

# Career Planning in Ontario

## Grade 10 Students: Counsellor Perspectives

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### Abstract

Despite the recognized importance of career guidance to postsecondary access and persistence, research with key stakeholders in Canadian secondary schools is meager at best. This study sought the perspectives of Ontario school guidance staff on the career planning context of Grade 10 students. Students entering the workforce were seen to have the most difficulty with career planning and university-bound students the least. Respondents suggested that most students recognize the importance of career planning and that self-exploration and broad exploratory information regarding careers would be most useful to them. Counsellors also indicated that career planning information would be best provided via interactive web sites, a comprehensive 'one-stop' web site or workplace experience. Among the resources currently available, individual interaction with counsellors and experiential opportunities such as co-operative programs or the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program and computer programs such as Career Cruising, were rated as most helpful. Suggestions for additional resources are also noted and the implications for current practice are discussed.

### Résumé

Malgré l'importance reconnue de l'orientation professionnelle pour favoriser l'accès aux études postsecondaires et la persévérance scolaire, les recherches réalisées auprès d'intervenants clés dans les écoles secondaires du Canada sont plutôt rares. La présente étude visait à recueillir les perspectives des orienteurs dans les écoles de l'Ontario au sujet du contexte de la planification de carrière chez les étudiants de 10<sup>e</sup> année. Il appert que les étudiants qui intègrent le marché du travail ont le plus de difficulté avec la pla-

nification de carrière et ceux destinés au secteur universitaire en ont le moins. Les répondants ont indiqué que la plupart des étudiants reconnaissent l'importance de la planification de carrière et que l'exploration intérieure et de l'information exploratoire générale au sujet des carrières leur seraient plus utiles. Cette information pourrait être mieux communiquée par le biais de sites Web interactifs, d'un site Web complet «à guichet unique» ou d'une expérience en milieu de travail. Parmi les ressources actuellement offertes, l'interaction individuelle avec les orienteurs et les possibilités d'expériences d'apprentissage, comme les programmes coopératifs ou le Programme d'apprentissage pour les jeunes de l'Ontario, et les programmes informatiques, tels que Career Cruising, étaient considérées comme étant les plus utiles. D'autres ressources sont également suggérées et les répercussions des méthodes actuelles y sont discutées.

The dominant theories of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century posited that with adequate access to good career information and guidance, individuals would acquire the tools to make sound career decisions on their own. These decisions would result in improved human-resource allocation, labor force mobility and productivity, and improved cost-effectiveness of employment, education, and training programs (Krumboltz and Worthington, 1999). However, recent analysis of school-to-work programs globally brings this assumption into question by raising the need for individuals to locate and process information in an empowered way on top of simply providing basic information and guidance (Lent, Hackett, and Brown, 1999; Savickas, 1999; Worthington and Juntunen, 1997; Grubb, 2002).

The benefits of career guidance programs are well documented. Magnusson and Roest's (2004) meta-analy-

sis and synthesis of the efficacy of career-development interventions has shown that they are by and large positive and enabling tools for Canadian adolescents across the provinces. Despite the lack of longitudinal studies and best practice analyses, many interview-based studies conclude that career planning services among adolescents in junior and senior high schools often lead to reduced drop out rates, improved employment prospects, an increase in self-esteem, more efficient use of resources, a greater supply of skilled workers to employers, changed attitudes to increased career choice, and increased motivation to continue learning after high school (McCrea Silva and Phillips, 2007; Bell and Bezanson, 2006). Some, however, have argued that career planning supports could reap greater benefits if they went beyond the typical descriptive format; there must be an active engagement with key stakeholders that goes beyond an information dump (Grubb, 2002; Walker, Alloway, Dalley-Trim and Patterson, 2006).

### Barriers to Postsecondary Participation and Persistence

Numerous studies (Barr-Telford et al., 2003; Ringer-Lepre, 2007; Malatest, 2007; McElroy, 2008; King et al., 2009) have examined the barriers cited by high school students as reasons for not pursuing postsecondary education immediately after high school. One study in particular (Malatest, 2007), suggests an information gap exists with respect to making decisions about postsecondary studies. Less than half the high school students surveyed reported they had received enough information to make informed choices about their career path. In addition, over one third felt that high school had not provided enough information to make good postsecondary decisions. The same infor-



mation was also found to be important for persistence in that half of the respondents who had discontinued their postsecondary studies did so because they were undecided about their career and reported they had not been provided with sufficient information about postsecondary options (Malatest and Associates, 2007). Foley (2001) found that nearly thirteen per cent of high school graduates did not pursue PSE because they couldn't decide what to do. A regional analysis showed that in Ontario, more than other provinces, this reason was cited by one fifth of those who did not pursue postsecondary education. The findings across many studies are consistent in that career indecision or 'not knowing what I really wanted to do' placed second or third among the reasons given for not pursuing postsecondary education.

The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada and the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation (2009) have highlighted the need for more emphasis on career development. Their study concluded that inadequate information about postsecondary choices and the connection to careers led some Grade 11 students to discount the possibility of additional studies after high school. It also found that only a minority of participants had interacted with their school's guidance counsellors. Those who spoke to them typically reviewed grades and courses. Very few participants had approached their guidance counsellors to inquire specifically about postsecondary education and in most cases discussions with guidance counsellors took place after students had already begun considering alternatives to postsecondary studies. An important finding, consistent with the argument made by Grubb (2002), is the need to present information about postsecondary education alongside information about careers. This would not only illustrate how they are linked, but also help students think more about postsecondary education and future careers. Improved career guidance resources at the secondary school level, therefore, is clearly one way to increase college and university participation rates.

One of the first reports derived from Statistics Canada's Youth in Transition Survey (Lambert, et. al., 2004),

concluded that a lack of program fit was the major reason cited by those who had left college or university without completing their program. Ultimately, a notable proportion of postsecondary leavers stated that they had done so either because they didn't like the program or their program wasn't for them. Similarly, the Price of Knowledge (Berger et. al., 2007) concluded that a lack of career direction is a barrier to persistence in and of itself.

