

Heather Nester and Melanie Buford // University of Cincinnati

72% of Generation Z students say that colleges should allow them to create their own majors. The average American changes jobs every 4.2 years, typically ending up in areas very different from what they studied in college. Our society, especially our present and incoming workforce, is not as interested in the linear career path that has traditionally been center stage. Some individuals have a passion for multiple interests and creative pursuits, a phenomenon that Emilie Wapnick has coined "Multipotentiality." This article outlines the theory of Multipotentiality, some of the challenges associated with this identity, and tangible steps to assist these students in finding a "career worth having" for themselves. One of the greatest challenges we face – as higher education administrators, family members, friends, and employees – is the need to challenge those in our lives to pursue meaningful work. We are used to understanding "meaningful work" in terms of income, established professions and our society's traditional definition of success. The idea of multipotentiality challenges us to evolve our understanding of experiential learning, and to examine what meaningful work looks like for each student. Instead of defining it for them we need to let students speak for themselves and assist them in finding a way to make their definitions a reality. >>>

## The Issue at Hand – Work Climate and Conflicting Generational Expectations

The honest truth that we need to present to college students is that the workforce is not the carefully painted picture they encountered growing up. The workforce is changing, and so is the nature of the demands placed on employees. Out of approximately 100 million full-time American employees, 51% aren't engaged at work and feel no real connection to their jobs. 6% are "actively disengaged," miserable and resenting their jobs. 51% of employees are searching for new positions or watching for openings, while, in general, 47% of the workforce agrees that now is a good time to find a quality job (Gallup, 2017). The Bureau of Labor Statistics states that the average American changes jobs every 4.2 years, often ending up in areas very different from what they studied in college ("Employee Tenure Summary," 2016).

Many people aren't defining success, fulfillment, and happiness the same way their predecessors did. Generation Z (Gen-Z) is changing what happiness looks like, becoming "less focused on consumption and more focused on contribution." They're asking "'How can I do something that makes a difference?' and they long to be part of something bigger in a more meaningful way" (Coca-Cola, 2015). While previous generations might have defined "meaningful work" in terms of income, established professions and our society's traditional definition of success, 78% of Gen-Z agreed that "Choosing to be happy is more important than anything else you can do in your life." On top of this statistic, school/ college is considered the least critical component of a meaningful life for this generation with a minimal 27% (Coca-Cola, 2015). A significant portion of Gen-Z students say that their colleges should allow them to create their own majors (Bach, 2016).

While part of the climate is influenced by outside forces and organizational structure, some of it can be attributed to the fact that these individuals might not be working in a field or job that aligns with all of their passions. We are attempting to construct a passionate workforce in a generation with new characteristics and expectations. Millennials and Generation Z have a developmental history of increased exposure to social media and open access to the advantages of the internet, changing how they process and discuss information. The very language we use to describe fulfillment can become one of our greatest barriers for those who aren't finding satisfaction in one career path over a lifetime. Some individuals have a passion for multiple interests and creative pursuits, a term that Emilie Wapnick has coined "Multipotentiality." Thus, our challenge now is how to make sure the students we are working with, who may desire to pursue an array of interests, flow into the current workforce.

## What is Multipotentiality?

"An educational and psychological term referring to a pattern found among intellectually gifted individuals. [Multipotentialites] generally have diverse interests across numerous domains and may be capable of success in many endeavors or professions, they are confronted with unique decisions as a result of these choices" (Puttylike).





When we begin to look at multipotentiality with a career education and experiential lens, we must acknowledge that we are deviating from education's traditional linear path. The irony is that although multipotentiality is a new term, the idea is not. Many of us are already familiar with the concept of a "Renaissance man" or "Polymath," someone whose expertise spans various subjects. The term "Renaissance man" comes from the idea that men who were knowledgeable or proficient in various fields were considered successful during the Renaissance period.

As we move through western history, our perspective on career success has become narrower, valuing specialization over a breadth of knowledge. We began to romanticize the idea of having "one true calling," as opposed to pursuing multiple passions. Emphasizing one ideal occupation supported the cultural and institutional preference for specialization, making it easier for us to sort individuals by careers, majors, fields, etc.

