

# Vocational Development: Keys to building a career.

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## Abstract

*This paper looks at assumptions regarding the purpose of secondary education and how it relates to preparing students for vocational life. Universal components of vocational education are highlighted in the forms of key skills and competencies. The inclusion of work-related experience, and lifelong learning is suggested, and the importance of meaningful choice as a key component in all aspects of learning is presented.*

Public education is increasingly criticized for perceived failures to adequately prepare students for the future. Much of the criticism points to dropout rates of students in secondary schools, failure of beginning college freshmen to complete their program, ill prepared students at all levels, and a low quality of skilled new employees. These criticisms call into question the ultimate purpose of secondary education.

Public schools around New Mexico have stated surprisingly consistent views regarding their general purpose, which include academic, career, life and citizenship skills (CHS, 2004; SFPS, 2003), lifelong learning (CHS, 2004; SFPS, 2003), and future success (GHS, n.d.; SFPS, 2003). In short, secondary education goals are to provide the student with academic, personal and social preparation so that the student can choose a career direction. Preparation for advanced schooling is only one of many possible career directions and it can be

assumed from the mission statements that schools are dedicated to providing service to all of their students. A common idea of secondary education is that it prepares every student to “go to college,” to “get a degree,” and to “get a good and prestigious job.” If that is truly the unsaid, underlying purpose, we are falling well short of the mark.

According to the 2000 census report of adults age 25 and older (CensusScope, n.d.), approximately 20% of the population does not finish high school, 50% attains an education level equivalent to high school graduate, and 30% attain an Associates degree or higher (see Table 1). With only 30% of the population pursuing academic achievement beyond the high school level, it is clear that although it is a very important aspect of secondary schooling, college preparation is by no means, nor should it be, the most important aspect. For the remaining 70%, vocational, or work-related preparation is a more relevant and appropriate objective for high schools.

An assumption exists that work-related learning is only useful in dealing with low levels of educational achievement among students who are viewed by their teachers and other adults as disengaged and disaffected from school (Hall & Raffo, 2004). This view assumes that vocational education, and by extension vocational employment, is considered of lesser value than purely academic pursuits. It also fails to recognize the values that vocational skills and training have at all levels of work, regardless of the amount of required preparation.

It is not the intent of this paper to suggest lowering scholastic expectations or standards. Rather, that existing programs can be enhanced by making them more relevant and appropriate to a larger portion of students by recognizing the desires and goals of each student and incorporating those skills most applicable to their chosen career direction. This breaks from the traditional assumption that all students require the same preparation and training. Asking the student to make a career path choice will define a preliminary program of skills, qualifications and competencies necessary to be successful. It will also help the student to take ownership of his/her education because it begins the process of building the student’s career.

**Table 1: Educational Attainment in Population 25 Years and Over, 1990-2000**

	1990		2000	
	Number	Percent of Total	Number	Percent of Total
Total Population Age 25+	158,868,436	100.00%	182,211,639	100.00%
Less than 9th grade	16,502,211	10.39%	13,755,477	7.55%
Some high school, no diploma	22,841,507	14.38%	21,960,148	12.05%
High school graduate*	47,642,763	29.99%	52,168,981	28.63%
Some college, no degree	29,779,777	18.74%	38,351,595	21.05%
Associate degree	9,791,925	6.16%	11,512,833	6.32%
Bachelor's degree	20,832,567	13.11%	28,317,792	15.54%
Graduate or professional degree	11,477,686	7.22%	16,144,813	8.86%

### *Building a Career*

Whether or not a student plans to go to college, it is not too early to start thinking about building a career. The concept of career includes three core characteristics, that it (1) accompanies and spans one's total lifeline, (2) is a changing process as opposed to a static personality trait, and (3) demands intervention from the individual to reconcile oneself and one's work-life environment (Chen, 1998). The student may see this as overwhelming at first but it must be kept in mind that the purpose is not to make the final or best choice, but rather to experience the process of making a choice and seeing where that takes you. "Instead of viewing career as a narrowly defined, isolated work-related aspect only in one's life, career is seen as an integral, active and essential component in a person's life" (Chen, 1998, p. 439). The idea of career, then, takes on a larger meaning than work or job, and approaches the sense of 'life path.' "A career is a person's life, and in this usage, there is only one career for every person" (Cochran, 1991, p. 7).

