

Integrating College and Career Planning: A Counseling Paradigm

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Academic and career counselors can assist students in integrating the total college experience into a problem-solving approach to career planning.

Perusal of the professional literature, discussions with practicing counselors, and interviews with hundreds of students over several years suggest that there is a misconception about the role of the college major in career planning. In counseling and career planning centers counselors commonly hear questions and comments such as the following:

“I’m graduating next semester, and I want to know what careers I can get into with my major.”

“What majors have the best jobs?”

“I need to hurry up and choose a major, but I’m not sure what fields it will allow me to enter.”

“I wanted to major in history, but all you can do with it is teach!”

These comments reflect the misconception that there is a direct relationship or alignment between requirements for a specific college degree

and the requirements for entering a specific occupation. Many students associate preparing for a career with completing academic degree requirements rather than with gaining the skills, experiences, and academic training necessary to meet the requirements of an identified career objective (Van Wey, 1977). These students often have difficulty relating their skills, experiences, and academic preparation to the requirements of a career. Consequently, many leave the university without a sense of direction or feeling of control over their future.

Numerous articles have focused on principles, objectives, and procedures of career counseling and academic advising, but few have addressed the validity of the assumptions on which both are often based. This article has three major objectives: (a) to clarify and put into proper perspective the author's views of the relationship between establishing a career objective and selecting a college major; (b) to present an integral career counseling paradigm to assist students in relating and integrating career and academic goals; and (c) to describe specific steps that can be taken to facilitate the use of the paradigm.

SOME TRADITIONAL ASSUMPTIONS

Studies on the stability of college major selection indicate that between 50% and 90% of students who select majors as freshmen eventually change majors (Astin, 1977; Foote, 1980; Krupka & Vener, 1978). Gordon (1981) suggested that the large number of students who change majors indicates that many students commit themselves to choices without exploring personal values and needs. Foote (1980) noted that there is probably little difference between most freshmen who declare a major and those who register as undecided. Those who list themselves as undecided may actually be more clear about their actual status.

Many students change their college majors because they have based their academic and career decisions on traditional and inaccurate assumptions that interfere with effective career planning. For example, many students believe college majors are structured to prepare them exclusively for a specific set of occupations. Consequently, these students assume that selecting a major is equivalent to making a career choice. This may be true in some cases, but in

the majority it is not. A major problem with this assumption is that students who subscribe to it often take a passive approach to their career preparation and development. These students believe that course completion and career preparation are identical rather than integral processes. Research on employer selection criteria and discussions with many college recruiters indicate, however, that job-relevant skills and other personal characteristics outweigh the choice of major as a selection criterion. In contrast, the integral perspective implies that the university and the university community provide the student, through both academic and extracurricular education, an opportunity for development of skills and for experiences relevant to career and life goals. The university does not prepare the student for a career; it provides resources the student can exploit to realize career and other objectives.

Many students also assume that their choice of major will limit their occupational choices. For instance, if they major in English, math, chemistry, or some other discipline, only certain occupational fields will be open to them. Krupka and Vener (1978) suggested that most students lack both general and specific information about the broad spectrum of possible careers available and have unrealistic expectations about how their college majors prepare them for work. When they discover there are few or no jobs designed specifically for their academic preparation, many become confused about what jobs they can pursue and about how to pursue work. Many believe they are graduating with few or no relevant skills, and consequently they have difficulty identifying alternatives for which they feel qualified.

The confusion many students have about the relationship between their college major and occupational choice may be further complicated by the common assumption that selecting a major is the first step in establishing a career objective. Many students assume that they should first select an interesting major and then determine what career options are available within that major.

Many students, faculty members, parents, and even counselors make a related assumption that students should choose a major quickly because of the extensive time and course preparation requirements of some professional fields (e.g., engineering or premedicine). This assumption relates to the major premise of this article: Stu-

dents should not commit themselves or be pressured to pursue an objective until they have chosen it for themselves in a rational manner.

Many students often feel pressure to choose a major as quickly as possible before they have had a chance to explore their personal interests, goals, and needs. Sagaria, Higginson, and White (1980) examined orientation needs of freshman students at The Pennsylvania State University and found that the need for assistance in choosing a major was rated only second to assistance in scheduling courses during the orientation period. Titley and Titley (1980) suggested that students are pushed by parents, college administrators, and even faculty to choose their academic majors as quickly as possible. Parents often expect their sons or daughters to know their vocational choices when they enter college and consider periods of undecidedness as time wasted. Some faculty see the undecided student as academically inept. Academic departments competing for majors sometimes recruit students into their departments even before they are ready for a choice or have a reason for it. Even the college advising system is often set up to encourage early selection of majors. College catalogs and student guides often contain statements implying that students should have their majors chosen as soon as possible.

