
Empowering the Liberal Arts Student with Personal Flexibility for the World of Work

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Abstract

A series of six Career/Life Planning Modules was designed specifically to facilitate university students' concept of themselves as "active agents" in the career planning process. One of the workshops, in the series "Translating a Degree into an Occupation", assists graduating Liberal Arts students to understand the unique skills and personal attributes they bring to the world of work. Assisting students to understand their potential in the world of work and how to manage their careers successfully is counselling for personal flexibility.

Résumé

Une série de six modules de planification de vie et carrière a été conçue spécifiquement pour faciliter le concept de soi des étudiants universitaires comme "agents actifs" dans le processus de la planification de carrière. L'un des ateliers, dans la série "Traduire un diplôme en une occupation", aide les étudiants finissants à comprendre les compétences particulières et les attributs personnels qu'ils apporteront dans le monde du travail. Aider les étudiants à comprendre leur potentiel dans le monde du travail et gérer leur propre carrière avec succès, c'est là une orientation pour une souplesse personnelle.

The world of work is changing rapidly. We are now in the information age. Futurists discuss the need for flexibility, adaptability, and good transferable skills. Individuals can expect to change their jobs and even their occupations a number of times during their lifetime. Liberal Arts students have the abilities that futurists are highlighting but they do not understand this and do not recognize how these can be marketable in today's economy (DeCoster, 1985). Liberal Arts students also have great flexibility in the variety of occupational fields they can move into yet they do not see how this will be valuable to them in their future world of work.

A series of Career/Life Planning Modules have been developed at the University of Calgary designed specifically to facilitate the students' concept of themselves as "active agents" in the career planning process. The fourth Module in the series, "Translating a Degree into an Occupation", has been developed to assist graduating students in understanding the unique skills and personal attributes they present as an employee or as an entrepreneur and to assist students in focusing their career objectives. Liberal Arts students, in particular, have participated extensively in this workshop during the past four years that it has been offered.

The theoretical underpinnings of the Career/Life Planning Modules will be presented with an overview of the Module Series. Then Module Four

will be focused on, giving an outline of the process and the content of the module.

CAREER/LIFE PLANNING MODULES

Theoretical Underpinnings

A guiding rule for the development of the modules was that they should be soundly based in theory (Johnson & Figler, 1986). An extensive literature review was undertaken regarding current postsecondary career planning programs. Johnson & Figler (1986) contains the most extensive overview but it is noted that many of the programs involve brief interventions and do not incorporate the developmental dimension of career planning.

Super's (1957, 1980) theory was chosen as the basis for the Career/Life Planning Module series because it allows for the provision of a comprehensive, integrated, and innovative program that can serve the diverse needs of the adult population that post-secondary counselling departments are responsible to. Brown, Brooks and associates (1984) comment in their text reviewing career theory that, "Super's theory is the most comprehensive of those presented to date" (p. 327). Super labels the various components of his theory as differential-developmental-social-phenomenological. Super (1980) has added a life-space, life-span dimension to his theory. A brief review of the components of Super's theory will demonstrate how these constructs underlie the structure of the modules.

The differential component of Super's theory involves the concept that individuals are unique and possess different abilities, interests, and personalities. Correspondingly, occupations require different patterns of abilities, interests, and personal characteristics. Individuals will be better suited to different occupations although all individuals are also multipotential and could be equally happy in a variety of occupations. This construct is prominent in the modules as students learn more about themselves and about suitable educational programs, occupational fields, and jobs. The process of matching though is not presented as a once-in-a-lifetime event but rather as a reoccurring phenomenon in the process of career development.

The developmental component of Super's theory views vocational development as one aspect of the overall process of human development. The individual is seen as progressing through a series of career development stages, each with a specific set of goals and tasks that need to be accomplished. Individuals become more career mature as they progress through the stages. Factors which are assessed to determine career maturity include: planfulness, exploratory attitudes, decision-making skills,

information about occupations and other life roles, and realism (Crites, 1978; Super, 1984). Super (1980) has added the concept of recycling to his developmental component so that the stages are not viewed as being rigidly associated with particular ages but allows for individuals who experience occupational changes in their career paths. In the modules students learn about the stages of career development, they explore their stage of career development, and they come to the understanding that this will be a process throughout their lifetime. The modules themselves have a developmental framework by showing students that careers are built through a series of decisions. Students face three major types of career decisions while at university: choosing an educational program, choosing an occupational field, and choosing a job. These decisions are made in a developmental sequence with earlier decisions affecting the later decisions. Elements of the later decisions need to be recognized in the earlier decision-making process.

