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UH 499 Senior Project

When I was a senior in high school, our class had the privilege of welcoming a number of men and women to share information about their chosen professions. I remember that the staff had reserved a whole hall in the school so that the career men and women could each have a classroom. We had the option of attending two sessions that morning where we could listen to two of the visitors talk about their careers and share information about their schooling and daily life in their profession. I remember there being a good number of professions from which to choose. There was a doctor, an elementary school teacher, a nurse, a pharmacist, and a lawyer. Admittedly, I have remembered only the ones that I was interested in, or the jobs which I thought to be most prestigious.

Of course, I remember my number one pick vividly. She was a medical doctor who worked in the Department of Pediatric Infectious Diseases at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis. Let me just say, I was impressed. She seemed genuinely excited about her work, and that only fueled my interests. I remember staring at her and listening intently to every word that she said. That day was one of the most memorable of my senior year.

This fall, I am hoping for the opportunity to organize a day just like the one I have just described in one of the inner city high schools in Knoxville, Tennessee. Right now, I am planning to ask three or four people to visit the high school. My advisor and I believe that it might be best to ask a smaller number of professionals in exchange for a more prepared and thorough talk to be given by each of the visitors. I am hoping for the chance to meet with each of these individuals personally, at which point in time we can discuss what the students would like to hear about the visitor's specific education and job. I was very impressed with how well-organized the event was at my high school, so I am hoping to borrow some ideas from what I

remember involving how to set up the classrooms and what forms of technology will be most effective in making the sessions most informative and, of course, interesting.

I honestly do not recall whether or not we had any blue-collar workers visit our school on that day of my senior year, but I definitely want to ask someone who is involved in some form of manual labor to share information about his job. I want to introduce these students to vastly different options, because at this point in my life more than ever before, I am coming to realize how important and admirable are the many jobs that are performed by the dedicated men and women of our country. From construction work to engineering, each job requires learning and skills and has become an integral part of our culture.

I am choosing inner city school students because I think that this is a population that could benefit most from a day like this, and also perhaps they are not as often given opportunities to explore all of their options before they are set on a career path that “most suits” their perceived personality, behavior, and/or academic performance.

What I hope most is that these students enjoy themselves during the sessions, and maybe even start the wheels turning for what they might want to do in their futures. I want them to ask questions of these professionals, if they have them, and I hope that they will. I think that it might have been good for me to be curious of other areas of work when I was younger, not solely medicine. It was not hard for me to choose who I wanted to visit most that day in my high school. I have known from a very early age what kind of work I want to do and what kind of a job I believe will make me happy, but I will talk about that later. My point here is that, while it can be a blessing to realize what kind of work will give you the most fulfillment, I believe also that it can be very helpful and encouraging to explore areas of work that may not be intuitively the work that you think you might like the most. That’s because you may be pleasantly surprised

and find that some other type of work may make you even happier, but also because I think that you will learn to respect the work of others and realize the importance of close relationships between different professions in our society. I think what I want most for these students is that they get as much as I did out of speaking with someone who works in a profession that they find very interesting. I want them to stare in awe at these workers and admire them and get pumped about their future jobs. I hope, also, to dissolve any limits for these students and present them with job opportunities that they have not thought of pursuing before, whether because they have had little exposure to the particular job, or they have been misled into thinking that they are not capable of pursuing such a career. In short, I want this day to be about them and for them.

It is interesting that Erik Erikson's stage of identity formation comes at the time in our society when a young adult is expected to start making serious decisions about his future. According to Erikson, the formation of the identity is most crucial in the period of adolescence. The conflict of this stage, as defined by Erikson, is officially called "Identity versus Role Confusion," (49) and suggests that the adolescent is beginning to have a desire to figure out who they are presently and who they will be in their future. This, Erikson suggests, includes choosing friends, thinking about jobs, and defining their values.

