

The Decade After High School

A PROFESSIONAL'S GUIDE



Cathy Campbell
Michael Ungar

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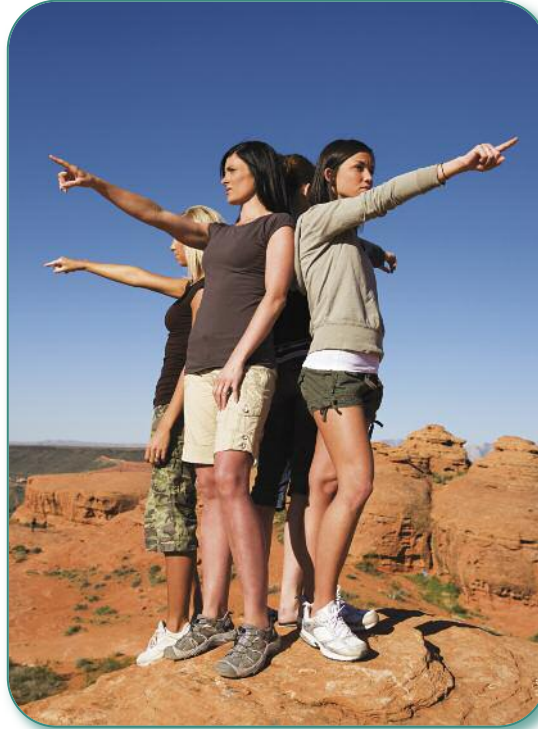
Introduction

The transition from high school into educational and occupational pathways is an anxiety-ridden and bewildering process for many young people and their parents. From the time they start kindergarten to the day they graduate from high school, their path forward is relatively clear. They proceed systematically from one grade to another. Everyone their age is doing pretty much what they are doing school-wise, and making career decisions is something for the distant future.

After they complete high school, they abruptly reach the edge of the roadmap. While some make relatively smooth transitions from school to post-secondary education and into satisfying work, others flounder. They change their post-secondary program multiple times or drop out altogether. Many who graduate from training programs have no idea what they want to do and spend years careening from one job to another and back to school in an attempt to find satisfying work.

There is no doubt that young people face what has been described as a complex and circuitous transition into the workforce.¹ Compared to previous generations, they are faced with higher expectations², more choices³, and the requirements for more post-secondary education that is becoming increasingly expensive.⁴ Perhaps worst of all, there are no guarantees that a good job awaits a young person who has invested a lot of time and money into post-secondary education.⁵

Further complicating the process is the pressure that young people feel to identify specific long-term goals for their educational and occupational pathways. Vance Peavy, an innovative educator and scholar in the career counselling



field, noted that “the effect of this approach can be to present career decision-making as an ominous, irrevocable decision-making process which can lead to fears of failure rather than promoting thoughtful and meaningful actions.”⁶

Some of the conventional wisdom that young people hear creates further confusion. Kenneth Gray, a professor of workforce education, notes that two of the most pervasive “pearls of wisdom” young people hear are: “You’d better go to university right after high school or you never will” and “Just get a degree and everything will work out.”⁷ While there may be some truth to these assertions, they are not valid for many youth.

It is not uncommon to find young people who, despite having done everything “right,” are still languishing in debt and underemployment. They come out of university or college no clearer about what they want than when they started. They can’t find a good job despite having invested substantial time and money into post-secondary education and training, and they are left to wonder what *they* did wrong.

Overview of the Research Project

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the educational and occupational pathways that high school graduates take after graduation. In particular, we wanted to know who and what helped and hindered this sample of young people to make a successful

transition. To this end, from 2007 to 2008 we interviewed one hundred young people in four different Canadian sites: Prince Edward Island, Halifax, Guelph, and Calgary. Our sample included youth between the ages of 23 and 30 who had taken a variety of educational and occupational pathways after graduating from high school.⁸

The young adults selected for inclusion in the study participated in a one-on-one interview lasting 60 to 90 minutes, which focused on what they had been doing since graduating from high school. Specifically, they were asked to reflect on what influenced the pathways they took and what supports and constraints they encountered as they made their way into post-secondary education and/or directly into the workforce. As well, they were asked to share any advice they might have for how parents and professionals could best help young people. The interviews were audio taped, transcribed, and analyzed for both common and unique themes. Follow-up interviews were conducted with those who were willing to be contacted again.

The data was analyzed using qualitative research methods associated with what is termed “grounded theory.”⁹ This approach emphasizes that explanations about what people are doing should emerge from the data. Using these methods, we proceeded from the case-by-case study of individuals to a theory that explained commonalities and differences among the study’s participants.

The second part of the project was the dissemination of the results. Two publications have been written based on the findings that emerged from the study. This publication is written for education and career development professionals who work with young people. A companion publication is available for parents (available at www.storiesoftransition.ca).

Our intent is to help young people and those who guide them, whether parents or career professionals, to understand the challenges facing high school graduates and the multiplicity of possible pathways they may follow when continuing their education and finding employment.

In the discussions of the research findings in subsequent chapters, we have tried, as much as possible, to give direct voice to the experiences of participants. To that end, we frequently quote participants. As well, we share information from other sources which helps to bring some insight into the experiences participants have shared with us.

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Career Planning in a Contemporary Context

You have to have a foreshadowing of anything that you could ever want to do when you're eighteen. How do you do that?

❧ 26-year-old participant from Guelph

Until recently, the transition to adulthood was compressed into a relatively short timeframe.¹ Most youth entered the workforce directly after graduating from high school. Those who went to post-secondary education were generally able to find good jobs immediately after graduation.

Today's youth face a much different reality. Job prospects for those without post-secondary education are becoming increasingly limited. As a result, the vast majority of high school graduates are pursuing further education and training. The need to invest in post-secondary education significantly increases the time it takes young people to transition from high school to full-time employment. This transition now takes, on average, eight years for young adults to complete.²

In this chapter, we outline some of the key findings from recent studies that have examined the experiences of high school students in the decade after they graduate from high school.

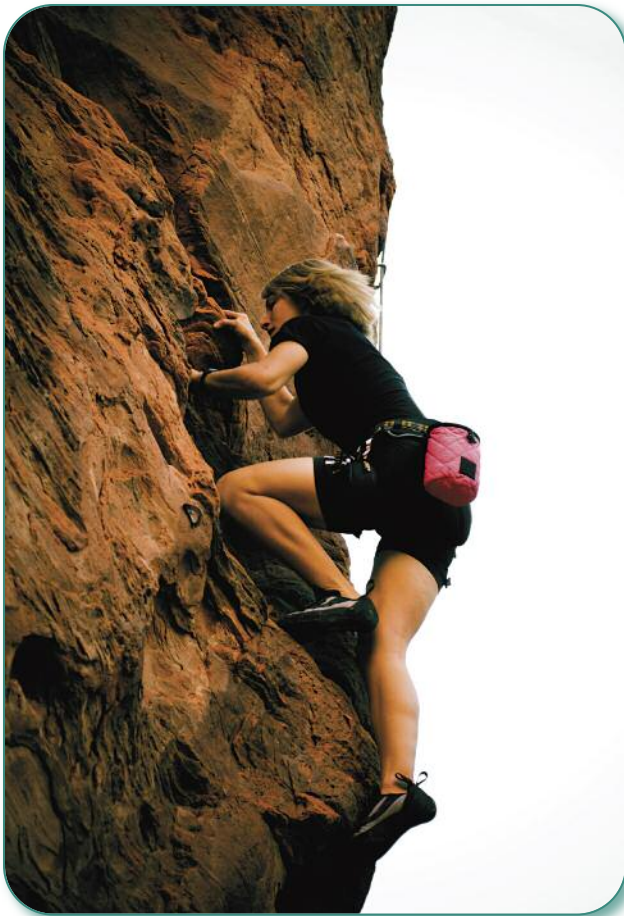
Emerging Adulthood

Jeffrey Arnett argues that changes in the way young people transition into adult roles means the period between the late teens and mid-twenties has become a distinct period developmentally.³ Partially because of the increasing need to obtain post-secondary education in order to get a satisfying job, young people are delaying getting married and having children. In the early 1970s, the median age of marriage was 21 for women and 23 for men. By 2001, this had increased to 26 and 28 respectively.⁴

In the past, the pressures of marriage and parenthood “forced” most young people to sort out how they were going to make a living in their late teens and early twenties. Without these responsibilities, young people today have more time to explore who they are and what it is they want to do. Arnett has coined the term “emerging adulthood” to describe this period of exploration that many young people engage in between their late teens and mid-twenties.⁵

A central feature of emerging adulthood is identity exploration which, in turn, is essential in the search for satisfying work. When a young person asks herself what kind of work she wants to do, she is also asking herself what kind of person she wants to be.⁶ The primary way that young people explore their identity is by trying things out. They become clearer about who they are and what they want out of life through engaging in post-secondary education, paid and unpaid work, and a variety of extracurricular activities. Just as importantly, they become more aware of what they don't want. As Arnett points out, explorations in emerging adulthood often include failure or disappointment but “the failures and disappointments in work can be illuminating for self-understanding.”⁷

Young people explore in different ways. Some go about it in a systematic way, while others approach it in a more haphazard fashion. Rather than carefully considering what might be promising options to explore, some young people opt for the post-secondary education institution that is closest at hand or fall into jobs that happen to come their way. David Blustein and Hanoch Flum's view of young people's exploration “encompasses exploration that occurs as a result of systematic actions as well as the exploration



that may result from unplanned or fortuitous life experiences.”⁸ While a haphazard approach may not be a particularly effective exploration strategy, it nevertheless does result in a young person gathering more information.

With exploration comes instability.⁹ The only constant for many emerging adults is that their plans keep changing. As they try things out, they learn more about themselves and the options available to them. New learning often leads them to change their plans. They realize that the computer science program they chose isn’t as interesting as they expected. Or they don’t do as well in their undergraduate program as they had hoped and have to revise their plans to go on to law school. They find that they can’t get a job in their chosen field without more training or they decide to train for another field altogether.

By their late twenties, most young people have moved out of the exploration phase into more settled lives.¹⁰ However, there is still a substantial minority who continue exploring. One study found that, while most had settled on some sort of occupational identity by the time they were in their late twenties, about 25% continued their

exploration because they weren’t satisfied with their work or with their salaries.¹¹

While the emerging adulthood phase is experienced by many, it is certainly not universal. Arnett emphasizes that the ability to use the late teens and twenties as a period of exploration is impacted by a young person’s environment and temperament. Parenthood, social class, tolerance for instability, and cultural norms all impact the degree to which the late teens and twenties can be used as a period of exploration.¹² In some cases, a young person may be pressured by parents or other authority figures to pursue a certain career path. Instead of developing their identity through a process of exploration, they adopt a “ready made identity” that is “drawn from conformity to values and expectations of significant others.”¹³

Career Paths are Unpredictable

Predicting a young person’s career path is a lot like weather forecasting. Both are impossible to predict accurately over a long period of time.¹⁴ Like weather systems, there are many influences that interact in unpredictable ways on a young person’s career path. Wendy Patton and Mary McMahon have developed a systems-based theory to account for the multiple influences on career pathways including an individual’s interests, abilities, ethnicity, values, and age; the support and functioning of the individual’s family and peer group; the individual’s exposure to broader social forces related to their socioeconomic status, labour market conditions, and political culture; and the external physical environment in which they live.¹⁵

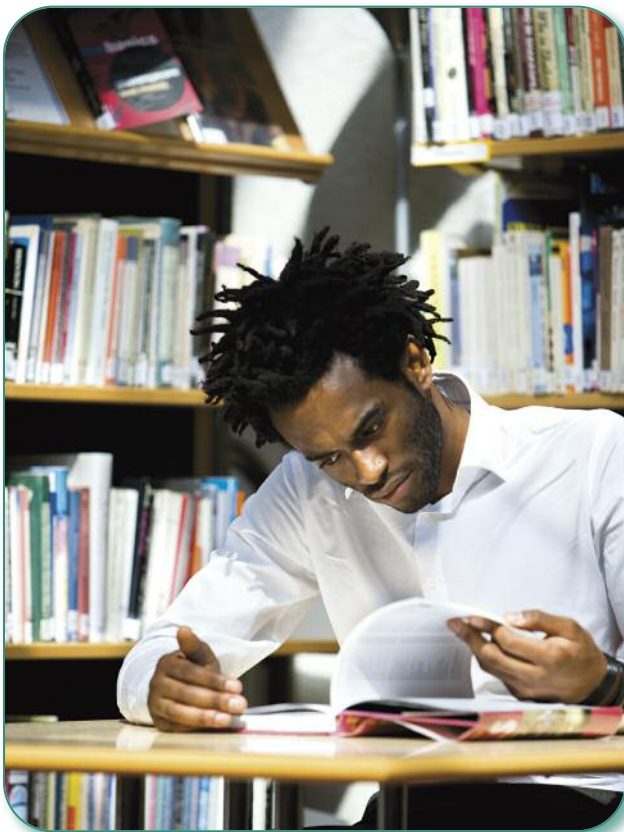
As well, unanticipated events often exert a significant impact on people’s career paths. Unexpected events can have a facilitative or constraining effect on the pathways taken. These events can include professional or personal connections for obtaining a job; unexpected advancement; right place/right time scenarios; influences of marriage and family; encouragement/discouragement of others; obstacles in original career path; influence of historical events, and unexpected exposure to an interest area.¹⁶ The impact of unanticipated events is apparent even for those in their late teens and early twenties. A study of 772 high school and university students in Australia found that close to 70% identified at least one chance event as having influenced their educational or career path.¹⁷ Unanticipated events are so pervasive that, according to John Krumboltz and Al Levin, they should be expected.¹⁸

Participation in Post-Secondary Education

Most young adults and their parents are well aware of the critical role that post-secondary education plays in terms of increased employment prospects. As a result, young people are investing in education and skill development in record numbers. The following is a statistical snapshot of young Canadians' participation in post-secondary education.

The vast majority of high school graduates attend some type of post-secondary education

- Eighty-two percent of high school graduates enrol in some type of post-secondary education within three years of graduating from high school.
- They go to a variety of institutions: university (51%), college/CEGEP (33%), and other types of post-secondary education institutions (16%).
- Post-secondary education participation rates vary significantly across the country. Provincially, Ontario and Newfoundland and Labrador have the highest participation at 83% and Alberta has the lowest at 71%.



- Youth in urban communities (82%) are far more likely to attend post-secondary education than those living in rural communities (65%).
- Those who attend post-secondary education from rural areas are less likely to go to university (40% as compared to 52% of those from urban areas).¹⁹

Some high school graduates delay going to post-secondary education

Sixteen per cent of high school graduates delayed going to post-secondary education for up to three years after graduating. Lower high school academic achievement is associated with delayed post-secondary attendance. Not surprisingly, those that receive scholarships and grants are less likely to delay.²⁰

It is not uncommon for young people to drop out of post-secondary education before completing their programs

Fifteen percent of young people drop out before completing a post-secondary education program. The most frequently reported reasons for dropping out are: not enough money (18%), not liking the program (18%), and wanting to work (17%).²¹

The majority of young people try more than one post-secondary education program

Most post-secondary education graduates attempt more than one program, with 60% graduating from a different program than the one that they started in. Approximately 25% attempt three or more programs.²²

Many continue getting more education after completing a university degree

Many young people return for more schooling after graduating with a bachelor's degree. In the Maritime provinces, 72% of all first degree holders who graduated in 1999 returned within five years for more schooling.²³ This figure is considerably lower in Alberta where 25% returned within two years for more schooling.²⁴

Graduates from liberal arts and science degrees are more likely to return to school than those who graduate with applied or professional undergraduate degrees. The most common reason cited by youth in the Maritimes for going back to school was to improve their chances of getting a job or getting a better job. Amongst liberal arts and

science graduates, 62% returned to school for this reason, while 41% of applied arts and sciences/professional school graduates gave this reason.²⁵

Students are incurring more debt

- Over the past twenty years, post-secondary tuitions have increased substantially while government grants to students have been cut. As a result, students and their families have had to take out more student loans to cover their education expenses.
- Young people graduating from college and university in 2000 owed 76% more than those who graduated in 1990.²⁶
- Approximately half of students graduating with a bachelor's degree left university without any debt; however, the other half had an average debt load of \$20,000. Close to 15% owed more than \$25,000 when they graduated.²⁷
- The level of student debt is particularly high in the Maritime provinces. Thirty per cent of graduates in 2007 owed \$40,000 or more.²⁸

High levels of debt make it difficult for graduates to pursue further education which might improve their chances of getting better employment. Students who graduated with \$40,000 or more debt were significantly more likely to say that they were not planning to return for more schooling or that they were going to delay returning for a year or more.²⁹

Underemployment is common for university and college graduates

Young people with post-secondary degrees, diplomas or certificates have a distinct advantage in the labour market over those who don't. People with post-secondary training are less likely to be unemployed and more likely to have a higher salary than those with only a high school diploma.³⁰

Post-secondary credentials, however, do not guarantee that young people will be well employed after they graduate. A phenomenon called *credential inflation*, more education to do the same or similar work, has entered the labour market.³¹ Bachelor's degrees and college diplomas have become the standard credential for entry into many occupations. Master's degrees and Ph.D.s are becoming necessary for people who want to rise to the top of their chosen professions.