Findings from the 2006 – 2008 Ontario College Student Engagement Survey (OCSES) (Dietsche, 2009) also support this conclusion. The study showed that while three in five entering Ontario college students are quite certain about the type of job they will obtain when they graduate, that is they are high in career clarity, approximately one quarter are not. Career clarity was defined by a student's response to the Likert item, "I feel undecided about what my career will be after college". Consistent with the findings of Berger et. al. (2007), the OCSES results demonstrated the importance of career clarity in an educational context where most academic programs are designed to develop occupation-specific knowledge and skills. The study revealed that students who began college with significant doubt regarding their future career and the relationship between their program of study and their eventual career destination were significantly less likely to become engaged in their studies, were more likely to express a preference for working rather than studying after a few months of college experience and more strongly indicated a desire to leave. Other research, both nationally (Finnie and Qiu, 2010) with college and university students and with Ontario college students alone (Finnie, Childs and Qiu, 2010), has produced similar results.

King (2003, 2006) examined access to and perceptions of career guidance activities in Ontario secondary schools. His research found that the vast majority of students had received information from their teachers and guidance counsellors about universities and colleges. For students who had received career and educational information on colleges, approximately one-half found the information they received from guidance counsellors 'helpful' and 'very

helpful', while approximately one quarter viewed the information as 'slightly' or 'not' helpful. Additionally, two-fifths found teachers' information 'helpful' or 'very helpful', and over one third viewed the information as 'slightly' or 'not' helpful. Finally, one fifth of the students claimed they had received 'no information' about colleges from guidance counsellors and teachers.

These results are consistent with those obtained by Bloxom, Bernes, Magnusson, Gunn, Bardick, Orr, and McKnight (2008) with Grade 12 students in Alberta. The authors found that most resources such as career counselling, written materials, internet sites and career fairs were only rated as somewhat helpful. It was also noted that the results confirm the importance of students being active participants in influencing the development of career services. Further, the Canadian Career Development Foundation (2003) has stressed the need to strengthen student awareness, planning and decision-making with reference to postsecondary education choices. Their study documented students' frustration with not having enough help connecting entrance requirements and courses of study with a career direction or career path; the relatively narrow focus on university as the preferred postsecondary option; the complexity of information and applications; and understanding of costs associated with post-secondary participation. Clearly, more work is required to identify the types of career information and delivery formats that will most effectively support the career planning efforts of high school students.

In spite of the overwhelming evidence for the importance of career guidance to postsecondary access and persistence, research on this topic with Canadian secondary school stakeholders outside of Alberta (Magnusson and Bernes, 2002; Pyne, Bernes, Magnusson & Poulsen, 2002; Bardick, Bernes, Magnusson & Witko, 2004; Code, Bernes, Gunn & Bardick, 2006; Bloxom, Bernes, Magnusson et. al., 2008), is meager at best. This is particularly true for research on stakeholder groups such as teachers and guidance counsellors. The study of counsellor perceptions reported on here was part of a larger research program designed to portray stakeholder views of guidance resources in Ontario secondary



schools. Views regarding career information needs, resources and realities were sought from secondary students, school guidance staff and teachers involved in the mandatory Ontario Grade 10 Career Studies course. The nine-week Career Studies course, a major component of the Ontario secondary school guidance curriculum, is designed to help students assess their interests, skills, and characteristics and investigate current economic and workplace trends, work opportunities, and ways to search for work. The course explores postsecondary learning and career options, prepares students for managing work and life transitions, and helps students focus on their goals through the development of a career plan (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006).

The objectives of this study were to: i) identify the attitudes and plans held by junior high school students toward their future career; ii) identify the types of career information and delivery format(s) desired by adolescent learners iii) identify key players and activities that influence their career planning; iv) describe the availability, use and helpfulness of career information, activities and resources typically available to Ontario high school students. This report focuses on the perspectives of Ontario secondary school guidance counsellors regarding these topics.

### Methods

Perspectives on the career planning needs and activities of Ontario secondary students were gathered via a survey similar to that used by Magnusson and Bernes (2002). Parallel versions of questionnaires were administered to students, teachers and guidance counsellors to triangulate the views of the three stakeholder groups. Areas examined included the views on the relative utility of various types of career planning information and activities, the relative utility of various formats for the delivery of career information, the relative influence of individuals and groups on adolescent career planning, and the availability, use and perceived helpfulness of diverse career guidance/information resources typically available to Ontario secondary school students.

The unique perspective of guidance counsellors was obtained with a survey conducted online during May 2010 in

collaboration with the Ontario School Counsellors Association. The survey web site was publicized to all members via *OSCAnews*, the weekly e-journal of the Association. The questionnaire consisted of six sections and included both closed and open response types. In addition to employment background and demographic items, four closed response sections examined counsellor perceptions of the information that would be most useful to the career planning of Grade 10 students, the most useful format for presenting such information and who influenced their career planning the most. A final section asked respondents to indicate what types of resources were available to their students and the degree to which they believed each was helpful in supporting career planning. The questionnaire ended with two open response items probing what additional resources would help their students plan their career.

Counsellor perceptions of the most useful supports for Grade 10 students were based on their ratings of fifteen types of information or activities that could inform their career planning. These were presented in a sequence following Gati and Asher's (2001) characterization of the career decision-making process as involving six tasks. The sequence begins with a student recognizing the need to undertake the planning process followed by self exploration to identify passions, interests, and abilities and progresses to a broad exploration of types of careers available. This is followed by acquiring more in-depth, career-specific information such as annual salary, employment opportunities, required knowledge, skills and duties, information about related postsecondary programs and opportunities for financial support. The last two stages involve selecting between a few alternatives and finally committing to a single career path.

### Results

The online survey of guidance counsellors yielded 144 completed questionnaires comprising 62% of Ontario school boards, 140 individual public, separate and independent schools, both English and French as the language of instruction, and all geographic regions of the province. Over four fifths of survey respondents were females em-

ployed full-time, with approximately one half having less than 10 years experience and almost one third with fifteen or more years as a guidance counsellor.

