

CHAPTER ONE

Getting Real

New Realities for Postsecondary Success

The fact is that large numbers of college graduates leave school as unsure of what they will do “when they grow up” (except perhaps continue to go to school) as they were when they started.

—California Postsecondary Education Commission, 2007

Despite a decade or more of state and federal efforts to improve the academic performance of public high schools, success has been marginal at best. Increased graduation requirements, emphasis on math and science, efforts to put a qualified teacher in every classroom, and, of course, mandated proficiency testing have had little real impact at the high school level. On the contrary, in some ways things have gotten worse, especially for the half of all high school students who either drop-out or go to work after graduating. Among those who do go off to college, success is equally illusive. It should be obvious to all that an emphasis on academics alone to improve the American high school are not going to ensure widespread success for most teens. It is time to recognize that teens need help in other areas. I argue that helping them face reality and develop a postsecondary plan based on at least a tentative career interest is one important, and too often overlooked, way to help more teens be successful.

High School Dropouts and the Work-Bound

Since 1990, the national high school dropout rate has increased from one-quarter of all entering ninth graders to almost one-third. For the graduating class of 2006, this amounted to almost 1.2 million teens (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007). Among African Americans, 48 percent did not graduate on time with a regular diploma; among Hispanics, the rate was 44 percent. It has been estimated that 3.8 million young adults ages 18–24 are neither in school nor working, an increase of 700,000 from 2000 to 2004.

Of those who do graduate, 30 percent go to work directly after high school. Despite the hype about increasing college enrollment, the number of students enrolling in college as a percentage of all entering ninth graders, including those who drop out of high school, still hovers around half. Unless they have taken career and technical education (CTE) in high school, less than 20 percent of those who go to work will receive any formal on-the-job training, suggesting their fate is low-skill/low-wage work. In fact, except for those who do take CTE, the experience of these high school graduates is not much different from those who drop out. Both face unemployment, less than full-time employment, employment in low-skill/low-wage service and food industries, lack of health insurance, etc. Postsecondary success would seem to have eluded many of these teens.

The College-Bound

Agencies, schools, governments, and researchers have spent a lot of time counting and calling for further increases in college enrollments. Few, particularly among the ranks of high education administrators and lobbyists, seem interested in the logical next question—namely, “How many are successful?”

For most American youths, virtually all barriers to college, including academic ability, have been removed. While the cost of college continues to increase faster than inflation, it has not had any apparent effect on the number of teens matriculating, which is predicted to continue to increase. In the meantime, the fixation on enrollment masks a dark truth: Most teenagers who attempt college fail. Either they do not graduate or they do not find

commensurate employment if they do. Even when tracking students who leave one institution to transfer to another, the six-year university/college graduation rate is around 60 percent (Adelman, 2003). Meanwhile, only one-third of those who enter two-year colleges intending to transfer to a university actually do so. Of these, only one-third graduate in six years; the resultant success rate is 11 percent, or, conversely, the dropout rate is 89 percent. At best the combined higher education dropout rate at two- and four-year institutions is 50 percent or more. And then there is the fact—a fact colleges again would rather you forget—that among those who graduate, half or more, depending on their major, cannot find commensurate employment.

Among recent college graduates, a growing number each year leave college with student loan debt, a degree, and no job. Many ultimately join the ranks of “gray collar” workers—workers who are employed in jobs that are not commensurate for their education and pay too little when compared to the cost of these degrees. It is estimated from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (1993) *Baccalaureate and Beyond* study that as many as half of all baccalaureate graduates find themselves in this situation. Among arts and science majors, it is two out of three. Thus, it would seem postsecondary success has eluded many of these college-bound students as well.

If postsecondary success is the goal, there would seem to be room for improvement. Clearly the present single emphasis on academics has done little to increase postsecondary success—and in some ways has made it worse. The purpose of this book is to make the argument that success can be improved for all students—those who are at risk of dropping out, those who graduate and go to work, and those who go to college—by helping teens develop a sense of direction, a basis for staying in school to graduate; to go to work prepared to compete for employment that pays a family-sustaining wage; and to go to college, graduate, and find a job that is equal to their education.

