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Student Advocacy and Research Regarding Employability with Women in an Addiction Recovery Center

Abstract

This article presents a course project that allowed senior undergraduate occupational science students the opportunity to experience advocacy and leadership roles as they prepared to transition to entry-level occupational therapy programs. The students coordinated an on-site employment fair for women residents of one Alcoholics Anonymous-based substance abuse recovery center in Kentucky. This ultimately led to a preliminary qualitative program evaluation study of the participants' perceptions of employability after participating in the fair. Following a semi-structured interview protocol, nine participants were interviewed by student investigators immediately following the fair. The resulting data were compared within and across transcripts, and coded for emergent themes within an Alcoholics Anonymous framework. The results indicated that the women considered both the students and employers to be advocates; also, the fair was seen as a practical resource for recovery. The women exited the fair poised to pursue diverse work opportunities they previously thought unobtainable. This article supports occupational therapy education efforts to promote research experiences and has implications for future occupational therapy practice in the domain of work.

Keywords

women and addiction, occupational science, advocacy

Cover Page Footnote

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Credentials Display

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“I thought they would look for a specific type of person, but after talking to them [the employer] there are jobs for everybody in most of these businesses. Perception is everything and my perception was wrong.” This quote comes from one resident of the Liberty Place Recovery Center for Women (Liberty Place), an Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) residential addiction treatment center in Richmond, Kentucky. It reflects her feelings after participating in an on-site job fair (the Liberty Fair) that is coordinated annually by Eastern Kentucky University (EKU) senior undergraduate occupational science (OS) students.

This woman’s response underscores broader research that has explored gainful employment as an important outcome of substance abuse and recovery (Negura & Maranda, 2008; Washington, 1999; Webster et al., 2007; West, 2008). The OS students’ participation in the Liberty Fair gives them the opportunity to understand the concept of employment as a valued occupation and its relationship to occupational therapy practice (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2008). The principle of doing or carrying out advocacy helps students to create their occupational identity (Schell, Gillen, Scaffa, & Cohn, 2013) and enables them to understand the influence of occupations on individuals’ sense of health and well-being (Royeen, 2003).

This article explores a course project that resulted in OS students gaining a greater understanding of advocacy for their development as occupational therapists. Client-centered occupational therapy interventions and outcomes for women recovering from addiction are not

addressed. Instead, the focus is on the value and rigor of student advocacy within a pre-occupational therapy context that informs community agencies working to positively change individuals’ lives. In addition, the course project ultimately led to a small-scale preliminary study of the participating women’s perceptions of employability, which is also presented here.

Literature Review

In sweeping social science vernacular, advocacy and social justice have been inextricably linked. Advocacy consists of efforts to achieve acceptance for individuals whose welfare and interests are compromised or rejected by others and/or to alter a law or policy to influence public attitudes (Sosin & Caulum, 1983). Smith asserted that social justice is the notion that “governments have a legal and moral responsibility to provide for the basic needs of their citizens, including the preservation of liberties and protection from harm” (Braveman & Suarez-Balcazar, 2009, p. 14). Similarly, Townsend (2011) discussed how “occupational therapy’s social vision of justice has guided the evolution” (pg. 1) of occupational science. Social justice is often discussed in occupational therapy literature in terms of occupational justice, reflecting a belief that “societies should provide opportunities for people to engage in meaningful occupations that allow them to develop their potential and participate in their communities” (Braveman & Suarez-Balcazar, 2009, p. 15). Occupational justice addresses individuals’ participation in meaningful activity as empowering self-advocacy (Paul-Ward, 2009).

As previously mentioned, research has explored gainful employment as an important outcome of substance abuse and recovery (Negura & Maranda, 2008; Washington, 1999; Webster et al., 2007; West, 2008). According to Webster et al. (2007), “employment occupies time, provides structure, and can help a drug-abusing individual with a sense of self-mastery and self-esteem” (p. 259). Studies exploring the direct relationship between AA addiction recovery and employability for women are limited. Majer, Droege, and Jason (2010) studied recovering addicts in a 12-step residential treatment center and found that meaning in life was an important resource for recovery, since the inability to find meaning contributed to their addiction. As Kelly, Magill, and Stout (2009) have noted, AA studies have also stressed the separate aspects of the commonly known AA meetings and in-depth education (i.e., 12-step facilitation) programs housed within residential treatment centers. Kelly et al. have suggested that individuals in a 12-step residential program recover by enhancing “self-efficacy, coping skills, and motivation, and by facilitating adaptive social network changes” (p. 236). Although AA has been shown to be beneficial for many different types of individuals with alcohol problems, as Kelly et al. suggested, there is limited research specifically on women’s patterns of drug use and addiction and recovery programs. Grant (2007), who studied rural Appalachian women and how they made meaning of their recovery processes, noted that “much of the literature generates stereotypical images of women who use drugs and alcohol, distorting their

