

Using Career Interest Inventories to Inform Career Planning

The Importance of Self-Exploration to Career Planning

It is often difficult for youth to determine what career path to pursue. In many cases they are unfamiliar with the range of career options available. While they usually know some activities they like to do and which activities they are good at doing, they typically lack a clear idea of how their skills and interests align with different career possibilities.

For this reason, engaging youth in self-exploration – the process of learning to identify their skills, interests, and values and how they could be used in various careers – is a critical step in the career development process for all young people, including youth with disabilities. Once youth have a clearer sense of themselves, they can better set goals and make informed choices about their education and career plans.

Research suggests that by engaging in self-exploration, career exploration, and career planning and management activities, students will perceive the relevance of how courses in high school and college connect to self-defined career and life goals (Solberg, Gresham, Phelps, Durham, & Haakenson, 2010). For the many youth who enter high school with a history of low academic performance, access to these activities are especially critical because research has clearly indicated that when low performing students perceive the

This Innovative Strategies Practice Brief provides practical examples and resources used by promising and exemplary youth programs to conduct career interest inventories with youth. The youth programs featured in this brief have been recognized by NCWD/Youth as [Innovative Strategies](#). NCWD/Youth's Innovative Strategies features workforce development programs and practices that serve youth with disabilities, either as a target population or as part of other youth populations. The U.S. Department of Labor does not endorse any of the products, vendors, or tools referenced in this brief. Any mention of vendors, products, or tools is for informational purposes only.

relevance of a course to their future goals, they achieve better grades and report more interest in the course (Hulleman & Harackiewicz, 2009).

Career assessment is a component of self-exploration, however not all types of career assessment lend themselves to self-exploration. The types of assessment tools used for self-exploration should enable youth to examine their interests, skills, and values and to evaluate career possibilities in terms of whether the occupations match these interests, skills, and values. Career assessments should not be used to dissuade a youth from a particular career pathway or program; the intent is to develop their awareness of various options, not to narrow their options. The type of career assessment tool commonly used for self-exploration is the career interest inventory.

What is a Career Interest Inventory?

Career interest inventories typically describe or illustrate (often with

pictures and videos) many occupations and job tasks and ask youth to rate how much they would enjoy doing each job or task. By rating their level of interest in a wide range of occupations, these inventories help young people recognize their predominant interests and preferences (Timmons, Podmostko, Bremer, Lavin, & Wills, 2004). Career interest inventories can be used in school classes, in afterschool and community youth programs, in workforce development programs, and at home.

Multiple Ways to Administer Career Interest Inventories

Often, youth complete a career interest inventory by individually reading occupation and job task descriptions and filling out a questionnaire with paper and pencil or using a computer-based questionnaire. This method may work well for some youth but others may need or prefer a different way of completing the inventory.



Career interest inventories can also be completed verbally one-on-one by an adult and youth or with a group of youth. To complete them verbally, a youth service professional often reads the description of each occupation or job task aloud or assists youth to read them out loud. In a group setting, youth may take turns reading the descriptions. Reading them aloud presents an opportunity for staff and youth to confirm whether they understand the description and discuss any questions before rating their interest. Providing pictures or videos along with each description where possible helps youth to visualize the occupation or job task. Some computer-based interest inventories give youth the option to have text descriptions read aloud.

Once each description is reviewed, each youth typically writes their rating down on paper. Each youth may also respond verbally by individually stating how they rate their interest in the given occupation or job task (this works best one-on-one or with a small group).

Practical Examples for Conducting Career Interest Inventories

Career interest inventories are commonly used by a diversity of youth programs including those that operate in schools and those in community settings such as youth workforce programs and disability service agencies. A review of all the Innovative Strategies program profiles indicates many programs engage youth in some form of career assessment. Career interest inventories were specifically mentioned in seven of the program profiles. Through a recent survey,

more in-depth details on how they use career interest inventories were shared by the following programs highlighted in this brief:

- The [Center for Independent Living of North Central Florida \(CIL/NCF\)'s High School/High Tech \(HS/HT\)](#) program in Gainesville, Florida.
- [Linking Employment, Abilities and Potential \(LEAP\)'s Job Link](#) in Cleveland, Ohio.
- [Linking Learning to Life \(LLL\)](#) in Chittenden County, Vermont.
- The Minnesota High School/High Tech E-Connect program, one of several programs of the [Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development Pathways to Employment Initiative](#).
- [Shasta County Twenty-First Century Career Connections \(STC3\)](#) in Redding, California.
- [Tech-Now Oklahoma's High School/High Tech](#) program.

