“YOU WOULD THINK...”
Applying Motivational Interviewing and Career Coaching Concepts With Liberal Arts Students

By Kate S. Brooks
Introduction

Liberal arts students are bright, interesting, creative people. So why do we find ourselves scratching our heads and saying:

• “You would think that a philosophy major with $35,000 in loans would look for a job prior to graduation.”
• “You would think that an English major considering an advertising career would want something on his/her resume related to advertising.”
• “You would think that a student would review the company’s literature before an interview.”

Career services professionals spend countless hours designing programming and developing services for liberal arts students. Most parents of college students certainly expect their children to take full advantage of the career center. Yet we all know that many students won’t darken our doors, much less become proactive job seekers, until late in the game. The students’ behavior seems illogical, even counter-productive.

In Motivational Interviewing, William R. Miller and Stephen Rollnick may have an explanation for this seemingly illogical behavior. Written primarily for therapists working with clients with drug and alcohol issues, their description of the “reluctant client” is surprisingly apt for liberal arts students. Studying this concept of the reluctant client and adding action-oriented career coaching techniques to career services programs and services might be a strategic solution to one of the challenges of working with liberal arts students.

Reluctant Clients

Miller and Rollnick use the phrase “You would think…” to highlight the seemingly illogical behavior of their clients. They summarize the thinking of the reluctant client as essentially, “I want to, but I don’t want to.” Alcoholics might want to stop drinking, for example, but if they do, they may lose their friends or have to face issues they don’t want to face. The short-term cost isn’t necessarily worth the long-term gain. From a career perspective, liberal arts students might want to do an internship, but doing so will require up to 10 hours a week of unpaid labor and take away time for social activities or studying. Thus they might “want to, but don’t want to.” And so they remain stuck.

Miller and Rollnick call this stuck behavior “ambivalence.” The core of the resistant client, ambivalence is a form of approach-avoidance and is a normal experience. It is understandable that college students would have mixed feelings about career plans. College seniors are experiencing many “lasts.” The last time they’ll attend a particular event. The last time they’ll see a particular person. The last time they’ll have the chance to take such diverse classes. Do they want to miss any of these “last times,” or give up their free time to attend a career center program?

Our role then is to help students move out of the state of ambivalence so they don’t remain stuck. As Miller and Rollnick say, “Ambivalence is a reasonable place to visit, but you wouldn’t want to live there.” But we need to take care in how we attempt to move students forward. Miller and Rollnick caution against taking too simplistic an approach or assuming that once the client is informed of his or her ambivalence that he or she will change. They state that client resistance can occur when reluctant clients are pushed to change before they are ready. Reading this brought to mind a story from a career center director whose office had placed advertisements for their services at the football stadium in an effort to reach a large number of students. The director was surprised to find that the seemingly ingenious marketing ploy backfired: Students reported they didn’t want to be reminded of the looming job search when they were enjoying a football game.

In offering suggestions for breaking the bonds of ambivalence, Miller and Rollnick state that the proper question isn’t so much “Why aren’t the students motivated?” but rather, “What motivates the students?” By discovering what motivates the students, we can set better conditions for change.

Career center staff might benefit from taking a look at our programs and services and analyze whether they are truly motivating to students. A former colleague who hated meetings was in the unfortunate position of serving on a faculty tenure committee. He would come back after a particularly long meeting and lament, “Well that’s four hours of my life I’ll never get back.” We need to consider this: Why should a student take a risk of “wasting” an hour of his or her life at some workshop taught by some professional the student doesn’t know or doesn’t necessarily respect? What will they get in return? There are no jobs anyway, they think. On the other hand, they know the value of meeting a friend for coffee, studying for an exam, or going to a party. When choosing between a tangible activity such as studying or partying, or the more ephemeral act of writing a resume for an unknown future, it is easy for students to go with the least-resistant option, presumably partying.

So how does change occur and how can we promote it?

