The very notion of career implies a dynamic process incorporating change and adjustment over a lifetime. In a simplified version of this process, young people somehow acquire education and training that will provide them with the knowledge and skills necessary to enter the world of work. Once employed, individuals then settle into career paths defined by changes in employer and occupation over their working lives.

The term career is itself subject to different interpretations. In the broadest sense, a career may be synonymous with lifetime work activity. O'Toole, for example, views a career as "more than a job or series of jobs — it is a course of events that constitute a life."¹ A narrower interpretation equates a career with an orderly occupational progression: individuals move over time to more challenging, more responsible employment while drawing on prior accumulated skills. In this sense a career is a "particular type of work history . . . in which there has been a firm commitment to a given occupation or type of work."² For the most part, we will use the latter interpretation, in which career development refers to upward mobility within the occupational hierarchy. This upward mobility can be accomplished through either changing employers, internal promotion within
the firm, or a combination of both. However, this view of career development is simplistic and leaves much to be explained.

Individuals differ in their abilities, talents, values, aspirations, and motivations. Their career orientations and type, level, and timing of job preparation should reflect these differences.

Education and career decisions also operate under a series of constraints. Financial difficulties may limit the acquisition of training. Lack of information about both present and future educational and employment opportunities limit the range of choice. The state of the economy and structure of labor demand narrow the range of available career opportunities. For particular individuals barriers of race and sex discrimination may also set significant limits on opportunities. Because of these factors individuals acquire education that varies in amount, timing, and specialization. Therefore, individuals with these different education backgrounds have varied employment experiences. A better understanding of these linkages can aid in the formation of policies aimed at improving the efficiency of our educational resources.

The methods by which individuals settle into and progress in their careers are also important. Much of the research in this area concerns the characteristics of and problems with the school-to-work transition. An understanding of the youth labor market is necessary because of the cumulative nature of the career development process; early experiences can influence both the direction and type of future employment. Recognizing the factors that influence the career mobility of the adult work force also can help us to understand the career development process.

EDUCATIONAL PREPARATION AND CAREER CHOICE

Economists have developed a variety of theories to guide the analysis of educational and career decisions. Three of the most common models are presented in this section.

The Human Capital Model

The most widely used approach to career and educational decision making, the human capital model,\(^3\) assumes competitive labor markets characterized by freedom of choice, equal opportunity, and unrestrained labor mobility.