

Conceptual Framework for Career Development Practice

—

Marie Mitsou, B.Ed., M.Ed., RP, CCC
Senior Counsellor, Career and Employment
Career Development and Experiential Learning (CDEL)

April 2026

Contents

Abstract	3
Résumé	3
Introduction	3
Framework Summary	4
Core Career Development Theories	5
Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT)	5
Holland's Theory of Vocational Interests (RIASEC)	6
Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Theory	7
Career Construction Theory / Life Design	9
Social Learning Theory of Career Decision Making / Planned Happenstance	10
Complementary Psychological Foundations	11
Positive Psychology	11
Growth Mindset	12
Learning and Applied Career Development Approaches	13
Experiential Learning Theory	13
Integrated Approach to Career Development	15
Career Development Learning Outcomes	16
Relationship to Design Your Life	18
Conclusion	19
References	19

Abstract

This report presents the conceptual framework that grounds Career Development and Experiential Learning's (CDEL) professional practice and its initiative to establish a university-wide career development ecosystem, known at uOttawa as Build Your Future (BYF). Drawing on vocational psychology, counselling theory, and the science of human development, it synthesizes nine frameworks across three groupings: core career development theories (SCCT, Holland, Super, Savickas, Krumboltz), complementary psychological foundations (positive psychology, growth mindset), and learning and applied approaches (Kolb, Burnett & Evans). These traditions converge on five Career Development Outcomes that build toward a single program-level objective, Career Agency. The framework provides the shared theoretical language through which CDEL designs programming, advises students, develops assessments, and evaluates outcomes, and it makes explicit the equity commitments embedded in that practice.

Résumé

Ce rapport présente le cadre conceptuel qui fonde la pratique professionnelle du service de Développement de carrière et apprentissage par l'expérience (DCAE) ainsi que son initiative visant à créer un écosystème de développement de carrière à l'échelle de l'université, désignée à l'Université d'Ottawa sous le nom de Bâtir son avenir (BSA). S'appuyant sur la psychologie vocationnelle, les théories du counseling et les sciences du développement humain, elle réunit neuf cadres répartis en trois ensembles : les principales théories du développement de carrière (TSCC, Holland, Super, Savickas, Krumboltz), des fondements psychologiques complémentaires (psychologie positive, état d'esprit de développement) et des approches d'apprentissage et appliquées (Kolb, Burnett et Evans). Ces traditions convergent vers cinq résultats d'apprentissage en développement de carrière qui mènent à un objectif unique à l'échelle du programme, l'agentivité de carrière. Le cadre fournit le langage théorique commun grâce auquel le DCAE conçoit sa programmation, accompagne les étudiant.es, élabore ses évaluations et en mesure les résultats, et il rend explicites les engagements en matière d'équité inscrits dans cette pratique.

Introduction

Career development is a discipline with deep roots in vocational psychology, counselling theory, and the science of human growth. It is not a support function at the margins of higher education. It is a systematic and evidence-based practice grounded in decades of research into how individuals form career interests, construct vocational identities, develop the confidence to act, and build the capacity to navigate an uncertain and rapidly changing world of work. This document presents the conceptual framework that grounds the University of Ottawa's Career Development and Experiential Learning (CDEL) service's professional practice: the theoretical traditions we draw on, the psychological foundations that make development possible, and the experiential and applied approaches through which theory becomes action.

This framework which underpins CDEL's professional practice and the Build Your Future initiative connects career development preparation to experiential learning participation across a student's degree. It provides the shared theoretical language through which CDEL's team designs programming, conducts advising, develops assessments, and evaluates outcomes. It also makes explicit the equity commitments embedded in that practice: the theories presented here consistently attend to the structural conditions that shape students' developmental possibilities, and the framework as a whole is designed to produce equitable outcomes, not merely to serve students who already know how to seek support.

Framework Summary

Table 1 below provides an at-a-glance overview of the nine frameworks that together constitute CDEL's theoretical and applied foundation. Each is described in full in the sections that follow, where their key constructs, implications for practice, and relationship to the five Career Development Learning Outcomes are developed in detail.

Table 1. Primary theoretical, psychological, and experiential frameworks informing CDEL's approach to career development practice.

Category	Framework	Key Scholars	Core Idea and Key Constructs	Role in Career Development
Career Development Theories	Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT)	Lent, Brown, & Hackett (1994)	Beliefs, learning, and context shape career development. Constructs: Self-efficacy, outcome expectations, personal goals, contextual supports and barriers, learning experiences, environmental influences	Explains how career interests develop and translate into choices, persistence, and performance.
	Holland's Theory of Vocational Interests (RIASEC)	Holland (1997); Holland, Daiger, & Power (1980)	Fit between interests and work environment drives satisfaction and success. Constructs: Person-environment fit, congruence, consistency, differentiation, vocational identity, RIASEC typology	Explains the relationship between personality type, interests, and occupational environments.
	Life-Span, Life-Space Theory	Super (1980)	Career develops across the lifespan through evolving self-concept and life roles. Constructs: Self-concept, vocational identity, career maturity, life roles, career salience, adaptability, career stages	Explains career development as a lifelong developmental process shaped by identity, experience, and life context.
	Career Construction / Life Design Theory	Savickas (2013)	Careers are built through meaning-making and personal narratives. Constructs: Career adaptability (concern, control, curiosity, confidence), narrative identity, life themes, life portrait, career story in-interview	Emphasizes identity construction, adaptability, and meaning-making in career development.
	Social Learning / Planned Happenstance	Krumboltz (2009)	Career paths are shaped by learning experiences and unexpected opportunities. Constructs: Learning experiences, environmental conditions, task approach skills, chance events, curiosity, flexibility, optimism, persistence, risk tolerance	Highlights the importance of exploration, openness to opportunity, and navigating uncertainty.
Psychological Foundations	Positive Psychology	Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi (2000)	Strengths, engagement, and meaning support flourishing. Constructs: Character strengths, PERMA model, flow, meaning and purpose, engagement, strengths-based development	Connects career development with strengths, meaning, well-being, and conditions for flourishing.

