters and resumes in a more appropriate context.

A second group of individuals who may benefit from the findings of this study is Career Center staff members who develop and present job search seminars. This study showed that overall, students understand how to create aesthetically pleasing cover letters and resumes, yet both documents lack vital information. The relationship between previous experiences and skills and how those relate to the position for which students are applying tend to be overlooked in cover letters. Information about their coursework, work experiences and skills within the resume is also less evident. One reason students may omit these types of information is that they are unclear about how to create a document that also meets suggested one-page limitations. Generally, students are encouraged to create cover letters and resumes that do not exceed one-page in length. Students often struggle with composing short, concise sentences that relay their thoughts and ideas to the reader in a one-page document. Career Services staff members may wish to hold sessions that educate students on how to write short and concise cover letters and resumes. This seminar may also provide guidance on creating a resume that uses key words that

employees look for. If staff members educate students, students may be better prepared to compose strong cover letters and resumes that also meet recommended page limits.

Career Services staff members may also wish to target males more heavily than females with sessions and seminars that focus on writing techniques and skills. The results of this study revealed that women have stronger writing skills than men in terms of cover letters and resumes. Perhaps staff members from Career Services could advertise and hold sessions and seminars that are for men only. Through these sessions, the particular strengths and weaknesses of men's writing skills could be addressed and refined. The sessions could focus specifically on these skills in relation to cover letter and resume composition.

Along those lines, Career Center staff could also hold similar sessions and seminars for minority students. According to the findings of this study, minority students' cover letter and resume writing skills are not as strong as those of majority students. Therefore, it may behoove staff members to conduct seminars for minority students only. In order to target these students, advertising in places such as minority student organizations and minority offices (i.e. Multicultural Center, Black Cultural Center) may be necessary.

Finally, Career Center staff members could work in collaboration with the specific Colleges to offer cover letter and resume writing courses. As this study revealed, students from the College of Business seem to better understand 3 of the 5 cover letter components and students from the College of Engineering seem to better understand 2 of these 5 components. Collaboration between professors in these colleges and Career Center staff members could assist students in gaining a better understanding of all cover letter components. For instance, if these Colleges require their seniors to complete a capstone course, one section of the class could focus on cover letter and resume writing. Staff members from the Career Center could facilitate those

class sessions, offer tips on how to create these documents, and set aside time to critique class members' cover letters and resumes.

A final constituency that could benefit from these results are writing professors, particularly those in business and engineering colleges. This study revealed that students in these colleges have average written communication skills when composing cover letters and resumes. Professors in these fields may wish to develop or improve their writing courses. These courses would need to focus on what components are included in a cover letter and resume and how to professionally address each component. For example, one topic could explore the various ways applicants can appropriately mention their intent to contact the employer in the future. This research found that students in the College of Engineering scored lower on that component than students from the College of Business. If professors could provide appropriate guidance, students may be better equipped to write strong cover letters and resumes.

These professors could also create various assignments that are gender specific. Data from the present study suggest that women have stronger written communication skills than men. Professors of writing courses could offer assistance to men by asking them to complete assignments that focus on their weaknesses, with hopes of strengthening them. According to this study, men had more trouble than women discussing the link between their previous work experience and skills and the available position. Professors may wish to ask male students to write a paragraph on the relationship between their strongest attribute and how it helped them in a previous internship or summer job. By practicing how to link skills and work with a past experience, men may gain a better understanding of how to link past experience with a future position.

This study also revealed that minority students could benefit from more guidance and practice with written communication skills. Writing professors may wish to offer classes that are geared towards minority students. In these classes, professors could address issues that surround the dominant (Caucasian) business culture. Class topics could include a brief overview of the dominant business culture, what is expected of an applicant, and how to prepare cover letters and resumes that are in line with that culture. Professors could also help minority students strengthen their written communication skills by giving them assignments where they are asked to critique majority students' cover letters and resumes. This assignment may help minority students see and understand how to create cover letters and resumes.

