

A NEW TOOL FOR CAREER DECISION-MAKING

By Cheryl Donahue

A new online tool is helping high school students figure out their future career opportunities.

What do you want to be when you grow up? That old-fashioned question has new relevance in the global, skills-focused workplace of the 21st century. Adults in the workplace hear it, college students hear it, and high school students hear it: you need a good education, and good skills, if you want a good job in “the new economy.”

But how do students figure out how to get the education and skills they need to prosper as workers, citizens and family members? A new online tool from America’s Career Resource Network (ACRN), a program sponsored by the Department of Education’s Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE), seeks to answer that question.

The Career Decision-Making Tool (CDMT) is based on a cognitive model developed by Florida State University (FSU) researchers. The online tool was developed by FSU and the National Training Support Center (NTSC), which is funded by OVAE to support ACRN, and managed by DTI Associates (www.dtiassociates.com).

The CDMT helps high school students plan for their futures by showing them how to make good decisions about education and careers.

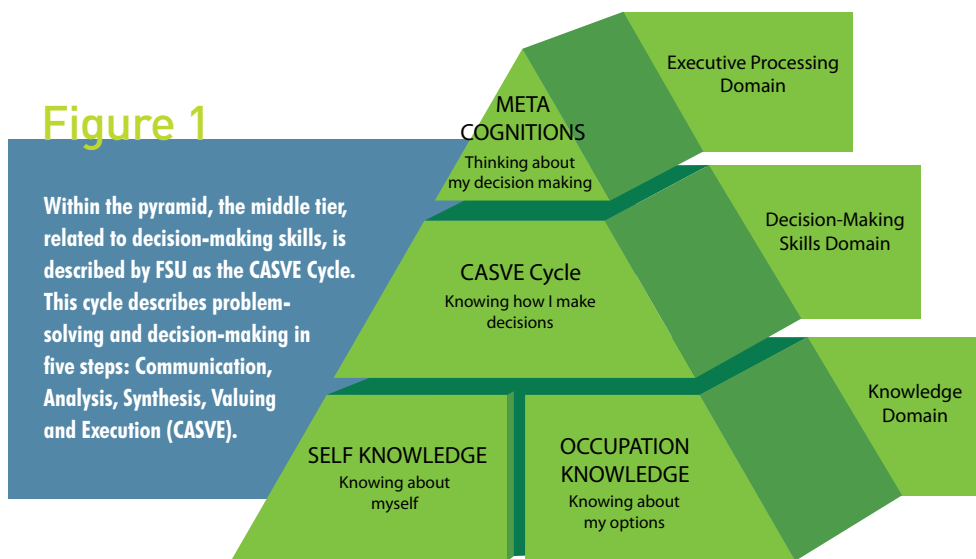
Why Plan for the Future?

The trends are well known. Manufacturing jobs that require only a high school education and on which entire families can be supported are going or gone. The low-skill service-sector jobs that have replaced them don’t pay well, don’t provide benefits, and don’t offer much room for advancement.

People working full-time in these jobs still have trouble paying the bills. That means that high school students who graduate without good skills could be stuck in jobs where they’ll be struggling financially all their lives.

Burt Carlson, a senior official at OVAE before his retirement last spring, notes that the number of low-skill jobs is decreasing as well.

“The jobs that remain are those that



Source: Pyramid of Information Processing Domains in Career Decision-Making Adapted from: Sampson, J. P., Jr., Peterson, G. W., Lenz, J. G., & Reardon, R. C. (1992). A cognitive approach to career services: Translating concepts into practice. *Career Development Quarterly*, 41, 67–74. © National Career Development Association. Used with permission.

cannot be computerized or outsourced, or that require physical presence to perform,” says Carlson. “Meanwhile, there are thousands of adults that have already been washed out of the U.S. labor market for lack of skills.”

There are also a large number of immigrants who arrive in the U.S. with less than a high school education.

“What this means,” notes Carlson, “is that while the number of low-skilled jobs decreases, the number of persons seeking employment in these jobs is increasing.”

So students leaving high school without the skills to do college-level work or get a good job will be competing with adults for a decreasing number of low-skill jobs.

Another factor in the changing American labor market is lack of job security. Most workers can expect to change jobs, to experience periods of unemployment, and to be competing for new jobs or contract work a number of times in their careers. They will also have to upgrade their skills regularly.

As Carlson notes, students need not only “the knowledge and skills related to job performance, [but also] the knowledge and skills required both to function effectively in the labor market and to appropriately manage their own careers, including health, unemployment and retirement planning. These are not skills usually taught in high school.”

The message is clear. Students need a good education and solid skills to get a good job. They also need to know how

to keep learning, so they can stay on top of the market and take advantage of new opportunities. And students need to start thinking about their futures while still in high school.

