

# Advancing the Career Counseling Profession: Objectives and Strategies for the Next Decade

Mark L. Savickas

This article discusses the 9 analyses of the career counseling profession's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that appear in this September 2003 special issue of *The Career Development Quarterly*. The author identifies points of convergence, proposes a mission statement, and summarizes what career counselors seem intent on doing in the coming years. The analysts recommended that the career counseling profession concentrate on 8 objectives: advancing theory that is more holistic, contextual, and multicultural; using accumulated research more effectively; focusing new research on the career counseling process; exploiting technology to construct new tools; ameliorating career counseling training; expanding the National Career Development Association's role; increasing advocacy about public policy; and fostering the international growth of the profession.

Each author in this special issue on career counseling in the next decade has presented a realistic and erudite appraisal of the profession's current strengths and weaknesses as well as its future opportunities and threats. Although conducted from differing perspectives, the analyses converge on reaffirming career counseling's historic mission of helping individuals adapt to societal expectations and personal transitions in their work lives. The rapid changes that are now occurring in the organization of work and the arrangement of occupations, as well as the increasing globalization of the workforce, remind many career counselors of the cultural context that led to the formation of the counseling profession in 1908 and, 5 years later, to the formation of its professional organization, now called the National Career Development Association (NCDA). As Virginia Woolf (as cited in *Signal*, 1987) astutely observed "on or about December 1910, human nature changed" (p. 7). In the first decade of the twentieth century, the agricultural economy was overcome by the forces of industrialization, urbanization, commercialization, and immigration. One response to the ills exacerbated by city life was the Progressive vision of an industrial society redeemed by enlightened science. As part of this democratic impulse, social reformers such as Parsons (1909) scientized the benevolent social work of the late nineteenth century, when volunteers used evangelical religion to build character and in so doing originated modern vocational guidance, in which professionals use *true reasoning* to match personalities to occupations.

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*Mark L. Savickas, Behavioral Sciences Department, Northeastern Ohio Universities College of Medicine. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Mark L. Savickas, Behavioral Sciences Department, Northeastern Ohio Universities College of Medicine, Rootstown, OH 44272-0095 (e-mail: ms@neoucom.edu).*

Today, the mechanical age of the city is giving way to the media age of the global village as information technology fosters a worldwide economy, the emergence of world workers, and new psychological contracts between employers and employees. As more and more workers feel insecure in a dangerous world (Hansen, 2003), career counselors find themselves reinvigorating the professionalized benevolence that was championed by Progressive reformers such as Parsons and renovating the models and materials that they use to help individuals cope with changes in the work world that are every bit as daunting as the changes that transformed human nature in 1910.

The social transformation of the work world prompted the analysts to identify constituent parts of the career counseling profession that show strain in coping with emerging needs as well as other parts of the profession that face threats from external groups and situations. As one might expect, the analysts viewed many of the profession's traditional strengths—such as its foundational theories, accumulated research, valid tools, and tested methods—as fraught with potential weaknesses if they are not adapted for use in the Information Age. One overriding weakness that was identified by multiple analysts was the minimal training offered by counselor education programs for students who wish to specialize in career counseling. The nominal training available in career counseling seems particularly vexing because the counseling profession originated as vocational guidance, yet now shows little interest in the activity that engendered it. The weakness in training seems related to the “deprofessionalization” of career counseling, a threat that is posed by the growing number of career coaches and Internet entrepreneurs. To meet the challenges of the next decade, several analysts called on the profession to mentor a new generation of leaders, market the effectiveness of career counseling to the public, advocate issues and legislation to policy makers, and support systematic efforts to democratize the work world. Taking the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) into consideration, the analysts converged on a vision for career counseling in the next decade. Their image of the profession may be conceptualized in a succinct mission statement.

## Mission

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Career counseling is a specialty within the profession of counseling, one that fosters vocational development and work adjustment of individuals at each life stage by engaging them in life planning aimed at the psychosocial integration of an individual's abilities, interests, and goals with the work roles structured by the community and occupations organized by companies. It is characterized by developmental and person–environment fit models that assist a developing and deciding individual to make suitable and viable choices. Career counselors, with a range of training and credentials, are employed in settings as varied as schools, colleges, companies, community agencies, and government offices. As they assist diverse clients in manifold contexts, career counselors display multicultural competence and promote social justice. They continually renovate and innovate their methods and materials for providing career services across the life cycle—including, but not limited to, vocational guidance, work adjustment, career education, job placement, occupational information, academic advising, position coaching, employee assistance, retirement planning, vocational rehabilitation, and organizational consultation.