A NEW GOAL: POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS

In light of high school dropout rates, the experience of high school graduates who seek full-time employment without job skills, and

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widespread postsecondary failure, it's time to set new goals for teens and the institutions that prepare them. The simplistic goal of preparing everyone for college is flawed. First, half of all teens either drop out of high school or go to work when they graduate. For most, they do so because they have had enough of school, not because they are not admitted or lack funds. Second, of those who go to college, half drop out; and of those who do graduate, only half find commensurate employment. Thus, most who try college also fail. A new goal is needed. That goal should be postsecondary success for all.

Every student will graduate from high school having developed a postsecondary plan that is grounded in at least tentative career choices and has a high probability of success.

The new benchmark should be how graduates do the first year after high school. A postsecondary plan with a high probability of success for some youths will be matriculation at a university, but for many others, alternatives need to be considered, particularly pre-bachelor's degree technical education or even taking a year off, a "prep" year, before enrolling.

Success rates will increase only when students and parents start making better decisions that are based on thought-out career directions and at least consider alternatives to baccalaureate education. Making such decisions requires career direction. For this generation, the number one predictor of postsecondary success, particularly in college, is not grades (today it is all but impossible to flunk out of college), but rather having a goal or the commitment that comes from career maturity and career direction (Cope & Hannah, 1975). As much as anything, doing so revolves around impressing upon all involved that for this generation, there is a fourth "R."

CAREER DIRECTION AND THE "FOURTH" R

Postsecondary success for this generation requires two ingredients: academic skills and commitment. The commitment comes from having a plan for after high school. For most this plan

includes, if not centers on, a career focus. Researchers find that the two strongest predictors of graduating from college are: (1) high school grade point average—thus academic skills—and (2) career maturity/focus (Allen, 2008). Whereas the former, academic skills, has been the traditional focus of the schools, the latter has not. High schools that are committed to promoting postsecondary success need to add a second focus: creating a program to provide all students with an opportunity to develop at least a tentative career focus that is grounded in reality, not fantasy.

Past generations were schooled according to the three “Rs”: reading, writing, and arithmetic. For this generation, a fourth “R”—*reality*—has become just as important. All too many teens drift in college with little or no thought as to why. They, and all too often their parents, embark at great expense on a path that is completely void of any consideration of reality. Fearful they may discourage teens, adults often overtly or covertly communicate that unrealistic plans for after high school are OK. Both hope that reality will settle in while in higher education. Not so for most. A study of the effectiveness of the California higher education system in preparing students for employment concluded that one of the biggest obstacles was a widespread lack of direction even among those who actually persisted to graduate. Alarming, and thus the title of this book, many have plans, but they are totally unrealistic in that they ignore their own abilities/talents and the labor market competition they will face. The purpose of this book is to guide those who would promote postsecondary success for this generation by helping teens “get real.”

CAREER MATURITY AND CAREER DIRECTION

Parents, teachers, and even most teens recognize the nexuses between academic skills, as indicated by grades, and college entrance exams and admissions. Of students with a C average in high school who enroll in a four-year college, only 8 percent complete a bachelor’s degree, compared with 54 percent of those with an A average (Astin & Dey, 1989). It should be noted, however, that many students with good high school grades and test scores also drop out of college. Although students with a combined SAT score of 1,300 or higher are five times more likely to graduate

from college than those with a 700, the surprising thing is that only two-thirds of these academically blessed students actually graduate. Academically, these students are obviously all dressed up and ready to go, but if they do go and graduate, all too many end up underemployed.

Success in college depends on many factors, only one of which is academic ability. The research of Tinto (1993), Bean and Metzner (1996), and others on why students leave college provides additional answers. Students leave for four main reasons: (1) poor academic skills, (2) lack of money, (3) feelings of alienation at college, and (4) lack of commitment to graduating.

The last, lack of commitment, often stems from a lack of a clear goal or reason for attending in the first place; for many, this reason is career related. Of the variables associated with lack of persistence, lack of focus or commitment is too often overlooked, but it is important. It is worth observing, for example, that returning adults as a group always have greater success in college. Having been out of formal education for years, this success cannot be attributed to academic skills. It can be attributed, however, to the fact that they are much more career focused.

