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**The Career State Inventory (CSI):  
Applications in Practice**

**Robert C. Reardon, Guest Editor**

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# THE CAREER STATE INVENTORY (CSI): APPLICATIONS IN PRACTICE

By

**Robert C. Reardon, Serena Christianson, Rachel Coleman, V. Casey Dozier,  
Seth Hayden, Stephen J. Leierer, Adam K. Miller, and Gary W. Peterson**

## **Abstract**

The career decision state (CDS) is a condition of being or consciousness, a “snapshot,” with respect to one’s present career goals. The Career State Inventory provides a total score assessing the CDS, and assesses three components of it, i.e., (a) a person’s self-assessment of occupational preferences or lack thereof (*career certainty*), (b) an assessment of satisfaction related to the occupational preferences (*career satisfaction*), and (c) the strength of a person’s confidence regarding the career decision-making process (*career clarity*). An individual’s career decision state may range from being highly certain, satisfied, and clear in one’s choice (first choice, no alternatives), to being completely undecided, dissatisfied, confused, and lacking confidence in making a choice (no choice, no options).

Key Words: practice, career decision state, counselor, assessment, readiness

## **The Career State Inventory (CSI): Applications in Practice**

Imagine there was a quick test providing a number that could indicate a person’s career condition or readiness for making career plans and decisions. Imagine that it worked much like a thermometer for checking one’s physical health and would provide this information in a few moments after answering five short questions. It would provide some guidance for a practitioner on how a person might be assisted in career decision making. Imagine that it was free to use. And imagine that it could also provide information about whether or not a career treatment worked and if the person was now in an improved career condition. That quick test exists and it is called the Career State Inventory (CSI; Leierer, Peterson, Reardon, & Osborn, 2020) for measuring a person’s career decision state. The CSI is published by the Florida State University Libraries under a Creative Commons Attribution-No Derivatives 4.0 license, allowing any reader to copy and distribute the CSI content without permission of the authors or the Florida State University Libraries, provided that the authors of the content are given proper attribution and that the content is not modified in any way.

We begin with a review of the history, research, and use of the Career State Inventory (CSI; Leierer et al., 2020) since 2011. A free copy of the *CSI Manual*, the CSI Participant Version, and a copy of the CSI Professional Version is available at [http://purl.flvc.org/fsu/fd/FSU\\_libsubv1\\_scholarship\\_submission\\_1587411085\\_afa0b2e3](http://purl.flvc.org/fsu/fd/FSU_libsubv1_scholarship_submission_1587411085_afa0b2e3). In this article, we highlight brief reports from seven practitioners using the CSI with diverse groups, including graduate students in a career counseling, advising freshmen and nonfreshmen in a neuropsychology program, student profiles in a career planning class over four time periods, a screener for worry in older workers, undergraduate students in an online career class, student CSI profiles before and after the arrival

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of COVID-19, and university graduate students in a career workshop.

### **Career Decision State**

At the conceptual level, the career decision state (CDS) is a subjective state of being, or state of momentary consciousness, regarding one's career goals or aspirations, and it is composed of both cognitive and affective components (Leierer et al., 2020). The CDS may also be thought of as a single continuum from being highly goal-directed, satisfied, and confident on the one hand to being immobile or frozen, dissatisfied, and confused on the other. Thus, this existential state carries implicit questions such as "Who am I?" (identity), "To what goal am I headed?" (direction), "What are my feelings regarding my goal?" (satisfaction), and "Do I believe in my capabilities to make an appropriate choice and to attain a career goal?" (self-confidence, self-efficacy). Further, when individuals seek career services an overarching issue is whether this person is *ready* to make an important career decision?

The concept of career decision state (CDS) is tangentially related to the work of Spielberger, Gorsuch, Lushene, Vagg, and Jacobs (1983) and the development of the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory. They conceptualized two different but related aspects of the anxiety condition, *trait* and *state* anxiety. Trait anxiety is associated with excessive worry in anticipation of future events and long-lasting arousal in the face of potential threat. On the other hand, state anxiety could be defined in terms of fear, nervousness, or discomfort induced by different situations, demands, objects, or events perceived as uncomfortable in the moment. This type of anxiety refers more to how a person is feeling at the time and is considered temporary. When the object or situation that is perceived as threatening goes away, the person no longer experiences anxiety.

