

Career Options: Needed Education, Credentials for Evaluators in Diverse Settings

Robin A. Cook

Wichita State University

Academic Preparation

Consideration of preservice preparation for vocational evaluators, as with most disciplines, generally revolves around educational programs. Components of such programs typically include coursework, orientation, and field experiences such as practica or internships. While there is a significant degree of overlap, each of these facets do differ from the undergraduate to the graduate level. Though the profession advocates entry-level at the master's level (Modahl, 1997), many evaluators continue to begin their careers with a baccalaureate degree (Evenson & Williamson, 1993).

Therefore, both types of programs are discussed below.

Undergraduates. In general, classroom instruction related to vocational evaluation is relegated to a relatively minor role in most undergraduate rehabilitation service programs. This is so for a variety of reasons. As mentioned previously, both the profession and many employers advocate that evaluators hold a minimum of a master's degree. Logically, then, courses at the undergraduate level would be fewer in number and generally of an introductory nature. Such courses usually present basic psychometric theory, a sampling of basic instruments such as interest inventories or specific aptitude tests, and possibly an overview of report writing.

Another consideration in undergraduate training is that many assessment instruments that vocational evaluators would use, or need to be familiar with in interpreting psychological reports, are restricted for use by graduate-level practitioners. Additionally, undergraduates are not fully (if at all) exposed to supporting coursework (statistics,

find
not-
either
do
may
l in
raining
vledge
rates
job
along
ms.

counseling, etc.) that would enable them to develop an appropriate framework for understanding sophisticated assessment data. Lastly, although a number of individuals are hired for VE positions with an undergraduate degree only, many graduates are hired into support positions performing duties such as job coaching, group home staffing, or job development (Crisler & Young, 1987). For the most part, responsibilities associated with these types of positions require only a basic familiarity with evaluation data and usage. Depending on the setting, field experience(s) for undergraduates can provide good information about the work of vocational evaluators, but due to the factors noted above, student are more likely to be used as paraprofessionals or testing "aides," thus becoming knowledgeable about only a few basic procedures or tests (Benshoff, Eckert, Riggan, & Taylor, 1995).

Graduate. As alluded to previously, more in-depth training is conducted at the graduate level. This training encompasses both needed supporting coursework and more in-depth exposure to test administration, interpretation and report writing. Field placements will be required and of longer duration. Placements are also more likely to contain an evaluation-related component in which the student actually conducts evaluations or is, at minimum, assigned duties which involve reading and interpretation of evaluation reports.

Personnel in rehabilitation counseling or possibly even rehabilitation services programs (as opposed to vocational evaluation or rehabilitation psychology) may not be exposed to more than one or two courses dealing with vocational assessment (Taylor,

Bordieri, & Lee, 1993). This is often the case unless a concerted effort is made to include coursework that would enable the graduate to be CVE-eligible as well. This may be difficult for students in programs which do not offer a vocational evaluation "track." Even in programs which do offer a concentration in vocational evaluation, students may find that they need to supplement VE coursework with assessment training from other disciplines (special education, psychology, counseling), depending upon the work setting they wish to enter. Unfortunately, unless the student has had prolonged exposure to the desired work setting, the realization that multidisciplinary preparation is needed may come after graduation or as one reaches the end of an academic training program. An additional consideration is acquisition of knowledge about various means of vocational assessment, which often requires multiple courses in vocational evaluation. This is important for working across settings, but also in providing services to specific populations. For example, Brown and Saura (1996) recommended situational assessment over more traditional structured assessment approaches with consumers having a dual diagnosis of mental illness and substance abuse.

Orientation of Program

At both the undergraduate and graduate levels, academic programs often have an overall focus which often is determined by the background of the faculty and the types of placements usually available to or taken by a given school's graduates. Such a focus or orientation is often towards public (especially State-Federal Vocational Rehabilitation) or private sector (i.e., legal /forensic) positions. Although such orientations have positive

aspects (i.e., in-depth knowledge and preparation for a given setting), another consequence may be a subsequent narrowing of opportunities or knowledge about various jobs and job settings. It is sometimes clear to students whether or not their chosen program has such an orientation, but at other times it may not be apparent until the career paths of program alumni are tracked.

