Main Street Project Research – Summary

Six teams in SOAN 371 conducted research for the Main Street Project Steering Committee, each focused on a different topic concerning the transition from college to vocation and career:

1. Attitudes, Beliefs, and Plans Regarding Career Planning and Post-College Life
2. Vocation and Career Discernment
3. Career Exploration
4. Gaining Transferable Skills
5. Gaining Formal Career and Job Experience
6. Job- and Career-Seeking

Each team reviewed the scholarly literature, conducted a focus group to expand and test their research questions, and constructed survey questions. The teams distributed a total of three online surveys (two teams per survey) in late October 2010 to three random samples of St. Olaf students, with no student receiving more than one survey. Response rates ranged from to 38% (292 of 777 students invited) to 50% (389 of 777 students invited).

The research teams have completed their preliminary analyses, each of which is summarized here (pages 3-8), with assistance from three CIR Statistics Fellows (Ben Bayer, Trevor Knapp, and Patrick Delahunt) and Paul Roback. The teams have also made some recommendations for the Main Street Project – some broad and some specific – also listed here (page 2). The teams will continue data analysis for the rest of the semester, and the Statistics Fellows may continue next semester. If you have any requests for specific analysis, please inform us as soon as possible.

Please keep in mind that all of the standard caveats regarding survey questionnaire research apply: not all of the invited students completed the surveys; the data are based on self-report, which is always subject to respondents’ time constraints, fallible memories, and desires for positive self-presentation; and responses depend partly on the framing, ordering, and specific wording of survey questions and response options. It is also important to note that the data were gathered at a time when first year students had been at St. Olaf for only two months and perhaps before seniors become focused on sharpening their resumes and practicing their interview skills. Finally, to keep this summary reader-friendly, statements sometimes refer to “most students” and “students have used” when they would more accurately refer to “most respondents” and “students reported they have used”; the percentages have been rounded to whole numbers; and “SS” refers to statistical significance.

If you have any questions or requests, please contact us.

Sincerely,

Ryan Sheppard, Assistant Professor of Sociology (sheppard@stolaf.edu)
and
Students of SOAN 371, Fall 2010 (surnames listed on this summary)
Key Recommendations from Research Teams (also included in team summaries, pp. 3-8)

1: Attitudes, Beliefs, and Plans Regarding Career Planning and Post-College Life
   - Use caution when labeling vocational programs and activities. “Vocation” is a touchy word.
   - Emphasize career-planning services for all years. Most start by sophomore year.
   - Provide services to increase self-efficacy and/or positive attitudes about planning for post-college life, since these may influence each other and enhance career planning.
   - Help students plan for financial independence after graduation.
   - Help students find affordable housing for after graduation.

2: Vocation and Career Discernment
   - Emphasize relationships (new and existing) in services vocational exploration. Consider using class requirements.
   - Evaluate the effectiveness of each existing resource for vocational discernment (internships, classes, professors, CEL workshops, etc.).
   - Increase advertising for CEL Vocational Workshops; offer them at more times.
   - Encourage advisors to promote vocational services
   - Expand already-existing resources: job postings, panels, Leaders for Social Change, etc.
   - Perhaps require students to tour the CEL website (first years) and meet with CEL staff.

3: Career Exploration (CE)
   - Promote awareness of CEL career exploration resources since users perceive them as helpful for CE but most students have not used them.
   - Promote research assistantships, internships, and especially job shadowing opportunities (low costs, high benefits). Expand CEL services for finding these opportunities. Ask departments to assign a professor as a resource for info. on research assistantships.
   - Revise the Alumni Directory, promote externships, and mandate attendance at CEL events. Advertise CE resources in a welcoming manner.

4: Gaining Transferable Skills
   - Provide services to increase skills in networking and time management.
   - Help students identify and articulate skills gained from classroom experiences, group work, extracurriculars, leadership positions and social relationships.
   - Encourage professors to identify and discuss transferable skills learned in class.
   - Increase student participation in CEL services for gaining/articulating transferable skills.