Using this comparison of state vs. trait anxiety, the Career Decision State (CDS) as a phenomenon is considered a "state" entity, and the CSI, as a measure of the CDS, is viewed as a "state" measure. Positive movement with respect to a career decision such as taking an interest inventory or participating in a career class or workshop, then, could reduce the temporary negative feelings in the career decision state.

### **The Career State Inventory (CSI)**

The Career State Inventory (CSI; Leierer et al., 2020) is brief questionnaire that assesses one's capability to undertake career decision making and it measures three constructs, (a) certainty about a career goal, (b) satisfaction with a goal, and (c) vocational clarity and confidence in pursuing one's career and life goals. It can be completed and scored in less than five minutes. Four scores are derived from administering the CSI, three component scores and the total score. The three components or dimensions of the career decision state include (a) the degree of *certainty* with respect to a career choice as measured by the Occupational Alternatives Question (OAQ; Slaney, 1978; 1980), (b) the extent of *satisfaction* with the choice(s) as measured by the Satisfaction Item (Zener & Schnuelle, 1972), and (c) career *clarity*, an indicator of one's vocational self-confidence in pursuing a career goal as measured by three items from the MVS Vocational Identity Scale (Holland, Johnston, & Asama, 1993). Scores from the three dimensions are summed to provide a total CDS score ranging from 2-12.

As a measure of capability, CSI results may identify individuals who are uncertain,

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dissatisfied, and/or confused regarding a career goal. Such persons may lack the capability to engage effectively in career exploration without assistance from a qualified career practitioner. Administering the CSI can be an initial step in career services to test a person's capability for engaging in the challenging task of career decision making, or it could be used to assess the impact of a career intervention on the career decision state.

### Using the CSI

The CSI may be used with appropriate credit at no charge by researchers and practitioners to study career behavior and improve career services. The CSI is not to be sold for a fee and researchers and practitioners are encouraged to inform the authors of experiences using it.

The CSI can be used to assist practitioners in assessing an individual's career decision state before or after an intervention. It consists of five items measuring three career decision state dimensions: (a) certainty (1 question), (b) satisfaction (1 question), and (c) clarity (3 questions). The CSI can be administered in the form of a brief survey, or the questions can be embedded in an in-take form for career counseling or included in a background data form for a career program. CSI results can be used to determine (a) whether a person is ready to engage directly in career problem solving or a program of study, or (b) whether further readiness assessment is needed to ascertain the possible influences of dysfunctional career thoughts, or the effects of overwhelming life circumstances. It can also be used in a time-series format to assess changes during an extended counseling intervention, i.e., a career class, as described later in this article.

**Low scores.** Low total scores (2 - 4) on the 11-point overall CSI profile along with low scores on each of the three dimensions, e.g., 1 on OAQ, 1 on Satisfaction and 0 on Vocational Clarity, indicate a high state of readiness and suggest individuals' focused on career goals, well satisfied with their choices, and self-confident in their choices. A person scoring in this range would be a likely candidate for self-help career services, and perhaps brief-staff assisted services (Sampson, Reardon, Peterson, & Lenz, 2004) as one moves toward executing a first choice.

**Midrange scores.** For scores ranging from 5 - 9, the question is asked, "What is a minimum score (or "cut score") in which the administration of follow-up assessments, e.g., CTI and/or DSW, is recommended?" The CSI authors believe that a *total score of 6* is worthy of further inquiry to reduce the likelihood of false negatives (i.e., those individuals with slightly lower CSI total scores, but moderate to severe negative career thoughts). Persons scoring in this range on the CSI would be likely to benefit from brief staff-assisted career services.

**High scores.** Higher total scores on the overall CSI (10 - 12) as well as high scores on the three respective dimensions, e.g., 3 on the OAQ Career Certainty Scale, 3 - 5 on the Satisfaction Scale, or the endorsement of 2 or 3 items as True on the Career Clarity Scale, suggest individuals who are highly uncertain or even frozen regarding a career goal, very dissatisfied with their career decision state, and experiencing considerable confusion and lack of self-confidence in making a choice. A score in this range may indicate that the individual is still getting "in touch" with all elements related to the career problem and might warrant consideration of further diagnostic assessment and the likelihood of an individual case-managed career intervention.

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The CSI mean scores can also be used with group members to show the distribution of their career decision states in an unstable environment, i.e., as a measure of change following an intervention. In this situation, the CSI is not measuring an individual's readiness for career decision making per se but the effects of a career intervention, i.e., a career course or workshop, on a group's collective career decision state (Osborn, Sides, & Brown, 2019). The present article includes descriptions of several such CSI applications following career interventions.

