A Model for Wisdom Development—
And Its Place in Career Services

By Scott C. Brown

Instinct, anecdote, experience,
and research all confirm one thing:
A college education is more than just
course work. Although this is an obvious
notion to many people in general and career
professionals in particular, stakeholders such
as legislators, board members, employers, par-
ents, and students are raising questions about what
students are getting out of their academic experiences.
In response to demands for greater accountability, higher
education has been shifting its emphasis from what is being
taught to what is being learned.

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Although there is much discussion about “what” students learn, and to a lesser extent “where,” educators still don’t know how students integrate all the lessons they have learned in and out of class and on and off campus and make meaning from those experiences. What is known is that students learn from many places, from the classroom to the sports field, through part-time jobs and late night conversations. But how do all of these seemingly disparate experiences come together? Is there a way to address learning as the holistic phenomenon that it is, without dividing it into discrete variables? Educators need to conceptualize a college education as a sum that is greater than its individual parts, to understand how this process occurs, and to determine what they can do about it.

Wisdom is a construct that subsumes all of the integrated learning outcomes associated with a college education. In this article, the author presents an overview of his wisdom-development theory, which defines wisdom, details how it develops, and illustrates how career centers are uniquely positioned to make significant contributions to its development.

Many practitioners would agree that wisdom is valued, but what is it? Think about people in your life who you think of as wise. What is it about them that makes them wise? What qualities and characteristics set them apart? Those questions were posed to ten recent graduates of a flagship, public Research I institution who had demonstrated the ability to integrate their college experiences and had actively participated in campus life. The author’s theory on wisdom development emerged from an analysis of the students’ experiences. The theory posits that:

Wisdom is a construct of six interacting dimensions:
1. self-knowledge
2. understanding of others
3. judgment
4. life knowledge
5. life skills
6. a willingness to learn.

Wisdom develops when students go through the core “learning-from-life” process: reflection, integration, and application.

The conditions that facilitate the development of wisdom by directly or indirectly stimulating the learning-from-life process are the student’s:
- a. orientation to learning,
- b. experiences,
- c. interactions with others, and
- d. the institutional environment.

Depending on how deeply and often students are stimulated to go through the learning-from-life process, they will experience growth in one or more of the six dimensions of wisdom.

The model of wisdom development is presented in Figure 1, and discussed at length thereafter. “Wisdom” is presented first, followed by the core process, learning-from-life, and finally the conditions that influence the core process. It is important to note that the development of wisdom is a dynamic and complex process, and the key factors interact in a number of ways.

Wisdom Defined

Wisdom is a construct of six interrelated dimensions that are briefly described below.

Self-knowledge encompasses three main dimensions: the development and reliance on an internal locus of success and the ability to maintain personal authenticity in a variety of contexts; a deep understanding of one’s own guiding values, talents, interests, multiple identities, and ethics; and personal confidence and self-efficacy. Self-knowledge embodies the adage, “To thine own self be true.”

Understanding of others refers to a deep understanding of a wide range of people in varying contexts at individual, group, and systemic levels. It is based on the ability to engage them, the capacity to empathize with them, a genuine interest in learning about them, and a willingness to help them. Understanding of others is knowing how to effectively connect with others and to use this power for good purposes.

Judgment is the ability to absorb, integrate, and apply information to one’s life. It is characterized by a high level of discernment and is demonstrated through assessment of a situation and context, reflection on options, synthesis of multiple perspectives, consideration of consequences, and sound decision making. Judgment is about seeing through the complexity of a situation and finding the right path.

Life knowledge refers to an individual’s common sense, insightfulness, and understanding of the realities of life. While judgment refers largely to the ability to process a situation, life knowledge provides the context engaged in that process. Life knowledge can be described in terms of the breadth and depth of one’s reservoir of knowledge, obtained from both books and the “street.” It includes a capacity for understanding and appreciating life and its uncertainties, circumspection, answering difficult questions, knowing what one can change, accepting what one cannot change, and knowing when to push and when to hold back.

Life skills refer to expertise in balancing multiple roles, handling daily affairs, anticipating problems, overcoming barriers, and possessing the practical tools and strategies for dealing with multiple contexts in life.

