**UMaps Then and Now: RIASEC Still Helps Students “Find Themselves”**

Barbara Jacoby, PhD

Higher Education Consultant

[bgjacoby@gmail.com](mailto:bgjacoby@gmail.com)

January 27, 2024

**Bio**

Barbara Jacoby is a higher education consultant with Barbara Jacoby Consulting (<https://www.barbarajacobyconsulting.com/about-barbara-jacoby>). She served the University of Maryland for over 40 years in roles focusing on service-learning, civic engagement, and commuter students. Her scholarship centers on high-impact educational practices and all forms of experiential learning, with an emphasis on critical reflection, service-learning, and community engagement. Dr. Jacoby’s publications include seven books and many articles and chapters. She consults and does keynote speeches and workshops around the world.

**Abstract**

Forty years ago, the University of Maryland launched a program using RIASEC theory to help commuter students find their way on a large, decentralized campus. This article describes the UMaps program with links to examples of the maps. It then addresses how UMaps can be adapted to the students and technology of today and tomorrow.

**UMaps Then and Now: RIASEC Still Helps Students “Find Themselves”**

Since universities have existed, young people have come to them to find out about the world and their place in it. And universities have always offered many ways in which they could do this. Over time universities grew larger, providing more and more opportunities for students to explore the world and themselves. As they expanded, universities also became more complex and more decentralized both physically and, for students, psychologically. Because the number of students grew much faster than the number of rooms in on-campus residences, commuter students became the majority at many institutions (Jacoby, 1989).

In the 1970s, student affairs-professionals initiated services and programs to meet the particular needs of students who lived off campus (Jacoby, 1989). In addition to the lower-level physiological needs for shelter and food in the Maslow hierarchy, commuter students needed a sense of connection, belonging, and mattering within the campus environment (Maslow, 1943). Given this situation, the staff of the Office of Commuter Affairs at the University of Maryland addressed this third-level Maslow hierarchy need of students who lived off campus and struggled to find their way in the large, complex, decentralized institution of 38,000 students.

After exploring theories of college student development, they turned to person-environment theory as the starting point for their effort. One theory quickly stood out as the most fitting: John Holland’s theory of vocational choice (Holland, 1997; Rayman & Gottfredson, 2020), a theory of personality and environmental matching. The staff set out to utilize RIASEC as a means to organize the university and its myriad offerings and opportunities in a way that would enable students to find others who were like them, find compatible environments within the campus, and, ultimately, a sense of belonging and comfort. They believed that if behavior is determined by an interaction between personality and environment, RIASEC might allow the behavior of commuter students to change from that of an outsider to that of an insider.

**Developing UMaps**

The Commuter Affairs staff used RIASEC to create campus “maps,” believing that maps are not only representations of physical entities. They gathered catalogs, schedules of classes, and numerous brochures from various campus departments, both academic and cocurricular. They then organized lists of options in these categories (i.e., academic programs, career possibilities, internships, organizations). After developing the lists for each RIASEC category, the staff worked with a graphic designer to create a colorful UMap for each of the RIASEC categories with the header “Find Yourself.” They then created a Find Yourself document that described each of the RIASEC categories and invited students to choose the ones that sounded most like them and to pick up a UMap for each of the descriptions they selected. Sample UMaps are at this link: [Find+Yourself.pdf (squarespace.com)](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/60f07d1d4c662865954f8955/t/655e1331283ed75f87fada7b/1700664120559/Find+Yourself.pdf)

The colorful and enticing graphics made the UMaps stand out among the many fliers and brochures on campus (Jacoby et al., 1984). The Office of Commuter Affairs staff were pleased when John Holland visited the University of Maryland in 1983 to do a lunchtime conversation with members of the Counseling Center staff and other colleagues. As UMaps were in production at the time, the director of the office described them to Holland during the question-and-answer session at the end of his talk. He smiled and said the idea was “intriguing.”

**The Present**

Much has changed in the world and in the academy since 1986 when the last versions of UMaps were published. Today’s students are far more diverse racially and ethnically. They include growing numbers of first-generation students, online learners, adult students, and those who attend part time. In both the higher education or popular press several themes related to college students occur regularly: stress, mental health, loneliness, alienation, barriers to engagement, searching. Although the Internet provides instant access to information, overuse of social media has led some students to become even more isolated from their peers.

**The Future**

What is the message of UMaps for today and tomorrow? In the vein of UMaps, students are still trying to “find themselves” in the world, on the campus, and elsewhere. RIASEC has a role to play in the future through the multiple technologies available today to create paths and connections that were unimaginable when UMaps began. Untold possibilities lie ahead with the development of artificial intelligence, human-computer interfaces including “wearables,” and virtual and extended reality. Students who are Realistic will always be practical and mechanically inclined, seeking opportunities to work with their hands. Those who are Artistic will always seek ways to express their creativity and to surround themselves with creative others. Students who are Enterprising will seek ways on campus to develop their entrepreneurship. UMaps invite us to consider how the powerful combination of RIASEC and modern technology can help the students of today and tomorrow enrich their college experiences and find themselves.

**References**

Holland, J. L. (1997). *Making vocational choices: A theory of vocational personalities and work environments* (3rd ed.). PAR

Jacoby, B. (1989). *The student as commuter: Developing a comprehensive institutional response*. ASHE-ERIC Report Number 7. Washington, DC: George Washington University.

Jacoby, B., Rue, P, & Allen, K. T. (1984). UMaps: A person-environment approach to helping students make critical choices. *Personnel and Guidance Journal*, *62*(7), 426-428. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.2164-4918.1984.tb00244.x>

Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review, 50*(4), 370–396. [https://doi.org/10.1037/h0054346](https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/h0054346)

Rayman, J., & Gottfredson, G. (Eds.). (2020). My life with a theory: John L. Holland's autobiography and theory of careers. National Career Development Association.