A national study (Malatest and Associates, 2009) found that only a small percentage of guidance counsellors' time each day was dedicated to career counselling. To assess how much was devoted to various student needs, counsellors in this study were asked to indicate, on average, what percentage of their time was spent dealing with student personal, social, academic or career issues. The results showed the largest percentage (40%) of time was dedicated to discussing academic issues, followed by career (25%), personal (20%) and social (15%) issues. A relatively small component, it seems, was focused on the career concerns of students.

High school counsellors support the career planning efforts of students bound for apprenticeship, college or university study or the workforce following high school graduation. Helping students identify their future destination can be quite different for each group given the differences in the type information required and in the students associated with each destination (Creed, Patton and Hood, 2009; Rojewski and Kim, 2003). To explore this possibility for Ontario high school students in more detail, counsellors were asked to rank, on a scale of 1 to 4 with 1 being most difficult, the level of difficulty they believe students encounter when planning for their post-graduation destination. Mean rankings by group showed that counsellors believe students headed to the workforce had the most difficulty ( $M = 1.9$ ), followed by college ( $M = 2.5$ ) and apprenticeship-bound students ( $M = 2.7$ ). University-bound students were perceived to have the least difficulty ( $M = 2.9$ ) with their career planning.

Several questionnaire items were designed to explore counsellor perceptions of the career planning of Grade 10 students. Three major areas were examined: what types of career planning information or activities were perceived to be most useful to students; the relative usefulness of various formats in which career information might be delivered; and the relative influence of various groups and individuals on their career planning.



**Ideal Career Planning Information**

Counsellors were asked to indicate the degree to which each of fifteen types of information or activities could help the majority of Grade 10 students plan their future career. These were presented in a sequence corresponding to Gati and Asher’s (2001) characterization of the career decision-making process as involving six tasks. The process begins with a student committing to undertake the career planning process (Task 1) followed by self exploration to identify their passions, interests, and abilities (Task 2) along with a broad exploration of types of careers (Task 3). This is followed by collecting more in-depth, career-specific information such as annual salary, employment opportunities, required knowledge, skills and duties, information about related postsecondary programs and opportunities for financial support (Task 4). The last two stages involve selecting between a few alternatives (Task 5) and finally committing to a single career path (Task 6). Possible usefulness ratings for each type of information or activity ranged from 0 = *Don’t know*, to 5 = *Very Much*.

Table 1 presents, in descending order, the types of information counsellors rated as very useful to the career planning of Grade 10 students and their correspondence to Gati and Asher’s sequence of tasks.

Between sixty and sixty-five per cent of counsellors indicated that self-exploration information, corresponding to Task 2 in Gati and Asher’s list, to help students identify their interests, talents and abilities and related careers would be most useful in their career planning. One half believed that broad

exploratory information about different types of careers and related programs of study (Task 3) would also be very useful. Approximately two in five supported a mix of broad and in-depth information such as the experience of a postsecondary program, the knowledge and skills required for specific careers, and obtaining one-on-one career planning support. Approximately two in five believed that ‘orientation to choice’ information (Task 1) or an awareness of the need to make a career decision would be very useful for students.

One quarter of respondents believed that information reflecting Gati and Asher’s final stage 6 ‘commitment’ task would be very useful and approximately one fifth felt that students would need help deciding between more than one career plan (Task 5). Other types of in-depth information such as the salaries

ways including workplace experiences, conversations with individuals working in various careers, watching videos profiling specific careers or reading print or web-based text. To assess which of these formats guidance counsellors considered most useful to students engaged in career planning, they were asked, *Information on careers can be presented in different ways. How useful you think each of the following would be to students in Grade 10?* Responses could range from 0 = *Don’t know*, to 4 = *Very Useful*.

Table 2 shows that almost two thirds (64%) of counsellors ranked interactive web sites involving surveys and quizzes first in usefulness and that three fifths (59%) rated the concept of a comprehensive ‘one-stop’ web-based tool second. More concrete, active learning resources such as work experi-

Table 2

*Utility of Information Formats*

| Delivery Format  | Very Useful (%) |
|--|-----------------|
| 1. Interactive web sites (e.g. surveys, quizzes, careers game etc.)                    | 64              |
| 2. A web-based tool that provides all the information needed to select a future career | 59              |
| 3. Spending time ‘on the job’ exploring what a career involves on a day-to-day basis   | 52              |
| 4. Talking to people working in the career area you are interested in                  | 47              |
| 5. Video clips of people talking about what they do in their career.                   | 40              |

and hiring potential associated with specific careers were also seen as very useful by approximately one fifth of respondents.

**Utility of Information Delivery Formats**

Information about careers may be delivered to students in a number of

ence or speaking with people in a career of interest were ranked as very useful by approximately half the respondents. Two fifths believed that watching video-based interviews with similar content would be ‘very useful’.

**Influencers of Career Planning**

The questionnaire item, *Please indicate the degree to which you believe each of the following influences the career planning of Grade 10 students*, required counsellors to assess the influence of various actors on career planning. Possible responses ranged from 0 = *Don’t Know* to 4 = *Very Much*. Table 3 presents the proportion of respondents rating possible influencers as *quite a lot* and *very much*.