The time of this development, however, is not free from turmoil and conflict. Adolescents will come into contact with individuals who will try to assign them a role or an identity, which many adolescents, thankfully, find is an opportunity to assert their own ideas about themselves even more strongly (49). Also, adolescents will inevitably be faced with perceived cultural boundaries, although often times a cultural connection is necessary for a true sense of self (71), and in that way, I think, becomes something to be proud of and a good thing. Another problem may arise if the adolescent becomes too decisive too early. If the adolescent

formulates too firm of an identity early in his or her life, then this could lead to an inflexibility later in life and a real problem with change, which could make adjustments hard if they have to be made for one reason or another (56). Despite these potential roadblocks, Erikson asserts that if the adolescent is given enough freedom and time to explore, then he will become a mature adult who has a firm sense of self and a strong awareness of who he truly is (50).

This crucial identity stage is a great time to introduce potential career options to students in high school thinking about going to college or moving straight into their careers, and not only that, but it is a chance for students to talk to an adult who has been through the stage of identity formation, hopefully successfully, and is able to see what a fulfillment vastly different professions can be for different individuals. At the same time, I think that I have to be sensitive to the fact that this identity formation is a time when bad conflict can arise, like those that I have mentioned. Therefore, I think that it is important that, if each student does not get the chance to visit all of the professionals (which I believe would be the best scenario, so that the diversity of the jobs and the professionals themselves can be experienced), then it is important that I set up the event so that each student will make his or her own choice as to who he will visit. I also think that I should be ready to seek out diverse individuals to share information about their professions. I should be careful not to promote negative stereotypes in my choice of individuals and professions. As I said before, I really hope to have a great number of listening ears and thinking minds. I want students' minds to be filled with thoughts. I want their preconceived notions to be abolished. As Erikson says, to a certain extent identity confusion can be a healthy and desirable thing (68). I want to use this to its full advantage, and help students realize that they can come into their own identity without limits and without sudden and forced decisions.

An uneasy image that I picture is an adolescent thrust into the advisor's chair at school and handed pamphlets, shown test results for their "career match," and sent on their way to "figure it out." What I think could be missing in this scenario is someone who is actually going to sit with the student and ask him or her what that individual student's ideas about the future are. No, not every student is going to give an ideal answer, but in the beginning stages, that is not needed. What the student does need to hear is that his or her opinion *matters*. A healthy conflict during identity formation is good, but it needs to be something that the student sees as an enjoyable challenge. I think that when students recognize that they have a listening ear and the opportunity to think for themselves, exploring the future evokes less panic and more interest and curiosity. Students need to enjoy the process of exploring their options for the future, and really, they need to know that someone is ready to listen to their questions and ideas.

An exciting part of identity formation is that it is not only when an individual is trying to discover who they are and what they will be in the future, it is also a discovery of what they can be for *others* in the society. It is a realization of their place as members of a grownup world. I think that adolescents have a really great chance to see that they are worthy individuals to so many people in their lives, and that they will continue to be an important presence to other lives in their futures. I hope that on the day that the career men and women come to visit their school that they not only get a chance to find out about the jobs themselves, but I also hope that they have the opportunity to see that the group of career men and women have found happiness in their profession, and that they have found a true sense of how they are benefiting this world.

I want to consider a little more thoroughly the role of society and culture in the formation of identity, just because I think that it is so influential in the process, especially in today's society. Erikson's belief is that part of identity formation begins to be recognized by society.

That is, society will begin to recognize a young person's assertion of identity and begin to recognize him for who he is and who he is working to become (63). I think, then, that because society has this role of recognizing an individual, the person in the midst of identity formation can become highly influenced by that society's desire to place them in an assigned role and give that person assigned values. As I mentioned before, while I think that this can be something positive in some instances, I think that it can also be very dangerous. Since I am looking to introduce my career exploration day at an inner city high school, I am particularly wary of how much influence the society and culture of these young adults has had upon them. Though I am no expert, my experiences with inner city school children have been that they are far too often impacted by the negative messages that their society is sending. *Is a person like me supposed to go to college? Can a black person like me become a doctor? Can a woman like me be expected to do more than raise a family?* These questions that I am imagining coming from students, I fear, would often have disappointing answers. Of course I don't think with one career exploration event during one day of a student's high school career that I am going to cancel out all of the negative messages of a society, but I do hope that an awareness can be made, by continuous positive efforts of the community, that at the core of a healthy identity should, I believe, be personal contentment and a positive self-worth.

