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Better career planning saves time, money

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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 that cost her more than \$40,000 in student loans, plus interest. Now 31, without a degree, marketable skill-deficient 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 man 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

About half of postsecondary students drop out or change programs by the end of their first year, Statistics Canada do with their education when they start it, says the government's summary report for its 2003 BC College and In

Just 75 percent of students completed the college or institute credential they set out to earn, according to another 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A big part of the waffling comes from crummy, outdated career counselling, according to the man who is respon 1963, developed the Choices career-exploration software in 1976. Most youngish Canadians will remember taking your interests and skills (a challenge at 15 years of age), and the test spits out career suggestions. You could be a

"It probably told you to be a funeral director," Jarvis said with a groan during a phone interview with the Georgia development at the nonprofit National Life/Work Centre. "When I developed it, I thought career planning was an assumption was, if you can find the right destination, you just need to figure out how to get there and you'll be h

Even though Choices is still the most popular career-exploration tool in the country, Jarvis admits the concept is flawed. Having spent 29 years in classrooms, Jarvis knows that half of students graduating from postsecondary institutions can't 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 of "What are your lifelong set of "competencies", which include self-knowledge, intentionality and purposefulness, relationship intelligence, and perseverance. The good news, Jarvis said, is that half of all ministries of education in Canada have adopted Blueprint.

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. "They're not facing the problem themselves. Professors are not facing what their students are facing. They're good people, but they're trapped. Education is moving 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. The questions for one's school and career path, Jarvis said, are on the shoulders of the student. "We're all free," he said, "but from now on, 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. It uses edge counselling strategies, including building self-knowledge and deeper reflection, and connecting paid work to 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 skills is the responsibility of career services. Group and individual counselling sessions are available for new students, but they are based on a one-size-fits-all model."

Visit Vancouverite Mark O'Meara's site, canadastudentdebt.com/, and the problem with our postsecondary advising system, whether 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 postsecondary student Ferron. "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 parents for sending me 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 high employment rates for 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 make. For the sake of education's sake, O'Meara said they're living in a different world. "They're removed from reality. Most people don't have 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. Her room and board were free, and food was free. At the end of her four-year program, Chesney graduated as a registered nurse. In exchange, she had to work for the hospital during her studies.

Today at BCIT, an RN course costs \$2,718 per year for three-and-a-half years (\$9,513). Add \$9,602 in supplies, and the total cost is \$19,115.

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 diploma at the private BCIT costs between \$12,400 and \$19,000 (including books and supplies) for a 12-month practical-nurse diploma at the private Vancouver Community College; and the visual-effects program at Vancouver Film School costs \$29,500; and the six-month program at the Pacific Institute of Technology. In any case, 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 after working for Human Resources Development Canada. The 33-hour Implicit Career Search course offers unemployed Vancouverites a question "What do I want to offer the world?" It's the kind of contemporary career counselling Jarvis advocates.

"Every book I've read about career says, 'Know yourself and your purpose,' then they don't give you the tools to do it. Her clients often arrive only knowing that they've wasted 20 years working at a job they hate, and they've hit a wall 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 unemployment.

"Anyone who would like to get more focused about what they're doing should take the Implicit Career Search,"

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