The social aspect of Super's theory recognizes the influence that the environment, the economy, and the social situation has on an individual's career development and career decision-making. This is one of the weaker component's of Super's theory in that the dynamics of this interaction between the individuals' social situation and their career development is not clearly outlined (Brown et al., 1984). Other career theories were utilized in the development of the modules to supplement this component.

The phenomenological component deals with the relationship between the individual's self-concept and career development. Occupational choice is considered to be a reflection and implementation of an individual's self-concept. The process of career development is also seen as an individual developing his/her self-concept through synthesis and compromise. Students are encouraged throughout the modules to develop an awareness of themselves and to apply that awareness to their career decision-making. It is recognized that making a career choice is an implementation of one's sense of one's self, a very emotion-laden process. The discussion of feelings is facilitated in the group process and the exploration of the meaning of career in the student's self-concept is fostered.

Super (1980) has recently added the life-space, life-span dimension to his already well established career theory. In 1976, Super proposed an expanded definition of career which encompassed all the life roles across the individual's lifetime. The life-span aspect is the developmental component of his theory with a few revisions, as mentioned earlier. The life-space component is the concept that an individual's lifestyle is made up of various life roles and the importance that those life roles have for the individual. The salience or significance of life roles changes over an individual's lifetime. Super believes it is critical when an individual is making

a career decision to determine the importance of the various life roles and the interrelationships between the life roles. The concept that career planning is lifestyle planning is introduced in the modules and students examine the significance various life roles hold for them now and project into the future. In the modules students often reflect on the interaction between their career role and their future lifestyle.

Other career theories have been used to supplement Super's theory in the Career/Life Planning Modules. Tiedeman & O'Hara's (1963) Decision-Making Theory is incorporated into the developmental component. This theory provides the concept that careers are built through a series of decisions. Holland's (1973) Trait Theory is added to the differential component, which allows for the inclusion of Holland's typologies and their relationship to various occupations. Mitchell & Krumboltz's (1984) Social Learning Theory, offers many useful concepts in the social component where Super's theory is weak. This theory explains in more depth the environmental influences on an individual's career choice and provides many useful techniques such as modelling, simulations, and positive reinforcement, which are utilized in the modules.

The career theories provide the Content Goals for the Modules whereas two theories of student development, Chickering's (1969) theory of psychosocial development and Perry's (1970) theory of cognitive development interpreted by Knefelkamp & Slepitz (1976) into a career context, provide the Process Goals. Other developmental theories expand the career developmental aspect of Super's theory. By incorporating these two theories the counsellor can be aware of the psychosocial stage and the cognitive stage of development that the clients are in and assist them with further development across these realms during the career planning process.

Given these theoretical underpinnings the following are the primary principles of the Career/Life Planning Modules:

- Career planning is a developmental process, that will occur throughout the lifetime of an individual. It is useful for students to be aware of the stages of career development, to know the stage of career development they are in, and to understand the tasks of that stage of career development. The student will also realize that the stages are not rigidly defined by age and that they may recycle to an earlier stage of career development any time during their careers.

- Students will understand that career development occurs during their post-secondary program as they face three major career decisions over that time, namely: choosing a program of studies, choosing occupational fields, and choosing a job. Each decision impacts on the subsequent decision and each is a step in the career decision-making process.

- Career planning skills are necessary life skills because career development is ongoing throughout the individual's lifetime and also because of the rapid pace of change in the job market, which may force some individuals to make occupational or job changes during their career.
- Career planning is lifestyle planning. Individuals need to consider career decisions in the context of their various life roles and the importance each life role has for them. Life roles change over an individual's lifetime so this is why Career/Life Planning again needs to be an ongoing process. Also due to the increase in dual-career couples and seasonal unemployment the management of one's occupation with other life roles is becoming increasingly significant.
- Clients are viewed as and assisted to become "active agents" in the process of career planning. This process is empowering for individuals, helping them to develop a positive sense of themselves and belief that they can influence their environment and create their futures.

Overview of the Module Series

The Career/Life Planning Modules are designed to be taken sequentially over students' four-year university program. This though is not an absolute requirement and students may, with the assistance of a counsellor, choose to do later modules without having completed the earlier workshops. The module format offers the presentation of discreet units of content that will be suitable to meet students' needs and time requirements. An overview of the Modules and their sequencing is shown in Figure 1.

