

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Research Background

Universities around the world play a crucial role in providing formal education that prepares students for life beyond the classroom (Marginson, 2011). The knowledge and competencies gained during their studies help them adapt more effectively to the dynamic conditions of the modern workforce (Omar et al., 2023). In addition to academic knowledge, students are increasingly expected to strengthen their interpersonal skills so they can remain competitive and attractive to employers. Companies today value employees who are able to collaborate, communicate clearly, and adjust to different working styles within diverse teams. Ho et al., (2023) explained that workers who can mingle and interact with their colleagues are often considered more valuable compared to those who choose to remain isolated. Al Asefer and Abidin (2021) identify four essential workplace skills that support graduate employability, namely leadership, effective communication between colleagues and leaders, strong teamwork, and the ability to solve problems. These abilities can significantly increase employment opportunities for fresh graduates.

Harvey (2007) describes employability as an individual's capacity to secure a job, which includes a combination of qualifications, skills, knowledge, and personal attributes. He further emphasizes that employability involves both the ability and the willingness to remain competitive in the labor market by anticipating

changes in tasks and work environments and responding to these changes proactively. Similarly, Pegg et al., (2006) explain that employability consists of a set of accomplishments, such as skills, understanding, and personal qualities, that enhance a graduate's chances of obtaining employment and succeeding in their chosen career, while also contributing positively to themselves, the workplace, society, and the economy. Employability also concerns how former workers can reenter the workforce, how current employees can remain competitive, and how students or new graduates enter the labor market (Berntson, 2008). Moreover, employability is considered a significant determinant of an employee's performance in completing their tasks at work (de Grip et al., 2004).

The importance of having employability skills becomes even clearer when viewed alongside the broader challenges that students face today. Currently, college students face a world that is changing quickly because of the rapid development of artificial intelligence technology. These forces reshape almost every sector, causing many traditional jobs to evolve while new types of work emerge at an even faster pace (Lee, 2024). Such uncertainty can make it difficult for students to clearly imagine their future careers or feel secure about the choices they need to make. Because of this situation, students need skills and knowledge that are flexible and transferable across different career paths (Vieriu, 2025). They must be prepared to adapt to new demands, continue learning throughout their lives, and make confident decisions as they navigate an unpredictable job market.

International reports consistently indicate that youth unemployment and underemployment are elevated globally, with numerous employers citing discrepancies between graduates' skills and labor market demands (McMurray et

al., 2016), suggesting that higher education does not consistently equip students for the workforce. In China, the number of university graduates is growing quickly every year. This makes it harder for graduates to find jobs that are right for them and puts more pressure on universities to show that their employability support services work (Dai & Pham, 2024). At the regional level, including in Hubei Province, local labor market conditions and limited job openings make it even harder for graduates of local undergraduate schools to find work. This is because the quality and results of jobs often differ from school to school and program to program.

The recent studies had also been identifying the potential risk of large unemployment due to automation by AI technology. Nigar et al., (2025) found that although some policies try to support safe and responsible use of AI, these efforts are still not enough to handle the risks of workers losing jobs, so more research and stronger policies are needed. Furthermore, according to Ren et al., (2024) the advancement of AI technology creates new skill demands and changes workplace conditions, highlighting the need for adaptation, lifelong learning, and stronger human abilities such as creativity, critical thinking, and emotional intelligence. Consequently, graduates are expected not only to possess disciplinary knowledge but also to continuously update their skills to remain competitive in an increasingly technology-driven labor market.

This global shift is also reflected in the Chinese context, where national policies strongly emphasize preparing university graduates for the demands of the modern workplace. Providing students with meaningful practice before they enter the workplace is essential for ensuring a smooth and successful transition from

university to professional life (Zhou, 2020). In this context, Career Development Center (CDC) play a crucial role in responding to AI-driven employability challenges. CDC programs should not only provide students with job-related information but also foster adaptive employability skills that enable graduates to succeed in a technology-driven labor market. Such programs can strengthen students' digital readiness, communication, teamwork, problem-solving abilities, adaptability, and commitment to lifelong learning, all of which are increasingly valued by employers in the AI era.