Maybe it will not be too much to hope for that the staff at the high school will see the benefits of having a career day such as the one I want to organize, and find it a worthwhile endeavor to continue to offer such an event each year to a specific grade level. I would absolutely love that! Also, I mentioned earlier that a huge part of healthy identity formation would, in my mind, be that the students know that they are being heard and that their own

thoughts about the future are valued. I think that, in talking to the staff at the school to prepare for the event, it will be my job to get that message across.

There are two more stages that Erikson speaks of that seem to play a big part in decisions that a person will make about his or her future. These are stages in early life that come before the conflict of identity according to Erikson. They are “Initiative versus Guilt,” (46) which is prominent during the play age just before school, and “Industry versus Inferiority,” (48) which is prominent during the early school years.

What is interesting about the “Initiative versus Guilt” stage is that out of this conflict develops a sense of purpose. It is the beginning of a drive within the child to want to make meaningful goals (47), and also the beginnings of a realization of what they can become later in life (46). Erikson warns that at this stage it is important that a child be free to declare themselves without being controlled by means of guilt (47). During this stage, a child’s method of exploration becomes playing, and so the child begins to experiment with role play, dressing up as often the most identifiable roles, such as nurses, firemen or train conductors (47). The negative component of this kind of play acting could be a child acting out a personality that does not match his own (48).

The stage that comes into play during the school years, “Industry versus Inferiority,” is brought about, in part, by new social situations. The child is introduced into the new school setting, and experiences the inevitable comparisons between himself or herself and his or her peers. Here, the child can be negatively affected and develop a sense of inferiority, or he can be appropriately encouraged and given a sense of competence (48). I think that the sense of inferiority presented at this stage can be a very serious event, and I wonder if a sense of inferiority gained during this stage can be done away with as the individual matures. Obviously,

I think that a sense of inferiority can really hinder a person's ability to actively pursue the kind of work that he or she believes will truly make him or her content in life. Looking at two different perspectives on the general age when personality becomes fixed, it appears that the biological perspective seems to be a little more optimistic. The brain has not fully developed until the age of twenty-five, and so it is thought that this is the point when personality development becomes a little less adaptable and a little more defined. On the other hand, social theorists seem to tend to limit crucial development of identity and personality to a very small window of time in childhood and adolescence. Famous psychiatrist William Glasser has this to say in his work *Identity Society*: "Even if the child gains a successful independent role, if he does not sometime between the ages of twelve and twenty achieve some reasonable goals that will support his role, he will slowly lose his successful identity" (125-126). Both are indeed a short span, however, when we consider the average length of a human life.

Naturally, as I am beginning to try to understand what adolescents today need in order to get them on the right path to a successful future, I have been reflecting on my own decisions about my future. My mom has always said that my interest and desire to be a medical doctor from a very early age is something to be envied. This summer, I had to smile secretly as I overheard my mom, in the midst of giving a speech to my younger brother, describing my "just knowing" what I wanted to do as being "lucky." I must admit, it is not hard to work hard when you have a clear and strongly desired goal to work for. Still, as I have mentioned, I do not think that having an open mind when you are young is such a bad thing. In fact, for some people, I think that it can be a clear advantage.

I remember very vividly one day when my mom was watching a television show about a group of doctors. I must have blurted out something like, "I want to be a children's doctor,

Mom.” I can imagine her looking at me and smiling, “Do you see that woman doctor?” she asked, “She is a special kind of children’s doctor. She does surgery on children. She is a pediatric surgeon.” “Well, I want to be a pediatric surgeon,” I proclaimed. Even before then I loved to play “Doctor.” I certainly did a lot of role playing when I was younger. Some of my best memories are of playing the “Doctor” game with my best friend.