523). Sanders (2006) studied women who attended women-only AA meetings and concluded that women in recovery must redefine their entire being and find the ability, courage, and power to overcome their addiction.

Other vocational rehabilitation and drug and alcohol research has addressed mental health and the gender of clients in addiction recovery. For example, Webster et al. (2007) explored employment barriers for women based on their mental health status and concluded that “drug abuse treatment providers should pay particular attention to the needs of female clients, who may be in greater need of mental health services and increased vocational rehabilitation” (p. 264). Similarly, West (2008) found that substance abuse is “an independent and significant predictor of unemployment and underemployment when controlling for such factors as level of education, age, gender, and ethnicity” (p. 72). As might be expected, drug-abusing women are typically employed less than men and face more barriers to employment (Grant, 2007; Negura & Maranda, 2008; Washington, 1999; Webster et al., 2007).

Background

Liberty Place

Liberty Place is a state-funded, long-term, community residential program that seeks to adequately serve Kentucky women who are recovering substance abusers (Kentucky River Foothills Development Council, Inc. [KRFDC], 2012a, para. 2). It is currently a 100+ bed facility that houses approximately 100 women who have been referred to the center from the Kentucky Department of Corrections or self-admitted. The

center's mission is "to restore opportunities to thousands of women by preparing them to lead sober, stable, and productive lives" (KRFDC, 2012a, para. 3). There are three phases in the program: (a) Safe Off the Streets (SOS), (b) Motivational Tracks 1 & 2, and (c) Transitional Housing. SOS screens women for medical, physical, and mental health issues, while Motivational Tracks 1 & 2 concern the women's commitment to a new way of life. Transitional Housing enables the women to receive vocational counseling and live independently in the community (KRFDC, 2012b).

Liberty Place is based on the 12 steps of AA's recovery program model: A self-help group whose purpose is to help its members achieve and maintain sobriety (KRFDC, 2005). AA considers an individual's journey of recovery to be based on sharing one's story and learning about reparation, lifestyle change, and spiritual renewal (Weegmann & Piwowoz-Hjort, 2009). Consistent with Liberty Place's AA philosophy of lifestyle change, West (2008) has concluded that "one of the strongest and most consistent predictors of substance abuse treatment success and sobriety maintenance post-treatment is gainful employment" (p. 71). This became the basis for the linkage between the Liberty Place student advocacy project and the resulting study that explored the participating women's perceptions of potential gainful employment.

Liberty Fair Advocacy Project

Senior EKU OS students participate in the course *OTS 402S Practicum in OS IV: Advocacy and Research*. The course gears student learning

outcomes toward critical thinking in line with community service, the spirit of advocacy, and the department's core curriculum themes of occupation, reasoning, diversity, communication, and professional identity (Eastern Kentucky University, n.d.). One section of the course allows students the opportunity to organize and host the Liberty Fair, a one-day job fair. The OS students have organized the Liberty Fair for the Liberty Place residents since 2010. Local and area employers are invited to attend, interview, and recruit the women who are completing the Transitional Housing phase of the program.

The students use a three-step modified program evaluation approach for advocacy. Step 1 is investigation, providing insight into primary conceptual aspects of the program. Step 2 is an action plan, creating a visual image of the project and developing strategies that will work best for the organization. Step 3 is evaluation and implementation, documenting all project communications and analyzing future project feasibility. The modified program evaluation methodology helps students to bridge ideological views of self as occupational beings to a more practical awareness and recognition of others' occupational lives. Students experience the meaning of work and see how the women access and potentially acquire employment. Students' specific actions from the 2013 Liberty Fair included the following steps.

