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T.J. Warren and Benjamin Robert Forsyth

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Helping Students Pursue Meaningful Work: Identifying Necessary Shifts in Education

T.J. Warren and Benjamin Robert Forsyth

University of Northern Iowa

There is a great need to address the process and practices through which educators assist young people on finding and selecting majors and career paths. Based on empirical evidence, personal experience, and a review of current practices, the authors introduce some of the challenges students are faced with when deciding upon a professional career path. Unfortunately, too many students choose majors based on external influence and assumptions, without an understanding of themselves, their goals, and their values. Furthermore, students are growing up in a “noisy world,” with a conflicting view of the world of work, and a lack of professional guidance as they engage in career exploration. After outlining the challenges students are facing, this article proposes four solutions toward enhancing students’ major and career decision-making. These solutions include 1-on-1 purpose coaching, engaging the student’s inner circle, elevating career exploration standards, and offering greater career exploration opportunities.

Several years ago, one of us (TJ Warren) had a conversation with a first-year college student about changing their major. The conversation was similar to past conversations working in career services centers at a small Midwestern college and a mid-sized Midwestern university. However, this one conversation in particular has been especially meaningful when discussing matters of major selection and career exploration with various colleagues. Below is a portion of the conversation with the student. It is not an exact word-for-word retelling, but it is quite close:

Student: "I am no longer interested in business."

Me: "How did you decide on business as a major?"

Student: "Well, in middle school, I took an assessment that showed me I was good at business. So I was told to follow the business track in high school."

Me: "In middle school?!"

Student: "Yes."

Me: "So you took a bunch of business courses throughout high school?"

Student: "Yeah. I took a lot of business classes and I received some transfer credit for a couple of them."

Me: "Did you take any other courses besides business courses?"

Student: "Not many. A few math classes, a couple science courses, English, Spanish, and a history class."

Me: "So you took an assessment in middle school, the assessment indicated you might have an interest in business,

which led you to take a number of business courses all throughout high school, and from there you decided you would major in business because you already had a couple credits that would transfer in. Would you say this is how you chose your major?"

Student: "Yeah, I guess so."

Me: "Gotcha. Do you even like business?"

Student: "Not really."

Me: "Did you like it in high school?"

Student: "Sort of. Not a lot"

Me: "If you really didn't like it in high school and don't like it now, why would you major in it?"

Student: "I don't know... My parents strongly encouraged it and I heard you could make quite a bit of money in business. Someone else also told me that I could do anything I wanted with a business degree."

Conversations like this are pretty common for career and advising professionals today. We casually polled ten professionals working within our institution in advising and career services, and of those ten, seven indicated having similar conversations with students in the past. Though not tested in a formal empirical way, we are confident many higher education professionals are having these kinds of conversations on a regular basis.

On a more personal note, the above conversation resonates deeply as we, the authors, had our own personal struggles to figure out what we wanted to major in and what career path to

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pursue at a young age. We are invested in this work because we believe there are many resources and tools to help students explore career and vocational decision-making. This paper explores what impacts students' major and career decision-making processes, and it is an effort to help secondary and postsecondary professionals deeply consider ways to help young people more proactively figure out what they want to do with their lives. The paper first discusses some of the challenges impacting students' major and career decision-making processes, while also providing some evidence regarding those challenges. Next, four solutions and benefits are explored because they have the potential to effectively help young people pursue meaningful work. Finally, the paper concludes with a brief discussion that summarizes the interplay between challenges and solutions, and provides some suggestions for future work.

Challenges and Evidence

Major societal challenges are typically complex and highly interconnected. Furthermore, solutions to these challenges often require a deep understanding of the theories and issues that exist, as well as anchoring evidence about the nature and scope of the problems (cf. Glaser, 1984). Helping students find and pursue meaningful work is one example of a societal challenge that is both complex and highly interconnected. Therefore, in this section, we describe four challenges impacting students' paths toward finding meaningful work and provide evidence regarding the nature of these challenges. By no means are these the only challenges. Rather, we find them to be some of the most prevalent.