Consistent with other research findings, one half of counsellors rated parents/guardians as influencing the career planning of Grade 10 students *very*

Table 1

*Ratings of Usefulness*

| Decisional Task          | Information/Activity   | Very Much (%) |
|--------------------------|--|---------------|
| 2. Self Exploration      | 1. Help them understand/identify their interests, talents and abilities            | 65            |
| 2. Self Exploration      | 2. Help them identify careers related to their interests, talents and abilities    | 64            |
| 2. Self Exploration      | 3. Finding careers related to the things they are really passionate about          | 60            |
| 3. Broad Exploration     | 4. Information about career-related PSE programs of study                          | 50            |
| 3. Broad Exploration     | 5. Information about the different types of careers available                      | 49            |
| 4. In-depth Exploration  | 6. Information about the knowledge and skills required for specific careers        | 40            |
| 1. Orientation to Choice | 7. Help them understand that career planning is important for them right now       | 39            |
| 3. Broad Exploration     | 8. Information about what it’s like to take a college / university program         | 38            |
| 4. In-depth Exploration  | 9. Obtaining personal one-on-one support to develop their career plan              | 37            |
| 4. In-depth Exploration  | 10. Information about the day-to-day tasks / duties for specific careers           | 29            |
| 6. Commitment            | 11. Help with planning the next steps in a career plan they’ve already developed   | 25            |
| 3. Broad Exploration     | 12. Information about financial help to continue their education after high school | 22            |
| 4. In-depth Exploration  | 13. Information about the chances of getting hired in specific careers             | 20            |
| 5. Decisional Status     | 14. Help with choosing between two or more career options / choices                | 18            |
| 4. In-depth Exploration  | 15. Information about the salaries associated with specific careers                | 16            |



Table 3

Sources of Influence

| Individual/Group                                     | Quite a Lot (%) | Very Much (%) |
|--|-----------------|---------------|
| Parent(s) or guardian(s)                             | 42              | 51            |
| Someone they admire working in a field/job they like | 52              | 31            |
| Brother, sister, cousins                             | 49              | 17            |
| Friend(s)  | 44              | 16            |
| Guidance counsellor(s)                               | 52              | 16            |
| The media (e.g. movies, TV programs, etc)            | 51              | 15            |
| Teacher(s)   | 45              | 9             |

Table 4

Availability of Career Planning Resources

| Resource   | Available (%) |
|--|---------------|
| Working one-on-one with a guidance counsellor                        | 100           |
| Mandatory Career Studies course in high school                       | 99            |
| 40 hour high school volunteer requirement                            | 99            |
| Computer programs (e.g. Career Cruising etc.)                        | 99            |
| Written materials (magazines, brochures etc)                         | 99            |
| High school co-op courses  | 93            |
| Career information sessions with guest speakers                      | 92            |
| Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program (OYAP)                          | 90            |
| Community agencies (e.g. YMCA, Canada employment centre, etc.)       | 88            |
| Speaking with college / university guidance staff                    | 86            |
| Paid work experience (full/part-time work)                           | 85            |
| School career information centre / library                           | 85            |
| Groups of students working with a guidance counsellor                | 83            |
| Career Interest questionnaire (e.g. Strong Interest Inventory, etc.) | 83            |
| Career Fairs/Career Days   | 80            |
| Career related internet sites (e.g. myBlueprint, The Real Game etc.) | 80            |
| Job Shadowing (time with someone at their job)                       | 65            |
| Short videos clips showing actual on-the-job duties                  | 63            |
| Workplace / Industry Tours   | 61            |
| Career planning / education workshops for parents                    | 35            |

*much*. Almost one third reported that someone the student admired who worked at a job they liked could be very influential. When only considering *very much* responses, other family members, friends, guidance counsellors, the media and teachers were perceived to have considerably less influence than parents. However, combining the *quite a lot* and *very much* responses results in a slightly different picture. Guidance staff now become the third most influential group and the influence of the media increases substantially as well

**Availability and Helpfulness of Career Planning Resources**

The final closed response section of the questionnaire focused on the current career planning context of high school students as perceived by guidance counsellors. This was assessed by asking re-

spondents to indicate whether a particular planning resource was available to students and how helpful they thought it was for those in Grade 10.

Table 4 shows the perceived availability of various career planning resources. The results show that from the perspective of guidance counsellors, a substantial number of resources are available to students in Ontario secondary schools. Working individually with guidance staff, the mandatory Career Studies course, the provincially required commitment to volunteer work, computer programs such as Career Cruising and written materials are seen as available to all students.

In addition, between eighty and ninety per cent of respondents indicated that students had access to co-operative education and the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program, career informa-

tion in school libraries and community agencies, group work with school counsellors, dialogue with college/university staff, guest speakers, events such as career fairs and career finding tools such as questionnaires and internet sites. Information from job shadowing, workplace tours and short videos on careers was seen to be less prevalent as only two thirds of counsellors reported these were available. And only one third reported career planning workshops for parents were available.

Table 5 presents the perceived helpfulness ratings of these resources. When only considering the “very much” responses, working one-on-one with a guidance counsellor and high school co-op courses were seen to be the most helpful resources. Approximately one third rated the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program to be very helpful and approximately one quarter considered computer programs such as Career Cruising, groups working with a counsellor, speaking with college or university guidance staff and paid work experience as very helpful.

Career information sessions with guest speakers and the mandatory Career Studies course were seen to be very helpful by roughly one fifth of respondents. The nine-week course teaches students how to develop and achieve personal goals for future learning, work, and community involvement. Students assess their interests, skills, and characteristics and investigate current economic and workplace trends, work opportunities, and ways to search for work. The course explores postsecondary learning and career options, prepares students for managing work and life transitions, and helps students focus on their goals through the development of a career plan (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006). Other resources such as career days, workplace tours, job shadowing, school career libraries, the mandatory volunteer service requirement and print materials were all seen to be very helpful by quite small percentages of respondents.

