



LEADERSHIP ACADEMY FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

Pathways Project Implementation Memorandum

TO: Laura Rittner, Executive Director, Success Center – OACC
FROM: Rhea Busick, Laura Emerick, Kelly Hogan, Bruce Weaver
RE: Supporting Career Exploration and Connection to Programs of Study for Online Students
DATE: September 2, 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY/INTRODUCTION

Many students are forced to select a major or program of study without understanding the connection between programs and careers as well as availability of positions and salary expectations. Developing an online learning module that allows students to explore both academic and career pathways and related job opportunities will help students make more fully informed decisions and develop their individual career and academic plans in the first semester.

We recognize the importance of having a First Year Experience (FYE) course for all students. However, our project is designed to address the specific needs of students enrolled in online sections of this course. Online students may not be as connected with campus resources related to career exploration as students who generally attend classes on campus. In addition, students who select online classes may have difficulty visiting campus resource areas like Career and Advising Services during their hours of operation due to their personal and work schedules.

To that end, our project will offer recommendations for the design of a robust online module that allows students to explore career opportunities by pathway and interact with peers, faculty, and staff using tools that support remote participation.

RELEVANT LITERATURE REVIEWED

Career Exploration in FYE Courses

An essential component of the Guided Pathways framework is to help students choose a career path. Even among students who have selected a major at time of entry, up to 70% of students may be undecided or end up changing their major—

declaring a major is not the same as making an informed decision and committing to a major (Gordon & Steele, 2003, as cited in Hansen & Pederson, 2012).

Engaging students in career development activities needs to begin right away in the first year. Historically, utilizing Career Services and meeting with career counselors has been viewed as an “optional” service. As such, students are not likely to engage in career exploration unless they are required to do so. Additionally, students often wait to visit Career Services until they are at the end of their college career and ready to search for a job. Given these challenges, embedding career exploration into a required FYE course is a natural fit (Harrington & Orosz, 2018).

Career development courses and/or career exploration modules, embedded in FYE or introductory courses, have proven very effective in helping students develop career decision-making self-efficacy (Damminger, Potter, & Pritchard, 2009; Stebleton & Diamond, 2018). Additionally, Workman (2013) found that students learned more when actively engaged in exploration through a FYE course than from simply discussing their interests and career options with an advisor.

Also in line with the “keeping students on the path” pillar of Guided Pathways, both career development and college-student retention research demonstrate that students with a clear sense of career direction and vocational goals are more likely to maintain motivation and persist to graduation (Stebleton & Diamond, 2018; Tinto, 1993). Therefore, not only will embedding career exploration in a FYE course aid with selecting a career path, but it can also help students stay focused on the end goal of completing their degree.

Career Exploration, FYE, and Equity

Having structured opportunities for career exploration is also important for equity. Research shows that students tend to rely more on informal resources to obtain career information, such as conversations with family and friends. However, this approach advantages those from more privileged backgrounds who have people in their network who have been exposed to higher education and a breadth of higher income and prestigious careers. On the other hand, those from less privileged backgrounds, particularly low-income, first-generation students, tend to have less information and fewer connections to career information (Harrington & Orosz, 2018).

While most institutions do offer free career counseling services, as mentioned earlier, studies demonstrate that few take advantage of these services if they are not required. Again, students from more privileged backgrounds may better understand the benefit of those services and therefore utilize them whereas less advantaged students may not (Harrington & Orosz, 2018). A 2016 Gallup-Purdue Index Study found that nationally only 52% of students ever visited their career center, and first-generation students were even less likely to do so. Moreover, community colleges in particular, which serve 45% of all undergraduates, often don't have the staffing and

financial resources dedicated to career services like their four-year counterparts, and community colleges serve a significant portion of first-generation, low-income, and marginalized students (Stableton & Diamond, 2018). As a group, these points demonstrate that optional services may further perpetuate the equity gap.

Lastly, FYE and career courses have also been found to contribute to greater levels of academic achievement, retention, and persistence (Hansen & Pedersen, 2012). Stableton and Diamond (2018) present first-year career exploration as a high impact practice (HIP), which may be embedded in a FYE course or other activities. In general, HIPs positively impact student retention, persistence, and engagement, particularly for underrepresented students. Grier-Reed, Skaar, and Conkell-Ziebell (2009) found career courses helped reduce self-defeating thoughts and empowered low-income and first-generation students (as cited in Stableton & Diamond, 2018). Therefore, institutions that embed career exploration into their FYE course ensure all students have access to credible career information and have guidance in making informed career decisions as well as support student persistence among at-risk populations.