While it is true that some occupations have become more complex, it is also true that others haven't changed much from the days when a high school diploma sufficed. This creates a situation in which a young person may need a particular credential to get the job, but does not need to use that education to do the job.

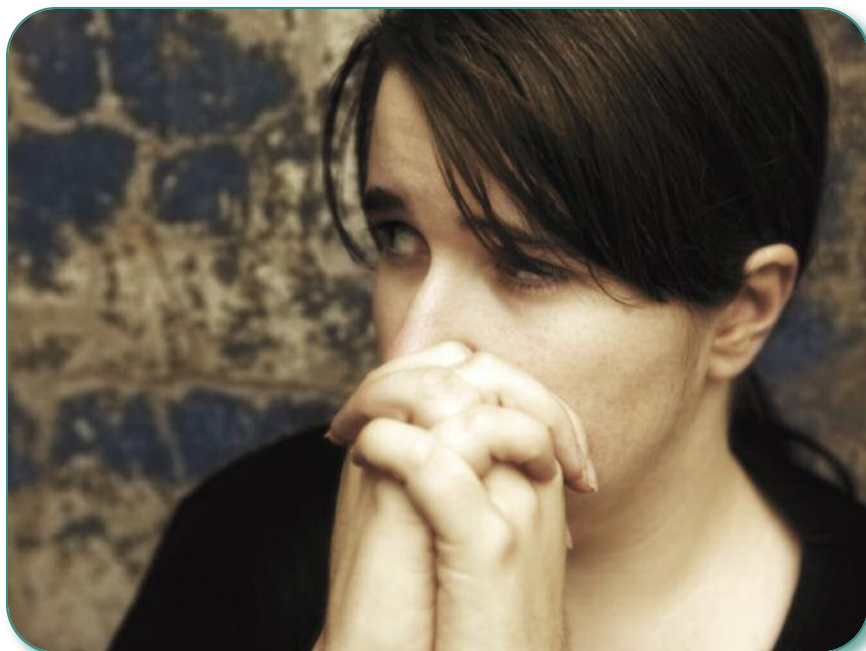
As James Coté and Anton Allahar observed:

*Herein lies a paradox faced by the current generation, or what we call the 'credentialism paradox': credentialed skills often have little to do with the work that is eventually performed, but without the credentials, one's employability and earning powers are seriously jeopardized.*³²

This paradox has led to many educated young people being *underemployed*, in jobs that do not utilize the skills they have developed through their training. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, about half of Canadian undergraduates were in jobs two years after graduation that did not require a university degree.³³ The proportion improved after five years to one-third, but didn't improve much afterwards.

Summary

This brief overview of what is known about the decade after high school illustrates that it is a time of growth and change for most young people. At one time it may have been true that young people made a relatively





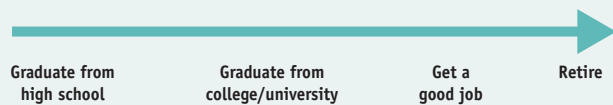
straightforward transition from high school into the workforce; today it is no longer the norm.

Young people spend many more years experimenting with post-secondary education programs and jobs, trying to figure out what constitutes satisfying work. Whatever plans they have when they graduate from high school, more likely than not those plans will change over time. Even the high school graduate who is well informed and focused about his future will likely experience unpredictable events and influences that will change, or at least modify, the path that he takes.

A discouraging reality for many young people is that investing in post-secondary education is not the guarantee it once was. Many college and university graduates have difficulty finding a job that is commensurate with their skills and training. This leads many to invest in further education in the hope that it will give them an advantage in the labour market.

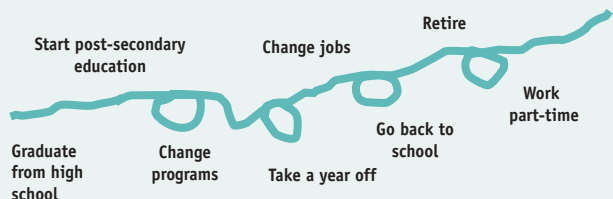
The way it is *supposed* to look

Many assume that young people will follow a linear, predictable path from high school to post-secondary training, and then on to a permanent full-time job. They believe that young people's career pathways should look like this:



The way it looks for most

Rather than a straight line, most young people's career paths will look like this:



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Finding Their Place

*If I like it, I'll stick with it. If I don't, I'll have to look somewhere else.
That's all you can do. One of these days, you'll find the right thing.*

∞ 28-year-old participant from Halifax



As we showed in Chapter One, the late teens and twenties can be a chaotic time. This was certainly the case for many of the participants in our study. The majority of young people we interviewed either did not have plans when they graduated from high school, or they changed their original plans as experience caused their goals to shift or their access to resources such as education, job opportunities, and self-confidence grew or diminished.

Although their life stories were very different, the participants shared at least one common struggle after graduating high school: they wanted to “find a place.” For our participants, *place* meant a career in the broadest sense of the word. For some, place meant what they did for paid employment. Others found their place as stay-at-home parents or through volunteer and leisure activities through which they contributed to their families and communities.

Finding a place was seldom straightforward as participants tried to find a fit between what they wanted and the resources that were available to them. The good news is that, by the time these young adults were in their late twenties, the majority had found a place with which they were satisfied. A few found that place in their early twenties, but most needed more time. There was still, however, a sizeable minority who, for a variety of reasons, were not able to follow their chosen career path or were still unclear about what they wanted to do.

In this chapter we'll outline the different ways young adults find a place and the outcomes of their searches.

The Process of Finding Their Place

Many participants said that they were “blind” to the many options that existed after they graduated from high school. During the decade after graduation, they had much to learn about themselves and the opportunities that were available to them. A 25-year-old participant from Halifax said:

I needed to find out who I really was. I haven't found out who I am completely yet, but I know better now than I did when I finished school. I had no clue. I didn't have any time to figure it out. I was just in

school and doing whatever it was. You need time where you can think and work, find out who you are.

For most, finding a place was the result of engaging in a process of trial and error. As they tried out different post-secondary education programs and types of work, they began to get a better sense of who they were and which career paths might suit them. Participants recounted stories of feeling they had found their place when different dimensions of their lives “clicked.” Something, they said, eventually “felt right.” One 24-year-old woman from Calgary told us:

When I was taking the program, I wasn't so sure that being an administrative assistant was for me. I did my practicum at a large oil and gas company. I worked under three vice-presidents and realized this is kind of where I want to be.

For others, where they wanted to be evolved over time. One 28-year-old from Prince Edward Island described how her decision to become a professional musician came about:

Over a period of time I noticed that I always had a guitar and I was always writing. It just seemed natural to try and turn it into something that maybe made me money. That's basically it: my guitar is like my best friend. I can't leave it behind, it's always there.

Three Paths

With 100 detailed case studies to consider, any attempt to reduce the sample to a narrow typology would, of course, risk oversimplifying the complexities of the participants' lives. However, most of the participants' accounts of trying to find their place cluster under three broad categories: *Navigators*, *Explorers*, and *Drifters*.

Participants may have used more than one strategy depending on how sure they were of their goals and their access to resources. Some participants described patterns that overlapped with one or more categories at the same time, although in general the typology could account for most aspects of the participants' search for a career with which they could feel satisfied.

Navigators

Navigators know what they want to do and are engaged in education and/or work activities necessary to achieve their goals. Though they could clearly articulate a desired destination for their career search, they may or may not have known much about the specifics of what they had chosen to do.





Case Study – Navigator

Kristen is a 24-year-old working in Calgary as a chemical engineer with a large petrochemical company. She enrolled in a university chemical engineering program immediately after high school and found a job in her field soon after graduation.

At the beginning of Grade 12 I had no clue what I wanted to go into, but I was leaning towards chemistry. I had weekly meetings with my guidance counsellor to check my progress because I was going to a self-directed learning school. I was discussing with him that I was thinking chemistry and he suggested getting into engineering. When the university was doing their open house for high school students, I went to both presentations by the engineering department and the chemistry department and from that decided wholeheartedly that engineering was the way to go.

While Kristen appeared to know exactly what she wanted to do coming out of high school, she said that she hadn't been certain about her decision. She had to experience the engineering field through her university courses and co-op placement to confirm that being an engineer was a good career choice for her.

Even though I didn't know what I wanted to do for sure, I thought it was a good opportunity. I don't even know if I knew back then that engineers can do so many different jobs.

Kristen is enjoying her job right now, but she fully expects to be doing other types of work within the engineering field in the future.

Analysis: Kristen has taken an unusually direct route from high school to university and into a full-time job that she finds satisfying. This was possible because she had all of the necessary resources to follow her chosen path.

- She had the *self awareness* in high school to know that her interests and abilities lay in math and chemistry.
- With the help of a *guidance counsellor*, she was able to translate those interests into a post-secondary program that was a good fit.
- Her *parents* were supportive of her decision to choose engineering and were able to *pay all* of the costs associated with getting her degree. This meant that she did not need to work while attending university and could focus on her studies.
- Her *academic skills* and *motivation* helped her to successfully meet the rigorous requirements of completing an engineering degree.
- Once she graduated, she was able to find a *satisfying job* because of the high demand for chemical engineers in the oil and gas industry in Alberta.

If any of these resources had not been available, Kristen's pathway might not have been so direct. Without the assistance of a guidance counsellor, she would likely not have known in Grade 12 that engineering was a good fit with her interests and abilities. If she had followed her original plan to take an undergraduate degree in chemistry, she still might have come to realize that engineering was a good fit, or she may have found an equally satisfying career in the field of chemistry. It would, however, almost certainly have taken her more exploration time or more years of training to do so.

Her parents' support was critical. Kristen said that she would not have pursued engineering if they hadn't approved. Likewise, without a demand for chemical engineers, she would have been forced to either relocate or go into a different field.

Kristen also enjoyed an element of *luck*. By her own admission, she knew little of what engineers did when she chose to pursue that path. Through her university experiences she was reassured that her chosen field would be a satisfying one. She could have just as easily discovered that it wasn't something that interested her, or that another field interested her even more.



Navigating to the wrong option

Not all Navigators are as fortunate as Kristen. More often than not, participants told stories of having chosen a field only to discover that the realities of the work didn't interest them as much as they had expected. Jeff, a 28-year-old from Halifax who is working now as an arborist, described navigating towards computer networking only to find out that it wasn't something he enjoyed:

At the time when I went to university, computers were the thing, so that's what I did. Thinking, I like to play computer games, I'll love computer science. Not the same thing at all. I went to university for three years and I got my certificate in computer science, which is now just a real expensive banner on the wall.

After that, I went to work for a psychology professor, installing coding software for her. That's when I decided I hate computers. Not really hate them, but I just couldn't . . .

I grew up doing forestry for my father. Like planting trees, anything in the woods, so I'm really used to working outside with my hands, doing a lot of physical labour stuff. So I was inside doing the computer and I looked at all the kids walking around campus on a nice

day. It was just hard on my head. It really wasn't me. I mean I could do it, but I really didn't like it. I made great money doing it, but I just couldn't stand it. I'd rather make way less money for something that I like to do.

Like many high school graduates, Jeff chose to pursue an occupation that he knew little about. This can lead to expensive learning. One participant who navigated toward office administration after high school realized she didn't like working in an office after she had incurred a \$20,000 debt getting her diploma.

Explorers

Explorers cannot say what they want to do specifically, but they are engaged in a process of experimentation as a way to learn more about themselves and their options. They are proactive in their search for information about career opportunities; they speculate about areas of interest, and they seek experiences whereby they can test the waters to determine the fit of particular career options. Explorers, though uncertain about their goals, are actively trying to understand where they might put their talents to best use.

The time for exploring may run out

The late teens and early twenties are an ideal time for exploration because most young people do not have the responsibilities of mortgages, marriage and/or parenthood. As they move into their mid-to-late twenties, an increasing number take on these added responsibilities which, though welcomed, can also narrow opportunities for exploration. This was definitely the case for a 29-year-old from Guelph who had spent much of the preceding ten years exploring her options. Although she would like to continue pursuing more meaningful work opportunities, she said it wasn't as easy since getting married:

I have to be more calculated about exploring and go about it more intentionally. The question is, given my responsibilities, how can I satisfy my curiosity?



Case Study— Explorer

Carol, a 24-year-old from Calgary, has been working as an administrative assistant for two years with an oil company. She loves her work and the interaction she has with people. Carol was unsure what she wanted to do after graduating from high school, but was inter-

ested in exploring the possibilities:

I did a little bit of research, but I just wanted to see what would interest me. I thought, I speak Italian fluently so Spanish might be fun to learn. I was considering sports medicine for a long time, all through high school. I played sports since I was fourteen and I still kick box. I really considered that avenue so I took human physiology and human anatomy. I started taking the sciences and that didn't appeal to me.

I couldn't find anything that I really was interested in at the college. I started looking at another college and I went through quite a few different programs. I started doing more and more research.

I thought about being a pastry chef because I have a sweet tooth. Then I thought being a chef and working in, maybe owning, my own restaurant. That still intrigues me. I do love to cook. But I realized being a pastry chef, getting up at three in the morning to own your own bakery, not if I want kids. I like my Monday to Friday, nine to five.

Still unsure after a year at college, Carol decided to take some time off to figure out what she wanted to do. She took a job in retail and, in the process, learned a lot about herself:

I realized working there that I do like to work with people. I am very much a customer person. I have a bubbly, outgoing personality so I realized that I didn't want to be stuck by myself at a job. I wanted to be able to work with others at some point. With that in mind, it

eliminated a lot of different careers where you're on your own. Like an investment planner or something in the financial world. My brother's an accountant; I find it's pretty mundane. I like administration because it's very fast-paced and you're constantly multi-tasking. You've got probably about four projects on the go at a time ... very interactive with other people.

Carol's retail job made her realize that she wanted regular working hours and a decent salary. Her brother, who worked in the oil and gas industry, encouraged her to try to get into the industry. With that in mind, she decided to go back to school.

A college admissions officer suggested that she take an information management program that would provide a "good starting place" and improve her computer skills. Carol was attracted to the program because it offered hands-on learning, the possibility of working in jobs where there was a lot of people contact and, as a final bonus, elective courses in office application in the oil and gas industry.

Despite all the pluses going for the college program, Carol still wasn't positive that office administration was the right career choice for her. She looked upon her training as an opportunity to see if this was something she wanted to pursue. It was only through her practicum experience with an oil and gas company that she was able to confirm that office administration was what she really wanted to do.

Analysis: Both during high school and after graduation, Carol explored a range of options. Like most Explorers, she was curious about the possibilities and actively pursued a variety of avenues that would increase her self and career awareness.

Carol's exploratory stage was facilitated by her personal attributes.

- She was able to *resist* the admonishments of her parents to stay at college, which created an opportunity for her to work in retail and learn more about herself.
- She researched the possibility of a pastry arts career, but realized it was a poor fit for the *lifestyle she envisioned* for herself.
- She was willing to tolerate some *ambiguity and uncertainty* when she enrolled in the office administration program, considering she wasn't absolutely sure it was what she wanted.
- Even when the office administration field seemed to be a good choice given her interests and abilities, Carol remained *open to change* if she found that it didn't ultimately suit her.



Case Study — Drifter

Antoine is a 27-year-old from Guelph who has been working for his father in the real estate and construction field for the past three years. He does not particularly enjoy the work he is doing, but isn't sure what else to do. Antoine explains how he drifted into university and then into his present job:

When I was going into university, I didn't necessarily have something in mind that I wanted to be. From high school, I had good grades and obviously it was the logical decision. If you have the means to do so, go to university and take the next step. Which is what I ended up doing.

I ended up being at university for five years. Throughout that time too—whatever it was—lack of motivation, ambition, direction, goal setting, I still graduated from university not knowing what I wanted to do. I had a diploma, but I didn't know what I wanted to do with it. I still didn't say to myself, this is what I want to be, this is what I want to do.