Overall, students create average to above average cover letters and resumes. Certain components need improvement and writing professors could assist students in strengthening those areas. Writing statements about future contact was one area in which letters had low mean scores. Writing professors could set aside one class period and address this issue. Students understand that this information needs to be included, yet it is often omitted. This may be because students do not know how to appropriately include a statement to that affect. During one class session, writing professors could review various statements and ideas of how to address future contact on cover letters. Students could take an active role by creating statements and then sharing them with the class.

Results of this study also have implications for future research. The current study explored only the written communication skills students use. A future study may wish to investigate oral communication skills. For example, a study could be conducted in which student interviews are videotaped and analyzed based on grammar, enunciation, tone and volume of

voice, and body language. Such a study would expand the information available about communication skills used by college students in the job search process in general.

Another study could further investigate communication skills by academic college. The present study had limited data from five of the eight colleges at the university where the research was conducted. To more thoroughly investigate the differences by college, a study could be devoted to that focus. The results of such a study might help faculty within each college better understand the level of communication skills among their students. This information could also be used to develop and refine capstone and writing courses that these colleges offer.

Researchers may also wish to conduct this study using a different sample. Gathering data from student leaders versus non-student leaders may reveal varying levels of communication skills. These findings could help faculty and staff members who facilitate leadership courses better understand what communication skills are strengthened by filling leadership roles on campus. This information could then be used to tailor class sessions towards a discussion about communication and leadership.

Another study could be conducted that targeted employers or individuals who hire college students. Employers have expressed concern that college applicants do not possess the communication skills that positions and fields require. A future study could survey employers asking what they view to be the main reasons for this deficit. The results of this study may indicate what changes or modifications need to be made, at the college level, to better equip students with the communication skills they need to succeed in the professional world.

Finally, a future study may investigate students who are exposed to writing intensive classes versus those who are not. Such a study might help determine the effectiveness of writing

intensive classes. Results may help professionals understand what areas of curricula are adequate and what areas need improvement.

<div align="center">Limitations of the Study</div>

Once the research had been conducted and data analyzed, the researcher noted several additional limitations to the present study beyond those described in Chapter One. One limitation related to the formatting of resumes. Participants' resumes were gathered from the Web Resume Book, a web based resume storage site. The majority of students who employ this service tailor their resumes around the examples given in the Career Services Manual. It is possible that this led to the high scores on the aesthetic values of resumes so that the results were unduly influenced.

The second limitation related to the low number of spelling errors on both types of documents. Since these documents were most likely composed on computers, participants had the chance to spell check the cover letters and resumes before submitting them to the researcher. Spell checking would allow the students an opportunity to correct any mistakes prior to releasing the materials. This could be one explanation for the low occurrence of spelling errors that might have influenced the results.

A third limitation dealt with the number of participants in the study. The researcher originally sought to gather data from 120 students. However, the final sample consisted of only 50 participants. Having a limited sample size reduced the amount of data gathered, which may have caused a misrepresentation of data.

To participate in the On-Campus Interview program, students are not required to submit a cover letter. It is possible that the students who took part in this study created a cover letter strictly for the purpose of participating in the study and earning the $5 incentive. If this was the

case, the cover letter possibly did not reflect a true and honest effort on the participant's part. This may have influenced the scoring, skewing the outcomes of the study.

The final limitation also deals with the On-Campus Interview program. Students who register to participate in this program are required to attend an orientation session. During this session, students are given valuable job search information. It is possible that students who participate in On-Campus Interviewing may submit documents that are different than students who do not participate in On-Campus Interviewing.

In conclusion, one of the aims of higher education is to produce good citizens. Part of good citizenship includes being employed. In order to become employed, students have to conduct a job search. A major part of the job search revolves around the written communication skills of applicants.

Employers have reported that student applicants lack the communication skills they seek in workers. The present findings suggest that the students' lack some of the communication skills needed to succeed in the business world and confirm employer sentiments. Overall, students seem to have adequate communication skills, but there is room for improvement. Specifically, students could improve their communication skills in the area of linking past experiences and knowledge with the requirements of the position for which they are applying.

