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100 Years of Career Guidance - Honoring Frank Parsons

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It was exactly 100 years ago, 1908, that Frank Parsons, a Boston attorney and social reformer, set out several fundamental concepts of vocational guidance, or career counseling, as we call it today. From the fundamental concepts, three emerged as main principles of career choices: 1) "a clear understanding of yourself," 2) "a knowledge of different lines of work," and 3) "true reasoning on the relation of these facts."

Vocational Guidance Before Parsons

There were attempts at vocational guidance before Parsons. Occupations were a popular source for many books of engravings and woodcuts of people at work, some with descriptive texts that were published in Europe as early as the 17th century. One 1837 example, The Complete Book of Trades, patterned after a British book, was published in the US in many editions, as was a board game not unlike the Parker Bros. board game "Careers".

Vocational counseling, as we would now call it, was proposed as early as the 16th century by Juan Huarte, a Spanish priest, in his book "The Examination of Men's Wits." He proposed that there should be men of great wisdom and knowledge, who might "discover each one's wit at a tender age, and cause him to study that science which is agreeable to him." In practice, there were several efforts to help students decide on a fitting career. In the last decade of the 18th century, George A. Merrill inaugurated "tryout" courses in manual arts to help students make a confident choice of a trade. Jesse B. Davis served as a vocations counselor, helping students at Detroit's Central High School, to choose a career. Later, as principal of a high school in Grand Rapids, he required seventh grade students to write a weekly essay describing an occupation, subsequently giving summer courses on his methods at several state universities.

Frank Parsons

FRANK PARSONS

Frank Parsons was born in 1854, educated at home and at a local private school. When not yet 16, he entered Cornell University, graduating with studies in mathematics and engineering. He secured a position on the engineering staff of a railroad company, (comparable in prestige today to becoming a computer engineer for a major manufacturer). Unfortunately, the financial panic of 1869 caused the failure of his company, and Parsons could only find work as a laborer in a steel mill. Subsequently he became employed as a teacher of Mathematics, History, and French in Southbridge, Massachusetts, ultimately "reading" for law, and passing the bar examination in 1881. In the late 1880s and 1890s Parsons edited a number of legal works for Little Brown & Company, while teaching part time at Boston University. Before the turn of the century, he added teaching appointments at Kansas State University and a small college dedicated to populist causes, Ruskin University (sic) at Glen Ellyn, Illinois, and Carthage, Missouri, all the while turning out a dozen books and articles on social causes for Arena Magazine.

1. A Clear Understanding of Yourself – Assessment

Parsons' call for a clear understanding of self paralleled the development of psychological testing in the US. The Binet test of intelligence was introduced in 1908. In 1912, E. L. Thorndike used the newly devised correlation coefficient to reveal the association between self-reported interests and abilities, and by 1919 the first work was done on what became the Strong Vocational Test. In a 1913 book, Hugo Munsterberg, professor of psychology at Harvard University, praised Parson's concept, and suggesting the potential of selection tests he had devised for several area employers.

2. A Knowledge of Different Lines of Work – Occupational Information

The first publication of Vocations Bureau, "Pamphlet 1", prepared by assistant director, Frank Allen, described the machinist's trade, responding to Parsons' specification for knowledge of different lines of work. It consisted of ten pages, describing "the trade," pay, future opportunities, comments of people in the trade, and schools offering training. Allen probably knew of another source of occupational information, the federal government's

Department of Labor, founded in 1884, which we know today as the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The bureau is well-known as a source of occupational information, publishing the Occupational Outlook Handbooks, providing thorough descriptions of nearly 270 occupations, and of O*NET, the online resource for detailed information on about 900 occupations in the US.

3. True Reasoning

"True reasoning" was never elaborated by Parsons. Today, research on decision-making under risky conditions is probably the modern equivalent of true reasoning, but has received little application in vocational psychology. A history of the vocational guidance movement by John Brewer, gives details of a printed form that the Vocational Bureau used, calling for notes on certain points—vital principles, interesting and inspiring ideas, helpful suggestions and applications to life, and the like.

The Vocations Bureau

Parsons not only elaborated the principles of career counseling and choice, he innovated the very first career counseling practice. Among his many activities, he taught a class on practical psychology at the informal "Breadwinner's College" at Civic Service House, a settlement house in the north side of Boston. A talk he gave at an evening high school in the city set forth the need of help for youth in the choice of a vocation. The talk attracted a number of requests for personal interviews, stimulating the formation of the Vocations Bureau.

At the bureau Parsons served as the Director and Vocations Counselor and was supported by associate counselors: Phillip Davis, a Civic Service House executive; Ralph Albertson, personnel manager at Filene's Department Store, and Lucinda Prince, who later founded the Prince School of Stroe Salesmanship. Branch offices were established at the Boston YMCA and the Women's Education and Industrial Union (both still in existence in Boston today).

A report of the first five months of the Vocations Bureau operation stated that over 80 young men and women, ages 15 to 39, were seen, and according to their own spontaneous statements, "all but two received much light and help, some even declaring that the interview with the Counselor (sic) was the most important hour of their lives."

Counselor Training

Parsons' Vocations Bureau established a class to train counselors at the Boston YMCA, and in 1909 the Boston Public Schools introduced vocational counseling. Meyer Bloomfield at Harvard University had a course in vocational counseling by 1911 and subsequently taught summer classes in vocational counseling at a number of state universities. By 1912 Grand Rapids established a city-wide vocational guidance department, and within a few years, school districts in Seattle, Cincinnati, Minneapolis, and Oakland, California all had vocations bureaus. Before World War I, similar bureaus were organized in Des Moines, San Jose, Chicago, Denver, Pittsburg, and Atlanta.

A Professional Association

Bloomfield and others suggested that a national conference on vocational guidance might be useful, and in 1910, delegates from thirty-five cities gathered in Boston. A second conference was set in New York City in 1912, and at a 1913 joint meeting with the National Society for the Promotion of Industrial Education in Grand Rapids, the organization of the National Vocational Guidance Association (now National Career Development Association) was completed. In 1915, the Vocational Guidance Bulletin was begun, with a circulation of about a thousand.

Today, a century after Parsons' first formulated his idea of vocational guidance, I believe we can confidently say that his hopes have been bountifully realized.