Across all these programs, four trends emerged regarding their use of career interest inventories:

- Many youth programs use free career interest inventory tools that youth can access on the Internet.
- Programs adapt their methods and materials to suit individual youth needs.
- Programs use the career interest inventory results as a starting point for engaging youth in exploration and planning for careers and postsecondary education.
- Programs use other types of career assessment tools where appropriate.

1) Many youth programs use free career interest inventory tools that youth can access on the Internet.

State sponsored interest inventory and assessment tools are commonly used. Many state government websites include free interest assessment tools as a part of career information systems for anyone to use. For example, the [Tech-Now Oklahoma's High School/High Tech](#) program uses the interest inventory and other career assessment tools available on the Oklahoma Career Information System (OKCIS) website, <http://okcis.intocareers.org/> (Select "Just Browsing-Quick Start" to review the tools). OKCIS is operated by the Oklahoma Department of Career and Technology Education. A section of OKCIS called My Career Plan provides step-by-step career planning activities for middle and high school students. In the first step, Getting Started – Know Myself, students are encouraged to complete an Internet-based Career Cluster Inventory as well as other self-reflection worksheets to identify their interests, values, skills, and goals.

In Florida, the High School/High Tech program operated by the [Center for Independent Living of North Central Florida \(CIL/NCF\)](#) uses the Interest Profiler and other career planning tools available from the Florida Department of Education. Florida's state-wide career planning system is called the Florida Choices Planner, online at <https://access.bridges.com/>. In addition to an Interest Profiler tool, the website has a [Work Values Sorter](#). Using this online activity, youth read 20 Work Value statements and decide



what order of importance to rank them in on an online worksheet.

Some schools have their own career planning software programs that youth can use on school computers when available. For example, the [Linking Learning to Life](#) program indicates that youth sometimes use the Burlington High School's Choices software. The Choices system includes an Interest Profiler, a Basic Skills Survey, and a Work Importance Locator.

There are several advantages to using government or school sponsored online career interest inventories including:

- They are typically integrated with state and national career information data systems. This allows the young person to view information about various careers that match their interest inventory results as soon as they complete the questionnaire.
- Most online interest inventories automatically tally the youth's responses and provide a results report that explains his/her predominant career interests and next steps for exploring careers.
- Many systems provide a login account so that youth can save their answers and results and come back at another time to complete questionnaires or use other career planning tools. These systems typically enable youth to create online portfolios, set goals, explore career options and postsecondary training and education requirements, and create action plans for pursuing their goals.

2) Programs adapt their methods and materials to suit individual youth needs.

Career interest inventories and career exploration activities work best when they are tailored to fit individual youth needs and accommodate differences such as varying learning styles, abilities, culture, and language. This practice is reflected in the different approaches and materials that programs use for conducting career interest inventories.

For example, the [LEAP Job Link](#) program staff frequently use a video, among other tools, for identifying career interests. They find the Envision Your Career DVD to be a good tool for their program's youth population because "it works for our low/non-readers, deaf students, and ESL students." The video is "language free" – occupations and work-related tasks are demonstrated silently, rather than described in text or with words. The instructions for how to rate each occupation/task are also demonstrated visually without words. (For programs interested in using career videos, there are free videos available from www.CareerOneStop.org that may or may not be suitable for the population of youth being served.)

The staff at [Linking Learning to Life](#) vary their approach to career interest inventories based on the individual youth's ability. Sometimes they use a Picture Interest Career Survey, which they obtained from the local Vocational Rehabilitation agency. Other times staff read career descriptions and instructions to youth and assist youth with writing their interests on paper as needed.

[STC3](#) decided to create its own universally designed career interest survey tools ([available to download from their website](#)) by adapting a commonly used career personality type questionnaire, the RIASEC Inventory. The RIASEC Inventory is based on John Holland's Vocational Personality Theory and adapted from the U. S. Department of Labor's *O*NET Career Interests Inventory* ([See all the Department of Labor O*Net tools](#)).