To continue its good work in the next decade, the career counseling profession must intensify efforts to serve a diverse clientele in new settings, translate theory and research into knowledge about the career counseling process that can be used in practice, construct new tools that exploit the potential of informational technology, increase and improve the training offered by counselor education programs, infuse information and values into public policy debates, and assist counselors worldwide who seek to internationalize the profession of career counseling. In this regard, the analysts offer for consideration the following objectives and sample strategies.

### **Advance Theory That Is More Holistic, Contextual, and Multicultural**

Many of the analysts who examined the current status and imminent future of the career counseling profession identified its foundational theories as a major strength (Harris-Bowlsbey, 2003; Niles, 2003; Pope, 2003; Tang, 2003; Whiston, 2003). These theories of person–environment fit, human development, and social learning provide counselors with well-articulated and data-based models that they can use to conceptualize career issues and interventions. However, these theories incorporate the values and views that characterize the modern industrial era, and, like the construct of career itself, they reflect the bureaucratic and hierarchical form of the large organizations that dominated the last century. Postmodern scholars have deconstructed the concepts of “career” (Richardson, 1993) and of “development” (Richardson, 2002) so that these two core concepts are now ideas, not ideals. Having stripped career and development of their privileged status, these scholars have already refocused their attention from career to “the place of work in people’s lives” (Richardson, 1993) as well as from development to management. As the organizational structures they have served collapse, career development theories must be renovated with new propositions and augmented by innovative models that accommodate the realities of working and living in postindustrial societies. In particular, the analysts recommended that in the next decade the career counseling profession should (a) expand the purview of its theories beyond the traditional focus on the vocational behavior of White, middle-class men and should incorporate greater awareness of and sensitivity to race, sex, and culture (Chung, 2003; Pope, 2003; Whiston, 2003); (b) concentrate more attention on adult transitions to supplement its emphasis on adolescent decision making (Parmer & Rush, 2003; Pope, 2003; Tang, 2003); (c) promote a holistic view of life roles and emphasize “life structure counseling” (Hansen, 2003; Niles, 2003); (d) integrate career development theories to make them more coherent and comprehensive (Harris-Bowlsbey, 2003; Pope, 2003); and (e) address the turbulence in the work world and soothe the anguish and ills experienced by workers (Hansen, 2003; Parmer & Rush, 2003).

### **Use Available Research More Effectively**

A second strength that the analysts roundly applauded was the extensive research on career development. However, in the same breath, the analysts deplored the ineffective communication between practitioners and researchers. Extensive data pertaining to career development continue to

accumulate yet not be used because career counselors and vocational psychologists work in separate spheres. Career development researchers have already produced an impressive amount of content. Now may be the time to focus on helping career counselors use that content in their practices. Rather than focusing on adding more content, the profession might switch focus to user functionality to make it easier for practitioners to navigate through the content to find information that they can use to help a particular client. For many years, *The Career Development Quarterly* has moved in this direction by asking the authors of the annual literature reviews to address one important question: How can the research published last year be useful to counselors?

As early as 1941, Williamson and Bordin called for research to address an even more important question: "What counseling techniques (and conditions) will produce what types of results with what types of students?" (p. 8). Sixty-two years later, Whiston (2003) echoed this call for empirically based counseling information that supports the judgment of career counselors with practical ideas. Such articles and evidence-based protocols would provide peer-reviewed counseling guidelines and would recommend techniques that best address particular career concerns. These brief documents, cowritten and continuously updated by master counselors and experienced researchers, would summarize the best available information about a circumscribed topic from leading texts, premier journals, and peer-reviewed guidelines. The articles could also be accompanied by handouts for clients. Advances in this direction surely will be facilitated by *Career Convergence*, the exciting new Web publication debuted by NCDA in February 2003. This electronic magazine, or "e-zine," provides a practical online resource for career counselors in the form of "how to" and "best practices" articles, informational tips, and Web links. I hope that this "practitioner-to-practitioner" forum will lead to collaborative reflection and research on the process of career counseling.