Applying for jobs afterwards was, as you would imagine, difficult because I didn't know what it was that I wanted. There wasn't a clear direction that I wanted to go.

I tried applying to law school. I guess this ties into some of the things I've done later on, the influences that people have over you. Law school was not necessarily something that I wanted to do myself, but something that my father had pushed for. I'm sure

there are many psychological reasons why I know these things—to appease another individual, or trying to make them proud of you, or whatnot. Regardless, I didn't end up getting into law school.

I tried applying to a handful of different jobs through web sites, which wasn't successful at all. I was applying to different jobs within government. I figured, with my degree in English and with political science, that that would be enough to apply to something within the government sector. Politics was always something that really interested me. I felt it would have been a job that would have been rewarding and fulfilling. Being a government job, it would pay relatively well.

However, I was sort of naïve. It's incredibly difficult to get into government if you don't know anybody or you don't have any connections. What I went through was discouraging and I don't think I exercised all the avenues open to me in order to perform a successful, not just job search, but career search.

I ended up getting discouraged and took a job working at the mall selling shoes. Not my proudest moment but, at the same time, I needed money and I found myself stuck in a rut. I didn't want to work there for a year; I quit after eleven months and decided I would either continue my career search or try something different.

I ended up trying something different. My dad was a real estate agent and I ended up getting into business with him. I took my real estate courses, complete in about six months, and then was working with him. Feel it was like a consolation that's available; it's easy to do so let's go for it.

After two years, it was a bit of a dead end. It wasn't something that I enjoyed; it wasn't something that I was passionate about; it wasn't something that was fulfilling. When my father suggested that I do real estate, it wasn't something that I necessarily wanted to do, but I felt I couldn't say "no."

Analysis: Antoine's father's expectation of him made it difficult for Antoine to engage in exploration. Flum and Blustein note that a young person is less likely to explore when significant others attempt to control their decisions and don't encourage them to take personal initiative.¹

- As the eldest male in a family that immigrated from the Middle East, Antoine was *expected to listen to his parents* and to go into the family business.
- Antoine *had not developed a clear picture* of his interests and abilities, or what he wanted to do.

- He graduated with a *general university degree* which meant that it was not clearly evident to him or prospective employers where he fit into the labour market.
- Antoine was in a Catch-22 situation: without a sense of what he did want, it was difficult for him to challenge his father's expectation. His father's expectation, on the other hand, made it difficult for Antoine to engage in an exploration process to figure out what he wanted. So he remained stuck in a career field that held no interest for him.

Drifters

Drifters don't know what they want to do, are laissez-faire about making choices, or face numerable barriers to career fulfillment. Being unable or unwilling to proactively seek a career, they are apt to "go with the flow." Over time some became stuck. There was a sense of aimlessness and passivity in the stories drifters told of their post-secondary education and work histories.

High-functioning drifters

The typical image of a Drifter is someone who is wasting their time engaged in low pay, low skill jobs, or not working at all. However, there are also Drifters who are not so easy to spot. From the outside, most people around Antoine would assume that he was an ambitious young man going to work in his father's successful business. He appears to be on track towards a satisfying career while, in fact, he is aimless. Antoine is what we refer to as a "high-functioning drifter."

A common place to find high-functioning Drifters is in graduate and professional schools. It is tempting for university graduates with good marks to deal with the uncertainty about what to do after graduation by simply continuing to go to school. It was like that for John, a 28-year-old who received a scholarship to do a master's degree that covered all of his tuition and living expenses. He explains what motivated him to go to do post-graduate work:

When I did my undergrad, I did a few co-op work terms and they provided very low job satisfaction. I don't even really know why I did computer science. Like, I never owned a computer in my life.

I always did well in school so one of the professors said I should apply for a scholarship for graduate school. I got a full scholarship, so school was for free anyway. I ski a lot and there's a lot better skiing in Calgary. I could go anywhere, so I decided to go to university in Calgary. I just wanted to see what Calgary was like.

There are advantages to drifting

It is natural to assume that drifting is not a good thing. Certainly, drifting for long periods of time is not likely to lead to satisfying work. However, drifting can have its place as a legitimate career planning strategy. While not systematic or proactive, drifting into a post-secondary education program or job is a form of passive exploration that can result in a young person being exposed by chance to career options that interest them.

This was the case for Kirk, a 28-year-old dental technologist who entered the field, not because he was interested in it, but because he was offered training.



Going through a web site I found this listing for a dental lab and they said on-the-job training provided and it's like, okay why not? That's pretty much hook, line, and sinker for me. It's like okay, that's a job where they don't want somebody to Mickey Mouse around. That's why I took the job. And they've lived up to it. It was the biggest fluke of my life.

Needless to say, Kirk did not keep his job and receive promotions by continuing to drift. Once he realized the opportunity he'd been given, he became very proactive and committed.

I definitely put in a lot more overtime now because of the passion, because I'm driven. If I have a problem that needs to be fixed or something that needs to go out for a patient, I will work six, seven hours of overtime. I've had weeks when I've had sixteen hours of overtime. Working at the hardware store, if somebody said, "Hey, you want to work overtime?" if I had been working 40 hours a week, I would probably say no. I figured I put enough of my time into that. With what I do now, I can freely give enough of myself to it, just because I know I'm putting the extra time in and this is going to help this doctor out, it will help this patient out. It will make somebody's life better.

While drifting opens the door to serendipitous encounters, it does pose dangers if it goes on for an extended period of time. A few participants in their late twenties had obtained

little in the way of credentials or marketable skills a decade after they had graduated from high school. It was like that for a 29-year-old from Prince Edward Island. After graduating from high school, he worked in a series of jobs that paid poorly and offered little in the way of skill development. For the past three years he has worked at a car dealership doing small

repairs and cleaning. Because he has no formal mechanic credentials, he is unable to advance his career prospects. He described the result of drifting this way:

I just got by. Like not done anything really meaningful career wise. In the time I've had, I could have done a lot more than I did, but I just go day to day.

Is One Strategy Better Than Another?

It is easy to assume that navigating is the best strategy. At an age when many are still trying to figure out what to do, Kristen navigated directly from high school into a well-paying job that she loves. Surely, we may naively reason, it makes sense to encourage all young people to know what they want to do coming out of high school and then follow through on their plans.

While Navigators appear to be "ahead," it doesn't always work out that way. Illustrative of this are the pathways taken by two participants who graduated from high school together. One *navigated* directly to university with the plan of becoming an architect. The other didn't know what he wanted to do and *drifted* after graduation into a job at a fast food restaurant. Likely, those around them at the time thought the Navigator was using a far better strategy than the Drifter. However, ten years later, the participant who drifted after high school is working in a field that he loves, while the participant who navigated is still trying to figure it out.

The Drifter did not remain drifting. Working in fast food for a few months motivated him to start exploring his options. By exploring, he found a field that was a good fit and started navigating toward it.

In contrast, the Navigator knew very little about architecture and she realized after two years of university that it was not something she wanted to do. She dropped out of school to explore her new found passion for music. Eventually she realized that sound engineering would allow her to make a decent living in the music industry. While she would like to navigate toward this field, the student debt load she has accumulated has made it difficult for her to consider any further training. She is now exploring options within the music industry which do not require her to go back to school.



It's hard to choose a career direction until you know yourself well enough to be able to determine what you want. Ideally, young people have the opportunity to learn about their interests and abilities and to explore different options before they are required to decide what they are navigating toward. By the time they graduate from high school, some young people do have enough self-awareness and exposure to occupations to be reasonably confident that what they are navigating towards will be a good fit. Others need more time to explore before navigating.

Exploring is generally preferable to drifting in that those who use a proactive approach are more likely to find satisfying work than those who are more passive. But drifting does allow for the serendipity of discovering that their interests and abilities lay in a completely unexpected area. The key is that a young person doesn't drift for too long or they may find themselves in their late twenties lacking the skills and credentials needed to get work they are satisfied with.

The Outcome of Navigating, Exploring, and Drifting

By the time participants were in their late twenties, the majority had made what Arnett describes as "the settled choices of young adulthood."² However, their satisfaction with the places they had found varied significantly. We found that the majority of the participants fell into one of two categories that we call *Committers* and *Settlers*.

Committers

Committers have found a place that "clicks" for them, one that they are generally happy with and have no plans to change any time soon. The good news is that many of our participants had attained a meaningful sense of place a decade after graduating from high school.

Committed—for now

Those participants who have attained satisfying work have found something that fits their developing identity. However, over time, their chosen field or particular job may fit less well. Part of the reason for this is that identity development does not stop in our late twenties. While it may be most dramatic in our late teens and twenties, our identity continues to evolve over time.³ New interests and

competencies may develop that lead us to explore and/or navigate towards other options in a related field or in a completely different direction.

Alternatively, things we used to enjoy may simply become stale over time. A 27-year-old engineer from Guelph said:

Now that I've been in the same job for three, four years, I'm not sure if there's any more room for growth. Maybe I need to do a lateral shift to something in a different field or something just different. I've learned everything I can for this job, so do I move somewhere else within the company or do I move to a different company? I've hit that wall just recently actually.

Settlers

Settlers are those young people who have found a place that they don't particularly like but, for a variety of reasons, they plan to stay. A decade after graduating, some of our participants were in the Settler category, having attached to an occupation or lifestyle that fulfilled their need for a place, but which they described as only being moderately satisfying. The source of their dissatisfaction may relate to the work itself, poor pay, or lack of potential for advancement. Settling is common when a young person has family responsibilities and bills to pay, but is not able to find a job that relates to their training or interests.



Case Study—Committer



Shawn, a 29-year-old chartered accountant from Prince Edward Island, found work that he finds deeply satisfying:

I've been a chartered accountant for four years. Mostly my line of work involves auditing, but it can involve some taxation, other special work, dealing with

clients. It's in a public firm so we deal extensively with the outside public. I really enjoy it. You don't see the same thing day after day: you don't know what you're going to be doing when you come in in the morning. You have a bit of an idea, but it can change minute to minute. So I like that the most.

Coming out of high school, Shawn did not know that he wanted to be a chartered accountant. He described the exploration process which he engaged in:

I kind of went a different route than other people coming out of high school. I wasn't entirely sure what I wanted to do and, for the first while, I was just working at a restaurant, basically to kill time and try to figure out what I did want to do.

After I graduated, I went back for another half semester and took another accounting and a calculus course because I liked math. I was thinking maybe I'd see if that's really what I want to do. I excelled at it when I was in high school, so I figured that's what I might want to do. I used that as a diving board, just to see if that's what I really wanted to do.

I really did enjoy the accounting. My brother had taken an accounting course at college and he had described what it was like to me. I thought maybe that

was something I would like to try. I thought college would be a good option because it was low cost as compared to university.

As part of the college program, they had on-the-job training. I went to a small accounting firm—just one guy and his secretary—and I was there to assist. I did my eight weeks and he asked me to come back again the next year. So I agreed and I went back every year from February until July, working full time during the busy season. After a few years, I got inspired and said, "I'm enjoying this, why don't I go the whole way." I decided I'm going to university with the goal of becoming a CA. That's what led me to where I am now.

Analysis: One of the key reasons that Shawn found satisfying work is that he took the time to *explore before navigating* along a specific career path. Coming out of high school, he did not know what he wanted to do and decided to work at odd jobs for awhile to figure it out. Many participants felt pressure to go immediately to college or university, despite being unclear about what they wanted to study. Fortunately, Shawn's parents were accepting of him *taking time off from his studies*.

- Shawn was aware that he had an *interest and ability* in math, so he used that as the starting place for his exploration. He *tested the waters*, first by taking additional high school courses and then by enrolling in a college accounting program. Later, work with an accounting firm confirmed for him that he wanted to become a chartered accountant.
- Shawn married and became a parent when he was twenty-three and in third year university. When asked if *marriage and parenthood* had any impact on his path, he said it hadn't because he was already in the process of becoming a chartered accountant when he took on these responsibilities. If Shawn had been navigating toward a goal that had ended up not being a good fit, he may very well have been forced to stick with that choice in order to support his family. Exploring before navigating increased the chances of him finding satisfying work that he could commit to, rather than having to settle for something that wasn't.



Case Study — Settler

Mylinda is 24 years old and currently working as a labourer in a furniture factory in Guelph. After high school, she obtained a college diploma in business administration, but was only able to find a job as a retail clerk. Her chance for advancement fell through when the store underwent a change in management.

I was working at a department store and they asked me if I wanted the opportunity to work as a supervisor or assistant supervisor. A couple of weeks after they asked me, new management came in and stopped all the training and said they wanted to focus on getting the store up to where it was supposed to be.

Frustrated by that experience, Mylinda quit her job. She describes the difficulty she had finding work in her field:

I don't know if it's just this area, but finding a good job is hard. You can hand your resume out to every company in town and they're all like, "oh sorry, you don't have enough experience." Well, I have all the requirements your job has asked for, how is it that I don't have enough experience?

Mylinda describes how she ended up working in the factory:

I got into it by somebody who I used to work with. The job I was at, they weren't paying enough and my boyfriend and I had just gotten the house. It was like everything all at once: they paid a lot more and it was

closer to where we were moving. So it was just convenience. At the time it was like, how am I supposed to say no?

Definitely I feel I'm so much, it's bad to say, smarter than everybody else. I can count on one hand how many people who have actually gotten some college, high school, or anything like that.

Mylinda feels underemployed and frustrated working at the factory, but plans to stay because she has other responsibilities:

This job, yeah. It's not just me I'm thinking about now. I have to think about my boyfriend and we want to start a family. So it's not just me; it's somebody else too. But we've both made sacrifices.

Analysis: Mylinda's reason for continuing in a job that she doesn't particularly like is a common one. As young people move into their mid-to-late twenties, they are more likely to be in significant relationships. The focus begins to shift from "me" to "us." Mylinda's primary focus has turned to *paying the mortgage* and planning to eventually *have children*. Finding a job that she likes has become of secondary importance.

- Mylinda has become *discouraged* trying to find satisfying work after her supervisor trainee job fell through and she wasn't able to land a job in her field.
- Mylinda hasn't *completely given up* finding more satisfying work. She is hopeful that, over time, an administrative position will open up at the factory. As well, she is planning to take bookkeeping courses in the future in the hope that it will open up doors to more rewarding employment.



I know I also enjoy, love, and cherish the idea of being able to become an oceanographer, a geologist, or that type of thing. For now, it's just going to be off to the side. If I see a road that goes down that way, I might be tempted. But then again, I'm mostly driven by my fears. What happens if I lose my career, what happens if I take this leap of faith and I end up falling a couple hundred feet on my nose?

Summary

The late teens and twenties was a time of exploration for most of our participants. Through *navigating, exploring, and drifting*, they learned more about themselves and the career options open to them. While some found a satisfying place by their early twenties, most needed more time. As participants took on the responsibilities of marriage, parenthood, and homeownership, the opportunities to explore began to narrow. By their late twenties, most were becoming clear about the type of work they would either commit to or settle for. Some were still trying to find a place for themselves.

Settlers may have different priorities

Family responsibilities are one reason participants settle for work that they don't particularly like. As we will discuss in more detail in the next chapter, another reason that some participants settled is that people value working for different reasons. It isn't everyone's priority to have a job they really like. A 28-year-old from Halifax indicated that financial security is his primary consideration:

I don't dislike my work, but I wouldn't say I enjoy it. It's something I do. I guess there are people who take a lot of enjoyment out of what they do for a living. For me, this is a means to live my life the way I want to. It allows me to be comfortable financially, to pursue my hobbies, diving, volleyball, things I want to do outside of work. And it allows me to just be financially secure.

There can be a lot of discomfort and fear in leaving a job, even one that you don't feel passionate about. Another 28-year-old from Halifax shared his reasons for staying in his job despite the fact that his interests lay elsewhere:

I know what I'd like to do and I know what I'm doing. I plan on doing the best job that I can, making sure that I'm able to create the best prosthetic to help somebody be able to chew their food.

- ^{1.} Hanoch Flum and David L. Blustein, "Reinvigorating the Study of Vocational Exploration: A Framework for Research," *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 56, (2000), 380–404.
- ^{2.} Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 124.
- ^{3.} Dan McAdams, *The Stories We Live by: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self* (New York: William Morrow, 1993).

The Impact of Internal Influences on Career Pathways

When someone says I can't do something, I go out of my way to prove them wrong.

