Changing Expectations for Career Advising: Embracing and Making Use of Uncertainty and Career Indecision

Dan Wilson
Kansas State University
2017 NACADA Conference
St. Louis, MO
October 12, 2017

Living is a form of not being sure, not knowing what next or how. The moment you know how, you begin to die a little.

The artist never entirely knows. We guess. We may be wrong, but we take leap after leap in the dark.

--Agnes De Mille

Advising conversations about planning for the future are shaped by how we think about the future...

...and by the expectations that students and advisors have for how career advising will help.

Oh, the expectations!!

Who is responsible for planning your career? You are responsible for making your education and career decisions, managing your career and controlling your own destiny.

How will your career affect your life? Your career affects your future lifestyle and feelings of self-fulfillment as well as where & how you live, your financial security, your leisure time activities, etc.
We can hear their expectations...

- "I get upset when people ask me what I want to do with my life."
- "I get so depressed about choosing a major that I can't even get started."
- "I'd like to choose this field, but there's no way that I'll be successful."
- "I am interested in everything. I can't choose!"
- "If I don't make the right choice now, I am going to pay for it later."

"Who are YOU?" said the Caterpillar.

This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation.

Alice replied, rather shyly, "I, I hardly know, sir, just at present—at least I know who I WAS when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then."

- Lewis Carroll
Certainty Before Exploration: This mind boggling expectation is implied through the questions we ask.

- What do you want to be when you grow up?
- What’s your major?
- What will you do with that major?

Give Me Anything But Uncertainty!

- I have to choose the right occupation (major) now so I won’t change in the future.
- I have to know before I decide!
- I have to be sure before I take action!
- I better wait until I know what I want to do before I select a major. I don’t want to waste my parents money.

Traditional Career Counseling/Advising
Help students overcome indecision and make a choice.
Today I received approximately the 11,504th email this year from a person telling me that they don’t know what to do with their life. And like all of the others, this person asked me if I had any ideas of what they could do, where they could start, where to “find their passion.”

And of course, I didn’t respond. Why? Because I have no (expletive deleted) clue. If you don’t have any idea what to do with yourself, what makes you think some jackass with a website would? I’m a writer, not a fortune teller.

Mark Mason, Screw Finding Your Passion
http://markmanson.net/passion
Too often, career counselors have not been trained to be comfortable with a client who remains undecided for very long.


Advisor’s discomfort with ambiguity and uncertainty may lead to…

- ...a focus on their own uneasiness rather than on listening to their advisees
- ...favoring the advisor’s perspectives and goals vs. student’s perspectives and goals
- ...loosing confidence in self, skills, the advising process and the power of the advising relationship.


As persons and professionals....

- ...How tolerant of ambiguity and uncertainty are we?
- ...Is it possible to increase our tolerance for instability and change?
- ...How can we make friends with unpredictability and uncertainty and embrace them as vehicles to transform our lives?
- ...How can we respond with curiosity and enthusiasm when we know that there is no clear answer?
- ...Can we help our students learn these same lessons?

Deep companionship, born of honesty can arise when we meet one another in Not Knowing.

“What’s the matter?” “I don’t really know.” “Well, I don’t know either, but here I am.”

Problems with the traditional approach:  
1. The matching model has never worked as well as we want it to.  
2. We aren’t very good at identifying why we like the things we like.  
3. Even if there was a time when matching did work, today’s world of work is so turbulent that we can no longer count on keeping our match.

Despite the appeal of such an elegant model, research suggests only 10 to 15% of these outcomes are explained by a match. In other words, there are other factors that explain why people are satisfied, engaged and productive at work.

The Postmodern Virtues of Being an Undecided Major
--Tom Krieshok

Shouldn’t we know the tastes, preferences, needs, and desires of the people we will be next year—or at least later this afternoon?

Shouldn’t we understand our future selves well enough to shape their lives—to find careers and lovers whom they will cherish, to buy slipcovers for the sofa that they will treasure for years to come?
If we want to steer ourselves toward happiness, it’s important to know why we make wrong turns, and how we end up disappointed by the very choices that were supposed to (make us happy).–Sheena Iyengar

Getting involved and engaged makes both rational & intuitive tools more informed and less naive.


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"Where do you see yourself in five years?"

"I’m committed to biology as a major and career, because it seems like a reasonable match with where I am today, and where I could see myself in five years. But, in fact, I am likely to change a great deal in the next five years, and more importantly, I am likely to be exposed to a thousand different people and situations that could provide opportunities."
The Butterfly Effect…

...states that a small incident at the beginning of a process (such as having a conversation with someone at a conference) can produce a huge effect in the long term outcome (a new career).

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The Postmodern Virtues of Being an Undecided Major
—Tom Kristek
Changing expectations, changing conversations

- Accept uncertainty and welcome indecision as a sensible approach to a complex and unpredictable future.
- Promote an appreciation for planned happenstance.
- Encourage action and engagement.

To be uncertain is uncomfortable, But to be certain is ridiculous.
—Chinese proverb

Reframing Expectations

- Career indecision is normal and not a problem to overcome.
- Anxiety about planning for the future is normal and can be replaced by a sense of adventure, curiosity, openness and a receptiveness to possibilities.
- Career indecision is hesitation before transformation.
- It’s an opportunity to make meaning of one’s life, to tap into and articulate one’s story.