The College Major

According to Eric St. John (2000) "[t]here is, perhaps, no college decision that is more thought-provoking, gut wrenching and rest-of-your-life oriented—or disoriented—than the choice of a major" (p. 20). To students, choosing a college major is a daunting task and may in fact be the biggest challenge students face when it comes to pursuing meaningful work. Many students believe the major they choose will lock them into one career for the rest of their lives (Bures, 2011). Interestingly though, only 27 percent of college graduates end up in a career related to their major (Burnett & Evans, 2016). This fact can also be confirmed by asking any group of professionals in a room to raise their hand if they are working within an industry directly aligned with their major. Very few typically raise their hands.

With this 'locked-into-one-career' myth in mind, pressure to choose the correct major is amplified when hundreds of majors with various curricula exist within thousands of institutions worldwide. Furthermore, when financial

constraints like rising tuition costs mix with uncertainty about what to major in, the pressure to choose the "right" major can be truly daunting (Perna, 2006).

For incoming college students, only 20 to 50 percent enter higher education as "exploring" or "undecided," and an estimated 75% of students change their major at least once before graduation (Gordon & Steele, 2015). These data align with two recent Gallup studies indicating that graduates feel unsure about their current work. In the Bates-Gallup national study, less than 50% of college graduates succeed in finding purposeful work (Gallup & Bates College, 2019, p. 5, 12) based on agreement levels from eight different statements that graduates were asked about regarding purpose in work. In the Western Governors University Gallup study, only a third of WGU graduates strongly agreed they had an ideal job for themselves compared to less than 25% of their peers nationally (Gallup & Western Governors University, 2019). Although these statistics focus on graduates and their work outside of higher education, the uninformed decision-making process of choosing a major and discovering career interests is likely a crucial contributing factor.

Students who do enter college knowing what they want to major in are most likely making a decision based on little research and/or a lack of self-reflection (Beggs, Bantham, & Taylor, 2008). Students' typical reasons for choosing a major are all across the board. Here is a short list of some questionable reasons students have shared with us over the years:

- To make a lot of money
- Forced by their family to major in a particular course of study
- Transferred in a lot of credit that fulfilled some requirements for a major and felt they could not change directions
- Found out the major was "easy" to complete
- Felt the subject was the only thing they were good at in high school
- Saw a certain type of career on a television or streaming show they liked
- Believed the only way to work with a certain population of people was through a specific major (e.g., education -> working with children)
- Athletics was the focus, not academics or their major
- An assessment "said" they should
- Just needed something to say to people who would ask

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Unfortunately, a large number of students are choosing a major based on influence and assumption, rather than an understanding of themselves, their goals, and their values (Freedman, 2013). This way of making a decision on a major and/or career could potentially impact the college student experience, which impacts retention, engagement, student learning, and goal-setting (Stock & Stock, 2018).

The college major is a major challenge, and it is important that the choice of a major be tempered with the knowledge that employers are often less interested in an individual's undergraduate major than in their "demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems" (Hart Research Associates & Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2015, p. 3). Consideration must also be given to the pace in which new jobs are being created and how employment opportunities are evolving. Opportunities for work constantly fluctuate and new occupations and types of work are developed regularly. One only needs to look at the COVID-19 pandemic to see how types of, and opportunities for, work can experience rapid change. In any case, changing students' perception and understanding of the college major is a necessity.

Lack of Guidance

Another major factor impacting the career decision-making process is how little guidance many young adults receive. Though counselors have received "Fair" to "Poor" marks for helping students think about different kinds of careers they might want to pursue (Johnson & Rochkind, 2010), we do not believe they should shoulder most of the blame. School counselors are understaffed and overworked.

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) reports the national average caseload for a school counselor today is 455 students (Bray, 2019). This is nearly twice the ASCA's recommended 250:1 student counselor ratio. However, some counselors have as many as 650+ students, while only a few have less than 200 (Baker, 2019). In California and Illinois, the ratio has reached more than 1,000:1 (National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2019). With their high caseloads, school counselors are charged with furthering young people's academic development, college and career readiness, and social-emotional development (Bray, 2019). Counselors will typically juggle course scheduling, short-term counseling, conflict mediation, and college and career advisement. Additionally, some counselors are assigned other tasks like managing a school's standardized testing efforts and/or offering prevention programming. It is no wonder 67% of students reported their high school counselors as "Fair" or

"Poor" in helping them think about different kinds of careers they might want to pursue (Johnson & Rochkind, 2010). In this same report, 48% of students described feeling like another face in the crowd when it came to describing their experiences with counselors in their high school. It is clearly evident students wish to receive further assistance in their major/career decision-making process in high school, yet school counselors are stretched so thin, how can they possibly provide each individual with the guidance they need and deserve?