Promoting Change in Reluctant Clients

We know that our students change eventually. They graduate, get jobs, raise families, and often return to our institutions to give students the same advice we tried to give them when they were students. My surveys of liberal arts graduates over the last 10 years indicate that six months after graduation, well over 90 percent of those who wish to be employed are employed. What causes this correction? What motivated the students to change? Miller and Rollnick identify seven factors that can facilitate change based on their research with addicted individuals. These seven factors can be observed and analyzed in the career development process as well.
The first—natural change—is change that will come about due to natural occurrences without the assistance of a counselor. One could argue humorously that the act of returning home and spending several days on the sofa in sight of his/her parents would foster natural change in the graduate, so in this instance, the career center need do nothing. Life—and parents—provide the change. Graduation is in and of itself a form of natural change.

The second cause of change—brief intervention—holds that a relatively short occurrence, such as a workshop, a meeting with an alumnus, and so forth, can bring about change. The student is inspired to take action as a function of this short intervention. This is a powerful piece of information for career services as we never know which brief intervention might work for a student. It encourages us to keep trying new programs and not to worry if students only attend one function.

The third factor in change, the “dose effects” theory, holds that if one meeting is helpful, several will be more helpful. However, the literature does not necessarily find this to be true. Long-term therapy with addicts wasn’t consistently more successful than short-term. Whether this applies to career counseling remains to be seen, but the message to career centers is that we can accomplish much in relatively short periods of time. This is an important message to convey to students who are ambivalent about the amount of time they have to devote to the job-search process. The more we can do to let students know that we can convey a significant amount of information in a short time, the better.

Miller and Rollnick found that faith and hope make up the fourth factor in influencing change. Often referred to as “self-efficacy” in the career counseling field, if students believe they can do something they are more likely to try to succeed. It is likewise important that the career center express positive beliefs about the students’ ability to succeed.

The fifth cause, counselor empathy and genuineness, is a key aspect of client change. When clients believe the service provider genuinely understands their situations, they are more likely to listen to the counselor’s suggestions. As career services professionals, we need to stop and think about our level of empathy with our students. Do we truly appreciate what they are doing—or are we too busy telling them what they “should” be doing?

The sixth effect—the “waiting list effect”—is particularly interesting. Miller and Rollnick found that if a client simply waited for an appointment, there was little change, but if the client was given self-help material to read between the time of scheduling and the appointment, change was more likely to occur. Miller and Rollnick cite the different messages being sent. When nothing is given to the client the message is “You just wait for the expert to fix you.” When materials are given to the client, the message is “You are in control; there are things you can do while you’re waiting.”

Finally, there is the “change talk effect,” that is, listening to the statements the client makes that imply a greater willingness and interest in changing. We’ve all heard the phrase “teachable moments” to describe the brief flash when a student is able to gain insight into a situation. Change talk effect is like that: If we catch the student saying something that implies she or he wants to change, we can be ready to assist. Signs of readiness for change include attendance at workshops and programs, seeking appointments, showing up for walk-in hours, and so forth.

It is important to note that, for space reasons, this article barely touches on the wealth of information and ideas related to change factors; reading Motivational Interviewing will provide you with much greater detail.