∞ 25-year-old participant from Prince Edward Island

For the participants in our study, finding a place wasn't just a matter of knowing what they wanted to do. It also depended on the opportunities and resources each person had available to them. Some participants clearly had more options than others. A youth with above average high school leaving grades, financial assistance from her parents, and access to a strong labour market had an edge over another who had fewer starting advantages.

Collectively, participants identified a lengthy list of internal and external influences that either facilitated or constrained what they were able to do. *Internal influences* included a range of factors that resided within the individual, such as confidence, motivation, knowledge, and skills. *External influences* were equally broad in scope and involved factors outside the individual such as access to education, labour market opportunities, and chance events. Participants also discussed the influence of the *critical messages* to which they were subjected, both from external sources such as family, and internally from their own inner critics.



In this chapter, we will focus on internal influences, while Chapter Four will discuss external influences and messages. For the sake of clarity, we have discussed each influence separately. In reality, we found that the influences interacted with one another in complex and unpredictable ways. While the influences had an impact on all research participants, the degree to which they impacted career pathways was unique to the individual.

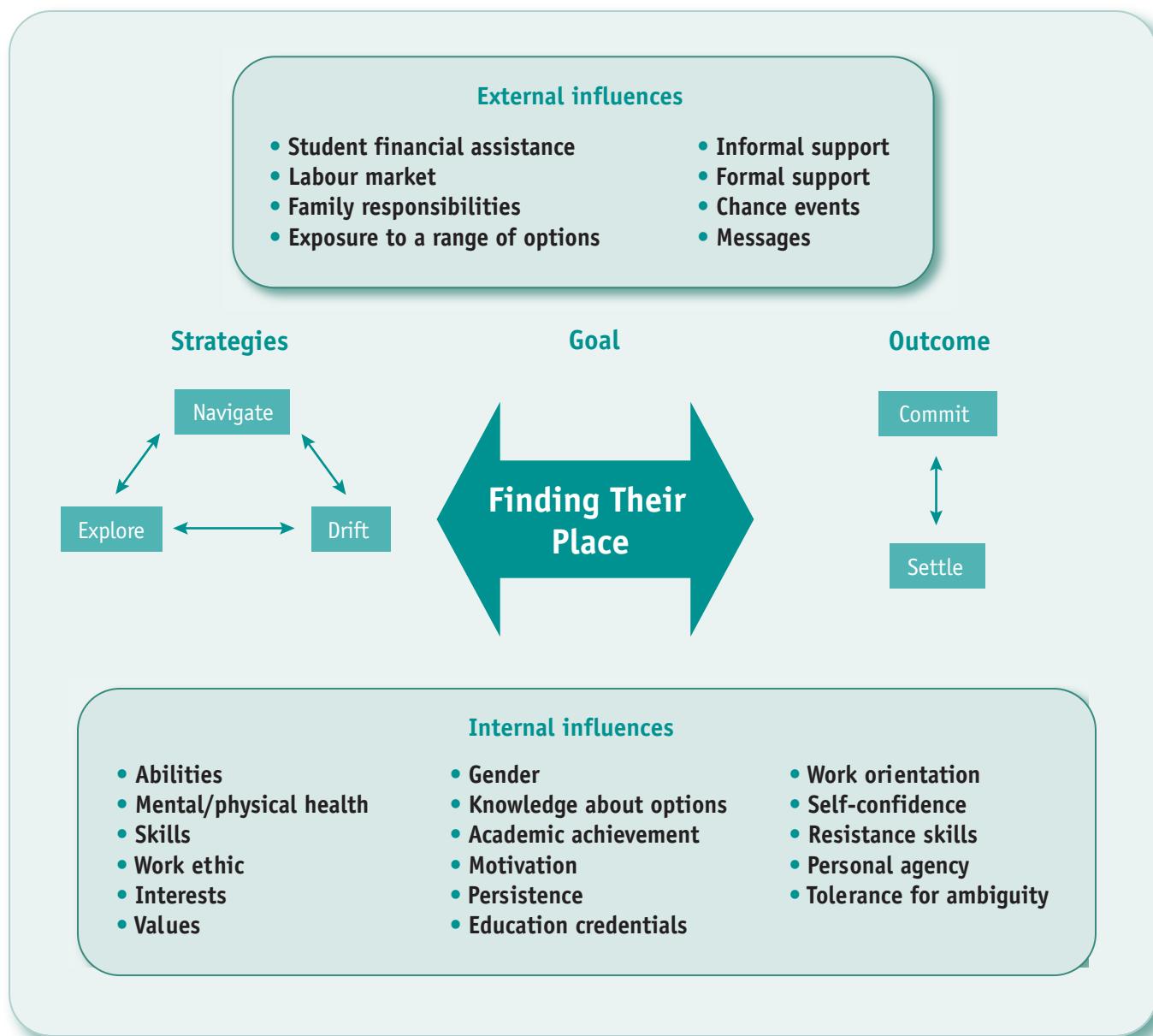
Self-Awareness

Participants varied in the degree of awareness they had of their interests, values, and abilities. For most participants, self-awareness grew over time as they were exposed

to a variety of education and work options.

Influence: Participants who had a good sense of their interests, values, and/or abilities had a reference point for making decisions. They seemed more likely to navigate toward post-secondary education programs or jobs that they found satisfying.

One 25-year-old participant from Halifax became aware of her interest in human rights and international development



through volunteer work she did in high school. This acted as a reference point for her deciding to participate in an international exchange program after graduating from high school:

It was an educational exchange program, so a lot of the focus was around cross-cultural learning, community development, leadership development, and that kind of stuff. I was just manifesting all of those desires and passions and skills. I think that first step was what led to the next thing and led to the next thing. Here I am now, with a great job working with youth from cross-cultural backgrounds.

Having some awareness of her interests and values made it possible for this participant to identify the exchange program as something that would be a good fit. Participating in the program confirmed her interests and values which in turn led her to seek out education and work opportunities that helped her to express them.

Academic Achievement

Our study included participants with a wide range of academic achievement. Some excelled in high school and post-secondary education, while others did poorly. For some participants, their academic performance appeared to be a reflection of their abilities; for others it was more a reflection of personal issues and motivation.

Influence: Academic achievement in high school and post-secondary programs greatly influenced the pathways taken by participants and the expectations that others had of what they would do. Some participants expressed frustration about being “pigeonholed” by their performance in high school. All too often, the information they received from guidance counsellors and parents and the critical messages they heard were related to their academic performance, rather than their interests or preferred learning style.

Many participants said that it was assumed they would go to university because they were “good” students in high school. Participants who were labelled as “poor” students said that they were expected to go to college or directly into the workforce. As a result, the “good” students were typically not given information about colleges or the trades, and poor performing students were not given information about universities.

Perry, a 28-year-old participant from Halifax, explained the different expectations that he experienced as a good student in high school compared to his friend who had been labelled a poor student:

I don't know if it's coming from a smaller school or what. At that time, if you went into the [pre-calculus] math class, then you were automatically supposed to go to university. There was no talk of trades or any other avenues at all. It was all “this is the way to go.”

I remember we had to choose a math course. It was either [my friend] was going to choose the academic math, or we used to call it “dummy math,” one plus one kind of stuff. He chose to take that one and I was like “why would you do that?” and he was like, “I just don't like it, I don't care, I know I can do the other, but I don't care.”

Then he took a free instead of taking French or gym class. So he took the bare bones and, of course, they told him to go to trade school. He went to take welding, or whatever, and dropped out of that. Now, he's got a psychology degree and he's working with at-risk youth.

Ironically, Perry's friend was encouraged to go into the trades for which he had no interest, while Perry was encouraged to go to university even though he preferred hands-on learning.



Academic achievement in university also influenced participants' subsequent involvement in post-secondary education and the opportunities that were available to them after graduation. Those participants who did well at university had many more choices available to them in regards to pursuing a professional or graduate program. Some participants who struggled with their university studies reported that they either dropped out or took a time-out. Others had to change their plans to pursue a particular occupation because of poor academic performance or they had to spend more time in university in order to improve their grades.

Education Credentials

Most participants in our sample, like young people their age nationally, had obtained a university degree or college diploma, or were in the process of doing so. The type of degree or diploma held by participants varied from those that were occupationally-specific such as accounting, office administration, or auto body to more general degrees such as a bachelor of arts or science. A minority of participants had either dropped out of post-secondary education or had never attended.

Influence: Some participants who did not have post-secondary credentials felt that it limited their options, while others did not. One 25-year-old from Prince Edward Island expressed his frustration with being locked out of jobs for which he thought he had the skills:

What's holding me back from doing what I want to do would be to have more certificates. Or education. Had I decided right after graduation that what I wanted to do was be a computer network technician, then I would have gone through and gotten all the certificates. The

only thing that's stopping me now is having a piece of paper that says I can do what I know I can do.

Not surprisingly, those who did not feel disadvantaged by not having post-secondary education were in occupations that did not require formal credentials. A 23-year-old entrepreneur from Guelph is illustrative:

I'm glad I never went to post-secondary education. A lot of people that I have met have spent more time doing that. While they were in school I was working full time. At the end, a lot of the people that I see, I'm more ahead than they are.

Participants with more occupationally-specific qualifications generally had an easier time finding satisfying work after graduation. However, some didn't like the work they were trained to do or could not get a job in their chosen field. Many participants with general arts and science degrees found it difficult to find satisfying work, either because they didn't know what kind of work they wanted to do or employers did not see them as being qualified. A 25-year-old political science graduate shared his experience with trying to find a job after completing his Bachelor of Arts degree:

I think that there is some kind of impression that it's just a stepping-stone, it's grade 13. I've often heard it referred to as that. After I finished my BA last year, I was looking for a job for the summer and I can remember employers saying "oh, that's just a BA," that it was just basically the same as a Grade 12 high school diploma.

Many participants with general arts and science degrees either returned to university or were considering going back to do professional or graduate degrees in order to increase their marketability.

Personal Attributes

There were many personal attributes that influenced the pathways taken by participants. Similar to Wendy Patton and Mary McMahon's systems-based theory that accounts for the multiple influences on career pathways, we found that attributes such as interests, values, skills, gender, mental and physical health, abilities, and disabilities influenced the pathways taken by participants.¹ Not surprisingly, participants also identified motivation, ambition,



determination, and work ethic as being important factors to the success of their educational and occupational pathways.

While there is not enough space to discuss the influence of all the personal attributes we have identified, there are five that appeared frequently in our research: self-confidence, sense of personal agency, work orientation, resistance skills, and tolerance for ambiguity.

Self-Confidence

For most participants, self-confidence was something that grew after they graduated from high school and as they experienced success in post-secondary education, the workplace, and through travel. In a few cases, participants' self-confidence was significantly diminished by poor academic results in post-secondary education or unsuccessful work experiences. Although they blamed themselves for their lack of success, it was often at least partially the result of poor supervision, unrealistic expectations, or not being properly trained.

Influence: For many participants, confidence in their academic abilities seemed to be a determining factor in their decision to go to post-secondary education immediately after high school. Many participants who did not do well academically in high school said that they never thought about going to university because they did not consider themselves capable of doing so. A 25-year-old from Prince

Edward Island with a bachelor's degree explained why she delayed starting university:

Now I want to go into social work; I'm going to apply for grad school next year. But at the time, I didn't do very well in high school: I had mediocre to low grades and I didn't enjoy school. Part of not wanting to go to university right away is I didn't think I could do it.

Working before enrolling in post-secondary education gave her the confidence to try university. She started by taking a few courses and, eventually, gained the confidence to take a full-course load.

Those who had their confidence shaken by a negative work experience were left wondering if they were capable of pursuing a career in their chosen field or sufficiently interested to continue. Tessa, a 25-year-old from Calgary, had aspired to a career as an art curator, but is not working in that field because her self-confidence was compromised by a supervisor who treated her disparagingly:

I had been working in an art gallery since I was about sixteen or seventeen. I started off in my home town while I was still in high school as a gallery assistant on the weekends and I was doing a co-op education program at the art gallery. So I had been working up to this for a long time and I thought it was my big break. I thought that it was me stepping out of university into my career.

It was only a one-year contract, but it turned out to be an absolute nightmare. My boss was abusive mentally and emotionally. So I left, maybe five months into my contract, and I haven't worked in the field of art since then. It was just a really bad start to my career. It severely impacted my confidence.

I went through a period of being extremely afraid to apply for any jobs in the art world, let alone talk to anybody from the art world. I just felt like she probably dragged me through the mud. I still don't know to this day if she has or not, although I've become more involved again. But it definitely had a major impact on my confidence and I think it really affected my aspiring career.

Five years after this unfortunate experience, Tessa is still trying to gain enough self-confidence to return to the art world.

Sense of Personal Agency

Participants varied in terms of the degree of personal agency (the power to direct their lives themselves) they exercised as they navigated their way through post-secondary education and into the workforce. Some resisted the expectations of others and pursued options they thought would be personally satisfying. Some passively did what was expected of them or chose educational programs or careers that were closest at hand. Still others took time off to figure out what they wanted to do.

An important form of personal agency exhibited by many participants was their ability to avoid or leave an education program or job when it became clear that it didn't fit their sense of where they belonged. Others exercised their personal agency by engaging in activities that would increase the likelihood they would be successful in their chosen educational or occupational pursuits. This included putting effort into their school work or jobs, or relocating to a place where there were better employment opportunities in the field for which they'd trained.

Influence: Personal agency helped participants to navigate towards promising options and to make corrections when it became clear that an educational program or job wasn't a good match. Jennifer, a 26-year-old who is now working in human resources, describes how she left a college program that didn't fit:

I decided that I wanted to go back to school. I actually went to a program at a college for about a month. It was a program for the visually impaired, so it would be more like rehabilitation and stuff like that. Then I decided I didn't like it, I guess it was four weeks or so.

I really liked the course work, but the practical side was just too much. When they were talking about what I would have to do, I'd be working with obviously, visually impaired people, which would be fine. But it would be out of my house and it's really hard to get a stable job out of that.

I didn't want to do it because I was looking for stability. So I decided to move away from there, which was hard, but it was a better decision for me I think.

Leaving the program was not an easy thing for Jennifer to do. There was a great deal of pressure from her parents and friends to “finish it off,” even if it wasn’t what she wanted to do. A month after leaving the program, Jennifer was hired by a temp agency that placed her in a human resources position based on previous work experience. By leaving an education program that didn’t fit, she was able to take a job that eventually led her into satisfying work as a human resource professional. In contrast, participants who stayed in unsatisfying education programs and jobs for long periods of time often ended up settling for a job they didn’t like.

In the busyness of going to school or doing a demanding job, participants said there was little room to gain any perspective on what was really important to them. Participants who took a time-out, either before or after attending post-secondary education, said that it provided

a much-needed opportunity to gain control of their career path. A 25-year-old referred to it as “deciding time”:

While I was in high school, I didn’t have a clue. I didn’t know what I really wanted. I needed to get outside the four walls of high school to find out how things really work, to find out if I wanted to buy a house, live in an apartment, have the same job, a bunch of jobs. Having some deciding time helps you figure these things out.

Work Orientation

Work orientation refers to whether a person considers his work to be a job, a career, or a calling.² People who view their work as a job are primarily concerned about the wage they are earning, rather than the work itself. Those who

view their work as a career value prestige, social status, and the power that comes with advancement in their careers. Those who see their work as a calling are less concerned about salary or status and more interested in finding jobs that are personally meaningful. We found examples of all three of these work orientations among the participants we interviewed.

Influence: Participants who viewed their work as a job stayed if that job provided good pay and job security, even if they didn’t particularly like it. Participants who placed a premium on meaningful work seemed to face a more complex and circuitous transition in the decade after high school. Like the 28-year-old employment counsellor who left a secure well-paying government job, participants seeking a vocation said they would not commit or settle for work they didn’t find meaningful.

My big thing was, and still is, and it’s going to be the death of me I swear, the never-ending quest for meaning in work. You know, I wanted to have something where a career meant getting out of bed in the morning, being excited to go to work and working hard, and feeling fulfilled doing that work.



I guess that quest for finding something that was meaningful someday was a bit of a motivating factor. I knew that there had to be something out there, which was what made me not want to settle for anything less. I think that's what kicked me into registering for the career development practitioner program. It was the case of this is something that I want to do, find that job that means something.

Some participants were torn between wanting job security and having meaningful work. They had a secure job that paid a good salary, but were unhappy because they were eager to do something else. They sometimes thought they should leave their jobs to follow their passion, but couldn't bring themselves to give up the security they had.