Category	Framework	Key Scholars	Core Idea and Key Constructs	Role in Career Development
Learning and Applied Approaches	Growth Mindset	Dweck (2006)	Abilities and skills can develop through effort, learning, and persistence. Constructs: Growth vs. fixed mindset, incremental theory of intelligence, challenge-seeking, effort and persistence, feedback orientation, resilience	Encourages persistence, learning from challenges, resilience, and continuous skill development.
	Experiential Learning	Kolb (1984)	Learning happens through experience, reflection, and experimentation. Constructs: Concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, active experimentation, learning styles, reflective practice	Enables students to explore interests, build skills, and develop self-efficacy through real-world experience.
	Design Your Life	Burnett & Evans (2016)	Design thinking and iteration support career exploration. Constructs: Prototyping, reframing problems, curiosity, bias toward action, iterative experimentation, multiple possibility thinking	Provides practical tools for exploring multiple career possibilities through experimentation and reflection.

Core Career Development Theories

The following theories provide foundational and complementary explanations of career development that together inform CDEL's professional practice.

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT)

Robert W. Lent, Steven D. Brown, and Gail Hackett

Overview

Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent, Brown, and Hackett, 1994) explains how individuals develop career interests, make educational and occupational choices, and persist in career-related goals. Building on Bandura's (1986) social cognitive framework, SCCT places self-efficacy at the centre of career development: students' confidence in their ability to perform specific tasks shapes what interests they pursue, what goals they set, and how persistently they work toward them. Outcome expectations interact with self-efficacy to influence both the directions students explore and the commitment they bring to those directions, creating a cycle in which learning experiences revise beliefs, beliefs shape interests, and interests motivate action.

A defining feature of SCCT is its explicit attention to the role of contextual factors. The theory distinguishes between background variables such as family background and socioeconomic status, and proximal contextual supports and barriers that more immediately affect a student's ability to pursue their interests and goals. This makes SCCT particularly valuable for understanding the career development experiences of students from equity-deserving communities, for whom structural barriers may constrain access to the developmental conditions that more privileged peers navigate more easily. Career development practice grounded in SCCT attends to both the beliefs students hold and the environments that shape those beliefs.

Key Constructs

- **Self-efficacy:** a person's belief in their capacity to successfully perform specific tasks or behaviours; the central mechanism through which learning experiences translate into career interests, choices, and persistence
- **Outcome expectations:** beliefs about the consequences or results that will follow from performing particular behaviours; students who anticipate positive outcomes from a career path are more likely to pursue it
- **Personal goals:** the intentions individuals form to pursue particular activities or outcomes; goals link self-efficacy and outcome expectations to actual behaviour and provide the motivational direction for career action
- **Background contextual variables:** distal factors such as family background, socioeconomic status, and cultural context that shape the learning experiences available to individuals and influence career development over time
- **Proximal contextual supports and barriers:** immediate environmental factors that facilitate or constrain a student's ability to act on their career interests and goals, including access to mentorship, financial resources, and institutional support
- **Learning experiences:** the direct and vicarious experiences through which individuals develop self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations; mastery experiences, social modelling, and encouragement all contribute to the formation of career-relevant beliefs

Implications for Career Development Practice

- Administering and debriefing the Career Readiness Quiz (based on Holland's My Vocational Situation instrument) to measure and track students' self-efficacy beliefs and perceived barriers over time
- Designing experiential learning opportunities that generate the mastery experiences through which students build belief in their own capacity to act, moving from observation and exploration toward active participation
- Identifying and addressing structural barriers that constrain students from equity-deserving communities, including targeted programming, culturally responsive advising, and proactive outreach rather than waiting for students to self-refer
- Helping students articulate the connection between their learning experiences and their developing career interests, making the self-efficacy cycle visible and purposeful
- Supporting goal-setting through the uOCompetencies SMART goal framework, translating self-efficacy and outcome expectations into concrete developmental intentions

Holland's Theory of Vocational Interests (RIASEC)

John L. Holland

Overview

Holland's theory of vocational personalities and work environments (Holland, 1997) proposes that individuals are more likely to experience satisfaction, stability, and success when their personal characteristics align with the demands and culture of their work environment. Holland identified six personality types, Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional, and argued that occupational environments can be characterized in the same terms. The closer the match between a person's dominant type and their environment, the greater the likelihood of persistence, achievement, and well-being. This core proposition, person-environment fit, provides both the theoretical foundation and the practical rationale for interest assessment in career development.