Research evidence also suggests that the three respective dimensions of the CSI are related to negative career thoughts as measured by the Career Thoughts Inventory (CTI; Sampson, Peterson, Lenz, Reardon, & Saunders, 1998) and career and life stress, thus providing evidence of convergent and concurrent validity. Leierer et al. (2020) conducted a principal components factor analysis with three variables and the three variables all loaded on the first factor in the same magnitude. Thus, all three variables contribute in similar magnitude to the CSI construct, and the CSI Total score can be viewed as a composite score with the three variables contributing equally.

### **Reliability**

Reliability of the CSI alludes to internal consistency or the precision of scores associated with the overall career decision state at the time the measure is administered. Combining data across several studies ( $n = 425$ ) reviewed in the *CSI Manual* (Leierer et al., 2020), this 3-item scale (uncertainty, satisfaction, and clarity) possessed a Cronbach alpha of  $r = .74$ , inter-item correlations of .63 (OAQ/SAT), .36 (OAQ/Clarity), and .59 (SAT/Clarity) (Leierer et al., 2020). Thus, the CSI possesses an acceptable level of commonality across the items as well as independence among them. This measure may also be considered as producing normally distributed scores in college student populations with mean = 6.21,  $SD = 2.45$ , median = 6.00, skew = -.004, and kurtosis = 1.33. The standard error of measure (SEM) = 0.12. We do not report stability or test-retest coefficients since the CSI is designed as a *state measure* as opposed to a *trait measure*. To reiterate, the CSI is a snapshot of one's state of consciousness regarding one's career goals in the moment along three dimensions (certainty, satisfaction, and clarity) and a total score.

### **Applications**

In this section we summarize a series of reports from seven practitioners using the CSI. Each section begins with a short narrative describing the context for using the CSI, i.e., setting, population, conditions, followed by information that shows the CSI results in this situation. We do not provide detailed information about methods or data analysis, but simply illustrate quickly and clearly how the CSI can be used in practice.

### **Career Class**

In the process of developing and testing a new, one credit, 7.5-week career planning class for students at Arizona State University, I (Christianson) asked them to complete the CSI at the beginning and end of the class. All 27 non-first year students enrolled on-ground and on-line completed the CSI, and 22 (85%) completed it both times. At the beginning of the class, CSI total scores indicated that students were likely to be tentative, uncertain, and have doubts about their career state (see Table 1), and at the end of the class they had moved toward being more goal-directed, satisfied and confident. The career certainty dimension changed the least because

they were locked into the major, while satisfaction and clarity dimensions changed the most over the time of the course. The CSI Total Score at the end of the course indicated students were now more goal directed, satisfied, and confident.

Table 1.

*Pre/Post CSI Scores for Students in a 7.5-Week College Career Class, Fall 2019 (N = 27)*

Variable	Pretest Scores (SD in parentheses)	Posttest Scores	<i>p</i>
Certainty	2.50 (1.54)	1.86 (1.36)	<.08
Satisfaction	2.68 (1.13)	1.86 (0.71)	<.003*
Clarity	1.95 (1.17)	1.18 (0.85)	<.001*
Total	7.14 (3.04)	4.91 (2.29)	<.001*

\*Significant; SD in parenthesis

### Career Workshop

Two remote Career Exploration Groups (CEGs) for graduate students at (Duke University) were conducted to facilitate career development and the CSI was administered at the beginning and conclusion of the groups. A total of 13 doctoral or master's students met for five weeks and focused on self-awareness, goal setting, building career community, occupational research, and decision making. What did I (Coleman) learn? The mean CSI *pretest* scores for the students were Certainty 2.5 (0.5), Satisfaction 2.7 (1.2), Clarity 2.2 (1.2), and Total 7.5 (2.5). These scores indicated that students generally had a first choice and alternatives; were satisfied or maybe unsure about their choices; had considerable confusion and anxiety about career decision making; and could be characterized as uncertain, doubtful, and tentative. As noted earlier, a total score of 6.0 or greater suggests that individuals merit further attention to reduce the likelihood of false negatives (i.e., those individuals with lower CSI total scores, but moderate to severe negative career thoughts). Persons scoring in this range on the CSI would be likely to benefit from brief staff-assisted career services or, in this instance, group counseling.

