

Complete Story

Teaching Counselors about Computer-Assisted Career Guidance

by **Becky L. Bobek**

Computer-assisted career guidance systems (CACGs) are flourishing. The Internet systems are accessible 24 hours a day 7 days a week from virtually any location and are used in a variety of ways to help individuals with career planning. Individuals use CACGs for everything from assessing interests, abilities, and values, to searching for occupational and educational information, to building decision-making and job search skills. Some CACGs are more comprehensive than others. Some have a narrow focus and are helpful for specific needs, such as searching for occupations. How does a counselor best match a career guidance system with the client?

A model career guidance graduate curriculum helps counselors-in-training better understand and use CACGs. The curriculum explores three main issues:

- (1) What are benefits and shortcomings of CACGs?
- (2) What should counselors consider when selecting a CACGs to use with students?
- (3) How can counselors effectively use these career guidance systems?

Benefits and Limitations of CACGs

This curriculum familiarizes prospective counselors with the benefits and limitations of Internet-based career guidance systems. Only a few are highlighted here. One advantage to CACGs is that many young people can relate to the way computers work, making them an appropriate way to deliver career information. These computer guidance systems can also offer multiple assessments that provide immediate feedback, and have the potential for engaging individuals in career planning through interactive presentation.

There are also limitations to this medium. Delivery pitfalls include a lack of appropriate hardware, compatibility issues, and security concerns. Maintaining client/student confidentiality in an Internet environment with security problems is difficult. In addition, some Internet-based career systems don't provide data on the reliability and validity of their assessments, or the credentials of web site authors. Furthermore, most CACGs do not screen users for decision-making readiness, which can negatively effect clients who are not prepared to make career decisions. Finally, a majority of programs don't recommend counseling when it is appropriate, which limits the ability of computerized career programs to serve as comprehensive career planning tools.

Selecting a CACGs

How do counselors decide which CACGs are appropriate for clients? There are a number of criteria to consider before choosing a CACGs. The following questions can help guide you through the process of selecting appropriate CACGs:

Client Needs

- ☐ Which CACGs would best address the developmental needs, motivation levels, and range of abilities that characterize the clients who would use this system?

- ☐ How might the race/ethnicity, gender, class, disability, and/or geographic location of clients influence their interactions with CACGs?
- ☐ When working with special needs clients, will the CACG system be responsive to those needs, or are there ways to make it more responsive?
- ☐ How would clients who have not experienced much success in school or work have an opportunity to meet with success or be encouraged by using a CACG system?
- ☐ Have client needs been thoroughly assessed?
- ☐ How will a CACG system benefit your clients?
- ☐ What are your assumptions, as a counselor, about who may or may not benefit from CACGs?

Program Considerations

- ☐ What is the theoretical basis of the program? (e.g. developmental, client-centered, decision-making focus?)
- ☐ What kinds of career-related content is included in the program?
- ☐ How does the program avoid culture and gender bias?
- ☐ How do the features and functions of CACGs satisfy national, state, district, and/or school level standards and guidelines for career development?
- ☐ How often is the program updated?
- ☐ How does the computer hardware, audio and visual options, screen size, colors, type size, etc. enable persons with disabilities to effectively use the system?

Program Requirements

- ☐ Is the program designed for use by individuals with, or without supervision?
- ☐ Does the program recommend that clients follow-up with a counselor?
- ☐ Is the program suitable for use by students or adults with disabilities?
- ☐ How much time would be required by the client to use the entire program?
- ☐ Is special training required to use the program? If so, at what cost and where?

Information

- ☐ Can the program be interrupted and restarted at a later time, retaining available data?
- ☐ What printouts are available?
- ☐ Can data (e.g. individual profiles) be saved on the computer or stored on a disk?
- ☐ Are client information and results kept confidential? Who has access?

Costs

- ☐ What are the hardware requirements and costs?
- ☐ What are the initial software costs and software update costs?

For counselors, assessing client needs, program considerations, requirements, information, and costs at the outset can help determine which career guidance system is most suitable.

Effectively Using CACGs

The graduate curriculum, designed to provide students with training using a specific computer-based career guidance system, enables counselors to more effectively apply career exercises with this resource. First, guided exploration increases familiarity with the Internet-based DISCOVER program. Second, counselors-in-training simulate a counselor/client relationship and develop individualized exercises using the program and its companion Tool Kit. These activities correspond to common career planning steps: finding out more about yourself, exploring options, choosing a direction, making plans, and taking action. Third, graduate students use the career guidance program and Tool Kit to carry out career exercises with secondary or postsecondary students as part of a field experience. These steps solidify what students learn about DISCOVER and its career-related applications, which can then be transferred to settings where they will ultimately be employed as counselors.

At the 2003 NCDA Conference in Denver a skill building workshop will be presented using ACT's DISCOVER Career Guidance Graduate Training Curriculum and Tool Kit as a model to develop and discuss applications that are responsive to the needs of diverse high school and college students. Counselor educators who used the curriculum at various institutions around the U.S. will discuss their experiences with participants.

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