5: Gaining Formal Job and Career Experience
   - Promote internships, possibly with GE credit. Help students articulate their skills.
   - Increase CEL advertising, especially to first years and sophomores. Perhaps bring first-year writing classes to the CEL or have CEL representatives go to early first-year classes.
   - Expand/establish resources: link students with alumni-mentors, make an internship a GE requirement, require a career exploration course and attendance at 1-4 CEL events/year

6: Job- and Career-Seeking
   - Create a directory of parents willing to help with job/career searches.
   - Expand CEL professional staff to meet student desires for help with post-college planning and for a more personal relationship with a career counselor.
   - Improve CEL location and publicity.
   - Expand CEL offerings for help with specific career paths and increase awareness of them.
   - Encourage use of CEL services that help with job-seeking.
1: Attitudes, Beliefs, and Plans Regarding Career Planning and Post-College Life  
(Goetsch, Jordan, Jung, Lampman, Nobbs, Ruiz)

Main findings:
- “Vocation” as a problematic term: Most students (78%) feel called to a particular vocation but only a minority (31%) already has a vocation. Students may believe that feeling “called” is an overarching phenomenon and having a vocation is more specific.
  - Recommendation: Use caution when labeling vocational programs and activities.
- Career planning onset: Most respondents believe students should begin career planning by sophomore year, and most sophomores, juniors, and seniors had begun by then.
  - Recommendation: Emphasize career-planning services for students in all years.
- Feelings about career planning: Most respondents feel excited and most feel anxious.
- Career planning self-efficacy (SE): This refers to an individual’s beliefs about his/her ability to successfully perform career planning. Most respondents feel prepared for career planning. Higher SE is associated with already having started planning, planning to start sooner rather than later, higher year in school, and greater confidence in one’s ability to find a career, but not with gender, race/ethnicity, or first-generation status.
  - Recommendation: Provide services designed to increase SE and or positive attitudes about planning for post-college life, since these may influence each other and may enhance career planning.
- Attitudes about planning for post-college life: Students tend to have more positive attitudes if they already started career planning, if they plan to start sooner rather than later, if they expect to have a vocation before graduation, and if they have higher SE.
  - Recommendation: Help students plan for financially independence after college.
- Financial independence after graduation: Most respondents (76%) want to be completely financially independent after graduation and most believe the most important aspect of a post-college job is to provide financial independence, but most (77%) expect to be partially financially dependent on their parents/guardians. This is not related to career planning SE or to positive attitudes regarding post-college planning.
  - Recommendation: Help students find affordable housing for after graduation.

2: Vocation and Career Discernment  
(Aaker, Baird, Cahalan, Omar, Swanson, and Thompson)

Key points from the scholarly literature: Helpful sources for developing vocation and career goals include experiential learning (work experience and workshops), online career planning programs, and career counseling, especially if counselors disclose their own discernment process.

Main findings:
- Vocational development level: Students have relatively high vocational development (average = 18.3 on a 24-point index). This was not associated with participation in CEL Vocational Workshops (no SS), suggesting that other activities may be at least as important for vocational discernment. This team’s focus group responded negatively to the term vocation, viewing it as constraining and religious. The team avoided the term on the survey and instead asked about passions and a sense of meaning in life.
- Having a sense of vocation before arriving at St. Olaf and changing it while here: Most students (77%) had passions in life before arriving at St. Olaf, and most (63%) experienced a change in their sense of passions in life after arriving.

- Factors motivating vocational exploration (11 options such as class requirements and CEL emails): Personal relationships matter. Over 78% agreed that self-motivation, professors, parents, and peers are important motivators. Academic advisors (63%) and class requirements (64%) are more important than CEL emails (16%) and posters/flyers (10%).
  - Recommendation: Emphasize relationships (new and existing) in services and programming for vocational exploration. Consider using class requirements.