Resistance Skills

We have borrowed the concept of resistance skills from the positive youth development literature which uses the term to refer to a young person's ability to resist negative patterns of behaviour, like drug abuse or delinquency, in order to fit in with a peer group.³ In the context of this study, we define resistance skills as a young person's ability to resist the expectations of others (peers, parents, and community) when the wishes of others are in conflict with what the person wants to do him- or herself.

Participants varied in their ability to resist the expectations of others. While it was never easy, some were able to resist very powerful messages about what they should do. A minority were able to resist the expectations of significant others in their late teens, while others' resistance skills grew as they progressed through their twenties. One of the most common strategies participants used was to control the flow of information. They often made plans without telling their parents and only told them once their plan was in place. Another common strategy was to enlist the support of family members, friends, and others who encouraged them to pursue their desired plans.

Influence: The ability to resist the expectations of others was critical for participants whose goals were not compatible with those of significant others. It gave some the courage to leave education programs that didn't fit even when other people were encouraging them to "just finish it" and others to leave "good jobs" when they were being pressured to stay.

A 28-year-old participant who is a successful hair stylist said that hairdressing was his dream when he graduated



from high school. However, his parents wanted him to go to university. He completed his undergraduate degree to "pacify" his parents, but was able to resist their expectations that he continue on to take a master's degree in public administration:

My father was a foreman; he didn't want me having a trade. He wanted me to have an education and master's program. The scariest thing ever is to go against my parents' wishes. I think I whispered to my aunt, this is what I wanted to do, and she encouraged me. Then she got hold of my older sister and we were able to keep it low and not tell anyone. I wasn't happy for four years at university. I felt like I was treading water and not going anywhere. But, as soon as I was done university and was able to take a course that I wanted to take, that was the best part.

When asked where he might be if he hadn't been able to resist his parents' expectations, he said, "I would have been in Ottawa somewhere, probably pushing papers or having a boring life."

Tolerance for Ambiguity

The process of finding their place was an inherently uncertain one for most participants.

Whether they navigated, explored, or drifted towards post-secondary education programs and jobs, there was little assurance that it would all work out. Some were quite comfortable with this ambiguity, while others tried to keep it at bay. Those who were able to tolerate ambiguity were typically optimistic about their future. A 29-year-old participant typified this confidence when she said that, despite her uncertainty about what her future held, whatever happened she had faith that it “will take her somewhere great.”

Participants’ optimism often seemed to be connected to trusting their feelings or something outside of themselves. A 24-year-old participant said that, when she moved home to weigh her options rather than going to graduate school, she was sure that it was the right thing to do:

I really trust my intuition about things. I feel like I should be living here for some reason. I can’t tell you why, but I feel like there’s something, something’s going to happen here.

Others felt that there was someone or something guiding them. For some, they felt that this guidance came from God, while others were not specific about what they thought the source was. One 25-year-old participant said:

It’s just like one thing led to the next. There’s been periods of time where I have felt very confused and have no idea where I’m going. Then all of a sudden something comes to me. It feels like there’s somebody just handing things to me.

Influence: Participants’ tolerance for ambiguity impacted on their comfort level with staying in what they perceived to be uncertain situations. Those who were not as comfortable with uncertainty seemed to be more inclined to rush into taking an education program or job. For example, some took a graduate or professional degree that they weren’t particularly interested in because it gave them a sense that they were moving forward.

One 23-year-old said that her plan had been to do a Master’s degree in clinical psychology immediately after her undergraduate work. She was not accepted to the program and was so uncomfortable with uncertainty that

the following year she applied to four different psychology programs, including one in experimental psychology that she had no interest in. When asked if she would have taken that program had she not been accepted into a clinical program, she said:

After not getting into a grad program the first time, there was no way I was taking the chance of not being in school. Getting into any program was better than not being in school.

Participants who had a higher tolerance for ambiguity appeared to be able to take what a participant referred to as the “leap of faith” that is often necessary in leaving post-secondary education programs and jobs that don’t fit. One 26-year-old said:

When I decided that religious studies was the thing that I wanted to do rather than chemistry, there was a big question for me about security. Do I take chemistry where I know I’m going to have security? Or do I take this path of the unknown, insecurity, not knowing what I’m going to do? That’s when I made that decision that following what I want to do is more important than security.

Summary

In this chapter, we have outlined a wide range of internal influences. These, combined with the external influences discussed in the next chapter, can constrain or facilitate the pathways taken by young people.

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1. Wendy Patton and Mary McMahon, *Career Development and Systems Theory: A New Relationship* (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1999).
 2. Amy Wrzesniewski, Clark McCauley, Paul Rozin, and Barry Schwartz, “Jobs, Careers, and Callings: People’s Relations to Their Work,” *Journal of Research in Personality*, 31, Issue 1, (1997), 21-33.
 3. Peter L. Benson, in Richard M. Lerner and Peter L. Benson, eds, *Developmental Assets and Asset-Building Communities: Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice* (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2003), 19-46.

The Impact of External Influences and Messages

I told my mother I wanted to be a mechanic when I was in Grade 8 or Grade 9 and she cried.

— 23-year-old participant from Guelph

In the previous chapter, we discussed the internal influences that impacted the pathways taken by participants. In this chapter, we will look at the external sources of supports, assistance, and opportunities that participants either had or did not have and how that facilitated or constrained their career decision making. We will also examine the power of messages from both external sources and one's own inner critic to persuade or dissuade participants from pursuing career paths.

External Influences

Financing Post-Secondary Education

Money factors into young people's educational decisions as never before. Youth know that satisfactory labour market attachment depends on increasing amounts of post-secondary education. They also know that education is getting more and more expensive. For many participants, therefore, the availability of financial assistance has become a primary determining factor in the choice of education program, institution, and number of years one can attend. Some participants' families were able to pay for all or most of their children's education, but many families were not in a position to help. In many cases, participants paid most, if not all, the costs by working and/or taking out student loans.

Influence: The availability of financial support skewed career paths in several ways. A number of participants opted not to attend post-secondary education because of the debt they would accumulate. Others deferred post-

secondary education until they could save enough to cover their expenses.

Those who financed their own educations usually worked while studying, sometimes holding down two or three jobs at the same time. Carrying a full course load and holding



down a job resulted in lower grade point averages for some participants which, in turn, limited their ability to get into graduate and professional programs.

A number of participants who accrued significant student debt, but weren't sure what they would do with a degree, chose to leave their program of study before completion. Others with large debt loads who were ineligible or unwilling to extend their student loans were unable to acquire further credentials they believed were necessary to get a good job.

Those burdened with high levels of debt seemed to have less flexibility in the workforce. Some felt they had to take the best paying jobs, rather than the most interesting ones, or the ones with long-term potential. Roz, a 28-year-old from Guelph who is working in marketing in the private sector, detailed the impact on her career path of having to finance her own education and repay the ensuing \$40,000 debt:

Finances is probably the biggest barrier because you make your decisions not just based on what you think is right, but what you can afford. I may not have went the corporate route. I may have went a more social work route, but they didn't pay for their co-ops. So I think finances impact a lot of my decisions.

I've got a second job waitressing now, where I could be taking this great volunteer leadership program. It is a twelve-month program with different professionals from the public/private [sectors]. They come together to do monthly courses on board governance or project management. There's about 30 people in the class, and you work on a project for the community and then it's a big network. I'm hopefully going to do this program, but I may have to defer it because right now my priority is to pay down some of these loans.



Labour Market

The strength of the labour market influenced the variety and availability of jobs for participants. A strong labour market allowed young people to save towards financial goals, pay down debt, and access opportunities through which they could pursue their career aspirations. Participants living in the boom economies of Calgary and Guelph had easier access to well-paying jobs than those in Halifax and Prince Edward Island. In Calgary especially, participants could find work that provided a substantial standard of living that facilitated further education, travel or entrepreneurship.

Influence: Opportunity structures related to job markets

shape the relationship between post-secondary education and employment. In more robust economic conditions with a shortage of workers (such as Calgary), fewer credentials and less job experience were sometimes required to obtain a good job. In the more economically depressed Maritimes, higher demands for advanced credentials and more on-the-job experience were, according to participants, barriers to obtaining good jobs. However, underemployment still seemed to be an issue for some participants living in Calgary who graduated with general arts and science degrees. In all four survey sites, those with professional degrees and trades or vocational certifications were less likely to be underemployed.

Exposure to a Range of Options

Participants who successfully found a place where they felt satisfied career-wise often spoke about a range of educational and occupational experiences to which they had been exposed. These experiences acted as catalysts that helped them figure out where their interests and abilities lay and, just as importantly, what they didn't want to do. Exposure occurred in a number of ways including high school and/or post-secondary education courses, work internships, paid employment, volunteer positions, extracurricular activities, and through contact with people

who were engaged in a range of different activities. It also included being exposed vicariously through observing and listening to the experiences of family members and friends.

Influence: The wider the range of experiences, the less time and money it tended to take for participants to find a suitable place for themselves. Experiences are related one to another, with chance encounters and the serendipity of opportunity combining to shape career choices. One 23-year-old who owns a marketing business shared how he became aware of his interest in being an entrepreneur:

I've always liked business and I started out with an entrepreneurship class in high school. Through that class, one of our field trips was to a business enterprise centre. I love that place. The government had something that they called the Summer Company Program. I went through that just to see if I would really like to get into business. I did it for the summer and I loved it, loved being my own boss.

A 28-year-old who is now a counsellor described the experience that changed her mind about pursuing veterinary medicine. She loved animals, but quickly realized that taking care of badly injured animals was not for her:

I had decided at a very young age that I was going to be a veterinarian. I worked for a vet for a while when I was in early high school and it was just a train wreck. It was a good way to determine I didn't want to do it.

Socioeconomic status seems to play a significant role in what a young person is exposed to. Youth from middle-class families seemed more likely to have taken music lessons, been enrolled in sports programs, travelled, and attended university than participants who grew up in working-class families. Growing up in a rural community also seemed to have limited the amount of exposure participants had to career-related experiences. In particular, smaller high schools did not provide the range of courses available at urban schools, and rural youth were less likely than urban youth to encounter people in a wide range of occupations.



Information and Guidance from Professionals

The majority of participants recounted stories of making post-secondary and occupational decisions knowing very little about their chosen path or any alternatives. Some participants sought career information and guidance from teachers, post-secondary education instructors, and high school and post-secondary counsellors. Especially if they were good students, high school counsellors and teachers tended to advise participants to attend university without a full exploration of alternative career and education pathways. Students who were weaker academically were given information about colleges, trades, or no information at all. Most participants reported receiving little, if any, information during high school about specific occupations that could be of interest to them.

Those who went to university sometimes talked to individual professors about future career goals. Not surprisingly, the information they received was most often limited to the professor's own subject area. The most common information they received related to graduate school. Participants who attended college programs received more assistance from their instructors. Information tended to relate most to the types of employment prospects associated with the training they were taking.



Few participants received occupation-related information or career guidance from a high school or post-secondary counsellor. Some sought out help from a counsellor to deal with the stress of attending post-secondary education.

Influence: The collected narratives suggest that, with even a minimal amount of guidance, participants might have found their place sooner than later. A 29-year-old participant said that she didn't seek out guidance while she was in high school or university because her plan was to go into medicine. When she didn't get into medical school, she had no idea what else to do:

I needed someone to help me in the right direction. Maybe that's why I did my travelling and working at different types of jobs for as long as I did because I was trying to discover that for myself. My family couldn't guide me and say, "You're really good at this, why don't you go back to school and do this." Not to put blame on them, it's just they didn't really have the knowledge to say, "You have a biology degree, this is what you should do with it." Nobody in my family were science people. So I think I needed that guidance from somewhere completely different. Not having that, I needed to go off and find out who I was.

The few participants who received guidance from a career professional said that they found it helpful when counsellors explored with them whether their education and career choices were a good fit with their skills and interests, or pointed them in the direction of a promising alternative. A 25-year-old who is happily employed with an auto parts

company described how his high school guidance counsellor helped him find a suitable path:

In my last year at high school I didn't really know what I wanted to do. I became interested in business and business administration and I can remember the moment I went in and saw my guidance counsellor. I went through some tests and my guidance counsellor was able to see the sort of things that I was interested in. She had a student the year before who had gone to this program and the student said that they really liked the program. It was a match with some of my interests and so she recommended it to me. I didn't just go ahead and jump into it. I went to a couple of the open houses at the college and got a feel for it. I was really interested and decided to pursue it.

It is unlikely that he would have been able to navigate so directly to a suitable program without someone helping him to translate his interests and connect them to an appropriate educational option.

Information and Support from Non-Professionals

Participants cited non-professionals such as family members, friends, and employers as being beneficial sources of information, advice, and encouragement. Not surprisingly, parents who had attended college or university were able to provide their children with more guidance about post-secondary education than those who had not. In a number of cases, friends and older siblings were cited as important sources of information in regards to post-secondary education programs, occupations, and job opportunities. Occasionally, participants mentioned employers who had mentored them. Few received guidance about choosing an occupation beyond "do what makes you happy."

Most participants said they had also received strong encouragement and emotional support from their families, partners, and friends. Several participants cited self-help and "positive mindset" books as important sources of incentive and support. Emotional support can be felt most



by its absence. Participants who lacked emotional support because of the death or emotional withdrawal of their parents reported lower self-confidence and a lack of motivation to pursue post-secondary education.

Influence: Our interview with Angie, a 24-year-old, illustrates how having emotional support from a variety of sources can help a student get through university:

I had a terrible roommate in first year. We didn't get along. I shouldn't say she was terrible. We had a terrible relationship and it really affected everything. From my grades to my outlook, I was ready to drop out, I was ready to come home.

My parents were excellent: they would turn up on a week night, when I was in tears. They were very supportive in that way. They would come and get me and bring me home on weekends. My boyfriend at the time, now husband, was excellent. He would drop everything and turn up at the drop of a hat if I needed him and would encourage me in any way possible. It helped that he thinks I'm the smartest person on the planet. I'm not sure where he gets that idea, but it sure helped. And my brother too: I talked a lot with my brother. He was one year ahead of me so he'd been through everything before me. He was incredibly supportive and helpful.

A number of participants said that the information they received from friends, family members, and employers at a critical juncture in their career path significantly

influenced the direction they took. A 26-year-old who is a youth minister described how friends helped him make a radical career shift:

I started off in the chemistry program and was doing the work, I was doing well at it. But I woke up one night in a cold sweat, thinking that I was going to be a chemist for the rest of my life. I thought I was locked into this program for the next four years. I was relaying this story to somebody and they're like, "well, why don't you just switch programs?" It's like, you can do that? Another friend who was in physics suggested religious studies and I was thinking about music. So I went and found out the information about all those programs.

While knowledge about an option increased the likelihood that it would be suitable, it was not a guarantee. A number of participants were exposed to an education program or occupation prior to starting it, but discovered later that it was not as enjoyable as they'd originally expected, or it was difficult to find a job in the field for which they'd trained. All too common was the experience of a 28-year-old human service worker who took an office administration program immediately after graduating from high school:

My family comes from a strong background in business and I felt this is what I'd really like to do. It turned out, when I finished, I didn't want what I had chosen, it wasn't me. I'm not a person to sit behind a desk, like to type. I shouldn't say that: I don't mind it, but I want to be out there, actually hands on and helping people because that's who I really am.

Family Responsibilities

A young person may have family responsibilities that include domestic duties, child care, elder care, or looking after ill family members. Many participants were married or in a common-law relationship by their mid-to-late twenties. A sizeable minority had children. Some had taken on these responsibilities in their late teens or early twenties, while most had waited until they were in their mid-twenties or older. A few were caring for parents, grandparents, or siblings.



Influence: Family responsibilities seemed to constrain the process of finding a place for some participants, while being facilitative for others. Many participants said that, once they were in a serious relationship, they needed to factor into their plans their partner's needs. It might, for example, be necessary to pass up a good job opportunity or attendance at a university of their choice if their partner was unwilling to relocate. Financial responsibilities such as a mortgage could tie a young person to a particular employer, whether the job was well-chosen or not.

Having children, in particular, had a significant impact on what participants did, especially women. Female participants were more likely to report having left the workforce completely or cut their work back to part time to accommodate the demands of family. Conversely, some male participants said they felt the need to take the best-paying job possible, even when they preferred to do something else, in order to support their family.

The experience of having children was facilitative for some. A number of women said that having children had acted as a catalyst for them to go back to school and increase their professional credentials. They wanted a career in which they could feel proud and from which they could support their families. A 26-year-old from Prince Edward Island described how having children impacted her career path:

If I didn't have my children, I do not believe that I would be a resident care worker. I actually didn't mind working at housecleaning or whatever. It made the difference because I thought I am out slaving and working and this just isn't going to pay off. And my kids deserve more. So I think that was basically the driving force.

