



LEADERSHIP ACADEMY FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

Pathways Project Implementation Memorandum

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RE: Developing Clear Connections Between Programs, Careers and Transfer Pathways/Outcomes

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY/INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of higher education is often viewed as a means for students to open doors to a more meaningful or lucrative career after college. However, students often lack an understanding of what career opportunities exist in their local communities and the connection between technical programs and transfer pathways to local, in-demand jobs are not always clear to students. Community colleges are unique in that they are able to customize educational programs to help meet regional workforce demands. However, career-related services are often provided to students at the end of their educational journey, which leaves little opportunity for application and implementation. In order to address these challenges, the following document will **present a checklist designed to assist Ohio community colleges in developing clear connections between programs and careers and transfer pathways/outcomes.** By highlighting career resources throughout the onboarding process, these recommendations provide students with the opportunity to form a coherent connection between their academic endeavors and long-term career goals.

RELEVANT LITERATURE REVIEWED

College onboarding processes are often conducted under the assumption that students possess defined career goals coming into college. However, research indicates that many students are not finalizing major and career goals prior to college enrollment. Hodara et al. (2018) explain “A common theme across all system types

and states is that many students do not select a major and destination institution early enough in their community college career to avoid credit loss, and student also change their mind about their major” (p. 341). This concern is especially prevalent at community colleges, where a large proportion of students struggle to determine what program to choose (Grubb, 2006). Since degree completion is strongly related to students’ commitment to educational and career goals (Wyckoff, 1999), assisting students with career exploration and goal setting is crucial for successful retention and completion initiatives. The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) helped to pave the way for demonstration on a national level just how community colleges across the country could create clear pathways to program completion, workforce opportunities, and further education beyond the associate degree (Jenkins et al., 2019). Incorporating career-exploration guides and labor market information into early admission processes, student advising sessions, new student orientations, and first-year curriculum can help students formulate career-focused goals throughout the onboarding process. According to Hodara et al. (2018) “Students’ experiences suggest that advising about the importance of selecting a major and transfer destination early on, or at least the trade-offs associated with not selecting them early on, is critical to ensuring that students can prepare to successfully transfer” (p. 342).

It is important for students to understand how major selection is related to future career opportunities. Students often face confusion when trying to link academic goals to job opportunities (Gillie & Isenhour, 2003). This disconnection may impact future employment outcomes if students are unable to understand what is required within an academic program or what job opportunities are available post-graduation. Student advising is a vital component to establishing career exploration and academic options early in a student’s journey. Therefore, evaluation of counseling and advising redesign within institutions may provide better support for students as they explore their career options to better align with the academic program that will lead them on a guided pathway to degree completion (Jenkins et al., 2019). Developing viable educational plans and career goals that are compatible with students’ interests, values, and skills strongly influences students’ satisfaction levels with college (Cuseo, 2005).

DATA EXAMINED

Many community college students enroll without clear goals for college and careers. Research shows that students are more likely to complete their credentials if they identify a career goal and choose the relevant program when they enter college. Community colleges typically offer a wide range of programs, but most provide little guidance to help students choose and enter a program early in the onboarding process. Colleges carefully track course enrollments but often do not know which students are in which programs. Nationally, fewer than 36% of first-time community college students earn a credential from a two or four-year institution within six years. However, success rates were substantially higher, approaching 50%, for students

who identified specific programs of study. The research suggests that by helping students enter programs early on, community colleges can improve completion rates (Jenkins, D. & Cho, S. 2012). Institutions of higher education across the country are implementing guided pathways and adapting the community college advising and counseling models to improve rates of completion, transfer and employment. According to the Center for Community College Student Engagement (2018), “More than two-thirds of returning students (68%) report that college advisors or instructors are their main source of advising, compared to only 47% of entering students” (p. 6). This suggests we have to reach students earlier in the onboarding process in order to assist them in making the connection between career goals, academic programs, and transfer pathway options. According to the Aspen Institute, the vast majority of students entering community colleges do intend to earn a bachelor’s degree; therefore, developing clear pathways that connect to career opportunities and transfer options becomes a vital component in providing excellent student service at institutions across the country (Wyner et al., 2016). Community colleges strive to provide educational opportunities for 8.7 million students each year that align with the economic needs within their communities (Davidson et al., 2019). Therefore, having a vision for talent development and economic mobility, the delivery of high-quality programs aligned with regional needs, evaluating student support throughout their journey, and developing mutually beneficial partnerships within the community are all essential practices to meet the needs of students and employers alike (Davidson et al., 2019).

