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BEYOND THE NUMBERS:

Labor Market Information Research and Writings

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STUDENT MOTIVATION and LABOR MARKET REALITY: Inspiring Students to Face the Emerging Economy

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The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) says that **home health aides** will be the fastest growing occupation in the nation through the year 2005. In the state of Texas, the occupation with the greatest number of projected job openings through the year 2000 will be **general office clerks**. The daily newspapers talk about high technology, corporate downsizing and global competition. Even though this information is useful in its own right, what does this mean for the average student or job seeker?

There is an enormous gap between understanding labor market and occupational trends and how an average citizen can use information as part of an individual education planning or job search strategy. We describe this disparity as an "action gap." Clearly, a brief article cannot address all the nuances of personal education and labor market decision-making that are inherent in the career development process. Our goal, however, is to begin bridging the gap between empirical, factual labor market statistics and concrete recommendations for developing a lifelong career strategy.

Clarifying Career Goals

Career goals may be the most important place to start. What a person does to prepare for work is largely a function of individual choice and perseverance. Knowing what you want doesn't guarantee success; but it *increases the probability* for success. Getting a college degree is a noble objective with many personal and professional benefits. It is not, however, the only route to career success, nor is it necessarily great for the pocketbook. Based on a BLS study of 1993 college graduates, there appears to be a good job market for graduates in some specific fields of study, but *not necessarily a universal market for all college graduates*

in all regional labor markets. Earnings for graduates in **engineering, mathematics, computer and information sciences, economics and pharmacy** were well above the median salary levels while graduates in **liberal arts, philosophy, religion, social work, foreign languages, literature and education** fell well below the median. In fact, the median earnings level for graduates in education, theology and performing arts was below that of telephone cable installers, plumbers or pipefitters, respiratory therapists and a number of other occupations which require no more than an Associates degree. A person must decide if a college degree will increase the likelihood of achieving his or her career goals.

Many mature workers in the labor market today arrived at their present job by accident. These baby-boomers had the good fortune of being born during economic times when a strong work ethic was as important as a good education. Today's students face a much different economic environment. No longer can a student expect an accidental approach to career decision-making, nor a random, cafeteria-style of course selection to result in above average economic returns.

Guidance counselors, teachers and case managers are a vital link to filling the gap between the research of labor market economists and student career development plans. While counselors have both informational and motivational functions in career guidance, economists tend to focus largely on esoteric research and the generation of statistics. Counselors historically have faced yet another set of obstacles. Career information was scarce, inaccessible and hard to use. On occasion, labor market information made its way into specialized journals for narrow audiences—written in the dry language of statistics more for self-expression than for the edification of counselors—

much less for high school or junior high students who are in the process of making critical career choices.

Today, however, automated career information tools, tabloids, and job hunter's guides are readily available to counselors and students in formats that are easy to understand and use. Instructional programs like the SOICC's *Improved Career Decision-Making (ICDM)* seminars have been designed to teach counselors how to integrate labor market information into counseling services while working directly with students. Hard copy materials based on the same data used by planners and curriculum developers have been packaged in formats that students can understand (such as the *Texas Job Hunters Guide* and the *Career Success* tabloid) and provided to counseling offices for dissemination. Counselors and students alike are being made aware of LMI clearinghouses such as the toll-free *Career Information Hotline* and the Internet Home Page operated by the Texas SOICC. Software has been developed to package data in formats that will engage the interest of students and adult workforce development program participants including the multi-media *Texas CARES system*, *RESCUE*, and the *Consumer Report System*.

Labor Market Trends

Making career information more widely available cannot solve the problem alone. For those students who 'just want a job' or find school tedious and irrelevant, much of the occupational information describing job opportunity without some postsecondary education can be discouraging. Employment prospects in many clerical, agricultural, manufacturing, and oil and gas-related jobs, perhaps held by their mothers and fathers, are disappearing as the service sector expands and computer technology replaces workers who previously held routine or production type jobs.

While we take great care to point out that the employment numbers do not indicate a shortage of work to do, we must be honest in telling students that there is a scarcity of *traditional* career prospects in the sense of relatively secure, full-time, high wage employment on a career ladder within a single firm. There are, in fact, many fewer jobs which match the model of getting an education, going to work for a firm (particularly in the manufacturing sector), and remaining in an upward career path until retirement.