Willingness to learn is characterized by confidence in what a person knows, and the humility to believe that he or she simply cannot know everything. Willingness to learn includes a continual openness to—and interest in—learning.

How Wisdom Develops

Learning from life is the core process associated with the development of wisdom and encompasses reflection, integration, and application. Reflection and integration entail absorbing information and transforming it into something more meaningful by engaging in a series of conscious or unconscious actions: analyzing (separating information into parts, then considering the information in new ways); connecting (between new information and existing
areas in one’s life); contextualizing (associating the similarities and dissimilarities between the new information and previous knowledge); and synthesizing (bringing the new information into existing knowledge, creating a new whole). Application demonstrates any changes in a student’s attitudes, values, awareness, and/or behaviors. Development is most likely to occur when the process is completed.

**Conditions That Facilitate The Development Of Wisdom**

There are four conditions that can directly or indirectly facilitate the critical learning-from-life process:

**Orientation to learning** refers to the attitudes, expectations, personal histories, and motivations that individuals bring to their interactions with people and situations. A person’s experiences affect not only his or her approach to a situation, but also what he or she puts into it and expects to get out of it. A student’s goals for college are another important dimension of orientation to learning. For example, one student in a lecture hall may have read all of the assigned readings, while another student is scanning the readings during class. The students occupy the same place at the same time, but the orientation of each student will affect how much each gets out of this situation.

**Experiences** refer to any activity or situation, including the formal and structured (e.g. classes, internships, work); informal (e.g. recreation, organizations, travel); and even the unplanned (e.g. late night conversations, living situations). Students participate in a variety of experiences and involvements, at different points in their college career, with varying frequencies and duration. All become a stimulus for the process of reflection, integration, and application.

**Interactions with others** include dealings with people in a variety of contexts, including courses, co-curricular activities, and living situations. Interactions vary in terms of quantity and quality and generally offer exposure to a variety of perspectives, interests, and behaviors. Those who may have a specific, significant affect on a student’s development of wisdom include faculty and administrators, family members and friends, supervisors or co-workers. Some may even be influential by serving as negative examples, providing students with opportunities to observe what they don’t want to be.

**Formal, informal, and unplanned experiences** and also increases exposure to a large number and variety of people, offering a number of sub-communities that are important to the learning-from-life process.

**Reading the Model**

How do the four conditions combine with the learning-from-life process to encourage the development of wisdom? The model presented here is a visual representation of this interactivity. In reading the model, it is important to understand each condition’s placement within the model and how conditions relate to one another, represented by arrows. The institutional “environment” provides a setting where “orientation to learning,” “experiences,” and “interactions with others” influence the core process, “learning from life” and develop “wisdom.” If there is passage through the learning-from-life process, there is subsequent movement on one or more of the six dimensions of wisdom (self-knowledge, understanding of others, judgment, life knowledge, life skills, and willingness to learn), which then changes a person’s “orientation to

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**Environment** incorporates many aspects of the aggregate college experience and provides the context where students’ orientation to learning, variety of experiences, and interactions with people may come together in various combinations to produce wisdom. The college environment ethos purposefully influences each of these areas because its core function is to advance learning, as opposed to other settings (e.g. military, business) where learning occurs but is not the primary purpose. In the academic setting, the people, policies, and resources are directly and indirectly focused on the achievement of the student. The college environment provides numerous opportunities for
learning” for his or her next experience. However, the arrows indicate that it is possible for individuals to have “interactions with others” while participating in “experiences,” yet never go through the core process. Thus, students’ “orientation to learning” will not have been altered in any way and they will be in the exact same spot for another time or circumstance. The engagement of the learning-from-life process accounts for why some individuals seem to get more out of some situations than others. The dotted lines around the “orientation to learning,” “experiences,” “interactions with others,” “learning from life” and “wisdom” portions of the model indicate the permeable nature of parts of the college experience. The college environment itself provides one context where wisdom may be facilitated, but also allows for the unbounded ways in which non-college-related and college-related experiences interact. This model represents one slice of an ongoing process that is incremental and cumulative, and the individual dimensions can develop at different levels at varying speeds. The learning-from-life process is like walking up a spiral staircase, both repetitive and progressive, allowing one to look down and see where she/he once was, but no longer is.