Chance Events

An element of serendipity was present in the career discovery experiences of most participants. Having a passion for a particular academic subject area often had as much to do with the instructor as with the course material. A 28-year-old environmental scientist said that her original plan was to go into emergency medicine. In the second year of her studies, she was dreading taking a required ecology course because the professor was known to be terrible.

Luckily for her, the regular professor was on sabbatical leave that year and a dynamic replacement teacher brought ecology to life for her. It is doubtful she would have switched into environmental science without having had such a positive experience.

Similarly, participants often said that the way they found out about the education program or occupation they chose was through a friend or family member's casual comment. Some talked about "falling into a job" that ended up being what they wanted to do. Illustrative of this is a 28-year-old who graduated with a math degree and discovered that she wanted to be a pastry chef while doing a time-out stint as a stewardess on a yacht in the Mediterranean.

I like to cook and bake. I have a bit of an artistic side to me I certainly didn't utilize in my education. I've always liked the artistic side, especially cooking. There's a bit of a science to it as well. What happened was, the head chef was not getting along with anyone that they put in to be his second chef. Since I'd been working on board for eight months, they knew that I got along with him quite well. It was more important to find someone to get along with him than it was to find somebody with the experience because he could train somebody. That's what I volunteered to do.

She is currently researching the possibility of starting her own small business. She would like to open a high end specialty cake business catering to clientele like the ones she served on the yacht.

Messages

The most common message that participants heard after high school was that they were expected to continue their studies at college or university. Many said that going to post-secondary education wasn't really a choice. It was assumed to be the next step after high school. It's worthwhile noting, however, that this expectation was talked about more by participants in the Maritimes (a low opportunity labour market) than in Calgary (a high opportunity labour market). It was less prevalent among participants whose parents did not attend post-secondary education themselves and among participants who had done poorly in high school.

Participants also heard strong messages about their career choices. Parents who were professionals themselves often expected their children to go into white collar jobs. Parents with lesser amounts of education or those who were in blue collar jobs seemed to be more accepting of their children considering career choices that did not have as much status. Participants who pursued occupations in the arts often felt that their parents, and society in general, disapproved of their choices. As one participant quipped, "People love music, but they hate musicians."

Influence: Messages had a strong influence both on what participants did and how they felt about what they were

doing. Many participants said that attending college or university was not their choice, but rather something others assumed they would do. A 25-year-old from Halifax explained how he, like most people he knew, went to university because that was what was expected of him:

I feel like a bunch of people just go to university. It's not really their decision to go—it is their decision to go, they can say no, but the majority of people won't. I didn't. None of my friends did. Your parents want you to go, so you just do it. You're only like seventeen, eighteen, you're still a kid. You don't even know if you know how to say "no" to your parents.

Most did not regret going to university or college because it gave them a chance to grow up and learn about themselves. But, the fact that it was not a personal choice meant that many participants were not motivated to succeed or enrolled in a program that was not a good fit. A lack of interest meant that they were likely to be distracted from their studies (by their friends or significant others, jobs, video games, music, or other leisure or extracurricular activities) which resulted in poor grades that sometimes complicated future career decisions.

Participants who chose to pursue careers in the arts seemed particularly prone to receiving disapproving remarks. A participant from Calgary moved to Toronto to continue her career as an actress. She said that she was told repeatedly by her in-laws to get a "real job." She eventually complied and spent two "miserable" years working as an administrative assistant at a bank. Amid the criticism, she came to believe herself that being an actress was not a good thing to be.



Some participants continued on their path in the arts and music fields despite being criticized by others. However, it was not easy for them. They often had doubts about whether or not they were doing the right thing. One 29-year-old musician said that, despite her passion for performing, it was a constant struggle to convince herself that it was a worthwhile thing to do. Every few months she would feel that she should be doing something more "productive." Another



aspiring musician described what he did to placate those around him:

I applied to go to the community college, like two or three times. I got in, but I didn't go because I didn't want to go. The reason I was applying, I didn't know it at the time, but it was to pacify my mother because she wanted to see me do something.

Many participants said that they did or could have benefited from a time-out before, during, or after completing post-secondary education. One of the primary benefits cited was that it would have given them an opportunity to figure out what they wanted to do. However, many reported that taking a time-out was frowned upon, particularly if it lasted for any length of time. This was especially true for those who wanted to take a time-out immediately after high school. The message was that, if they didn't continue on to post-secondary education immediately after high school, they may never go. While travelling for a brief time after graduating from a post-secondary program was often encouraged, taking any length of time outside of school to figure out what they wanted to do was not.

Stephanie, a 25-year-old participant who is now working in publishing, decided to take a break after finishing her Bachelor of Arts degree. She was feeling pressure to continue with a professional or graduate program, but she was unsure about what she wanted to do. Stephanie

describes how her friends and family reacted to her opting to work in retail instead:

I was literally having people call me and say, "You need to leave, you're wasting your time, I always thought that you would amount to something." Like friends say this to me. My parents at first, you know, "You're living with us and you don't have any money, it's okay. You worked really hard and you did well in school so it's okay. Don't worry about it."

But that turned into, "When are you going to pull it together and go back to school?" My dad, especially, was pretty disappointed when I didn't write the LSATs. They're very supportive but, at the same time, they want me to do well. And I think they were very worried that I would suddenly do nothing with my life. So there was a push there: my dad's very much, "You should have a professional degree."

Fortunately, she resisted these powerful messages. She took the time to engage in career counselling and took a portfolio course that helped her realize that the publishing industry would be a good fit. But many are not able to resist.

Summary

External factors and messages influenced how participants went about finding a place and the quality of the place they found. Taken in combination with the internal influences discussed in Chapter Three, the presence of so many unpredictable and complex influences illustrates the absurdity of trying to get high school students to make definite plans about their future.

Pulling It Together

I'm thirty years old and I've had a good run. It's time to be an adult.

∞ 30-year-old participant from Calgary

In the previous two chapters, we discussed the process by which participants found a place and the influences that impacted on their pathways. For the sake of clarity, the strategies, outcomes, and influences were discussed primarily in isolation to one another. By doing so, we are in danger of losing the most important finding of the study: the exploration strategies, outcomes, and influences interact with and inform one another in complex and unpredictable ways.

In this chapter, we present a case study that illustrates how one participant moved back and forth between exploration strategies and outcomes and was influenced by different factors to varying degrees at different points along her career path.

Drifting

Megan had “no dreams, no goals, and no plans” when she graduated from high school. Her high school years were difficult. She was bullied both emotionally and physically and did poorly academically. She had no friends and was “socially handicapped” when she graduated. Her experience in school left her with little confidence: she believed herself to be incapable of doing anything beyond working on a road crew or an assembly line. One of the few positive things Megan had in her life during high school was the emotional support of her mother and step-father. As she put it, they “built me up after I would come home everyday in a puddle” and constantly told her not to “let ‘them’ win.”

She hadn't planned to go on to post-secondary education after high school because of her poor marks and lack of confidence. However, her mother was adamant that she gain skills that would make her self-sufficient.

Megan had no idea what interested her so her mother decided that a computer support technician program would

be a good fit with her personality. Megan's mother took matters into her own hands, making phone calls and going down to the community college in late August to see about getting her registered for the program. Despite there being a waiting list, her mother persuaded the college to accept her and paid her tuition.

Megan wasn't particularly interested in the program, nor did she think she was capable of doing it. She agreed, however, to give it a try because she believed that there were no other options open to her.

Upon graduation I didn't know what I was going to do. I thought maybe about going back to high school for a year, but my mother said you've got to do something. Through some lucky phone calling, my mother managed to get me into a program at the community college. I at least could feed myself and that was the plan. I actually would have some sort of a job.

Most of her classmates were older than Megan and they offered her support and encouragement. Much to her surprise, she excelled in the program. Her success increased her self-confidence to the point that she was able to consider applying for jobs in her field. Graduates in previous years had had a hard time finding good paying jobs, but she was fortunate enough to be graduating when a new call centre was recruiting in her community. She accepted a job offer from the company, believing it was the best job available to her.

Settling

Although she didn't like the work at the call centre, Megan viewed it as a career because it was considered “the place to work” in her community.



I thought that I was lucky enough to get into the community college and now I've got a career. I figured I was done. At the time it was a horrible job. I hated it, I was upset, became stressed out. But, as a kid eighteen years old clearing \$1,500 every two weeks, that was a lot of money and I thought I was on top of the world.

The call centre job proved to be instrumental in Megan's personal growth. She said that "it provided a protected environment where I could recover from high school." She developed a group of supportive friends who "coaxed her out of her shell." They even introduced her to the man who would later become her husband.

Megan excelled at dealing with angry call centre customers who regularly took their frustration out on whoever was on the other end of the phone. She attributed her ability to deal with the abuse to the "tough skin" she had developed from years of being bullied in high school. Her supervisors praised her skills and hard work, and her confidence grew from the positive feedback:

I developed huge confidence. I had no confidence before I worked at the call centre: I was shy, I was very reserved. When I walked away, I was confident, nothing can faze me, I'm bulletproof.

But after four years Megan had become frustrated. Despite being the most qualified candidate for a promotion, she was overlooked for the job. Her supervisor told her that she was too young to be supervising employees so much older than her.

I was overlooked because of my age constantly. Everybody said that I should be promoted, I was top notch and I really do believe I was excelling at what I was

doing. But a 40-year-old didn't want to listen to a 20-year-old. I could never get a promotion, I could never move up, I could never advance even though my record and my skills showed that I should be doing it. I had that kind of pull: everybody treated me as a supervisor, but they were never going to promote me because of my age. They'd always give it to somebody older, more mature.

Three months after being passed up yet again for a promotion, a co-worker told her that "you're too good for this place" and suggested that she consider going to university. Megan "laughed" because she believed that it was impossible to go to university with her low high school marks. Her co-workers informed her that she could apply as a mature student.

Megan discovered that she could try out some university courses in spite of her poor high school academic performance. She took an English course and found it easier than she had expected.

Encouraged by her success, she enrolled in a bachelor of science program because she thought her interests might lay in one of the health care professions. Megan continued to work at the call centre full time in order to support herself while going to school.

Exploring

Once in university, Megan volunteered at the hospital to get a better sense of which health care profession might interest her most. She considered massage therapy and physiotherapy, but her mother was against her choices because she mistakenly associated the occupations with working in a massage parlor. In retrospect, Megan thought that these occupations may have been a good fit, but she did not pursue them because of her mother's resistance.

In the summer of her second year, she had the good fortune of getting into a government-sponsored program designed to expose students to a range of health care professions. It was here that she became interested in becoming a physician.

Her first two years at university were challenging as she acclimatized to academic life, at the same time maintaining a full-time job. On top of that, she struggled with health issues. Several times Megan considered quitting and settling for working at the call centre. A professor explained to her



that the first two years were a “weeding out” process and that it would be easier in third and fourth year. This encouragement, combined with her husband’s support, kept her going.

I wanted to quit. I really wanted to give up, I didn’t want to do it anymore and he told me that I just couldn’t give up. He helped me see that I could do more than I give myself credit for.

At the end of third year, Megan planned to continue to work at the call centre and volunteer at the hospital. On a whim, she applied for and got a summer job as an environmental field worker through a government internship program. It was an area she knew little about, but quickly found that she both enjoyed and was good at it. Megan was offered a full-time contract position in government after she graduated.

Do I Settle or Navigate?

After working in government for two years, Megan felt that she was at a crossroads. Her job had become routine and “stale.” The work she wanted to do required graduate studies. With a PhD, there would be “limitless opportunities” and she “could write her own ticket” in environmental science. Unfortunately her funding for graduate school fell through.

Megan’s interest in medicine had also resurfaced after a family member underwent treatment for a serious illness.

She had been told by three Canadian medical schools that her work experience would make her a strong candidate, but she would need to improve her grade point average in order to be competitive. Megan estimated that it would take two years of course work to be able to compete against other candidates.

She found it “devastating” not to have the required marks. She thought that working full time and having research experience would count for more, but discovered that one’s grade point average was the main criterion medical schools consider. By working full time, she had not

only hurt her chances of getting into medical school, but also of being “at the front of the line” in terms of graduate school. If she had known, Megan said that she would have focused more on school and less on work.

Megan had turned 30 shortly before she was contacted for a follow-up interview. Her outlook was undergoing another shift. She and her husband were hoping to start a family in the next few years. Still interested in medical or graduate school, Megan was seeing her options “starting to slip away.” It was a case of “panic time, do it now or never.” Her husband was supportive of whatever she chose to do, but Megan wanted to be a “devoted mother” that stayed at home while her children were pre-schoolers.

She was feeling torn between the options in front of her. In her view, staying in her present job was “selling out” because it was not something she found challenging or rewarding. On the other hand, she was hesitant to quit because the job offered good benefits, including maternity leave. She also thought that going to graduate or medical school would be a financial strain on her family, at least in the short term.

When asked about how she will decide either to settle in her job or to navigate toward medicine or a PhD, Megan said that she had confidence that “hints” would be given to her and that it would become clear about what to do.



Megan's Points of Transition

Megan's story illustrates some of the key points of transition in which participants moved from one exploration strategy and outcome to another. Her lack of confidence and low marks left her feeling that she was incapable of doing anything. She drifted into a program at the community college because she believed there were no other options.

Her success in the program gave her enough confidence to apply for a job at the call centre. This, combined with the good fortune of graduating at the time the call centre was recruiting staff, allowed her to get a job that paid well. Once she had the job, Megan moved from being a Drifter to a Settler. If the call centre had not been hiring, she would likely have ended up in jobs that paid little more than minimum wage. This may have led her to drift from one job to another.

Megan viewed her job at the call centre as a career because she didn't think there were any other options. At that time, she considered a health profession "was not in her range." However, by the time her co-workers suggested she contemplate university, much had changed. The disillusionment with being passed up for a promotion, combined with an increase in her internal and external resources, set the stage for Megan to consider moving from being a Settler to an Explorer.

The confidence Megan had gained in her abilities on the job and the support she had received from her mother, step-father, and workplace friends provided the emotional safety net that allowed her to take a chance and try university. It is important to note that Megan said that she might very well still be at the call centre if she had received the promotion. As well, she may very well have moved from an Explorer back to a Settler had she not been encouraged by her husband and her professor to stick with her university studies.

At the time of the follow-up interview, Megan was on the threshold of moving from an Explorer to a Settler or Navigator. During the initial interview, she was focused on her growing self-awareness and exploring what kind of work she would find most satisfying. She was gearing up to go back to graduate school and considering the possibility of eventually applying to medical school.

Turning 30 changed her perspective. There was a sense that the time for exploration was running out and that she needed to make a decision. Now Megan's attitude was, "I would love to do medicine, but it involves such a big chunk of time." Had Megan not needed to commit two years to improving her marks for admission to medical school, she may very well have chosen to navigate towards medicine. She is now in the unfortunate position of knowing what she wants to do, at the same time feeling that it is time to move into a "family phase."

Shifting Places

Megan's career search trajectory illustrates the fluid nature of the strategies that young people utilize and the outcomes they reach as they seek to find a meaningful place. No matter what point a young person is at, more than likely it will change over time. Almost inevitably there will be movement as new events (planned or unexpected) occur and as resources (internal or external) grow or diminish.

The points of transition that we found in our research are summarized as follows:

Navigators

May become:

Committers as they learn more about the realities of what they are navigating toward and realize it is a good fit.

Settlers, *Drifters*, or *Explorers* as they learn more about the realities of what they are navigating toward and realize it doesn't fit with their goals.

Drifters or *Explorers* if a lack of internal or external resources make their chosen career path inaccessible (e.g. debt, low marks, family responsibilities, or not being able to find a job in their field).

Explorers

May become:

Navigators if they find an education or career path that they believe will be satisfying.

Drifters or *Navigators* if they become frustrated with not finding a suitable path or overwhelmed with the number of choices available.

Settlers if they are not able to determine what they want to do or if they take on family responsibilities that require them to stay in a job that they don't enjoy.

Settlers if they do not have the internal or external resources to pursue their preferred career option.

Drifters

May become:

Navigators if they bump into an education program or work that interests them.

Explorers if they gain more internal or external resources or if they become so frustrated by the education programs or jobs they find themselves in that they choose to exercise more personal agency over their choices.

Settlers if they are not able to determine what they want to do or if they take on family responsibilities that require them to stay in a job that they don't particularly enjoy.