The importance of commitment or focus in predicting persistence to graduate is illustrated by noting the time when students are the most likely to drop out of college. Many never survive the freshman year. Nationally, 27 percent of matriculating college students drop out their first year. Subtracting those who leave between semesters, about one-third of the rest depart in the first three weeks of the first semester. Considering that, in many large universities, it may take that long just to find classes, it is clear that these students did not want to be in college in the first place; their commitment was zero. Important to note is that some of these students are among the most academically qualified.

Another common time for students to leave is between the sophomore and junior years. Although most college students can hang around and take courses forever, to get a degree, a student must eventually choose a major. For many, this is the moment of truth. They had no specific interest when they enrolled, and two years later they are still clueless. Facing mounting student loan debt and little motivation, many simply leave. Others stick around and engage in a new pastime known as “major of the month.”

These students change college academic majors frequently—one reason why the average time to graduate from a public four-year college is now more than five years.

Although changing a major can be a sign of developing career focus, changing majors frequently and randomly is not. Changing majors is not benign either. At most universities, changing a major means another year, which increases both the cost and time necessary to obtain a degree. For most students who change majors frequently and randomly, graduation means under-employment. They entered college not knowing where they were headed, and they graduated the same way. In the end, they chose a major that was the quickest or easiest route to getting out with a degree. They would have been wise to heed the advice contained in *Workforce 2020* (Judy & D'Amico, 1997):

Simply getting a college degree, regardless of major, will not be all that helpful for those entering the twenty-first century workplace. The specific field of study matters a great deal—far more than simply getting a diploma. Students should focus their energies acquiring the specific skills and kinds of knowledge demanded by occupations that are both growing rapidly and paying well. (p. 69)

Had many of today's college graduates heeded this advice in the first place, they would have graduated dressed up and with somewhere to go. Likewise, many who dropped out would have persisted to graduation. In a study of community college students, for example, Kostelba (1997) found that those who enrolled in occupation-specific programs—indicating a specific career interest and thus a reason for attending—were statistically more likely to graduate. These students knew why they had enrolled. They had achieved an appropriate level of career maturity.

Defining Career Maturity

What is the definition of *career maturity*? Like all forms of maturity, what is considered mature behavior for a seven-year-old differs from that considered mature for an eighteen-year-old. Career fantasy, unencumbered by reality, is natural and desirable

in the elementary grades, but by high school such fantasy is a sign of career immaturity. Career maturity is demonstrated by teenagers of high school age when they:

1. Understand the importance of narrowing career interests as a basis for postsecondary planning;
2. Have, by the tenth grade, identified one or more career interests after an objective evaluation of their likes and dislikes, their aptitudes, and labor market projections;
3. Have, by the end of the twelfth grade, engaged in activities to verify these choices; and
4. Used these choices to make post-high school decisions.

Operationalized, this definition of career maturity suggests that high school seniors should exhibit four characteristics upon graduation:

1. They understand that career direction, even a tentative one, is as important to postsecondary success as good grades.
2. They have made tentative choices by the tenth grade.
3. They have taken actions that would verify these choices during their final two years of high school.
4. They use these decisions as one focus for postsecondary planning.

CAREER EXPLORATION ACTIVITIES AND CAREER MATURITY

While the goal is to develop higher levels of career maturity among teens in order to promote greater postsecondary success, *career exploration* is the term commonly given to programs and activities that are designed to promote career maturity.

Examples of career development activities:

- Career interest inventories
- Career exploration Web sites
- Job shadowing

- Internships
- School-sponsored work experience programs
- Curriculum-based programs (career majors, career academies, career clusters)
- Career and Technical Education (CTE)
- Work-study, cooperative education

Getting Real the Old-Fashioned Way

The process or rationale of “getting real” is simple and old-fashioned. Deciding what to do after high school should be based on: (1) a realistic personal assessment of individual likes and dislikes, as well as strengths and weaknesses as they relate to labor market opportunities; (2) making tentative career decisions based on this assessment; and (3) exploring alternatives and plans for preparing to pursue these interests after high school. Perhaps most important is the attitude implied by these behaviors: namely, that success comes from planning and that planning requires knowing the direction in which one wants to head. Today many teens take a far different view. They go to college, sit back, and see what will happen when it is over. Many do not have to wait very long. Lacking any commitment, they soon leave. This is true even among the academically blessed.