High School Decisions

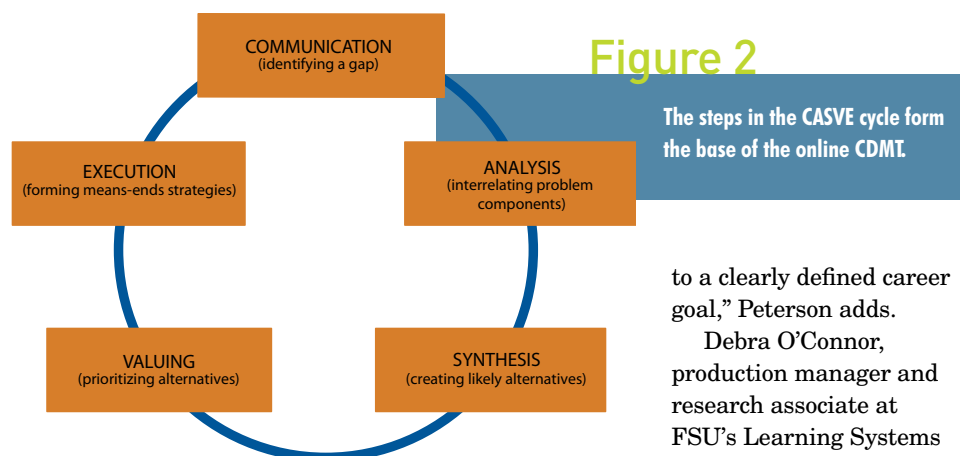
ACRN has been focusing for some time on strategies to help students (and adults) make better decisions about education and careers. But project leaders at NTSC and officials at OVAE realized the model ACRN was using was outdated. In addition to the changing economic realities described above, there has been a huge change in the way people get and use information.

Laura Lanier, DTI manager and NTSC project director, notes that, “The Internet, which is host to an array of online resources, is how most people access education and career information. The shift from textbooks and paper to digital and electronic tools creates a need for a product that shows people how to navigate the information and then understand how to use that information to make decisions about their educational and career plans.”

Adults actually in the labor market might find that process difficult. High school students are barely aware of the process at all. Students do hear a lot about doing well in school if they want to get a good job.

But, as Carlson notes, “too few high school students are brought face-to-face with labor market realities they will

Figure 2



Adapted from *Career Development and Services: A Cognitive Approach* by G. W. Peterson, J. P. Sampson, and R. C. Reardon. © 1991 Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, Pacific Grove, CA 93950, a division of International Thomson Publishing, Inc. Used with permission.

be confronting and only learn of them through negative experiences after leaving high school.”

According to Indiana University’s High School Survey of Student Engagement (<http://newsinfo.iu.edu/news/page/normal/2135.html>), more than 80 percent of high school students say they want to go to college. Yet most are not taking the courses they need or doing the work required to succeed in college. A recent ACT study confirmed that more high school students than ever have college plans, but their skills are lacking (<http://www.act.org/news/releases/2005/8-17-05.html>).

There is a clear disconnect between student hopes, student knowledge and student plans. Students need a way to bridge that chasm.

The FSU Model

Researchers at FSU see the need firsthand. Gary Peterson, principal investigator and professor in FSU’s Department of Educational Psychology and Learning Systems, notes that students have more options now in the transition from high school to college or work.

Says Peterson, “Students may elect to pursue dual enrollment, advanced placement, early admission to college, co-op education or alternate graduation through a [GED].”

Students might also be working to help pay for college. “Such educational decisions require deliberate and thoughtful educational planning related

to a clearly defined career goal,” Peterson adds.

Debra O’Connor, production manager and research associate at FSU’s Learning Systems Institute, notes that students vary greatly in their career counseling needs. “Some require assistance in locating specific occu-

pational information, whereas others require considerable support to address the personal and social complexities of life circumstances surrounding a given career issue,” says O’Connor.

To address these issues, FSU researchers began to develop a model for helping students make career decisions. The model they developed, based on Cognitive Information Processing (CIP) theory, seeks not only to provide information, but to give students new awareness on how they make decisions, and the knowledge to improve their decision-making skills.

FSU researchers use a pyramid to describe how students process information related to career decision-making (see Figure 1).

From CIP to CDMI

Starting from the CIP model, OVAE asked FSU to help develop a national, online, career decision-making tool for the ACRN network, working with DTI Associates in Washington, D.C. DTI’s National Training Support Network has been supporting the ACRN network for several years with training, resources, and the development and maintenance of the national ACRN Web site.

The new career decision-making tool would be hosted on the ACRN Web site and would be available to everyone. Teachers, counselors and career-development professionals nationwide could use the tool to help students plan for their future.