It is important to recognize that Holland's typology describes tendencies rather than fixed categories. Most individuals exhibit a profile of two or three dominant types whose interaction is often as informative as any single type alone. Fit is not determined in advance; it is discovered and refined through structured exploration and real-world engagement. The constructs of congruence, consistency, differentiation, and vocational identity together describe the dimensions along which that discovery unfolds, and they provide practitioners with a precise language for interpreting assessment results and guiding students toward environments where they are likely to thrive.

Key Constructs

- **Person-environment fit:** the core proposition that congruence between a person's dominant personality type and their occupational environment predicts satisfaction, persistence, and performance
- **Congruence:** the degree of match between a person's dominant RIASEC type and their occupational or educational environment
- **Consistency:** how closely related a person's top two or three RIASEC types are to one another within the hexagonal model
- **Differentiation:** the clarity and distinctiveness of a person's RIASEC profile, indicating how strongly they identify with particular types versus being spread evenly across all six
- **Vocational identity:** the clarity and stability of a person's sense of their own interests, abilities, and goals in relation to work (Holland, Daiger, and Power, 1980)

RIASEC Interest Types

- Realistic / Investigative / Artistic / Social / Enterprising / Conventional

Implications for Career Development Practice

- Administering RIASEC-based interest assessments such as the Strong Interest Inventory to help students identify their dominant personality types and explore aligned occupational environments
- Debriefing assessment results with attention to the full profile rather than a single type, interpreting congruence, consistency, and differentiation to help students understand the nuance of their results
- Connecting Holland profiles to concrete academic programs, experiential learning opportunities, and occupational pathways at uOttawa, translating abstract type descriptions into actionable next steps
- Supporting students in recognizing that fit is discovered through engagement rather than determined by a test, and encouraging real-world testing of interest hypotheses
- Tracking vocational identity development over time through repeated administration of the Career Readiness Quiz

Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Theory

Donald E. Super

Overview

Super's life-span, life-space theory (Super, 1980) conceptualizes career development as a continuous, lifelong process of self-concept formation and expression rather than a singular decision point. As individuals grow and accumulate experience, they develop, test, and refine a vocational self-concept that guides their occupational choices and commitments across five broad developmental stages: growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance, and disengagement. University students are typically navigating the exploration stage, the period of tentative choices and identity testing at which the foundational work of self-understanding

and occupational awareness is done. Structured support during this stage has significant consequences for academic intentionality, persistence, and long-term career satisfaction.

Super also recognized that individuals occupy multiple life roles simultaneously, including student, worker, family member, and community participant, and that these roles interact with and sometimes compete with one another. The constructs of career salience and life roles acknowledge that the importance a student places on work relative to other commitments shapes how they engage with career development. A framework that attends only to occupational goals without acknowledging the broader context of a student's life is less likely to produce lasting developmental gains than one that helps students understand how their career path can be integrated with the full range of their values and responsibilities.

Key Constructs

Career development stages

- Growth
- Exploration (the stage most relevant to university students, characterized by tentative choices, identity testing, and progressive crystallization of vocational preferences)
- Establishment
- Maintenance
- Disengagement

Core constructs

- **Self-concept:** the evolving sense of who one is, including abilities, interests, values, and personality, that shapes and is shaped by career choices across the lifespan
- **Vocational identity:** the expression of self-concept in occupational terms, developed through exploration and crystallized into stable career commitments over time
- **Career maturity:** the readiness to make informed, age-appropriate career decisions, encompassing both attitudes toward career planning and competence in decision-making
- **Life roles:** the multiple roles individuals occupy simultaneously, such as student, worker, family member, and citizen, and their interaction with career development
- **Career salience:** the relative importance a person places on work compared to other life roles, which shapes engagement with career development activities
- **Career adaptability:** the capacity to cope with the tasks, transitions, and challenges of career development across changing circumstances

Implications for Career Development Practice

- Framing the university years explicitly as the exploration stage, helping students understand that tentative choices and identity testing are developmentally appropriate and not signs of failure or indecision
- Designing career development programming that begins in first year, when Super's theory predicts it has the greatest developmental impact, including early integration of Horizons and Career Corner engagement
- Supporting self-concept development through structured reflection activities, personal narrative exercises, and advising conversations that help students articulate who they are becoming in relation to their academic and professional experiences
- Acknowledging and working with the full range of students' life roles in advising conversations, recognizing that career decisions are made in the context of family obligations, cultural expectations, financial pressures, and personal values that shape what paths are realistic and meaningful

- Tracking career maturity development over time using the Career Readiness Quiz, helping students see their own progression from early exploration toward greater clarity and intentionality

Career Construction Theory / Life Design

Mark L. Savickas

Overview

Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2013) understands career development as an ongoing process of meaning-making in which individuals construct their vocational identities through the stories they tell about their experiences, interests, and aspirations. Rather than discovering a pre-existing self that points toward a particular career, individuals actively construct a narrative identity that gives coherence and direction to their working lives. This constructivist perspective places reflection, storytelling, and interpretation at the heart of career development practice, and it positions the practitioner as a guide who helps students make meaning of what they have lived rather than an expert who prescribes what they should do next.