As we have mentioned, the major/career decision-making process is a daunting task; one that requires a great deal of time, attention, and resources. With high caseloads, some counselors' allotted availability only allows for 50 minutes of career guidance per student in a given school year (Baker, 2019). Additionally, when a student has to wait days to meet with their assigned counselor, and the counselor has very limited knowledge/experience on how to assist a student, it is difficult for students to make a well-informed, thoughtful decision on a college, major, and/or career path within a timely manner. It takes a great deal of skilled guidance to help students understand that the major/career decision-making process is a lifelong process. Unfortunately, when guidance is limited the only students who make up for it are the ones whose social circle is equipped to assist. This is an especially daunting task for the many first-generation college students who have fewer individuals in their social circle who have relevant college experience, which includes parents. According to RTI International (2019), as of a 2016 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study by the U.S. Department of Education, 56% of college students had parents who did not have a bachelor's degree.

It is disheartening to think about the amount of untapped potential because students do not have the proper support to pursue world-serving, problem-solving work. Our students today need further guidance to help them find a better aligned personal and professional path for themselves. Our society needs a future generation of workers who can meet the challenges of our world.

A Noisy World

Distractions often pull people away from what is most important in their lives. For young people, this can often mean robbing away intentional time for getting to know themselves. Not to mention an understanding of the vast complexities of change when it comes to labor markets, the economy, and constant occupational shifts with new and evolving positions. Students, and adults, dedicate very little attention to considering who they are and the professional opportunities

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beyond graduation (Selingo, 2016). In our experience, when students are asked “Who are you?” very few can articulate a strong response. Characteristics, such as personality traits, experiences, skills, interests, values, and goals are often neglected or poorly reflected upon. We must find ways to help young people quiet the noise of distraction and help them consider important vocational and avocational paths. Though avocational paths are often based on enjoyment, they still play a critical part in an individual’s life and need to be considered. For some, avocational paths are more meaningful and fulfilling. In these cases, students must consider vocational paths that allow them to focus on their worthwhile avocational interests or paths where their avocational interests can be incorporated into their vocational paths. These situations can be even more challenging for students to understand and consider, and they require dedicated attention.

We live in a fast-paced, rapidly-changing, constantly-connected world, and today’s students know nothing different. Most of today’s students have never experienced life without internet connectivity (Sladek, 2014). Cell phones and social media play major roles in students’ lives, and families and educators compete with these, sometimes addictive, elements for a slice of their time, attention, and connection (Sahin, Ozdemir, Unsal, & Temiz, 2013). Speaking of time, many young people today do not have much time to spare, or they are operating on unstructured time (Brown, Nobiling, Teufel, & Birch, 2011; Moeller, Brackett, Ivcevic, & White, 2020). Schedules become filled with instrument lessons, choir practices, summer camps, and sports leagues. Many of these activities provide great benefits, but they also tend to consume a lot of children’s time and attention, not to mention parents’ bank accounts (Bennett, Lutz, & Jayaram, 2012; Hau & Yeung, 2015). More concerning is how bombarding media and marketing elements are to students. Messages and content are constantly thrown at students telling them who they should be, how they should look, and ways they should act (Brooks, Longstreet, & Califf, 2017). The amount of information and content available to high school and collegiate students is overwhelming, and it is only going to continue to grow.

It is worth noting that even employers are contributing to the noise. Recently, some employers throughout the United States have started recruiting high school students to work for them as they earn their college degree at a nearby community college (Moran, 2019; Society for Human Resource Management, 2014). While these working students attend college, their employers will agree to pay for their tuition and typically guarantee a full-time position with the company upon graduation, so long as they meet a few stipulations (e.g., working so many years with the company). Many would argue

this is a great “deal” professionally, and to an extent, it is. Guaranteed full-time employment upon graduation and paid tuition is outstanding, especially in a post-COVID, high-tuition economy. However, if the workplace does not have well-established career development practices in place, and is unwilling to support a young employee’s change in directions, it can pigeonhole a student and eliminate their opportunity to explore various experiences and paths that may be more aligned with their interests, skills, and desires. These recruited students only see a single lens of the working world throughout their college career, which could be detrimental. It is possible the benefits outweigh the disadvantages. However, we argue these practices hinder more than help, because a worthwhile career of purpose often requires a wider view of the world. Borrowing loosely from Socrates, the unexamined career is not worth pursuing.

