Introduction to Career Development

by
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My passion for career development started soon after I took my B. A. from Carleton College. A typical traditional-aged student, I had changed my major three times during the course of my education, finally settling on art history. I learned about art, history, architecture, sociology, psychology and religion all by studying beautiful works of art. What could be better? I graduated with honors, sent my meager belongings home to New Hampshire and took some time off.

That next fall, when I decided to job hunt on the east coast, I had no idea what I wanted to do or what I could do. I hadn't a clue how to look for work. I figured surely someone would see my great potential and hire me to do something.

That bubble burst when one interviewer said, "Oh yeah, sure I've heard of Minnesota. That's the capital of Wisconsin, right?" Another recruiter snarled, "Art History, huh? Isn't that like majoring in baton twirling?" I was devastated. How could anyone say such a thing—and what if it were true?

I had it in my head that you weren't supposed to say much in a job interview. The purpose was really for them to tell you about the job and for you to nod politely in return. When the employer checked my faculty references he asked them if I ever spoke, to which they replied, "Do you have the right person?" Demoralized by now, I took the first job I was offered and felt grateful.

The only problem was I hated it. I lasted nine months at that, moved, found another job and hated that one even more. These were perfectly acceptable entry level professional jobs. What was the matter with me? If I kept this up I could become a thirty-year-old with an eighty-page resume.

I soon learned there is a better way, and it is called career development. I read everything I could get, I learned how to job hunt, and I went to graduate school. Now I have fourteen years of experience helping students and alumnae to plan their futures. Career Development is only partly about "Get a job"— it is mostly about "Get a life." My passion is about helping students to discover the spot for themselves in the world that will give them the most satisfaction, and coincidentally, that spot is also the place where they will contribute the most to the world. "Work" is something I define as purposeful energy. It might not be a job in the traditional sense. It might be raising children, writing a novel or creating a work of art. What we teach students in the career development office is a thought process — a way of looking at information and making decisions that will help them to find that spot for themselves.

Self Assessment

The career development process has three major parts. The first part asks an individual, "Who are you? What do you know about yourself so far?" A student would ask herself or himself:

- What does work mean to me? (Different cultures will have different answers to that question.)
- What is important to me? What is worth my time and energy?
- What motivates me to do a good job?
- What am I interested in?
- What do I need from my next step?

A student also needs to look at her career decisions in the context of other areas of her life and ask further questions:

- What family responsibilities do I have? (For some of our multicultural students the extended family plays a large role in career decisions.)
- What is my financial status?
- Where do I want to live?
- What are some of my life goals and priorities?
- Do I have a "calling"?
- Where can I really contribute?
- How do I want to contribute as an active citizen?

Occupational assessment

Once some personal priorities have been set, a student can move onto the second part of the process, which is occupational assessment. This process asks the question, "Where are the people like me and what are they doing?" Typically, students have a very limited and often stereotypical view of occupations. We teach them how to find out about possibilities by asking:

- What is required for entry into a particular profession?
- How do you work with people in a particular setting?
- What rewards can be expected?
- What is frustrating? Satisfying?
- Could this profession fit for me?
- What is the work environment like?

Then a student will make some decisions about professional goals.

Career implementation

The last part of the career development process is called career implementation, job hunting. This part of the process includes resume writing, job interviewing and job hunting skills, all historically associated with a career development office.

What students need to know to find a job is important, but it is not hard to grasp. Students master far more complicated concepts in your classrooms. What is so hard is the anxiety students feel when they job hunt. It can be especially difficult for students who are not of the majority culture. For instance, a student whose culture teaches her or him that it is disrespectful to look someone in the eye will have difficulty with most western job interviewing. For most new graduates, the job hunt is discouraging, frustrating and downright unpleasant most of the time. Even the strongest self esteem can take a shellacking.

Try, for a minute, to put yourselves in their shoes. Let's say a tornado flattened your school and there was not a stick standing. Let's say that the Board decided to shut down the school for good. How well prepared would any of us be to make a transition to another line of work or to find another teaching position? When was the last time you went on a job interview and had to say why you were better than any of the other candidates? How long could you survive financially over a long job hunt?

At graduation, basically, a school lays students off. We deliberately downsize. We tell the students that they can't work here anymore. Admittedly, some are delighted and can't wait to be done. But some were very happy in school. They knew what was expected, they liked their co-workers, and they found the work to be satisfying, interesting and enjoyable. All of them wonder what they will do next, will they be good at something else and will someone hire them to do something other than school work.