An issue, certainly, for students in programs with a strong focus on certain areas of practice is obtaining broad experience and skills that will enable them to be viable candidates for a variety of evaluation-related jobs. It is also true that regardless of whether a program has a specific "leaning," that many graduates do not get information on or exposure to "alternative settings" in which they might work. This is partially because of the need for qualified workers in more traditional types of placements, but also because university supervisors may themselves have limited knowledge of other options in the community. Finally, supervision may present an issue. Persons who are interested in obtaining exposure to more far-flung opportunities find it increasingly difficult to obtain field supervision by credentialed (LPC, CRC, CVE) individuals, a factor that continues to increase in importance. The "alternative" sites themselves (e.g., psychiatric facilities/practices, prisons/juvenile detention facilities, various human services and employment and training agencies, corporate EAP's or departments of human resource) may be initially difficult to procure and structure, if they have had little exposure to student supervisees from rehabilitation counseling/rehabilitation services

programs. They may be unsure of the skill areas of such students or how to provide adequate supervision for them in conjunction with a field experience.

Credentialing

A current issue for a number of human-services areas is the increased demand for credentialing, either via licensure or certification. This trend holds true for vocational evaluators as well, and has come about as a result of several influences. More numerous opportunities for VE's in private practice and the forensic market have resulted in greater demand for designations that indicate a certain basic level of knowledge or that will lend additional credence to court testimony (Deutsch & Sawyer, 1995). Traditionally, there has always been a greater emphasis on credentialing in the private sector, and with increased employment opportunities in that realm, it is now a bigger concern for graduates.

Another trend, however, has been the growing clamor for licensure or certification in the public sector as well. This state of affairs has come about primarily for two reasons: (1) state legislative requirements that persons who practice counseling or psychological assessment must hold state licensure or national certification, and (2) public laws and programmatic regulations in both education and employment/training which require that vocational evaluation be conducted by "qualified practitioners," often broadly defined as those persons who hold relevant licensure or certification. Until recently, practitioners working for public or non-profit agencies generally did not need to hold certification or licensure in order to practice. With this change has also come a greater need to ensure

that coursework is taken which enables one to be eligible for licensure or certification, and to take part in field experiences involving supervision by credentialed persons.

Other Occupational Factors

In addition to the items listed previously, other factors contribute to changes and new opportunities for vocational evaluators that are more intrinsic to the workplace itself. One of these is the presence of increased competition for provision of vocational evaluation services. More companies/individuals are “getting into the act,” and even agencies who traditionally have only worked with certain groups (i.e., Vocational Rehabilitation) are now branching out and offering assessment on a fee-for-service basis. Examples of this would be where Vocational Rehabilitation has contracted with private industry to perform evaluations on incoming or incumbent workers, or agreed to assess consumers from other agencies (i.e., participants in the welfare-to-work program).

Certain legislative changes have had an impact in this area. (For example, the 1990 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA] incorporated vocational assessment into transition planning; the latest amendment of the Rehabilitation Act [1997] lists assessment as a pre-eligibility service and therefore open to more people, and the passage of the Workforce Investment Act [1998] calls for “one-stop” shops housing several different employment and training programs, with whom vocational assessment will be available.) Since there are more outlets for provision of VE services, providers who previously would not have been in the assessment business are now adding this service as part of their packages or repertoires. However, many persons engaged in evaluation lack

preparation in how to perform this type of work. Given that they may not have the appropriate training or be conducting comprehensive evaluations, services may be less extensive and less expensive than those offered by vocational evaluators and so constitute competition. Even so, at the same time there is more demand for credentialed personnel due to the language in the law and due to increased opportunities in the private sector, which has historically placed a higher value on credentials than the public sector.

Another trend which cuts across many occupations is the growing trend for employers to expect workers to “wear many hats.” Thus, persons who previously might have been hired for the express purpose of conducting vocational evaluations may also now be expected to engage in counseling, case management, job development, administration, vocational training, etc. Although rehabilitation counseling has been long been viewed as multifaceted in nature (Rubin & Roessler, 1987; Szymanski, Hanley-Maxwell, & Asselin, 1990), an even greater emphasis on diverse job responsibilities naturally impacts the type of preparation evaluators will need in order to enjoy maximum career latitude.

