

A new paradigm for education and career goal development — Academica Forum

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We've heard the debates about how much postsecondary institutions should focus on training students to enter specific careers. Many argue that the traditional role of these institutions—especially universities—is to equip students with the reflective and critical thinking skills they'll need for a lifetime of learning. Others argue that institutions should provide students with an education that helps them find good jobs after graduation.



But what if this entire debate is based on a false choice? What if the same skills that encourage reflective, critical thinking are also the bedrock for finding and pursuing a meaningful career?

The situation facing students

Students today are increasingly being told that their careers will probably follow non-linear paths and involve a number of different jobs, or that the career best suited to them is one that doesn't yet exist. To make things even more complicated, career development professionals and policy strategists have acknowledged that labour market information can only shape this new reality in a limited way, as it is often focused on specific regions and only applicable in the short-term.

So at roughly 17 years of age, students confront a confusing array of messages and choices.

With respect to career attitudes, the majority of today's student population falls somewhere between two polar groups: those who don't yet know what career they want to pursue, and those who do. These groups live in a world where students are also being confronted with a new set of pressures associated with higher ed in general, and these pressures are:

- Increasing costs (and debt)
- Increasing choice (more institutions, platforms to choose from)
- Decreasing certainty of outcome (the “promise” of a good job after graduation)

As these pressures mount, students often feel as though they face an increasingly stark choice between using PSE for personal exploration and using it to get a good job after graduation. Or to use the words of one Financial Post writer, they feel that “the right education has never been more valuable and the wrong education has never been more expensive.” [1]

Working toward a new understanding

Students want to find stable, meaningful work after graduation. But this doesn't mean that choosing (and more importantly, committing to) a specific career is easy for them.

Many members of the university community consider the undergraduate degree to be an ideal opportunity for students to explore their areas of interest and passion. The question of how these areas relate to specific careers, though, is rarely integrated into traditional curricular learning and often left to career counselling offices.

Some schools and private sector partners, however, are beginning to address the school-to-work transition through a more holistic approach, one that acknowledges how the decision to choose, train for, and enter a specific career is something students consider with every class they attend and every resource they access.

At [Academica Group](#), we have been surveying incoming students for over 20 years consecutively. The following findings come from a question in our [UCAS](#) studies that asks applicants why they chose to apply to PSE [2]. We have seen the results stay relatively consistent for two decades now, and this trend plays an integral part in the debate concerning career preparation and the role of PSE.

It should come as little surprise to learn that “To prepare to enter my chosen career” is the reason most commonly cited by students for entering PSE. What might be more surprising, though, is that this reason does not stand alone. In fact, it’s only one part of an entire ecosystem of motives that bring students into higher education. For example, we find that more intrinsic motives like “For personal and intellectual growth” or “To increase my knowledge and understanding of an academic field” are never very far behind in students’ minds.

Top Ten Reasons for Applying to PSE: University

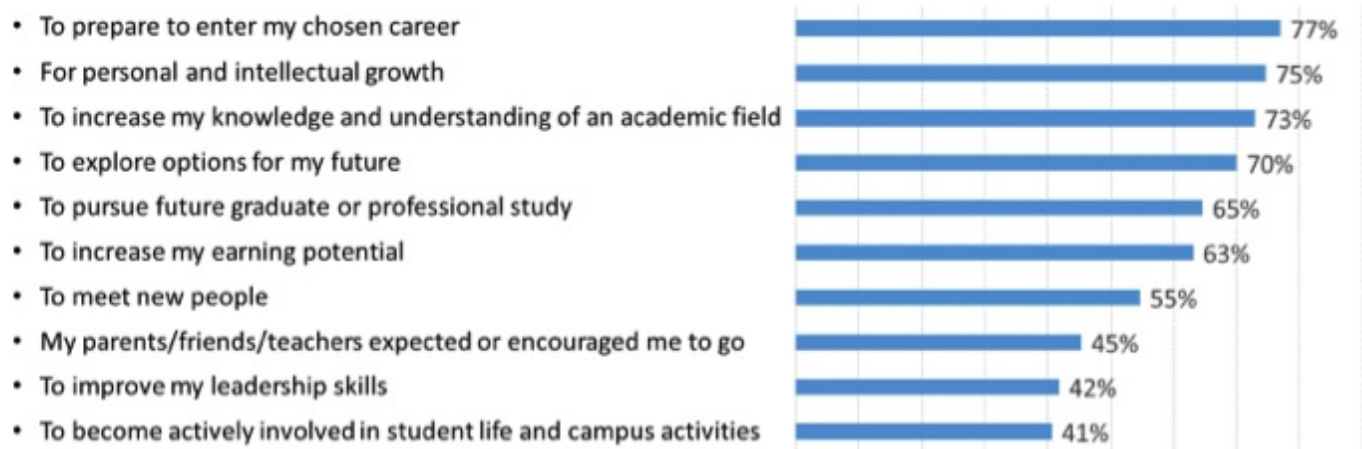


Figure 1

Even with college students, it can hardly be said that career preparation stands as the sole motivation for entering PSE. While college students showed a bigger gap between career preparation and the next most common reason for applying to PSE, it is still worth noting that over 60% of incoming college students expect PSE to help them “Explore options for my future” (61%) and contribute to “Personal and intellectual growth.”