PROPOSED CHANGES/REFORMS TO BE ADOPTED

Community colleges are often an integral part of the community because they have the unique opportunity to serve the needs of both students and local employers. At excellent colleges, leaders strive to make their institutions conduits to economic opportunity and ensure advisers and teachers are equipped to help build students’ aspirations rather than constrict choices based on assumptions about interests or abilities. They help students of all backgrounds make informed decisions about their program of study and career goals, recognizing that even the most self-directed students may be basing their decisions on incomplete or inaccurate information. They make career guidance an integral part of the student experience rather than an optional resource, and focus career advising on helping students see the full range of their own potential options. They do not see the student’s journey as complete until that student is employed in a good job, earning a living wage. These colleges own the student experience, from before students matriculate until they attain a good job (Davidson et al., 2019).

Institutional change can be an overwhelming and often times, challenging process. However, in order to best serve our evolving communities and students’ needs, community colleges may want to think of “flipping the script” on how they help students make the connections to academic and transfer pathways to local industry

and ensure that there is a clear link to future employment opportunities. To help facilitate this change, we encourage colleges to explore incorporating these clear connections throughout the onboarding process. The following checklist is designed for community colleges to use that may be most conducive at their respective institution. It is understandable that all the items may not be implemented, but rather, help to facilitate a change in mindset of how community colleges may assist students early in their academic journey.

Checklist to incorporate career and transfer pathways and career exploration in the student onboarding process:

- ✓ **Campus Change Champions:** Identify key stakeholders on campus that can serve as campus champions for implementing change and that can provide the necessary information that can be distributed across departments. Identify a campus champion that can obtain and maintain regional labor-market data in order to keep campus constituents and resources up-to-date.
- ✓ **Recruitment/Marketing:** Provide prospective and current students with clear points of connection to labor market data that is relevant to the college's career and transfer pathways. Design recruitment and marketing materials that showcase academic programs and potential career and transfer pathways, and median salary information. Include inspiring testimonials from successful program graduates in marketing materials. Clear examples of success stories can demonstrate to students how an education path and program can lead to landing an in-demand job.
- ✓ **Academic Programs:** Clearly align academic program offerings at the institution to the skills, jobs and careers that are in-demand in the region. Consider developing an online tool that may be designed to showcase current academic program offerings that connect directly to career and transfer pathways, which include labor-market information. This can be accomplished by utilizing a proprietary system or using a third-party vendor such as the EMSI Career Coach tool.
- ✓ **Advising/Orientation:** Embed career exploration resources during initial advising appointments and new student orientations, such as career interest assessments and career counseling into early onboarding practices. Have students create an education plan tied to career goals, identify clear course sequencing, and establish advising milestones and touch points throughout the education journey to ensure students are staying on track and working towards their education and career goals. Consider incorporating current organization structure of Career Service professionals or coaches within the advising and orientation experiences. Provide students an opportunity to begin discussions regarding career opportunities early in their advising sessions.
- ✓ **First Year Experience Courses:** Provide students with information about career services and work-based learning opportunities with regional and local employers during the first semester at college. Programs with the strongest student outcomes are intentional about connecting students with employer partners via apprenticeships, internships and other earn and learn models.

Consider incorporating assignments that surround the exploration of regional in-demand jobs, potential salary earnings, and what education beyond the two-year degree or certificate may be needed for transfer pathway consideration. This helps students obtain jobs in their intended industry or program of study and often ensures they transition smoothly into the workforce.

- ✓ **Professional Development:** Provide professional development opportunities for faculty and staff members. Consider who are your campus champions that may be key to assisting in providing professional development updates across campus to all stakeholders. Student service professionals are tasked with trying to stay up-to-date on changes to campus services and programs. Professional development, even if it is provided internally, is a vital component for key personnel to learn about and stay current on regional and local in-demand jobs, academic programs, and transfer pathway information. Consider working with four-year institution and local employers to provide professional development updates to faculty and staff.