As the world continues to evolve more quickly, it continues to get “noisier.” Cell phones, computers, TV, streaming services, ads, social media, and video games all contribute to this “noise” or distraction. In her book, *iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—And Completely Unprepared for Adulthood*, author Jean Twenge (2017) stated that high school seniors today spend approximately 2.25 hours a day texting on their cell phones, about 2 hours a day on the internet, 1.5 hours a day gaming, and about .5 hours on video chat. She argued that even if there is multitasking with some of these activities, the amount of time available for other activities, including meaningful connections with others and adequate sleep, becomes crowded out.

Even more alarming, students recognize they are distracted by technology (Attia, Baig, Marzouk & Khan, 2017; Galloway, 2017), yet they continue to make themselves even more distracted (Hazelrigg, 2019; Wilmer, Sherman & Chein, 2017). At this rate, portions of society’s constant connection—or addiction—to technology alone is enough to keep us distracted from what is most important in our lives, and probably will not change anytime soon.

Today’s youth appear to be the most distracted individuals of all time. Generation Z or iGen (ages 10-25) has never known a time before the internet, and this trend will only continue with incoming generations, including Generation Alpha (ages 0-9). Future generations will continue to experience these harmful distractions if proactive measures are not undertaken.

A Conflicting View about the World of Work

Despite being a highly interconnected and informed global community, many young adults still struggle to comprehend

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the operational dynamics of the workplace. After all, today's youth are growing up more slowly and many have never held a paying job during high school (Twenge, 2017). Additionally, the amount of opportunities available to students beyond graduation are virtually limitless, making it more of a challenge for students to discern their future plans. For these reasons, students have a very unclear understanding and conflicting view about the world of work.

In 2015, the National Association for Colleges and Employers (NACE) launched a Career Readiness initiative to determine a definition and competencies for career readiness. Since then, colleges and universities in partnership with employers throughout the country have come to know, understand, and appreciate the NACE Career Readiness competencies as a means of determining whether or not students have the skills necessary to enter and become part of a strong, productive workforce (for further details, see <https://www.nacweb.org/career-readiness/competencies/career-readiness-resources/>).

The NACE Career Readiness initiative recently produced a study that found employers and graduating seniors differed greatly when it came to rating proficiency in competencies such as professionalism/work ethic, oral written communications, and leadership (2018). The biggest disparity involved perceptions about professionalism and work ethic. A massive 89.4% percent of students considered themselves proficient in this area, while only 42.5% of employers surveyed agreed. These results clearly show the discrepancy between how students and their future employers feel they are prepared for entering the workforce.

In addition to work preparation concerns, the number of opportunities available to students can seem pretty straightforward, but still paralyzing. Depending on the type of community or school district one grows up in, some students seem to have a limited understanding of what they might be able to do. Consider, for example, a student from the rural Midwest who has never traveled to another part of the world and is only aware of the professions within their own community (doctor, lawyer, dentist, teacher, social worker, mechanic, construction worker, police officer, business owner, veterinarian, athletic trainer/coach, or military). Knowing only what they know, and the possible lack of guidance from their school counselor or other external influences, may lead a student to believe this small set of professions are the only options, when in reality the number of options is quite large. On the Occupational Information Network (O*NET) webpage (<https://www.onetonline.org/>), one will find information on more than 1,000 occupations within the U.S. economy (2020). What's more, 65% of today's youth will end up working in

jobs that do not currently exist (Schwab & Samans, 2016). There are jobs today that did not exist five or ten years ago, and with each passing day, new careers are created making accurate knowledge about the world of work all the more challenging to discern. A narrow view of the world and virtually unlimited opportunities creates the perfect storm, or distraction, for students trying to make an informed, reflective decision about their career path.

Solutions and Benefits

The aforementioned challenges do not address all the contributing factors that make the career decision-making process so challenging for students today, but we do believe what we have written about are some of the most challenging. These challenges need effective solutions, which will require shifts regarding how students are educated. These shifts need not be revolutionary, but they will require purposeful effort.