In response to these challenges, Hubei Enshi College established a Career Development Center in 2024 to enhance students' career readiness by improving access to employment information and professional development opportunities. The center provides career guidance and disseminates information about available training programs while offering activities designed to strengthen interpersonal and employability skills. These include leadership development, teamwork, problem-solving, adaptability, and effective communication with colleagues from diverse backgrounds. The CDC program at Hubei Enshi College was inspired by the model proposed by Zhao and Wu (2022), which focuses on organizing career workshops, professional development seminars, and training sessions focused on communication skills, resume writing, interview techniques, and workplace etiquette.

The CDC in Hubei Enshi College is still a pilot initiative rather than a mandatory program that all students are required to participate in. Participation is voluntary and limited to students who choose to engage with the services and activities offered by the center. As a result, comprehensive institutional data, such

as graduate employment rates linked directly to CDC participation, employer satisfaction surveys, or systematic tracer study results, have not yet been formally collected and analyzed. Despite its growing role in supporting students' career development and employability, the program has not undergone a comprehensive evaluation to assess its effectiveness, implementation process, strengths, and areas for improvement. Therefore, a systematic evaluation is needed to provide evidence-based information that can support future program development and institutional decision-making.

An evaluation is therefore essential to understand the effectiveness, relevance, and overall impact of the CDC on students' career development. Evaluating the program is important for several reasons. First, it provides evidence-based information about how well the programs achieve the program goals. This helps the institution identify strengths that should be maintained and weaknesses that need improvement (Creswell & Guetterman, 2020). In the absence of systematic evaluation, several risks and gaps may occur in the current CDC implementation. For example, program activities may continue without clear evidence that they improve students' employability skills, resulting in a gap between program objectives and actual student outcomes. There is also a risk that CDC services do not fully match students' career development needs or regional labor market expectations, as student feedback and outcome data are not systematically collected and analyzed.

The need to evaluate the Career Development Center (CDC) at Hubei Enshi College is particularly important given the institution's strong emphasis on graduate employment and career development. The university has identified high-quality

employment as an important institutional priority and has developed various initiatives to support students' transition from higher education to employment. These initiatives include employer engagement, recruitment activities, career planning, job-search training, interview preparation, and individualized employment guidance. In 2024, the university reported that it organized seven online recruitment events involving nearly 3,000 employers and more than 9,000 positions, as well as five offline recruitment events. The university also provided targeted guidance on communication skills, interview practices, and employment preparation for students.

The institutional context is further characterized by relatively strong employment outcomes alongside an increasing emphasis on the quality of graduate employment. Hubei Enshi College reports that its undergraduate graduate employment placement rate has exceeded 95% in recent years, while its 2024 graduates recorded a high-quality employment rate of 35.45%. The university has also developed a more comprehensive career development infrastructure, including a career development center that provides services such as resume optimization, simulated interviews, career assessment, and job recommendations. These developments indicate that career development is not limited to individual employment activities but has become an increasingly important institutional function.

Recent studies had identified the benefits of conducting program evaluation. Program evaluation is that it allows administrators and stakeholders to assess the extent to which program goals are being met. This ensures that resources are used responsibly and that activities are producing meaningful results (Rallis & Bolland,

2005). Evaluation also helps reveal gaps between program design and actual implementation, offering insights into factors that may hinder success. In addition, evaluation promotes accountability and transparency. It demonstrates to stakeholders, including funding bodies, policymakers, and the public, that the program is being monitored and managed effectively (Nouraey et al., 2020). Regular assessment also supports continuous improvement by encouraging organizations to learn from their experiences, adapt to changing conditions, and respond to emerging needs.

Although previous studies have extensively examined career-related interventions in higher education, most have focused on isolated components such as career courses, internship programs, work-integrated learning, or career guidance services. Comparatively fewer studies have evaluated Career Development Center (CDC) programs as integrated institutional systems that encompass strategic planning, resource allocation, implementation processes, and educational outcomes. Furthermore, although the Context, Input, Process, and Product (CIPP) model has been widely employed in educational program evaluation, its application has primarily emphasized assessing program quality rather than examining how different evaluation dimensions collectively contribute to students' perceived employability. As a result, limited evidence exists regarding the relationships among program context, institutional resources, implementation quality, and employability outcomes within university career development systems, particularly in Chinese higher education institutions. This limitation restricts the ability of existing evaluations to explain not only whether a CDC program functions

effectively, but also which program dimensions contribute most substantially to students' employability development.