Finally, increases in government/forensic use of evaluators (i.e., the Worker’s Compensation arena, Social Security Disability, personal injury cases) have had an impact on the types of job opportunities (and needed background) for vocational evaluators. This is also true for other settings (such as schools, mental health facilities) who may be now adding evaluators to their staff, or at least adding evaluation

evaluators and vocational rehabilitation personnel in general. Many potential employers (rehabilitation centers, psychiatric institutes, hospitals, private corporations) are totally unfamiliar with the profession and consequently do not consider persons with this background (however appropriate) when making hiring decisions. For example, many rehabilitation centers choose to hire nurses, OT's or PT's or even social workers to coordinate services or provide case management oversight (Shaw, McMahon, Chan, Taylor, & Wood, 1997). Many businesses hire workers with human resource/business backgrounds to address functions like job analysis and ADA compliance. In both cases, individuals with a background in rehabilitation counseling or rehabilitation services may be overlooked or rejected outright for such opportunities (despite training very well suited to such functions) because employers know little to nothing about the profession.

Implications/Recommendations

Given the foregoing, several recommendations are hereby offered in assisting evaluators in improving their preparedness for and exposure to a greater variety of related career opportunities. The first recommendation concerns academic preparation. Both pre-service personnel in school and practicing professionals should reexamine their academic background with respect to its viability for various job options. For example, with the increased demands for certification and licensure, it is important that professionals in our field be qualified to hold appropriate licensure or certification, especially the LPC (Licensed Professional Counselor), CRC (Certified Rehabilitation Counselor) and CVE (Certified Vocational Evaluator) credentials.

Inasmuch as certain credentials are not universally “reciprocal” (i.e., state counselor licensure), it would also be very valuable to obtain state licensure requirements for not only the state of current residence, but those potentially of interest at some point in future. For example, if one moves to a state where vocational assessment is covered under title and/or scope of counselor licensure laws, one’s practice as a vocational evaluator may be halted if requirements to “sit” for state (counselor) licensure exams cannot be met. If the requirements were known in advance, perhaps additional coursework/supervision could be acquired prior to the move.

Even for persons not currently in a work setting requiring licensure or certification, the overall movement in this direction makes it highly important to obtain and maintain some or all of these designations depending on the work setting(s) in which one wishes to work. Part of that preparation is ensuring that one’s academic program meets set guidelines of appropriate credentialing organizations. Depending on program orientation and thoroughness, plans of study may or may not be directly linked to requirements needed for credential eligibility. Therefore, it is wise to ascertain the credentialing needs in the various service areas of interest, obtain criteria for credential eligibility from those respective organizations and compare those the courses taken within one’s academic program.

It is also important to think in terms of service areas (emphasis on plural) of interest. This is relevant from a couple of standpoints. Emergent disability areas (such as working with geriatric populations) are changing the face of rehabilitation services, and so it is

important to look at the trends in service needs. From a more individual perspective, employment statistics indicate that workers, on average, will make seven job or career changes throughout their working life . This figure serves to remind us that it is likely that we will be entering new work environments for whatever reason(s) at some points during our working years, and reinforces the need to anticipate potential career needs and options.

The second recommendation regarding academic preparation is to look carefully at supporting coursework. In conjunction with the above discussion on job changes and trends, potential outlets for employment may be closed off due to lack of auxiliary coursework. For example, a practitioner interested in obtaining a job conducting evaluations with a school system may find that the position also involves some measure of instructional duties (another "hat"), and therefore requires that the applicant possess a teaching certificate. Another example might be an evaluator considering a position performing Social Security Disability evaluations with a psychology practice. It is possible that the candidate may be expected to provide therapy as well, or perhaps administer some clinical measures not taught by typical rehabilitation programs. In this case, the applicant would have benefited from coursework in therapeutic techniques, psychological diagnosis and psychometric testing such as administration of objective personality instruments. Additional coursework in counseling, psychology, education or social work is often helpful (U.S. Department of Labor, Occupational Outlook Handbook, 1998/99). Kelley (1993) maintained that preprofessional curriculum content

should emphasize the applicability and generalizability of vocational assessment and adjustment principles to a wide array of human services disciplines and programs. She (Kelley) further stated that to accomplish this objective, that evaluators and counselors should become more knowledgeable about perspectives and idioms of related disciplines and apply assessment and adjustment concepts to those frames of reference (p. 174).

