Information about Occupations

We can review only briefly the available types and sources of career information that the counselor must have. More detailed discussions of this important area can be found in Hoppock (1976), Isaacson (1977), or Norris et al. (1979).

Selecting appropriate materials for a particular client requires understanding of the client as well as knowing what career information is available, and where. One must face such questions as the following: How much information is needed? What kind of information can be most accurately and rapidly integrated into the client's decision-making system? Where is that kind of information readily and economically (in terms of both time and money) accessible? Can the client successfully deal with acquiring and using this type of information?

Sources of information are constantly changing, with new sources and systems appearing and older systems shifting and disappearing. For example, the Department of Labor has recently established a National Occupational Information Coordinating Committee to work with a network of state level committees. This structure is charged with developing a system that will make occupational information more accessible and more usable.

Printed Materials

The most abundant type of career information is printed matter. It ranges in scope from a few brief sentences to lengthy volumes. Accuracy and usefulness vary similarly, and there is no apparent correlation among the three factors. A paragraph in the Dictionary of Occupational Titles may describe precisely the essence of the tasks performed in a specific occupation, and, at the same time, a monograph of many pages may simply interpret, illustrate, and explain that same paragraph.

Because the educational system has used books so widely, we are accustomed to turning almost automatically to printed sources when we seek new information. Counselors must recognize that not all individuals read well, understand what they read, and are able to apply or use what they read. Sometimes, also, other types of information may fit the needs of a particular client more appropriately.

School media centers, libraries, and career resource centers will often have an extensive collection of printed career information. Often the material will be catalogued and arranged or filed according to one of the frequently used filing systems. The counselor may need to teach the client how the system works if he or she is to use it.

Sources of printed materials include many government agencies, professional organizations, private companies, educational institutions, periodicals, and commercial publishers. Vocational Guidance Quarterly includes in each issue a list of recently published career materials. Several commercial publishers of career materials issue an annual index of recently published materials, and at least one book listing current materials appears regularly.

The Dictionary of Occupational Titles, the Guide for Occupational Exploration, and current issues of the Occupational Outlook Handbook are generally considered as basic references.

Valuable additions to this basic group would include DOT related publications such as Supplements to the Dictionary of Occupational Titles and Selected Characteristics of Occupations Defined in the Dictionary of Occupational Titles. State Employment Service offices publish material relevant to the state or regions of the state such as Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas or Economic Regions that provide locally useful information unavailable from national sources.

Audiovisual Materials

The old adage "a picture is worth a thousand words" confirms that audiovisual techniques are useful for counselors. Many films, filmstrips, pictures, audiotapes, and videotapes can be used to assist clients to understand particular occupations. Television and radio series or
special presentations, movies, and news broadcasts on either TV or radio may help to build insight or, conversely, may simply reaffirm superficial stereotypes.

High-quality audiovisual (AV) material is more costly to produce than most printed material. Consequently, it is often less accessible than books, monographs, and pamphlets. AV materials are often maintained in centralized locations from which they can be borrowed or rented for short periods. Many school systems are now affiliated with cooperative agencies providing this kind of service.

Both AV and printed materials face a common problem since both may retain their usability longer than their accuracy. The world of work is fluid and, in periods of rapid change, information about salaries, number of openings and preparatory programs may quickly be seriously dated.

Programmed and Mechanized Materials

Workbooks or sequenced exercises have been developed to assist individuals in either the entire career-choice process or in certain segments of that process. Typically, these devices provide a logical series of experiences that assist the client to obtain needed information and to process that information in a way that moves him or her toward a decision. The advantages usually include allowing the individual to proceed at a personally determined pace and assuring that specific steps are mastered before advancing to later steps. The disadvantages are that some attention to individual client needs may be lost, and feelings of depersonalization may develop in the client.

Recent examples of programmed material are the Vocational Exploration and Insight Kit developed by John Holland and incorporating his Self-Directed Search, and two workbooks prepared by the Employment Service entitled Job Selection Workbook and Self-Appraisal Workbook.

The VIEW (Vocational Information for Education and Work) system is representative of several mechanized systems that are now in general use. This system, first developed by the San Diego Department of Education, has been adopted and adapted by many state and local agencies over the past fifteen years (Gerstein and Hoover, 1967). VIEW incorporates the use of microfilm aperture cards and necessitates the use of a microfilm reader and microfilm printer. The system overcomes many of the disadvantages inherent in much printed and AV material. It provides current and usable national and regional information and retains economy, compactness, and ease of operation. It can be kept updated and also directed toward needs of particular groups.

Further illustrations of mechanized systems include the Occupational View-Deck and the Worker Trait Group Keysort Deck.

Computer-Based Systems

Computers have been used for a long time to store and retrieve information. Many have been used for career materials. As early as 1974, Harris identified thirty systems in various stages of development or use. Since that time there has been considerable expansion in availability and usage. As computers become even more efficient and simultaneously less expensive, their increased application is assured. Several states have been working in a consortium to explore the use of computers in statewide information delivery systems. The results of this tryout should soon be available for wider application.

Several high school and college systems have adopted the Computerized Vocational Information System (CVIS) developed by Harris and others at Willowbrook High School. This system is essentially an information-retrieval technology that includes information about the student as well as about occupations, schools, training programs, and so forth. Stored information can be kept current, and the system can be used easily and economically by students wherever it is available.