Step 1- investigation. Students systematically investigated Liberty Place as a community agency and gained insight into factors correlated with advocating for the women. They

gathered extensive information about the setting and residents of Liberty Place, identified the main themes for the Liberty Fair, and evaluated their initial job fair design for missing elements.

Step 2- action plan. Students created a flow chart of the Liberty Fair idea developed during Step 1, identifying an optimal set-up and establishing student goals and objectives. The students were able to set fluid programmatic advocacy goals with the women, such as (a) work collaboratively with Liberty Place, (b) offer practical career tips, and (c) contact area employers to participate and consider offering job opportunities to the women. Sample student-written objectives during Step 2 included (a) three to five of the women would be offered a job by participating Liberty Fair employers, and (b) the women's self-perception of their job-seeking abilities would improve. Students also met twice with a small group of residents to gather input into the fair design.

Step 3- evaluation and implementation. Students had the option of using a modified Service Utilization Chart (Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004) or different strategies from Pierce (2003) to execute and evaluate the Liberty Fair. Students chose Rossi et al.'s method. They (a) documented all communications and organized information by group consensus; (b) implemented and directed the Liberty Fair; (c) monitored their own performance from project start to finish; and (d) disseminated thank-you letters and a final report to Liberty Place staff, residents, and employers.

The teaching-learning focus for the course

and the advocacy project was the assimilation of
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broad social justice elements of thought. The students completed all three steps of the modified program evaluation methodology and began to also discover its alignment with basic occupational justice principles of individuals' participation in meaningful activity.

Study Context

One result of the 2013 Liberty Fair advocacy project was that a small-scale preliminary study emerged which examined the participating women's perceptions of employability. The author has been involved professionally with Liberty Place for four years and is well versed in the center's recovery program. Through this community stewardship and the OS students' Liberty Fair work, the need to explore the women's perceptions of employability was identified.

Multiple disciplinary scholars have explored the concept of occupation (the act of doing) and the belief that individuals can live in a productive, meaningful way that encompasses all phases of their lives (Grant, 2007; Kielhofner, 2002; Larson & Zemke, 2003; Majer et al., 2010; Russel, 2001). In spite of this, we know that recovering addicts may view employment, or the act of doing work for pay, as an elusive goal (Negura & Maranda, 2008; West, 2008). This was the context for the study of the Liberty Place women.

Study Purpose

The purpose of this preliminary study was to describe the effect of the Liberty Fair student advocacy on the women of Liberty Place and capture their perceptions of potential employability. For this research, employability was defined as the women's perceptions of their potential to seek and

acquire a job upon discharge from Liberty Place.

The research questions were:

- How do the women reflect on their level of readiness for employment?
- How do the women make sense of and find meaning in the Liberty Fair?

Method

Design

A program evaluation approach was undertaken with nine key women who participated in the 2013 Liberty Fair. A 2012 EKU-awarded University Research Committee faculty mini-grant, titled *The Liberty Fair Advocacy Project and Women's Employability*, funded the study in the amount of \$1,414. Approval from EKU's Division of Sponsored Programs Institutional Review Board (IRB) was obtained August 13, 2012, and permission to interview the women was secured by April 2013. The principal investigator (PI) was the author of this article, and the co-investigators were four undergraduate OS students enrolled in the OS course previously mentioned, along with one department graduate assistant.

Initially, 10 to 15 women were purposefully selected by the Liberty Place vocational counselor. They were identified as (a) 2012-2013 residents of Liberty Place, (b) eligible for the Transitional Housing phase, and (c) eligible to participate in the Liberty Fair. Of this sample, nine women were ultimately recruited based on their willingness to participate in the study and after one on-site, individual, semi-structured interview. The investigators were not provided with access to the women's demographic information and personal histories, per the program's restrictions, and thus

were unable to consider individual occupational profiles. In addition, the participant selection was not controlled for diversity.

Data Collection

The data collection was conducted within an AA conceptual framework in an attempt to uncover a broad range of the women's perceptions about employability as residents of Liberty Place. The student investigators, who had been formally trained in qualitative interviewing during one five-hour session by the PI, conducted semi-structured interviews of the nine women. This training met with IRB approval and was true to the original grant proposal and the role and scope of study. The participating women were well informed of the study's purpose and all provided written consent.