To address this gap, the present study employs the CIPP evaluation model to evaluate the CDC program while extending its application beyond descriptive program assessment. Rather than treating the four CIPP dimensions as independent evaluation components, this study examines their collective contribution to students' perceived employability and identifies strengths and weaknesses across each dimension to inform institutional decision-making. The novelty of the study therefore does not lie simply in applying the CIPP model to a CDC, but in bringing together three elements that have received limited attention in combination: the evaluation of a CDC as an integrated institutional system, the examination of CIPP dimensions in relation to students' perceived employability, and the application of this integrated evaluation approach within the Chinese higher education context. By connecting program context, institutional inputs, implementation processes, and program products with employability outcomes, the study provides an outcome-oriented evaluation of a university career development system rather than a conventional assessment of individual career services. This perspective contributes to the literature on career development evaluation by illustrating how the CIPP framework can be extended from assessing program quality to generating evidence about the institutional dimensions that may support students' employability development (Divayana et al., 2022).

In the present study, the evaluation focuses on the entire CDC program implemented at Hubei Enshi College since its establishment as a pilot initiative in 2024, rather than on a single CDC activity or service. This setting provides an

important empirical context because the study examines a newly established CDC within a Chinese higher education institution and evaluates the program as an institutional system while it is still in its pilot stage. The study evaluates the CDC across four dimensions of the CIPP model. The context evaluation examines the clarity and relevance of CDC policies, program goals, students' needs for career support, and opportunities for future program development. The input evaluation focuses on the adequacy of teachers responsible for operating the CDC, supporting facilities, and professional training provided to CDC personnel. The process evaluation examines how the program is organized and implemented, the quality and accessibility of services delivered, and the monitoring and feedback mechanisms used to support continuous improvement. Finally, the product evaluation assesses improvements in students' career skills, career readiness, career-related knowledge, student satisfaction with CDC services, and the extent to which the program achieves its intended goals. Through this comprehensive evaluation, the study examines the overall effectiveness of the CDC as an institutional career development program rather than evaluating individual activities in isolation.

Given that the CDC is still a pilot initiative and has not previously undergone a formal evaluation, the CIPP model is particularly appropriate because it not only measures outcomes but also identifies strengths and weaknesses in program planning and implementation (Stufflebeam & Zhang, 2017). Accordingly, the contribution of this study is primarily empirical and evaluative: it provides a systematic account of how an integrated CDC operates across the CIPP dimensions and how these dimensions relate to students' perceived employability, thereby

providing evidence that can guide the institutional development of a newly established CDC.

1.2. Description of The Evaluation Program

The program evaluated in this study is the CDC at Hubei Enshi College, a university-level unit that coordinates career guidance and employability support for students. Table 1.1 gives a preview of the CDC program implemented at Hubei Enshi College.

Table 1.1 Overview of CDC Program

Aspect	Description
Year established	2024
Target participants	Undergraduate students/recent graduates
Main services	Career counseling, workshops, internship support, job fair
Teachers	Administrative Teachers, teachers, volunteers
Partners	Employers, alumni, faculties
Main objectives	Career readiness and employability
Evaluation focus	Context, input, process, product

At Hubei Enshi College, the CDC program is organized as a set of recurring services and activities aimed mainly at undergraduate students, with some activities also open to recent graduates and alumni. (1) career information and counseling (for example, individual counseling sessions, career interest assessments, and CV or interview consultations); (2) skills-development workshops and short training sessions focused on core interpersonal competencies such as leadership, communication, teamwork, and problem-solving; (3) facilitation of experiential opportunities, including internship and job-placement support, company visits, and career fairs. These activities are intended to complement formal academic learning and to help students understand labor-market expectations more clearly.

The CDC program is managed by a small professional consists of administrative Teachers and student volunteers. Teachers responsibilities generally include planning the annual activity schedule, coordinating with faculties and study programs, inviting external partners, managing participant registration, and documenting participation and feedback. Employers and alumni are involved as speakers, mentors, or internship providers, while students are the primary target group. This structure is consistent with international evidence that university career services can act as intermediaries that reduce the skills gap between graduates and employers by providing targeted information, training, and networking opportunities (Hosen et al., 2024)

The CDC at Hubei Enshi College is treated as an employability program whose design and implementation are examined using the CIPP (Context, Input, Process, Product) evaluation model. In this evaluation: the context component focuses on how far the CDC's goals, priority skills (e.g., leadership, communication, teamwork, and problem-solving), and target groups match labor-market demands and institutional policies. The input component reviews organizational resources such as Teachers qualifications, budget, facilities, partnerships, and the planning of activities; the process component analyses how activities are implemented in practice, including information flows to students, recruitment of participants, and the conduct of workshops, counseling sessions, and employer-engagement events; and the product component considers short-term and intermediate outcomes, such as students' self-reported skills, job-search confidence, early employment experiences, and satisfaction with CDC services (Stufflebeam & Zhang, 2017).

