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Focusing on the Future: Experience from a Career-Related Program for High-Ability Students and Their Parents

One of the myths about gifted and high-achieving students is that they are self-directed and know where they are heading (Greene, 2005). However, according to a National Center for Education Statistics (2010) report, approximately 57% of first-time students seeking a bachelor's degree or its equivalent and attending a four-year institution full time in 2001–02 completed their programs at that institution in six years or less. Among the various reasons speculated by researchers is a lack of realistic postsecondary planning related to future career goals. This lack of planning may contribute to students not successfully completing a college education or to students spending more years to complete than the expected timeframe for undergraduate education (Gibbons, Borders, Wiles, Stephan & Davis, 2006). This article introduces a career development program designed for high ability middle and high school students and their parents and examines responses to open-ended questions related to the perceived benefits and effects of the program. The program was designed to help gifted students and their parents engage in career planning and develop specific career plans.

Career Development Issues for Gifted Students

Career development serves as a lifelong process requiring constant personal development of skills and knowledge (Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996). Krumboltz (1993) stated that individuals must prepare for diverse work skills required in an occupation and work to expand their capabilities and interests. Appropriate career development empowers students to make proper career decisions through providing information, encouraging self-awareness, enhancing self-concept, and helping students acquire the necessary knowledge and skills (Super, 1980;

Krumboltz, 1993). Schools often initiate interventions to improve students' academic achievement but do not make similar, career-related efforts in relation to academic interests or achievement.

Because learning experiences significantly influence career decision making in terms of self-efficacy and goal setting (Watters, 2010) for career and career education, teachers and counselors must consider students' interests and passions about their subject matter along with content knowledge. Doing so benefits students by providing relevant learning experiences that set high expectations toward future careers and achievements. In a study of 209 gifted high school students, their interests and love for a subject were the most important factors influencing their career choice (Kim, 2009). If students focus on academic achievement without connections to future career goals, they may wander in early adolescence and waste their time and energy rather than pursue long-term goals. McCash (2006) stressed the importance of career education rather than considering only academic subject-related courses for students' career preparation. McCash believed that if students can make the connection between academic content and practical work in the real world, they will understand better the value of academic learning. Therefore, schools should invest more effort in connecting academic courses with career achievement and provide high-quality experiences in terms of career-related education. For example, workshops with professionals will benefit students by providing them with a way to make connections between the academic class and career experiences.

To provide better career-related programs for students, researchers suggest effective interventions (Brown & Krane, 2000). Gifted learners have additional, particular needs to be addressed. In an effort to understand gifted and talented students' different needs in career development, Greene (2005) and Sparfeldt (2007) identified the unique issues of such students

related to career development, such as multipotentiality and the need for complex and intense career-related experiences and information based on their cognitive and academic ability levels. In addition, parental role appears to be a vital factor influencing the career development of gifted students (Ferreira, Santos, Fonseca, & Haase, 2007; Wigfield, Battle, Keller, & Eccles, 2002; Kim, 2009).

Multipotentiality. Multipotentiality is defined in career choice as “the interest and ability to succeed in so many vocational areas that choosing one career path becomes problematic” (Delisle & Squires, 1989, p. 98), which may work either positively or negatively. Some gifted students may benefit from multi-potentiality, acquiring opportunities to be involved in a variety of career choices, while others may find it difficult to make a decision with so many choices (Rysiew, Shore, & Leeb, 1999). However, Lubinski and Benbow (2006) proposed that the ceiling effect of assessment may lead to a misunderstanding about gifted students’ actual multipotentiality. They found that gifted students demonstrate their preferences in a specific subject earlier than students who are not gifted, indicating that such students need intense career-related guidance, based on their academic ability and interests, from an early age.

Need for complex and intense career-related experiences and information. Gifted students tend to have more intense curiosity and passion in their subjects of interest than do non-gifted students (Sparfeldt, 2007). In one study, even though students appeared to have difficulties in career decision-making because of a lack of information, guidance counselors did not provide sufficient information to address students’ need for career planning (Brown & Krane, 2000; Lent, Nota, Soresi, & Ferrari, 2007). In a study of gifted high school students, students complained that counselors lacked specific knowledge related to an occupation, had low expectations, false or inaccurate information, and lacked knowledge about diverse students

population among high school counselors (Kim, 2009). Opportunities for educational intervention for career development, focusing on individual needs, will strengthen students' talent development as well as their career development.

Need for in-depth information related to post-secondary education and career path.

The majority of students become aware that their majors in college were intended to help them reach their career goals (Kerr & Erb, 1991). Students without appropriate career development may experience confusion and find themselves lacking focus during adolescence. Students may experience confusion about their career paths if they make a career choice too early without enough information. Students, who make a career choice too early without enough information, may lose the opportunity to explore another career choice that is a better fit to their talents. Confusion caused by lack of information and inappropriate career development education may be expressed through dropping out of college or changing career goals (Kaufmann, 1981; Robinson, Shore, & Enersen, 2007). Greene (2005) stressed the importance of career education and of connecting careers and real life beyond school.