Central to the framework is career adaptability, which encompasses four dimensions, concern, control, curiosity, and confidence, that describe the attitudes and behaviours enabling individuals to navigate uncertainty and change with purpose. Alongside adaptability, the constructs of narrative identity, life themes, and life portrait provide practitioners with tools for helping students understand not only what they want to do but why, and how their professional aspirations connect to who they are as people. This depth of self-understanding is particularly important for students navigating major transitions, career uncertainty, or a sense of disconnection between their academic program and their sense of purpose.

Key Constructs

Career adaptability dimensions

- **Concern:** a forward orientation toward the future and awareness of upcoming vocational tasks and transitions
- **Control:** a sense of personal responsibility and agency over one's vocational direction
- **Curiosity:** active exploration of possible selves and future scenarios in relation to work
- **Confidence:** belief in one's capacity to pursue goals and overcome obstacles

Additional constructs

- **Narrative identity:** the coherent and evolving story a person constructs about their life and work, integrating past experiences, present circumstances, and future aspirations
- **Life themes:** recurring patterns of meaning that run through a person's life story and often reflect their deepest interests, values, and motivations
- **Life portrait:** the integrated narrative that draws together a person's life themes, career adaptability, and vocational identity into a coherent self-understanding
- **Career story interview:** a reflective conversation tool used to help individuals surface life themes and construct meaning from their experiences

Implications for Career Development Practice

- Using the career story interview and narrative reflection to help students surface life themes and understand the deeper motivations underlying their career interests
- Building career adaptability explicitly by cultivating all four dimensions: helping students develop concern through future-oriented planning, control through goal-setting and action, curiosity through exploratory experiences, and confidence through accumulated mastery

- Normalizing uncertainty and non-linear trajectories in advising conversations, using Savickas's framework to help students find meaning and direction in complex or ambiguous career situations rather than waiting for clarity before acting
- Designing reflection prompts within Horizons, the uOCompetencies App, and advising sessions that help students construct coherent narratives from their experiential learning, connecting what they did to who they are becoming
- Supporting students navigating major transitions by helping them reconstruct their narrative identity in ways that integrate past experience with new direction

Social Learning Theory of Career Decision Making / Planned Happenstance

John D. Krumboltz

Overview

Krumboltz's social learning theory of career decision making (Krumboltz, 2009) emphasizes the role of learning experiences and environmental influences in shaping career interests, beliefs, and choices. Career paths develop through interactions among personal characteristics, the learning experiences individuals encounter, and the task approach skills they develop for navigating those experiences. Crucially, the theory validates rather than dismisses the non-linear trajectories that characterize many real career paths: chance events, unplanned encounters, and unexpected opportunities are not deviations from a plan but legitimate and important drivers of career development.

The concept of Planned Happenstance extends this foundation by arguing that students who cultivate curiosity, flexibility, optimism, persistence, and openness to risk are better positioned to recognize and act on unplanned opportunities when they arise. This perspective has particular relevance in contemporary labour markets characterized by rapid change and portfolio careers. Rather than teaching students to predict and control their career futures in detail, this theory supports the development of the navigational dispositions that enable students to move purposefully through uncertainty and turn unexpected circumstances into developmental assets.

Key Constructs

Social learning foundations

- **Learning experiences:** direct and vicarious encounters through which individuals develop the beliefs, interests, and skills that shape career decisions
- **Environmental conditions and opportunities:** the social, economic, and institutional contexts that open or constrain career possibilities
- **Task approach skills:** the cognitive and behavioural habits individuals bring to career decision-making, including problem-solving strategies, work habits, and attributional styles

Planned Happenstance constructs

- **Chance events:** unplanned occurrences that create career opportunities; not disruptions to a plan but legitimate drivers of career development that students can learn to recognize and act on
- **Curiosity:** the disposition to explore new ideas and possibilities, generating the experiences from which unplanned opportunities emerge
- **Flexibility:** the willingness to revise goals and adapt to new circumstances rather than adhering rigidly to a predetermined path
- **Optimism:** the expectation that new learning and action will produce positive outcomes, sustaining engagement in the face of uncertainty

- **Persistence:** sustained engagement with career-related activities despite setbacks, rejections, or unclear direction
- **Risk tolerance:** the willingness to act on incomplete information and engage with unfamiliar situations

Implications for Career Development Practice

- Encouraging broad engagement with experiential opportunities including informational interviews, career fairs, Work-Study, and community service learning, framed as the generation of experiences from which unplanned opportunities emerge
- Cultivating the five Planned Happenstance dispositions, curiosity, flexibility, optimism, persistence, and risk tolerance, through advising conversations, reflective exercises, and programming that rewards engagement over certainty
- Reframing students' non-linear trajectories, program changes, unexpected interests, and unplanned experiences as developmental assets rather than deviations, using Krumboltz's framework to help students construct a positive narrative of their path
- Helping students recognize how their existing interests and skills were shaped by chance encounters, building awareness of the mechanism so they can engage with it more intentionally
- Designing programming that prioritizes action and engagement over perfect planning, consistent with the Planned Happenstance principle that generating experience outweighs waiting for certainty

Complementary Psychological Foundations

Career development theory explains what students need to develop and how the process unfolds. But development does not happen through theory alone. It requires the right motivational and dispositional conditions: students who believe their abilities can grow, who approach uncertainty with curiosity rather than anxiety, and who connect their career choices to a genuine sense of meaning and purpose. The psychological frameworks below describe those conditions and explain how CDEL's practice can cultivate them. They are not supplementary to the career development theories; they are the conditions under which those theories produce their intended effects.