1.3 Limitation and Problem Formulation

This study has several limitations that need to be acknowledged.

1. The evaluation only focuses on the CDC at Hubei Enshi College, so the findings cannot be applied directly to other universities that may have different conditions or resources.
2. The study also evaluates the program at one point in time and does not follow students in the long term; therefore, it cannot measure long-term employability outcomes.
3. The results in the product component depend on students' self-reported information, which may contain bias because students may overestimate or underestimate their skills and experiences.

Based on the limitation of the program, the problem formulated are as follows:

1. How is the evaluation of CDC program at Hubei Enshi College from the context dimension?
2. How is the evaluation of CDC program at Hubei Enshi College from the input dimension?
3. How is the evaluation of CDC program at Hubei Enshi College from the process dimension?
4. How is the evaluation of CDC program at Hubei Enshi College from the product dimension?
5. How is the perceived effectiveness of CDC program based on the combined CIPP evaluation results?
6. How do students perceive the CDC program to their employability?

To address the limitations of relying mainly on students' self-reported perceptions, the study adopts a multi-stakeholder evaluation approach. In addition to student data, input from teachers were collected to provide complementary perspectives on students' employability development and program outcomes. Teachers provide insights based on their observations of students' skill development and career readiness. This triangulation of data sources helps reduce self-report bias, strengthens the credibility of the findings, and provides a more balanced assessment of employability outcomes within the product component of the CIPP model.

1.4. Evaluation Objectives

Based on the problems formulated, the objectives of the studies are:

1. To investigate the evaluation of CDC program at Hubei Enshi College from the context dimension.
2. To investigate the evaluation of CDC program at Hubei Enshi College from the input dimension.
3. To investigate evaluation of CDC program at Hubei Enshi College from the process dimension.
4. To investigate the evaluation of CDC program at Hubei Enshi College from the product dimension
5. To investigate perceived effectiveness of CDC based on the combined CIPP evaluation results
6. To examine students' perceptions of the CDC program and their employability skills at Hubei Enshi College.

1.5. Benefits of Evaluation

1) Theoretical Benefits

The significance of this study can be viewed from both theoretical and practical perspectives. From a theoretical and methodological perspective, this study adds to the broader field of employability evaluation in higher education by applying a systematic, CIPP-based evaluation framework to assess Career Development Center (CDC) programs. While many previous studies focus mainly on employability outcomes or student perceptions, this study integrates contextual factors, resource inputs, implementation processes, and multidimensional employability outcomes into a single evaluation model. Beyond evaluating program management and implementation, the study adds to a deeper understanding of how career development services support students' employability by fostering career identity, adaptability, and the development of human and social capital. Through the CIPP framework, the study demonstrates that the effectiveness of career services depends not only on program outcomes but also on how institutional contexts, available resources, and implementation processes shape students' preparedness for an evolving labor market. In this way, the study extends existing literature by demonstrating how program evaluation theory can be operationalized to examine career development services holistically, particularly in local undergraduate institutions. The findings also add to employability theory by illustrating the interconnected relationships between institutional support, career development interventions, and students' capacity to navigate career transitions in technology-driven workplaces. The findings also provide a conceptual reference for future researchers interested in evaluating employability interventions, offering

insights into the relationships among career guidance activities, institutional resources, program implementation, and student employability development.

2) Practical Benefits

From a practical perspective, the study offers direct benefits for multiple stakeholders. For students, the evaluation identifies which CDC services are most effective in supporting employability skills such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and job-search readiness, and provides guidance on how students can better engage with counseling, workshops, internships, and networking activities. For the institution, particularly Hubei Enshi College, the evaluation generates evidence-based information to support program improvement and decision-making. The results help the college identify strengths and weaknesses in CDC planning, management, and implementation, and inform improvements in areas such as Teachers capacity, resource allocation, employer partnerships, and coordination with academic departments. More broadly, the findings may also serve as a practical reference for other similar higher education institutions seeking to evaluate and enhance the effectiveness of their career development services.