STC3 choose to adapt the RIASEC Inventory because they wanted to ensure the descriptions of work activities and skills were appropriate for the varying ages, grade levels, and prior life experiences of youth served by the schools and programs in their community. They also wanted the tools to use multiple means of representation, one of the key principles of Universal Design for Learning. By presenting the information in pictures as well as in concrete and more abstract language, youth with varying language abilities can use the tool.

STC3's Director Sue Sawyer describes their approach, "We created several forms of a simple color coded interest survey that is based on the Holland Code. The goal was to provide resources for youth in middle school and high school, so each tool can be used by all youth. We also developed a pictorial version so that students who have difficulty reading have the same information about their interests. We are in the process of linking the resources to a free career assessment called California Career Zone. This will enable the students to



explore careers and watch video clips of people doing the job.”

A word of caution about adapting available career interest inventory tools – Making changes to formal assessment tools can alter the validity and reliability of results. Learn more about assessment validity and reliability by reading the chapter on “[Selecting and Using Assessments](#),” in NCWD/Youth’s publication, [Career Planning Begins with Assessment: A Guide for Professionals Serving Youth with Educational and Career Development Challenges](#).

3) Programs use the career interest inventory results as a starting point for engaging youth in exploration and planning for careers and postsecondary education.

Youth programs and the youth they serve use the results from career interest inventories in multiple ways. Most commonly, programs use the inventory results as an entry point to discussing and exploring various career interests. By reviewing the results, both the youth and the program staff gain insights about what types of careers youth want to learn more about and consider as options. Rather than narrowing career exploration to just one or two familiar options, career interest inventories frequently open young people’s minds to multiple career possibilities that they may never have heard of before.

According to [CIL/NCF’s High School/High Tech Program](#) Director Amy Tharpe, “It opens their eyes, sparks their interest in careers they

may not have considered before.” With interest inventory results in hand, youth start thinking about personal goals for exploring careers. At the same time, program staff at CIL/NCF use the results to guide program planning activities.

Simon Parlante, employment services staff at [Linking Learning to Life](#), describes similar uses of career interest inventory results, “I discuss the results with students and build conversation around them individually or as a group. I also use them to help guide placements for employment community-based learning.”

[LEAP’s Job Link](#) program uses the interest inventory results and other information gathered from assessments and conversations to create a student plan. The student plan is revisited annually and reviewed throughout the year by the youth and staff. The content of their program curriculum continually evolves based on the needs, goals, and interests of the youth in the program.

Some youth programs use mentoring as a strategy to support career exploration and preparation. In mentoring programs, career interest inventory results often serve as a conduit for discussion about career options and planning between youth and mentors. Once youth in the Minnesota High School/High Tech E-Connect program (a part of the [Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development Pathways to Employment Initiative](#)) identify some career interests, they discuss these

interests with their online mentors. A unit of the E-Connect curricula, called [“Using Personal Interest to Develop Professional Opportunities”](#) includes various career discussions for mentors and youth such as:

- How the mentor’s personal interests and skills when they were young influenced the careers they were interested in at an early age.
- What the mentor’s current career is and what if any previous careers he/she has had.
- What skills youth will need to be prepared for careers matching their interests.
- What the workplace environment may be like in the careers that interest youth.
- What the average salary is for the careers that interest youth.
- How the mentor chose his/her career and what things are important for youth to consider when selecting a career.
- The increasing likelihood that youth will switch careers many times in their life and the importance of developing diverse experience and knowledge that will be useful in a variety of careers.
- What secondary school courses and postsecondary education pathways will prepare youth for the career(s) that interest them.

[STC3](#) has developed various resources for schools and youth programs with the goal of helping young people put information about their career interests to good use. Sue Sawyer describes this, “We wanted to answer the question, *Now that I know how to describe my interests, what do*



I do with the information?, by developing career guidance tools that include posters of the interests and relate them to classes, hobbies, volunteering, and career choices.”