Students who start college intending to major in engineering are a good example. Among entering freshmen that plan to major in engineering, many change their minds quickly. For example, at prominent engineering colleges it is not unusual for 50 percent of women and 40 percent of men to drop the major by the end of their freshman year. What’s the reason for the high rate? Students admitted to engineering are always among the most academically blessed on campus. For many, the problem is not the academics, but rather that they had no idea what they were getting into or what they really wanted in the first place. In most cases, they elected engineering solely on the advice of others without making any effort to find out what a practicing engineer does or what studying to be an engineer entails. When they finally get started in

their engineering major—sometimes not until the junior year in college—they discover a little too late that it's not for them. Although they may have been academically mature, they exhibited all the signs of career immaturity.

The Goal of Informed Choice and Tentative Career Direction

Notice that, among teens, developing career maturity does not mean forcing them to make decisions at age eighteen on the “one best” career for them or—to use the conventional wisdom—locking them into this decision. The goal is to help them make a tentative choice that is *informed*—meaning based on some logical process and reality. The hope is that much of the narrowing down process will take place during the high school years and not while incurring great expense in college or enduring disappointments in the labor market. Many teens will change their minds later, but if they make good decisions in the first place, their new interests should relate to the originals. Also, many teens will find it impossible to narrow their interests and choices to just one career focus. If so, some logical nexuses between these multiple career interests are necessary.

A high school senior who expresses an interest in both computer-aided manufacturing and computer graphic design and makes postsecondary plans accordingly is exhibiting career maturity. A high school senior who expresses an interest in being either an astronaut or a tattoo artist may need some assistance. Why? Because there are significant occupational similarities between computer-aided manufacturing and computer graphic design, but there are none between astronaut and tattoo artist.

Rethinking Our Attitude Toward Career Decision Making

The hopes and dreams of many of today's youths are hopelessly out of sync with their aptitudes and other realities. Beyond a vague notion of wanting a good job in order to make a decent living, many teens have few specific hopes and dreams. This is not totally their fault, however. Until now, the conventional wisdom has been that the lack of career focus among teens not only is normal, but also may be desirable.

It is interesting to observe that whereas lack of academic maturity—meaning poor skills and thus poor grades—is generally considered cause for concern, lack of commitment stemming from career focus is not. For example, a teacher, counselor, or parent may sense trouble ahead for a high school senior who is planning to go to college but has yet to pass the first level of algebra. But no such concerns are expressed about A-average students who do not know why they are going to college. This double standard seems to be rooted in outdated notions about the labor market this generation will face and in outdated beliefs about the danger of making career decisions.

Two old “saws” illustrate these attitudes. The first is, “Be careful about making career decisions too early; you don’t want to close any doors.” The second is, “Don’t panic if you have no career interests; you will decide that in college.” As is discussed in later chapters, both are terrible pieces of advice to give today’s teens. The enlightenment parents hope for and colleges promise more often than not end up being misplaced hope and unfulfilled promises (Lang, 2008).

Suffice it to say for now that, for this generation, a lack of commitment predicts failure in higher education, and career focus is the best source of such commitment. This book is predicated on one main thesis.

For this generation, career maturity is as important as academic maturity. Both predict post-high school success.

CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS: ARE THEY EFFECTIVE?

It seems appropriate now to address a fundamental question, namely, “Do career development programs work?” Do they promote high school and postsecondary success? Research suggests they do. Perhaps the most comprehensive study is that done by MPR Associates (Visher, Bhandari, & Medrich, 2004) that used a sample of 5,300 students taken from the National Longitudinal Study (NLS) data set. The analysis compared matched pairs of

students who had and had not participated in one or more career exploration programs while in high school. Seven career exploration activities were tracked: career majors, cooperative education, internship/apprenticeships, job shadowing, mentoring, school sponsored enterprises, and tech prep. Analysis found that participants were: (1) more likely to stay in school to graduate, and (2) more likely to go to college and more likely to enroll in one- and two-year technical programs.

Career exploration participation seems to motivate those who are on the fence about whether to go to college or not, and choices of college major are more likely to be career related. The researchers suggest that while the focus of educational reform efforts have been mostly on academics in order to increase college enrollment, career exploration programs also are effective in promoting the same goal—increasing higher education participation, particularly among a group of teens who would not have attended otherwise.