Putting the Theory Into Practice

Career services practitioners are uniquely positioned to facilitate the development of wisdom. The reasons are four-fold: First, they have the opportunity to have significant relationships with students from matriculation to graduation and beyond. Second, they have a reason to interact with nearly every constituency on campus. Third, they consider students’ cumulative experiences rather than focus on a specific area, such as course work. Fourth, they not only provide a place that allows students to reflect on their whole life experience, but furnish experiences, e.g. internships, as well.

If you were going to redesign a career center to develop wisdom, what sort of changes would you make to existing or attainable resources? Did you ever see the movie *Apollo 13*? When everything is going awry in space, the crew throws every resource aboard the spacecraft on a big conference table, and puts them together in imaginative ways to deal with the pressing problem. For career educators, the pressing concern is connecting their programs and services in the most direct way to the educational mission and institutional priorities.

At Mount Holyoke College, the staff’s charge was simple: make the Career Development Center (CDC) a greater part of the overall undergraduate education of students. Here is how the staff have translated these concepts into practice. Using the wisdom development model as a guide, the staff conceptualized and translated wisdom into three learning outcomes known as the 3 Cs: clarity (self-knowledge, willingness to learn), confidence (understanding of others, judgment, life knowledge); and connection (life skills). The 3 Cs provide a relevant framework for students to make sense of their aggregate experience; sharpen their goals; articulate the knowledge, skills, and qualities they have developed in ways that are compelling to evaluators (e.g. graduate schools, employers); and connect themselves to key resources and opportunities in pursuit of their goals.

The staff then began to focus on how CDC programs and services could develop these three learning outcomes by reorienting students and staff to the work of the center through a (revised) mission statement: “The Career Development Center (CDC) is designed to make significant contributions to the overall education of all Mount Holyoke College students, from matriculation to graduation and beyond. All aspects of this office are specifically organized to increase the 3 Cs of the CDC: clarity, confidence, and connection. The Career Development Center helps students...
professional counselors, and policies) to stimulate the reflection, integration, and application of lessons “learned from life.”

Clarity

When students go to their career centers, they are more often than not at the crossroads of a decision or dilemma: “What should I do for an internship?” “Should I go to grad school?” “Which one?” “I’m thinking of changing my major.” Without criteria to evaluate their options in terms that are meaningful to them, they are overwhelmed by the vast array of choices. “Clarity” is the degree to which students understand how their values, interests, personal biographies, and dimensions of their multiple identities guide their actions and decisions. Students, even the most talented ones, are not often asked to think about success in their own terms, and they have difficulty in determining what they want, why they want it, and what they are willing to do to get it. Clarity requires students to examine their experiences, plumb what they liked and disliked, and determine the criteria they will use to make future decisions, learning from their mistakes to become more sophisticated consumers of their own happiness. Students know a lot about themselves and can use all the dimensions of their experiences, including their “hard knocks.” Students that have developed a greater sense of clarity are less likely to be sucked into a situation that is incongruent with their values and needs. Instead of retrofitting themselves into an opportunity, they are better able to determine what they want and find opportunities that fit their own criteria. With clarity, students can effectively differentiate industries’ and companies’ programs, and can identify, with evidence, why they are specifically interested in one place over the other. They also have a more nuanced understanding of their fit with an organization that can decrease their likelihood of making a decision that they will regret later.

Career practitioners help students develop clarity by applying the four factors within the wisdom-development model that directly or indirectly affect the critical learning-from-life process.

Orientation to learning. Because of the inherent anxiety that the career development process can raise, the narrow road that students must cross to get to the career center might as well be a river of fire. First and foremost, practitioners have to get students to the center, and that means having to communicate that it is a rewarding and relevant place to visit. To do so, Mount Holyoke’s CDC staff conveys to students that the “journey is as important as the destination” through a variety of means. The staff has created a “roadmap” brochure designed to humanize the office, make clear how resources and programs are relevant and available for them, and orient students to the educational mission of the office. As indicated in the road map, the CDC has certain rules of the road that facilitate the process: “there is no right way; there are no speed limits; get lost and you may find yourself; mistakes are great teachers; the highways are quick, the back ways are scenic; start anytime; go fast or go slow, just go; ask for directions.”

