



SELF-DETERMINED CAREER PLANNING: THE CAREER VISIONS PROJECT

The Career Visions Project (CV) works with young adults who are 20 to 30 years old, and want career and job planning assistance that address challenges they have getting and keeping a job due to their mental health issues. Prior experiences and challenges of the young adults seeking assistance from CV vary a great deal. Some young adults began receiving mental health and/or special education services in their teens or earlier, whereas others did so for the first time in their 20s. Their prior work experiences range from none, to one or two jobs, to having had a large number of short-term service industry jobs. Most of the young adults have at least completed their GED, and many have started college and continue to attempt to complete their degree.

Almost all of the young adults in CV want assistance to figure out the type of job or career that would be a good match for their skills and interests and in which they could be successful. Most of those who are going to college or have attempted to, but struggled in doing so, want assistance with discovering strategies that will help them to complete their education. Those who are seeking or want to seek a job want help with landing a job and being successful on the job.

Figuring out the “right” career or job area to pursue, how to be successful in college and other job training programs, and how to get and maintain a job are challenges that are typical of most young adults. The term “quarterlife crises” has been used to describe the struggles of people in their 20’s as they move from the accepted norm of being dependent on parents as adolescents to fully independent adults, especially in the area of financial self-sufficiency.¹ Arnett² has more recently described these years as a unique developmental phase of life which he calls “emerging adulthood.” Arnett’s research suggests that contemporary young adults take longer to move through this phase than prior generations as they marry later in life and as more pursue

postsecondary education before seeking a full-time career job.² The recession and slow economic recovery of the past half-decade has made the employment challenges of young adults particularly difficult. For example, it is estimated that over half of recent college graduates have not been able to find employment or are underemployed.³

The young adult years pose many challenges for those going through them, and in many cases families are also challenged as they attempt to balance continuing to support their adult children while encouraging them to take steps toward independence. Arnett² points out that most individuals successfully maneuver through these years. However, data suggest that many young adults with mental health issues do not. The unemployment rate for Americans with mental health conditions is three to five times higher than for those who have not been diagnosed with these conditions and about 70 percent of people with mental health conditions with college degrees earn less than \$10 per hour.⁴ Combining the challenges experienced by most young adults with the unique challenges faced by those who also have mental health issues (i.e. societal and employment stigma) results in many who unsuccessfully maneuver through these years, spending their lives dependent on Social Security and living in poverty.

SELF-DETERMINED AND SELF-DIRECTED CAREER PLANNING

There is evidence that individuals who experience disabilities and who learn and use “self-determination” strategies such as goal setting, plan and action step development, and problem solving are more likely to be successful in adult life, including in employment.⁵ Therefore, the young adults who participate in CV learn and use strategies to choose a career or job that is a good fit for each of them, to develop plans for moving toward their career goals, and to take steps toward these goals. They also learn other practical skills such as how to do informational interviews and write resumes. In addition the young adults gain information and support directly related to mental health challenges and in particular the specific challenges each of them experiences related to moving forward with their career plans, including going to school. This includes information that they can use to decide if they want to disclose their challenges to colleges and employers, and if so, when and how.

Each young adult meets with his or her career guide about once a week for 12 meetings. During these meetings the young adult learns how to answer each of the questions shown in Table 1, and by the end of these meetings the

TIM'S STORY

Tim was in his mid-20's when he began with the Career Visions Project. He experiences Aspergers and a number of mental health diagnoses. Tim attended an alternative high school for students with behavior issues at which he was not challenged academically. When Tim completed high school, a job developer helped him obtain a job at a video store which he held for several years. When the store closed down, the public mental health program where he receives services suggested Career Visions to him. Through the planning process, Tim shared that when in school and prior to going to alternative schools he had enjoyed math and science. He also shared that in his spare time he liked to create Excel spreadsheets to keep track of things. One of the career fields that we suggested that he might like to research was Geographical Information Systems (GIS). He and his career guide researched it on-line and then met with someone at a company who does GIS. Tim was excited about what he learned and then met with GIS program directors at a community college. He wasn't sure if he could be successful in college or would like going to school again, but decided that he would like to give it a try. The next challenge was figuring out how to pay for it. With the assistance of his career guide, Tim asked his VR counselor to pay the cost of one class as an assessment of whether he could do the work and if he liked it. His VR counselor agreed to his request because of all of the research that he had done, including presenting her with data that showed that the employment projections in the GIS field were excellent. Tim took his first GIS class in the fall of 2012, received a B+ and loved it. He is now taking two more classes and plans on completing his GIS certificate and then pursuing a career in the field.

