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# At the Crossroads of ‘I can,’ ‘I should,’ and ‘I want’

## How the Japanese framework of Ikigai can help guide American youth toward more targeted education and career pathways

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# Introduction

As a generation of American youth graduates into growing unknowns and uncertainty during and immediately following the COVID-19 pandemic, it is increasingly important that their awareness of self and of purpose be clear. For too many young people and soon-to-be graduates in America, the process of planning for the future, even at the best of times, involves shots in the dark and frequently incorrect assumptions about the world beyond high school. It also implies a level of self-awareness and understanding of their own skills and abilities that we know simply isn't true for most teenagers.

For many students, "What do you want to *be*?" is a question that causes much angst and indecision. Some students make up an answer to please the adults in their life. Others make loose associations between what they like doing or what might earn them the most, and a career path that may or may not work for them. Still others may answer the question based solely on their limited exposure to known work fields. And some have no answer at all and see no point in endeavoring to find one. Conversations about the future with American students all too often involve this oversimplified and misleading question which gives the impression a person simply ends up *being* something.

What if the emphasis shifted from "What do you want to *be?*" to questions like "What are you passionate about?" "What do you want to give to society?" and "What are you capable of?" There is, in fact, a guiding framework that can serve as a roadmap to help young people think about and articulate a plan, in terms of what they want, what they can do, and what society needs.

# A Reason For Being

The Japanese word "ikigai" means *a reason for being.* Far from a passive state, ikigai is the culmination of work and activity one chooses to undertake in order to realize one's purpose, enjoyment and motivation in life. Ikigai is not something one is born with; rather it is a desired state of being. It has been claimed that living in a state of ikigai is linked to lower instances of stuttering and social anxiety.[1] These assertions fall well outside the scope of our work, but it is worth noting that middle and high school students who, whether realizing it or not, have achieved a state of ikigai, tend to have higher grades, greater career-certainty, and are more engaged in their courses, as we will detail below. For purposes of educational and career utility, **ikigai is a useful framework by which anyone can understand their ideal state of being along four axes: doing something that you love; doing something the world needs; doing something you are good at; and doing something you can be paid for.** In typical conversations about career ambitions, young people may take into consideration one or two of these areas, at most, without much thought to how (or indeed if) they intersect. A student who is good at art, for example, might pursue a degree in a STEM field in the hopes of earning more money. Or a young person who is a talented actor might instead feel compelled to go into a field in which there is a more obvious bent towards helping others, like teaching. In the state of ikigai, earning, enjoying, thriving and giving back are not mutually exclusive, but exist intersectionally, and enable a person to plan and make deliberate decisions about their own education and work that can carry them through their adult life.

## Doing Something You Love

Our data show that, overall, those in middle and high school who do feel certain about their career are primarily driven to certainty by a strong sense of what they love to do and would "truly enjoy" doing for work. Some 78% of middle and 76% of high school students we surveyed who indicated that they were career-certain said they felt certain because "I think I will truly enjoy working in this field."[2*]

Conversely, those who don't feel certain about their career express that not knowing what they are good at is the strongest detractor preventing them from clarity in this area. Of career-uncertain middle school students, 38% indicated "I haven't found anything I would really love to do," while 40% of high school respondents indicated the same. While their understanding of what a career truly entails may be limited, their perception of future career enjoyment seems to be among the strongest drivers of career-certainty.

**Students who feel certain about their future career are primarily driven to certainty by a strong sense of what they love to do.**

## Doing something you are good at

Among those students who are career-certain, most report that their certainty is rooted in being "good at" the types of skills needed for their preferred field. Unsurprisingly, these self-reported skills grow with students' age and experience. Among those feeling uncertain about a career, however, around half (45% of middle and 47% of high school students) say this uncertainty is at least partially driven by not knowing what they would be good at. Of career-certain students, 76% of middle and 77% report "I know what I'm good at" and even more (77% of middle and 81% of high school students) indicated "I'm interested in learning what career or work I'm best suited for." The link between ability and perceived future success, for many students, is very clear. Understanding one's own ability and the options on the table, however, is not a given in the school experience, as reflected by the high percentage of students who indicated an interest in pursuing further career exploration and discovery.