If faculty and staff in higher education want to help produce good citizens, then more attention needs to be paid to the communication skills used by college students in the job search process. Employers have expressed their concern regarding this matter, and it is the duty of those in higher education to ensure that students receive an education that fully equips them with strong communication skills. If students continue to graduate from college with weak

communication skills, individuals, employers, and companies will begin to question whether

colleges and universities are achieving their goals.

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Appendix A:

E-mail Message Sent to Potential Participant

Dear Name,

You are being invited to participate in a study to explore college students and the job search process. With the cooperation of Career Services, I have obtained a copy of the On-Campus Interviewing schedules for the past two weeks. I selected your name because it appeared on one or both weeks' schedules. If you choose to participate, you will be compensated $5.

In order to participate in this study, you need to complete the following steps:

1) Create a cover letter for a job position in which you have an interest or have completed an interview. Electronically submit the cover letter to Robin Porter, the researcher, at rporter@vt.edu. You must submit the cover letter within 72 hours (3 days) of receiving this message.

2) Provide authorization for me to access your resume through the Web-Resume Book. You will provide authorization by submitting your cover letter to the researcher (rporter@vt.edu). A Career Services staff member will print your resume and give it to me.

3) Complete the demographic survey found below. For each item, please place an "X" next to the category that applies to you.

A $5 incentive will be paid to each participant of the study. Your compensation will be available for you to pick up in 140 Squires Student Center on April 5 from 2:00-4:00 PM, April 6 from 9:00-11:00 AM, and April 12 from 1:00-3:00 PM. Just bring your student ID to me during these times and I will pay you $5.

Thank you for your time and cooperation. I hope you will consider taking part in this important study. If you have any questions, please contact:

Robin Porter, Researcher   231-2565
Dr. Joan Hirt, Faculty Advisor   231-9700
H.T. Hurd, Chair, IRB Research Design   231-5013

Thank you,
Robin Porter

Gender Male _____   Female _____

Race: Caucasian _____   African American _____ Native American _____
Asian American _____ Hispanic _____   Bi/Multi Racial _____
Other (Please specify) _____

Academic College: Arts and Sciences _____ Business_____ Engineering_____

Appendix B:

Cover Letter Ranking Sheet

Cover Letter Ranking Sheet:

Ratings of Goals and Components

Name _____

Gender _____

Race_____

Academic College_____

0=Omitted   1= Below Average   2= Average   3 = Above Average

Component I - Introduction

Goal 1-Identify the position & Point of reference   **Effectiveness**

Clarity	0 1 2 3
Language	0 1 2 3
Spelling/Grammar	0 1 2 3

Component II - Body

Goal 2 – Related Skills, Knowledge, Experience

Clarity	0 1 2 3
Language	0 1 2 3
Spelling/Grammar	0 1 2 3

Goal 3- Reference to an enclosed resume

Included = Yes	Yes 1 No 0
Omitted =No	

Component III - Conclusion

Goal 4- Indication of future contact

Clarity	0 1 2 3
Language	0 1 2 3
Spelling/Grammar	0 1 2 3

Component IV -Rating of Aesthetic Value   **Effectiveness**

Neatness	1 2 3
Overall Layout/Form at	1 2 3
Font Size and Style	1 2 3

Scoring:

Total Goal 1_____

Total Goal 2 _____

Total Goal 3 _____

Total Goal 4 _____

Total Aesthetic Value _____

Total Overall _____

Appendix C:

Resume Ranking Sheet

Resume Ranking Sheet

Name _____
Gender_____
Race_____
Academic College_____

0= Omitted   1= Below Average   2= Average   3= Above Average

Personal Information   **Effectiveness**

Clarity   0   1   2   3
Language   0   1   2   3
Spelling /Grammar   0   1   2   3
Completeness   0   1   2   3

Body of the Resume

Clarity   0   1   2   3
Language   0   1   2   3
Spelling/Grammar   0   1   2   3
Completeness   0   1   2   3

Aesthetic Value   **Effectiveness**

Neatness   1   2   3
Overall Layout/Format   1   2   3
Font Size and Style   1   2   3

Scoring:

Total Personal Information _____

Total Body of the Resume _____

Total Aesthetic value_____

Total Overall _____