young adult has at least begun a career plan. The young adult then meets with the career guide about twice a month for 9 more months in order to obtain support and encouragement as she or he takes steps in her or his plan. Some young adults complete all of their meetings within about a year, while many others take longer because they have to miss meetings due to a number of issues such as hospitalizations, reentering inpatient substance use rehabilitation, and personal and family obligations.

The curriculum that we are using for CV was adapted from materials developed by Wehmeyer and his colleagues.⁵ However, no intervention or research to date has specifically focused on whether such programs can benefit young adults with mental health conditions.

PRELIMINARY OUTCOMES OF THE PROJECT ARE PROMISING

In order to evaluate the impact of the Career Visions Model on the young adult participants we are using a study design in which the young adults who wish to participate are randomly chosen to either receive the full intervention or to receive only a few hours of career guidance. We are using a number of assessment instruments that all of the young adults in the CV group complete prior to receiving guidance. The assessments are given again after the first 12 weekly meetings; after the 18 twice monthly meetings; 6 months after the last meeting; and then once more 6 months later. Those in the brief career guidance comparison group complete the same measures during the same time intervals. Additionally, CV participants are given a semi-structured interview after the weekly meetings to gather qualitative data on program effectiveness.

The study is still underway and data continue to be collected from many of the young adults. However, the preliminary results appear to be promising. One of the measures that we have used gathers the quantity of career planning activities the young adults have engaged in out of about 50 career planning activities that include internet research to learn about different jobs or careers, meeting with a Department of Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor, and applying for jobs. As Figure 1 shows, very few of the young adults in either group had done any of these activities prior to the study. Those in the CV group had done many more of these career planning activities after being involved in the program, whereas those in the comparison group continued to engage in very few of the activities.

The young adults also completed a measure called the Career Development Self-Efficacy (CDSE) scale, which assesses how confident they are related to career planning.⁶ Those who were in CV have made much greater gains in their career planning self-confidence than those in the comparison group (See Figure 2). On the Disability-Related Self-Efficacy measure,⁷ which assesses a person's confidence in effectively dealing with challenges related to their disability, the CV young adults also made greater gains than those in the comparison group, particularly after meeting with their career guide for about a year (See Figure 3). In fact, the comparison group young adults' confidence deteriorated over time. Additionally, on the subscale of the ARC Self-Determination⁸ measure that is specifically related to career planning and employment, the young adults in Career Visions have made larger gains than those in the comparison group, whereas the self-determination of those in the comparison group declined (See Figure 4).

FEEDBACK FROM THE YOUNG ADULTS

The story shared by a CV participant about her experiences in the project (see p. 24) reflects those of many of the young adult participants. Most of the young adults identified the following things to be particularly helpful:

1. Participants learned and were supported to use practical information and strategies focused on jobs and careers. While they acknowledge that the counseling and case management services they received from other programs were helpful, they felt that Career Visions was unique in providing them with specific support that they needed in order to actually take steps toward jobs and careers.
2. Although all Career Visions participants learn the same set of self-determined career planning strategies, how they use these strategies is up to them and the type and nature of the supports provided by the career guides to help them do so is very individualized.
3. The career guides are nonjudgmental and flexible. We are not focused on the young adults' diagnoses or the things that they have done in the past that have gotten in the way of them moving forward in a positive fashion (such as a legal history), but on helping them to rediscover a sense of hope for, and belief in, themselves and their futures, and to act on this hope.
4. The consistent meetings with their career guide helped them to stay on track in planning and doing the steps that they had listed on their "to do" list. They recognized that knowing that they would share with their career guide what they had done and not done provided an extra incentive to them for getting things done.
5. As was suggested before, many of the young adults enter the program with little confidence in their abilities

or their futures. The consistent communication by the career guides of their belief in the young adult, along with the opportunity to experience success and accomplishments and learning to pat themselves on the back each day for taking even small steps was critically important for most of the participants.