## Doing something the world needs

If personal enjoyment and passion are strong drivers of career-certainty and students clearly understand that link, it seems that altruism and societal benefit may be missing from many conversations about education and career exploration, or students are not being guided to understand the intrinsic societal value of a wide array of careers. Only around half of students who feel certain in their career path say that their career-certainty is, in part, driven by an altruistic belief that working in that field will benefit others. (Of career-certain students, 48% of middle and 55% of high schoolers reported "I believe working in this field will benefit others.") Conversely, of career-uncertain students, 15% indicated "I don't know of any careers where I can truly help others," indicating that altruism is a consideration for relatively few students during career exploration and discovery. It is worth noting that paying bills and becoming financially secure are dominant career motivators for many people, and altruism falls by the wayside or becomes something of an afterthought when considering future possibilities.

## Doing something you can be paid for

Financial security is an understandable motivator for American students looking to enter the working world. Even several years before the COVID-19 pandemic directly hit the American labor market, 51% of Americans reported that jobs were hard to find, while 49% reported that they were falling behind the cost of living.[3] Those hoping to pursue a four-year college degree today may be enticed to seek out higher-paying career paths, regardless of suitability and

connection to personal interests, in order to get a jump-start on becoming financially secure. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, we can expect this trend to continue (and perhaps grow) for the foreseeable future. Around half of students who feel certain in their career path share that they are certain, at least in part, because they believe people in that field "make a decent income." Of career-certain students, 45% of middle and 55% of high school students indicated "I think people in this field make a decent income" while 45% indicated "I think there are good job opportunities in this field." Conversely, 25% of career-uncertain middle and high school students reported "I think people in the field I like don't get paid very much" with 36% of middle and 40% of high school students indicating "I don't know what the job opportunities are in the field I like." In this instance, low-paying careers didn't seem to be the barrier; a lack of understanding of what career options even *exist*, is standing in the way.

## Who unlocks ikigai?

Without a conscious understanding of ikigai or its value, it's fair to say that not many young people have simply arrived at this clarifying mindset. Perhaps some students have inadvertently unlocked ikigai through a fortuitous combination of their own hard work and passion, encouragement from parents and educators, a strong understanding of the possibilities before them, and a desire to make an impact on the wider world. To date, our research shows that just 16% of middle school and 21% of high school students are approaching ikigai. That is to say that those students are not only career-certain, but that their certainty is driven by a strong understanding of what they love, what they enjoy, what the world needs and what they can be paid for. While these students are a small portion of the whole, they can be readily distinguished from students who have low or no career-certainty, as well as those who are career-certain, but who do not cite all four components of ikigai as drivers of their certainty.

**Just 16% of middle school and 21% of high school students are approaching ikigai.**

In terms of demographics, the students who have achieved ikigai are more likely to be girls than boys (22% vs. 17%), but no major racial disparities are apparent. Students who are approaching ikigai tend to have higher grades, with many earning As and above. They are also more engaged (ranking as "high" in class engagement metrics). We also see, among students who are approaching ikigai, a large portion of students (49%) who show strong academic performance, are certain about their future, and indicate being low on stress. (By comparison, someone who is not fully approaching ikigai may, for example, score relatively high on class engagement and have high grades, but also have below average career-certainty/college-certainty, and have high stress.)

# How Can We Help More Students Approach Ikigai?

## We can tell them about it.

Had *you* heard of ikigai before reading this? As you've read this paper, have you been quietly measuring your own education and career journey against the four components of ikigai? Rather than expecting students to stumble into this sweet spot of career and life-certainty, we can help them understand that ikigai is, in fact, a helpful framework for finding the right career path, and that the four components of career satisfaction can be deeply interconnected, with some effort. Simply teaching young people about ikigai and giving them an awareness of this concept as something to work toward, is a great first step.

## We can start early.

Helping students connect what they love, what they're good at, what they can be paid for, and what the world needs (whether or not we use the term "ikigai"), starting as early as middle school, is critical to ensuring that the essence of ikigai is reached for more students and with an eye toward a satisfying education and career path. College is simply too big of a commitment to be used as a testing ground for young people to learn what they want and need from their life and work. Middle school students are young enough that they can approach exploration and discovery with an open mind and with a world of possibility before them.