There is also research evidence that participation in career exploration activities, and thus increased career maturity, also promotes postsecondary success as well. Allen (2008) studied freshman at a large university branch campus and found that along with high school grade point average, career maturity was positively related to both freshmen year grade point averages and persisting to the sophomore year.

SOCIETY'S AMBIVALENCE ABOUT CAREER CHOICE

Although most people would agree that schools are responsible for instilling academic maturity among the college-bound, they are uncertain about who or what is responsible for career maturity. For example, some believe that the best way for a teenager to maximize his or her opportunities is to postpone any career decision as long as possible—go to college and see what happens afterward. Others worry that making students deal with the reality will discourage them. Not wanting to “step on teenagers’ dreams,” they prefer to keep quiet and let the teens drift. Thus, the focus is on getting students into college, not on facing what will happen after they get there.

Still others (sometimes for historically sound reasons) see a plot afoot. To them, career exploration in any form is simply a new “code word” for social engineering. They point out, accurately, that students from impoverished homes are already the least likely to attend college and the most likely to end up in low-paying jobs. Even though *career exploration* may be the preferred term, they believe that more “persuasion” than “exploration” is going on and that teenagers are being told what they can and cannot do. Along the same lines, some view efforts to assist teens in developing career maturity as an infringement on family rights; the attitude is that schools should stick to academics while parents tell their children what to do after high school graduation.

Added to these concerns is the thorny issue of “false negatives.” The fact is that some people beat the odds, and it is virtually impossible to predict who those will be. A few individuals succeed when all objective data would suggest otherwise. In fact, those who do are like folk heroes: They personify the American dream. Had they made logical decisions and not tried, they would not have succeeded. Knowledge of those who beat the odds seems to devalue the importance of objective planning.

While recognizing the sincerity and evidence for all these views, we are obligated to think about the alternative that we, as a nation, have chosen and its results. Because we do not want to discourage youths, because we worry about unequal effects, and because we remember those who beat the odds, policymakers have created a higher education capacity that can accommodate everyone and thus allow all to avoid reality—but only for a short time.

Higher Education/Labor Market Darwinism

Little attention is paid to what may be the real function of higher education in the United States. It is not creating opportunity: Honest numbers suggest that as few as one-third ever graduate from college and end up with commensurate employment, and these tend to be the children of the upper middle class. Nor is it the transmission of culture—television and other mass media, not universities, are now the preservers and transmitters of culture. What, then, is the real function of higher education?

One thing higher education does very well is society’s dirty work: It sorts the fit from the unfit. If the college system fails to

weed out all the unfit, the labor market will finish the job in Machiavellian fashion. Although we let everyone pursue his or her fantasies in college, the majority will fail at great expense. We call it equal opportunity. It can just as well be called higher education/labor market Darwinism. What we have done, in fact, is create a system in which youths (and parents) can postpone facing reality. In the end, though, the reality comes at great expense for most.

So, what is the answer? Are creating opportunity and realistic career planning incompatible? Perhaps Herr and Cramer (1996) provide a middle ground for these differing points of view regarding teenage career decision making:

One cannot choose what one does not know about, does not know how to prepare for, or how to gain access to. (p. 126)

If the goal of democracy is individual opportunity, meaning equal access to competition for desirable employment, how can one exercise this right without knowing what the options are? As Herr and Cramer (1996) point out, one cannot prepare to compete for what one does not know about, and it should be clear that, to date, institutions of higher education have not proven to be very good places to make these sorts of determinations. Even if they were, they're one of the most expensive places in the world to do it. Teens themselves realize the importance of having career goals. In follow-up surveys of high school graduates, students with all levels of academic ability indicate a wish to have had more opportunity to explore careers in college (Gray, Malizia, & Huang, 1993). They look to schools, not necessarily to tell them what they should or should not do, but for help in making these decisions.

THE ROLE OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Much of the ambivalence among educators regarding career development programs revolves around confusion about their role in the programs. This confusion seems to be based on the misconception that career guidance entails educators telling teenagers what they should or should not do after graduation from high school. This is not the point at all. The goal is to assist them in

making informed choices. Despite our efforts, many will still pursue postsecondary plans that have little probability of success, but in our society that is their right.