Combining the “quite a lot” and “very much” responses results in few changes to the counsellor ratings, although the helpfulness of students speaking with college or university guidance staff and the Career Studies course in-



Table 5

Perceived Helpfulness

| Resource   | Helpful (%) |           |
|--|-------------|-----------|
|  | Quite a Lot | Very Much |
| Working one-on-one with a guidance counsellor                  | 40          | 44        |
| High school co-op courses                                      | 40          | 42        |
| Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program (OYAP)                    | 37          | 34        |
| Computer programs (e.g. Career Cruising etc.)                  | 40          | 28        |
| Groups of students working with a guidance counsellor          | 31          | 24        |
| Speaking with college / university guidance staff              | 40          | 22        |
| Paid work experience (full/part-time work)                     | 31          | 22        |
| Career information sessions with guest speakers                | 28          | 20        |
| Mandatory Career Studies course in high school                 | 36          | 19        |
| Career related internet sites (e.g. myBlueprint, etc.)         | 30          | 15        |
| Career Fairs/Career Days                                       | 30          | 12        |
| Career Interest questionnaire (e.g. Strong Interest Inventory) | 37          | 11        |
| Workplace / Industry Tours                                     | 28          | 11        |
| Job Shadowing (time with someone at their job)                 | 30          | 10        |
| Career planning / education workshops for parents              | 21          | 10        |
| Community agencies (e.g. YMCA, CEC, etc.)                      | 27          | 7         |
| School career information centre / library                     | 24          | 5         |
| Short videos clips showing actual on-the-job duties            | 27          | 5         |
| 40 hour high school volunteer requirement                      | 12          | 4         |
| Written materials (magazines, brochures etc)                   | 16          | 4         |

creases. Generally, the resources perceived to be most helpful are experiential activities such as interacting with staff, more hands-on experiences such as co-op and OYAP and computer resources such as Career Cruising.

**Additional Resources**

The final closed response item asked respondents to comment on the following: *Would specific career guidance or career information resources assist you in helping your students with their career planning?* This was followed by two open ended survey questions, *If so, please describe what this would be in the box below* and, *Using the text box below, describe what one policy, action, resource or program would most help Grade 10 students identify and plan for their future career?*

Responses to the final closed question showed that while almost two in three (64%) counsellors agreed there was a need for additional career planning resources, approximately one quarter (23%) responded with “Don’t Know”. Whether this is a reflection of counsellors’ reluctance to devote extra time to completing this section of the questionnaire, or whether they actually “Did not Know” is a matter of conjecture. Of those who had an opinion, however, over four in five (83%) endorsed the need for additional resources.

The first open end question elicited a large number of written suggestions for additional resources. Seventy four of the 93 suggestions could be grouped into seven categories or themes. The most frequently occurring comment (44) expressed a need for specific information or tools such as web sites that provided or integrated information in a way that is currently not available. For example, one suggestion stated a need for, *Student friendly resources on job market trends and accurate information on salaries. More comprehensive resources on jobs related to high school subjects, hobbies, interests, talents.* Another suggested, *Various pathways taken by real people on how they reached their career choice. They need to see different ways that people eventually end up in a career. See the different roads that are taken, post-secondary options available etc.*

The second most frequently mentioned theme was related to the use of Career Cruising or myBlueprint. Some extolled the value of these computer programs while others expressed the desire to have access to them. Others cited the shortcomings of what is currently available,

“Students here currently use myBlueprint and Career Cruising. It would be nice to have a current, Canadian based tool specifically for counsellors

with detailed information regarding skills/aptitudes/interests required for specific careers and perhaps suggestions for a range of careers related to skills/aptitudes/interests suited for a range of students (i.e.) college bound, university bound, etc.”

Reference to greater use of interactions with others such as guest speakers, a roster of available speakers from the community, workplace visits and job shadowing was made by six respondents. Finally, five individuals identified the need for additional professional development opportunities for counseling staff especially as this related to the use of computer tools and interest inventories.

The final open ended question ... *describe what one policy, action, resource or program would most help Grade 10 students identify and plan for their future career?*, elicited a total of 126 comments of which 96 could be classified into five categories. The frequency of comments for each category is shown in Table 6.

Table 6

Themes for Additional Resources

| Topic Category              | # of Mentions |
|-----------------------------|---------------|
| Career cruising/myBlueprint | 24            |
| New Information             | 21            |
| Career Course               | 20            |
| Trips, guest speakers       | 18            |
| Professional Development    | 10            |

The most frequent comment related to the use of online resources such as Career Cruising and myBlueprint. For example, one respondent mentioned *Currently, Career Cruising seems to be the most engaging resource. Interactive game sites to learn about the different careers and pathways are very positive and well received by the students.* The second most frequent comment by counsellors expressed a need for additional resources that were a better fit for their students. For example one mentioned the need for *Comprehensive Career Interest Questionnaires adapted for high school students. JVIS and Ashland are too advanced in terms of language*



but career cruising is too simple. Another suggested, *Something to help students identify what they are really passionate/interested in and connect it to careers. Also, a way to help them communicate these ideas to their parents (who often have other aspirations for their kids).*

Many comments focused on the need for change to the Career Studies course, a mandatory component of the Ontario Grade 10 curriculum. The comments took three distinct forms. The first was the need to lengthen the course; *Extending this course to a full credit rather than 1/2 would be the best way - we simply don't have enough time to make a huge impact.* The second focused on the fact that many Grade 10 students are not ready for career planning; *I think most students in Grade 10 are too young to and immature to start thinking about their future. Unfortunately our system forces them into a streamed decision at a young age in terms of their "pathway".* Some suggested that the solution to the immaturity problem was to have sequential courses with a career focus in both Grades 10 and 11, *Honestly, sometimes Grade 10 students are too young or immature so there should be a follow up course in Grade 11. However, Grade 10 students should focus more on their skills/talents and interests, you have to know yourself first to find the career that fits you.* Others expressed the desire to have more flexibility in matching course content with the characteristics of their students; *More flexibility in tailoring Career Studies program to specific needs of students in a particular school. Because I teach only university-bound students, some aspects of the current course have little relevance.*

A final category of comments focused on the need for more direct contact with authentic career information via guest speakers, job shadowing and workplace visits. For example, one respondent identified the need for, *A province-wide job shadowing program similar to Grade 9 take a child to work day for grade 10s would help, but students should be able to select from a bank of jobs, not just rely on parents,* and another cited the need for more guest speakers, *Availability of guest speakers to visit class more often for*

*students to be able to speak to professionals about their careers and related careers.* The effectiveness of such strategies was highlighted by one respondent who said, *I find that students get the most when I organize a Career Day and I invite community partners to speak about their jobs.*

### Discussion

This study sought to describe guidance counsellor perspectives on the career planning activities of Grade 10 students in Ontario high schools. The results document their views on the relative utility of various types of career planning information and activities, the relative utility of various formats for the delivery of this information, the relative influence of individuals and groups on career planning, and the availability and perceived helpfulness of diverse career guidance resources typically available to Ontario secondary school students.