Positive Psychology

Martin E. P. Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

Overview

Positive psychology, as formally articulated by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), represents a shift from psychological dysfunction and remediation toward the scientific study of human strengths, well-being, and flourishing. In career development, this reorientation supports an approach centred on identifying and building on students' existing strengths, values, and sources of meaning rather than beginning from a deficit perspective. The PERMA model, character strengths, and the concept of flow together provide a framework for understanding what conditions allow individuals to thrive, and how career development practice can create and leverage those conditions.

A strengths-based approach to advising and mentorship creates the conditions of psychological safety within which students are more willing to take risks, explore unfamiliar territory, and develop belief in their own capacity to succeed. When students connect their career choices to their deepest values and sources of meaning, they are more likely to experience their work as purposeful rather than merely instrumental, a connection that positive psychology identifies as a key predictor of persistence, engagement, and long-term

well-being. The emphasis on what is working and what is possible, rather than what is lacking, supports the confidence development that career development theory identifies as central to meaningful action.

Key Constructs

- **Character strengths:** the distinctive personal qualities that energize and engage individuals, identified through tools such as the VIA Classification of Character Strengths
- **PERMA model:** Seligman's framework for well-being encompassing Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment
- **Flow:** a state of optimal engagement in which a person is fully absorbed in a challenging and meaningful activity, associated with peak performance and well-being
- **Meaning and purpose:** the sense that one's work and life contribute to something larger than oneself, a key predictor of sustained motivation and career satisfaction
- **Engagement:** the experience of being fully present and invested in one's activities, associated with intrinsic motivation and vocational identity
- **Strengths-based development:** an approach that builds on what is already working well in a person rather than focusing primarily on deficits or gaps

Implications for Career Development Practice

- Opening advising conversations with strengths identification using tools such as the VIA Character Strengths survey, establishing what students are already good at and what energizes them
- Connecting dominant character strengths to specific career environments and experiential learning opportunities where those strengths are likely to be expressed
- Using the PERMA model as a reflective framework in advising and programming, helping students evaluate whether their current academic and career direction supports positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment
- Creating the conditions of psychological safety at Career Corner through peer mentorship and accessible staff, so that students take developmental risks more readily
- Helping students identify sources of flow and meaning from their experiential learning, connecting positive engagement with concrete career direction

Growth Mindset

Carol S. Dweck

Overview

Carol Dweck's research on implicit theories of intelligence (Dweck, 2006) established a foundational distinction between a fixed mindset, the belief that abilities are innate and unchangeable, and a growth mindset, the belief that abilities can be developed through effort, learning, and persistence. This distinction has significant consequences for how individuals approach challenges, respond to setbacks, and engage with feedback. Students who hold a growth mindset are more likely to embrace difficult tasks, persist through difficulty, and interpret failure as information rather than verdict, making the orientation itself a career development resource rather than merely a personality trait.

In career development, growth mindset supports the willingness to experiment, explore unfamiliar domains, and engage in the iterative process of trying and revising that career exploration requires. Students who believe that competence and clarity can be developed through effort are better positioned to navigate the inherent uncertainty of career decision-making productively. Cultivating a growth orientation is therefore not peripheral to career development support; it is a foundational condition for it, enabling students to approach

self-assessment, feedback, and setbacks as developmental opportunities rather than as threats to a fixed sense of who they are.

Key Constructs

- **Growth mindset:** the belief that abilities and intelligence can be developed through effort, effective strategies, and support
- **Fixed mindset:** the contrasting belief that abilities are innate and essentially unchangeable, leading to avoidance of challenge and vulnerability to failure
- **Incremental theory of intelligence:** the theoretical basis for growth mindset, proposing that intelligence is malleable rather than fixed
- **Challenge-seeking:** embracing rather than avoiding difficult tasks, viewing them as opportunities for development
- **Effort and persistence:** sustained engagement with difficulty as the primary mechanism of learning and growth
- **Feedback orientation:** seeking and acting on feedback as information for improvement rather than as a judgment of fixed ability
- **Resilience:** the capacity to recover from setbacks and reframe failures as learning opportunities

Implications for Career Development Practice

- Framing career development programming as a learning process from first contact, establishing that uncertainty, revision, and iteration are signs of healthy engagement
- Debriefing setbacks and redirections using growth mindset language, helping students extract developmental information rather than interpreting difficulty as evidence of fixed limitations
- Modelling a growth orientation in practitioner language, avoiding fixed-category descriptions of ability and consistently framing competencies as developable through experiential learning
- Using the uOCompetencies proficiency scale to make growth visible and concrete, helping students see their own progression from earlier to later administrations as evidence that development is real and measurable
- Supporting peer mentors in communicating growth mindset through their own stories of uncertainty and revision, leveraging near-peer credibility to normalize the iterative nature of career development

Learning and Applied Career Development Approaches

The career development theories presented above explain what students need to develop and why. The psychological foundations describe the conditions under which development occurs. What remains is the question of how: how does theoretical understanding become lasting change? The frameworks below provide the answer. Kolb's experiential learning theory establishes that knowledge is constructed through the cycle of experience and reflection. Information transfer - labour market realities, professional norms, disciplinary expectations - provides essential content, but lasting understanding requires that content to be tested and integrated through direct experience. Design Your Life translates that cycle into a structured practice methodology. Together they are intended to serve as the pedagogical bridge between CDEL's theoretical commitments and the lived experience of students who engage with them.