The third recommendation involves performing a self transferable skills analysis. It is ironic that we attend very well to the notions of skill profiling and career laddering with the consumers we serve, yet perhaps fail to think of our own careers in these terms. It can be a very useful exercise to enumerate the various general and specific skills one possesses as a vocational evaluator, and compare those to job descriptions for a range of professions. For example, the interviewing, report writing and referral skills VE's possess are valuable in virtually all human and social service jobs. Actively engaging in such analysis and comparisons can aid greatly in addressing employer needs when applying for jobs. Employers who might not typically hire rehabilitation services personnel are thus able to see a side-by-side comparison of our skills and assets with their job requirements.

A fourth recommendation is to use yet another technique which we teach our consumers, that of investigating multiple sources for employment. Although the professional journals, newsletter and conferences of our field are a major route to securing employment, securing a "non-traditional" job may be best facilitated by investigating "non-rehab" outlets. One way to accomplish this is to read publications of related fields (social work, psychology, special education) and attend multidisciplinary

trainings. This also enables the applicant to become more familiar with the terminology preferred by other fields, particularly critical when terms are not used in the same way. For example, a person wishing to work in corporate human resources would want to discuss relevant skills such as vocational assessment and job analysis in a business context, rather than how those skills are utilized in a “traditional” rehabilitation context.

Lastly, it is recommended that incumbents stay updated as to evolution of both our field and the labor market in general. There are several facets already discussed in this paper: changes in the law, emergent populations, certification and licensure issues, and privatization. Also important, however, are changes in techniques and modes of service delivery. One illustration of this idea can be seen in the admonition that rehabilitation practitioners need to have an understanding of how health care policy and costs impact the rehabilitation process and provision of services to the consumer (Blades & Harley, 1997). Another example - the field of rehabilitation has been moving closer to implementation of a voucher system for roughly the last decade, now embodied in key provisions of the Workforce Investment Act and most recent reauthorization of the Rehabilitation Act. Anticipation of such changes enable us as professionals to adjust accordingly and continue to enhance our value in the eyes of potential employers.

Job Options for Vocational Evaluators

Appendices 1 and 2 contain listings of various occupations and employers appropriate for either baccalaureate-prepared individuals (Appendix 1) or those possessing a master’s degree in the area of rehabilitation counseling or services

(Appendix 2). These listings are not meant to be exhaustive, but provide avenues for further exploration and research. It should also be noted that access to some of the occupations listed may differ by geographic area because of market demand, licensure or certification constraints or employer availability. Most job options listed would also be very appropriate for rehabilitation counselors as well as vocational evaluators.

Summary

Numerous job opportunities exist for professionals trained in vocational evaluation, rehabilitation counseling and services. Job opportunities within these varied settings have reshaped the practice of vocational evaluation (Taylor, Bordieri, & Lee, 1993). However, a variety of issues impact knowledge of and ability to access these resources. These issues include academic preparation, employer needs and awareness, credentialing movements, legislative changes and micro- and macro- vocational trends (e.g., likelihood of multiple careers, changes in service delivery mechanisms and emergent populations in rehabilitation). Strategies include multidisciplinary exposure and training, review and remediation (as needed) of academic training, keeping abreast of professional trends and conducting periodic self transferable skills analyses and examination of career goals.