However, if someone truly has multiple interests, passions, and talents, they might not find happiness in one specific job or field. These individuals thrive on learning, exploring, and mastering new skills throughout their lives. While this idea of multipotentiality might seem perfect only in an "ideal world," successful multipotentialites are more common than you might think. Some well-known multipotentialites include:

## MAYA ANGELOU

Poet // Memoirist // Civil Rights Activist Fry Cook // Performer and Dancer

## AMY NG

Magazine Editor // Illustrator // Entrepreneur Teacher // Creative Director

DR. BOB CHILDS Psychotherapist // Luthier

### **ISAAC NEWTON**

Mathematician // Astronomer // Physicist

## **HELEN BEATRIX POTTER**

Writer // Illustrator // Natural Scientist Conservationist

Instead of falling into the stereotype of "jumping between interests," these individuals were able to bring their multiple interests together into different careers and passions. They did not define "finishing" with a career the way that someone in a specialized field might. They brought their talents from one field, and repurposed them into another. In reality, multipotentialites excel in harnessing their transferable skills. The challenge becomes how multipotentialite students can showcase these skills and accomplishments to the rest of the world.

## **Challenges of Multipotentiality**

While there may be multiple challenges inherent in teaching, advising, and supporting multipotentialite students, below are three overarching issues:

## **1. SELF-ESTEEM AND NORMALIZATION**

Students, advisors, professors, parents, colleagues, and friends, generally do not have the language to describe and legitimize the reality of multipotentiality. It's not a term that most of us have grown up with. Thus, a lot of people have encountered negative stigma, being labeled "lazy," "restless," "immature," or "lacking direction." Thus, throughout their lives, many have not had language upon which to build their self-esteem, and have instead had to grapple with the negative connotations of our existing vocabulary.

For example, since many colleges and universities require the selection of a specific college major, students therefore face social and family pressures to narrow down their choices early on in their careers. Little attention is paid to the anxiety that may be caused by this process, because nearly everyone goes through it. Selecting one discipline, or calling, is the "norm," and if you can't decide, it may be viewed as a kind of failure. Now, as higher education professionals, we are tasked with helping these students understand that it isn't "wrong" to have multiple passions and interests.

## Suggestions:

- The most fundamental suggestion is to share the concept of multipotentiality with students – validate it – and give them language to describe themselves in a positive way.
- *Encourage* them to explore a variety of interests. Help ease the anxiety that they have only "one true calling," especially if they haven't figured out what that is yet.
- If a student seems stuck, and is open to the idea, suggest travel or international work experiences. These give students a chance to be exposed to new ideas, different outlooks about work, and a broader sense of opportunities.

- Encourage them to find other like-minded students that are facing the same challenges. This might include joining a club, exploring a liberal arts major, or pursuing their hobbies. Help them find others so they know they aren't alone in the way they feel and the challenges they are having picking a career path.
- Refer to real-life cases to validate that there are *real* people that have succeeded as multipotentialites.

#### **2. QUALITY EXPERIENCES**

Another challenge is how these students can gain quality experiences and become professionally competitive when they appear to be "all over the place." If students are holding several major and career possibilities open, they might have an array of experiences, including internships, part-time jobs, and organizational involvement. Thus, one significant challenge is how to assist students in defining, and pursuing, success.

### Suggestions:

- Recommend experiences that will help students gain transferable skills – those relevant across multiple interests and sectors.
  - Examples: Study abroad, international work, rotational internships/co-ops, leadership roles in activities they are passionate about, adding a minor, volunteer work and post-graduate fellowships.
- Watch for signs of over-commitment suggest a few high-quality experiences that still resonate with the student's passions and interests.

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## **3. MAKING DECISIONS**

It can be difficult for multipotentialites to make decisions that close doors on topics they are interested in. Career decisions may produce anxiety for students who aren't "100% sure" about their chosen major or career path. Some narrowing may be appropriate, but these decisions are still hard to make. By choosing a single direction or position, they might feel like they are missing out on something else.