Most students find it difficult to fully articulate what is important to them and why. To clarify students’ motivations and goals, the staff asks reflective questions such as: “What do you want to get out of this experience?” “What motivates and inspires you?” “What are the themes and patterns that connect all of your experiences?” “Based on your experiences, if you were to write a job description of the ideal job, what would you be doing, with whom, for what purpose, in what type of organizational environment?” “Of the criteria that you have created that will affect your decision, what can’t you compromise on?” “What about your previous experiences did you enjoy or dislike?” “What have you learned from these experiences that you can draw upon later?”

Experiences. All of the experiences that students acquire by participating in the career center’s programs or using its services are designed to assist students in gaining clarity. The CDC library contains information that helps students gain greater self-understanding from resources based on academic major, interests, personality, and on their social identities such as race, ethnicity, gender, age, and sexual orientation.

CDC programs are always couched in the importance of students understanding themselves. Web resources and an alumnae network are designed so students can take in information in personally meaningful ways. The recruiting program is organized so that students will learn as much about themselves as they will about visiting organizations. In terms of policies, students who participate in the CDC’s internship program are required to create a learning contract in which they delineate what they want to get out of the experience and how they intend to do so. Programs on how to do cover letters, resumes, interviewing, and personal statements help students to explore why they are truly interested in applying to a particular organization, and how to articulate their desires in a relevant and compelling way to evaluators. The office is also leading a campus effort to implement an electronic learning portfolio that will enable students to systematically reflect on their experiences.

Interactions with others: When students arrive at the CDC, the staff and student workers are trained to greet them and get a sense of how to help them, provide a brief overview of what the staff does and why, and guide them to appropriate resources. Modifying a well-known aphorism, the staff believes “It takes a college to raise a student,” and is committed to the whole student learning experience. Counselors can help students identify what core values they hold most dear; help them define success in their own terms; assist them with the ability to negotiate external pressures that are at odds with their values; provide opportunities to explore their multiple identities, values, and interests; and consider how those bear upon their decision making. Students are also encouraged to identify key
individuals in their lives that will help them in this process.  

**Environment.** The physical and virtual environment of the CDC is specifically designed to communicate a welcoming, comfortable, and affirming place for an extraordinarily diverse student population. This orients them in a way to more fully engage with the CDC’s resources. The staff also communicates important messages to students through visible signs and symbols, intentionally arranged bookshelves, and the use of inclusive language. Students learn more about the range of backgrounds and interests of the staff from the “meet the staff” sections on the CDC web site. 

**Confidence** 

Students are the sum total of their life experiences, and it is critical that they can draw upon and articulate the lessons they have learned. However, students often only count the experiences for which they receive academic credit. “Confidence” refers to the knowledge, skills, and qualities students develop in and out of class and on and off campus, and their ability to connect them to future challenges. 

Consider the student who takes a biology course. At the end of this experience, she is likely to have a greater grasp of the content of the course that she might draw upon later. But there is also the process of taking the course, e.g., developing her critical thinking skills in doing a research report, discerning what is most important to support her main argument, synthesizing her findings, and communicating it in written form. If she had to give a report to the class, she will have had to develop her speaking abilities. If she worked on a lab team, she might have needed to work with several very different individuals to achieve a goal. Lastly, she says she had a very difficult time with the course. How did she rise to the challenge? Did she identify a person in the class to study with? Work more closely with the faculty member? How did she manage her time differently since this was more difficult than she anticipated? This one biology class is an example, but, with encouragement and support, students can extract lessons from nearly every experience, good or bad. Also, by determining a base level of their knowledge, skills, and qualities, students are able to more accurately map out areas where they are comparatively strong and specifically identify ways to develop those areas where they are not. 

Again looking to conditions found in the wisdom-development model, how can career centers develop confidence in students?  

**Orientation to learning:** The key reflective questions for confidence are “What parts of your collegiate experience enabled you to address this challenge/situation/decision?” “How are you different because of enrolling in college?” “Are you the same person you were as a first-year student?” “What have you gained specifically?” 

**Experiences:** The CDC at Mount Holyoke College provides students with experiences that engage a wide variety of knowledge and skills, and it also gives consideration to all of their other experiences. The staff encourages students to think about their own experiences and how what they have learned is applicable to other situations (e.g., leadership, teamwork, creative problem solving, initiative, discipline). 