The career development process is one that continues throughout a lifetime. The only thing that is guaranteed is change. Sometimes that change is initiated by the employee; for instance, someone who has been in the same job for ten years may be bored and want new challenges. Other times change is out of the employee's control. An alumna I saw this summer had been at her job for thirteen years and had enjoyed it very much until she was told on a Friday that her entire job description would be changing and she had until the following Monday to decide whether she would accept the new job or take a severance package. In order to deal with this kind of situation, I hope students will learn the job search process while they are in school so they can use it when they need it for the rest of their lives.

When I first used this process in my own career, it was because I wanted work that challenged me and that I would enjoy. In the 1970's, there were jobs out there for Carleton graduates no matter how poorly we interviewed. Since then, the job market has changed forever. The workplace is also far more diverse. Job security is a thing of the past. We are all literally free agents.

The College Placement Council says the chance that a professional will be terminated sometime during a career has risen from 25% to 33% over the past five years. It is essential that our students learn to make career decisions and understand what they need to do to implement those decisions simply to stay employed over a worklife.

The average student loan debt in a private college in 1992 was $11,333 or close to $200 per month for ten years. Almost all students, traditional and non-traditional aged, are working while they are going to school, and they are

working more hours per week; they have less time to spend on their career development and tend to be last minute in their approach to their decisions. Some students are more savvy than others about their career development; for some the process is culturally unfamiliar. Savvy or not, they all need help with their career plans.

Students often have complicated life situations. A sampling of students with whom I have worked include:

- A traditional-aged student who is a single parent of a five year old, who lives with her parents and is desperate for health insurance.
- A divorced mother of six who has the house and spousal support until she finishes her B.A. degree and who has not worked a day outside the home.
- The student who is here on his company's tuition reimbursement plan, which is suddenly canceled.
- The battered wife who has fled half way across the country from her abusive husband and whose first stop after safely depositing her two children at her best friend's house is the college career development office.

It can be overwhelming to all of us at times.

By the year 2000, 90% of the jobs in this country will require more than a high school education. Half of all new jobs created by the year 2000 will require a college degree. The students who learn the career development process and put in the energy and effort are successful even in this job market. We definitely can make a difference to students who are willing to help themselves.

There are some obvious, practical reasons for faculty involvement in the career development process. Every study you read these days reports that students are worried about career options, and to further their career prospects is the top reason they attend college. To recruit and retain students, we need to be concerned about this. Career development needs to be a community involvement.

The most important thing faculty can do to contribute to students' career development is to truly educate them. Doing high quality academic work is the best way students can prepare for their futures. Basic skills in writing and communication, quantitative skills, and computer literacy are essential. And we need to tell students that over and over again. Every time you intervene with a student who doesn't write well, encourage a student to develop quantitative skills, or assign work on the computer, you are contributing to a student's future.

Departmental career days and departments tracking graduates to make alumni information available to current students are invaluable services. Classes offer experiential learning opportunities, and faculty members bend over backwards to help their majors with advice, referrals and leads. Faculty serving as mentors are in a unique position to encourage and nurture talent and to build confidence. All of you can think of some student you have taken under your wing.

How can faculty help?

Though faculty already do a great deal related to career development, we need to be more deliberate, more direct and more explicit about the career preparation we offer. First of all, we need to name what we do here. We need to help students articulate what they are learning. That interviewer who asked me about art history and baton twirling really wanted me to articulate what I had gained from that choice of major. To do this students need to know about professional skills.

Content skills

Content skills are what you get across in the classroom. A nursing student learns anatomy, an English student learns to analyze great literature, and an art history student learns to identify major creative periods. Content skills sometimes are directly connected to a student's job after graduation, but sometimes they are not. What is critical is that students learn to learn, no matter which content area they choose. They need to learn to figure out what is critical, to ask questions and to find information.

There are a couple of problems, however, if students rely solely on content skills. For one thing, knowledge becomes obsolete at an alarming rate. The half life of an engineering degree, for example, is now about five years. We need to be sure our students can keep current. Furthermore, just because you know something doesn't mean you will be good at a particular job.

Personal skills

Are you prompt, reliable, honest, motivated, enthusiastic, tactful? And do any of those qualities matter to a particular profession? Employers look for and pay for the personality traits they need in their employees.

Transferable or functional skills

What can an individual do with people, things, information and data using interpersonal skills, organizational skills and leadership skills? Can you make an educated guess? Can you work without all the pieces? Can you adapt to change? That is what most of us do most of the time in our jobs. Our students need to know this in no uncertain terms so they are not tongue-tied when asked why they are here.