- Vocational discernment resources (12): Of students who had used the resources, over 80% found internships, classes, professors, and off-campus study helpful, and 45% to 60% found specific CEL vocational services helpful. Greater discernment was associated with perceptions of greater helpfulness from non-CEL resources such as advisors and classes (SS). A minority had participated in CEL vocational workshops (24%).
  - Recommendation: Evaluate the effectiveness of each of these resources.

- Causes of low participation in CEL Vocational Workshops (seven options): Over 38% of students were unaware of the workshops (but many respondents are first years), 20% had scheduling conflicts, and several said they did not have enough time to participate.
  - Recommendation: Increase advertising and offer workshops at more times.

- Effective methods for advertising voc. services (eight options): Students chose advisors (21%), CEL emails (17%), posters/flyers (16%), registration and class requirements (14% and 13%), and class announcements (13%). Least chosen were tabling and TV ads.
  - Recommendation: Encourage advisors to promote vocational services

- Career plan development (based on a five-item 20-point index of statements such as “I have a clear plan for pursuing my future career”): The average score of 10.89 is close to the midpoint (neutral). Higher career plan development was associated with having done an internship but not with having used CEL job-seeking services.

- Vocation/career plan link: Respondents tended to link vocation and career. On a 6-item index (0-24) of statements such as “It is important for me to pursue a career that gives meaning to my life,” the average score of 19.53 was well above the midpoint of 12.

- Suggested vocational development resources: A large minority (45%) agreed that a vocational development course would be helpful. Over 55% of students providing their own suggestions focused on already-existing services, suggesting more job postings, panels, programs like Leaders for Social Change, networking, help with interviewing skills, and opportunities to interact with small businesses. Some suggested requiring students to meet with CEL staff and requiring first years to take a tour of the CEL website.
  - Recommendation: Expand already-existing resources. Consider mandates.

3: Career Exploration (CE)
(“St. Olaf College Students and…” – Abbas, Brown, Hager, Heinonen, Tamblyn, and Waleag)

Key point from the scholarly literature: High career decision-making self-efficacy (an individual’s beliefs about his/her ability to successfully perform a given task, in this case, career decision-making) predicts high engagement in career exploration activities such as internships, career research, and mock interviews.

Main Findings:
- Participation in CE: 21% of students have had at least one internship, 19% had done job shadowing, and 12% had a research assistantship position. Most students had not participated in CE. Participation increase with year in school.
- **Sources of motivation for CE** (five options: self, parents, friends, professors, and advisors): Each source was reported by a majority of juniors and seniors (58% - 67%, depending on the sources) and by a smaller percentage of first years and sophomores.

- **Use and perceived helpfulness of resources for general CE** (from a list of seven resources): Students most commonly used academic advisors, professors, and peers; the least used were CEL internship searches, alumni panels, job shadow searches, and the Alumni Directory (data includes first years, who would not be expected to use these resources in their first two months). Students who had used these resources tended to rate them as helpful: 96% of students who had used professors as resources agreed they were helpful, as did 77% of students who had used CEL job shadow searches.
  - **Recommendation:** Promote awareness of CEL CE resources since users perceive them as helpful for CE but most students have not used them.

- **Resources used for finding research assistantships (RAs), internships, and job shadowing opportunities:** The top resource for finding RAs is professors; the top for internships are parents and online searches; the top for job shadowing are parents and professors.
  - **Recommendations:** Expand CEL services for finding all three experiences. Ask departments to assign a professor as a resource for students seeking RAs.

- **Gains from RAs, internships, and job shadowing:** All three increase awareness of what the working world is like, expand job-related skills, and help students know what they do and don’t want in a future career. Skill gains were most strongly associated with RAs, while increased awareness of the working world and knowing what one wants in future careers were most strongly associated with job shadowing.
  - **Recommendation:** Promote all three of these, especially job shadowing because of its low costs and high benefits.