DATA EXAMINED

The benefits of a career center, or courses with career exploration and development, are great for incoming “undecided” students as well as continuing students who may rethink their choices. A Miami University study of undecided students found that though working with advisors was appreciated, engaging in relevant courses with active career exploration was more helpful (Workman, 2013). Additionally, study of the retention rates of first-year students in “Ethnography of Work” classes, in which students visit employers, use online career exploration tools, and apply ethnographic principles to career planning at New Hampshire’s community colleges, showed “33% higher retention rate than their peers who didn’t take those courses” (Kafka, 2019).

The connections between courses and career work should be explicit. According to Kafka (2019), graduates are “63% more likely to value their education if they understand the relevance of their courses and agree to their career.” The article also highlights Complete College America’s findings that “36% of college graduates, in retrospect, would pick a different major if they were choosing again and that African-American and Hispanic graduates are underrepresented in the highest-paying and fastest-growing jobs in STEM, health, and business.” Career exploration, course relevance, and job outlook are all important aspects of higher education pathways for students.

In February 2020, eighteen of Ohio’s twenty-three community colleges completed an OACC Student Success Policies and Procedures Survey. Though there were several institutions that did not complete the survey, among these eighteen we can see the

range of our institutions—some offer FYE and some do not, some require FYE and some do not, some offer online FYE and some do not, and some include a career component in FYE and some do not:

- 14/18 who responded offer FYE course
- 12/18 require first-year degree or certificate seeking students to enroll in FYE course, though only some require this in the first semester
- 8/18 require FYE course in the program curricula
- 4/18 do not offer FYE course
- All (14/14) offer face-to-face FYE course; 11/14 offer online FYE course; 7/14 offer hybrid FYE course
- Course time spent on Career Exploration 13.7%; Cluster/Program topics 9.5%
- Topics in FYE courses in 14 institutions include:

Time Management (14/14)	Technology (navigation) (12/14)
Study Skills (14/14)	Cluster/Program Info (10/14)
Career Fit (13/14)	Enrollment Services (fin aid, reg) (8/14)
Student Services (student activities, tutoring, academic advising) (13/14)	Other (none indicated "career" in their free responses) (3/14)

Eleven of sixteen respondents indicated they have plans underway to revise FYE, and four of these referred to "career" in this context.

Helping Students Get on a Path is a part of the Guided Pathways implementation strategy, and requiring FYE that help students explore the field and choose a major as well as develop full program plans based on required career/transfer exploration are fundamental to ensuring students have the best start possible.

PROPOSED CHANGES/REFORMS TO BE ADOPTED

Recommendation #1

Career exploration should be embedded into a required FYE course. Colleges with an existing FYE course should add or update the career exploration module and related assignments to ensure students are engaged in self-assessment and are aware of program requirements, ongoing education expectations, job outlook, and salary range. Colleges who do not currently offer a FYE course should develop one, if possible.

Given most institutions already offer a FYE course, they should include a robust career exploration module in this course. To ensure all students have access to a structured career exploration experience, this course should also be mandatory. However, the key is *robust*. Many institutions already offer a FYE course and include career exploration/career services at a minimal level—a visit to the campus Career Services office for a presentation on services and offerings or taking a career assessment during a class period. However, career development is not a one-time event, and students need more time to engage in this process. At minimum, the career exploration module of a FYE course should include 1) assessment of interests, skills, values, and personality traits, 2) opportunity to identify career options that match said interests, and 3) research of careers of interest using legitimate occupational information resources (such as O*NET or Occupational Outlook Handbook) (Dammingier, Potter, & Pritchard, 2009; Harrington & Orosz, 2018). Even better would be to include an experiential learning component, such as an informational interview or job shadow experience (Harrington & Orosz, 2018). In order to include all of these components, institutions/instructors should plan on dedicating at least several weeks to career exploration in the FYE course, if not the entire semester by integrating with other topics such as information literacy, critical thinking, and academic and financial planning (Harrington & Orosz, 2018).

In the online course format in particular, it will be important to consider sense of belonging, engagement, and active learning. One of the benefits of taking a FYE seminar in person is making connections with peers and faculty. First-year seminars are very effective at creating a sense of belonging, especially when related to a meta-major and “welcoming” of students into that meta-major community (G. Schmidt, personal communication, August 17, 2020). However, students enrolled in online classes may face unique challenges preventing them from engaging in their coursework and the career exploration process in the same way. Therefore, the delivery of the content and opportunity to engage with the instructors and peers is of utmost importance.

Foote and Mixson-Brookshire (2014) reported that students consistently rated interaction and communication with instructors as an important aspect of an online FYE course. Additionally, they also found setting clear expectations from the instructor to be important as well. Therefore, faculty selected to teach the online sections of the course should be experienced with online instruction, know how to utilize technology to engage students, communicate expectations regularly, provide ongoing feedback, and be willing to meet with students virtually as needed (such as virtual office hours).

Good online instruction should also employ active learning methods to enhance engagement and not simply put in-class materials into a learning management system (Foote & Mixson-Brookshire, 2014; Murray, Lachowsky, & Green, 2017).

