FORUM SPEECH - October 18, 1983

Paul H. Thompson

In the past 15 years I have spent a great deal of time studying the careers of professionals; you might say I've made a career out of studying careers. Gene Dalton and I have interviewed hundreds of professionals, including engineers, scientists, accountants, bankers and professors. Today I'd like to look at the implications of that research as it relates to college students who are in the process of choosing a career.

Since 1970 it has become more and more difficult for students to choose a career, primarily because as the numbers of college graduates has increased, the number of jobs for those with college degrees has not kept pace. This has created a dilemma which has forced many students to choose between studying in their field of interest and selecting a major that is more likely to lead to a job. In addition, there are a number of myths perpetuated by our society that confuse the issue and make this discussion even more risky. I will present the first 5 myths briefly and address them as a group.

#1 To Be Happy I Must Get Into the Right Profession - For many students that means medicine, law, or perhaps dentistry. This myth puts a lot of pressure on many students.

#2 To Be Happy I Have to Get a Job in the Right Organization - Some of the organizations mentioned include IBM, Proctor & Gamble, Hewlett Packard, and the LDS Church.

#3 To Be Happy I Must Make a Lot of Money - Students want to know which are the highest paid professions.

#4 To Be Happy I Must Rise to the Top of the Organization - Become president or chief executive officer.

#5 To Be Happy I Must Please my Family and Pursue the Career They Have Chosen for me.

Even though these myths are inaccurate as valid guides in the career choice process each contains elements of truth which tend to lead many people astray.

The main problem with these 5 myths is that they suggest that people should use external criteria to choose a career. They assume that the most important information is what other people think. They imply questions such as:

- Will people respect me?
- Will people think I'm important?
- Will I have prestige in the community, etc?

NOTICE: This Material May Be Protected By Copyright Law (Title 17 US Code)
If you want a rewarding and productive career those are the wrong questions. Most of you will spend about 40 years in the workforce. If you work 40 hours a week that’s 2,000 hours per year and 80,000 hours in a lifetime. That’s a long time to work at something you don’t enjoy. In my view, the objective in choosing a career is to discover one’s genius. By “genius” I mean those things that you do with excellence that you enjoy doing. I can best convey this idea by presenting some examples:

I have a friend who took a long time to get into her professional career. She went to college to get an education but married at the end of her first quarter and was pregnant by the end of the second quarter - so - she dropped out of school to raise a family. At the time her fifth and last child was one year old she started taking one class a semester in order to get her bachelor’s degree. When her youngest child entered kindergarten she found she could take a heavier load, and in a period of 8 years she finished the bachelor’s degree. She then went on to complete a masters degree, but even with a masters degree it took her several years to get into her career. First she worked as a graduate assistant and then she started teaching part-time. Eventually she was hired to teach full-time. Over a period of years she has become an outstanding teacher. She has had many letters from students who say “This is the best course I’ve ever had.” My friend has discovered that her genius includes being a loving wife & mother, and an excellent teacher.

Lavell Edwards worked for 10 years as an assistant coach at BYU before taking over as head coach in 1972. As an assistant coach he was a defensive specialist. I suspect that very few football fans predicted that he would become the coach of the most successful passing team in the nation.

I won’t repeat all of Coach Edward’s accomplishments. The football team’s performance last Saturday makes the point very well. My barber is the source of my vast store of knowledge about BYU sports and I asked him what made Lavell so successful. He said that when Lavell became head coach he did not try to pattern himself after Vince Lombardi or some other prominent coach. He was just himself. It took Coach Edwards a number of years to fully discover his genius but fortunately for BYU he certainly has done just that.

Sybil Ferguson is at present a business executive. As a young woman she had no plans for a professional career and was married right after high school. She spent a number of years raising a family and after about twenty years of marriage she experienced the blues of middle age. She was overweight, she didn’t like her appearance and didn’t feel very good about herself. Eventually, Sybil decided to find out how to lose weight. She read a lot of books and developed a weight loss program that worked for her. People were curious as to how she’d accomplished this feat and so she shared her program with others. Finally she opened a diet center in her home. That center was so successful she decided to franchise the program in other cities. After 12 years her organization has 1500 diet centers throughout the United States. This experience changed Sybil’s life. She has become a confident executive who does a lot of public speaking and has written a best seller on losing weight.
Clayne Robinson is a professor of music at BYU – no doubt most of you have heard him sing. However, he took a roundabout way to discover his genius. In college he had a difficult time deciding what career to pursue. He went to Law School at Harvard and worked for a year in a major law firm. He found out he did not enjoy the work. He left the firm to work at BYU for a year. He next worked for a large consulting firm for a year. He said, “I could feel what I wanted to be like at age 60 and those jobs weren’t moving me toward that goal.” He then returned to BYU to study Social Psychology, also accepting an assistantship in Music because he was singing in some productions at the University. By mid-semester he had decided to pursue a career in Music. That meant giving up his dream of saving the constitution when it was “hanging by a thread.” From the minute he started studying music it was great fun. He enjoyed everything about his doctoral work. When you hear Clayne sing or watch him teach music you know that he has discovered his genius.