Make career information available

Information on alumni, professional associations, fields of study or work, graduate school, and internships should be accessible to students in your school and department. Use your academic advising role to bring up a student's career plans and help him or her begin to sort through those questions. Encourage students to explore and to take risks. Reward risks, help students to try new things and suggest that they get involved. Talk about their co-curricular activities as career related, and encourage them to start their involvement early.

I am not asking you to be a career counselor. That takes years of training. I am asking you to be familiar with the concept of skills and this model of career development. Make it your business to know what the Career Development office does.

Professional departments

Students who say, "I have chosen nursing (social work, education), so I have made my career choice and I don't really need to do anything else but do

well in my classes" tend to put all their eggs in that knowledge skill basket. It may be true that students from the professional programs have an easier time landing a job at graduation depending on the job market, but you know as well as I do that it is not the end of career decisions.

What about the occupational therapist who hurts her back in a car accident and is no longer able to do the work? Or what of the nurse, teacher, accountant who has been in the field for 5, 10, 15 years and wants to make a change. Or what if the job market changes in the four to five years it takes to get a social work degree? These students come into my office terrified that they cannot do anything else. About 25% of our client load annually is alumni. And what about the student who doesn't get into the professional major, doesn't succeed in the major or decides she doesn't like the major?

In the professional programs, we need to help the student see the broader view of her education, including those personal and transferable skills. The American Institute of Certified Public Accountants advocates a broader education for those who sit for the CPA exams. "These people need to function in the business world and they need to know more than accounting." These people need to function in the health care arena or the classroom. We need to be sure our professional students know about career development as a lifelong process so they can handle future change.

Better intervention and follow-up with the students who are not admitted or who do not succeed in the professional majors are also necessary. Failing in this way can be very traumatic and these students need help in redirecting themselves. In the professional programs, we need to help prepare our graduates for advancement in their professions so the social worker can go on to become the executive director of a non-profit and the nurse can turn her interests to lobbying for health care reform.

Liberal arts departments

Students very unfortunately assume that all you can do is teach with a liberal arts degree and that only if you are lucky. I can't tell you how many times I have heard, "I would love to major in history (English, theology, sociology,

art), but you can't do anything with that. I need something practical, I need a job." I have also heard complaints about the liberal arts core courses because they "don't get me anywhere."

One of the most interesting clients I have had was a sophomore who was initially in tears in my office. She loved college and wanted to stay here. She was in a professional major where she was actually doing quite well but did not enjoy the work. She wanted to change her major to English, but her father had threatened to stop supporting her financially if she did. I calmed her down, offered her some Kleenex and coached her on the career development process. I told her what I tell all liberal arts majors. You develop many skills from a liberal arts major and the most important thing is that you choose a major that you will do well in and enjoy. You cannot, however, these days, keep your head in the sand. You will need to do some volunteer work, get some paid work experience, talk to school alumni who have majored in English, do one or more internships, and you must absolutely learn to job hunt. She changed her major, did three internships and had a great job the April before she graduated. By the way, her dad did continue to pay for her education.

Obviously, that was a success story. On the other extreme, there was the student who arrived in my office and said, "I will be graduating next weekend, I will be getting married the next weekend, I am a liberal arts major and I would like to have something lined up for after the honeymoon." No student should be that naive a week before he or she is to graduate!

In the liberal arts departments we need to quit apologizing for not being practical. Tell students about the personal and transferable skills they will develop in your major. Help them to name what they will gain. Have information on your graduates available: where they have gone, what they are doing. Encourage students to think about their career plans and possible work experiences they would like to try. Encourage co-curricular activities and volunteer experiences either on campus or in the community at large. Internships are essential and are an absolute "must" for the liberal arts major. As faculty you need to be knowledgeable about internships and willing to supervise them.

With our multicultural students, we in the career development office are still learning how to best serve their needs. They need coaching in dealing with a process that is culturally unfamiliar. All of our students will go into a workforce that is far more diverse and where an understanding of and an appreciation for cultural differences will be expected.

Before I get off my soap box, let me emphasize a couple of points. I believe that all of our students will need to know and use this career development process to live full and meaningful work lives. I see this as being nothing less than an adult survival skill for the next century. I also believe that it is our responsibility to expose our students to this information and to assist them in appreciating its importance.

Sometimes it is easier to help a student than you expect it will be. For example, a student I saw just last week said to me, "All I really needed was someone to say it was O.K. to try," and she is off to graduate school this fall.