## Suggestions:

- Reframe the language about making a career decision so that it emphasizes a choice "for now" instead of "forever." Their decision in college, on a specific major, does not lock them into one option for the rest of their lives.
- Shift the conversation, and thinking, from selecting a major to focus on developing skills.
  - Ask "What types of skills might you want to learn/develop?"
  - Encourage diverse experiences so that students can build new skills and clarify their passions and talents.
  - Recommend personality assessments the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), StrengthFinder, Strong Inventory, DISC, etc.

While these challenges require working around some existing higher education structures, we must acknowledge the presence of these themes in many students' lives. We need to find a way to serve all students, whether they have a single career focus or multiple interests.

## Four Approaches to Working with Multipotentialites

\*The following strategies have been extracted from Emilie Wapnick's book, How to Be Everything: A Guide for Those Who (Still) Don't Know What They Want to Be When They Grow Up.

## **1. THE GROUP HUG APPROACH:**

Having one multi-faceted job or business that allows you to wear many hats and shift between several domains at work.

**Strategy 1:** Working in a naturally interdisciplinary field.

**Strategy 2:** Finding where multipotentialites hang out (a niche within your discipline).

**Strategy 3:** Working for an open-minded organization.

Strategy 4: Making an existing job more plural.Strategy 5: Starting a business.

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 THE SLASH APPROACH: A "Portfolio Career," with two or more part-time jobs and/or businesses that you move between on a regular basis.

**Strategy:** Dive in and refine as you go – which slashes do you enjoy, are the most profitable, present opportunities, etc. This is key for individuals who might not desire the typical full-time structure.

## 3. THE EINSTEIN APPROACH:

Having one full-time job or business that fully supports you, while leaving you with enough time and energy to pursue your other passions on the side. **Strategy:** Have a job that is enjoyable, with a high enough salary for your financial goals, while leaving you with enough energy to pursue your interests.

#### 4. THE PHOENIX APPROACH:

Working in a single industry for several months or years and then shifting gears and starting a new career in a new industry.

**Strategy:** Create a balance between depth and breadth, gradually building skills to get where you want to go, and exploring options before you commit.

## Final Steps & Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle Theory

In essence, experiential learning is grounded in the idea that students must actively acquire experiences and reflect on them. Thus, no matter your approach to working with students, we must all remember to genuinely listen to their experiences and desires. We need to let them define what their career paths look like, reflecting on their own experiences and skills, so they can join the part of the workforce that finds happiness in what they do.

If you look at Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle Theory, you can see how multipotentiality fits in. Kolb's theory operates on two levels: a four-stage cycle of learning and four separate learning styles that focus on the learner's cognitive processes. One of the main tenets of this theory states that "learning involves the acquisition of abstract concepts that can be applied flexibly in a range of situations" (McLeod, 2010). Multipotentiality, in essence, touches on all four stages in the experiential learning cycle as a student works with their advisor or professor.

## Kolb – Learning Styles



#### • CONCRETE EXPERIENCE

(doing/having an experience)

Multipotentialites are actively completing experiences across their multiple interests. A concrete experience, to them, is any completion of activities, regardless of whether or not it adheres to their declared major.

## REFLECTION OBSERVATION

## (reviewing/reflecting on the experience)

With the guidance of an advisor, students reflect in some way on their experiences. Multipotentialites directly benefit from this relationship because they can reflect on how their interests might fit into one of the four aforementioned muiltpitentialites approaches to arranging their work.

## ABSTRACT CONCEPTUALIZATION

#### (concluding/learning from teh experience)

After reflecting on their experiences, multipotentialites can begin to determine which of the four work arrangements would best fit their career goals. The approach they choose will support them in fully learning from the experience.

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## • ACTIVE EXPERIMENTATION

(planning/trying out what you have learned)

Multipotentialites now have the ability to move forward with one of the approaches, applying it directly to their careers. They can actively test out what they want to do.

Whether it is an internship, co-op, post-graduate career, or something else, these students now have a better understanding of how their experiences, and multiple passions, can tie together to become successful and meaningful work. By listening to our students, and not forcing them to limit their passions to find a career, we let them explore all aspects of their happiness and well-being. As Arthur Golden once said, "A mind troubled by doubt cannot focus on the course to victory." Those plagued by the challenges of multipotentiality can't focus on their course to victory unless we give them the tools to do so.

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