Moving Past Ambivalence

We can examine our services and products and communicate in a manner that acknowledges and reduces ambivalence. Expressing empathy, helping students see the discrepancy between where they are and where they want to be, dealing with their resistance, and supporting their self-efficacy will all help students move past their ambivalence. With that in mind, consider examining your centers and services in terms of the key conditions for change, seeking opportunities to include them.
• Show empathy. How do we express empathy for our students? Do we convey our information in a manner that says we understand that they’re busy, or appreciate that they are giving up something to use our services? Do we find ways to make our programs appealing? Does our staff reflect our student population in age, gender, multicultural backgrounds, etc.?
• Help students see the discrepancy between where they are now and where they want to be. Do we provide clear paths that will help them see the actions they need to take, and provide support for those actions? Do we appeal to their ultimate goal and help them easily find the steps in between? Do we make it easy to obtain internships, develop networks, and take part in programs? Just telling students they need to network or do an internship won’t necessarily inspire change.
• Disempower their natural resistance by providing flexible programs and services. Have we found a way to provide options for completing job search tasks? Do we offer notes, transcripts, or videotapes of presentations or programs they couldn’t attend? Consider a common task in our office: resume writing assistance. Do we have multiple ways to assist students: resume drop-offs, walk-in hours, online assistance, etc.? Do we have printed and online versions of our resume guide?
• Maintain balance between voluntary and required activities. If something is required, have we done all we can to ensure its value to the students? Do we offer, but not require except where absolutely necessary? We all know that requiring something means more work for everyone. Requirements aren’t necessarily bad, and in fact can be educational, but review any requirements to see if some could be reduced or eliminated. Requirements can sometimes push the ambivalent student into an action mode, but only if the required task and outcome are perceived as valuable. A requirement that is perceived as time wasting will likely create resistance.
• Offer programming at students’ level and then move them to a higher level. Do we meet them at their level and help them move up rather than jump in over their level? One good example is networking programs—while everyone agrees that networking is a great idea, it is a new and uncomfortable behavior for many students. How can we find ways to introduce students gradually to networking in a non-threatening way? Many centers have excellent alumni data bases, but expect students to independently pick up the phone and call a stranger. Similarly, networking receptions can be overwhelming. These activities are a big leap for someone new to the job market. How can we better assist those ambivalent first-timers who aren’t sure of themselves, or introverts who are not comfortable in a crowd? When we discovered that alumni and students tended to cluster in their own groups at networking events, we instituted a colored name badge systems based on the alumni fields of employment corresponding to the student areas of interest. For example, alumni in and students interested in education careers all wore blue name tags, which facilitated conversations and eased the mingling process for both groups.
• Ask permission before providing assistance. Miller and Rollnick suggest that one way to defeat client resistance is to ask permission before offering suggestions or ideas. For example,
instead of pulling out a pen and changing a student’s job objective, say, “I have another idea for this job objective. Is it OK if I suggest something else?” Most students will readily agree and then you are working with a partner instead of a one-up relationship. The changes become a “want” on the part of the student rather than a “should.”

Using Career Coaching Techniques To Foster Change

Our task, then, becomes to continuously seek ways to encourage internal motivation in our students: Programming, services, and materials that will appeal to them, have intrinsic value, and carry an important weight.7 This is where the career coaching strategies can be helpful. Career coaching isn’t all that different from traditional career counseling: Both deal with the topics of career decision-making and planning, resume writing, interviewing techniques, etc. The career coach needs to have many of the same personality attributes as a counselor, including empathy, positive regard, and intuitive insights. However, career coaching is unique in its explicit emphasis on setting goals. It is outcome/solution oriented rather than process/problem oriented. Career coaching follows a strategic thinking model using Stephen Covey’s Habit #2: “Begin with the end in mind.”18 It is a highly active process for the client and coach. Encouraging students to set their own goals, and establishing goals throughout the process with the students helps focus their plans and provides a clearer path. To begin incorporating career coaching ideas into our practices, we can look at three areas: our attitudes and approaches to students; the services we provide; and the materials/publicity we offer.

Attitude and Approach

What you would do differently if you were paid a commission for every student who got a job?

I asked this deliberately provocative question at a recent NACE conference and received some responses that were positively Machiavellian, considering the friendly group of career counselors I was addressing. Statements like, “I’d just make them take a job” or “I’d make sure they were working anywhere—I wouldn’t care,” revealed the hidden assumptions we carry about our roles. While the counselors’ answers were an understandable reaction to a ridiculous pressure, they missed the point. They assume that “we” are responsible for the client getting a job (placement) as opposed to making sure that the best possible programs and opportunities are in place so the client can get the job. We jump to the same faulty conclusion that the students do—if we’re “paid to get them a job” then we should, by golly, get them a job. In reality, we are paid to create opportunities. Think about that. You have the luxury of being paid to create opportunity. And the quality and quantity of the opportunities you create for students will likely determine the success of your office. Our goals then focus on creating the best possible graduates who can find jobs on their own or through our programs.