### **Focus New Research on the Process of Career Counseling**

The preceding discussion suggests that although there is extensive research on career development, there is comparatively little research on the process of career counseling. Traditionally, career counselors have relied on vocational psychologists to conduct research on career choice and development, which university researchers have done exceptionally well. Nevertheless, there is a distinction between research on career development as a scientific domain and research on the counseling processes used by practitioners to advance the career development of their clients (Niles, 2003). For example, the hundreds of research studies on the predictive validity of interest inventories have improved the inventories yet not helped counselors use these inventories more effectively. In making this point, Tinsley and Chu (1999) conducted a comprehensive review of 65 studies that directly investigated the outcomes of test interpretation. They reported "that there is no evidence that interest inventories possess consequential validity" (p. 271). They were chagrined to conclude that there was no credible body of evidence that showed an interest inventory interpretation by a career counselor was helpful to clients. Funding agencies and organizations that employ career counselors are increasingly interested in data on client satisfaction, intervention ef-

fectiveness, and use of scientific evidence in practice, so it is imperative that practitioners and researchers create more ways to use data from career counseling encounters to improve outcomes, expand knowledge, and develop effective policies. To address this disjunction between theory and practice, career counselors in the next decade must emphasize research on the “career counseling process” (Whiston, 2003), “clinical research” (Tang, 2003), or “practice-based research” (Niles, 2003), being sure that this research emphasizes process over outcome (Pope, 2003) as well as includes participants from diverse racial and ethnic groups (Chung, 2003; Hansen, 2003; Parmer & Rush, 2003; Whiston, 2003) and from underserved populations whose low income makes inconceivable the very idea of career (Hansen, 2003; Pope, 2003). This research on process would be best conducted by teams of practitioners and researchers working collaboratively. Collaboration can be difficult, yet perhaps what other fields call “bridge researchers” could be developed for the career domain by actively cultivating scholars who concentrate on the interface between the profession of career counseling and the sciences of vocational psychology and occupational sociology rather than focusing on one or the other of these independent systems. Anyone considering such bridge research should seriously consider the comprehensive agenda for career counseling process research that has been presented by Heppner and Heppner (2003).

### **Exploit Technology to Construct New Tools**

The third strength that analysts noted was that members of the counseling profession had produced excellent materials to use with clients in implementing career development models and counseling methods. There are many valid interest inventories, ability tests, value surveys, and developmental indices as well as some effective computer-system interventions (Harris-Bowlsbey, 2003; Pope, 2003; Tang, 2003; Whiston, 2003). These tools have been so useful that, on the whole, the career counseling profession may have come to rely excessively on test interpretation as its central intervention. Although test interpretation is a core activity, purchasing tests has become prohibitively expensive. Harris-Bowlsbey drew attention to a weakness that is particularly frustrating: Counselors have insufficient funds to purchase these expensive tests and systems. Profit-seeking corporations now own and market the major career inventories and tests. Many counselors would like to use these popular tools with their clients, but they cannot afford to purchase the “products” from commercial enterprises. Early in the last century, concerned psychologists, led by James McKeen Cattell, formed the Psychological Corporation to distribute tests because they feared the possibility of corporate entrepreneurs profiting excessively from the work of scholars and researchers. It would be a worthy project for NCDA to develop a set of psychometric tools for career interventions and distribute them free of charge over the Internet. Harris-Bowlsbey mentioned the exciting possibility of NCDA going even further to develop Web-based career centers, one for counselors and one for clients. This type of decision-support system, delivered directly to counselors in their offices by the Web and personal digital assistants, could allow counselors to access tests, materials, evidence-based protocols, and other information quickly and conveniently. The

opportunity is on the horizon to exploit technology in this and other ways. As Hansen (2003) and Tang (2003) suggested, perhaps counselors could use such knowledge-delivery systems to use computer programs to do the person-environment matching so fundamental to vocational guidance and to free career counselors to do holistic life planning. This suggestion extends Holland's (1971) innovative idea of using a counselor-free, self-directed search for educational and vocational guidance to relieve counselors to do more complicated work with their clients. Of course, technology should also be exploited in constructing novel interventions (Parmer & Rush, 2003). For example, Whiston mentioned the possibility of streaming occupational information over the Internet. The old technique of having students "shadow" workers in their preferred occupation may become simpler and more widely available using such technology. Although the idea of improving tools and exploiting technology to advance the effectiveness and availability of career counseling is obvious to most counselors, a systematic and focused effort to do so needs planning and resources, something NCDA and other groups might address. As these new tools and technologies are developed, the career counselors who will use them must receive more training than the minimal education now provided.