The CSI *posttest* scores after the group intervention were Certainty 2.5 (0.8), Satisfaction 2.5 (1.1), Clarity 1.1 (0.9), and Total 6.0 (2.4). Certainty and Satisfaction scores showed little change following the CEG experience, but the Clarity and Total scores showed the greatest decrease (from 2.2 to 1.1 and 7.4 to 6.1, respectively). However, the Total score also showed that in spite of a lower average score at the end of CEG, participants remained in a somewhat uncertain and tentative career decision state. I should note that during this time period, the university moved to remote learning exclusively which may have affected CSI posttest scores.

### Pre/Post COVID-19

I (Dozier) used the CSI to learn more about the career decision state of students at the beginning of an on-ground career class in the Fall 2019 (pre-COVID) and an on-line career class in the Summer 2020 (post-COVID). I was especially interested in students' levels of career certainty, satisfaction, clarity, and CSI total score upon beginning the class so instruction could be adjusted to meet their needs more effectively.



What was learned? First, about 40 students in the Summer 2020 term class sections which were offered online only did not complete the CSI as often as students in the five on-ground Fall 2019 classes. Second, I expected students in the postCOVID group to have a career decision state marked by lower clarity and total scores, but this did not happen. Indeed, students in the preCOVID classes were more dissatisfied and less confident in career decision making than those in the postCOVID classes. This finding is consistent with an earlier report about this course at Florida State University (Reardon, Leierer, & Lee, 2007) showing that expected and earned grades were lowest in the fall term and highest in the summer term. Perhaps the fall, winter, or summer term of course enrollment contributes more to students' career decision state than might have been expected otherwise.

Table 2.

*Preclass CSI Scores for an Onground and Online Career Class*

<b>PreClass CSI Scores</b>	<b>PreCOVID N=103 Fall 2019</b>	<b>POst COVID N=15 Summer 2020</b>	<b><i>p</i></b>
Certainty	2.52 (.94)	2.20 (.68)	.20*
Satisfaction	2.37 (1.02)	1.47 (1.03)	.001
Clarity	6.64 (2.52)	4.93 (1.58)	.012*

\* Significant; *SD* in parenthesis

## CDS and Worry

In addition to the CSI being used as a measure of career intervention effectiveness, I (Hayden) found it can also be used to determine the connection between the career decision state (CDS) and mental health. We focused on worry, a dominant feature of generalized anxiety disorder, and believed that the discovery of a relationship between the CDS and worry would add another application of the CSI in counseling practice. This study was completed with a working adult population, a sample of 69 adult Amazon Mechanical Turk workers.

The CSI was used to examine the relationship of the CDS to worry (Penn-State Worry Questionnaire (PSWQ); Meyer, Miller, Metzger, & Borkovec, 1990). This instrument has become a widely used self-report tool for pathological worry, the excessiveness, generality, and uncontrollable dimensions of worry. We found that the career decision state and its dimensions of certainty and clarity were correlated with worry; indeed, worry was predictive of the career decision state and specifically certainty and clarity.

It was apparent that the lack of career certainty and clarity, viz., not being occupationally goal directed or undecided and frozen or confused, as measured by the CSI contributed to the measure of worry with the adult workers. Both in research and practice, understanding the influence of the career decision state on other dimensions of career and mental health such as worry expands our understanding of the complexity of career concerns. Additional information about this topic is available in (Hayden & Osborn). The ease of administration of the CSI allows for its use in multiple contexts with a variety of populations including working adults, which is needed in career development research and practice given the preponderance of college-age samples.

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### Counseling Graduate Students

I (Leierer) used the CSI with 90 graduate students in career classes to assess their career decision state for academic advising and research purposes, i.e., did their CSI scores change over time. Table 3 shows what I found. The students were certain about their occupational choices, but 20% did not mark a first choice. As an advisor, I will follow-up with these students to learn more about their career certainty. Regarding career satisfaction, 86% of the students were very satisfied or satisfied, but I will explore this indicator with the 15% of students not sure or dissatisfied. No students were very dissatisfied. With respect to career clarity, 44% of these graduate students indicated that career decision making had been a long and difficult process, and 19% indicated they were still confused about career decision making. Finally, the CSI Total scores indicated that 25% of the students scored 6.0 or 7.0, which indicates they may still be uncertain and tentative in their career decisions. Indeed, the item, "I am confused about the whole problem of deciding on a career," was marked true about twice as often as the other MVS items. I will follow-up with these students to see what interventions, if any, might be helpful in making them more goal-directed, satisfied, and confident.