What, exactly, are labor market realities for the 90's and what do the numbers tell us?

SIGNIFICANT WORKPLACE TRENDS AFFECTING STUDENTS

- 1) Despite an internationally competitive manufacturing sector, most employment growth is in the service and trade sectors of the economy.

- a) A decade ago, the manufacturing sector employed up to 19% of young workers who were not enrolled in higher education. These full-time jobs, at relatively high wages, have declined significantly.

- b) The military, which in 1987 enlisted 300,000 new recruits a year, gave them training, and, for some, vouchers to enable them to continue their education after discharge, has reduced its annual recruits by one third in six years with continued downsizing anticipated.

- 2) Within the service sector there is a wide array of jobs in health care, business and personal services which require a wide range of skills. Although these growth industries offer a number of excellent jobs for highly skilled workers, many occupations in demand in these sectors tend to be low-skill, low-wage, part-time, high turnover, subject to seasonal fluctuations, while offering few benefits. Some also are highly vulnerable to displacement by new technologies.

- 3) There is a growing surplus of experienced, displaced, high-skill workers with histories of good work habits and a proven capacity to learn new specific vocational skills quickly. There is also a surplus of persons coming out of colleges and universities with certificates and degrees required for better paying jobs. Consequently, employers have little incentive to impart additional skills and competencies to young, unskilled, entry-level workers.

- 4) A global economy also means that firms have access to well-educated workers in other countries and can take advantage of lower foreign labor costs to produce the same products historically produced in the U.S. This means that American workers are not only competing for jobs with persons in other states or communities but other countries as well.

Richard Zemsky in an article for the National Center on the Educational Quality of the Workforce (EQW), noted that employers are not particularly interested in hiring graduates fresh out of college—much less recent high school graduates. He used a direct quotation to illustrate prevailing employer sentiments, "give me a twenty-six year old with three prior jobs." Employers are looking more for evidence of good work habits and a capacity to learn new skills and competencies quickly than for simple credentials, such as a high school diploma, which some have grown to distrust as indicators of work readiness.

These labor market realities pose a significant dilemma. **Guidance counselors must help students form realistic career expectations and create an environment for them to motivate themselves to put forth the effort required to obtain appropriate education and training.** Many of

the entry-level jobs that are most likely to be available to adolescents and young adults are relatively undesirable as long-term job prospects. Confronted by such prospects, it is easy to understand why so many students become discouraged; seemingly resigned to a low wage future where they see no point in putting forth the effort to obtain a good education. Many of us have referred to low wage service jobs in eating and drinking places, personal services etc. as being 'dead end' jobs. It is unfortunate that in an effort to funnel the 'cold hard facts' to students through their teachers and counselors, our use of derogatory language may discourage students from adopting a positive attitude toward work. It is critical that parents, teachers and counselors work to improve our collective ability to connect student education to the world of work. Many students become more motivated to learn once they see the relevance of their studies and the importance of exhibiting exemplary work habits even in entry-level service sector jobs.

Employment Success

How do you motivate students to put forth the effort to learn if their immediate post high school labor market prospects are presented in less than a rosy light? First, realize you can not motivate others for the long run; you can only create an environment for self-motivation. The solution lies not in retracting or masking the realities of the labor market but in putting the *appropriate spin* on the data. The fact is there will be many good jobs which require high skills and which will pay high wages. Many of the baby-boomers, for example, will be reaching retirement age creating vacancies to be filled by appropriately qualified younger persons now coming through the training pipeline and advancing up the career ladder. These replacement opportunities, coupled with newly created jobs, will be available only to those who put forth effort to get the required training and who 'pay their dues' by applying themselves conscientiously to the jobs available to them now. The prizes will go to those who work hardest and smartest and the best jobs are unlikely to be attained by accident and blind luck. The young persons most likely to achieve employment success will be ones who understand the following keys to success.