The study also examined the direct involvement of high school guidance staff in the career planning of Grade 10 students. High school counsellors must divide their time with students to deal with personal/social issues, academic issues such as course selection, and career guidance. Currently the numbers of guidance counsellors are spread quite thinly across the school population in most secondary schools making direct involvement with all students difficult. Available data (Malatest & Associates, 2009) suggest a ratio of one full-time counsellor for every 625 to 750 students, depending on school size. In addition, much of their time is spent with senior students advising and helping them to prepare applications for post secondary institutions (King, 2009). Although students are typically assigned a guidance counsellor, they may not take advantage of the opportunity to obtain career counselling (Council of Minister of Education, Canada & Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2009).

The results of this study are consistent with others that find counsellors devote close to half their time with students dealing with academic issues with one-quarter dedicated to career support. For example, a pan-Canadian survey of counsellors (Malatest and Associates, 2009) found one-quarter of

their time was devoted to individual career planning with the remainder being allocated to other activities. Possible reasons for this include the fact that the highest level of education for three quarters of Ontario guidance staff was found to be a B.Ed. degree and the largest proportion, two in five, had less than five years of experience (Malatest and Associates, 2009). The same study also found that in provinces offering mandatory, standalone career education courses, counsellors were less likely to spend time on individual career planning with students. So, while counsellors indicate that working one-on-one with students is available in all schools and rate this activity as the most helpful career planning resource, it appears that, in actuality, only a relatively small fraction of counsellors' time is spent on career guidance, particularly with Grade 10 students.

To further complicate matters, the Ontario secondary school curriculum supports students working toward various post-graduation destinations such as the work force, apprenticeship, college or university. This study has shown that school counsellors believe work-bound students have the most difficulty identifying a future career path, university-bound students have the least and apprenticeship or college-bound students fall in between. This finding is remarkably similar to other research on work-bound students. Creed, Patton and Hood (2009) found that work-bound students had the poorest career development and personal functioning, university-bound students the highest, with the college bound students falling in-between the other two groups. The authors concluded that work-bound students were the poorest prepared, could be making occupational decisions based on insufficient career information, a poor understanding of how labour markets operate, and with poor decision-making skills.

These results are also important in light of several studies with high school students suggesting that secondary school guidance activities are less likely to be focused on work-bound students with university being the preferred option (Herr & Niles, 1997; Rojewski, 1999; Rojewski & Kim, 2003; Canadian Career Development Foundation, 2003;



King and Warren, 2006). King and Warren (2006) for example, found that approximately one third of those graduating to work said they could not or were uncertain about accessing educational and career planning supports at their school. The work of Despres (2008), however, could prove instructive in this area. The author has described a best practice in delivering a culminating career development experience for work-bound seniors that leads to their gaining full time employment upon, or shortly after, graduation.

### Ideal Career Planning Information

The type of information that would best help Grade 10 students with their career planning was one of the core questions posed by this study. Counselors rated various types of information following the task sequence described by Gati and Asher (2001) representing; (1) orientation to choice, (2) self-exploration, (3) broad exploration of the environment, (4) in-depth exploration of the environment, (5) decisional status, and (6) commitment. Each task level brings the individual closer to identifying a specific career plan.

Two in three counsellors indicated that self-exploration type information that helps students identify their interests, talents and abilities and related careers would be most helpful to their career planning. These results are not surprising and are consistent with a Grade 10 student population who are, for the most part, in the early stages of career planning. Indeed, the developmental theories of Erikson (1968) and Chickering and Reisser (1993) emphasize that adolescence is a stage of development with a focus on identity as a sense of direction and purpose. Individuals at this stage are struggling to answer not only the question "Who am I?", but also "Who am I going to be?" Not surprisingly therefore, the second most frequent response by counsellors was that broad exploratory information about different types of careers, corresponding to Gati and Asher's Task 3, would also be very useful. Smaller proportions of respondents, approximately two in five, reported that information corresponding to Tasks 1, 5 and 6 would be useful. The implication is that most counsellors believe most of the students

are beyond the 'orientation to choice' task and are aware of the need to make a career decision. Few of them, however, were seen to be at the point of deciding between two careers or committing to a specific career.

### Ideal Format of Information

The ideal format for delivering career planning information was the second core question posed by this study. Options included print material, static and interactive web sites, and experiential activities such as speaking with those employed in an area of interest or work placements. While print materials and static, text-based web sites were not seen to be effective delivery formats, interactive web sites and a comprehensive 'one-stop' web tool were rated as the most useful methods for delivering career-related information. This result might be expected if, as has already been noted, only a small portion of a counsellor's time is focused on the career needs of students. Such tools allow students to access career planning information independently and reduce the workload of guidance staff. It might also be felt that the delivery of self exploration and broad exploratory information would be most efficiently achieved via computer programs or web tools. Their effectiveness, however, likely depends on the student's ability to make sense of the information they receive or else it simply becomes an 'information dump' (Grubb, 2002).

While their work context may be a significant influence, it is clear from this study that counsellors view internet resources that provide opportunities for students to explore interests and related careers as the most effective format for the delivery of career planning information. This is consistent with other research (Canadian Career Development Foundation, 2003) that highlights an increased use of tools such as the Real Game, Career Cruising, myBlueprint and other web-based career development resources supported by Human Resources Development Canada. Emphasis, however, was also placed on the usefulness of more authentic formats for the delivery of career information

The second format counsellors perceived as very useful for delivering career planning information was exposure

to concrete experiences and opportunities to dialogue with others. Approximately half felt that activities providing concrete and authentic information such as work placements or speaking with someone in their field of interest would be very useful. A less concrete and less interactive format such as watching a video was not considered to be as useful as actual experience. Indeed, the utility of experiential activities such as co-op and work placements has also been highlighted by others (King, 2009). Additional possibilities for obtaining career information in this way, such as visits to businesses and industries, appear to be quite infrequent for Ontario high school students (King, 2006). Other jurisdictions, however, such as the U.K. (EBP West Berkshire, 2011) have been successful in creating organizations that facilitate such opportunities on a broader scale and might serve as models for Ontario.