Settlers

May become:

Explorers or *Drifters* if they are laid off or begin to find their job intolerable.

Navigators or *Explorers* if they are encouraged to examine their interests and abilities for perhaps the first time.

Committers

May become:

Explorers, *Drifters*, *Navigators* or *Settlers* if they lose their jobs or start to find their work less satisfying.

Navigators if they find work that they prefer.

Settlers if they have to take a better paying, but less satisfying job because of family responsibilities.

Summary

Megan's story provides an example of how the strategies young people use and the outcomes they achieve often change over time. Shifting took place as new events occurred and resources grew or diminished.

Promoting Positive Career Transitions With Youth

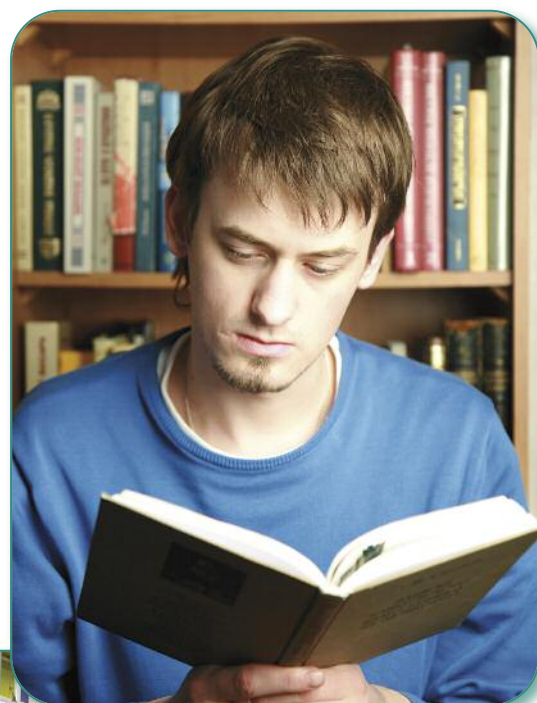
It would have been nice to sit down with someone and have them ask, “What are you really good at, what do you really like to do, where do you see yourself in the years after graduation?”

∞ 29-year-old participant from Halifax

Many participants in the study said that they could have benefited from career guidance. This opinion is similar to what Kris Magnusson and Kerry Bernes found when they surveyed the career planning needs of 7000 junior and senior high school students in Alberta. Of those surveyed, 70% expressed a need for additional support with their career planning.¹ This chapter outlines what our study found in terms of the assistance that young people need after high school graduation in order to make effective transitions into post-secondary education and/or the workplace.

Present a range of educational options in a way that they are equally valued

A key finding of the study was that most participants had a limited view of the post-secondary options that were available to them when they graduated from high school. In some cases, this was due to a lack of information. They simply didn't know that it was possible to take anything at university beyond a bachelor of arts or science degree. Some participants were limited by the expectations of others. If they were “good” students, it was assumed they would go to university; if their academic performance was weaker, they were expected to go to college, into trades training, or not go to post-secondary education at all. University is not a good fit for



all young people who do well in high school, nor is college or the trades suitable for everyone who doesn't do as well.

All high school graduates, whatever their academic standing should be made aware of the multitude of post-secondary options both in the university and college system. Students with high marks should know that many college programs are both challenging and offer good job prospects. Students who have not done well academically in high school should be aware of the existence of “second chance” opportunities for returning to learning. Academic upgrading programs in many communities and post-secondary education institutions offer young adults the chance to upgrade their high school marks, gain missing prerequisite courses, and build their confidence as a precursor to enrolling in college or university.

It can be challenging for career professionals to stay on top of post-secondary education offerings as programs continually change in response to the labour market. The more knowledge you have about the programs offered, the better equipped you will be to apply a young person's interests and abilities into promising post-secondary education programs. Some participants suggested that it would be helpful to invite current students or graduates from a variety of institutions and programs to speak to high school students about their post-secondary experiences.

Another challenge is getting high school students (and their parents) to value the range of post-secondary options equally. We are continually bombarded with the message that university is the “best” option. Until college is seen to be on an equal footing with university, many young people will not choose it even if a college program would be a better fit with their interests and abilities.

Career professionals are not immune to the same message and may show partiality to university choices and university-bound students, particularly since most counsellors and educators are graduates of these institutions. It is vital that counselling professionals become aware of any bias, misinformation, or stereotyped beliefs they may harbour regarding the relative worth of different types of education and which students are most appropriate for which type of institution. Career counsellors' focus should be on encouraging youth and their parents to put the young person's interests, abilities, and aspirations at the centre of any educational decision-making.



Recognize that many high school graduates are not ready to attend post-secondary education immediately after high school

A key finding of our study was that there were drawbacks for some participants in attending post-secondary education immediately after high school. Some felt that they wasted time and money because they were not ready to engage fully in their studies.

Kenneth Gray, Professor of Workforce Education, emphasizes that the question for high school graduates should not be if they go to post-secondary education, but rather *when*. Gray outlines four reasons that a young person may not be ready for post-secondary education immediately after graduating from high school: a) weak academic skills; b) lack of commitment that comes from not having an educational or career direction; c) not being emotionally ready to be away from home, and d) needing a break from school.²

In our study, we found examples of all four categories. Unfortunately, some participants who went to college or university before they were ready either dropped out or

got poor grades that later limited their options to go on to a professional or graduate school.

Gray outlines a series of what he refers to as “wake up calls” that may be a signal to parents that a young person is not ready for post-secondary education.³ While these signals are targeted at parents, they are also instructive for advising/counselling professionals.

Obvious wake up calls

- Poor high school grades
- Lack of career direction
- Not liking to read
- Always requiring close parental supervision to complete homework
- Skipping classes
- Not graduating with their class
- Trouble with the law, drugs

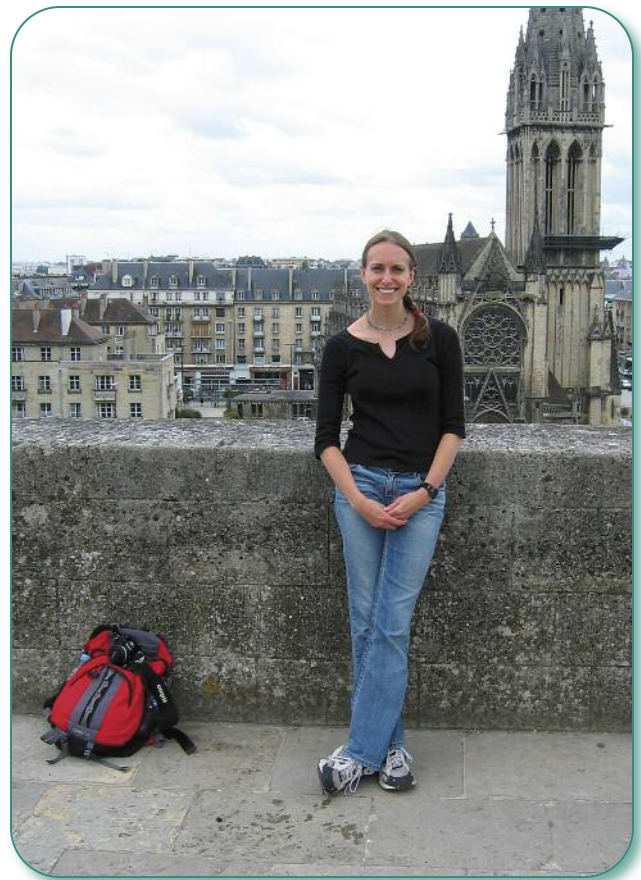
Not so obvious wake up calls

- Evasive about plans after high school
- Never getting around to filling out post-secondary education applications
- Having parents fill out applications
- Applying only to schools where friends are going
- Showing no interest in visiting college or university campuses

Provide alternatives to youth who are not ready to go to university or college

A key finding of our study was that many participants said that they could have benefited from taking a time-out before, during, or after they attended post-secondary education. One of the conundrums facing a young person who does not feel ready to go immediately to college or university is the dearth of alternatives. Some participants in our study said that they went to college or university mostly because they didn’t know what else to do.

The availability of worthwhile time-out options offers young people a legitimate alternative to rushing into training programs that don’t interest them or that they aren’t motivated to do. A worthwhile activity can be



anything that helps young people understand more about themselves, learn about the options open to them, and increase their confidence in their abilities. It provides a psychological safety net for the young person (and their parents) that something positive is happening, yet no final decision is required.

In an ideal world, there would be a range of structured options available for young people. For those youth who lack the academic skills or work habits necessary to be successful at post-secondary education, there would be transition programs available to increase their readiness. Those who want a better idea of their interests and abilities or want to “test drive” an occupation would have access to work experience programs outside the education system. Others who need time to adjust to being away from home or need a break from schooling would have access to youth programs that allow them to experience something completely different.

The reality is that structured opportunities to take a time-out are not common in Canada. “Gap year” companies provide a range of interesting international volunteer work opportunities, but they are prohibitively expensive for most young people. Programs such as Katimivik, Canada World

Youth, and SWAP (Student Work Abroad Program) Canada offer an inexpensive way to travel and experience the world, but are only accessible to a limited number of young people. Local youth employment programs are often poorly promoted and are at the mercy of ad hoc government funding.

In the absence of a formalized system for youth to take a time-out, an important role that advising professionals can play is to help young people identify worthwhile activities that will structure their time. As a starting point, professionals can help youth identify their motivation for taking a time-out. Do they need time to figure out what they want to do? Are they feeling unready to leave home? Do they want to leave home or their community but can't afford to go to school at the same time? Do they lack confidence in their academic ability? Do they want to save money before launching into post-secondary education? Are they looking for new experiences? Do they simply need a break?

Based on their reasons for taking a time-out, professionals are in a better position to help youth brainstorm possibilities that will help them reach their goals. Some of the time-out options that participants in our study undertook included: upgrading high school marks, taking additional high school courses, testing the college/university waters with one or two courses, participating in youth exchange programs, volunteering in an area of interest, working in their hometown, and moving away to explore better job opportunities and develop independence.

Armed with evidence of the merits of the time-out, counselling professionals can be allies for young people trying to “sell” the idea of a time-out to skeptical parents. Professionals can also be invaluable by encouraging youth to get the maximum benefit out of the experiences they choose. Through preparatory sessions, professionals can help youth clarify what it is they want to achieve during their time-out. In follow-up debriefings, counsellors can pose questions that may help youth to position their time-out learnings within the context of personal career building:

- What happened?
- What does your experience tell you about your likes/dislikes, values, and abilities?

- What new options are you now aware of?
- What does your experience tell you about the type of education program, occupation, and/or lifestyle that might be a good fit?

Help youth translate interests and abilities into possible career options.

Few participants reported receiving help from professionals, but many of those that did found it helpful. What appeared to be most helpful was the assistance they were given in translating their interests and abilities into education and career options.

A number of participants expressed frustration about being asked about their interests and abilities when they were in high school. They knew the kinds of things they liked and didn't like to do, but had no idea what that meant in terms of their interests, values, and abilities. They needed help in decoding the experiences they were drawn to and those they found uninteresting.

Career advising professionals can help young people identify their interests by asking such clarifying questions as, “What do you find so appealing about that activity” or conversely, “What do you dislike about the activity.”

Patterns of interests, values, and abilities will start to emerge. Typically, things such as “helping people”, “making a difference”, “organizing things”, or “problem solving” will repeat themselves as a young person explains why they are drawn to particular activities. On the flip side, when a young person says, “I don't like working by myself,” what she is really saying is that she likes having a lot of interaction with people. Once young people have a sense of some of their key interests, values, and abilities, they have a reference point for identifying post-secondary education programs and occupations they might find appealing.



Most high school students need help connecting the dots between their interests and abilities and suitable training and work options, simply because they have a limited awareness of what is available. Career professionals can play a pivotal role in this translation process to the degree that they are familiar with their clients and are knowledgeable about educational and occupational options. The better they know a young person, the more likely it is that they will be able to suggest appropriate career paths. As one participant said, “my guidance counsellor knew me really well so was able to make great suggestions.”

It is important that the options proposed are seen to be suggestions. One 29-year-old participant illustrated the dangers of forcing ideas on young people:

I found [that the counsellor] was kind of one-sided. He was just saying you should be an engineer and that's what he was pushing me toward. I didn't like being pushed, so I stopped going.

Be cautious about over-relying on career assessments.

Assessment instruments are one of the most common tools used by career professionals to help young people with education and career planning. Many participants in our study took some type of career assessment, whether it was a standardized interest or temperament assessment tool, or an informal inventory that was part of a computer guidance system. In some cases, participants said that they were beneficial but more often the response was that they weren't.

All too often the career assessments were used in isolation. A list of possible occupations was generated, but little assistance was given to participants to help them understand what the results meant. Some reported that it was a frustrating experience because the career assessment matched them with obscure or seemingly inappropriate occupations like dolphin trainer, florist, or funeral director. Others said that the career assessments identified occupations they were already considering, but did nothing to help them work through the confusion they were feeling about which one to pursue. Most did not receive any help in understanding why particular occupations were rated higher than others. Rather than broadening their thinking about what they could do, the career assessments

narrowed the options for some participants. One participant, reflecting on taking an interest inventory, said:

It said that I liked working with people and that I should be a firefighter. That would have been great, but it's kind of stereotypical. Working with people: I could have been a team manager, I could have been a social worker, I could have been so many different things. But it went “ding, firefighter.”

The comments of those who did find assessment tools helpful are instructive for career professionals. These participants said that a high school or post-secondary counsellor used the career assessments as part of a broader counselling process. The counsellor helped them to understand the results of the career assessment and brainstormed with them a range of education and career possibilities that were congruent with the participant's self-profile. Moreover, participants were given assistance in researching various options and sorting out which options made the most sense for them.

Encourage Navigators to investigate their choices

It is heartening when a young person knows exactly what he wants to do. However, our research indicates that we would do well to temper our enthusiasm. Many of our participants had a limited understanding of what their choices entailed. In some cases, they were lucky and ended up both liking and being able to pursue their chosen profession. More commonly, they realized that it wasn't what they expected and chose not to pursue it. The younger they were, the more likely that this was the case.



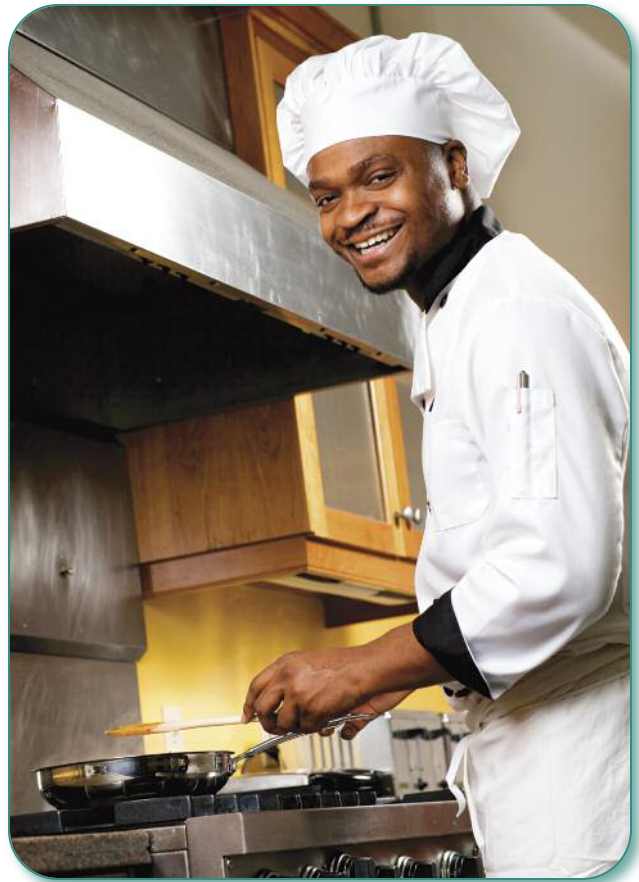
Professionals sometimes make the mistake of thinking that Navigators have it all figured out, that they don't require any assistance beyond ensuring they know how to get where they want to go. However, some Navigators may simply make a choice in response to the pressure they are facing to make up their minds. It is important to take the time to confirm that Navigators actually understand what their education and career choices entail and how that connects with what they know about their interests and abilities.