In order to adequately serve their students, career counselors must be aware of different needs of a diverse student population including high-achieving students. Students from various cultural backgrounds, ability-sets, and achievement levels have different career interests and expectations. Counselors can meet these different needs by providing in-depth information related to the interests of diverse student groups, including introduction to various career paths and required skills to be developed,

Need for parent education related to career development of their children. Parental expectations and support influence students' career development and career choices (Kim, 2009; Kotrlik & Harrison, 1989; Palmer & Cochran, 1988; Trusty, 1996). In an effort to to give parents

the tools to aid their adolescent children in career planning, Palmer and Cochran (1988) implemented the *Partners Program*. Forty tenth- and eleventh-grade students and their parents completed a four-week program, which resulted in better student understanding of their career paths. In a study of 209 high-achieving high school students, 47 percent of the total participants responded that parents' expectations and exposure to the extracurricular activities provided by parents were important influencing factors in their choice of career (Kim, 2009). Therefore, bringing parents into their children's career development process may enhance students' career planning, rather than simply allowing students to have multiple, unrelated career planning experiences. Even though parental influence is critical for students' career planning, training and informational resources for parents to support their children's career development remain limited (Clark & Horan, 2001). In order for gifted students' career development to be most effective, parents must have access to resources regarding a variety of career-related issues.

Gifted students need more systematic career development education connected to talent development, real life beyond schools, and parental support. The Focusing on the Future conference was designed to address the career development needs of gifted students. This conference serves as a career-related program for middle and high school students, open to educators, counselors, and parents, and designed to provide career-related information.

Focusing on the Future

Focusing on the Future is an annual career-related conference for high-achieving middle and high school students and their parents held by the Center for Gifted Education at the College of William and Mary. The Center for Gifted Education, founded in 1988, initiated a program to address high-ability students' career planning and to support parents with related information. Focusing on the Future consists of two opening sessions: *Academic Planning for Middle School*

Students and Their Parents and *A College Selection Process Panel Discussion for High School Students and Their Parents*. After the opening keynote, professionals present sessions covering various topics and career paths.

Students and parents attend two different strands of sessions. Students attend a mandatory session in which they complete a career inventory to assess their interest areas and provide direction regarding which career paths reflect their interest areas as long-term career possibilities.

Students are introduced to different career paths, promoting understanding of their career options. Professionals from different disciplines meet students and offer them guidance in their interest areas with accurate information regarding actual work in a career. Such in-depth information often goes beyond students' perceptions. Students choose three sessions from nearly 30 different disciplines. They have the opportunity in these sessions to engage in complex discussions on the work of these professionals. In some sessions, they participate in real-world activities that give them greater insight into the profession.

Sessions for parents offer valuable information related to issues of supporting gifted children's academic and career development. Parents select four topics out of 16 different sessions to attend throughout the day. Sessions include such practical issues as college entrance processes including SAT or ACT preparation and financial preparation for college and theoretical issues such as understanding gifted students' needs in academics and career preparation, social emotional issues, and different learning styles.

Parents and students are invited to attend a panel discussion with current college students during lunch time, providing them the opportunity to picture actual college life and to learn about academic or talent development opportunities in college. A local bookstore displays current and helpful materials for parents, offering materials for purchase on diverse topics related to gifted

children. A parent resource table includes a collection of articles and enrichment program information. Students and their parents have an opportunity to participate in a college tour provided by the university after the regular conference hours.

A total of 340 students and parents participated in the 2010 conference. Seventy parents and 29 students completed an evaluation form for the conference sessions. Each student and parent could choose up to four sessions through the conference. Sessions were rated on a 5-point scale: 1 signifies that the information presented will not help participants/participants' children with career/academic planning; 5 signifies that the information presented will strongly help participants/participants' children with career/academic planning. Parents and students were also asked about educational experiences related to career development of students in their schools and the aspects of the Focusing on the Future conference that they found most valuable as well as the benefits or positive effects received from the conference. In the evaluation of this program, the author examined responses to open-ended questions through content analysis in order to identify patterns among responses. Content analysis is an analytic strategy to examine forms of communication to obtain patterns within data (Rossman & Rallies, 2003). The findings of this study are useful in leading to recommendations for high-ability students and their parents to address the needs of career development.