In this section we offer up four possible solutions with their accompanied benefits that could help students better pursue meaningful work. These solutions include 1-on-1 purpose coaching, engaging the student's inner circle, elevating career development standards, greater career exploration opportunities.

1-on-1 Purpose Coaching

Offering career exploration support to students in a 1-on-1 setting is not new. For many years, 1-on-1 career counseling has been a practice and resource for helping students figure out career paths beyond high school graduation (Slaten & Werriden, 2018). School counselors, formerly known as guidance counselors, frequently engage in conversations with students about possible careers, potential postsecondary institutions, and career assessments. These are valuable conversations for students and worth having, but we want to encourage a specific kind of 1-on-1 conversation to take place more frequently; a coaching conversation focused on helping students consider their purpose(s).

One of us (TJ Warren) regularly engages in "purpose coaching" conversations. These conversations typically involve a student who is feeling lost and does not know what major or career path they want to pursue. In purpose coaching, career professionals take a few moments to help students consider what they do not want. Narrowing down major and occupation options is a critical part of the exploration process and arguably one of the easiest steps a student can take initially. Having too many options can cause a student to enter a stage of indecision, delaying their progress. After narrowing down the options, the career professional asks specific questions that help a student discern their interests, values,

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skills, and passions. Many students have difficulty articulating these characteristics on their own, as many have never been given a chance to look inward at their true selves. It is amazing to see the “ah-ha” moments students have as they consider these characteristics and get to know themselves again.

In cases where students struggle to answer questions about themselves, we recommend several assessments to help aid the process such as CliftonStrengths, Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), MCODE, and YouScience amongst the hundreds of assessments out there. Assessments can be of value to students and should be administered in a way where a career professional can walk alongside the student as they review their results. The assessments we recommend do have costs associated with them, but there are many available that are free to use on websites such as CareerOneStop and on O*Net Online.

Another valuable conversation worth engaging in during 1-on-1 “purpose coaching” includes helping students consider their needs and struggles. For example, if a student is regionally bound to an area, by choice or circumstance, this limits the opportunities available to them, for better or worse. A student living in Colorado who needs to be close to family may struggle to pursue a career opportunity in marine biology. Additionally, identifying struggles a student has faced may point them to a possible, motivated path where they could work to help others navigate experiencing something similar to what they experienced. These kinds of reflections point students toward the kinds of problems they might want to solve.

Purpose coaching can help students take a frequently given reason for pursuing a career path and help them to make that reason productive. When directly asked, “what do you want to do with your life?,” nearly every student responds by saying, “I want to help people.” This is a valuable problem-solving, service-oriented response that is unfortunately too vague and generic to be of much use in major/career decision-making. However, a student is much more likely to productively narrow their path if they can be guided to explain how and why they want to help people (Schultze & Miller, 2004; Warren, 2020). Considering the “how” and the “why” for helping people often leads a student toward linking their desire to help with solving complex and challenging problems like ending poverty or improving social justice. Many students are especially motivated to work on these large causes, precisely because it links to how they can serve important needs across the world. Some powerful questions--though challenging--to ask students are what problem(s) do you want to solve and/or how would you go about solving them? These questions tend to open-up some possibilities and options for students to take, especially when they are asked by an

individual willing to give further guidance, direction, and possible pathways. For further assistance to help guide these conversations with students, one could turn to SparkPath Challenge Cards and/or the Sustainable Development Goals established in 2015 by the United Nations (LeBlanc, 2015). Tools and resources such as these can get students to tangibly consider problems they might want to help solve and lead a student to next steps.

Yet another important part of 1-on-1 purpose coaching is to equip students with the understanding that pursuing one’s purpose(s) is a life-long journey, and the notion that doing what one loves and was put on the planet to do is in fact a life-long process. Most professionals today are not working in their first work interest area or degree focus (Pickerell & Neault, 2019). Most have started somewhere only to have developed their skills, found another interest or passion, struggled with a personal challenge, changed a value, etc. When helping students understand that pursuing one’s purpose is a life-long journey, career professionals can refer to the metaphor of climbing a mountain. Walking straight up a mountain is probably the shortest way to the top, but the terrain of a mountain does not allow for a peaceful, linear walk. The road to a summit is filled with rough terrain, falls, lateral shifts, and sometimes hardship, and when most people arrive at the top, they arrive only to notice there are more peaks or mountains to climb. We must emphasize to students that even after four years of high school, two to six years of college, military, or some other post-high school graduate experience, they may still not be brought directly to their calling. As Baz Luhrmann once said in his song, *Everybody’s Free (to Wear Sunscreen)*: “The most interesting people I know didn’t know at 22 what they wanted to do with their lives. Some of the most interesting 40-year-olds I know still don’t.” (1998, 02:12).