An example of an advanced level computer system is the System of Interactive Guidance and Information (SIGI) developed by Katz at Educational Testing Service. SIGI incorporates six subsystems that assist the user in assessing values, locating occupations that involve various values, comparing various occupations on assorted criteria, predicting chances for success in local preparatory programs,
planning personal preparatory programs, and estimating overall desirability of a specific occupation. Because the system is more complex than CVIS, it is also more time-consuming and costly to implement and maintain. Somewhat similar to SIGI in level of sophistication is the DISCOVER system, also now generally available.

Interviews with Experts

One basic source of occupational information has always been the worker. He or she should know more about a job—how it feels, what it demands, how it influences one's life, and the satisfactions it provides—than the employer or skilled observers, the two other major sources. The worker has at once credibility and authority, "can tell it like it is." Every community is certainly richly endowed with this resource. Elementary school teachers have long capitalized on the use of workers to tell their classes about different jobs and what workers do there. Secondary schools have modified the system slightly but, essentially, the career day or career conference is a device for bringing workers into a conversation with interested students. Many schools maintain a reference file of local individuals who have agreed to talk with students, individually or in groups, about their occupations. Counselors can, of course, locate appropriate workers who are willing to talk with clients as the need arises. A network of local contacts is essential to help identify suitable resource workers.

Some problems can occur with this technique, but most of them can be avoided by carefully selecting workers who are to serve this consulting role. One danger is that the worker's experience is unusual and not characteristic of most individuals in that occupation. Another problem can occur if the selected worker lacks communication skills and is unable to convey feelings, insights, and experiences. An additional problem arises when the worker over-enthusiastically "sells" the occupation with a recruiting approach or else emphasizes only how very difficult or demanding the job can be.

Simulation and Synthetic Work Environments

Simulation involves artificial activities in an artificial setting used to gain insight, understanding, or skill applicable to real activities and in a realistic setting. Teachers have long used this device as a basic tool in classrooms. Role-playing and fire drills are found in every school and typify simulation. Although widely used in teaching, simulation has been used in personal counseling or change counseling more frequently than in career counseling. The Job Experience Kits available from Science Research Associates and based on research by Krumboltz illustrate how this approach can be used effectively in career counseling.

Synthetic work environments are one step closer than simulation to reality. Simulation involves artificial activity, whereas synthetic work environments provide realistic activity, although both maintain an artificial setting. This technique is also widely used by teachers and schools. Many vocational education departments teach students construction skills by having the classes actually build a residence that is later sold to provide the land, materials, and equipment for the next year's project. In the process, the student actually performs the various construction jobs under supervision of faculty. Other schools maintain student-operated stores, office practice projects, child-care centers, and similar situations where the student performs the actual work but in a setting where teaching and supervision are available. Where these activities already exist, the counselor can use them to help clients obtain a feel for the "real thing."

Direct Observation

Field trips not only help the individual to see what a worker does and how he or she functions, but they also show the worker in his or her "natural habitat." One gains a much better feel for the occupation when one encounters both worker and work setting. Even the casual "walk-through" exposes the individual to sights and sounds and other reactions that cannot be provided by printed statements, pictures, or even interviews with workers. A modified use of the field trip has particular interest for career counselors because they are usually focusing on the needs of a single client. Many counselors report favorable results from an individualized field trip usually, called shadowing. In this technique, arrangements are made for the individual to spend a working day with a worker, watching the worker on the job, when time and activity permit listening to the worker explain why things are done a particular way, seeing what happens and how the job relates to the activity of other workers. Sometimes the individual can shadow two or three workers during the day and thereby broaden experiences still further.
Exploratory Participation

Career education advocates contend that every student, from early high school onward, should participate in some work experience. Exploratory work experience is primarily intended to assist the individual in understanding different types of work, work settings, activities, tools and equipment used, and the general aspects of work and work life. The exploratory experience need not be paid, although there are advantages to the experience of being paid for effort, and it need not be full-time. It does need to be long enough each work day to provide a realistic sample of the work, which probably requires a half-day in most settings. The experience also needs to be continued for enough days and weeks to supply the day-in-day-out variety or lack of variety that is characteristic of the job. Rarely can that be accomplished in less than three or four weeks.

Counselors can use this approach advantageously with many clients who have had very limited exposure to actual work settings. Often the client may be interested in occupations that require lengthy preparatory programs and may be concerned about the appropriateness of a tentative choice. Although direct involvement in the occupation is impossible because of lack of professional knowledge or skill, close contact through exploratory activities may be possible. A client interested in nursing or medicine might find experience as a part-time candy striper or hospital orderly enlightening. Other fields have similar jobs involving lower skill levels that provide some chance for exploratory exposure.

On-The-Job Tryout

The most realistic experience of all, where it can be arranged, is actual tryout on the job. This is appropriate to positions where requirements for previous training or experience are low, or where clients have completed the necessary preparation and now must make choices among an array of beginning assignments in their professional career. An illustration of the latter is the engineering student who is approaching graduation and is encountering difficulty in choosing among applied, research, sales, and training options.

There are difficulties in creating this type of experience for clients because it requires an actual work situation. Using a position for tryout experiences is costly for the employer, who usually prefers a fully committed, ambitious worker rather than one who may need to be replaced after the tryout period expires. Such personnel changes are expensive, time-consuming, and impose on other workers.

One example of on-the-job tryout that does work successfully is the vocational preparatory work experience program where the participant usually is assigned for a full school year on a half-time basis. The purpose of the program is to teach actual work skills, and participants ordinarily have already made a clear choice. Opportunity to be involved in such an experience would not be available to an undecided client.