Clearly the decision regarding post-high school plans is for students and parents to make. Schools help them be in a position, if they wish, to make informed, reality-based decisions. This attitude or approach is similar to the consumerist movement in America, wherein the philosophy is that individuals have a right to be informed, but the decision is still theirs to make. For example, despite overwhelming evidence that smoking is hazardous to one's health, anyone over a certain age is free to buy cigarettes. The government's role is not to make the decision, but to provide consumers with information in the hope that they will make better, more mature decisions.

Career development programs in schools are developed around the same philosophy. The point is not to make the decision for teens, but to make teens "better informed" decision makers. Why? So that more will ultimately be successful. The bottom line is that students and parents report wanting help with career decision making.

Most parents' hopes and dreams for their children include college. Given that reality, most parents also want their children to graduate and, after they do, land college-level jobs. With this goal in mind, parents seem to be sensing the need for their children to be focused. In one representative study conducted by PBS, 93 percent of adults thought that providing seminars that relayed information on career options and the skills required for various careers was an appropriate role for public schools; 94 percent approved of school-sponsored, work-based internships (Polls Show Support, 1998, p. 6). The widespread success of the Bring Your Daughter to Work program is another indicator of growing parental concern about the need for career focus.

Although parents understand this need, they are less and less likely to be able to do the job alone. In times past, parents' occupations were typically the dominant influence in the career interests of their teens. Not any longer. A recent Harris poll reports, for example, that 62 percent of entering college freshmen would not "even consider" pursuing the same career as either parent (Carey & Parker, 1998). Thus, although some family rights groups argue that setting career direction is the role of the family and not of

the school, this is a minority view. Data suggest that, in fact, the family is playing a smaller and smaller role in this process, leaving nothing to take its place. This is not to say that parents are no longer important influences in teens' postsecondary plans, but they are increasingly less prepared to influence or guide career decision making. This decline in parental influence is not surprising considering that half of all workers report being unsatisfied with their jobs and would not recommend that their children follow in their footsteps. Although the stated goal of the majority of teens is a professional career, two-thirds of all adults with professional careers say they wish they had done something else. In this vacuum parents are looking to the schools for help in developing in their teens a level of career maturity along with academic maturity.

MAKING THE CASE FOR CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

Individuals who seek to promote career maturity among teens via career exploration activities face many challenges. Often it begins with a need to convince skeptical teens and adults of its importance. Presented below are five arguments to make such a case; each will be elaborated on in subsequent chapters. We need to take career focus seriously for this generation because:

Rationale 1: High School Dropout Prevention and the Work-Bound

It is predicted that the next educational reform issue in the United States will be dropout prevention. It will overshadow testing and No Child Left Behind. There is little need to focus on test results when one-third of the teens are no longer in school anyway. Another group that is sure to draw attention are those who graduate but go to work full-time. If for no other reason than reality, these two groups together make up half of entering ninth graders and they are needed to solve dramatic shortages of workers with middle-level skills. As such, these teens already get much attention by reformers and employers. The research is clear that career development/exploration efforts, especially when coupled

with CTE, are very effective at reducing dropouts and are the only programs in the American high school that prepare graduates to compete for family-sustaining employment.

Rationale 2: Postsecondary Failure and Student Loan Debt

Today more than half of all high school graduates pursue postsecondary plans that end in failure. Reviewing the numbers: 69 percent of high school graduates go directly to college; 72 percent enroll within two years of graduation, two-thirds of whom enroll in four-year colleges, but 30 percent or more must take remedial education; about half graduate within six years, and of those who do, one in two goes underemployed. The half who go on to college who drop out and the half who do graduate who are forced to take jobs they are overeducated for have a common problem—student loan debt and wages that make paying them off problematic.

Nationally, at least two-thirds of all students receive some form of financial aid, and at least two-thirds of this aid is student loans. It is estimated that the average student loan debt is now \$21,000. Between 2005 and 2006 alone, the student loan debt level increased 8 percent. Of note is the increases that were most apparent at the higher debt amounts: In all cases, debt level above \$20,000 increased (The Project on Student Debt, 2007).

Postsecondary education failure rates, underemployment, and rising student loan debt are powerful arguments that maybe teens and parents ought to get realistic about college and career choice. Neither, I suspect, looks forward to the prospect of the most recent college graduate moving back home because they cannot afford to live anywhere else. Obviously there is room for improvement. How can the success rate be improved? Research is clear. Two things are important: academic skills and the commitment that comes from career focus.