Evaluation Responses

Students' responses. Students ($n=29$) listed the following as the benefits or effects received from the program. Responses from students (see Table 1) can be summarized into five benefits:

1. They could narrow down what they want to do in life. Many students (37% of responses) benefited from the program through getting more detailed information about their interest areas and being able to narrow these down.
2. They could get more detailed information about specific areas. Students who participated in the program appreciated access to detailed and in-depth information about their interest areas for their career path decision making, and middle school and high school students demonstrated different needs in career development education and requirements from the program.
3. They could become more confident about college life. High school students were able to find out more about college life during a panel discussion with current college students. The program also made clear the different needs of high school students from those of middle school students. Middle school students showed interests in academic planning in high school to align with their career goals. However, high school students were more interested in practical and authentic information toward their career goals.
4. Middle school students obtained ideas from the program about courses to take in high school. Middle school students mentioned that they benefited from planning their course work in high schools in order to gain relevant knowledge for their career path.
5. High school students demonstrated their interests were in authentic experiences in possible career options and information.

(Insert Table 1 here)

Parents' responses. The Focusing on the Future program required that students participate in the conference with their parents or guardians. Parents attended separate sessions concerning parental issues to support gifted and talented students' career development. Parents ($n=70$) listed the following as the benefits or positive effects that they received from the program. The responses from parents (see Table 2) can be summarized into seven benefits or positive effects:

1. Learning about college admission procedures and information such as SAT or ACT preparation. Parents were eager to have more accurate information, rather than rumors related to college admission, in order to help plan their children's career paths appropriately.
2. Being introduced to more varied career paths for their children. Responding parents were pleased to have an opportunity to become aware of the various career path options open to their children. In addition, parents were able to understand more about possible options for their children and the unique issues related to gifted and talented students' characteristics.
3. Having an opportunity to expose their children to career-related information. Only one parent stated that their children had experienced career-related programs in schools, and none of the parents had been given access to career-related information for their children's career development through the schools.
4. Learning about study abroad opportunities. One of parents stated that "The most valuable aspect of this program is to expose the world beyond high school and study abroad opportunities to my kid". Parents appreciated the opportunities to provide a larger picture of what their children are working toward.
5. Helping to encourage communication between children and parents regarding the child's career path. The availability of practical information on college admission procedures and

possible talent development options in college encouraged communication between students and parents.

6. Networking with other families. One parent stated that “hearing similar comments/questions from other parents and overlapping and divergent views of other parents on issues were valuable”. Parents wanted to hear from others and share information regarding their children’s career development.
7. Providing motivation for their children in terms of academic work related to their future career and scheduling for their career development.

(Insert Table 2 here)

From the parents’ responses, it appears that programs for parents are an important element of students’ career development. Parents and students indicated that the Focusing on the Future program provided more in-depth and thorough information, including more practical career-related and college preparation information, than their home schools did. In fact, most parent and student respondents could not identify a career program at their school.

Recommendation

This study surveyed only a small number of participants; therefore, it cannot provide a comprehensive list of recommendations, nor can it be more broadly generalized. The information provided, however, may be helpful in planning career development programs for middle and high school gifted and talented students. Because this study found different needs for career development for middle and high school students, recommendations from the responses of

participants are provided separately for middle school students, high school students, and their parents.

For middle school students.

- Academic planning during secondary school is important. As it is critical to help both middle and high school students get information about courses they will need to take in order to enroll in college or a post-secondary training program, middle school students need more systematic guidance in planning which courses to take in high school. Information about courses offered, available career education programs, counseling services related to GPA or other academic issues, and possible high school programs or services such as AP courses, dual enrollment services, honors programs, IB programs, and counseling services will guide students and parents in optimizing their efforts in middle school and high school to prepare for college and eventually for their career goals.
- Teachers and leaders in schools should understand that gifted and talented students need advanced and in-depth comprehension in a subject of interest in order to access meaningful knowledge in that discipline. In transition to middle schools, students are concerned about new expectations, rules, and responsibilities in the new environment, so they need help in goal setting and career awareness during these years (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Wagner, 2005). In addition, students need access to an integrated vocational and academic education. Promoting understanding of the broad scope of work and career possibilities available currently and in the future may promote intellectual development, higher-level thinking, and problem-solving skills, which tend to increase greatly in middle school years (Wagner, 2005).

- Various career-related educational programs such as short-term seminars with professionals, independent studies, and mentorships may benefit students in planning their career path. Not many middle school students have realistic career plans, and many lack awareness of the world of work (Finch & Mooney, 1997), so educators and counselors need to put efforts into helping students develop practical career plans and realistic perspectives. Workshops for career education designed to deal with detailed information, such as providing self-assessment opportunities to identify students' talents and preferences and providing opportunities to meet experts in various professional fields in order to address students' specific needs for information, will help students to have a more realistic understanding about themselves and possible career opportunities.
- To best provide guidance, teachers and counselors need to be knowledgeable about students with advanced academic abilities and various possible career paths. Teachers, counselors, and parents need to know a variety of developmentally appropriate career-related practices to provide each student with meaningful experiences.

For parents of middle school students.