As we alluded to in the challenges, it is no surprise that 1-on-1 purpose coaching requires a great deal of time and effort, and for counselors with caseloads of hundreds of students, it is highly unlikely they can engage in this coaching alone. In fact, they cannot do it alone. Counselors can incorporate 1-on-1 purpose coaching into their current practices, but they will certainly need to rely on others to aid them in this work. We recommend getting other individuals involved within school districts, homes, and communities. Fortunately, purpose coaching is work all educators, parents, and community members can engage in. We talk a little bit about getting others involved in the next section, but it is important to emphasize the need for others to assist school counselors with 1-on-1 purpose coaching. In cases where a student needs more time to consider and discern, postsecondary educators can take the “baton” and assist students in these ways. Equipping all

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educators (secondary and postsecondary), parents, and various other community members can help in this critically important work and better lead students in positive directions both vocationally and avocationally.

Engaging the Inner Circle of the Student to Assist with Their Exploratory Process

We have stressed the importance of students taking time to look inward at who they are and how they might want to contribute to society personally and professionally. Although the “inner work” a student engages in is important, we cannot dismiss the fact that the inner circle of a student can be incredibly valuable to their decision-making process. Those who love, care for, befriend, and mentor an individual can perceive qualities, characteristics, and values in a student that they themselves may not see. Thus, one solution toward helping a student pursue meaningful work is to encourage and equip a student’s inner circle to get involved in the exploratory process.

Getting a student’s inner circle involved does not have to be difficult. In fact, many parents and guardians are naturally doing the work already and don’t realize it. In their guide for parents and guardians, the Canadian Education and Research Institute for Counselling (CERIC) emphasizes the notion that parents are in fact children’s first teachers. The significance of parents and guardians getting involved in children’s activities, encouraging their curiosity, and paying close attention to their interests, preferences, and abilities are observations they can further share with a child as they grow and develop (Cahill & Furey, 2017b). We highly recommend parents and guardians view this guide, or others like it, as it emphasizes the key role they can play in the career exploration process which begins at a very early age.

CERIC also has a guide for educators (Cahill & Furey, 2017a). Though school counselors can play a major role in the exploratory process, it is clear their schedules do not allow for the opportunity to connect with every student and engage in the necessary deep, meaningful, and sometimes time-consuming purpose coaching conversations. Therefore, equipping educators to help with this process, can be of great benefit to students.

The phrase, “it takes a village” certainly applies when it comes to helping young people determine their vocational and avocational paths. We are mindful of an illustration our University President shares in his remarks at each graduation ceremony. He asks groups of the audience to stand up if they are supporting a graduate on that day. He asks parents, guardians, grandparents, siblings, friends, educators, and others to rise in support of the graduate they are honoring. Eventually, the entire arena, minus the graduates, are standing

in support of their graduate. He goes on to say,

Graduates, look around you. You are here today because of the people that stand and gather around you to celebrate this day. Their commitment to your life, to bringing you into this world, to training you, to teaching you, to guiding you, to caring for you, to giving you the things you need in your life to be successful, your education...These are the people that made today happen... [J]oin me in thanking these people who made this day possible for you (Nook, 2019).

We all play a significant role in many individuals’ lives. Counselors, educators, and parents/guardians should all recognize their importance and be equipped to support students in their career exploration process.