### **Ameliorate Career Counseling Training**

Half of the analysts (Harris-Bowlsbey, 2003; Parmer & Rush, 2003; Pope, 2003; Tang, 2003) identified as a significant weakness the current state of training in career counseling that is provided by counselor education departments across the United States. There is a widespread perception that career counseling has been marginalized because of disinterest among both faculty and students. Counselor educators seem indifferent to career counseling. A startling example of this indifference occurs in what is called *The Handbook of Counseling* (Locke, Myers, & Herr, 2001), sponsored by Chi Sigma Iota, in which "career counseling" is absent from all 44 chapter titles and scarce in the index. The specialty that originated the modern field of counseling by differentiating itself from social work is now marginalized as "ex-centric." Of course, part of the indifference among counselor educators may reflect the interests of their students who shun career counseling courses as they concentrate on family therapy, community counseling, mental health counseling, and substance abuse counseling. Although this could well be the fault of the career counseling profession, it is nevertheless unfortunate, given the contemporary need for counselors to help individuals adapt to dramatic changes in the economy and occupational structure. The Information Age and postmodern culture call career counseling to again play an important role in society, a role as substantial as it played at the dawn of the industrial era, during the Great Depression, after World War II, and as part of the civil rights movement. Despite this societal need—and probably because of disinterested faculty and uninterested students—many counselor education programs offer only one course in career counseling, and often that course is taught by an adjunct instructor or new assistant professor. Only a small number of programs offer a second course or an advanced practicum in career counseling. The programs that do offer a second career course find it difficult to identify a suitable textbook. Thus, NCDA

should continue to develop training materials to improve courses and to publish more materials for advanced courses (Niles, 2003; Pope, 2003). It may be time for NCDA to return to publishing its prestigious decennial volumes if only because they have in the past served as excellent textbooks for a second course in career counseling. NCDA is better positioned than are individual authors to prepare such textbooks. NCDA might even imitate itself in preparing a standardized syllabus for the introductory career course as it did in 1931, when its Committee of College Teachers of Courses in Guidance, then chaired by George Myers, published an influential set of lesson plans, called *Basic Units for an Introductory Course in Vocational Guidance* (Jones, 1931), written by 25 teachers of vocational guidance. NCDA might also ameliorate training problems by collaborating with an interested counselor education program to offer advanced training institutes for students and practitioners who seek such an experience. An important step that NCDA has already taken to improve training is collaborating with the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) to form and support a joint Commission on Preparing Counselors for Career Development in the 21st Century (Hansen, 2003). This NCDA/ACES commission recognizes the internal weaknesses of and the external threats to career counseling training and is moving deliberately and thoughtfully to rebuild old strengths and exploit new opportunities. Founded in 1998, this commission, now chaired by Dennis Engels, continues to write significant position papers and reports as well as construct new methods and media. Emphasizing training standards and competencies is an important part of this work (Parmer & Rush, 2003). Such action is particularly important in light of the emergence of "substitute practitioners." Given the societal need for career services, coupled with the disinterest of the counseling profession at large, career coaches are flourishing, and Internet sites offering career help are proliferating (Hansen, 2003; Niles, 2003; Parmer & Rush, 2003; Whiston, 2003). Hansen is not alone in lamenting the "deprofessionalization" that goes with the "anyone can do it" mentality of coaches and designers of Web sites. Partly in response to this situation, Harris-Bowlsbey called for the profession to help the public differentiate between professional career counselors, career development facilitators, and career coaches.

### **Expand the Role of NCDA**

As exemplified by the NCDA/ACES commission and as noted by Hansen (2003), NCDA is a strong and vibrant organization. It organizes excellent conferences and workshops; publishes a scholarly journal, informative newsletter, and practice-oriented books; and mounts impressive public relations efforts and public policy lobbying. Nevertheless, the analysts call upon NCDA to assume an even greater role in the next decade. While maintaining its formidable strengths, NCDA could do even more to advance the profession, according to the analysts. In addition to the already mentioned possibilities such as improving training, fostering bridge research, and developing tools, the analysts identified the turbulent times in the work world as an opportunity to expand the contribution of the career counseling profession to the nation's students and workers (Niles, 2003; Pope, 2003; Whiston, 2003). Pope called for NCDA to expand efforts to market the effectiveness of career counseling to the public. As

Pope indicated, individuals who know about career counseling want to avail themselves of the service. It carries no stigma in the public eye. Herr (2003) noted that the public may become even more interested in career services as increasingly employees are expected to *manage* their careers as “me incorporated,” because corporations are less willing to *develop* their careers for them along predetermined paths. Herr also recommended that career counselors expand their career building services to world workers who could use assistance in coping with “assimilation stress, cultural shock, and confusion about work norms and behavioral expectations” (p. 13). In addition to marketing their services to the public, career counselors can increase their contribution to society by being advocates of public policy about careers to legislators.