The investigators were able to interview the women immediately following the April 2013 Liberty Fair event. Utilizing the semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix), the nine interviews were audio taped. The interviews were conducted simultaneously, but in three stages, in one large room of approximately 1,000 square feet, which was partitioned into separate spaces for privacy. This was not an optimal interview setting; however, the vocational counselor, with the consent of the women, considered the lack of privacy as customary for this stage of their AA recovery. The women were interviewed for a total of one and one-half hours, and all investigators kept written notes. Three students and the assistant transcribed their own interviews (two each) and a fourth student transcribed her own interview, all in the Department of Occupational Therapy's Research Center. All

data were stored securely in a locked box in the research center.

Data Analysis

The PI completed data analysis in May 2013. The raw data were open-coded within each transcript by reviewing and making reflective notes, followed by a comparison of data across transcripts. The PI was not given additional access to the women for member checks. Saturation was influenced by program constraints, and data collection ceased upon the completion of the April 2013 Liberty Fair.

When the data were reduced, a short list of four major coded themes was developed that matched the text contents. The coded themes were based on how frequently a topic was found in the interview texts; major themes indicated five or more

responses from the nine women. Two additional minor themes represented four or fewer mentions in the women's responses. All of these themes were interpreted within the broad social science construct of AA, Liberty Place's recovery program framework.

Results

This article presents preliminary data and results. A comprehensive, qualitative account of the women's perceptions of employability has not yet been fully developed. The four major and two minor themes that the nine participants discussed are listed in Table 1. The themes reveal how the women perceived their experience with the Liberty Fair and their observations about their potential employability after participation.

Table 1

Major and Minor Themes in Liberty Fair Participant Responses (N = 9)

Themes	Major	Minor	# Responses
1.	Nerves and comfort co-existed		8
2.	Employers were empowering		8
3.	Need others' help		6
4.	Gained confidence to be different		5
5.		Practice makes perfect	4
6.		Return to school	3

Major Themes

Nerves and comfort co-existed. This first theme emerged when eight of the nine women expressed their initial feelings of nervousness and fear about attending the fair. However, they were

also able to experience immediate feelings of comfort once they began to participate.

There were seven area employers present at the fair, and approximately 40 women circulated through the fair in small groups at any given time. During the April 2013 event, the participating

employers represented a tailor shop, a chamber of commerce, a coffee company, a regional bank, two colleges, and a pet service company. The women were able to experience diverse potential work opportunities during the fair and were informed of businesses (via a handout) that were interested in hiring in the future.

Three examples from the study participants describe this nerves/comfort reaction:

- “I haven’t interacted with people outside of here in a long time and it was nice to know I’m OK, I’m still kind of normal, and I can talk to people without being uncomfortable.”
- “Well, going into it I was a little nervous—like on-the-spot questions. I got more relaxed and was able to open up more as I went along through the different booths.”
- “I felt nervous to start . . . it just brought back all that . . . it’s a good nervous.”

It appeared that the women became increasingly comfortable and at ease as they made their way around the employers’ booths at their own speed, without direct staff supervision, and consulted with resume-building and professional interviewing experts.

Employers were empowering. The second theme conveyed how the overwhelming majority of the women (i.e., eight out of nine study participants) began to recognize the employers as helpful and welcoming, and how they felt empowered to participate in the fair again. They were appreciative of the seven employers who showed up for the fair

and who took time out of their day to set up on site and hold conversations. Three of the participants described their feelings about the employers in the following representative comments:

- “Well, all the people, you know, understood and a couple of the people [employers] were telling us they researched about this place [Liberty Place]; you know, they understood where we come from. That’s amazing. You know, a lot of the girls have been through rough things and for them to be able to accept it and be understanding of it . . . I hope you all continue to do this because it will help me and some of the girls.”
- “All of the people at the tables were so kind and helpful and went above and beyond to answer questions and make me feel comfortable. I would love to participate again. I think it’s a really neat and a great opportunity.”
- “I felt like everyone was very nice, very personable, very easy to talk to. The tailoring guy was really funny . . . he was showing me how to do a stitch because I didn’t loop it. I tried to sew a patch into my jeans the other day and it didn’t stay because I didn’t loop it.”