Experiential Learning Theory

Overview

Kolb's experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984) holds that knowledge is not passively received but actively constructed through the transformation of experience. Learning occurs through a continuous cycle in which concrete experiences are reflected upon, those reflections are distilled into abstract concepts, and those concepts are tested through active experimentation, generating new experiences that restart the cycle. This framework positions experience as the primary medium of learning: understanding is created in the doing and the reflecting, not in the transmission of information alone. Career development interventions that build in structured reflection, debriefing, and meaning-making draw explicitly on this logic, ensuring that experience produces lasting development rather than passing through without transformation.

Kolb also identified four learning styles, Diverging, Assimilating, Converging, and Accommodating, that describe individual preferences for particular phases of the experiential learning cycle. These styles help explain why students engage differently with different types of career development activities, and why a diverse portfolio of learning experiences is more effective than any single approach alone. In career development practice, the cycle provides the theoretical justification for combining online content, reflective exercises, group discussion, advising conversations, and hands-on experiential placements: each modality addresses a different phase of the learning process, and together they support the full consolidation of career-relevant understanding. This applies equally to skills development: competencies are not acquired through knowledge alone but consolidated through repeated cycles of practice, reflection, and refinement.

Key Constructs

The experiential learning cycle

- **Concrete experience:** direct, first-hand engagement with a situation, task, or environment that serves as the raw material for learning
- **Reflective observation:** stepping back from experience to observe, describe, and begin to interpret what occurred and what it means
- **Abstract conceptualization:** drawing generalizations and forming concepts from reflection that can be applied beyond the immediate experience
- **Active experimentation:** testing new concepts and ideas through purposeful action, which generates new concrete experiences and restarts the cycle

Additional constructs

- **Learning styles:** individual preferences for particular phases of the cycle, including Diverging (experience and reflection), Assimilating (reflection and conceptualization), Converging (conceptualization and experimentation), and Accommodating (experimentation and experience)
- **Reflective practice:** the deliberate and disciplined habit of examining experience in order to extract meaning, improve understanding, and inform future action
- **Knowledge creation:** the principle that knowledge is not transferred from expert to learner but actively constructed through the interaction of experience and reflection
- **Integration of doing and thinking:** the foundational pedagogical claim that neither experience nor abstract learning alone produces durable understanding, and that it is their combination and iteration that generates genuine growth

Implications for Career Development Practice

- Designing career development activities that move students through the full learning cycle rather than stopping at information transfer
 - Building structured reflection into experiential learning placements, workshops, and advising sessions
 - Using diverse learning formats to engage students with different learning style preferences
 - Helping students make explicit connections between their experiences and their developing career understanding
 - Positioning experiential learning participation as the activation of career development theory in authentic contexts
 - Recognizing that skills development occurs through repeated cycles of active experimentation and reflection, not through single exposures - competency grows as students return to the cycle with increasing intentionality
-

Integrated Approach to Career Development

The theoretical frameworks presented in this document do not operate as independent lenses applied separately to different aspects of career development. They form an integrated and mutually reinforcing system in which each framework contributes something the others do not fully address, and in which their combination produces a more complete account of student development than any single theory achieves alone. Integrating these frameworks does not resolve every theoretical tension between them - Holland's relatively stable typology sits in productive tension with Savickas's constructivist account of fluid identity, and Kolb's structured cycle does not map neatly onto Krumboltz's validation of unplanned, opportunistic learning. These tensions are acknowledged here as inherent to any integrative approach, and are treated as generative rather than contradictory: each framework addresses aspects of career development that the others do not fully capture, and their combination is more practically useful than theoretical purity alone would allow.

The career development theories establish the foundational architecture. Social Cognitive Career Theory explains the psychological mechanisms through which career interests form and translate into goals and action, placing self-efficacy and contextual supports and barriers at the centre of the developmental process. Holland's theory provides the typological language through which students begin to understand themselves in relation to the world of work, offering a structured framework for the exploratory work that SCCT identifies as essential. Super's life-span theory positions that exploration within a developmental sequence, establishing that the university years are a critically important and time-sensitive stage in which self-concept formation and vocational identity development have lasting consequences. Savickas's career construction theory deepens this developmental account by insisting that identity is not simply discovered but actively constructed through meaning-making, narrative, and reflection, and that the capacity for career adaptability is as important as any specific career direction. Krumboltz's planned happenstance theory completes the picture by addressing the role of uncertainty, chance, and openness in real career trajectories, validating the non-linear paths that many students follow and providing a framework for turning unexpected circumstances into developmental resources.

The psychological foundations support the motivational and dispositional conditions under which these career development processes flourish. Positive psychology contributes a strengths-based orientation that shifts the focus of career development from deficit and uncertainty toward capability and meaning, creating the relational and environmental conditions within which students are willing to take risks and engage openly with their development. Growth mindset provides the underlying belief structure that makes the iterative, trial-and-error process of career exploration sustainable: students who believe their competencies can grow

through effort are better positioned to engage with the full developmental cycle that the career development theories describe.

