A career café may be just the recipe you need for middle school career exploration.

BY KATHERLENE GOODMAN
About five years ago I decided to take a deeper look at how I was teaching students about careers. As a K–8 school counselor I had set out to take a creative approach to career exploration. I designed my bulletin board with a Dr. Seuss “Oh! The places you’ll go” theme and spent months designing and organizing career day for eighth-grade students. At the end of the year, I surveyed the eighth-graders about a variety of my lessons and specifically asked for feedback on career day.
school students, cups of coffee in hand, circled around each other engaged in conversation, it reminded me of what you might see at a café somewhere. The more I thought about this informal café idea, the more I wanted to try it with my middle school students. In my mind, I was envisioning these career conversations being conducted in a more relaxed setting where students could come and learn about careers of interest to them.

My heart sank when I read comments such as, “I wish you’d ask what we’re interested in” or “I want to work with animals, and no one like that came.” The comments reminded me of the results a survey conducted by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Can I Get a Little Advice Here? The survey’s findings showed that when more than 600 high school students were asked to rate their high school counselors in helping them think about different kinds of careers only 36 percent were rated excellent or good while 62 percent rated fair or poor. I wanted to be in that “excellent” category and was determined to make a change before the next school year.

The idea of this career café model came to me after visiting a local high school counselor who implemented a “coffee and conversation” program as a way for students to chat informally about current events. When I visited her school, I saw students gathered in a small multipurpose room deep in conversation. “I had a few students who wanted to hold a forum to talk about current events and asked if I’d help them organize,” she said. She shared that sometimes an outside speaker volunteered to come in and speak about a variety of topics, but most often, the subject matter was student-initiated and -facilitated. As I watched these high school students, cups of coffee in hand, they were engaged in conversation, it reminded me of what you might see at a café somewhere. The more I thought about this informal café idea, the more I wanted to try it with my middle school students. In my mind, I was envisioning these career conversations being conducted in a more relaxed setting where students could come and learn about careers of interest to them.

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levels, school counselors can introduce a wide variety of career fields requiring diverse skill sets. From personal experience, having been a school counselor at the elementary, middle and high school levels, I also think middle school is the most ripe for interdisciplinary work because of the flexible schedules and the growing trend toward project-based learning.

Year One: Harvest the Coffee Beans
Over the summer, I completely revamped my eighth-grade school counseling core curriculum to revolve around these three tenets:

• Knowing myself as a learner
• Knowing myself as a friend
• Knowing myself as a worker

During the first unit, which coincided with the start of school, I taught students time-management tips and study strategies and had them take an informal learning styles inventory. Next, I moved onto helping students explore their personal values and beliefs, the role of a bystander in a bullying situation and how to identify warning signs in other people. Finally, the year concluded with students exploring careers in a way that fit their personality.

I had students take a fun career interest inventory based on John Holland’s work on careers to discover which of his six codes (realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising and conventional) fit them best. With their Holland code now in hand, I directed students to two of my favorite career exploration websites, www.careeronestop.org and www.mynextmove.org, where they could read about education, training and job outlook and watch videos of actual people providing a “day in the life” account of their career. Finally, I had students complete a survey I created, in which they selected their top two careers from each of Holland’s six areas.

With only a few months left in the school year, I made a mad dash to find speakers from a variety of different careers. I managed to hold the first career café as a six-part series over six consecutive Fridays during lunch. I advertised each speaker on my bulletin board with the various Holland codes so students could self-identify what code best matched their interests.

In the first year, there was no official sign-up process; I just hoped students would show up. I found a tiny conference room near the cafeteria so students could come during lunch.

At the end of the first year, I assessed the program’s strengths and areas for growth. Its strengths included student buy-in and being able to find speakers in a short time frame. Areas for growth included advertising and time and space constraints.

Year Two: Brew Stronger Coffee
My two biggest challenges after the first year were all logistical. If you decide to host something similar to a career café at your school, you’ll need to take into account a few of these logistical considerations:

• Space: considerable in size, convenient location and, if held during lunch, allows food
• Time and frequency: at what time during the school day, how long, the duration (for six weeks, whole year, etc.)
• Promotion: program advertising and sign up

I was thankful to have the support from my principal and buy-in from my colleagues. The art teacher offered up her much larger space, which not only made it more comfortable for students but was also one of the few classrooms where food was allowed. Anyone who’s spent any time in a school knows the schedule is always a beast to work with, and even with the most interesting speakers, students are reluctant to give up their little recess time after lunch. I’m typically working with just 35 minutes for lunch, and by the time students get their lunches and come to the room, it’s realistically more like 25 minutes.