We also want to recognize some of the challenges within a student’s inner circle. Some students do not have a solid inner circle to guide and lead them appropriately through 1-on-1 coaching and exploratory methods. Additionally, there may be cases where students’ inner circles are more prescriptive in nature and they are pressured into certain pathways that perhaps go against their desires and interests. These are challenging situations to detect and navigate. Therefore, training all educators to better spot these situations and engage in further conversation with students is key to helping them navigate these situations. This stresses the fact that an equipped educator and/or counselor is all the more important to have within every student’s inner circle where 1-on-1 purpose coaching is more likely to occur. Furthermore, certain students must be encouraged and equipped to engage in the tough conversations that may go against some of the pressured pathways emphasized within their inner circles. The additional training for educators and parents may also extend to students as well, better equipping them to engage in their decision-making processes and navigating challenging conversations. Again, this work truly “takes a village”.

The inner circle, when implemented well, can be a powerful method for helping students in their vocational discernment process. When students look inward at themselves and engage in meaningful conversations with their teachers, counselors, parents, and friends about who they are, what they do well, what they enjoy, what problems they want to solve, etc. they are more likely to be resilient and persistent towards pursuing their unique purpose(s) (Rounds & Su, 2014).

Elevating the Career Development Standard(s) in P-12 and Higher Education

The importance of educational standards and benchmarks, and holding educators accountable to educating our students to be productive, contributing, life-long learners cannot be overstated. Standards and benchmarks are essential, and they

have been established for nearly every educational subject, as well as for the ethical and professional practices of administrators and teachers. The standards that have been heavily emphasized in recent years revolve around science, technology, engineering, mathematics (STEM), and literacy; all of which prepare students for our fast-paced, complex, rapidly-changing world and better a student's critical-thinking and problem-solving skills on a broader, holistic level. However, we believe the career development standards in P-12 education have been overshadowed by these recent STEM and literacy pushes, and this overshadowing may in fact be contributing to the vocational discernment challenges of students. With more focus on STEM and literacy, there is less opportunity for exploratory measures and practices. We strongly encourage educators to emphasize the career development standards to better serve students in their career and life exploration practices. Our suggestion is not to take away from the STEM and literacy standards, as we know these are important. Rather, we believe elevating career development standards in the minds of educators will better prepare students in their vocational and avocational plans.

It is worth noting that many states and the nation as a whole believe in standards for career development and employability. For example, the state standards we are most familiar with, the Iowa Core Standards, have employability standards throughout grades K-12 (Iowa Department of Education, 2010). Many other states have similar standards that align well with the NACE Career Readiness standards (National Association for Colleges and Employees, 2018). However, one has to wonder if these standards get much attention. With a seemingly ubiquitous push for young people to pursue STEM fields—which are a vital and important part of our current workforce—one has to wonder if wider career exploration and the general pursuit of purpose have detrimentally been put to the wayside.

Though the focus of this section is on P-12 education, we still recognize that standards and practices for career guidance should continue into postsecondary education. Practices within higher education can be small, such as having every student complete a personality inventory and/or participate in a career readiness program that encourages exploration. However, larger endeavors are also important to pursue like re-aligning general education requirements for exploratory measures, limiting students' major choice until their sophomore year of college, or rethinking the college major altogether. These larger scale initiatives may seem too radical for some people, but we include them here to illustrate that more can be done toward elevating the career development and exploratory processes of students in higher education.

Greater Career Exploration Opportunities throughout P-12 Education

Another way in which students can be helped in their major and career decision-making processes is expanding the number of opportunities for P-12 students to engage in career exploration. In short, we recommend greater career development activity as early as elementary school (Pulliam & Bartek, 2018). Creating more P-12 career exploration opportunities is an extension of elevating the career development standards, but stronger standards without accompanying concrete action would still not be enough. Getting students to engage in concrete, hands-on learning experiences to see and feel what the day-to-day operations are in a line of work is important to begin early and often. These exercises can take place through the classroom or through large-scale programmatic experiences, and at various stages in a student's education.

When one thinks about career development, we tend to think of it merely as preparing for the world of work. This is a major part of career development, but career development is so much more. As stated in CERIC's guide for educators (Cahill & Furey, 2017a), "career development is not just about jobs, work, and careers" (p.12). Rather, career development is a lifelong process that involves constant growth, change, and adaptation. With career development taking place every day in a student's life, even at a young age, greater frequency of engaging in career development exercises and activities seems essential to students. A great place for these exercises is within the classroom (Larson & Miller, 2011).