References

- Benshoff, J.J., Eckert, J.M., Riggart, T.F., & Taylor, D.W. (1995). Parameters of professionalism: Exploring the myths and realities associated with paraprofessionals in rehabilitation settings. Journal of Rehabilitation Administration, 19(2), 133-141.
- Blades, D.A., & Harley, D.A. (1997). Vocational and medical rehabilitation: The impact of health care policy and funding on service provision. Journal of Rehabilitation, 63(3), 35-39.
- Crisler, J.R., & Young, M.E. (1987). A new perspective on paraprofessionals in rehabilitation counseling. In B. Caplan (Ed.), Rehabilitation psychology desk reference (pp. 437-449). Rockville, MD: Aspen Publishers.
- Deutsch, P.M., & Sawyer, H.W. (1995). A guide to rehabilitation. White Plains, NY: Ahab Press.
- Evenson, T., & Williamson, C. (1993, Spring). Careers in rehabilitation with an undergraduate degree in rehabilitation. American Rehabilitation, 24-28.
- Kelley, S.D.M. (1993). Training needs in vocational assessment and adjustment: Organizational and occupational perspectives. Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin, 36(3), 160-176.
- Modahl, T. (1997). Current trends and practices in vocational evaluation. In R. Fry (Ed.), The issues papers: Eighth national forum on issues in vocational assessment (pp. 4-9). Menomonie, WI: Stout Vocational Rehabilitation Institute.
- Rubin, S.E., & Roessler, R.T. (1987). Foundations of the vocational rehabilitation process (3th ed.). Austin, TX: Pro-Ed.
- Shaw, L.R., McMahon, B.T., Chan, F., Taylor, D., & Wood, C. (1997). Survey of rehabilitation counselor education programs regarding health care management in the private sector. Journal of Rehabilitation, 63(3), 46-52.
- Szymanski, E.M., Hanley-Maxwell, C., & Asselin, S. (1990). Rehabilitation counseling, special education and vocational special needs education: Three transition disciplines. Career Development for Exceptional Individuals, 13(1), 29-36.
- Taylor, D.W., Bordieri, J.E., & Lee, D.Y. (1993). Job tasks and functions of vocational evaluators: A national study. Vocational Evaluation and Work Adjustment Bulletin, 26(4), 146-154.
- U.S. Department of Labor (1998/99). Occupational outlook handbook. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office

Author Note

Special thanks is due to Claire Horner, B.S., vocational evaluator for WorkTec, Jonesboro, GA. Her assistance in locating references for this article and her co-presentation of this material at the 1999 *Forum* were each greatly appreciated.

Appendix 1

Sample Occupational Options for Vocational Evaluators - Baccalaureate Level

- Consumer Agencies (e.g., Alabama Head Injury Association)
- Assessment/Intake
- Job Placement Specialist
- Job Developer
- Work Adjustment Specialist
- Psychosocial Rehabilitation staff (e.g., job clubs, facilities, non-profits)
- Client Advocacy (ombudsman, rehabilitation facility)
- Mental Health Technician/Behavioral Specialist
- Corrections Officer (or vocational evaluator/rehabilitation aide)
- Job Coach
- Caseworker (various human/social services)
- Employment Specialist (counselor/counselor aide)
- Pre-Employment/Job Skills Trainer
- Vocational Evaluator/Evaluator Aide
- Independent Living Coordinator
- Eligibility Worker (Social Security Administration, other human & social services)
- Group Home (MI/MR) Supervisor
- Workshop Coordinator
- Job Analyst
- Suited for most entry-level positions in many human and social service areas similar to that for graduates in social work, psychology, sociology, some education

Appendix 2

Sample Occupational Options - Master's Level

- Social Services - case management, administrative, some clinical - many positions
- Psychometrist (depending on state licensure laws)
- Corporate/proprietary rehabilitation programs
- Private Practice (Workman's Compensation, Social Security evals)
- Community agency counselor or program supervisor
- School-based transition counselor/vocational evaluator
- Special Education/Vocational Special Needs teacher (will need to add credits for teacher certification)
- Human resources manager
- Employee assistance program counselor/caseworker/administrator
- Rehabilitation facility/program supervisor
- Behavioral specialist
- Employment/Career counselor
- Program coordinator with local or state education agency (transition)
- Free-lance testing examiner (vocational or psychoeducational)
- Job Placement/Job Development Coordinator
- Corrections (rehabilitation, vocational training)
- Coordinator, Community Developmental Disability programs
- Staff/coordinator for professional organizations (licensure boards, advocacy organizations)
- Traditional - state agency, non-profit, private practice)