Module 1 is an overview of the career planning process and assists students to decide which further modules would be appropriate. A positive mental set including many of the philosophies outlined earlier are established in this first module. Modules 2 and 3 assist students with their first major career choice or a reassessment of their decision, that of choosing a faculty/major. These modules are useful to first- and second-year undergraduates and to prospective students. Module 2 is a self-assessment workshop and Module 3 assists students with researching educational alternatives and career decision-making. Module 4 will be discussed in detail in the next section. It has been designed for students in their third or fourth year of study where the choice of a faculty is resolved and the major career issue is which occupational fields to pursue. Modules 5 and 6 are designed to assist students with the job search process — the third major career decision of finding a job. These workshops are geared mainly towards graduating students although some students take these modules to assist them with their searching for summer or part-time work. The content of these workshops is resumé writing, covering letter

preparation, interview skills and strategies, job search techniques, transition to work, and strategies for handling one’s first job.

Taken by all students as an overview of Career/Life Planning concepts

Module 1: A Beginning

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| 1st & 2nd year Undergraduates | 3rd & 4th year Undergraduates & Graduate Students | 3rd & 4th year Undergraduates & Graduate Students |
| Choosing an Educational Program | Choosing Occupational Fields | Choosing a Job |
| Module 2: Exploring Yourself | Module 4: Translating a Degree into an Occupation | Module 5: Résumé Writing |
| Module 3: Career Research & Decision-Making | | Module 6: Interview Skills/Job Search Techniques |

Figure 1. Career/Life Planning Modules

MODULE 4: TRANSLATING A DEGREE INTO AN OCCUPATION

Johnson (1981) identified the following as reasons why liberal arts graduates are considered poor prospects for employment in business: unclear career objectives, unable to link their skills and education with occupational requirements; lack of knowledge of occupations and of employers; unable to convey a sense of confidence and self-awareness; and a lack of assertiveness and dedication. These reasons apply generally to why liberal arts students have difficulty in finding employment. DeCoster (1985) found, in a comparative study of liberal arts students, science majors, and practical majors (business and engineering), that liberal arts students see their majors as less marketable, view themselves as less desirable in the job market, and consider themselves less able to be successful. Both Johnson and DeCoster concluded that Liberal Arts students require assistance with career planning. Liberal Arts students need to understand themselves, particularly to understand and value the skills they have developed in their liberal arts programs; to know which

occupational fields they are suited to and can do the best job of marketing themselves in, and to develop the skills of career planning so that they may manage their careers in the future as they are amongst the most flexible and versatile of future employees.

"Module 4: Translating a Degree into an Occupation", has been designed to assist students in their career decision-making and in developing their skills of career management. Over the four years that this program has been offered at the University of Calgary participation by Liberal Arts students has been approximately 80 percent of the overall participation. Liberal Arts students initially present themselves with the issues and difficulties outlined above but report in their final evaluations an increased understanding of themselves, confidence in their abilities and in their ability to market themselves, and a new understanding of the opportunities available to them in the world of work. Student evaluations also indicate mastery of the skills of career planning and ability to manage the career decision-making process successfully in the future.

Objectives of Module 4

Module 4 has as objectives to help the participants to:

- Conceptualize occupational decision-making as an instance of career decision-making, to which the skills of career decision-making can be applied;
- Clarify where to spend time and effort in the process of occupational decision-making;
- Crystallize their image of their future lifestyle and the importance of various life roles;
- Do an abbreviated self-assessment focusing on more specific occupational considerations such as work-related values, skills obtained through their university years, and working conditions;
- Examine various working styles and work places to determine their options and preferences;
- Do a focused occupational assessment examining the variety of occupations related to their degree;
- Utilize information interviewing to learn more about specific occupations, organizations, organizational needs, and the short-term job market; and to begin to develop a resource network;
- Consider the usefulness of experiential occupational research;
- Apply skills of rational decision-making and action planning to this career decision.

The objectives illustrate how Super's theoretical orientation is applied in the content of the workshop. Participants in Module 4 are considered to be in the "Exploration Stage of Career Development" (Super, 1957) with

the following tasks to accomplish: prepare for an occupation, crystallize their career direction, and obtain a position in the work force. Module 4 as compared to Modules 2 and 3 focuses more on the immediate issue of determining Occupational Level Criteria, finding occupational options, or graduate level programs that suit the participant and his/her degree and learning the career decision-making process.