- Parents need to be kept informed about their children's growth in academics and their interests in specific subjects, and they should be invited to participate in educational planning for their children.
- As a way of introducing various topics in depth, opportunities to access various enrichment programs may serve to identify where students' passions are. Passion for a subject is an important factor in choosing students' career paths, which many gifted students find through enrichment programs (Kim, 2009). Also, parents need to have access to various academic enrichment opportunities for their children's career development over the long run.

For high school students.

- Subject-related programs, such as AP courses and dual enrollment, should be strengthened to provide more content knowledge that will help them in considering their career path. Kim (2009) found that high school students benefitted from in-depth courses, such as AP courses and dual enrollment, among career-related programs. As Colangelo, Assouline, and Gross (2004) discussed, taking advanced courses might allow students to pursue more interests in a specific topic and have a chance to study a discipline in-depth, which can help them to develop their career paths. Therefore, in-depth knowledge in various subjects should be provided through advanced academic courses to help students identify their passions and career aspirations.
- More guidance is required to make connections with actual professionals, as in the Focusing on the Future conference. Also, providing hands-on experiences will strengthen students' understanding of the relationship between subject-related courses and actual career experiences, as Lent, Nota, Soresi, and Ferrari (2007) have pointed out. Based on their study of 354 senior students in Italy, they proposed that realistic academic major previews would provide useful information about students' career choices. Students identified gaps between what they expected and actual academic experiences. As a result, they showed decreased interest and expectations; however, the more knowledgeable students reported higher levels of interest, self-efficacy, and outcome expectation. The same study also indicated that realistic experience helped students adjust their expectations and interests based on more knowledge and experience in career areas. Participants in Lent et al.'s study expressed the need for practical experience about the subject to be studied in colleges in order to obtain more accurate information related to their career choices.

- Counselors need to be knowledgeable about curricula, accelerated courses, enrichment classes, summer opportunities for the gifted, and various educational options. Kim (2009) reported that high-achieving students were not satisfied that guidance counselors' career-related knowledge was appropriately serving their needs. Guidance counselors' knowledge and expertise should be an integral part of planning for undergraduate study and future career paths.
- Administrators need to support counselors in keeping up with rapidly changing occupational trends and internship or mentorship opportunities to meet student career development needs and to guide students through an appropriate program of career decision making and planning.

For parents of high school students.

- Parents should be kept informed about their children's growth in academics, possible career options, college admission procedures, and possible activities to develop their career path in college. More practical and in-depth college admission information should be provided. In the survey, parents expressed their satisfaction about the Focusing on the Future conference because they were provided practical information about college admission. Survey responses indicated that parents and students fear the process of college admission, and want detailed and accurate information regarding it. College is the first step in building students' career paths, and proper guidance for college admission procedures and college life will promote students' appropriate career development. As SATs and ACTs do not tell students about their likely success in a future career, students and parents need information about these exams, because these test scores are a significant element in the college admission process. Addressing the need for college admission information is important for students' academic

success. In addition, counselors believe—albeit erroneously—that academically able students should be able to make career decisions and go through college admission procedures themselves before making any "real" career plans. However, students and parents who participated in Focusing on the Future said that they are eager for information about college admission procedures and want guidance counselors to provide practical information in terms of college admission preparation for high-achieving students.

Conclusion

Middle school and high school students are in different stages of academic and career development and have different needs regarding both. The middle school students and parents indicated that the program was helpful in deciding courses to take at high school. High school students and parents stated that the program was beneficial because of practical information such as college admission information as well as in-depth information in a variety of subjects.

Although gifted and talented students may pursue interests with a passion that is more mature than typical of children their age, this does not mean that these students are ready to plot a career path independently or that they are mature enough to make suitable decisions during the complex career decision-making process. Parents and students who attended the Focusing on the Future program indicate that guiding students depending on their developmental stages would be beneficial, as Greene (2005) identified. Therefore, it is crucial that school counselors at all grade levels become familiar with some of the important career development issues facing this student population. Although this study is not sufficient to provide the whole developmental picture for gifted and talented students, experiences from the career-related conference, Focusing on the Future, highlight the importance of understanding the different needs of gifted students, based on their different developmental stages, and the importance of the facilitation of different

counseling strategies. By understanding the different needs, we can help gifted students to plan their career goals and make their unique contribution to society.

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Table 1.

Students' responses about the benefits of attending Focusing on the Future Conference

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Narrowing down interests	7	37%
authentic experiences	4	21%
Get detailed information	3	16%
Information on college life	3	16%
Academic planning	2	12%

Table 2.

Parents' responses about the benefits of attending Focusing on the Future Conference

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
College admission procedure information	14	34%
Opportunity to expose their children to career related information	10	25%
Introduction to various career paths	4	10%
Academic motivation	5	12%
Communication between children and parents	3	7%
Networking	3	7%
Information on study abroad program	2	5%