Rationale 3: The “One Way to Win” Mentality

The best evidence of the need for efforts to promote career maturity is the degree to which the nation’s teens and their parents, and almost everyone else, have become irrationally addicted

to the “one way to win” mentality (Gray & Herr, 2006). Specifically they have concluded that the only hope for success in the future is to (1) get a four-year degree (2) in order to obtain high-wage employment (3) in the professional ranks.

In a national longitudinal survey, 95 percent of all high school sophomores in the sample indicated expecting to go on to college, up from 78 percent in the 1970s. Surveys of entering college freshmen consistently indicate that students’ primary reason for attending college is to “get a better job.” Setting aside the fact that only 40 percent of today’s teens graduate from high school prepared to do college-level academics, the NCES findings reveal more cause for concern: About one-half of all teens and two-thirds of female teens indicate a desire to be engaged in a professional occupation when they are thirty years old. Currently, and in the future, however, only 21 percent of all work is or will be in the professional/managerial ranks (Dohm & Shniper, 2007).

Survey data on entering freshmen show the same trends: Around half say they plan to major in managerial/professional areas and only 1 percent in technical fields. For most, this is not a very wise choice. Unfortunately, the economy will generate only about half as many jobs as graduates annually. Clearly the hopes and dreams of more than half of all teens in these surveys are out of touch with reality. In fact, the success rate among those who try the “one way to win” strategy is, at best, one in four: Half will not finish college and the half who do will end up underemployed. While there are many reasons for individual failure, a fundamental reason is poor decision making in the first place. A lack of awareness of alternatives has led teens and their parents to make the default “one way to win” choice and then, more often than not, they head off toward failure. If they knew of other alternatives, some would make better decisions and thus fewer would fail.

Rationale 4: Race, Gender, and Occupational Stereotypes

An equally compelling reason to help teens “get real” is the potential to increase labor market equity for teens of color and to decrease the continued detrimental effects of race- and gender-

specific occupational stereotyping. It is estimated, for example, that less than half of African American and Latino male teenagers graduate from high school on time. Many end up incarcerated and thus even less employable. As will be discussed in Chapter 3, one reason teens from low-income homes drop out in the first place is that they see no future in staying in school. To them, the “one way to win” message is beyond hope, but they do not know that other opportunities exist.

For a variety of complex reasons, young girls and boys do not consider certain occupations because they are nontraditional for their gender. Of particular concern is the aversion of many girls to technical, manufacturing, and skilled trade careers. These stereotypical views have detrimental effects on both individuals and the nation. For example, thirty-five years after the Equal Pay Act, women as a group still earn 80 cents to the dollar earned by men. Meanwhile, the shortage of information technology workers that developed in the late 1990s was partially attributed to the reality that few women select this field.

Other equally pernicious occupational stereotypes persist that are race, ethnic, or region specific. Such stereotypes narrow the range of opportunities that teens consider and thereby narrow their opportunities. This topic is important enough that Chapter 4 is devoted entirely to it. Suffice it to say here that “getting real” includes helping youths see beyond stereotypical views of themselves and work.

Rationale 5: The Quiet Dilemma: Globalization, Skill Shortages, and Underemployment of College Graduates

The future employment outlook for today’s youths is complicated and generally worrisome. The days are gone when teens could slide out of high school, into college, and then into jobs that paid family-sustaining wages and their student loan debt. One main reason is the globalization of the labor force. As we begin the twenty-first century, it has become clear that globalization has made the future much less rosy for this generation. To be specific, while the number of high-wage jobs has not increased significantly—there are still far too few to go around in the United

States—the competition for these jobs has become worldwide. Globalization is now the new gorilla among reasons teens need to get real about their future.

The number of jobs that have or could be off-shored in the future is just plain frightening. Many free trade advocates are beginning to conclude that virtually all manufacturing jobs could be off-shored: hourly compensation per employee in China, for example, is just 3 percent of the U.S. level (Lett & Banister, 2006). Service jobs are threatened as well.