Clayne’s experience illustrates the 6 myth about careers:

#6 The Career Decision is so Important that it Would be Disastrous to Make a Mistake - Many students find it very difficult to choose a major, because they believe they are choosing a career and the cost of making a mistake is very high.

There are at least two fallacies in my number 6. The first fallacy is the idea that selecting a career is one big decision – for example, for those who choose Law, their life is determined. That is simply not the case. A career consists of making hundreds of small decisions. You choose a discipline, then a specialty, then an organization to work for, a department, and so on. Then you may change organizations, specialties, departments, etc.

Secondly, you need to understand that all career decisions are correctable. If you’re dissatisfied with your work you can change to something else. Some of you may be thinking, “What a waste! Professor Robison is not using the training he received in Law School.” I can’t accept that view because in Law School they teach a person to think and he’s still doing that. Besides, our nation has too many lawyers. Law Schools are turning 35,000 graduates a year. But how many people can sing like Clayne Robison.

Now, I can imagine that some of you are thinking, “This is just in time. How do I discover my genius? I’m a second semester junior and I haven’t declared a major yet.” or “I’m working on my fourth major this year!” Unfortunately, it takes years for most people to find an activity that they do well, which enables them to earn a living. In the meantime, they have to select a major and take a job without the benefit of knowing their genius.

James Michener, the author of several best sellers, wrote his first book after the age of 40. In an essay entitled “On Wasting Time,” he said:

“Many men and women win through to a sense of greatness in their lives only by first stumbling and bumbling their way into patterns that gratify them and allow them to utilize their talents to the maximum. . . I believe you have until age 35 to decide finally
on what you are going to do and that any exploration you pursue in the process will in the end turn out to have been creative."

I can imagine that I may be losing credibility with some of you at this point, who may be thinking, "Terrific! – so what do I do until I’m 35? I can’t stand living at the Riviera Apartments that long!” If you’ll bear with me a few more minutes, I do have some suggestions.

First of all, a self-assessment can help you to discover your genius. Self-assessment involves asking questions like:

Who am I?
What do I enjoy doing?
What don’t I enjoy doing?

The University has a Career Information Center in the Wilkinson Center that can help you in that process. They have aptitude tests, books, courses, etc., that can assist you in self-assessment.

I had an experience a few years ago that emphasized the importance of this process:

One day a friend came to my office with a problem. He told me that he had studied art in college and then pursued a career in that field, which included a couple of teaching positions. It was while he was the Director of an Art Museum that he finally realized that his profession was not going to provide him with enough money to support his large family. He thought he had solved his problem by taking a job in the advertising department of a large company. But, two years later the company fell on hard times and he was laid off. He came to ask for my advice. I suggest that he read the book, “What Color is your Parachute.” I didn’t see him again for three years, until we met at a high school reunion. He proceeded to thank me for all my help. When I questioned him, he explained that he had read the book and completed the self-assessment. Based on that information he decided he would really enjoy working in business, and he took a job selling life insurance. That job gave him a better income, and he thoroughly enjoyed the work. He felt good about the service he was providing.

Please don’t jump to conclusions. I’m not saying that selling insurance is better than being an art director – I’m saying, understanding yourself is important in making career choices.

Part of self assessment involves learning from experience. You might ask yourself:

What have been the 5 best periods of my life - at work, school, mission, etc.?

What have been the 5 worst periods of my life?

Then analyze that information. What are the common themes in the best periods and the worst periods? In this analysis you need to be careful that you don’t draw the wrong conclusions from your experience. For example, when I returned from my mission, an insurance agent came to see me and offered me a job selling insurance. He convinced me that having filled a mission I was
prepared to be a good insurance salesman, since the work was similar. I accepted the job and worked part-time for a year. To my surprise I did not like the work at all. When I thought back on my mission I realized that I didn’t enjoy contacting people for the first time. I loved teaching lessons 2 through 7, but not the first contact. Unfortunately, the insurance job was all first contacting and it was painful for me.