Experiential learning theory provides the pedagogical mechanism through which all of the above becomes operational. Kolb's cycle explains how career development outcomes are consolidated through doing and reflecting rather than through information transfer alone. Without structured opportunities to apply and reflect on learning in context - whether through placements, workshops, or guided reflection - career development risks remaining at the level of awareness rather than consolidation. Without career development preparation, experiential learning lacks intentional direction and students struggle to articulate what they gained. The cycle closes when reflection on experience generates new self-knowledge, which informs revised goals, which motivate new action, which generates new experience. This is the mechanism through which Career Agency, the culminating outcome of CDEL's developmental framework, is progressively built.

Design Your Life brings these theoretical commitments to life as a structured practice model, translating the iterative logic of experiential learning, the exploratory orientation of planned happenstance, the adaptability emphasis of career construction theory, and the strengths focus of positive psychology into concrete activities that students can engage with at any stage of their development.

CDEL's professional practice is grounded in this system, and the Build Your Future initiative is its institutional expression.

The integrated framework emphasizes:

- Exploration of interests, strengths, and values as the foundation of all subsequent development
- Construction of career identity and vocational self-concept through reflection and experience
- Development of self-efficacy and creative confidence as the motivational engine of career action
- Adaptability and openness to uncertainty as essential navigational capacities in a changing labour market
- Skills literacy and intentional competency development as the bridge between self-knowledge and professional readiness
- Learning through experience and structured reflection as the mechanism through which all outcomes are consolidated
- Constructing meaningful, self-directed, and sustainable career paths as the integrating purpose of the whole

Career Development Learning Outcomes

These theoretical traditions converge on a shared understanding of what career development practice is designed to produce. CDEL has articulated this through five Career Development Learning Outcomes that build toward a single integrative program-level objective: Career Agency. The outcomes form a progressive developmental sequence, moving from the reflective and inward to the strategic and practical. They describe the developmental capacities that career development programming builds, while Career Agency describes the integrated outcome that emerges when those capacities are developed and sustained across a student's academic journey. The application of these outcomes and the institutional conditions required to support them at scale are addressed in the Build Your Future proposal.

Career Agency is the program-level objective toward which all five outcomes contribute. It is defined as the demonstrated capacity to direct one's own path with sustained intention, and to revise that direction through reflection across lived experiences. It is positioned as the integrating construct at the convergence of three

theoretical traditions: Savickas's (2013) narrative identity framework, which positions self-authorship as the culminating outcome of career construction; Super's (1980) self-concept crystallization, which describes the movement from tentative exploration to committed direction; and the Agency principle of uOttawa's Experiential Learning Framework (Gofton and Ramsay, 2025), which identifies agency as the hallmark quality of fully developed experiential learning. Career Agency emerges over time as students accumulate preparation, engagement, and reflection. It is observable across sustained engagement rather than within a single course or intervention, and distinguishes a student who has completed activities from one who has developed the self-authorship required to navigate their career with intention.

Each of the five outcomes names a specific capacity that career development practice is designed to produce, framed as an evaluable learning outcome grounded in the theoretical traditions reviewed above.

1	Knowing Yourself <i>reflective and inward</i> Identify and articulate their personal interests, values, strengths, and lived experiences, forming the self-knowledge that serves as the foundation for informed choices about their academic, professional, and personal paths.	Theoretical grounding <i>Holland (1997) person-environment fit; Super (1980) self-concept development</i>
2	Career Identity <i>constructive and directional</i> Construct and revise an evolving narrative that connects past experiences, present self-knowledge, and future possibilities into a coherent sense of direction, informed by realistic expectations about academic and professional pathways, and emerging opportunities.	Theoretical grounding <i>Savickas (2013) career construction theory; SCCT outcome expectations framework</i>
3	Career Confidence <i>generative and experimental</i> Explore, prototype, and evaluate career and learning possibilities through iterative experimentation, building the self-efficacy needed to act without requiring certainty of success. Measured not by what students feel but by what they try.	Theoretical grounding <i>Bandura (1986) self-efficacy theory; Burnett and Evans (2016) Design Your Life</i>
4	Adaptability <i>responsive and navigational</i> Anticipate change, strategize emerging possibilities, and take ownership of responses to uncertainty in evolving professional environments, drawing on the skills and behaviours needed to recognize and capitalize on unplanned opportunities.	Theoretical grounding <i>Savickas (2013) career adaptability model; Krumboltz (2009) planned happenstance theory</i>
5	Skills Literacy <i>strategic and practical</i> Recognize and articulate existing competencies, identify the skills required to reach professional and academic goals, and design plans to build those skills over time.	Theoretical grounding <i>SCCT self-efficacy and goal-setting mechanisms; uOCompetencies framework</i>

These outcomes reflect the capacities students develop through sustained engagement with career development theory, reflection, and experiential learning. They provide the shared professional language that grounds CDEL's practice and anchors the Build Your Future initiative.

