Grappling with "Life" after High School, Are Options *Really* a Good Thing?

Can having too many choices cause more regret than good? What about for teens who are navigating the process of exploring post-secondary options? Options can be a double-edged sword: it can feel good to have control but what happens when too many options make a decision challenging?

As international school counselors, we work with students exploring a range of careers that take them around the globe. We are preparing them for careers that do not even exist yet. So how do we support students in knowing themselves to make the best decision for which path to take after high school?

We strive to work with students to help them understand "fit" in terms of which post-secondary options are best for them. But with so many options available, how do we support students in making the best decision for them? As most schools have moved to online learning, how do we remotely support students in understanding "fit" remotely and making decisions about where to go for university?

As we support students in completing their research, international counselors have a wealth of resources through college counseling conferences, Facebook groups, the ISCA Forum and various networks. As we seek sites to help educate ourselves, students and/or parents to the multitude of options available, it is important to not overlook the psychology behind decision making.

Barry Schwartz's Ted Talk "*The Paradox of Choice,*" highlights his research into the psychology of happiness and the impact of choices. He provides insight into the paralysis that people experience after making decisions that involved several compelling options. He explores two negative effects from decisions with such options:

1. "Producing paralysis rather than liberation." When there are too many options, people struggle making a decision. For instance, Mr. Schwartz discussed a study exploring investment records from 2,000 companies that offered voluntary mutual funds. When the employer offered more than ten funds, the rate of participation went down 2%. When fifty funds were offered, the rate of participation went down 10%. People become paralzed by the quantity of options that it becomes impossible to make a choice.

2. Second-guessing your decision leads to regret and dissatisfaction. With more options, our expectations increase. "With perfection, the expectation, the best you can hope for is that stuff is as good as you expect it to be. You will never be pleasantly surprised, because your expectations, my expectations, have gone through the roof…The secret to happiness is: low expectations."

In our work with students, having a counselor encourage students to have low expectations would not be positively received. How about we reduce pressure by supporting students in having realistic expectations ? We can continue to work with students to find comfort in not being perfect, rather comfortable and proud of their accomplishments.

In his book, *The Paradox of Choice*, Mr. Schwartz advises we might find more happiness if we learn to limit options so that decisions do not seem so overwhelming. These suggestions can aid us in supporting students in having realistic expectations that align with options that are the best "fit." Mr. Schwartz suggests the following steps to help in reducing choices:
1. Figure out your goal or goals
2. Evaluate the importance of each goal
3. Array the options
4. Evaluate how likely each of the options is to meet your goals
5. Pick the winning option
6. Modify goals

So how do we support students in making decisions? We can employ a range of counseling strategies but also keep in mind the "paradox of choice" as we:
● Talk the student through reducing choices.
● Open the conversation that not making a decision can also be a step towards making a decision. Could it be that there are some unresolved fears hiding behind procrastination?
● Discuss previous decisions. Does the student have a pattern of second guessing the choice(s) made? Explore if the time spent second guessing could have impacted the students enjoying the choice?
● Could some of the stress or anxiety about this decision be related to family expectations and/or other peer's decisions? Support the student in making the decision for themselves.
● Continue to explore the psychology of happiness, including the ISCA Positive Psychology Resources.
● Explore the ISCA Career Counseling resources, especially Amy Burke's 2017 ISCA Conference Presentation on Contemplative Career Counseling and Resources from the 2018 Conference.
● Once a choice has been made, support the student's transition to post-secondary life through the articles within ISCA's Transition Resources.

As schools have moved to online learning, counselors are working remotely with students to celebrate post-secondary options. In addition to encouraging students to consider Mr. Schwartz's points, there are a multitude of ways to explore campuses through reaching out to your school's alumni who are or recently attended a university in the area. Individual universities are also reaching out to admitted students, but students can also request additional information through university representatives. Other virtual options include:

Informational Webinars with Universities:
- [Webinars Compiled by Shanghai College Counselor](#)
- [Cialfo's Recorded Webinars from Online Fair](#)

Websites with Virtual Campus Tour and/or Informational Sessions:
- [Campus360](#) (worldwide universities)
- [Campusreel](#) (mostly American universities but additional universities are being added)
- [Youvisit](#) (American universities)
- [Youniversity](#) (American universities)
- [UCAS Virtual Open Days](#) (UK universities)

Other Sources:
- [Google sheet](#) of UK, American and Canadian universities with virtual visit options (compiled by a College Counselor in the States with data from Collegeboard)
- Use the official university Youtube / Instagram / Facebook posts!

Written by:
Elizabeth Mohr, Assistant Director of College Counseling
TASIS The American School in England