In the second year, I kept the same format for eighth-grade students, which seemed to flow well with the counseling curriculum I had already established. When I began talking to teachers about ways to incorporate careers into other classes, a new sixth-grade English teacher enthusiastically approached me about ways to reinforce career lessons through her own assignments.
September started off with activities built around different career settings: indoors, outdoors, work with people, work with animals, work with your hands, work with computers, etc. After I felt students had been introduced to a wide variety of careers, the English teacher assigned her students to write a haiku about one of the careers we’d discussed. This skill was something she planned to teach anyway and decided it would be a fun reinforcement of my lessons. One student who wrote this:  

One day I will be  
A doctor who helps people  
Learn to be healthy

Another skill students would work on in sixth-grade English class is persuasive writing. The topic I chose for persuasive speeches was, “Why should students attend at least one career café in the spring?”

I was beyond thrilled to hear the creative ideas students shared. There definitely were future salespeople in that bunch. In the weeks leading up to the career cafés I asked a few of the students to share a sentence or two from their persuasive paragraph over the intercom each Monday morning during announcements. By the end of the second year, I had spread out the career cafés to twice a month from January through April for a total of eight sessions.

Successes I experienced in the second year were interdisciplinary opportunities and adding another grade to the career café. Areas of challenge from the second year that I hoped to address in the next year were again around space and sustainability. Although it’s small, it provides an opportunity for me to decorate with posters and bulletin boards, career haikus and pictures. I also have swapped out some of the larger furniture for small round tables and chairs, which makes the space more conducive to engaging in conversation. In addition to creating a more relaxed space that looks and feels like a café (minus the gourmet coffee), I’m also working with the seventh-grade students to create table topics placed in jars around the small tables so students can pull out a question and ask one of our speakers.

Currently, under the “artistic” career field, I have three different speakers lined up: a makeup artist, a videographer and an architect. And by arranging the space with circular tables, students are able to move from one to the next and use the table topics to spark conversations. Although our school doesn’t have a debate team or formal public speaking class, I like to think the act of sitting down with an adult and asking a question is a life skill that can be reinforced in other core academic classes. I also like the idea of having students generate some of the questions. When I’ve reached out to prospective speakers in the past, I’ve provided a loose framework of guiding questions such as, “What education and training did you need?” “How did you learn about this career?” “Who was your role model growing up?”

I’ve come to find that the questions students are asking are much more authentic – and humorous. My favorite so far is “Will I really need to use math when I’m older?”

**Time to Franchise?**

When I speak with other school counselors about this approach, the No. 1 question I get is, “What’s the difference between this and career day?” The idea around the café model is to generate conversations in a relaxed format about careers drawn from student interest. In a traditional career day, it’s usually just that – one day. I find that while providing consistency is a lot more work on my end, it results in a more meaningful experience for the students.

The key to the career café’s success – as with any new program – is to start small, with a few core goals, and fine-tune each year with small tweaks. This school year isn’t even halfway over, and I’m already making adjustments for next year. I hope to follow this pattern for years to come. If in five years I’m still tweaking this program, I’ll consider it an opportunity to be relevant, creative and adaptable. And aren’t those great qualities we all want to model for our students?

**Year Three: Renovate the Coffeehouse**

I’m only a few months into the program’s third year, and I have made two more changes to the program. The first change is that I’m again working with the current sixth grade, but because of the success with last year’s sixth-graders I already have buy-in with the now-seventh-graders. I plan to leverage this and conduct a version of the Holland codes with them in hopes of launching two career cafés before winter break. I now have a small group of committed speakers and feel much more comfortable lining up someone first semester.

The second change I’m working on concerns the meeting space. I’ve decided to use my office for career cafés. Although it’s small, it provides an opportunity for me to decorate with posters and bulletin boards, career haikus and pictures. I also have swapped out some of the larger furniture for small round tables and chairs, which makes the space more conducive to engaging in conversation. In addition to creating a more relaxed space that looks and feels like a café (minus the gourmet coffee), I’m also working with the seventh-grade students to create table topics placed in jars around the small tables so students can pull out a question and ask one of our speakers.

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