In fifth grade our school had a writing competition through the anti-drug program, D.A.R.E. I think the prompt was something like, “Why are you choosing to stay drug free?” I wrote about my very lofty goal of being a pediatric surgeon, and I won the competition. I proudly gave a speech in front of the whole fifth grade class about choosing to live drug free so that I could make my dream come true. The “doctor bug” stayed with me in middle school and high school, though I became interested in other fields of medicine besides surgery. Before twelfth grade I attended a weeklong medical forum during the summer at Emory University. There, I was able to hear from several medical doctors, patients of chronic diseases and even hold a human heart! During my senior year of high school, every week I had the unique and exciting opportunity to meet with a group of other students interested in medicine at Le Bonheur Children’s Medical Center in Memphis. On those Thursdays we would talk to doctors, explore the hospital setting, and even volunteer. Some of my favorite days were volunteering in the hospital’s special care unit, where I would get to rock tiny babies. In college, I have continued to volunteer in the hospital and at elementary school clinics. I have talked with doctors and during one summer I worked at a nursing home where I made some wonderful friends, but also had my first experience with the loss of a wonderful friend.

Still this little passion that I have had since my childhood burns within, but throughout my time in college, it has changed a little. While I still have a definite interest in the field of

medicine, my hopes have become less fixed on a particular job, and more focused on what kind of relationships I want with people and what kinds of things I can keep learning from working with people. I have realized that at the heart of my interest in medicine has always been a deep desire to serve, and in doing so, I have realized that I will find my greatest fulfillment. I want the kind of job where I can look into a person's eyes and talk to them sincerely. I want the kind of job where I can hold a person's hand and offer words of comfort. I want the kind of job that will keep me challenged, and the kind of job that will keep teaching me long after my schooling is over. Perhaps one day, I will even have the opportunity to teach others myself, a job which I think can be one of the most noble.

The very simple concept of a relationship is something that is important to reflect upon when one is considering working with and for other people. If we go about our work checking off check lists and obediently following some procedure, then I think that sometimes we can end up sacrificing what truly matters, and that is the relationships with the people with whom we work. Two years ago I was given the opportunity to work with two fifth grade boys who were struggling academically and sometimes were disruptive in their classroom. The two boys and I met together each week and we talked about their behavior in class and I also helped them with their school assignments. We made a lot of progress, but some weeks we would have setback. What I remember most, though, about working with those boys was the looks on their faces when I showed up, the excitement that was in their voices when they got to tell me their big news for the week, and the encouragement they seemed to get once they knew I was there just for them. You know, I think the greatest good that I did for those boys was listening intently to their stories and asking questions back. I showed that I cared, and that was easy to do because I cared and I still care for those boys and their futures with my whole heart. Nadinne Cruz, director of

Stanford University's Haas Center for Public Service and a distinguished scholar of Service Learning, has said "Service is the creation and maintenance of more just relationships." She has also spoken about her relationship with her own family saying, "In my family, across ideological lines, there was a sense of unconditional, loving acceptance." Indeed, this is an idea that she has shared personally with other students, specifically in her relationship with fellow students at Okada, a dorm on the Stanford campus where she is resident fellow. "I tried to replicate that in Okada," she said, "to liberate everyone to speak across differences of opinions because they felt they belonged." To succeed in a job where serving others is the goal, what needs to be examined is the very fundamental concept of the personal relationship.

So, during my growing up, I can pick out some clear advantages that I had that enabled me to identify the things that I wanted in my future. What I think that I have always had is a very real sense of purpose. Even without knowing that I wanted to be a doctor, I think that I have always considered myself capable of doing something that I believe to be meaningful for this world. I am very hard working, especially when I have significant goals. I get enthusiastic about pursuing my goals, especially when I am not afraid of failing. When I am afraid of failing, I get discouraged, but usually I am so determined that I can push through the bad days and look for ways to improve myself. When I look back now, I seem to have had an amazing amount of confidence when I was very young. I wish it was still as strong! I was always a rather quiet and reserved child, but I always seem to remember being very sure of my performance in school. In middle school and high school I had my share of insecurities and self-doubt, but I think that being able to realize your weaknesses makes you stronger, realistic and more resilient later on. Something that I can always be grateful for, and something that I can count as a definite

advantage, is the unconditional love and support of two outstanding parents. I was lucky enough to hear that I made my parents proud very often throughout my life.

