

## INTRODUCTION

# EDUCATION & EMPLOYMENT



**W**hat do you want to be when you grow up? At various times in my life I answered the question earnestly with the following: archeologist (I had just come back from visiting the King Tut exhibit), marine biologist (seals are so cute!), truck driver (my middle school years apparently brought with them a love of the open road), and van painter. As a child of the 70s, I envisioned a life in which I would air brush wolves, stars, and majestic tigers onto metal panels, all while I lived in the back of my own highly ornate van.

In college, my career path remained an open road. I began as a Drama major, but that didn't last long as the realities of job potential given my talents were all too apparent. I ended up settling on Communication (dabbling in Sociology along the way) where my new dream was to become a documentary film maker. Although I did fine as a college student, again in my actual abilities – this time behind the camera instead of in front of the camera – caused me to reflect on yet another career choice. My first job after graduation was working in syndication for a television network in New York City. I lasted three months as the long commute, intensely competitive work environment, and strict rules made me question whether a career in television – and my major – weren't a mistake.

Between college and graduate school, I earned money as the following: a barista, personal assistant, manager of a

sports intramural program, wedding cake consultant, and editor (Hey! Something stuck!). Then, in 1993, I started my Master's program in Developmental Psychology and by 1998, I earned my PhD in the same field (still working as a barista to help me through school). I was 30 when I graduated.

I don't believe my career path is atypical. Very few people know exactly what they want to be when they grow up, and create a linear path to that goal. Instead, they dabble in different dreams and jobs, learning where their skills match and the work environment is a good fit, ideally landing in a job that feels right.

Youth and young adults with mental health challenges face similar trajectories when trying to determine “who they want to be” when they grow up. However, their journeys are often more arduous due to their struggles with mental health. With that in mind, this special issue of *Focal Point* focuses on best practices for helping youth and young adults with mental health challenges reach their educational and employment goals, by highlighting preliminary results from some of our research at Pathways to Positive Futures as well as some of the work being done at the Transitions RTC at the University of Massachusetts. Three articles describe interventions, two of which are currently funded by Pathways. One describes the promising results of Career Visions, a program designed for youth to truly explore different career options as opposed to settling for any old

job, despite the obstacles mental health issues may bring. Another, Better Futures, supports high school students who have both mental health conditions and experience in the foster care system in their goals to get into college or other post-secondary education. Finally, Opt4College, created by Myra Rosen-Reynoso and colleagues, is a computer-based program which guides youth through the obstacles and supports that await them while applying for and attending college.

Other articles in this issue of *Focal Point* describe best practices for working with youth to achieve desirable education and employment outcomes. Pathways member Eileen Brennan and colleagues conducted research to determine what factors are associated with better educational outcomes in youth with mental health challenges. Another article examines how both supported employment and supported education can be effective with young people (Delman & Ellison), while this issue's Data Trends reviews how supported employment may not benefit all young adults equally. An editorial by Charles Lidz suggests that viewing career development as a part of the recovery process can reframe the way we think about employment services. Finally, an article by Joe Marrone and Stephaine Taylor examines how vocational rehabilitation services can work effectively with young adults with mental health challenges.

Three more articles provide a sense of what works from

the perspectives of young adults. Two young adult authors focus on what made the programs in which they participated (Pathways projects Career Visions and Better Futures) successful. Additionally, a group of young women from the Pathways sister program, Transitions – which operates out of the University of Massachusetts – offer advice as to how to best work with young adults with mental health challenges, while their supervisors do the same from their point of view in a separate article.

A common thread through all these articles is the need for support. No one person can achieve their educational and career goals without the help of others. When I think back on my own winding path toward where I am today, I am touched by the number of people who supported me along the way – a college advisor, my friends and family, and various people who were just willing to offer advice. For young people with mental health challenges, these supports can be more difficult to find, and are that much more important. We hope that this special issue of *Focal Point* provides valuable information and insights towards helping youth with mental health challenges reach their educational and employment aspirations.

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