
Features

[Features Archives](#)

Better career planning saves time, money

By pieta woolley

Publish Date: 18-Aug-2005

Special - Education

If M.J. Lorca could travel back in time a dozen years, she would kick her 19-year-old self's ass. That's when she started waffling through 10 years of postsecondary—a liberal-arts exploration that cost her more than \$40,000 in student loans, plus interest. Now 31, without a degree, marketable skill-deficient, and hiding from creditors, she thinks she has found her spark: nursing. She starts at Douglas College in February.

“I was so self-centred as a teen, I couldn't see more than six months ahead,” Lorca admitted, noting that the mandatory visits to her high-school guidance counsellor were useless. She didn't visit her college or university advising centre, based on that experience. She blames only herself for her predicament.

Lorca is an extreme case, a bit of a waffling-student parable, really. But waffling, or “exploring”, is the way most students journey through school, if statistics and anecdotes tell the truth.

About half of postsecondary students drop out or change programs by the end of their first year, Statistics Canada reported in 1997. Up to four out of five students don't know what they want to do with their education when they start it, says the government's summary report for its 2003 BC College and Institute Short Stay Pilot Survey.

Just 75 percent of students completed the college or institute credential they set out to earn, according to another report, the 2003 B.C. Student Outcomes survey. Furthermore, just 44 percent of former students reported that their job is “very related” to the training they took.

A big part of the waffling comes from crummy, outdated career counselling, according to the man who is responsible for some of it. Phillip Jarvis, a Burnaby South secondary school grad circa 1963, developed the Choices career-exploration software in 1976. Most youngish Canadians will remember taking the test in high school. Off the top of your head, you answer questions about your interests and skills (a challenge at 15 years of age), and the test spits out career suggestions. You could be a pilot! A farmer! A teacher! A bank teller!

“It probably told you to be a funeral director,” Jarvis said with a groan during a phone interview with the Georgia Straight from Ottawa, where he is now the vice president of partnership development at the nonprofit National Life/Work Centre. “When I developed it, I thought career planning was about choosing a career direction and finding out how to get there. My assumption was, if you can find the right destination, you just need to figure out how to get there and you’ll be happy for life.”

Even though Choices is still the most popular career-exploration tool in the country, Jarvis admits the concept is past its prime. The work world has changed significantly. Even after Choices spent 29 years in classrooms, Jarvis knows that half of students graduating from postsecondary institutions can’t connect what they learned to their post-school lives. And the majority of adults think they’re in the wrong job.

Jarvis has since developed what he believes is a 21st-century tool, called Blueprint. Instead of answering the question “What do you want to be when you grow up?”, it promotes developing a lifelong set of “competencies”, which include self-knowledge, intentionality and purposefulness, relationship intelligence, embracing change, and character—honesty, integrity, and perseverance. The good news, Jarvis said, is that half of all ministries of education in Canada have adopted Blueprints alongside Choices.

He saves his harshest criticism for postsecondary counselling departments.

“They’re stuck in 1978,” he said, mentioning that some of his best friends are university career counsellors. “The system is stuck in an old paradigm, and it’s not sure anything is wrong with itself. Professors are not facing what their students are facing. They’re good people, but they’re trapped. Education changes slower than anything else in the country, and career is changing at an accelerated rate.” He called postsecondary career counselling “the weakest link in the chain”.

Blueprint won’t help students make specific academic decisions at postsecondary, but it does promote intentionality—in other words, moving through school without waffling. Responsibility for one’s school and career path, Jarvis said, are on the shoulders of the student. “We’re all free,” he said, “but freedom is limited to knowledge. We’re not liberating people until we’re equipping them to take charge.”

At the University of Victoria, the counselling department is four years into a five-year pilot program called ACT, the Applied Career Transitions Project. It integrates some of Jarvis’s cutting-edge counselling strategies, including building self-knowledge and deeper reflection, and connecting paid work to home life. However, it’s not available to students until they finish their degrees. There’s nothing like it for first-years.