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

Although community colleges across the state and country share a similar goal, each institution possesses a unique set of academic pathways and operational structure. The fact that each institution operates uniquely with its own identity, structure, budget, and operating plan presents the largest implementation challenge. To help address this challenge, the checklist items have been provided in a general format so that individual institutions can adapt the recommendations to fit within their operating structure.

Variety in Operating Structures

While advising, new student orientation, first year experience courses, and career services are common practice at most community colleges, each institution takes a unique approach in how they deliver those services. Flexibility in the delivery of service provides institutions with the ability to customize services within their existing onboarding processes. For example, at Edison State Community College, new students discuss career goals with their Pathways Advisor during their initial advising appointment. Edison State also utilizes the Holland Career Assessment tool to help connect students to an educational pathway that is best suited for their personality and interests. As the student is exploring pathways, they are also able to view career outlook information, such as annual wages, annual openings, and expected growth on the college's website. Community colleges should look to those institutions across their state and country for best practices that may be adapted and adopted at their home institution. Institutions such as Indian River State College, Palo Alto College, and Sinclair Community College would be a good place to begin to explore. Exploring The Aspen Institute's *Transfer Playbook* and *The Workforce Playbook*, can also provide several recommendations for implementing best practices on community college campuses. Often times, change may be challenging and met

with some resistance, but rethinking how community colleges conduct their onboarding process by incorporating clear connections to careers and transfer pathways can provide the best educational journey for those that we serve.

Budgetary Concerns

Another major challenge for community colleges of varying size and structure are the budgetary concerns associated with new initiatives. While some colleges may be able to dedicate significant funds towards the purchase of licensed technology and software, such as career assessment tools, software for career exploration, and applications to track labor market data, other institutions may need to rely on free or low-cost resources to provide this valuable information to students. Luckily, options are available regardless of budgetary concerns. Free websites such as Ohio Means Jobs, Ohio's Top Job Website, and Career One Stop provide colleges with a no-cost way to connect students to valuable career planning, information, and resources. Alternatively, institutions that are willing and able to purchase paid services and programs, may find value in investing in analytical software that tracks ever changing labor market data, such as Burning Glass Technologies or EMSI economic modeling. To help colleges defray some of the technology costs related to expensive analytical software, in July of 2020 the Ohio Association of Community Colleges (OACC) launched a new data initiative that provides each Ohio Community College with customized labor market reports. Ohio's community colleges have the opportunity to access data coaching supports and customizable labor market reports through the OACC Success Center which aims to ensure that all of Ohio's community colleges are informed of labor market trends and stay on the cutting edge of their regional labor market activity. Similar paid license options are available for career assessment tools, staff training opportunities, and advising resources.

CONCLUSION

Few students arrive at college with a clear idea of where they're headed and how to get there. They may want to work in health care one day but not know whether they would prefer to work as a medical assistant, lab technician, registered nurse, or physical therapist. They may have professional aspirations that turn out to fall far short of their income expectations or find that their initial career goals are misaligned with their personality traits or interests. Even those who have clarity about their direction may not know what programs to enter or courses to take, or once they're further along in their education including the steps to take to move from college into a career. Students may simply be unaware of their career possibilities or how the talents they possess can link to a rewarding profession. This is especially true for students who are the first in their families to attend college or come from communities where they weren't exposed to a broad diversity of professions (Davidson et al., 2019).

In order to address these challenges, the **checklist created aims to assist Ohio community colleges in developing clear connections between programs and careers and transfer pathways/outcomes in the student onboarding process.** By highlighting career resources throughout the onboarding process, these provide ways for community colleges to:

- ✓ identify campus change champions,
- ✓ re-evaluate current recruitment and marketing strategies and materials,
- ✓ clearly align academic programs with career and transfer pathway opportunities,
- ✓ embed career exploration and discussion into advising and orientations,
- ✓ provide career and transfer pathway information into first-year experience courses, and
- ✓ provide professional development opportunities for faculty and staff.

Community colleges should incorporate strategies to implement change in order to support students with the goal of creating coherent connections between their education pathways, including transfer opportunities and long-term career goals and plans.

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