When career professionals suspect that Navigators have narrowed their career choices too quickly, they should encourage the youth to undertake more self-assessment work and conduct more career research. In particular, before enrolling in occupationally-specific education programs, Navigators should be encouraged to explore the depth of their interest in the occupation and the extent to which their choice can be transferred to other educational or occupational choices. A young person who enrolls in a business administration degree program with the idea of becoming a lawyer, has more room to maneuver if she decides not to pursue her original occupational goal than the person who enrolls in carpentry, then decides to become a social worker.

Help Explorers access career exposure experiences

Once young people have some ideas about education programs or occupations that interest them, they need to find practical ways that they can explore their options further. Many participants used post-secondary education to test drive an interest. While this method has its merits, it can be an expensive, time-consuming, and demoralizing way to learn that one is incompatible with an education program or occupation. This is particularly true in the case of occupationally-specific programs, such as nursing or plumbing, where the ability to transfer credits earned to another training program is more limited.

Advising professionals can be assistive in helping young people explore options by connecting them to career exposure programs, events, and experiences in their communities. The range of possibilities could include: participating in a work experience, co-op, or internship program while in school; taking a course related to an interest; attending job fairs, campus tours, or open houses; conducting information interviews with employers or workers; getting a part- or full-time job in an area of interest;



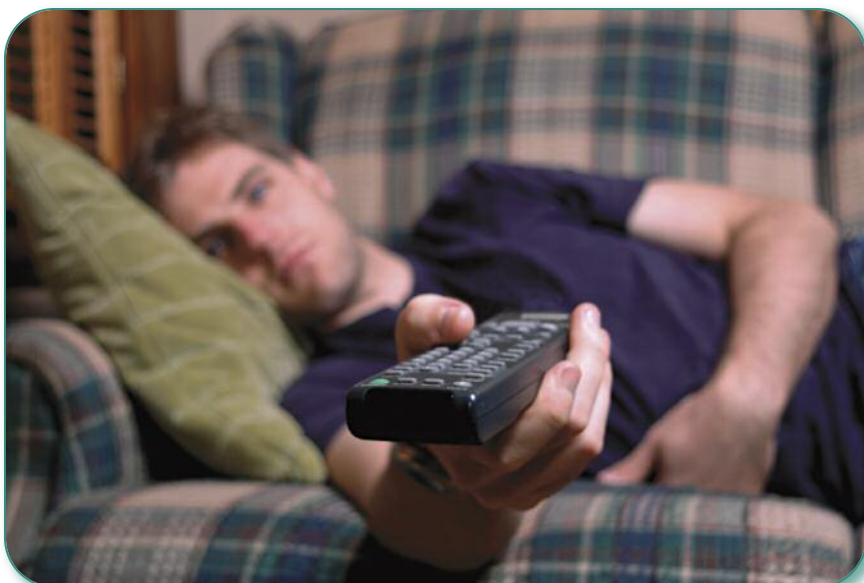
joining a club; job or educational program shadowing; or doing volunteer work.

The career professional's role may include recommending (and sometimes organizing) suitable career exposure opportunities; preparing youth beforehand on how to maximize the career building benefits of the experience; and debriefing afterward to help youth interpret and integrate the experience into their evolving senses of self.

Explore with Drifters what is constraining them from becoming proactive

While our study indicates that drifting can lead to a young person "bumping into" something that interests them, it is not an advisable long-term strategy. As we mentioned in Chapter Two, those that drift for long periods of time often have little to show for it.

For the career professional, there are a few things to keep in mind when working with Drifters. Firstly, don't assume that a young person is drifting until you check out what is really going on. The high-functioning drifters that we spoke



wrong direction. Through the counselling process, professionals can help young people recognize and articulate what others' expectations are of them and how those expectations are impacting their career decisions. They can help youth explore whether or not their choices are really their own. For young people who are being pressured into making decisions that are not a good fit, professionals can be instrumental in helping youth determine if and how they will handle conflicts with those who are significant in their lives.

Encourage young people to make career plans, but remain open to change

of in Chapter Four can be found in the most unlikely places, including the hallowed halls of professional and graduate schools. As well, Explorers can be mistaken for Drifters "wasting their time" when they take "menial" jobs or time-outs; in fact they may be actively exploring their options.

If a young person is in fact drifting, it is important to try to understand what factors may be leading them to be passive. Our study shows that there are many reasons that young people drift, including: a lack of self-awareness, critical messages about what they should do, low self-confidence, financial issues, mental health issues, and discouragement. If their drifting is related primarily to a lack of self-awareness or knowledge about the options available to them, traditional approaches to career counselling may be effective. However, when drifting is a response to other issues, those constraints need to be addressed (sometimes by other helping professionals) before proactive career planning can take place.

Explore the career messages young people are receiving

In our study, we found that participants were bombarded with powerful messages that influenced the pathways that they took. Many participants said that they made choices to please others rather than doing what they personally wanted to do.

Counselling professionals are in an ideal position to hear in a young person's conversations if there is any conflict between external expectations and personal preferences, or misinformation that is leading a young person in the

The majority of participants in our study either did not know what they wanted to do when they graduated from high school or subsequently changed their minds. One of the most common regrets that participants voiced was that, had they known what they wanted to do, they could have avoided an often painful and expensive process of trial and error. However, our study indicates that it is difficult for a young person to know for sure what they are going to do when they leave high school. There are simply too many unpredictable variables that can influence the pathways they take.

This is not to say that goal setting is a bad thing. Goals provide young people with a sense of direction and a purpose to engage in constructive exploring and navigating pursuits. Without goals, young people are liable to go around in circles, or worse, do nothing at all. At the same time, goals should not be viewed as set in stone. Young people need to be guided, rather than governed, by their goals.

H. B. Gelatt suggests that young people should be encouraged to approach their goals with "positive uncertainty" which recommends that people set off in the direction of their goals, while staying open to the possibility that they may change their minds on the basis of further experience.⁴ For the counselling professional, this means reinforcing the message with young people that uncertainty is normal and change is inevitable. As young people gain more experience and broaden their horizons, their interests and priorities will change and they will want to revise their plans to accommodate the new realities.



Help young people increase student financial management awareness

Participants who had high debt loads upon graduation were often limited in their ability to take the time to find satisfying work. Student debt also limited the ability of some participants to improve their labour market competitiveness by taking occupationally-specific training after a general degree or diploma.

Taking out student loans is unavoidable for many young people whose parents are not able to help pay for their post-secondary education. While student loans may be necessary, it is essential that the cumulative debt load remains manageable so youth have some room to maneuver after they graduate.

Typically, young people have not had much practical experience with large scale money management issues. If they are living away from home for the first time, they may have no experience with budgeting and little notion about

the costs associated with maintaining their own residence. They may never have considered to what degree their debt will mount over the duration of their studies. They may have no idea of their earning power upon graduation and how student debt repayment will impact their career and lifestyle choices for years to come.

A role for career professionals is to encourage young people to make fiscally informed decisions about the post-secondary education they choose to pursue. This includes having the young person become aware of the total cost of their education (not just tuition fees) and ways in which expenses can be minimized, such as living at home or starting one's education at a lower-priced college and later transferring credits to a university program. It also involves researching the types of entry-level jobs and typical salaries available to someone graduating with their chosen degree or diploma. For example, graduates from occupationally-specific programs such as library science, auto mechanics or geomatics are more likely to get well-paying jobs that allow them to repay their student loans more easily than those graduating with a general diploma or degree. The point is not to dissuade young people from taking a particular training program or from incurring a substantial student debt, but rather to have them make choices from a position of knowledge.

Guidance counsellors and career advisors also play an instrumental role in informing young people of non-repayable sources of student assistance (bursaries, scholarships, etc.) for which they might be eligible. Professionals can also discuss the role of paid employment in the student equation including: postponing post-secondary education until the young person has acquired some savings, taking part-time (and even full-time) jobs while a student, and beginning one's studies on a part-time basis while holding down a part- or full-time job. Any discussion of income generation options has to occur within the context of the young person's motivation and ability to successfully compete for scholarships, to juggle work and school so that academic performance is not compromised, or to extend (or contract) the duration of their studies to make them more financially manageable.



Engage parents in helping their children with career planning

Participants in our study were more likely to get assistance from family members than from professionals. Our findings were similar to a study done in Alberta that found that 46% of junior and senior high school students were most comfortable asking their parents for help. This compared with approaching someone working in the career field at 11.2%, friends at 11.1%, and school counsellors at 9.7%.⁵ In many ways, this is not surprising given the lifetime of familiarity and trust that exists between many children and their parents.

While parents are the ones that young people most commonly approach for help with career planning, some of them feel ill-equipped to provide guidance. Many parents are overwhelmed by the array of career and educational choices, the cost of post-secondary education, and the perceived risks of giving their children “bad” advice.

Given the critical role that parents play in their children’s career planning, it makes sense that a priority for career professionals should be to provide parents with infor-

mation that will help them support and guide their children. The point is not to turn parents into career counsellors, but to help them feel more confident in taking a constructive role in their children’s career development.

Parents need to be aware that:

- Emerging adulthood is a time of identity exploration and instability.
- It is common for young people to change their career plans.
- The labour market has changed dramatically since they were young adults.
- There are dangers related to pushing their children’s education and occupational decisions.
- Heavy student debt loads can limit their children’s future career maneuverability.
- Different types of post-secondary institutions offer a range of programs that can equally benefit youth, depending on their goals.
- There are benefits to taking a time-out.

Some post-secondary institutions have implemented joint youth/parent information sessions and have created links on their websites specifically dedicated to helping parents understand academic life and how they can be supportive of their children's evolving career development. The companion volume to this book, *The Decade After High School: A Parent's Guide*, helps parents understand the issues that youth face transitioning into post-secondary education and/or the workforce (available at www.storiesoftransition.ca). The Nova Scotia Department of Labour and Workforce Development has developed a program called Parents as Career Coaches (www.parentscareercoaches.ca) that helps parents develop the skills to identify their children's interests and abilities and translate them into possible education and career options.

Expand the reach of career development services

A key finding from our study was that most participants received little career information or guidance from professionals. This is similar to a study conducted with undergraduates of an Ontario university which found that less than one-third of students reported having received information about education and career options from their high school guidance counsellors.⁶

Clearly, young people need more information and career counselling assistance. The question becomes how do guidance and career professionals meet the myriad career development needs of the many young people to whom they may be responsible?

Traditionally, those with expertise in career development work in-depth with a small percentage of students, while seeing the majority infrequently or not at all. Young people themselves often don't seek out help from a career/guidance counsellor for a variety of reasons. One young participant in our study summed up what many students feel about going to see the school counsellor:

I knew that they were there and they could probably help finding information about university or careers. I don't really understand why I didn't go. At the time, it was a bit intimidating: you don't really know what questions to ask. I don't think the service was overly accessible. The door was probably always open, but it would have been nice if they had made more of an

effort to come to us. At that age, you're kind of overwhelmed and don't really know what's going on.

If career development services are to be provided in a more inclusive and effective manner, career professionals will need to move beyond working with individual clients within the confines of their counselling offices. Career specialists have an opportunity to broaden their reach by becoming catalysts for promoting and disseminating the career development credo amongst educational colleagues and community/corporate allies at large.

The time is ripe: inside and outside the education system there has been an explosion of interest and activity around instilling a career-building mindset within young people and exposing them to the vast range of available educational and career opportunities.

Within the education system, secondary schools and post-secondary institutions are increasingly introducing credit, non-credit, and, in some cases, compulsory career planning and career portfolio courses into their curricula. In addition, educational institutions at all levels are becoming more active in supporting student career exposure undertakings such as work experience, co-op terms, skills competitions, service learning projects, and credit for volunteer work.⁷

On the employer side, companies, industries, and sector councils are becoming more active in reaching out to the workforce-to-be through training bursaries, internships, mentorships and rotational placements; organizing job fairs and recruitment drives; participating in campus presentations, panels, and workshops; maintaining youth-targeted career websites; and a myriad of other interactive techniques to attract young people to careers in their fields.

Career practitioners, with their considerable specialized competencies including counselling skills, knowledge of career development, and understanding of the attitudes and aspirations of youth, are in an ideal position to capitalize on the momentum that is in place to enhance and extend the reach of career assistance available to young people. In particular, the career specialist in a newly envisioned role of "a collaborator, a resource person, and a consultant,"⁸ can be instrumental in orchestrating any of the following:

- Develop and deliver career education/job search programs in group settings.

- Consult with teachers to enhance the integration of career planning/portfolio development across the curriculum.
- Deliver career development workshops to “first in line” non-career specialists such as teachers, academic advisors, college instructors, and university professors to provide them with fundamental career development knowledge and increase their comfort level in providing career advice to students.⁹
- Consult with career event organizers to ensure that they understand and can appeal to the interests of their target audience.
- Collaborate with work experience and co-op coordinators to enhance the matching process between students and placements and to prepare students to maximize the career building potential of their work experience.
- Establish/maintain relationships with recent graduates and returning summer and co-op students who are able to emotionally connect with their peers and are willing to share their work experiences with them.
- Act as an information clearinghouse on local volunteer opportunities, employment assistance services, academic upgrading opportunities, alumni/employers willing to make career presentations, and other resources that colleagues may draw upon in the delivery of career development activities.

Summary

There is a wealth of roles that career professionals can play to assist young people making a positive transition after they graduate from high school. Some of those roles have long been part of traditional counselling, while others are relatively new. Whatever role a career professional chooses, the focus should be on encouraging youth and their parents to put the young person’s interests, abilities, and aspirations at the centre of educational and career decision making.

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Conclusion

The decade after high school is a time of growth and change for most young people. Whatever plans they have when they graduate from high school will, more likely than not, change as young people learn more about themselves and their career options. Even the high school graduate who is well informed and focused about the future will likely experience unpredictable events and influences that will change, or at least modify, a chosen path.

The results of our research suggest a number of different aspects of young people's experience after graduating from high school.

Pathways

- There is a window of opportunity for exploration that spans from the late teens to the mid-twenties for many young people. For some, there is little opportunity for exploration while others extend their exploration into their late twenties and beyond.
- Youth use three strategies to find out more about themselves and the options available to them: Navigating, Exploring, and Drifting.
- After a period of exploration, youth Commit, Settle, or continue to Explore.
- Young people receive powerful messages that influence the pathways they take. Some are guided by these messages, while others resist.

Path After High School

- The presence of complex, unpredictable, and interactive influences and events make it difficult to predict what education and career pathways a young person will take after high school.
- The majority of young people either do not know what they want to do when they graduate from high school or subsequently change their plans.
- Expectations about what youth will do after high school are influenced by their academic performance, the education level of their parents, and what their peer group is doing.

Post-Secondary Education

- There are drawbacks to youth attending post-secondary education when they aren't ready.
- Many youth benefit or can benefit from taking a time-out before, during, or after they attend post-secondary education.
- Young people who have high debt loads find it more difficult to engage in exploration and to gain further education.

Guidance

- Most youth receive little career information or guidance. Those who do are far more likely to get it from friends and family members than from professionals.
- Although a minority of youth receive assistance from professionals, many of those who do find it extremely helpful.

While there will always be a need for young people to experiment with post-secondary education programs and jobs, professionals can play an important role in promoting effective transitions into post-secondary education and/or the workplace. A pivotal role for career professionals is to encourage youth and their parents to put the young person's interests, abilities, and aspirations at the centre of educational and career decision making.

While young people need help developing career goals, they also need to be encouraged to stay open to the possibility that they may change their minds on the basis of further experience. This means reinforcing the message with young people that uncertainty is normal and change is inevitable. As young people gain more experience and broaden their horizons, their interests and priorities will change and they will want to revise their plans to accommodate the new realities.

Profile of Participants

Number of participants = 100	% of sample	number of participants
Gender		
Male	41%	41
Female	59%	59
Age		
23-25	39%	39
26-28	44%	44
29-30	14%	14
Race		
White	93%	93
Visible minority	7%	7
Location		
PEI	23%	23
Halifax	29%	29
Guelph	20%	20
Calgary (completed high school in Alberta)	16%	16
Calgary (completed high school in Atlantic Canada)	13%	13
Present Status		
Employed	78%	78
In school	12%	12
Unemployed	8%	8
Stay at home parent	2%	2
Highest level of education		
High School Diploma	18%	18
College Diploma	19%	19
Certificate	8%	8
Trade/Vocational Certificate	4%	4
Bachelors Degree	47%	47
Masters Degree	4%	4
Employment (present/last job held)		
Full-time permanent	58%	58
Full-time temporary	15%	15
Part-time permanent	7%	7
Part-time temporary	10%	10
Self employed	7%	7
Coop placement	3%	3
Quality of Employment		
Over-employed	3%	3
Well-employed	59%	59
Underemployed	38%	38

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