Established in 1992, EBP West Berks works closely with all ten of the local state secondary schools along with Newbury College. Links with the business community range from multinationals such as Vodafone and Bayer to smaller local organizations. The aim of the organization is to inspire and enable the future workforce. This means engaging with and supporting young pupils and students at all levels to better equip them for the challenges of their future working life. This is accomplished by giving young people of the region an introduction to the world of work to inspire and motivate them and above all to give them a sound footing on which to make more informed decisions about their future. The organization has successfully forged links between local employers, teachers and students, and through these partnerships they create and deliver a range of work-related and vocational learning opportunities to inspire, inform and motivate young people at all levels for their future working lives.

### Career Planning Influencers

The relative influence of groups and individuals on the career planning of Grade 10 students was a third focus of this study. Parents were perceived by counsellors as having the greatest influence on the career planning of high



school students followed by someone the student admires working in a field of interest. As with other research (Knighton and Mirza, 2002; Looker and Lowe, 2001), there is ample evidence to indicate that youth look to their parents for guidance in many parts of their life and that specific parental behaviours influence adolescent career exploration (Kracke, 1997). Indeed, the term 'helicopter parent' is well recognized by postsecondary admissions staff (Lipka, 2007; Miller, 2008). Otto (2000) found that four-fifths of high school juniors indicated their career aspirations are consistent with those of their parents and parental influence has generally been shown to be positive (Grant, 2000). However, as Otto (2000) suggests, the twenty per cent of cases where the career aspiration of the child does not match that of the parent could lead to enrollment in a program of study for which the student is ill-suited.

There is also some concern regarding the content of the advice parents provide. Middleton and Loughheed (1993) noted that parental encouragement, although well-meaning, may focus only on a range of alternatives acceptable to the parent and thus may limit adolescents' career exploration and choice. King (2006), for example, found that some high school students indicated their parents felt so strongly about attending a university that they would not let them go to college. King also found evidence that parents' advice may not be substantial. A third of university and of college-bound high school students thought the career information provided by parents was 'slightly' or 'not' helpful. Focus group results with students in another study (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada & Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2009) suggest that some parents were more inclined to nag their children about postsecondary attendance rather than provide them with practical information that could help them to decide what they might like to study.

While parents typically see their roles as being supportive, informative and educative, they also believe that more information and stronger relationships with teachers would help them (Bardick, Bernes, Magnusson & Witko,

2005). Parents also want their children to have the "personal touch" from counsellors with respect to a plan tailored to their children's abilities and aspirations (Canadian Career Development Foundation, 2003). Individual attention matters, as does assistance in gathering and understanding post-secondary education and career and financial information. However, the lack of opportunity for parents to obtain career-related information is a challenge. Few counsellors in the current study reported that such workshops were available in their school, a finding also noted in a national study of guidance counsellors (Malatest and Associates, 2009).

The relatively low level of influence attributed by counsellors to teachers, friends, the media, as well as themselves, is noteworthy and also consistent with other research (Alexitch & Page, 1997; King, 2006; Yau & O'Reilly, 2007). A potential reason for these low rates is provided by Yau & O'Reilly with a census of Toronto District School Board students. They found that more than half the students surveyed indicated that they "rarely" or "never" felt comfortable discussing personal problems with a teacher or counsellor. King's study also showed that while teachers and counsellors were suppliers of career information, one-third of students thought the information provided by teachers was 'slightly' or 'not' helpful and one-quarter felt the same about information from counsellors. While friends and the internet are also sources of career information, less than half the students in King's study reported information from friends was 'slightly' or 'not' helpful and only one half found internet information was 'helpful' or 'very helpful'.

#### **Availability & Helpfulness of Resources**

The results of this study confirm that, from the counsellor perspective, a wide variety of career planning resources are available to Ontario secondary school students. Those reported to be available to all students include speaking with a guidance counsellor, a mandatory Career Studies course, volunteering for community service, written materials and using computer

programs such as Career Cruising and myBlueprint. Of these, working one-on-one with a guidance counsellor and computer programs such as Career Cruising were also rated as very helpful career planning resources. Indeed, interviews with students and parents (Canadian Career Development Foundation, 2003) have shown that both groups desire greater access to individualized support. However, while counsellors report that such support for career planning is available to students, this and other research (Malatest and Associates, 2009) has shown that a minority of their time is actually devoted to individual career planning.

While the resources above show a good correspondence between availability and perceived helpfulness, this is not always the case. For example, the mandatory Grade 10 Career Studies course and the forty-hour community service requirement within the Ontario secondary school curriculum, available to all students, were rated as less helpful. The latter case is particularly interesting as a very small proportion of counsellors considered the community service requirement very helpful to career planning. This is despite the fact that experiential activities were cited by counsellors as one of the best formats for delivering career planning information. Perhaps the perception is that students are not able to use the experiences as a way to test potential career options. In contrast, paid work experience, considered by counsellors to be available to most students was rated by over half as quite or very helpful. Similar results have been found in interviews with students (King, 2009) who indicate that the experiences have helped them decide on a career path. It is possible that paid work experiences afford students a greater opportunity to select jobs related to potential career aspirations.

Other experiential opportunities to assess career options include co-operative education programs and the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program. While counsellors view both of these as not being available to all students, they are rated as very helpful to career planning by an overwhelming majority. Indeed, while Ontario is the province with the highest enrollment in co-op programs, counsellors have reported that only be-



tween twenty and forty per cent of students enroll in the courses (Malatest and Associates, 2009). Students, however, also cite the value of co-op programs in helping decide on a future career (King, 2009).