6. They liked that the career guides really "walked the talk" of self-determination by giving them the tools to self-direct their own plans, helping them to gather the information they needed to make informed decisions and respecting and supporting the decisions they made even when the career guide might not agree with them, and giving them the amount and type of support that they wanted in order to be successful.

OTHER LESSONS LEARNED

Each young adult in Career Visions is provided with a notebook of materials and forms that they use to write their plans, "to do" lists, and accomplishments. They find the materials to be very helpful, but many want us to put the materials on-line so that they can access and use them without needing to lug around a notebook. With the input of one of the participants we are now planning to create an interactive online program and "apps" that young adults can use.

Following completion of all of their meetings with their career guide, most of the young adults indicated that they would have preferred to continue to meet with him or her on an as-needed basis. Many of them, for the first time in their lives, were working or going to school and felt that they needed some on-going, but infrequent "booster" shots of support and help. In fact, preliminary data suggest that the gains made when they were meeting with their career guides began to decline during the follow-up assessments.

A number of State Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) counselors have been critical to the success of several of the

TABLE 1. CAREER PLANNING SELF-DETERMINATION AND SELF-DIRECTION QUESTIONS

PHASE 1 What careers and jobs are a good fit with my interests, talents and needs?	PHASE 2 What is my plan?	PHASE 3 What have I achieved?
1. What are my interests, strengths, & preferences? 2. What are possible jobs that reflect my strengths and interests? 3. What do I know about each now? 4. What must change to get the job and career I want? 5. What is my career goal?	6. What is my plan to reach my goal? 7. What actions can I take to reach my career or job goal? 8. What resources can I use? 9. What could keep me from taking action? 10. What can I do to remove these barriers?	11. What actions have I taken? 12. What barriers have been removed? 13. What has changed to enable me to get the job and career I want?