Says Gisela Harkin, career development program officer and ACRN coordinator at OVAE, “We thought we needed something more current that would speak of the 21st century challenges and expectations—something that could be interactive, fun and Web-based for an audience primarily of students.”

From the start, it was decided that the online model would be aimed at high school students. FSU researchers experienced in instructional design created a narrative that takes students through the steps of the CASVE cycle (renamed the “decision cycle”), and added a step to further clarify the progression.

In addition, FSU developed three storylines, each told by a typical high school student, to accompany the CDMI narrative. The stories are based on the kinds of situations FSU researchers see at the career center. They are told by three student guides: Marcus, Maria and Robert. The guides appear at each step in the model, talk about their home and school situations, and relate their experiences as they work through the CDMI.

FSU researchers hope that students will be able to relate to at least one of the guides as they use the CDMI. There are plans to create a fourth story and character that instructors could customize to fit the particular situation in which they are teaching. This would make the guide even more relevant to students using the CDMI.

DTI’s task was to take the model from paper to the Web. To go from narrative to online tool required several key changes. The language had to be simple and clear, and the information had to be organized in Web-sized chunks. The information had to be presented in a visually appealing way, and the student’s progress through the model had to be flexible.

Although the model on paper is a linear process (a repeating process, as it’s a cycle), the model online allows the student or instructor to dip in at any point in the cycle. The order of the steps is still clear, and users are encouraged to, “Go to next step,” at the end of each

page. But they can also go back, go forward, start again, or repeat any step if they wish.

DTI incorporated the guides' stories into the CDMT with screen icons that lead to pop-up windows where Marcus, Maria or Robert tell their story at each step.

The New CDMT

The new Career Decision-Making Tool (Figure 3) is now online at www.acrnetwork.org/cdmt/index.htm.

It consists of six steps based on FSU's CASVE cycle (the decision cycle).

There is also an orientation section to give the user some background, introduce the user to the three guides, give an overview of the decision cycle, and start her or him through the cycle. As all steps are available onscreen, repeat users can skip this section and move to wherever they want to be in the CDMT.

To reinforce key information in the CDMT, FSU developed activities to accompany the decision-cycle steps. These appear as downloadable files (in both PDF and Word formats) at the end of the relevant section. As the CDMT is an instructor-led activity, the instructor can

choose to spend class time going through the activities, or can give them to students to complete as homework.

Using the CDMT

A key feature of the CDMT is that it complements information and resources available through the ACRN network. Many states have an integrated Career Information Delivery System (CIDS), and many CIDS are online. The CIDS vary in content, but most feature information about the following:

- career opportunities in the state
- the state labor market
- educational institutions in the state
- training opportunities
- financing education or training

Counselors, teachers or others who use the CDMT as an instructional tool can tie it to their state CIDS to increase its relevance and usefulness for students (the "Tools by State" link in the CDMT reference menu has links to online ACRN resources in every state).

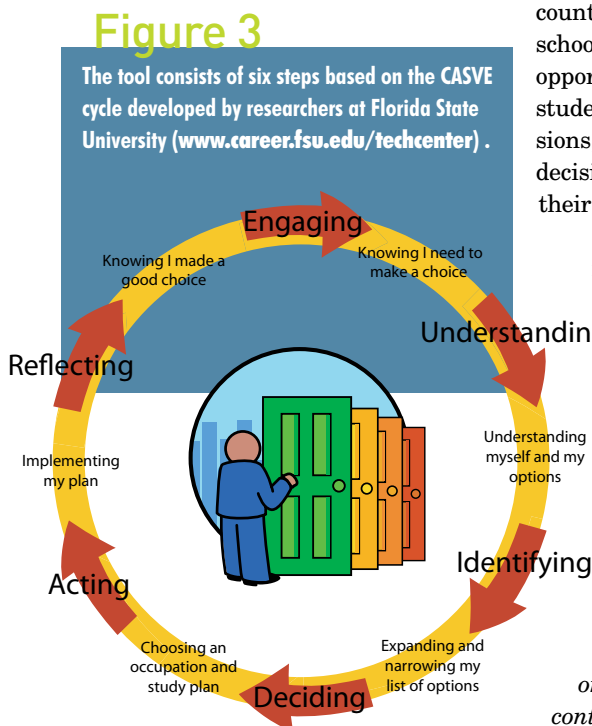
Conclusion

The online CDMT can help teachers, counselors and parents across the country impart vital information to high school students on education and career opportunities. The CDMT also makes students aware of how they make decisions, and improves their ability to make decisions that benefit themselves and their families.

In a time when students can no longer afford to leave their futures to chance, the CDMT gives them a chance to plan ahead, guided by their families, counselors or teachers. It will help young people move smoothly ahead to productive lives at home, at work and in their communities. ■

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