### **Increase Advocacy About Public Policy**

Herr's (2003) engrossing analysis of career counseling as an instrument of public policy and a sociopolitical tool sounded a clarion call to action, one that should move the career counseling profession to involve itself more actively in legislative and policy projects. Herr astutely identified the lack of coherence in legislation and public policies that provide career services. Layers of bureaucratic legislation have produced an “uncoordinated mosaic of efforts (Herr, 1991) rather than an integrated agenda” (p. 14) for the provision of career counseling. The resulting fragmentation of career services has isolated career counselors who work in schools, employment offices, rehabilitation hospitals, Veterans Administration centers, employee assistance programs, and public assistance agencies from each other. Niles (2003) and Whiston (2003) suggested that career counselors could begin to address this fragmentation by organizing a career summit meeting, an idea long advocated by John Crites and piloted by NCDA President Roger Lambert at the 2002 conference in Chicago. An agenda item for such a summit surely would be how to jointly advocate public policy issues. To prepare for such policy work, Herr recommended a sophisticated yet practical strategy to package the evidence that counselors would need to present to legislators and policy makers. He urged counselors to construct a matrix that comprehensively depicts the full range of career concerns across the life cycle aligned with the differential treatments that research has shown to be effective in alleviating each concern in diverse populations. The interventions included in this matrix must be evidence based and accompanied by cost–benefit ratios. In addition to using the matrix in policy initiatives, it could be used in public relations and marketing campaigns aimed at informing the public about career services. Career counselors in other countries, such as in Canada and England, have been working effectively for the last decade on policy and public relations initiatives (Hansen, 2003; Herr, 2003). Career counselors in the United States can learn from the experiences of career counselors in those countries and can take better advantage of the opportunities for collaboration that are offered by Canadian counselors who currently lead the way in public policy work about careers (Hiebert & Bezanson, 2000).

### **Foster the International Growth of the Profession**

One opportunity that is too important to miss is to make a significant contribution to the internationalization of the career counseling profes-



sion. In response to the globalization of the economy and the emergence of world workers, countries across the globe are instituting career services and university training programs to prepare career counselors to develop and deliver these services. No longer does the career counseling profession “export” its models and methods to international colleagues who translate them for use in their own countries. Now, career counselors in numerous countries are designing and developing indigenous models, methods, and materials that suit their culture and express their preferred ways of helping others. NCDA can do more to assist in the “globalization” of career counseling, which means adapting general knowledge about work, workers, and careers to the local language and caring practices of each country. This collaborative work, again work already well advanced by Canadian career counselors, should accelerate from the good efforts of NCDA and the International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance in cosponsoring a symposium, titled *International Perspectives on Career Development*, immediately before the NCDA 2004 conference in San Francisco. This symposium, chaired by Edwin Herr and Raoul Van Esbroeck, will seek to affirm that career counseling is a worldwide phenomenon, examine indigenous national approaches to structuring and delivering interventions, consider the roles of career counselors under different public policy initiatives, and discuss the emerging international training standards.

## Conclusion

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This special issue seeks to prompt members of the career counseling profession to reflect on the profession’s current status and plan its future. Rather than drift into new roles and responsibilities or let external forces shape their profession, career counselors can plan how they want their profession to advance and then implement that plan during the coming decade. The SWOT analyses presented in this issue and the mission statement and objectives outlined in this discussion of those analyses provide a vision of one “possible self” or more accurately “possible profession.” Readers need not agree with the analyses presented in this special issue; there are other ways to go. Actually, the analysts have met their goal if, in suggesting possibilities, they prompt career counselors to reflectively and thoughtfully select their profession’s destination a decade from now—when NCDA will celebrate its centennial. It is reassuring to realize that NCDA is already leading the way in constructing the profession’s future. Strategies aimed at most of the objectives recommended by the analysts are underway, being piloted, or on the drawing board. Although we cannot be certain of their outcomes, there is one aspect of the future that I am very confident about. In the next decade, as career counselors enact the democratic ideals inherent in the profession’s origins and in NCDA’s 90 years of service, they will most certainly continue to display compassion and competence in their daily work with clients.

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