### Additional Resources

This study sought counsellors' views regarding what additional resources might assist Grade 10 students with career planning. Two in three agreed that new resources were needed. The majority of comments focused on providing students with information of a type or format that does not currently exist. This ranged from the need for Canadian content in computer programs such as Career Cruising that is aligned with specific post high school destinations to having specific information about local job market trends and salaries. Other suggestions included increased opportunities for experiential learning via a guest speaker, job shadowing, or work placement rosters so that students could interact with those in careers corresponding to their interests or experience the career area first-hand, if only briefly. The effectiveness of such opportunities has been noted elsewhere (Canadian Career Development Foundation, 2003).

A second theme that emerged focused on the Grade 10 Career Studies course. This half-credit course was designed to help students with course selection and consequent career planning (Ministry of Education, 2006a). Some in this study suggested it should be a full-credit course as there was insufficient time to thoroughly cover all the material. Others noted that while the Ontario curriculum requires Grade 10 students to make course choices for Grade 11, some are too immature to do so effectively. King (2009) has also noted that for those students whose Grade 10 or Grade 11 achievement forces a reconsideration of future educational plans, additional opportunities to revise career plans are required. Another study (Canadian Career Development Foundation, 2003) has recommended greater infusion of career opportunities into classroom subjects and an increase in the amount of guidance/career development content and courses available in different grades. One solution suggested

in this study was to have a Grade 11 Career Studies option available. One possibility is the current Grade 11 course, *Designing Your Future*, a career-planning course that develops students' abilities to identify and pursue appropriate postsecondary educational and employment opportunities (Ministry of Education, 2006b). It is not clear, however, how many students actually take advantage of this option.

### Conclusion

This study obtained information from guidance staff located in numerous schools across Ontario with the goal of gaining their perspective on the career planning context of Grade 10 students. A number of important conclusions are warranted. First, the current study, in concert with others, suggests that career planning for students with a workplace destination after graduation is more difficult than those who are university bound. While the Ontario secondary school curriculum supports students with a variety of destinations, the Grade 10 Career Studies course is an 'open' course and could have all destinations represented in the classroom. Other research in Ontario suggests the focus of career planning often tends to emphasize the university destination above others. This is perhaps because, given their educational background, they are more familiar with the university setting than with community colleges or apprenticeship. If so, this could exacerbate the difficulties for students who are work bound and perhaps those focused on apprenticeship or college destinations as well. Implications include the potential modification of the Career Studies course to more intensively focus on diverse destinations and the consideration of proven best practices in other jurisdictions that ease the transition for work-bound students.

Second, counsellors reported they devote a minority of their time to career planning with individual students, likely due to high caseloads and the multiple demands of their role. A mandatory Career Studies course might also contribute since guidance staff know that students can access career information in the classroom. They believed that self-exploration and broad exploratory

information regarding careers and related educational programs would be most useful to the career planning of Grade 10 students. The majority also thought this information could be best obtained via a comprehensive 'one-stop' web site or computer programs such as Career Cruising. Should this occur within the half-credit Career Studies course, which some consider being too short, the danger is that the activity could become an 'information dump' and lack meaning, especially for students whose critical thinking skills are less well developed. While counsellors rated individual support for career planning relatively low in terms of usefulness, perhaps because Grade 10 students are early in the career planning process, such personal support might help more students 'connect the dots' than is possible in the current context.

Third, counsellors also strongly endorsed experiential sources of career information such as co-op and Ontario Youth Apprenticeship programs, and opportunities to speak with someone employed in an area of interest as being very useful to students' career planning. While opportunities such as co-op programs and OYAP were seen to be available to most students, evidence suggests that few students participate. The mandatory community service requirement, completed by all students, was not rated as being very helpful to career planning although little is known about how students view the experience. While workplace tours are not as available to students and counsellors did not rate them as very helpful, other jurisdictions appear to be enjoying success with such programs and might provide useful models for Ontario. Greater exposure to experiential forms of career information seems warranted.

As with many other studies, parents were perceived to be the primary influence on the career planning of Grade 10 students. While parents are largely seen as exerting a positive influence, other research suggests some may not be aware of the complete range of career and educational opportunities available to their children or promote options that are ill suited to their interests and talents. Unfortunately, this and other research indicates that few schools offer career planning and education informa-



tion workshops for parents. Given the low incidence of individual student-counsellor contact already noted (Malates & Associates, 2009), the possibility is that parents might create a poor match between the student, a career and postsecondary pathways. If students were exposed to additional sources of career information via experiential activities such as workplace visits or job shadowing, they might be better able to moderate parental influence and succeed in following a career path better suited to their interests and talents.

This study has also shown that a wide variety of career planning resources are available to Grade 10 students. Some that are widely available are not perceived by counseling staff to be very helpful while others with more limited availability are perceived to be very helpful. In contradiction to earlier findings, counsellors indicated that one-on-one support for students is the most helpful resource for career planning and also reported that it is available to all students. Research, however, suggests a reality of infrequent student-counsellor contact for career planning purposes. The likelihood is that this resource is available to all students, in theory, but that the current secondary school context imposes strict limits. Indeed, many of the respondents in this study suggested a need for additional career planning resources developed for the Canadian high school context as well as adjustments to the mandatory Grade 10 Career Studies course.

Taken together, the information provided by secondary school guidance staff suggests a need to rethink the access to and delivery of career planning resources for Grade 10 students in Ontario. Key initiatives might include an increase in experiential learning opportunities via expanded co-operative education, the development of local guest-speaker rosters representing common career destinations and increased liaison with business and industry, as occurs in other jurisdictions, to facilitate workplace tours. Consideration might also be given to increasing the Career Studies course to a full credit or, in its absence, develop strategies such as the use of peer-tutors to help students 'connect the dots' when working with web-based tools or computer programs such

as Career Cruising. Finally, the widespread development of career planning workshops or online resources specifically designed for parents could also be of great benefit. Similarly, professional development workshops that include a comprehensive review of community college programs, apprenticeship opportunities and career planning tools rated as particularly effective by students could also be of benefit to counsellors.

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