Providing opportunities for students while learning core subject matter is possible, even in the early stages of a student's P-12 educational journey. Ways in which students can explore and engage in career development within the classroom are abundant. Here are just a few of those ways:

- Incorporate relevant career questions to lessons, problems, and topics (i.e., Who would be interested in solving this problem? What kind of job might help solve this problem?)
- Bring in guest speakers and parents to talk about their jobs
- Allow space for students to engage in role-playing activities and scenarios that not only focus on problem-solving, but also imaginary career-oriented roles
- Have students write about what they like to do and illustrate those interests
- Schedule field trips to local businesses and organizations to learn about certain careers
- Set aside a week or more for students to share about a field of interest and allow them to talk with other students about fields they learned about

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- Encourage involvement in organizations outside of school that build professional networking and skills (Lego leagues, Boy/Girl Scouts, etc.)
- Have parents and teachers share career-related observations of their child/student to each other during teacher conferences

In addition to classroom engagement exercises that are appropriate at all grades, middle- and high school students can and should participate in larger scale, programmatic, community partnership-based, experiential learning programs, or internship, apprenticeship, and practicum opportunities. Two school districts within the community we live in have strong experiential learning programs that are actively partnered with local businesses and organizations. One includes a Career Center that provides 18 career tracks students can engage in as a part of the district's curriculum. Students investigate career pathways such as nursing, digital communication, manufacturing, and early childhood education through hands-on course instruction and practice. The other school district offers an elective course designed to take students out of the traditional classroom for half the day, each day of the semester. During this time, they are immersed in professional environments that develop their problem-solving and professional skills as they work on projects for real business clients. Other opportunities such as internships, practica, and apprenticeships not only equip students with the necessary tools and knowledge to perform a particular type of work, but also help students more actively investigate a profession for whether or not it fits their interests, skills, values, and passions. We believe these kinds of opportunities ought to be widely replicated.

One other option especially for high school seniors may include taking a "gap-year." A gap-year is much like a sabbatical year in which individuals take part in various educational and developmental activities that exposes them to the real world, as well as the challenges within it. This can be a productive exercise for exploring students if they do not know what they want to do (cf. Martin, 2010). However, a gap-year also requires students to be disciplined and willing to take initiative seeking out their own opportunities to experience the world around them in a different way. Although a gap-year may not be right for every student, the opportunity to engage in one ought to be more widely available.

Creating more exploratory opportunities throughout students' educational experience is a worthwhile investment for school districts and individual students (Cahill & Furey, 2017a; Patton & Porfelli, 2007). However, it is not an easy one. Initiatives such as a career center and internship program

can be costly, at least initially, but we feel the benefits outweigh the disadvantages.

Conclusion

In closing, we wish to clearly state several important lines of work based on the solutions that we recommend in this paper (i.e., 1-on-1 purpose coaching, engaging the student's inner circle, elevating career development standards, greater career exploration opportunities). First, it is important for school counseling and career services programs to continue to equip professionals with quality 1-on-1 counseling and coaching skills, which includes purpose coaching. Second, we recommend that school counselors and career services professionals resist the temptation to provide support to students as if they were insulated from a student's inner circle. Third, school counselors and career services professional organizations can continue to advocate for greater awareness and prominence of career exploration standards in P-12 education and beyond. Lastly, we strongly advocate for efforts that push for programmatic, purposeful career exploration opportunities within all levels of education. We are hopeful that all of these endeavors will greatly enhance the process and practices for students' major and career decision-making.

The transition from school to work is something important enough that appropriate resources, practices, time, and personnel be brought to bear upon it in the most effective and influential way. Choosing what to study, and considering possible career paths, requires attention so that it is not put off until the last moment. Students do not, and should not, have to make these decisions alone. Informed career professionals and their professional organizations do have the skills and knowledge necessary to help students make sense of a noisy world of options and conflicting perspectives about the world of work. However, they should not have to do this work alone, within short time constraints or without adequate institutional support. Choosing one's vocation and avocation is a process that begins earlier than secondary education and requires engagement with many members of a student's inner circle of friends, family, and trusted educators. P-12 and postsecondary professionals need to think more deeply about how they are preparing and assisting students with figuring out their future, and we believe 1-on-1 purpose coaching is an important part of delivering this quality assistance. Educators, parents, and counselors must prioritize this work of helping young people understand who they are and how they want to serve the world, professionally and personally.

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