In another context, a lot of people come to apply to the Master Program in Organizational Behavior because they say, “I really like to work with people.” After I have asked them a few questions I often recommend that they become a mortician, because many of them neither understand themselves nor the field of organizational behavior. I can’t overstate the importance of a careful self-assessment in making career decisions.

My second recommendation brings me to the seventh (and last) myth, which is:

#7 I Can’t Take the Risk of Pursuing an Education – I Must Prepare for a Job
Many students choose business or computer science over a liberal arts education because that’s where the jobs are. If one really wanted to be assured of a job he or she should go to a business college and take typing classes: There’s a strong demand for secretaries.

However, for people intent on building a career as a professional, that’s a poor strategy. My recommendation is to focus on a complete education while you’re at the University. Don’t misunderstand me, one can pursue an education while majoring in business, and while this is an age of specialization and one has to specialize to a certain degree, I’m strongly suggesting that one should not over-specialize.

Recently I was talking with a manager from a large company that hires a lot of engineers and management graduates from BYU. He said:

“Some of your graduates do not do very well in our company. Oh, they do pretty well for the first two or three years but we find that they lack breadth, and as a result, graduates from other schools begin to pass them up after three of four years.”

I find that a number of corporate executives share that view. C.C. Garvin, CEO of Exxon Corporation made these comments about today’s students:

“These days they may be becoming too narrowly focused on their first job, and not enough on their long-term goals.”

Not long ago I was reading a book by J. Paul Getty, who was a business executive and a billionaire. Normally professors who teach business lack credibility if they quote from books by billionaires, but Keith Warner gave me this quote and sociologists have more academic respectability. Mr. Getty said:

“I regard as disheartening the growing trend toward over-specialization – many young men are devoting an inordinately large portion of their academic lives to the study of the
useful disciplines while ignoring those subjects that aid in developing a multi-
dimensional human being.”

He continues:

“I consider my Liberal Arts education to have had far greater overall importance than any
of the purely technical or professional subjects that I studied.”

Some of you may be thinking – what’s the problem with over-specializing – it will get
me a job! There are at least four problems with that approach.

First, you may fail to acquire critical skills that are needed to be effective in
organizations. A large number of corporate executives were asked to assess the importance of
various courses in the education of future executives:

98% said: Written and oral communication were important.
91% said: Science and mathematics were important.
83% said: History and social studies were important.

Several other courses, including art, philosophy and foreign languages also received support
from the majority. A more specific example may illustrate this point:

Two or three years ago, Reginald Jones, the chief executive officer of General Electric,
was on this campus. In a meeting with a group of students someone asked him what skills they
needed to succeed in business. His immediate response was, “learn to write.” He said that often
he has to edit the memos written by his subordinates. He acknowledged that people get upset
when he corrects their writing but its important that people communicate clearly. My strong
advice is to acquire the basic skills that are offered in general education – learn to think
accurately, communicate clearly, and respond aesthetically.

Second, those who over-specialize often fail to develop interpersonal skills. A lot of
work in organizations is done in work teams or task forces. In our studies of careers we found
that one of the most common blocks to career progression was a lack of interpersonal skills.
Narrow specialists were unlikely to serve as mentors for younger professionals. They were less
effective in dealing with customers and suppliers. These problems meant that they were less
likely to be promoted to supervisor or manager.

Third, those who over-specialize run a great risk of obsolescence. Several years ago I
made a presentation to a group of 20 managers in a large computer company. After the
presentation I asked each one of them to identify a person in their organization who they felt was
blocked and frustrated in his or her career. At the end of the exercise they each described a
person who was frustrated in their career. We heard about 20 different people who had
specialized in a narrow area and in many cases the company no longer needed the specialty. The
managers were surprised that they had such a pervasive problem. But I was not surprised
because we had found that problem in dozens of organizations.
Fourth, those who over-specialize have less job mobility. This is true both inside and outside of the organization. Several years ago I looked at the statistics concerning people who had changed careers in the United States. Between 1965 and 1970, 30 percent of all employed people changed their career field, and that was not just blue collar workers. Twenty percent of the people in managerial, professional and technical jobs changed career fields in that 5-year period. There’s a possibility that you may find yourself in Clayne Robison’s position, where you don’t like the work for which you are prepared. If you have over-specialized it’s much more difficult to change.