Many of us have for years quoted the old saying, “If you give someone a fish they eat for a day but teach them to fish and they eat for a lifetime.” We assume our role is to teach, and sometimes use that as a reason (dare I say “excuse”?) not to do more for students. After all, won’t they learn more if they have to do everything themselves? However, as Miller and Rollnick pointed out, empathy is key. How empathic is it to expect 19-year-olds to pick up a phone and call a 40-year-old alumnus? How many 20-year-olds are savvy enough to know to do a marketing/business-related internship at a nonprofit organization? Here are cases where it wouldn’t hurt to hand them a fish or two so they don’t starve while they’re learning to fish. Remember their ambivalence—tasks that seem insurmountable will likely send them away. There’s nothing wrong with giving the students more support—it’s not hand holding, it’s supporting. And it’s also meeting the client where she or he is and not coming down from above like the expert.
Services

How many of us have heard the dreaded comment, “Yeah, I used the career center but it wasn’t helpful.”? We all know that behind that statement lie 1,000 possible reasons for the dissatisfaction (e.g., the student may not have used the services appropriately, or perhaps the career center staff may not have explained how to use the services), but quite often the reason is simply a disconnect or misconnect between the student’s goal and the counselor’s goal. Because these are often unspoken it is too easy for each to be on their parallel track, passing but never connecting. Again, the career coaching model’s emphasis on goal setting can be helpful here.

Before we provide a service, do we analyze the goal behind it? We may think we know the goal, “to teach students to write a resume” for example, but do students actually leave the workshop with a resume? If not, then how do we know we’ve taught them? Are we just a “talking book,” telling them what they can read somewhere else? Then why have we provided that service? What could we do instead that would ensure the students can write their resumes?

When we meet with a student, do we stop and ask what his or her goal is for the session? We might ask “Why are you here?”, but do we make sure we address that concretely and remind them before they leave what they came for—and whether they achieved that goal? If they haven’t, your asking provides another opportunity for you to help them achieve the goal. Traditionally, I would meet with students and take notes on our conversations. I would write such things as “Interested in banking. Working on resume. Will return in a few weeks with resume.” Now I use a checklist that lists the major steps in getting a job. (See “A Job-Search Checklist for Liberal Arts Students,” page 35.) I review it with the student and the student and I check off what’s been accomplished and what still needs to be done. Then I give the student a copy of the checklist.

Are we building powerful and valuable alliances? We’ve all heard this a million times, but Miller and Rollnick’s research indicates that when a client is ready for change even a small intervention can move him or her forward. Given that, the more offices and organizations on your campus that actively promote your services or assist students with career-related activities, the better. Your alliances will likely be unique to the culture of your campus. At the University of Texas’ College of Liberal Arts Career Services, we’re finding that our best alliance appears to be with the academic advising program. Our academic advisers can reach students at an earlier stage in their progress, have various ways to control their progress through a program, have an opportunity to have a dialogue and ask questions (Have you thought about an internship? Have you written a resume, if so, let me take a look at it.) before the student ever enters the career center.

Products

To fully integrate career coaching concepts, examine your materials, handouts, publicity information, and so forth with an eye toward action and goal setting. Take a look at your materials: What was your goal when you produced them? Many of us focus on the educational value of the material, e.g., “After the student reads this, he or she will know about X.” The problem is that
A Job-Search Checklist for Liberal Arts Students

Career services professionals can modify/use this guide when counseling liberal arts students in the job search.

The job search can feel overwhelming, so it’s helpful to break it into manageable steps. The good news is you don’t have to do every step in order. For example, you can start working on your resume before you identify what you want to do. Just start checking off as many of these activities as you can, and you’ll find yourself on the way to a great opportunity.

You can receive assistance for every one of these steps through the [insert name of career center]. And you don’t have to do it all during business hours—start by checking our web site [insert web site address] for lots of links and helpful information.

Step 1: Know yourself.

_____ I have identified my personal strengths, skills, interests, and values.
_____ I have made a list of possible job titles/fields of interest.
_____ I can name two or three careers/jobs I plan to pursue.

Step 2: Know where you want to work.

_____ I have researched organizations or companies that might hire someone with my skills, interests, and background.
_____ I have researched potential career fields: typical entry-level jobs, typical salaries, best geographic location for jobs, etc.
_____ I have identified the top three geographic areas where I’d like to live and work.
_____ I have identified 10 potential employers for the type of work I’m seeking.