**Table 3.**

*CSI Scores for Graduate Students in a Career Class.*

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Item</b>	<b>Percent (rounded)</b>
<b>Certainty</b>	First occupation, no alternatives	6
	First occupation & alternatives	73
	No first choice, just alternatives	19
	Neither a first choice or alternatives	1
<b>Satisfaction</b>	Very satisfied	25
	Satisfied	61
	Not sure	14
	Dissatisfied	1
	Very dissatisfied	0
<b>Clarity</b>	True: If I had to make an occupational choice right now, I'm afraid I would make a bad choice.	14
	True: Making up my mind about a career has been a long and difficult problem for me	44
	True: I am confused about the whole problem of deciding on a career	19
	False	23
<b>CSI Total Score</b>	2.0	3

	3.0	44
	4.0	16
	5.0	13
	6.0	16
	7.0	9

### CDS Changes Over Time

In the process of assessing the Career Decision State (CDS) of 151 students in a comprehensive career course over a 16-week semester, I (Miller) asked them to complete the CSI at the beginning of the class and after each of three course units. The students were categorized at three levels of CDS at the start of the class (i.e., poor CDS with high CSI scores (green); medium scores (red); and good CDS with low CSI scores (blue). The CSI results at the beginning and following completion of three course units are shown in Figure 1.

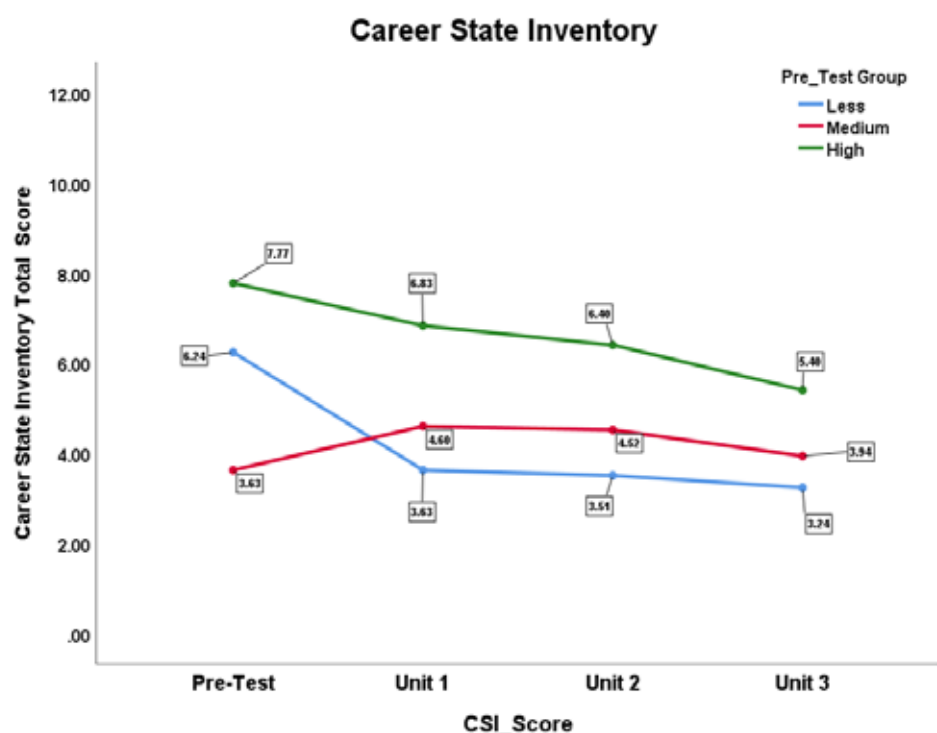


Figure 1  
*Changes in three levels of the career decision state in a career course over four time periods*

The figure shows that students at three different initial CDS levels all arrived at more positive CDS at the end of the course. The most dramatic change was with students in the positive CDS group (blue) who improved even more at the end of the course (3.0 score difference). Students in the low CDS group (green) also improved at the end of the course (2.37 score difference).

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The figure illustrates how the CSI can be administered to a group when the environmental situations change over time, i.e., instruction and student learning in a class during a semester. This analysis illustrates something novel about the CSI with repeated measures and using it over a relatively short period of time to assess changes in a groups' career decision state. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss how and why CSI scores fluctuated the way they did during the course, but additional information is available in Miller (2019).