The "Psychosocial Stage of Development" of the participants, according to Chickering (1969) would involve the final three vectors, that is: establishing a purpose, experiencing the choice of an occupation as a commitment to oneself; developing integrity; being consistent in one's values, thoughts, and behaviours; and developing freeing interpersonal relationships, formulating mature relationships which allow for one's personal development. Most students will be in either the Multiplistic or Relativistic Stages of Cognitive Development (Perry, 1970). The environmental conditions for these participants should be one that provides a diversity of options, emphasizes more of the abstract, allows for self-directed and vicarious learning experiences, provides a personal environment facilitating warm and trusting relationships amongst participants. It is noted that the participants in Module 4, as compared to the junior students, are more willing to take responsibility for their learning and for setting their own career direction. The workshop facilitator can take more of a teaching and facilitating role allowing the participants to determine some of the direction and timing of the workshop components. Emphasis can be placed according to the needs of the participants.

Content of Module 4

Participants in the workshop are introduced to Super's Stages of Career Development and each participant determines his/her stage of development and the corresponding tasks that they need to perform. Participants, as a rule, identify with being in the exploration stage of career development. It is helpful and reassuring to participants to understand that their careers will take a developmental course and that they do not need to have all the answers immediately. It is also reinforced that individuals have a variety of jobs and occupations throughout their lifetime and that they may recycle through the process again. This is reassuring for the mature students who often act as role-models for the younger students.

Participants are then presented with the Career Planning Model (Figure 2) to introduce them to the concept of career decision-making. It is highlighted that career decision-making occurs many times over an individual's career, that the students' have already made various career decisions such as choosing a post-secondary institution and choosing a

faculty/major. Students will be familiar with this model if they have attended previous modules.

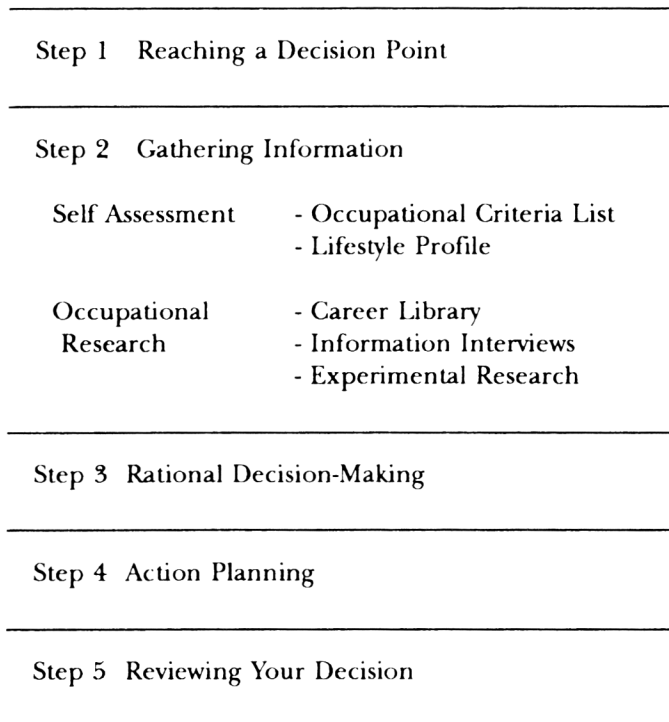


Figure 2. Career Planning Model

Gathering Information, in particular Self-Assessment, is focused upon next. Self-assessment assists Liberal Arts students with some of the deficiencies that Johnson notes, specifically lack of self-awareness and confidence, unclear career objectives, and lack of assertiveness. Throughout the process of self-assessment participants sort their personal characteristics, skills, interests, and values into their Occupational Criteria List or into other significant life roles. This process is helpful as it reinforces the concept of career/lifestyle planning throughout the workshop and it forces the participants to determine explicitly what they expect from an occupation. The self-assessment process is also very useful in helping Liberal Arts students understand that they do have very marketable skills.

An extensive review of skills is conducted through paper and pencil assessments highlighting the three types of skills, namely, Work Content

Skills, those specific to an occupational field; Transferable Skills, those skills that allow one to transfer between occupations, and Self-Management Skills, skills that allow one to manage the environment or people in the environment.

