

Vocational Psychology and Career Counseling: Inventing the Future

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Vocational psychology has amassed a mature and impressive scientific literature. It has also made a number of professional and political strides in recent years. However, several weaknesses, or gaps, are also apparent (e.g., certain issues or populations have been understudied, linkages to other domains of inquiry have often been missed, and less attention has been paid to contextual and cultural variables than is desirable). A plethora of threats and opportunities await vocational psychology in the next decade. Some of the threats (e.g., the availability of Internet-based career services) also pose great opportunities, depending on how we plan for, and respond to, them. Within this context, I suggest a revised mission statement for vocational psychology, focusing on many of the field's traditional strengths, unfulfilled promises, and new challenges. In addition, a set of goals is offered to encourage advances in several old and new areas of vocational inquiry and practice. © 2001 Academic Press

To articulate a future vision for vocational psychology is an audacious task. It is also, perhaps, more than a little foolhardy. Prognosticators are invariably limited by their own biases and blind spots, and their crystal balls are rarely crystal clear. They tend to predict a future they would like to see, rather than one based on a dispassionate analysis of trends and possibilities. My own vision of vocational psychology and career counseling will, necessarily, suffer from these same human limitations, try as I might to transcend them. In constructing this vision, I will draw liberally on the wisdom of other writers, seeking a convergence of ideas and a variety of agendas rather than a singular, strikingly new statement on where the field is or should be.

Visions and plans can be good things. As career development specialists, we tend to share the conviction that taking stock of oneself and the surrounding world, and developing goals based on this analysis, enables people to assert agency in their life course—to invent or author the sort of future they envision for themselves. Of course, the wisdom of this process applies to professions as well as it does to individuals. Developing collective goals may help us to shape the future of

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vocational psychology rather than only being buffeted about by shifting political and economic winds. But, as with individual career planning, we need to remain humble to the reality that, to paraphrase a popular expression, “shift happens.” Or in the words of John Lennon (1980), “Life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans.” Thus, it is well for our scientific and professional agenda to be permeable and open to unforeseen possibilities, lest it suffer premature consignment to the junk pile of hubristic, if noble, intentions.

In this article, I follow, more or less, the editor’s directive to perform a strengths–weaknesses–opportunities–threats (SWOT) analysis of vocational psychology. This analysis—really a series of informal observations—is followed by a proposed mission statement for the field and by a set of goals for elaborating this mission statement. Building as it does on the field’s traditional strengths, I suspect that readers will see my mission statement as largely comfortable and familiar. But I hope they will also spot much room for the field’s growth and renewal. The vision of the field that is implicit in this statement is intended to be evolutionary rather than revolutionary—cognizant of certain challenges and strains that lie ahead, yet mindful that we are (but one of many types of) players in an inordinately large and complex ballpark.

INTERNAL STRENGTHS

Vocational psychology has accumulated a treasure chest of accomplishments since its humble beginnings near the turn of the past century. It would be daunting to try to name them all. In this section, I list a number of the field’s internal strengths and achievements, as I see them, particularly over the past 30 years (i.e., since the founding of *Journal of Vocational Behavior*).

A Maturing Scientific Literature

Perhaps the field’s single greatest asset has been its continually growing scientific base. Several reviewers have described vocational psychology as representing one of the most mature and vital realms of scholarly inquiry within the larger domain of counseling psychology (e.g., Borgen, 1991; Gelso & Fassinger, 1990). It is tempting to invoke the image of the proverbial tail wagging the dog but, in fact, such hyperbole would not do justice to the historic and ongoing centrality of the vocational mission to counseling psychology. This is not to deny the numerous advances that have been made in other areas of counseling psychology inquiry (e.g., therapy process, counselor supervision, multicultural models; see Brown & Lent, 2000). However, though the popularity of the vocational psychology specialty within counseling psychology has waxed and waned over the years (Fitzgerald & Osipow, 1986), its scientific progress has been impressive, especially when viewed over the long-term.

By scientific progress, I refer first to the existence of an impressive array of foundational theories that have evolved over the years and that continue to guide researchers and practitioners alike. Holland (1997), Super (Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996), Dawis and Lofquist (Dawis, 1996), and Krumboltz (Mitchell &

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