**Interactions with others:** Mount Holyoke’s CDC staff helps students uncover the ways that their unique history directly connects with the requirements of an employer or graduate program, and gives them direction about the specific experiences that might augment their talents. By knowing what an organization is evaluating, which can be ascertained by reading its advertisements and mission statement; assessing the type of people it attracts, speaking with alums, or looking at its web site, students can determine which criteria interviewers will use to select prospective employees or graduate students. This helps students target their resumes, focus their interview questions and answers, sharpen personal statements, and improve their chances of being favorably evaluated. 

**Environment:** The CDC does many things to help students recognize and articulate the knowledge, skills, and qualities that they develop through their college experiences. 

**Connection** 

If students know what they want to do and where they want to do it (clarity), and know the skills, knowledge, and aptitudes they need to perform effectively in that capacity (confidence), then “connection” is how to get from Point A to Point B. Through the CDC at Mount Holyoke, students are connected to a variety of opportunities, resources, and networks through an extensive internship (summer/academic year/January); recruiting, fellowships/scholarships, and alumnae network. 

Once again, recalling the wisdom model, how can career centers develop connection?  

**Orientation to learning:** To increase connection, Mount Holyoke’s CDC staff encourages students to learn how to use everything as a possible resource and identify strategies that will be helpful in achieving their goals. The staff provides guidance on how to get the most out of the campus through effective use of available services and emphasizes that navigating different parts of the college experience is transferable to life beyond campus. For example, the key reflective questions of connection are: “What information do you need to get closer to your goal (e.g., books, web sites, job postings), or what people could get you closer to your goal (e.g., alumnae, faculty, family, friends)?” 

**Experiences:** Essentially all of the CDC’s resources are ways to connect students with opportunities, be it organizations that recruit on campus or long-standing internships. But because the
job of career centers is to help students discover what they want to do, they may desire to be connected to something novel, not available through the established resource base. For example, a student may wish to become a Malaysian shadow puppeteer. Who would know more about this? Any faculty? Is there a national organization? Who can provide contacts who may know more? Who knows that region? How does one become a puppeteer? Guilds or apprenticeship programs? At Mount Holyoke, some internships have been around for 50 years, but that is only useful if a student is interested in one of those internships. Accordingly, the CDC staff encourages students to define their own interests and helps them to conceive and cultivate opportunities that reflect them.

Interactions with others: The CDC staff helps students brainstorm possible routes to get closer to their goals, and assists them in locating key resources and opportunities. The staff also helps students to creatively expand rather than constrain options and connect themselves to their own goals. Additionally, the staff provides students with information about the academic and career pursuits of recent Mount Holyoke graduates.

Environment: The CDC’s physical environment facilitates connection based on its structure. (An environmental audit, done by walking into the center and assessing it from a student’s perspective, can help determine the quality of experiences encountered.) Connection also means managing information better, clearing the clutter, using bulletin boards judiciously, and organizing the vast amount of resources effectively. The staff is also developing guides on how the CDC library is organized so students can find materials more easily. Intake interviews help students get a sense of what they need and provides them an overview of print and computer resources. The CDC has also created a more coherent visual identity on its web site, letterhead, and handouts.

Organizationally, the CDC has reconfigured its administrative structure into three areas so that the staff is more streamlined and connected. The CDC evolved from several different free-standing programs that often worked independently from one another. The restructuring enables the staff to establish office-wide strategic priorities that will contribute to the development of the 3 Cs.