One of the biggest challenges for my career exploration day is also going to be one of the biggest goals, and that is for the students to engage in what they are hearing and become reflective about their futures. Remembering my visit from the career men and women during my senior year, I can recall some students who, unlike me, were trudging through the halls wondering how many excruciating minutes they would have to listen to an old person give a speech about their boring job. So, for my learning purposes, I think that a helpful question is: What made me ready to hear what the doctor had to say that day, when other students could have cared less?

Well, for one, they probably had not already found as strong a connection as I had to a career that I found to be very interesting. While I think that such a connection is not necessary at a high school age, I do think that it is important that a high school student begin to seriously think about further education (if that is a goal before a career), or be prepared to seek out opportunities to find out more about jobs that they could potentially be interested in. I can think of plenty of my peers who did not know exactly what they wanted to do and have eventually made amazing career choices and are very happy. They are the very ones, though, who really looked for opportunities to learn more about different jobs and sought out volunteer opportunities in their pursuit. My job for career exploration day will be to really find a way to spark an interest in the students who are not so far along in the thought process. I know very simply that to get some students engaged I will have to plan to make the presentations visually affective. As I have said before, I want the sessions to be interactive, so that questions can be asked and answered effectively. I want to include within the presentations the education

information of the jobs, so that the students realize what goes in to making a career choice a reality, and what they can expect their first step to be.

One thing that I have already touched on is the simple act of reflecting on the future. To reflect on what has been is our way of finding out where we have made errors and then thinking about how we can make improvements. To reflect on what is to come gives us a chance to make the right choices and take the right opportunities that come our way. Of course, I have done a great deal of thinking about my past. What I have learned in classes that I have already taken, strategies that have given way to great improvement in my schoolwork, and personal experiences that always seem to come to the forefront of my mind when I think about what I want to offer to this world during my life, all of these things and more have been the topic of my brainwork. Sometimes I think that we tend to close off our mind when we are worried about something in the future, and this probably only gets us deeper into trouble. I think that we must make an effort to reflect on things that make us scared, so that we can conquer our weaknesses head on. For the students at the high school who will be listening to the career men and women speak, I am going to try to ease their anxiety about their future by trying to make the sessions informative but not too intense, relatable, and interesting. I am hoping to motivate their inner reflection.

For some students I think that having a job does not seem quite “real” yet. For this reason, I think that I will consider asking the career men and women who participate to share what they remember their thoughts being in high school. I think this way the visitors might seem a little more relatable, as the students realize that they too were once in a high school student’s shoes. I think that another difference between me and some high school students might be that they have not yet developed that sense of purpose that I described having. For these students think that it is important not to force anything on them, because I think that gaining a sense of

purpose must be a deeply personal experience and something that can be gained with a little motivation and encouragement. Lastly, some students will not have the advantage of having a good support system at home, which, unfortunately, is one of the hardest things to make up for when you are not in a close personal relationship with the student. Encouraging teachers and other school administration to be aware of and very supportive of students' goals will hopefully help fill the missing messages of available and supportive parents.

Above all, I think that these kids need to know that they have a real shot at pursuing their dream, once they find what interests them. They need to be given opportunities to explore options and not have their futures thrust upon them. If I am successful, the students will enjoy the opportunity to learn about different jobs, they will learn the value of having a career that offers fulfillment in life, and they will become excited about their own future.

Works Cited

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Synopsis of Career Day Event:

I planned and organized a career day event for sophomore students at Fulton High School in Knoxville, Tennessee. My event took place on December 3, 2008. Three career men came to three ACT prep classes to talk to the students about their jobs and what advice best prepared them for their careers. I invited Mr. Archie Ellis, Chief Development Officer for the Knoxville Habitat for Humanity, Mr. Rick Bise, facilitator of Lincoln Park Technology and Trade Center, and Dr. James Killeffer, neurosurgeon and assistant professor at the University of Tennessee Graduate School of Medicine. Each presentation lasted approximately forty minutes and the classes included an average of 20 students. I have established a great relationship with Fulton's counselor in the School of Communications, and am hoping to have the privilege of organizing a similar event next year, with the hopes of making it available to more students and including more visitors. I have truly enjoyed having the opportunity to bring this event to the students at Fulton. It has been a worthwhile endeavor to help high school students understand the importance of working hard in school and beginning to prepare for their futures at this point in their academic careers.