“It came out of the identification that the transition from university to work that relates to a student’s interests or actual degree is a very difficult one,” said Jennifer Margison, UVic’s manager of career services. Group and individual counselling sessions are available for new students, but they are based on the more traditional “what do you want to be” model.

Visit Vancouverite Mark O’Meara’s site, canadastudentdebt.com/, and the problem with our postsecondary advising system is painfully clear. Hundreds of students, who either graduated with or without marketable skills, have created a sorrowful forum of posts.

“The government makes funds available to people who would not otherwise be able to attend school,” wrote poster Ferron in November 2004. “It provides the means but leaves it up to us to do the rest. I suppose that is what we call freedom in our society.”

Ferron goes on with a chilling regret: “I made wrong choices when I was in university and I blame myself and my ignorance at the time... Were I able to do it all over again I would have gone into college and done a two-year program in a practical field with a high employment rate.”

Economically, O’Meara told the Straight on the phone, the solution isn’t as easy as choosing practical fields with a high employment rate. The market may bottom out by the time a student graduates—as happened, for example, with computer-science graduates during the dot-com crash.

“No one has a crystal ball,” O’Meara said. “If you can find one, that’s what you need. You have a better choice to see a psychic than an adviser.” As for those who advocate education for education’s sake, O’Meara said they’re living in a different world. “They’re removed from reality. Most people don’t have the financial resources to pay for that [liberal-education exploration] any more. Especially when there’s no skills training at the end of a \$50,000, four-year degree.”

This is somewhat of a modern phenomenon. In the 1960s, career-unsure student Donna Chesney lived at St. Paul’s Hospital during her nursing training. Tuition was free, rent was free, supplies were free, and food was free. At the end of her four-year program, Chesney graduated as a registered nurse. In exchange, the hospital got years of free labour out of her during her schooling.

Today at BCIT, an RN course costs \$2,718 per year for three-and-a-half years (\$9,513). Add \$9,602 in supplies, plus other costs, for a total of more than \$19,000—plus living expenses.

The contrast is stark. Expensive education is the 21st-century reality.

At UBC, a 120-credit bachelor of arts degree costs \$16,368 in tuition alone. A one-year forest resources technology program at BCIT costs \$4,767. Those are public postsecondary prices. Try between \$12,400 and \$19,000 (including books and supplies) for a 12-month practical-nurse diploma at the private Sprott-Shaw Community College; tuition for the 12-month 3-D animation and visual-effects program at Vancouver Film School costs \$29,500; and the six-month program at the Pacific Institute of Culinary Arts costs \$12,070. Once you’re in one of these programs, there’s no room for dicking around or deciding that that career isn’t right for you.

Lorca, who decided multiple times that her programs were not right for her, discovered her

passion for nursing at the North Shore Compass Centre, a nonprofit career-counselling centre funded by Human Resources Development Canada. The 33-hour Implicit Career Search course offers unemployed Vancouverites the chance to reflect, individually and as part of a group, on the question “What do I want to offer the world?” It’s the kind of contemporary career counselling Jarvis advocates for a fulfilling and prosperous life.

“Every book I’ve read about career says, ‘Know yourself and your purpose,’ then they don’t give you the tools to do that,” the centre’s program coordinator, Sharon Clarke, told the Straight. Her clients often arrive only knowing that they’ve wasted 20 years working at a job they hate, and they’ve hit a wall. They’ve arrived at their average age of 42 without self-knowledge and without ever having taken the time to think deeply about what they want to offer the world.

Clarke’s dream is to offer her program to students transitioning from high school to university, before they get trapped in debt. Now the course is available to anyone—so long as they’re unemployed.

“Anyone who would like to get more focused about what they’re doing should take the Implicit Career Search,” Clarke said. “It can save you a lot of time and a lot of money.”

With tuition at a premium in 2005, it could be 33 hours well spent.