## **The CSI in Academic Advising**

I (Peterson) consulted with an academic advisor in the undergraduate behavioral neuroscience major at the university who had administered the CSI to 14 freshmen and 13 nonfreshmen (sophomores, juniors and seniors) enrolled in the program. This major is attractive to new students because it is considered a gateway to careers in health sciences, i.e., medicine. It includes coursework with emphasis in biology and psychology and essential foundations in statistics, physics, mathematics, and, chemistry, i.e., two courses in organic chemistry. The CSI results indicated that 79% of the freshmen, but only 46% of the nonfreshmen (a 33% difference), listed a first choice of an occupation on the OAQ. In terms of satisfaction, 100% of the freshmen were satisfied or well satisfied with their choice of occupation, in contrast to 77% of nonfreshmen. These CSI results show a disparity regarding career certainty and satisfaction between the freshmen just entering the program and nonfreshmen who had been it for 1-3 years. Regarding clarity, 86% of the freshmen answered all false or one true to the three MVS items as compared to 69% of the nonfreshmen. The freshmen appeared to be clearer and more confident regarding their career decision state, viz, answering "true" indicates a lack of clarity. In terms of CSI total scores, 79% of the freshmen would be considered goal-directed and satisfied (scores 2-4) as compared to 46% of the nonfreshmen (a 33% difference). It seems paradoxical that freshmen were in a more positive career decision state than the nonfreshmen, and it raises questions about the reasons for the career state differences between the two groups.

There appear to be two implications of these findings for academic advising. First, the majority of freshmen in the neuroscience major appear to be committed and focused on a pathway to their career goals with the exception of 2 or 3 individuals having a total score of 8 or above. These students are just beginning this major, and these findings suggest caution for the work of academic advisors moving forward given the higher scores of the nonfreshmen students. Second, a large portion (nearly half) of nonfreshmen expressed doubts and uncertainty regarding their career goals with total scores at the mid-range, i.e., 5 or higher. Academic advisors suspect that as students have more contact with the demanding coursework in this major, the career decision state decreases in terms of certainty, satisfaction and clarity.

CSI scores can be helpful in academic advising by identifying individuals who have a confused career decision state (do not list a first choice of occupation, are dissatisfied or not sure of the choice of occupation, or endorse at least one item as true in clarity). These individuals would be likely candidates for follow-up interventions such as brief counseling or referral. Finally, the CSI can be a useful starting point in initiating a discussion with students regarding their career goals and the appropriateness of continuing to pursue neuroscience as a major field

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of study.

## Summary and Implications

The Career State Inventory (CSI) measures a unique construct in career research and practice, the *Career Decision State*. The CSI provides a snapshot of an individual's state of awareness of regarding overall vocational goals along three career dimensions, i.e., certainty, satisfaction, and clarity. The CSI was developed at Florida State University and can be completed in less than five minutes. It is free to download and use so long as it is not modified in any way without the authors permission. The CSI can be used to assess a person's readiness or capability to engage in educational or career decision making, or it can be used to assess the impact of a career intervention on the career decision state.

CSI applications described in this article include changes in the career decision state over time in four college career classes at two universities and a career workshop for graduate students. Some of the classes were on-ground and some were remote or both, and some were offered at different times of the academic year. In each instance, the CSI results provided practical information for counselors, instructors, workshop leaders, and program developers. Another application focused on working adults and examined the positive relationship between the career decision state dimensions of certainty and clarity and psychological worry. This suggests a possible connection between the career decision state and mental health that merits further research. Another report with implications for academic advisors showed how nonfreshmen students in a demanding college major had a less robust career decision state than the freshman, an unexpected observation that merits more attention.

Sampson, Hou, Kronholz et al., (2014) reviewed published career literature and noted that the lack of evidenced-based practice in our literature is an ongoing problem. They found that the overall proportion of the career development literature in 2013 was distributed this way: Theory 31%, Research 46%, and Practice 23%. This article focused on seven applications in practice of the Career State Inventory, a new, free assessment of a novel concept, the Career Decision State. There is evidence in these practical reports of the need for more work relative to the theory and research that provides a foundation and justification for improved development and use of the CSI. Theory, research and practice in the career field have a mutually beneficial and reinforcing relationship, and the authors hope that this article on practice will further that triangular relationship.

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