It is noted that Liberal Arts students offer employers excellent transferable skills and self-management skills and are able to learn work-content skills. Watkins (1979), after studying the curricula of liberal arts programs, suggested the following as a list of marketable skills that liberal arts majors possess:

- Communication skills, both oral and written;
- Critical thinking skills;
- Ability to analyze and synthesize;
- Capable of handling unexpected situations;
- Responsible, capable of seeing projects through to completion;
- Tolerant of different people and their views;
- Ability to recognize assumptions and make inferences;
- Interpersonal skills;
- Understanding of the nature of science, experimentation, and theory;
- Understanding of the concepts of probability and proportion.

Self-assessment helps participants, particularly Liberal Arts majors, to begin to focus their career objectives. Self-assessment is conducted through the use of standardized career inventories: Strong-Campbell Interest Inventory (Strong, Hansen, & Campbell, 1985), Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Briggs & Myers, 1977), and the Life Roles Inventory (Super & Nevill, 1984); paper and pencil exercises; experiential activities such as doing a guided fantasy and group level activities. Participants enjoy the self-assessment process confirming that they really do know themselves very well but at the same time giving them a framework and language to understand and present themselves in relation to the world of work.

The next form of information participants need to gather is information about occupational alternatives. Completing this process is again very helpful in correcting several of the deficiencies that Johnson noted for Liberal Arts students, namely, unclear career goals, inability to link themselves with occupational requirements, lack of knowledge about occupations or employers, and self-confidence. Participants review the Checklist of Career Environment Options to determine the career environments they would prefer to work in. Occupational research is conducted in the career library reviewing a variety of printed resources. It is very useful for Liberal Arts students to have access to resources that are specifically targeted to them and to assisting them in understanding occupational clusters which suit their degrees. An extensive but not all inclusive Resource List is included to highlight some of the resources

particularly relevant to Liberal Arts students. Utilizing these more specific resources initially increases the students' confidence that they can market their degree in a variety of occupational fields and will spur them on to further research in more general occupational resources.

University of Calgary has also begun a Mentorship Program, which is very useful to Liberal Arts students. In this program students identify occupational areas in which they would like to do an Information Interview. The student is then paired with an Alumnus who has previously agreed to do the interview. Students find this form of career research extremely helpful and encouraging to see a former Liberal Arts student employed in work that the student can visualize him/herself doing. The students often are given further referrals and pointers on how to obtain employment in the field they have targeted. Students are also encouraged to use their own network for contacts for information interviews as well as to use a variety of other sources such as contacting professional associations and businesses/organizations directly.

Participants explore opportunities for further experiential research, especially third year students who still have some time for this form of research. Students are encouraged to consider volunteer work they might do. The University of Calgary has a Volunteer Center, which can place students in experiences that will suit their interests and offer them opportunities to develop skills. As well, practicum opportunities are considered to be summer and part-time employment. Utilizing experiential research effectively can be extremely beneficial to Liberal Arts students for future employment opportunities. Often Liberal Arts graduates are seen as lacking direct work content skills. By working in a volunteer or casual capacity, students can increase their employability because employers will recognize the direct work experience they have accomplished.

The final activities of the workshop focus on career decision-making. The students are taught a rational method of career decision-making to evaluate the alternatives they are considering against the Occupational Criteria, which was developed during the self-assessment phase. Participants are encouraged to keep their options open and not to narrow their options down to only one occupational field but rather to consider three or four fields to market themselves in and in addition, they will have choices to prioritize. This way Liberal Arts students are more flexible and able to adjust to the current demands of the job market. Liberal Arts students understand that their degrees will allow for more career options compared to some of the more narrowly defined applied degrees. Participants finish the workshop by determining their major career goals and developing action plans for the future. Students complete the workshop feeling more assertive in the workplace and having increased dedication and confidence that they can reach their career goals.

CONCLUSION

Liberal Arts students need assistance with career planning to understand the unique contribution they can make in the world of work.

Career workshops, such as "Module 4: Translating a Degree into an Occupation" offered at the University of Calgary, can help Liberal Arts students overcome their career planning deficiencies by helping them to clarify their career objectives, link their skills and education to occupational requirements, increase their knowledge of occupations and employers, and increase their sense of confidence and ability to market themselves assertively in the workplace. By assisting Liberal Arts students in this way career counsellors are empowering them with personal flexibility for the world of work.

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Resource list for liberal arts students

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