This generation cannot take solace in the “old saw” that high-skills jobs, ones that require a four-year degree, are the safest. Not so! Many of these high-skills jobs are the mostly likely to go abroad. Much is said about the new information economy, most often by policymakers and journalists who have no idea what the term means, but in hard truth, this is the type of work that is the easiest to offshore. An important point to be made is that work that cannot be off-shored is that which requires a person on the ground in the United States. As will be demonstrated throughout this book, technician-level occupations are exactly this kind of work. Many teens would be better served by considering all the options, including one- and two-year postsecondary technical education. The best evidence of career opportunity in technical fields is the nationwide shortage of technicians.

Although teens say one (if not the main) reason they are going to college is to get a good job (American Council on Education, 2007), very few seem to have thought much about the details. Many end up completing degrees that lead to few opportunities. Of the roughly 60 percent of high school graduates who enroll in higher education immediately after graduation each year, two-thirds matriculated in four-year colleges to earn bachelor's degrees, but only 12 percent of all employment requires this level of education. Thus even if there was a perfect match between what credentials are in demand in the labor market and those of graduates, there would still only be jobs for forty-seven out of every one hundred four-year college graduates.

The dilemma or paradox is that while increasing numbers of college graduates are ending up in low-wage service jobs, the nation's economy is generating record numbers of unfilled positions for technicians in high-skill/high-wage technical jobs. The problem is not an undersupply of college graduates, but rather an

undersupply of technically-skilled graduates. A 2006 national survey of U.S. employers (see Chapter 6) found that the demand for skilled technicians, those with skills learned at the one- and two-year post-high school level, was far greater than the need for engineers or scientists (National Association of Manufacturers, 2005). Companies complained of being forced to turn down contracts because of the lack of middle-skilled workers and asked Congress to increase the number of technically skilled foreign workers they could recruit from other countries using H-1B visas, which, until the terrorist event of 9/11, Congress was more than happy to do—but no longer. U.S. employers can no longer rely on non-native-born workers to fill critical technical-skill jobs.

Meanwhile, on discovering they are unable to find the employment they had expected due to lack of skills in demand, many young adults became “reverse transfers,” enrolling in one- and two-year technical programs at community and technical colleges even though many already have four-year or even graduate degrees. Why? They hope it will give them what their bachelor’s degrees have not—labor market advantage in competing for high-skill/high-wage employment. Clearly these young adults made bad decisions. The facts suggest that most teens are still making bad decisions. In fact, many high school graduates do not make any decisions at all: College has become a default decision. Unfortunately for these students, it’s also a wasteful one, as well as expensive to teens, their parents, and the public, who foot all or part of the bill. And this situation is not benign. Failure does not build confidence or character. Without intervention, this wasteful, harmful fiasco will continue as long as teens and parents make postsecondary plans that ignore reality. It will continue as long as the focus is on college, not on success.

This quiet national dilemma will not be resolved until the nation’s youths choose to pursue careers in areas of high technical demand. In the United States, federal and state governments have neither the power nor the will to mandate these decisions. It is up to the individual. The only hope is that teens will make better decisions when they are better informed. Thus, a logical role of government is to help today’s youths and their parents make informed choices. The skills gap will narrow significantly only when the general level of career maturity increases. Meanwhile, efforts to increase the level of career maturity among teens will be

accepted by the public only when they are helped to realize that it is time to stop counting how many go to college and ask instead how many succeed.

PROMOTING SUCCESS

This chapter presented the argument that despite fifteen years or more of emphasis on academics and mandated testing, the success rates of American high school students, be it in terms of dropout rates, those who go to work not having taken CTE in high school, or the experiences of those who go to college, have been dismal. Thus it is time to try an additional remedy—namely, efforts to develop a higher level of career maturity among the nation's teens. Research cited above demonstrates the positive effect of participating in career development activities in keeping students in school to graduate and motivating them to go on to higher education.

Ways students may be helped to improve their likelihood of postsecondary success by career planning is the subject of this book. The premise is that success for this generation of teens depends on both academic and career maturity. Although much can still be done to improve academics, particularly for those in the academic middle, the focus of this book is to create an understanding of the concept of career maturity, the importance of career maturity to all teens and the nation, and ways to promote greater career maturity through career development activities.

The goal in the end is to help make better reality-based choices that have a higher probability of success. To achieve this goal, it helps to have an understanding of those we intend to serve—teens, parents, and important subgroups of teens—as well as the occupational stereotyping that limits many from reaching their potential. Such understanding is the objective of Part I of this book.