SOME NEW ASSUMPTIONS

These traditional assumptions suggest that many students may be restricting their career choices on the basis of majors chosen with little or no information or personal exploration. Gordon (1981) suggested that students who make choices before exploring their values and needs are engaging in *identity foreclosure*. This concept, first identified by Erik Erickson (1959), suggests that some students concede to social pressures and foreclose on their identity before working through the crises of developmental stages and ultimately achieving identity development. According to Perry's (1970) scheme for describing the cognitive development of college students, younger students may be extremely susceptible to external pressures. Perry suggested that many freshman students are characterized by an external locus of control. They see parents, teachers, and administrators as authority figures who have the right answer and know what choices are best. Consequently, some students assume

that it is the responsibility of their parents—or more likely their counselors—to determine the career choice that is best for them.

New assumptions are needed on which to base and integrate career and academic planning into an approach that emphasizes problem-solving strategy and individual responsibility. As counselors we need to teach students how to plan and make decisions about alternative courses of action based on how well the alternatives will lead to the realization of defined goals. The assumptions described below provide the foundation for a problem-solving approach.

The student is responsible for the establishment of career plans and goals and for the implementation of plans. Healy (1975) suggested that developing a sense of "agency" is an important goal in career counseling. People with a sense of agency are planners and problem solvers who take charge of and assume responsibility for their career planning.

The career counselor's role is to facilitate the counselee's identification of career goals and to assist in the integration and use of university resources in career planning activities. The counselor assists the student in identifying tentative career goals by teaching strategies of effective career exploration and decision making. The counselor further assists the student in identifying activities and resources in the university and community that will help to identify and realize goals. The counselor may suggest specific courses, paid or volunteer work experiences, or extracurricular activities that may help the student to clarify goals.

The identification of career goals is the first step in integrating career and academic planning. Effective planning involves clarification of goals and identification of alternatives for achieving them. By defining career objectives, counselors can assist students in selecting courses and majors and in identifying relevant outside activities that will enhance development of career-related skills and realization of career goals.

Most college majors do not specifically relate to or provide specific preparation for a particular set of occupations. College majors are usually academic disciplines that may be applicable to a broad spectrum of occupations. The curriculum requirements of academic majors are designed to expose the student to the major concepts and issues of the field rather than to fulfill the entry requirements for a particular job.

Vocational choices are generally not restricted by academic major. Courses studied to meet requirements for general education or a specific major afford the student knowledge and skills applicable to a wide variety of occupations. For example, students may develop communication skills in English, speech, philosophy, and other courses that require essay exams, writing assignments, and oral presentations.

Completing academic requirements and career preparation are integral rather than identical processes. The university and community provide both academic and extracurricular resources to help students obtain specific academic training, accumulate job-related experiences, and develop job-related skills. Academic requirements represent an important preparation component that is integrated with the development of other job-related skills, through experiential resources, into a total career preparation process. For example, the student who seeks to build leadership skills may take a course in leadership and may participate in student government or other student leadership activities to gain experiences and develop skills. The student who wishes to improve communication skills can take speech and writing courses and can volunteer to write for various student and university publications. Business-related skills can be developed through part-time work and internship programs with local enterprises. Helping students to identify opportunities and activities for skill development is an important counselor function.

A COUNSELING PARADIGM

Fogel (1974) and Healy (1975) described problem-solving strategy in career planning as (a) defining goals, (b) seeking alternative means of achieving goals, (c) gathering information about the alternatives, (d) anticipating the consequences of the alternatives, and (e) selecting an alternative. The problem-solving approach reflects developmental theories of career development. These theories suggest that career development results from progression through a series of developmental stages over the life span. Throughout life and within each stage the individual will encounter developmental tasks that pose career-related problems. Individuals with effective decision-making and problem-solving skills are likely to resolve problems and progress

through the developmental stages. The counselor's role is to guide the student through the process by promoting information gathering and the development of systematic problem-solving skills. The paradigm described here can help the counselor guide the student through the identification of career goals by specifying the steps required to achieve those goals.

Step 1: Goal Identification

The first step is to help students identify and clarify tentative career goals. The literature is replete with counseling strategies to facilitate goal identification. The objectives common to most counseling strategies include self-awareness, career-information seeking, and knowledge of decision-making strategy. Fogel (1973) and Snodgrass (1977) also included increasing students' awareness of environmental factors that influence career decisions as an important objective in the career counseling process. Zunker (1981, 1982) suggested that career counseling strategies should also address dimensions of lifestyle preference as an important factor in the goal identification process. He developed a *Dimensions of Lifestyle Orientation Survey* (Zunker, 1975) to assist students in determining their lifestyle preferences.

Once tentative career goals have been established, they should be further defined to include the specific academic preparation, skills, and experiences that either will be required for or will enhance realization of the goals. Counselors can help students draw up lists of requirements that can be subsequently used for further planning. Table 1 shows a breakdown of the academic preparation, experiences, and skills specified by a student who identified the field of social work as a tentative career objective.

Step 2: Intermediate Requirements

After tentative career goals have been established and specified, the counselor helps the student clarify and identify means for meeting intermediate requirements beyond an undergraduate education. Some career objectives may require attending professional or graduate school. Other goals may require the student to seek specific vocational training after college. For many objectives this step will not be needed.