## We can help them connect passion and talent to opportunity.

For students as young as 10 or 11, unlocking an innate passion or interest is a step in the right direction. These discoveries are arguably among the most commonplace for students as they progress in their educational journey, and the easiest for both students and educators to identify. A teacher would be keenly aware, for example, that his student loves math because of her academic performance, or that another student loves the performing arts because of his expressed interest in theater. However, helping those students make the connection between interest, ability, and a career is less obvious, and the path can be harder to uncover. If that connection is ever made, it often happens much later in the exploration and discovery journey, by which time an array of external variables and pressures have come into play in a teenager's complex life. It is critical that students understand that their interests, abilities, and passions can and should be deeply tied to the eventual education and career path they pursue. This realization is important even when those interests, abilities and passions are in less obvious areas of academic life like the arts, sports or public speaking.

## We can help them understand the virtue of altruism.

That career-certain students are least likely to connect their career-certainty to the "What the world needs" facet of ikigai speaks clearly to the need for early conversations about altruism in the exploration and discovery journey. Students must be helped to understand that career satisfaction, and even high earnings, can be congruous with doing good in the world. Educators can point to an array of careers spanning STEM, the arts, and other fields, as examples of how to make a difference in the world while earning a steady income. But that connection matters little if they don't have a strong grasp of the need for civic responsibility. Educators can help students move beyond individualistic thinking toward a collective mindset in which helping their peers and community is deeply tied to their own success and satisfaction.

## We can give them the tools they need to discover and explore the world of education and careers.

While the first step is helping students to understand ikigai and where their abilities and goals fit into the framework, they must also have access to a wide network of tools to enable discovery and exploration. Our mobile-friendly, personalized insights platform Futurescape can help students better understand how their unique skills can connect to future paths. For middle school students, exploration and discovery must be social, fun, and relevant to their interests and the world around them.

## Policy Recommendations

**1 Make vital career exploration programs for young people a priority through authorizing legislation and robust funding.**

Students can only find the intersection of their passions, skills and potential careers if they're exposed to high-quality self-discovery and career exploration experiences that help them discover what they love. State and federal policy must prioritize funding these programs.

**2 Develop education frameworks and curricula that encourage exploratory learning and post-high school plans.**

Curricula should be developed to help students build an occupational identity—to truly understand what they love to do and what they are good at. This means allowing students to experiment in a variety of academic, social, athletic and extracurricular activities geared toward helping them think more clearly about post-secondary plans. Additionally, Individualized Learning Plans (ILP), which help students align their post-secondary education path with career goals, should be expanded to more students across the country.

**3 Increase availability of regional labor market data so that teachers have access to up-to-date information for their students.**

To truly achieve Ikigai, students must connect passion and talent to opportunity; they must link what they want to do with what the world needs – and what it will pay them for. Students need access to labor market data earlier in their educational journey so they can start to see linkages between their interests, potential careers and salaries.

**4 Expand opportunities for experiential and work-based learning.**

Hands-on learning, such as internships, apprenticeships and cooperative learning (co-ops), can help students explore their likes and dislikes, and better prepare them for the world of work. But such opportunities are limited for some students, particularly those under the age of 18. Public policy should support financial incentives for employers to expand work-based learning opportunities; establish centralized statewide internship coordination; encourage greater public-private partnerships; and expand pre-apprenticeships programs.

**5 Invest in recruitment, retention, training and support for teachers.**

High-quality self-discovery and career exploration programming will only succeed if there are well-trained and resourced teachers to provide this experience to students. Federal, state and local lawmakers must not let the COVID crisis exacerbate cuts to education spending, but instead seize the opportunity to invest in our schools and our educators so

that kids have the greatest chance of success in a world of growing unknowns and uncertainty.

**6** **Increase funding and support for school counselors.**
School counselors play an essential role in understanding students' triggers and motivators, helping students form a balanced view of self and future, and helping them explore their interests and themselves. But there simply aren't enough counselors to meet demand. Proper funding and support to establish comprehensive school counseling programs in middle and high schools, led by well-trained, highly competent professionals with the recommended workload of 250 students per counselor, will help guide American youth toward more targeted education and career pathways.

**7** **Boost youth-serving nonprofits and community organizations.**
Self-discovery and career exploration don't only happen during school hours. Afterschool and summer programs, community-based activities, mentors and more can all play a role in helping kids learn what they can do, what they should do, and what they want to do. Federal, state and local leaders, as well as the private sector and philanthropists, should support these organizations as much as possible through programs like the federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers.

Read more **here**.

# References


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