KEYS TO EMPLOYMENT SUCCESS

- 1) Choose careers rationally by matching your individual interests and aptitudes to high skill/high wage demand occupations;
- 2) Treat an employer's reluctance to fill full-time, relatively stable jobs with persons under 26 years old as an opportunity to gain maturity, training and experience via entry-level jobs;

- 3) Pursue coherent sequences of courses leading to an Associates degree or higher in a program directly related to the occupational employment you desire;
- 4) Select training programs based on performance outcomes as indicators that the curriculum is well designed to impart the competencies employers desire;
- 5) Apply yourself diligently to acquire both specific vocational training and a solid general education in which you 'learn how to learn;'
- 6) Treat each part-time, low skill, low wage job you hold in the interim as:
 - a) A means of earning tuition and expenses for additional education
 - b) An opportunity to learn and demonstrate good work habits
 - c) An opportunity to develop a strong work history
 - d) An opportunity to develop healthy work relationships and future references
 - e) A chance to explore the world of work to confirm or dismiss the suitability of occupations thought, *a priori* in younger years, to be worth pursuing
- 7) An opportunity to demonstrate your personal talents and character to people who may be in a position to help your career later in life;
- 8) Get all the formal education you can reasonably pursue, using entry-level work as a means of earning tuition, not as a substitute for school;
- 9) Be willing to mix vocational and traditional academic education to expand your skill base.

Tips for Student Workplace Behavior

Clearly, college is not for every student, and yet counselors often are pressured to focus student attention on four year college goals rather than associate or postsecondary vocational objectives. Counselors should strive to remind students of the following tips for workplace behavior.

- 1) Keep your options open and look for new options for additional education
- 2) Do nothing to close the door on job opportunities or options
- 3) When you leave a job, do so on good terms
- 4) Avoid substance and alcohol abuse, especially since drug testing is becoming routine
- 5) Avoid criminal activity. A felony arrest or indictment or a serious misdemeanor conviction can eliminate some occupational options

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- 6) Much of what you learn during secondary education may be obsolete by the time you get a 'good job.' Most important is learning *how* to learn—how to access new knowledge as it is developed, and how to create new, useful knowledge on your own
- 7) Get all the work experience you can and, when on the job, always exhibit good work habits and be as selective as possible about 'job jumping'
- 8) Be alert to entrepreneurial opportunities
- 9) Ask questions of coworkers and supervisors to learn about the organization and other career opportunities and career paths that may be close at hand
- 10) Prepare yourself for opportunity and work hard; luck is defined by many as 50% inspiration and 50% perspiration.

There is value in all work. *Every job* (even those that are low skill, minimum wage, and part-time) *contributes to the flow of goods and services in the economy.* The work performed has value to the employer and to consumers. Valued entry-level workers might not be on a career track within the firm but their value to the employer will be reflected in recommendations and references provided to fellow employers. Remember, your *next* employer may take the word of fellow employers as a better indicator of your work readiness than all of your formal learning credentials.

Filling the Action Gap through Motivation

As you create the environment for students or program participants to become more self-motivated, perhaps the use of the word MOTIVATE as an acronym can help capture some of the important aspects of labor market trends and what they mean to students.

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The Texas State Occupational Information Coordinating Committee (TSOICC) exists to develop and provide useful information on occupations, educational opportunities, and the labor market.

MOTIVATE

M Manage your own worklife. You are responsible for managing your own career. Understand any retirement and health benefits and limitations you may have and keep your resume current

O Options and Opportunity. Opportunity knocks for those who are prepared to answer. Explore your options and keep as many open to you as possible

T Training never ends. The best definition of lifelong learning is the ability to learn new skills and acquire knowledge as conditions change

I International mind set. The U.S. is only part of the world economy. Learn world geography, recognize and appreciate language and cultural barriers

V There is Value in all work. Demonstrate respect for yourself, your employer and your coworkers by giving your best at every job

A Focus on Achievement. Strive to improve yourself and achieve excellence in all you do. Allow others to help by making your goals clear to family and friends

T Technology. Computer fluency has become a basic workplace skill. Make a commitment to stay current in the areas you intend to pursue

E Economics. Understand how the economy works and how current economic events affect the labor market in general and your career in particular

As philosophers from Benjamin Franklin to Karl Marx, from Sigmund Freud to Studs Turkel agree, individuals gain a sense of meaning and self-worth through work. Through work come feelings of usefulness, of dignity, of accomplishment, of pride in knowing that one has *earned* his or her way in the world. In the words of Everett C. Hughes, "A man's work [sic] is one of the things by which he is judged, and certainly one of the more significant things by which *he judges himself*. A man's work is one of the more important parts of his social identity, of his self-esteem; indeed, of his fate in the one life he has to live." Communicating these concepts to our young people will help them better prepare, and take responsibility for their own career development journey.