When intermediate steps are required, the counselor's role is to help the student identify alternative courses of action that will meet the

TABLE 1
Experiences, Academic Preparation, and Skills Required or Helpful for Social Work Careers

Experiences	Academic preparation	Skills
1. Obtain a student job or do volunteer counseling on campus: Counseling center Residence halls Hotline Orientation program Student learning center	1. Complete a major in social work (if available) or other social science. 2. Complete additional courses as time permits in: Social work (if available) Psychology Sociology Public administration	Counseling Interpersonal communication Administrative Budgeting Report writing Language Time management Career and life planning Job search
2. Obtain a part-time job or volunteer in a community human services agency: Women's Center Hospital Housing authority County welfare Mental health clinic	3. Select and complete a master's program in social work 4. Complete additional graduate courses as time permits in: Counseling Public administration Social work	
3. Join NASW ^a and attend local professional meetings.	5. Attend NASW ^a and other professional training seminars.	

^aNational Association of Social Workers.

requirements and enhance the student's employability. For example, the student considering a career objective requiring graduate training might consider (a) whether to attend graduate training after working a few years versus attending immediately and (b) which universities have the most suitable graduate programs. Before the student decides among the various steps, the counselor would assist in the evaluation of such factors as conditions of the labor market, program availability, and the student's academic eligibility and financial status. Another objective during this step involves consideration of intermediate experiential and educational opportunities, such as attending professional meetings, and part-time work or volunteer experiences that would allow the student to gain professional experience and increase skill development while completing advanced academic training.

Step 3: College Planning

At Step 3 the counselor helps the student relate current undergraduate academic planning to specified career goals. Academic majors and specific elective courses can be chosen to pre-

pare the student effectively for intermediate requirements and longer-term career objectives. If graduate training is required, the student will need to determine whether or not specific majors or courses will be required for admission or will improve admission chances. Undergraduate students who express an interest in pursuing graduate programs might be encouraged to assist faculty in research projects and to participate in other activities that will enhance graduate admission chances.

Another objective of this step, as in Step 2, is to identify specific experiential activities that provide the student opportunities for goal-related experiences and skill development. For example, the student considering business management might want to participate in student government or other student organizations to develop leadership and organization skills. The journalism student may want to volunteer or seek part-time employment in the university public information office in addition to writing for the school newspaper or other publications.

Step 3 is a culmination of effective problem-solving strategy. The counselor helps the student relate academic planning and extracurricular activities and experiences to alternative ways of achieving predetermined goals.

This paradigm may seem overly utilitarian. On the contrary, the paradigm can and should be applied to nonvocational as well as vocational life planning goals. Healy (1975) suggested that career counseling involves teaching effective problem-solving skills. This paradigm is founded upon that principle. It is designed to help the counselor guide students through an effective problem-solving strategy to integrate academic and career planning.

TRANSITION AND PREPARATION: WHAT CAN BE DONE

The high proportion of changes of college major by students who declare majors as freshmen, combined with the findings of Sagaria et al. (1980) that students consider it very important to select a major during freshman orientation, suggest that the misconception about the role of the college major in career planning is well established before the student arrives on the college campus. A number of steps can be taken in the secondary system and within the university to help students understand and use a new approach to career planning.

First, high school and college advisers can encourage students who are unsure of their objectives to give their registration status as undecided or "no preference." It should be made clear that it is neither negative nor unexpected for a 1st-year student to register as undecided. Perhaps more important, high school students and their parents should be informed that most 1st-year students really are undecided about their career objectives. Students should also be informed that on most college campuses the courses taken the 1st year by the undecided student vary little, if at all, from those taken by students who have chosen a major.

Second, college admissions officers and recruiters who visit high schools should inform students and parents that undecided students will not be required, expected, or pressured to select a major immediately. Admissions officers should review their admissions publications and eliminate statements that imply that college majors should be chosen as soon as possible.

Third, college counselors can inform new students and their parents during the orientation period about the role of the college major in career planning. Students and parents should meet with academic advisers to gain a clear un-

derstanding of the core academic requirements and of how elective courses can be used for initial career exploration.

Finally, the university should provide an active outreach program in academic advising that provides individual attention to undecided students and helps students to (a) gain a better understanding of the college career-planning relationship, (b) establish tentative career- and life-planning goals, and (c) make academic choices on the basis of established goals. Snodgrass (1979) and Forney and Moore (1978) described counseling workshops that could be incorporated into advising programs to assist students in clarifying and relating career and academic goals.

Further research is needed to validate the counseling paradigm presented here. Healy (1982) provided a comprehensive summary of specific outcome criteria and measurement methods that can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of career-choice counseling. One approach would be to determine the effect of counseling procedures derived from the paradigm on dimensions of career maturity. Super's (1974, 1983) decision-making dimension is particularly relevant. Another approach would be to evaluate the quality of career plans made by students following counseling. Healy (1982) suggested that counselors consider using educators and employers in the targeted occupations, who have direct knowledge of the targeted environment, as evaluators of student plans.

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