STC3’s [TIPS for Success Guide to Transition document](#) encourages youth to document their own career interest survey results and other personal information. Sue Sawyer explains it as “the reflective, summary of the assessment data that is designed for students to use to advocate for themselves as they seek employment, and further education.” The one-page double-sided form is meant to be something youth can carry with them easily (it folds into wallet-size) and refer back to as they progress from career and postsecondary exploration to job searching and interviewing. The document captures a lot of the same information needed for filling out job applications and preparing resumes. It also has tips for finding a job and succeeding in an interview.

To help youth see the connections between their career interests and career options and education requirements, STC3 has also created: 1) [Career Pathway charts](#) that define the course of study – the sequence of courses available at high schools throughout the region – that relate specifically to areas of career interest; and 2) [Mobility charts](#), which depict the possible career ladders in a particular industry or career cluster such as health care or business.

4) Programs use other types of career assessment tools where appropriate.

Most youth programs reported using career interest inventories along with one or more other career assessment tools to inform career exploration and planning activities. The [Linking Learning to Life](#) staff sometimes use the Transition to Work Inventory, a tool that they obtained from the local Vocational Rehabilitation agency. This tool is a different type of interest inventory that consists of rating one’s interest in various non-work, leisure activities that the tool correlates with certain careers and occupations.

Programs also find assessments of learning styles and personality types to be helpful. [CIL/NCF’s High School/High Tech Program](#) says they use free online tools for assessing one’s personality and learning styles such as [Bridges Online Learning Style Inventory \(LSI\)](#).

STC3 developed the [Multiple Intelligences and Interests tool](#) to help youth identify their personal learning strengths and styles. Once they complete this assessment, youth document their strengths and style on the TIPS document alongside their career interest inventory results.

The state sponsored career planning tools available to youth in both the Tech Now Oklahoma and STC3 include a tool called Reality Check ([See the California Career Zone website’s version of the tool](#)). This tool walks youth through envisioning what life expenses they should plan for after high school – from housing and transportation to clothes, food, and entertainment expenses. Youth select one of four or more options in each expense category (e.g., for housing, will they choose to live at home, rent a studio/efficiency, rent a

one bedroom apartment, etc.). As they select an option in each category, the average amount they can expect to spend, based on local economy, is tallied up in a budget on the computer screen. The expense categories include estimates of student loan payments associated with different postsecondary education options. Once youth complete their selections in all expense categories, they see the total annual income they will need to live according to their chosen lifestyle and then they can view a list of occupations that match or exceed that income level. This tool helps youth see the connection between what expenses they will have once they are living independently and how much income they can expect to earn in different careers.

Other Tools and Resources

NCWD/Youth’s publication, [Career Planning Begins with Assessment: A Guide for Professionals Serving Youth with Educational and Career Development Challenges](#), provides guidance on the purposes, benefits, and limitations of various types of assessment. Topics covered include how to select and use assessment tools, descriptions of commonly used published assessment and testing instruments (See [Exhibit 3.1 in Chapter 3](#)), and when and how to seek help or further information about assessment.

More guidance on career interest inventories and other assessment tools can be found in the National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center’s [Age Appropriate Transition Assessment Toolkit](#). This online resource provides examples of interest inventories and discusses



some considerations (under the heading of “Emerging Issues”) for selecting valid and reliable tools.

With support from the U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, O*NET™ (Occupational Information Network) offers a free set of self-directed career exploration/assessment tools to help students and workers to consider and plan career options, preparation, and transitions more effectively. The assessment instruments, which are based on a "whole-person" concept, include: O*NET Ability Profiler; O*NET Interest Profiler; O*NET; computerized Interest Profiler; O*NET Interest Profiler Short Form; O*NET Work Importance Locator; and O*NET Work Importance Profiler. The tools link to the more than 800 occupations described by the O*NET database, as well as to occupational information in Career OneStop.

As they move from identifying career interests to exploring career options, youth may find it helpful to view the free career videos available from www.CareerOneStop.org (each is no longer than two minutes long and has captioning). The available videos include: those depicting [individual careers or career clusters](#); [Spanish language videos](#) for individual careers; videos on various [careers that require a specific skill or ability](#); videos highlighting [careers in a specific industry](#); and [careers that require a specific type and length of education and training](#) (e.g., apprenticeships, 2-year degrees).

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