FIGURE 1. CAREER ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

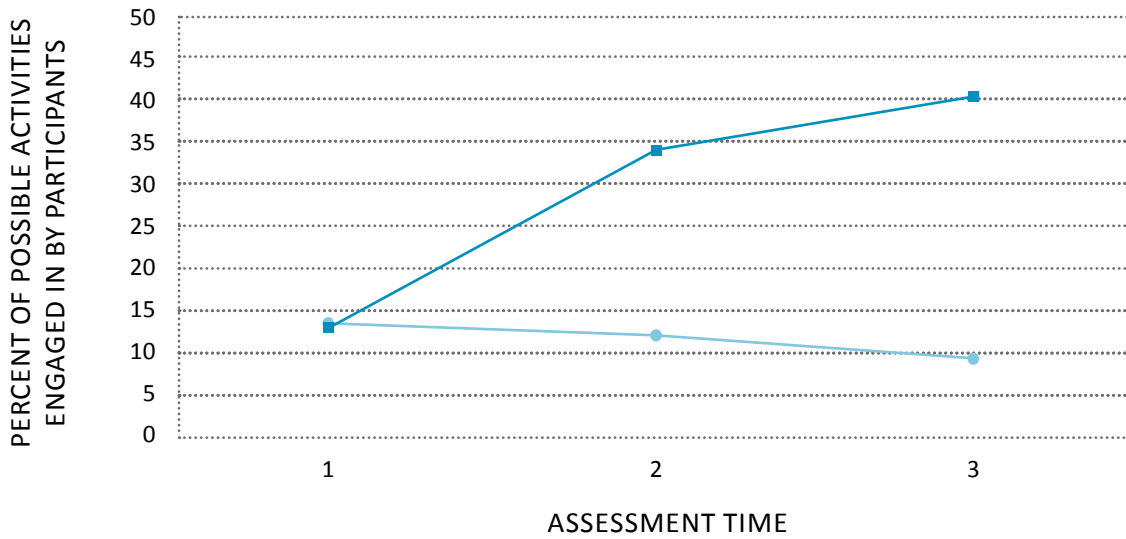


FIGURE 2. CAREER DEVELOPMENT SELF-EFFICACY

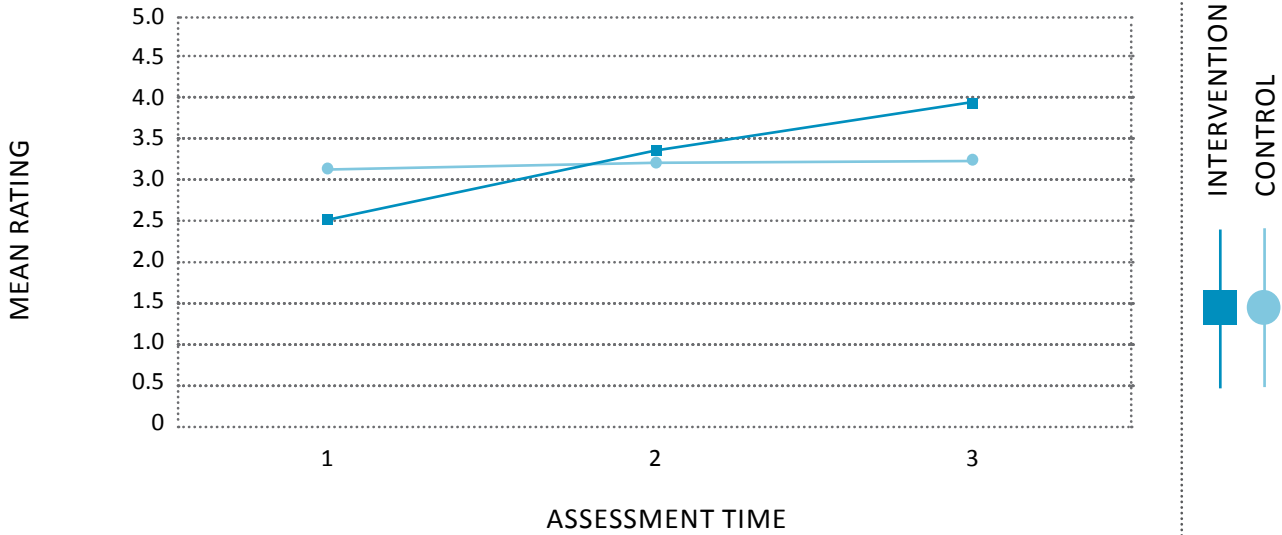


FIGURE 3. DISABILITY-RELATED SELF-EFFICACY

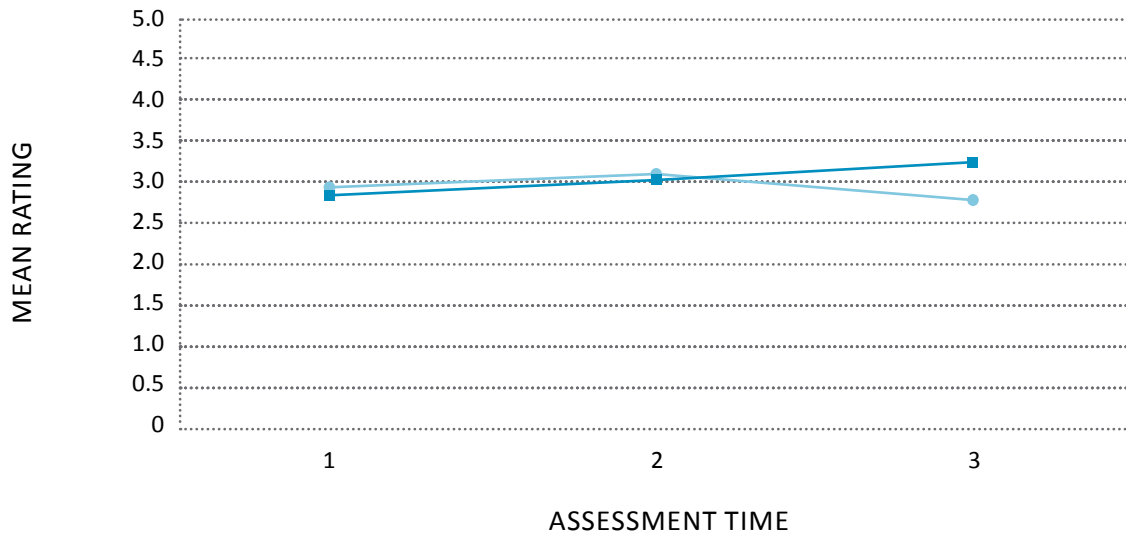
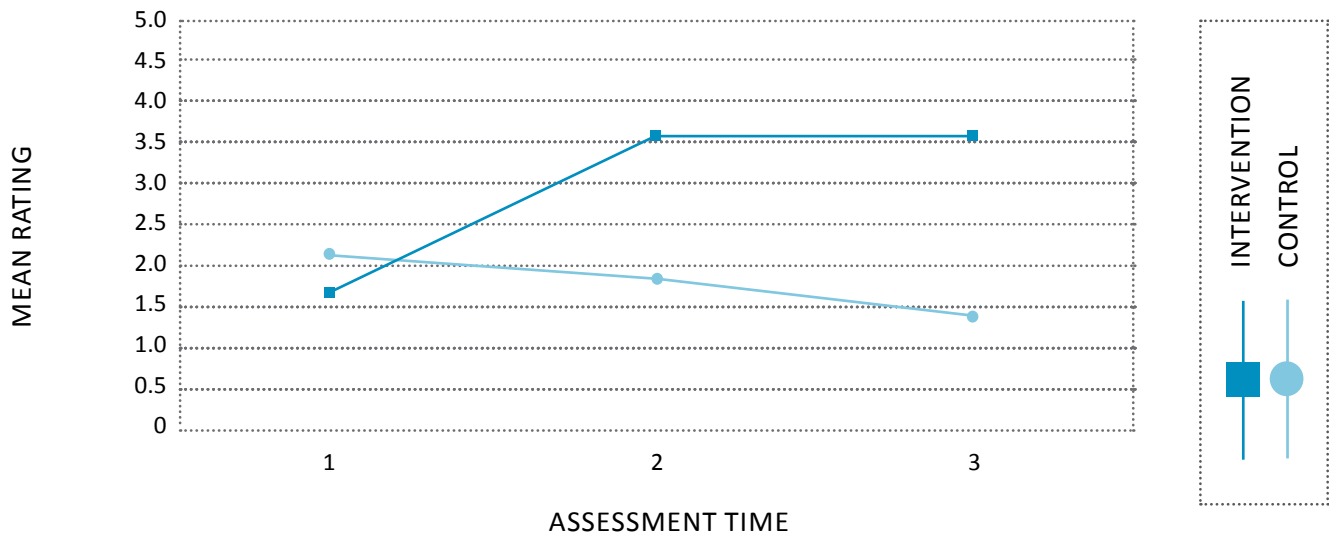


FIGURE 4. ARC SELF-DETERMINATION SCALE (JOB-RELATED SUBSCALE)

young adults in CV. One local county VR counselor office has been particularly supportive and willing to provide funding needed by some of the young adults to proceed with their plans. For example, she helped secure funding of college classes for a number of the participants. The story of Tim (see sidebar, p. 20) is another illustration of how a flexible and supportive VR Counselor can make the difference in a young person's life.

IMPLICATIONS

I have had the opportunity to work with many older adults who have long histories of involvement in the mental health system. Most of these adults had long ago given up on work because they had been told for many years by professionals and even their families that they could not work and that it would probably cause their mental health issues to become worse. Even as attitudes about work have evolved in the mental health field the focus has been on helping older people with significant work history gaps and little education or training to obtain entry-level jobs. There is a critical need to provide a great deal more systematic and intentional support for young adults at a time in their lives when they still have the opportunity to get back on the path to a career or job in which they have a chance to use their talents and skills, and to achieve a decent quality of life and self-sufficiency. As we continue to work with young adults and to collect and analyze our data we hope that Career Visions continues to prove to be effective and, thus, one approach that community programs offer to more of their young adult service recipients.

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