- **Suggestions:** Over 70% of students support revising the Alumni Directory to include job titles and brief job descriptions, creating a directory of St. Olaf parents willing to help with CE, and promoting externships. A smaller portion expressed support (38% - 49%) for mandatory CE such as a required course and a requirement that students attend 1-4 CEL CE events per year (similar to Music Dept. requirements). Students also suggested increasing awareness of CEL services, increasing access to career opportunities outside Minnesota and the Midwest, offering a CE course, offering a life skills course (finance, housing, cooking), increasing CE activities for science and music majors, and holding more CEL CE events in the evening to accommodate students’ schedules.
  - **Recommendations:** Revise the Alumni Directory, create a parent directory, promote externships, and mandate attendance at CEL events (given the precedent set by the Music Department and the Wellness Center). Advertise CE resources in a welcoming manner to address possible resistance to mandatory participation.

### 4: Gaining Transferable Skills
("Building Transferable Skills...." – Martin, Johnson, Hansen, Dangor, and Pietryla)

Key points from scholarly literature: There is often a gap between the skills employers desire and those that college graduates possess and can articulate. Recent graduates often lack decision-making skills, independence, preparedness, communication skills, and self-awareness. Students, especially first years, are often unaware of transferable skills taught in classes, but awareness can be enhanced by faculty feedback and by student interactions during longer-term, multi-component collaborative projects. Employers tend to value teamwork skills more than professors do, which may explain why group work is not more integrated into many college curricula. Extracurricular activities are also related to employment success. They may enhance interpersonal skills, motivation, and integrity, and they predict success more accurately than do
grades, but the specific type of activity (such as citizenship activities) and the degree of leadership in that activity matter and may influence access to firms and managerial positions.

Main findings:

- **Confidence in transferable skills** (based on a list of nine skills including communication, teamwork, independent work leadership, self-motivation, time management, and networking): Students tend to be somewhat confident in their skills. The average score on a nine-item index (0-36) was 28.97, well above the midpoint of 18. Students were most apt to be confident in working independently and communicating with peers and least apt to be confident in networking and time management.
  
  o **Recommendation:** Provide services to increase skills in networking and time management.

- **Perceived skill gains from five sources** (classroom experiences, group work for classes, extracurricular activities, leadership positions and social relationships): When asked about the impact of these sources on the same nine skills (using an index), students were most likely to report gains from extracurricular activities (average score of 28.88), but the average score for each source was over 26, well above the midpoint of 18. Higher overall confidence in skills was related to higher scores for classroom experiences, extracurriculars, and group work for classes (SS).
  
  o **Recommendation:** Help students identify and articulate the skills gained from each of these sources.

- **Professors’ identification and discussion of transferable skills learned in class:** Most students (71%) reported that none or few of their professors clearly identify and discuss transferable skills in class; only 29% said most or all do so.
  
  o **Recommendation:** Encourage professors to clearly identify and discuss transferable skills learned in class.

- **Group work v. individual work:** Most students (68%) prefer individual work for classes over group work, but most (77%) believe that group work fosters valuable skill-building.
  
  o **Recommendation:** Promote group work for classes.

- **CEL help in identifying transferable skills:** Students who rated relevant CEL resources as more helpful tended to express greater confidence in their own transferable skills.
  
  o **Recommendation:** Work to increase student participation in CEL services related to gaining and articulating transferable skills.

5: Gaining Formal Job and Career Experience
(Schattauer, Gurtcheff, Wojick, Madsen, Riley, and Melcher)

Key points from the scholarly literature: Student employment provides access to real-world experiences, information that informs future career planning, opportunities to network with professionals, and increased self-confidence and comfort in work settings.

Main findings:

- **Skill/asset gains from internships and jobs** (Eight skills and assets such as technical skills, decision-making skills, and expansion of professional network included in a 40-point index): The highest average score for skill/asset gain was for internships (32.5), followed by off-campus jobs (28.47) and on-campus jobs (23.2). Students reported higher average gains from academic than from non-academic internships, but the difference was not statistically significant. Of those with academic internships, most (75%) said working with a faculty supervisor was valuable to their learning experience.
Recommendations: Promote internships, possibly with GE credit. Help students articulate the skills they gain.