Top Ten Reasons for Applying to PSE: College

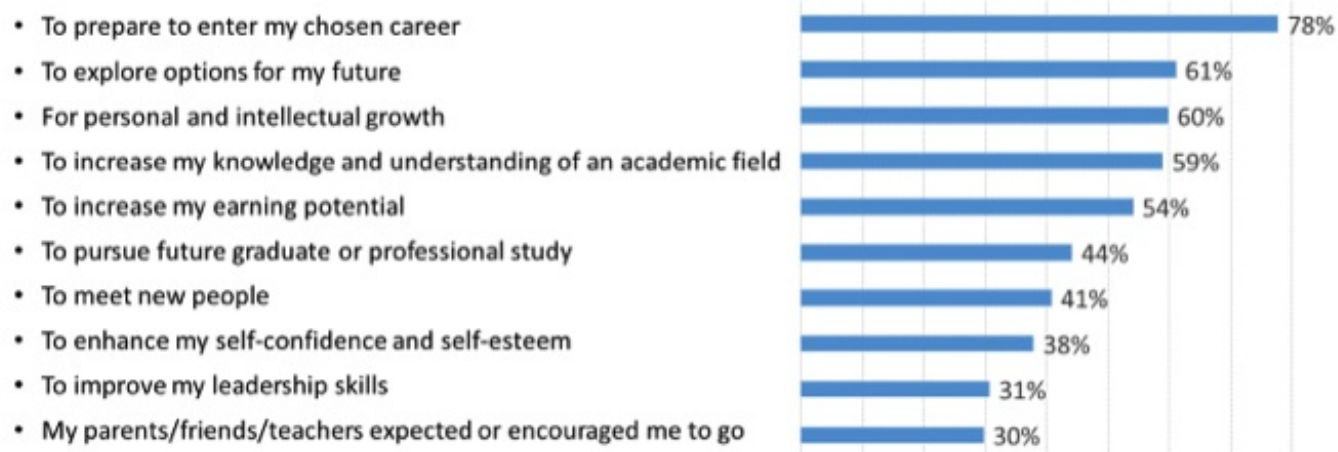


Figure 2

We can conclude from these findings that while incoming postsecondary students clearly want their education to prepare them for a specific career, they also embrace the intrinsic learning goals that are traditionally associated with higher learning.

So what are we to make of these findings?

It's all well and good to say that preparing to enter a chosen career is the top reason for students to enter PSE, yet this finding is also based on a major assumption—that students are already 100% sure of what career they want to pursue when they enter PSE. Yet how often is this assumption true? Consider students' desire to "explore options for my future," which sits only 7% behind career preparation for university students and is the #2 most cited motive for college students. The fact that such large proportions of students enter PSE to explore options for their future reminds us that regardless of whether students are certain about their career path, exploration remains a key motive for the majority.

The available data confirms that personal development, academic learning, and career exploration should not be separated when we talk about the goals of postsecondary education. And while this conclusion might have always been true, our traditional approaches to the design and delivery of PSE have understandably stressed learning and personal development while treating career exploration and development as distinct objectives. Given the growing pressures that students face and the shifting employment landscape that we've described above, this approach is becoming increasingly dysfunctional.

The pivot

We believe that it is time for a shift toward an institutional strategy that integrates both critical reflection and career preparation more deliberately into and across every aspect of postsecondary education, ushering in a new paradigm of education and career goal development. In our view, this approach should strengthen the role and importance of both the traditional liberal arts disciplines and the range of intrinsic goods associated with higher learning, in combination with the learning of specific job-based skills.

We believe that the need in this area has never been greater and that it will continue to grow. And, where there is need, there is opportunity. Postsecondary institutions have the opportunity to undertake a deliberate review and

realignment of their existing resources (i.e. academic advising, career counselling, and career services) with an aim to develop more integrated and scalable 'education and career goal development' programming. This can and should be done in collaboration with academic departments, with the goal of building consensus around a culture where higher learning's traditional objectives and career competency development are mutually reinforced.

We understand that it's one thing to call for a new educational paradigm and another to show how it would actually work in the real world. That's why we will continue to publish new articles on education and career goal development in the coming weeks and months. In our next piece, we'll be sitting down with Matt Thomas, a researcher and entrepreneur whose work on navigating non-linear careers has appeared in the *Harvard Business Review*.

Designing higher ed for the 21st century.

Continue this conversation with Rod Skinkle, who will be providing a keynote on this subject and joining an exciting line-up of higher ed leaders and innovators at a groundbreaking new conference '[Higher Education in Transformation](#).'

Endnotes

1. <http://business.financialpost.com/personal-finance/can-you-make-money-going-back-to-school-as-an-adult-it-all-depends-on-what-degree-you-choose>
2. Figure 1 & 2 data are from surveys of roughly 50,000 college and university applicants collapsed across 2010-2015 University and College Applicant Surveys (UCASTM).

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