To be able to navigate this 'life path' view of career, schools can assist the student by including several components that have been identified as necessary for success as the student launches her/himself into a productive career. First as stated before, the school should allow the student to take ownership of their learning. Second, an appropriate set of skills and qualifications that are appropriate to each individual should be defined. And finally, opportunities should be established to provide for learning when the student is ready to accept it, which is less age dependent.

### *Meaningful Choice*

Most, if not all, high school teachers have had the experience of a student challenging the relevancy that an assignment has on the student's future. In many cases, the argument is meaningless because the student hasn't made any future plans for which the assignment to be relevant or not. By giving the student the opportunity to choose a career path early on, the student must then accept a level of commitment to that path. The student will then be better able to see the relevancy of the assignment, or at least be better able to argue why the assignment is not relevant. It is unreasonable to expect students to embrace a course of study when the student has had no input in its development. In the beginning this input will most likely be faulty but, with practice and experience, decision-making will become more skilled. Choosing a career, and the resulting academic choices that follow, will help increase a sense of academic efficacy, and reciprocally, "children who have a secure sense of academic efficacy judge themselves to be efficacious for careers in science and technology, educational and medical fields, artistic and literary pursuits, and management of business and social services systems (Bandura, et al., 2001). Eventually, students may be expected to make informed, meaningful choices regarding their futures and establish themselves as stakeholders in their future. Cognitive self development

and career decision making behavior are important aspects with respect to the inner-self, (Chen, 1998), however as self concept is in a continual state of modification, refinement, and growth, individuals should be guided to become more self-directed in their decision making process (Zunker, 1994). Another aspect of meaningful choice is that meaningful choice requires allowing the student to experience the full effects of meaningful consequences. It is a mistake to over-protect students from the consequences of their decisions because this robs from them the pride in their successes. In short, success has no value when there is no failure.

### *Key Skills*

Students will in all likelihood make multiple career choice decisions before, during, and even after their high school years and each new choice might imply learning a new set of competencies and job requirements. Luckily, the basic or key skills required for virtually all vocations, regardless of the amount of required preparation, are quite stable. "Key skills are defined as generic, transferable skills that people can learn and develop in a wide variety of situations, whether in education or in the workplace. It is claimed that individuals need them in order to be effective, flexible, adaptable and mobile within the labour market" (Kelly, 2001, p. 21). The six recognized skills according to the British Qualifications & Curriculum Authority (QCA, 1999) are:

- Communication;
- Application of number;
- Information technology;
- Working with others;
- Improving own learning and performance;
- Problem solving.

These basic skills, along with other advanced job dependent qualifications, have been recognized as determinants of successful career progression. They are dependent on the underlying fundamental skills of literacy and computational ability (Kelly, 2001). Once again, successful learning presupposes engaged students who have taken ownership of their education. Given that, current school curricula more than adequately address what Kelly (2001) calls the "hard skills" of literacy, numeracy and information technology. The other three "soft skills" while addressed informally if at all in the classroom, are also identified by employers as skills that employees need. (UCU, 2004; UTSACS, 2005; WSDP, 2005) and should be included into the curriculum.

### *Key Competencies & Qualifications*

Vocational competencies and qualifications are more context dependent, many of which will be more important in one field but unimportant in another. Key qualifications vary within the context of occupations. Just as a janitor requires greater technical knowledge of practical chemistry than a waiter, the waiter will require more and greater socio-communicative competencies than the janitor (van Zolingen, 2002). Competencies should be

defined and a curriculum justified to be relevant to the student's career path.

This does not mean, however, that every student have an individual personal school curriculum. Many competencies cluster into groups relating to multiple career paths. These competencies span a wide range of careers including a number of important workplace skills, like communication, group techniques and problem solving (Velde, 1999). Examples of these career clusters describe how students in one cluster, such as Transportation, will have a high school curriculum that spans jobs with varying amounts of preparation, such as small engine repair to automotive technology, to mechanical engineering. van Zolingen (2002) described six dimensions that make up key competencies which include general-instrumental, cognitive, personality, socio-communicative, socio-normative and strategic.