John Gardner said:

“Education can lay a broad and firm base for a lifetime of learning and growth. The individual who begins with such a broad base will always have some capacity to function as a generalist, no matter how deeply he chooses to specialize. Education at its best will develop the individual’s inner resources to the point where he can learn (and will want to learn) on his own.”

I hear many students who say, “I’ll be so glad when I get all of these requirements out of the way so I can just take courses in my major.” I strongly advise you to resist that temptation. Take advantage of the excellent courses throughout this University. They may not help you get that first job but they will certainly help you to grow and survive throughout your career.

Let me make one more point about your education here at BYU:

I have a friend who had a hard time choosing a career. In college he majored in Accounting and worked part-time in an Accounting firm. By the time he graduated he had decided he didn’t really want to be an accountant, so he applied to Law School. He attended Law School for just one week, found he didn’t like law and withdrew. Then, he enrolled in a masters program in Educational Psychology. He lasted a full quarter in that program before dropping out. Next he entered a masters program in Marketing and completed that degree, but could see no place for himself in the job arena of Marketing.

By that time he had a military obligation and spent 4 years in the Air Force. As he completed that assignment he applied to the Doctoral Program at the Harvard Business School and was accepted. In his first year there he discovered Organizational Behavior and finally found a field that he enjoyed. Since then he has become an outstanding researcher and teacher in the field. When people hear that story they comment on all of the false starts. But the important thing is that no matter what program he was involved in he worked hard and received excellent grades. As a result, his academic record qualified him for admittance to Harvard. The moral: even if you don’t know where you are going, do your best work in order to keep your options open.

After all this time, and I’m only a third recommendation, which is: Don’t stay at the University too long.
This may sound a little strange coming from a person who has spent almost all of his adult life in a university. But a student can stay at a university too long. There is more knowledge there than one can learn in a lifetime but much of what you need to learn is about yourself.

Peter Drucker says that many times students go to graduate school as a delaying action. They can't decide what to do with their lives so they continue in school. He suggests it would be better to take a job and use it as an opportunity to find out more about yourself, what kind of work you enjoy, what kind of activities you don't like, etc.

That is good advice. If you're not clear about your future when you've completed your bachelor's degree, take the best job you can get and give it all you've got. After two years if you decide you don't want to spend your life in that field there is time enough for you to return to school to get a graduate degree in a field more closely related to your interest.

After I received my bachelors degree I worked for 8 months as a statistician for a government agency. They knew I was going to graduate school so it was a temporary job. While there I learned a lot about myself. I found working with numbers and doing detail work very tedious and uninteresting for me. I determined to avoid that kind of job in the future.

One word of caution – It's also a mistake to leave the university prematurely. Don't drop out today and go get a job. It's almost always wise to complete the degree on which you are working. Several years ago we had two MBA students who received job offers that would require them to leave the program one semester before completion. Several faculty members pleaded with the students to stay through to the end, but they had been told that this was the chance of a lifetime, and so they left. Three years later the company sold off the division in which they worked and in a short time those two MBA's found employment elsewhere. Both of their wives indicated later that they wished their husbands had stayed to complete their degrees.

Associate Academic Vice President Elliot Butler has some helpful comments on this issue in the October issue of BYU Today:

"I have reflected recently on my undergraduate years, ... in each of those four years I had at least one class outside my major that has had a profound effect on my life ever since. What a disappointing void would have remained if I had missed taking those classes! By association with those fine teachers, who were educated people, more mature and much wiser than I, I was introduced to several subjects that I could hardly have hoped to encounter significantly otherwise, and the introduction was sufficient to make it possible for me to maintain reading and study in those areas." ("Everybody is Ignorant, Only on Different Subjects" BYU Today, October 1983)

President Butler's approach is to continue learning and growing in many aspects of one's life. That is an important part of achieving balance.

Conclusion:
I've suggested in this presentation that it is not easy to choose and develop a rewarding career. However, it is possible with some effort to discover one's genius. You have the opportunity to get an excellent start on that process here at BYU. I'd like to close with a quote from Robert Frost, who captures much of what I wanted to say in a few short lines. This comes from his poem entitled “Two Tramps in Mud Time.”

“But yield who will to their seperation
My object in living is to unite
My avocation and my vocation
As my tow eyes make on in sight.
Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mortal stakes,
Is the deed ever really done
For heaven and the future’s sakes.”
(“Two Tramps in Mud Time,” Robert Frost, pg 114)

You have a major challenge in front of you in pursuing a rewarding and productive career. I wish you good luck in that effort.