Step 3: Get ready for the search.

_____ I have registered with [insert name of career center].
_____ I have had my resume and cover letter(s) reviewed by a professional in the field or a staff member at [insert name of career center].
_____ I have prepared a portfolio or work samples to highlight my experience, skills, and talent.
_____ I have developed my “30-second speech” for short encounters with employers.
_____ I have analyzed my education and developed my “liberal arts story” for employers.
_____ I have identified three individuals who will serve as references.
_____ I have developed my interview skills.
_____ I have prepared for interviews by practicing my responses to typical questions and/or doing a mock interview.
_____ I have an interview suit that is appropriate for the field in which I plan to work.
_____ I have a professional-sounding answering machine/voice mail message in case an employer calls.
_____ I have a neutral/professional e-mail address to give to employers.

Step 4: Start searching.

_____ I have uploaded my resume(s) to the recruiting site on the [insert name of career center web site].
_____ I regularly check the career center web site for career opportunities and I subscribe to the career center newsletter, [insert name of newsletter]. I read the appropriate job-search resources for my field(s) of interest.
_____ I have a system for keeping track of my contacts, interviews, and other job-search activities.
_____ I follow up on every interesting job lead immediately.
_____ I have developed a list of potential networking contacts and keep in touch with them.
_____ I keep a copy of my resume next to my phone in case I receive a call from an employer.
_____ I follow-up each cover letter with a phone call or e-mail to the employer requesting a job interview.
_____ I send thank you letters or e-mails to every person who interviews me.

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the materials are essentially passive in nature. If, and that’s a big if, the student reads the material, he or she may absorb just a small amount of the information, and there is a good chance that even that little bit will be forgotten quickly.

Materials need to be written with action in mind. It’s what you write and produce. Look at all your materials—handouts, web pages, and other pieces—with the career coaching paradigm in mind:

1. What is to be accomplished by this piece?
2. What is the goal of each of our pieces?
3. What is the point of each piece we offer students?
4. What will the student do as a function of receiving this?

Two common career center handouts come to mind: the classic four-year chart and the “What can I do with a major in…” list. For example, many of us have those four-year charts listing what you can/should/must do freshman year, sophomore year, junior year, and senior year. Some lists contain so much information as to totally overwhelm the students. Remember the empathy and the ambivalence? Are we scaring them away? Generally, the only people who really like those lists are the parents. What if instead of giving students an overwhelming list full of “shoulds,” we turned it into a checklist and ask students to check the two or three items in each year that they would like to do? Now it’s action-oriented and the student makes choices instead of passively readying a list that exhausts him or her.

As another example, many of us use “What to do with a major in…” sheets. These present quite a challenge. In trying to awaken students to the many career opportunities open to them, we tend to go overboard and provide too much information. Do you have extensive lists of every career you can do with a particular major? How valuable is that list? What is the goal of such a list? To let students know they can have 100+ career options? So what? If the student doesn’t know what he or she wants to do, such a list probably hasn’t helped. Many students report that such lists are of no more value than the list in their head that says they can do nothing. How could such a list be made valuable? Maybe by incorporating alumni information or asking the student to check the five careers that look the most interesting, or dividing the careers into sections by skills needed.

Again, the goal is to have a useful action-oriented handout rather than a passive “read-only” document.

Conclusion

The techniques and research behind motivational interviewing can be immensely helpful to career center practitioners. This article has only skimmed the surface and I encourage you to read further. In addition to Motivational Interviewing, I recommend the following career coaching texts:


Endnotes

2 Miller and Rollnick, 14.
3 Miller and Rollnick, 18.
4 Miller and Rollnick, 4-10.
5 Miller and Rollnick, 8.
6 Miller and Rollnick, 36.
7 Miller and Rollnick, 12.
8 Stephen Covey. The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989) 95.

Author’s note: This is not an ending, but a beginning. I have not accomplished all that I put forth in this article at our career center. Our web site is a work in progress and all our handouts don’t feature the career coaching style. But we’re developing new ideas regularly. And since I don’t want to do this alone, I encourage those who find this topic interesting to try some of the ideas, explore others, and share them with me to keep the dialogue going.