This, and similarly other, career cluster paths will contain the same elements until well into the high school years because they contain similar "knowledge, insight, skills and attitudes that are part of the permanent core of an occupation or a group of related jobs with the possibility of transfer to other, new jobs within that occupation, and of innovations within that occupation, which contribute to the development of an employee's competence and facilitates transitions within his career" (van Zolingen, 2002, p 222).

#### *Work-Related Learning*

Part of the transition from the school environment to the work environment involves adjusting to the norms and culture of a broader peer group. Traditional school environments are based on the cohort model where your peers are your own age and adults are providers, like teachers, administrators, and staff. Young people with few experiences of forming relationships with adults outside of school and social settings are less likely to be equipped with the skills necessary to be able to resolve [work-related, social] conflicts themselves or to seek the help of others in finding solutions to such conflicts (Hall, 2004). Learning to adjust to this new way of relating to adults as peers can be challenging but also rewarding. Students in work-related programs often report that they are "treated like adults" by their associates unlike the way they are treated by teachers (Hall, 2004). Given the potential socializing benefits of work-related learning, it must also be noted that some students may also develop less desirable attitudes about their academic pursuits. "The benefits of work-related learning for young people, where they exist, do not readily transfer to school-based settings and consequently do not necessarily result in improved levels of motivation or attainment at school" (Hall & Raffo, 2004, p 71). The net result of the advantages and disadvantages are yet to be resolved, but including real-world experiences as either part time apprenticeship positions or volunteer service to the community should be included and incorporated into the total package.

#### *Life-long Career*

The term 'career' should be replaced by the phrase 'life career development' (Chen, 1998). Many countries in Europe and elsewhere are recognizing that the traditional models of life career paths are no longer valid (Raffe, 2002). Often, people have multiple "careers" throughout their life career development and it is not at all uncommon that a job a person holds in later life not to have existed when the person started out. The career of an individual contains multiple developmental stages representing growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance and disengagement, throughout the lifespan (Super, 1980). Demographic, technological, and global changes are altering the nature of work necessitating the need to re-educate and update the workforce on a recurring basis in order to provide students with tools to function in a truly global economy (Velde, 1999). Societies are beginning to recognize that retraining for new and different jobs is an increasing reality and will likely occur several times during a person's work life (Raffe, 2002; Super, 1980; Velde, 1999). Presently, this retraining usually occurs at the decision and expense of the employer involving employees who may or may not want to pursue the new vocational direction, or it occurs with the motivated individual who is willing to invest the time and money for the retraining. Regardless of where the motivation or funding comes from, decisions regarding career choices are defined and redefined (Ginzberg, 1984), throughout a person's life. As Ginzberg (1984) put it, "Occupational choice is a lifelong process of decision making for those who seek major satisfaction from their work. This leads them to reassess repeatedly how they can improve the fit between their changing career goals and the realities of the world of work" (p. 180).

#### *Discussion*

Several suggestions and recommendations have been presented with the goal of providing better service through preparation to the greatest number of secondary students as possible. Secondary schools should broaden its attempts to prepare the majority of students for vocational life based on actuarial realities rather than on ideological desires. They should include vocational skills and competencies that will benefit students pursuing non-academic career paths equally well as well as those pursuing traditional academic paths. As a society, we must recognize and encourage the idea that lifelong learning is truly a valuable thing and provide opportunities to take advantage of interest in new learning regardless of the age it might occur. And finally, Throughout all aspects of secondary school, students should be given the opportunity to choose their career path even when that path is not what we would choose for them. In that way it becomes their education and not ours. We must recognize that learning is not something a teacher does to a student and only belongs to the student when the student is in responsible control of the decisions of the learning. "Secondary vocational education (both

theory and practical components) must play a central role in the acquisition of key qualifications . . . . The acquisition or further development of the cognitive and socio-communicative dimensions in particular should mainly take place in secondary vocational education” (van Zolingen, 2002, p230), which continue well into adulthood.

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