The women’s knowledge that employers came to their “home” (Liberty Place) to recruit them, despite their addictive backgrounds, contributed to a sense of enthusiasm for the fair. The women saw that employers listened to their

stories and provided descriptive job and contact information.

Need others' help. The third theme that emerged from the data was the study participants' desire to (and growing understanding of how to) access other social services, such as transportation and childcare, to aid them in future job searches. Their responses indicated how fundamental their need was for help in this area. It was not within the scope of this study to define which of the women were mothers or wives or daughters. But concerns about income, transportation, and childcare were part of two stories:

- “I don't have a license currently, so I'd have to know about public transit and how to get from jobs and interviews. I need to know what my options are as far as getting around town, and then I also need to be thinking about accessing a new bank account and that sort of thing to get started.”
- “I'm honestly not sure of how to go about doing transportation and childcare, but I would be more interested in doing those things.”

According to the Liberty Place vocational education counselor, transportation and childcare obstacles remain in finding employment, and the fair could become a resource for the women to pursue community services.

Gained confidence to be different. The fourth major theme spoke to the women's feelings of being better informed about how to look for jobs that may or may not be familiar to them. The

the near future, utilizing their unique worker skills.

Two quotes reflected this awareness of individuality:

- “Like she was talking about at the bank . . . you could start at the teller position and then advance from there. You don't have to have a degree, you know, to necessarily get a job there and I'm going back. I've learned that I want to explore options more and not get a job where, you know, the only thing they have is this position and that's it.”
- “I have worked in a frame shop for the last six years before I came here, so I'm hoping to maybe look for something that's more in the creative field. For my first job I want to build a savings account, and I would like to have something I really truly enjoy that I go home with a finished product in my head and feel like I really accomplished something. I've worked since I've been 16, so I have experience in factories and I talked to the tables here today and there are different options like that.”

Minor Themes

Practice makes perfect. The first minor theme (mentioned by four of nine participants) covered the women's thoughts about the Liberty Fair interview training. The women felt it was a beneficial employment service that helped them to understand how to practice interviewing and ask more questions of employers. The women practiced a job interview using a script, acquired feedback on nonverbal body language, and learned about

appropriate answers to standard interview questions.

Overall, the women felt empowered to actively pursue a line of questioning during an interview to meet their needs in a job, rather than taking a more passive stance. Some of the women specifically spoke about the direct benefits of consulting with the interviewing expert. Three women shared the following:

- “When we sit and talk you know . . . it is hard to interview, even this interview right now, but you know you just have to be prepared.”
- “I got a list of tips to practice when interviewing, and I will probably review it.”
- “I’ve never been told exactly how to and what were the don’ts, and I just look back on different interviews and I am like ‘oh, no wonder they didn’t hire me.’ So I feel more confident with my interviewing skills.”

Return to school. The final minor theme concerned the proposed plans of three of the women to pursue a formal education, in the hopes of gaining more interesting jobs and being able to vie for job advancement opportunities. They were inspired and interested in going back to school either while working or training for another job:

- “I really want to go back to school and I have four children as well, and so like I just think it will be too much pressure on me but it’s a possibility—possible part-time.”

- “I want to go back to school so I will be able to do something with accounting, maybe like HR Block, doing people’s taxes, something like that because I’m good with numbers.”

The women did not elaborate on how they would go about achieving an academic degree, nor did they expressively connect the idea that a return to school could mean a reliance on other community services.

Discussion

The practice of hosting the Liberty Fair reflects Liberty Place’s ongoing mission to educate residents about AA and recovery, followed by transition to the community. For many of the women, the Liberty Fair is the first contact in many months with the outside world. It may also be the first time they become aware of their own occupational lives by experiencing how to competently access and acquire employment.

In light of this context, the Liberty Place AA program philosophy was applied throughout this project. The rationale was that applying program-level AA philosophy to the study of the women’s perceptions of employability after they participated in the Liberty Fair would help to put a new face on the experiences women undergo as residents of Liberty Place.

For example, consistent with Majer et al. (2010), who have spoken to increased meaning in life beyond the 12 steps, the women’s discomfort about the Liberty Fair eventually led to the ability to envision meaningful work beyond Liberty Place. Their initial feelings of nervousness and fear gave way to a sense of comfort as they were given the

tools to develop their own job plans. On the surface, this may not sound too complex; however, their perceptions of employers as people, not institutions, fundamentally changed. They gained a newfound ability to recognize that their unique attributes could be assets rather than liabilities.

