



# Embracing Ambiguity: Navigating the School-to-Work Transition

By Brian C. Preble

**N**ow more than ever, students need assistance preparing for and navigating the school-to-work transition. Career counseling activities, such as the use of inventories and metrics, are worthwhile, but guidance and career development professionals' interactions with students should promote real-life exploration, validate career indecision and foster skill development for employment in multiple occupational opportunities—emerging, trending and unforeseen. The complex and dynamic nature of the 21st-century workforce awaiting students mandates a new approach; among these is an alteration in the nature of questions counselors employ when discussing employment goals with high school students.

## Questions That Mandate Students Make a Decision

Traditionally, school guidance and career development professionals have asked the following questions as a means of helping students determine a career:

- Have you thought about what you are going to do after high school?
- What are you going to study in college?
- What careers are of interest to you?
- Do you know what you want to be?

These questions, closed and definitive in nature, typically evoke a generic response to please the counselor, or, more often than not, they elicit emotional responses of guilt, fear, shame or trepidation in the student. As a guidance counselor, the reply that encourages me the most is, "I am really not sure."

John Krumboltz (2009), professor emeritus at Stanford University's Graduate School of Education, argued in his article, "The Happenstance Learning Theory," that what a person wants to be when he or she grows up "should not be planned in advance." And I agree. An indecisive, unsure, open-minded lifelong learner with viable employability skills may be better prepared for myriad opportunities, as opposed to one specific occupation. Validating students' indecision, while encouraging them to embrace ambiguity, could prove highly beneficial in this new workplace reality. But is the current definition

# Closed vs. Open Career Discovery Questions

## Traditional and Closed

Have you thought about what you are going to do after high school?

What are you going to study in college?

What career is of interest to you?

Do you know what you want to be?

## Altered and Open

What types of training and educational experiences do you think you may like to explore after high school?

What skills, abilities and interests would you like to further develop and investigate?

What subject matter knowledge would you like to master at this stage of your life?

What would you like to try or explore?

of “career” congruent with new workplace realities?

## Career Redefined

The term “career” has been a social construct, often used interchangeably with the related terms “job” and “occupation.” Donald E. Super (1957), the founder of counseling psychology, defined career as a course of events that constitute a life. Super (1976) also believed that work-related terms can be understood with regard to their context—or location—along a spectrum from local to global constructs: task, position, job, occupation, vocation, avocation and career.

Kenneth B. Hoyt, a professor of counseling and educational psychology, and Pat Nellor Wickwire (1999), a career educator, adhere to Hoyt’s 1975 definition of career as found in the book *Workforce Education: Issues for the New Century*: “... conscious effort, other than that involved in activities whose purpose is either coping or relaxation, aimed at producing benefits for oneself and/or for oneself and others” (pp. 49–50).

But there’s been a shift in the definition in the 21st century. Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey (2005), both counselors, define career as a lifestyle choice, as opposed to a definition of work. Declaring career uncertainty and career indecision the new acceptable reality and linear development no longer the norm, Mark Savickas (2011), professor of family and community medicine at Northeast Ohio Medical University, proposed his definition of career—one of lifestyle, resiliency and adaptability. And though derived from the Latin *carraria* meaning road, and the fact that Amal El-Sawad (2005) revealed that career metaphors abound, Eric Anderson (2013), director of career development at Capital University, argued the term “career” should not be associated with the word “path” but rather “voyage,” so that development could be understood to be a journey.

## Guidance Redefined

Now that we have looked at how the definition of career has changed through the years, it is time to move on to exploring a new approach to helping students on their journey. Earlier in the article I listed

a few “closed” questions that counselors sometimes ask, and those have a purpose. However, a more effective approach is to ask open-ended questions, such as:

- What types of training and educational experiences do you think you may like to explore after high school?
- What skills, abilities and interests would you like to further develop and investigate?
- What subject matter knowledge would you like to master at this stage of your life?

Questions like these leave a path wide open for reflection, self-evaluation and real-life exploration, all of which are hallmarks of career and technical education (CTE).

Coupled with these questions, I believe counselors should consider ending sessions with comments that build self-efficacy and address the new employment dynamics, e.g., “With your skill set, personal characteristics and ability to learn, you will have numerous career opportunities we cannot fathom at this moment.”

## Case Vignette

As a high school guidance counselor, quite a few young men and women knock on my door looking for help. A young man came to talk to me first thing one morning after returning from winter break—the start of the second semester of his last year of high school. Full of existential angst, he declared, “I do not know. I am not sure what I am supposed to do.”

His dilemma was an overwhelming reliance on a very narrow, mapped-out plan for a single postsecondary career which involved attending a highly specialized proprietary institution to learn automotive mechanic skills. At this point, he had completed one semester of auto mechanics at the district’s CTE center, and he had learned and mastered valuable skills, yet upon reflection he realized he did not enjoy the work as much as he had hoped he would.

After paraphrasing what he had shared and acknowledging the feelings he expressed, I explained he was in a perfect spot, doing exactly what he was supposed



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to be doing: exploring, developing skills, mastering, inquiring and learning. I told him a bit about my journey, and then I explained what he'd be committing to—financially and time-wise—if he went to that aforementioned specialized institution. Instead, I suggested he begin at the local junior college, taking both general education classes and exploring other CTE offerings—many of them in areas connected to automotive mechanics that he may enjoy.

I also prescribed a course of continued learning and networking, and I let him know that he was a well-mannered young man with good soft skills with the ability to learn and adapt. I assured him that he would more than likely be offered many positions during the course of his career.

In the days that followed, the young man explored alternative options and eventually selected another course of study. His last words to me following our initial encounter were, “Wow, that actually helped. Thanks.”

This vignette underscores the importance of embracing new realities in order to effectively assist students at the cusp of transi-

tion to the world of work. It also highlights the value of using alternative approaches for this new generation of students.

### Keep It Open

Traditional career counseling methodologies, such as assessments and inventories, are helpful and useful. That said, counselors should instill in students a desire to be curious and investigative, alert to opportunities, and desirous of being life-long learners. Finally, millennial students must be taught to embrace ambiguity engendered by career indecision, acquire skill sets needed for future success, and develop career adaptability and resiliency in order to be successful in the new world of work. **Tech**

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**Brian C. Preble** is a counselor at North Salinas High School in Salinas, California. E-mail him at [bpreb001@odu.edu](mailto:bpreb001@odu.edu).

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