Use and perceptions of CEL resources for gaining formal experience: Over half of juniors and seniors (57%) have used CEL to pursue employment. Overall, students had slightly positive views of the effectiveness of related CEL resources (average score of 11.1 on a five-item index, 0-20). About half of juniors and seniors (47%) and a smaller portion of first years and sophomores (46%) agree that CEL advertises its services well.

Recommendation: Increase CEL advertising, especially to first years and sophomores, perhaps by bringing first-year writing classes into the CEL to learn about vocation or by having CEL representatives go to early first-year classes to inform students about available services.

Suggestions for on-campus resources for gaining formal experience: Most students (77%) expressed support for linking students with alumni-mentors in their fields (74%). Students also expressed support for making an internship a GE requirement (42%), requiring a career exploration course (51%), and requiring attendance at 1-4 CEL events per year (49%). Students also suggested increasing CEL advertising, requiring career exploration for first years, and creating a program to increase student/alumni links.

Recommendation: Consider creating all of the resources listed above.

6: Job- and Career-Seeking
(“The Job Search” – Atcheson, Bouzard, Evans, Harden, Southard, and Trostrud)

Important point from the scholarly literature: Stigma associated with help-seeking may deter students from using career counseling services.

Main findings:

- Plans for the first year after graduation: 70% plan to attend graduate or professional school, 30% plan to embark on a career, 23% plan to take a job (not related to their career path) and 29% plan to do service or volunteer work.
- Sources of job-/career-seeking help (based on a list of five options): Students were most apt to indicate that parents/guardians helped and least apt to indicate that CEL helped.
  - Recommendation: Create a directory of parents willing to help with job/career searches.
- Desire for career counseling help: A slight majority (51%) agreed that they would like a more personal relationship with a career counselor, with regular one-on-one meetings. A large majority (87%) agreed that they want help with post-college planning.
  - Recommendation: Expand CEL professional staff, to meet this need.
- Graduate/professional school search: Of the students planning to attend graduate or professional school, most have not started their search, but 68% of the seniors have already started. Students in higher years and students who had used the CEL were more likely to have already started their education search or to plan an earlier start (SS).
- Job search: Of those students who plan to take a job after college, most have not yet started a job search. Most plan to do so more than a year from now or don’t know when they expect to start. Students in higher years and students who had used the CEL were more likely to have already started their job search or to plan an earlier start (SS).
- CEL – General knowledge and use: 88% knew about the CEL before the survey (100% of juniors/seniors; 90% of sophomores; 64% of first years). 25% had visited the CEL four or more times (85% of seniors; 79% of juniors), and 44% had never done so. Students in Fine Arts were least likely to have visited the CEL (3%). Students were more likely to
have used the CEL if they had already started their job/career or education search, especially if they started more than a year ago.

- **CEL – Factors affecting ease/difficulty of using CEL services** (location, hours, publicity, and website organization; asked of users and non-users): The top factors making the CEL easy for students to use are its website organization (40%) and publicity (33%). The top factors deterring CEL use are its location (25%) and publicity (18%).
  - Recommendation: Improve CEL location and publicity.

- **CEL – Awareness of offerings for targeted job/career/education searches**: Of students with a career path, 29% believe that the CEL has offerings for their specific path.
  - Recommendations: Increase awareness of CEL offerings for specific career paths; expand CEL offerings across under-served career paths.

- **CEL – Ease of using search services**: 80% find CEL search services easy to use.

- **CEL – Online services for graduate/professional school searches** (application tips, links to web searches, two workshops, etc.): Most students have not used these services, but most users found the services helpful (60% - 85%, depending on the specific service).

- **CEL – Use of job-seeking services** (resume critiques, meetings with professional staff, job fairs, interview skills workshops, etc.): Use varied dramatically. 16% of students have used CEL interview practice sessions and 63% have used the email alias. Most users found CEL job-seeking services helpful, especially critiques of resumes (96%) and cover letters (92%), Career Network for Oles (88%), and meeting with professional staff (86%).
  - Recommendation: Encourage use of these CEL job-seeking services.