The first research question addressed in this study was, “How do the women reflect on their level of readiness for employment?” The answer emerged from what they said they accomplished. They learned and experienced both concrete interviewing skills and the more abstract skills of developing personal goals for future jobs. The women stated they felt challenged representing themselves outside of Liberty Place and away from the AA vernacular. But, they also indicated they felt empowered by the employers to think beyond discharge from the program. Ultimately, the participating women perceived the employers as their primary advocates. In one day, the women exited the Liberty Fair poised to pursue diverse work opportunities they previously thought unobtainable.

The second research question was, “How do the women make sense of and find meaning in the Liberty Fair?” The answer proved to be multifaceted, with the definition of sense and meaning contingent upon their resident status. The women were required to participate in the Liberty Fair as part of their AA program, despite personal reservations about their own competence and employability. For these women, the Liberty Fair was not immediately viewed as a resource for recovery. Then, surprisingly, in one day, the

than merely a programmatic one. They viewed the Liberty Fair and their interactions with the students as an AA fellowship opportunity; their assumptions about the outside and employers’ formal hiring processes were dispelled. The women perceived the students and employers as empowering, even if the employers were aware of the women’s addictive backgrounds.

Study Limitations

The findings of this study are preliminary and limited in several ways. First, the findings emerged from a limited number of participants in one program (i.e., nine women at Liberty Place) and thus are not generalizable to all women in all addiction recovery centers. The participants were homogenous for sex and program resident status, and were not classified for race or ethnicity. In addition, the data collection, triangulation, and verification process was significantly constrained due to Liberty Place’s rules about investigators’ access to the women and their records. This posed some limitations on the study’s ethnographic validity. Finally, because the PI is regularly and actively involved with Liberty Place, personal bias and reactivity could have distorted the interpretation of the data.

Implications for Occupational Therapy Education

The OS students, by participating in the research and advocacy course, had the opportunity to learn about the Liberty Place women’s work interests and, more important, help the women identify job opportunities, participate in interviews, and complete employment documents to engage in remunerative employment. The students learned to

be advocates and leaders in the community, which is in keeping with Paul-Ward (2009), who stated that students benefit from “education that take(s) a more active social justice role in training new therapists, researching new questions, and conducting individual practice” (p. 82).

It is crucial that educators address their own and students’ capacity for new scholarship and research in occupational therapy education as formal recommendations materialize from the Scholarship and Research in Education Task Group (AOTA, 2013). EKU’s *OTS 402S Practicum in OS IV: Advocacy and Research* course, with the modified program evaluation research approach and Liberty Fair project, meet the recommendations that call on education programs to establish and disseminate research and scholarship focused on education. This is just one example of how students

and faculty gain the skills necessary to conduct education research in the context of academic coursework.

Conclusion

The students’ actions in the *OTS 402S Practicum in OS IV: Advocacy and Research* course resulted in a preliminary study shedding light on women’s perceptions of employability. The Liberty Place women, by participating in the student-led Liberty Fair, were able to consider new pathways to employment that they previously thought unimaginable. It is hoped that this article creates a dialogue among OS and therapy students and scholars about the role of student advocates in the community and how they can address clients’ instrumental activities of daily living in the area of work.

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Appendix

Liberty Fair Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Time of Interview:

Date of Interview:

Location of Interview:

Interviewer:

Interview Protocol

1. Explain purpose and nature of study to the participant.
2. Assure the participant that she will remain anonymous.
3. Indicate that she may find some questions silly or difficult to answer.
4. Indicate that she is free to interrupt and ask for clarification.
5. Seek permission to record the interview and explain why.

Guiding Questions

1. How did you feel about participating in the Liberty Fair and *immediately* upon completion of the Liberty Fair? Can you describe and/or give an example of how you felt?
2. Can you describe possible *changes* you may make with your job search now that you have participated in the Liberty Fair?
3. In light of these changes, what do you predict for *your own* employment future?
4. How do you feel about the *employers* and their contribution to your employment search? *Why?*
5. Describe your opinion about accessing other social services to aid you in finding employment (for example, transportation and childcare)? *Why?*

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