WARNING: DANGER AHEAD!!!

- Plan your future and stick to your plan.
- Failing to plan is planning to fail.

If You Don’t Know Where You’re Going, You’ll Probably End Up Somewhere Else

David P. Campbell
1. There is no plan.
2. Think strengths not weaknesses.
3. It’s not about you.
4. Persistence trumps talent.
5. Make excellent mistakes.

A creative approach to decision making requires two attitudes:
° Accept uncertainty
° Be positive about uncertainty

It comprises four paradoxical principles
1. Be focused and flexible about what you want
2. Be aware and wary about what you know
3. Be objective and optimistic about what you believe
4. Be practical and intuitive about what you do

Tell others you are “open-minded”--not “undecided.”

Accept uncertainty and welcome indecision as a sensible approach to a complex and unpredictable future.

Promote an appreciation for planned happenstance.

Answer: Yes or No

Have you ever wanted something, gotten it, and found you wanted something else?

Have you ever had a clear goal and discovered something better along the way?

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Some luck lies in not getting what you thought you wanted but getting what you have, which once you have got it you may be smart enough to see is what you would have wanted had you known.

--- Garrison Keiller

Planned happenstance emphasizes the need for students to:

- Value flexibility
- Be alert for imminent changes
- Prepare for possibilities
- Remain open to opportunities
- Develop skill at managing repeated transitions

--- Kevin Glavin on Career Adaptability from Ten Ideas that Changed Career Development

Always learning, always trying, always wondering

"My career had all the straight-line consistency of a tangled ball of yarn. Did I know where I was headed? Absolutely not! Did I plan my career moves in logical progression? Absolutely not.

There was no grand design. I was a California boy, stumbling cheerfully through life, succeeding, falling on my face, picking myself up and plunging ahead, holding onto some simple values, trying to live with a civil heart as someone said, always learning, always trying, always wondering."

--- John Gardner

“Have you ever noticed that unplanned events—chance occurrences—more often determine your life and career choices than all the careful planning you do? A chance meeting, a broken appointment, a spontaneous vacation trip, a "fill-in" job, a new direction and career..."  

--- John D. Krumboltz, "Luck Is No Accident"
Chance Plays an Important Role in People’s Careers

- Right place/Right time
- Personal Connections
- Unexpected opportunity
- One thing led to another

**Happenstance Learning Theory suggests that:**
- You Can Create and Capitalize Upon Chance Events

How You Control Unplanned Events

- Before the unplanned event, your actions position you to experience it.
- During the event, your sensitivity recognizes possible opportunities for action.
- After the event, your actions enable you to benefit from it.

The five pillars of Planned Happenstance

1. Curiosity: Follow Your Interests. Explore!
2. Persistence: Stay with it despite setbacks.
3. Optimism: View new opportunities as possible and attainable.
4. Flexibility: Changing attitudes and circumstances
5. Risk-Taking: Taking action in the face of uncertain outcomes.

“People can make chance happen by pursuing an active life that increases the number of fortuitous encounters they are likely to experience.”

—Albert Bandura
The Happenstance Approach Reduces Stress

- It is OK to make career plans as long as you are open to changing those plans.
- Make career decisions when you are ready.
- You have permission to make mistakes.
- You don’t have to wait for “the best.”
- You can act without knowing the outcome.

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Engagement in the Career Arena

“…taking part in behaviors that contribute to the career decision-maker’s fund of experience.”


How did you learn to know what you like?

You know what sucks? Everything.
Case for Engagement

Getting involved and engaged makes both rational & intuitive tools more informed and less naive

Krieshok, Black, & McKay (2009).
Career decision making: The limits of rationality and abundance of non-conscious processes.

A Better Goal for Career Development:
Taking actions to achieve a more satisfying career and personal life.

Actions: exploring, talking to people, interviewing, researching, expressing interests, establishing contacts, joining, volunteering, trying out part-time jobs, community service, studying abroad.

One step leads to another.

A career happens or unfolds; it's more like a voyage or journey, not a destination.

Ways to Get Students Occupationally Engaged

Show them their options
- Requirements for classes
- Find out what their interests are
- Do searches with them
- “If you were to take one step, what would you do?”
- “What will happen if you do nothing?”

Reduce anxiety about getting involved
- Have them come up with ways they are already engaged
- Introduce them to people who can get them involved
- Tap into already existing network (e.g. family & friends)

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The College of Chinese Wisdom

Concrete, defined plans for life are abstract because they are made for a self who is abstract: a future self that you imagine based upon a snapshot of yourself now. You are confined to what is in the best interests of the person you happen to be right now—not of the person you will become.
Live with a constant awareness of the ever-changing world and your ever-shifting self. Train your mind to stay open and constantly take into account all the complex stuff that is you.

- Traditional Career Advising
  - Help students overcome indecision and make a choice.

- An alternative
  - Put less of an emphasis on decidedness as an outcome.
  - Welcome indecision as a sensible approach to a complex and unpredictable future.
  - Promote an appreciation for planned happenstance
  - Encourage action and engagement

References:
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