Relationship to Design Your Life

The Design Your Life approach is a career development methodology derived from design thinking, originally adapted for career and life planning by Bill Burnett and Dave Evans (2016) at Stanford University. Rather than functioning as a standalone psychological theory, the framework operationalizes principles from career development theory and applied psychology into a structured process for navigating complex and uncertain career decisions. It does not ask students to discover a single correct career path. It asks them to approach career development the way a designer approaches a problem: with curiosity, experimentation, and a willingness to iterate.

Within a CDEL context, Design Your Life functions as the practice layer that makes the theoretical architecture of this framework operational. Its emphasis on prototyping, iterative experimentation, and curiosity-driven exploration resonates directly with Krumboltz's (2009) planned happenstance theory, Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, and Savickas's (2013) concept of career adaptability. It is particularly well suited to the exploration stage that Super (1980) identifies as the central developmental task of the university years, normalizing uncertainty and iteration rather than treating them as problems to be solved. The full application of Design Your Life tools and activities within CDEL's programming is described in the Build Your Future initiative narrative.

Table 2. Contributions of theoretical frameworks to Design Your Life.

Category	Framework	Contribution to Design Your Life	Key Connection
Career Development Theories	Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT)	Builds self-efficacy through experimentation, reflection, and iterative experience.	Self-efficacy and outcome expectations
	Holland's Theory of Vocational Interests (RIASEC)	Supports exploration of environments aligned with individual interests and personality type.	Person-environment fit; RIASEC typology
	Life-Span, Life-Space Theory	Frames career exploration as developmentally appropriate, normalizing iteration during the university years.	Exploration stage; self-concept formation
	Career Construction / Life Design Theory	Grounds Workview, Lifeview, and Odyssey Plans in narrative identity and life theme discovery.	Life themes; career adaptability; narrative identity
	Social Learning / Planned Happenstance	Validates prototyping and curiosity-driven action as the mechanism through which unplanned opportunities emerge.	Curiosity, flexibility, openness to chance
Psychological Foundations	Positive Psychology	Informs Workview and Lifeview reflections through strengths identification, meaning, and sources of flow.	Character strengths; meaning and engagement
	Growth Mindset	Supports the bias toward action and reframing of setbacks as learning within the prototyping process.	Effort orientation; resilience; feedback
Learning and Applied Approaches	Experiential Learning	Provides the cyclical learning logic underpinning prototyping: experience, reflect, conceptualize, experiment.	Concrete experience; reflective observation; active experimentation

Together, these theoretical connections illustrate how Design Your Life translates the insights of vocational psychology, developmental theory, and experiential learning into a practical, accessible, and generative process for students at any stage of their degree.

Conclusion

The conceptual framework presented in this document reflects a comprehensive and integrated understanding of how career development works and what it is designed to produce. The five career development theories, two psychological foundations, and experiential learning framework described here are not independent resources to be drawn on selectively. They constitute a coherent system in which each framework strengthens and activates the others, and in which the five Career Development Learning Outcomes build progressively toward the program-level objective of Career Agency, representing the cumulative developmental arc that the full system is designed to support.

This framework carries particular significance for students at the University of Ottawa, where a diverse student population brings a wide range of backgrounds, navigational resources, and developmental needs. SCCT's explicit attention to contextual supports and barriers, Krumboltz's validation of non-linear and unplanned career trajectories, Super's recognition of multiple life roles, and positive psychology's strengths-based orientation all contribute to a practice model that is responsive to equity, inclusive in design, and committed to meeting students where they are. Career development grounded in this framework is not a service for students who are uncertain. It is a developmental right for all students, and its absence disproportionately disadvantages those with the least navigational capital.

The five Career Development Learning Outcomes and the program-level objective of Career Agency connect the theoretical architecture of this report to the practical programming of BYF, ensuring that CDEL's work is evidence-based, purposeful, and oriented toward the development of students who are equipped to author their own paths in an uncertain and rapidly changing world.

References

- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Prentice-Hall.
- Burnett, B., and Evans, D. (2016). *Designing your life: How to build a well-lived, joyful life*. Knopf.
- Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. Random House.
- Gofton, T., and Ramsay, G. (2025). *Experiential Learning Framework: Summary Guide*. University of Ottawa. <https://doi.org/10.20381/7fzb-h846>
- Holland, J. L. (1997). *Making vocational choices: A theory of vocational personalities and work environments* (3rd ed.). Psychological Assessment Resources.
- Holland, J. L., Daiger, D. C., and Power, P. G. (1980). *My Vocational Situation*. Consulting Psychologists Press.
- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Prentice-Hall.
- Krumboltz, J. D. (2009). The happenstance learning theory. *Journal of Career Assessment*, 17(2), 135-154. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1069072708328861>
- Lent, R. W., Brown, S. D., and Hackett, G. (1994). Toward a unifying social cognitive theory of career and academic interest, choice, and performance. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 45(1), 79-122. <https://doi.org/10.1006/jvbe.1994.1027>
- Savickas, M. L. (2013). Career construction theory and practice. In S. D. Brown and R. W. Lent (Eds.), *Career development and counseling: Putting theory and research to work* (2nd ed., pp. 147-183). Wiley.



Seligman, M. E. P., and Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology: An introduction. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 5-14. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.5>

Super, D. E. (1980). A life-span, life-space approach to career development. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 16(3), 282-298. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0001-8791\(80\)90056-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/0001-8791(80)90056-1)