The 3 Cs in Action

Given that the 3 Cs are a proxy for wisdom and can be developed in different ways, here’s an example of how to put them in action: A student wants to write a resume for an undecided internship. (This will be a counseling session, but the points made below are echoed in CDC handouts and workshops.) In addition to providing the general mechanics of writing a resume, the staff does so in the context of the 3 Cs. For clarity, as a student puts a list of experiences together, the staff asks: “Based on these experiences, what have you learned about yourself?” “What sorts of tasks, environments, people, purpose do you enjoy the most and least?” “What knowledge, skills, and personal qualities would you like to engage or develop in the context of this internship?” In terms of confidence, the staff may ask (after determining the type and location of the internship): “What specific knowledge, skills, and qualities are the evaluators looking for, and what part of your background has demonstrated your capacities in them?” The staff would then have the student ascertain what the internship site is looking for by looking at the ad, looking up evaluations from previous interns, researching the organization, and identifying what sorts of things people need to be able to do to perform their jobs effectively. Once the student does this, he or she can figure out in what order and what way to showcase his or her relevant experiences. In terms of connection, the staff helps the student use a resume to get an internship: “Who needs to see this resume?” “What is the timeline?” “Who has hiring authority?” “Are there any Mount Holyoke students who have done this before and can provide more information?” “Faculty?” “Alumnae?” “What else does the employer need to enhance your chances?” “Can you get this in the hands of people who might be able to network on your behalf?”

With the 3 Cs, students know why they have specifically chosen an organization/graduate program, and can
articulate how their experiences have helped develop the very knowledge, skills, and qualities critical to the organization or graduate program. In an interview, students are less likely to doubt themselves or fall back on canned answers because they really know why they are applying for the internship and know what they can specifically bring to the position. They have gone through a process that makes them effective candidates because the opportunity is grounded directly in their interests and strengths and they can speak out of context of their solid experience. An employer/internship sponsor should be able to ask applicants about anything on their resumes and students could explain how particular experiences would help them do an internship or job or graduate program.

Who Benefits With the 3 Cs?

Benefits to students: Students benefit tremendously because the capacity to engage the 3 Cs is both timely and timeless. It is timely because they become more formidable candidates who are able to effectively deal with whatever presenting problem and decision that initiated the process in the first place. Knowing that students will only pursue that which alleviates whatever pressing problem they are facing, the staff plays up the 3 Cs’ relevance in helping them get a clearer sense of what they want and where they want to do it, how their background has directly prepared them for it, and how to get there. The staff also communicates to students that in addition to helping them now, the 3 Cs are timeless. As students grow older, they will engage the exact same process as they come to a crossroads or need to make a decision. Only the context and variables will change. When students are 20, 40, or 60, they will be able to take stock of what is important based on their own criteria, see what it takes to move forward, and identify ways to get there. This enables students to effectively make a living and a life.

Although all career centers provide students with ways in which to develop the 3 Cs, the importance lies in making the process explicit. The idea is to create a conceptual scaffold that enables students to connect their seemingly disparate experiences in an intentional way organized by the overarching 3 C framework (wisdom). Students not only learn how to deal with pressing issues but can transfer the ability to “learn from life” to other circumstances and capitalize on learning in less rich environments.

Benefits to institutions: From an educational standpoint, the development of wisdom helps career offices organize themselves for learning, giving students the most bang for their educational buck. From a practical standpoint, it helps career offices support the holy trinity of institutional priorities: recruitment, retention, and development. If career professionals can help explain what an education at their institution means, how a student will be different from attending the college, what makes the institution distinct, and how all of the existing programs are targeted for the development of wisdom, institutions will have an advantage in the marketplace. They also will involve students more deeply in the fabric of the institution, thereby increasing satisfaction and support of the institution. Additionally, institutions will be able to more clearly assess initiatives and the provision of resources, by determining how much they contribute directly or indirectly to these desired educational and practical priorities. At Mount Holyoke, like many other schools, 80-year-old alumnae make pilgrimages back to the institution because their college experiences were transformative. The wisdom theory makes the seemingly ineffable aspects of the institution’s education understandable, providing a way to discuss the career center’s work in a way that is straightforward, comprehensive, and compelling.

Benefits to evaluators (employers/graduate programs): Evaluators benefit from the 3 Cs because students have more thoughtfully chosen an opportunity that is congruent with their needs. They are serious candidates who know what a job entails and can provide useful and compelling evidence to the evaluators.

Conclusion

In higher education, much attention is being directed at the quality of the student experience. Its stopeducators to begin to answer the sophisticated questions that are being raised about the quality of undergraduate education, conceptualized in its broadest form by the institutions’ primary stakeholders. In this current context, the time is nigh for career services to maximize its contribution to the creation of powerful learning environments and take a greater role in shaping this discussion. This guiding model will benefit students, employers, and institutions alike.

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