Following Kolb's (1984) model of active learning, the module curriculum should involve opportunity for concrete experience (self-awareness activities, discussions about life experiences), active experimentation (create a video or virtual presentation to apply knowledge), and reflective observation (reflection papers or discussions on assessment results, personalized course content related to careers). To help build community and engagement, instructors can also use an inquiry-based learning approach to encourage meaningful interactions between students and instructors, students and peers, and students with the course content (Murray, Lachowsky, & Green, 2017). With this approach, students and instructors would work together and support one another to develop knowledge and solve problems—in this case, making informed career decisions.

Recommendation #2

Colleges that do not have a FYE course should develop an online career exploration module and related assignments to ensure students are engaged in self-assessment and are aware of program requirements, ongoing education expectations, job outlook, and salary range in the first year. This module can be delivered in a number of formats, including but not limited to:

- A) Embedded into a first-year introductory course in the meta-major; ideally students would engage with program faculty in this course in their first semester.
- B) Included as a required part of online new student orientation, or as an extension to new student orientation through an independent non-credit “course” or a series of workshops. These can also be delivered virtually through a learning management system or other platform.

Recommendation #3

Colleges should design career exploration and development opportunities for students that enhance or support the required academic course of study and related career readiness by ensuring the following:

- A) Required advising and/or career counseling so that all students benefit from connecting with professionals who can help them explore career options and organize academic, career, and financial planning through completion; this includes attending to pathways and choices of College Credit Plus students. Advising and counseling appointments can easily be conducted virtually via videoconferencing technology.
- B) Improved website design that offers program and career-related information by clustering programs by fields of interest (“meta-major”

approach) so students can make well-informed decisions early in the admissions stage.

Recurring Opportunities

The FYE course curriculum is one method to engage students in career exploration and planning, yet there are a number of ways institutions intentionally onboard students to college and career. From the information on the website and at orientation, to the ongoing course work and career counseling and advising that takes place throughout a program of study, fundamental and current information should be easily accessible and helpfully reinforced throughout the student life cycle. Additionally, exposure to career exploration does not have to occur in just one setting; rather, students should be provided with multiple opportunities to engage with career exploration throughout their first year (Stebleton & Diamond, 2018).

Timeline

1. Autumn 2020 - Create a taskforce of vested stakeholders for FYE success; have this team use research and findings from [Redesigning Community College Student Onboarding Through Guided Pathways](#) to guide their work.
2. Autumn 2020 - Assess the opportunities for career exploration and development within the student experience using a tool such as <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/redesigning-community-college-onboarding-guided-pathways-planning.docx>. Document any gaps in pathways design on the website, exploration tools for prospective students, orientation activities to majors and careers, exploration activities in FYE and intro courses, and consistent and required career counseling and advising expectations.
3. Spring 2021 - Present recommendations, including who is involved in changes, timeline for the work, and next steps. Note any changes to curriculum, including development or major modifications to an existing FYE course, will need to go through the college curriculum review process; that timeline also needs to be considered for implementation.

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

Since not every Ohio community college has a FYE course, it is not possible to offer career exploration to every student using a FYE course. One solution would be for a college to develop a FYE course that includes a career exploration module. While this option is possible and might yield various benefits, it is not likely to be adopted and, admittedly, it would present challenges for the college to add a new course. A more

viable option would be an online career exploration learning module offered independently or included in a structure other than a FYE course, such as orientation or a survey course, as entry into a pathway or meta-major.

Even when colleges have an existing FYE course, they may not offer any online sections, and those who do offer the course may not be interested in editing it to include the career exploration module. Since the proposal is to develop an online learning career exploration module, it is not necessary for a FYE course to be modified or offered online. These challenges may be addressed as discussed with reference to the first challenge identified in the preceding paragraph—an online learning module addressing career exploration offered independently or included in a structure other than a FYE course, such as orientation or a survey course as entry into a meta-major.

There are a number of resource challenges to online module or course development. One specific challenge regarding human resources is that faculty and workplace personnel, whose participation is vital, have limited time to participate. Careful structuring of the participation of these individuals in this module development would ensure these people would not be overwhelmed with the responsibility they would accept. Some institutions may face a lack of lack of fiscal resources for course design and implementation. CARES Act money may support reassigned time for instructors.

Another significant challenge is for the college to be able to assess and to implement mandatory participation by students during their first year of enrollment. This career exploration module should not be regarded as elective or optional. Therefore, creative solutions must be identified and implemented by each college to address this challenge.

Historically, students (as an aggregate) in online education experiences tend to underperform compared with face-to-face experiences. Each college must explore best practices in facilitating online learning experiences and take these findings into consideration as they design this module for implementation in their own particular context. Especially important is the need for faculty to engage students, whether the online delivery is synchronous or asynchronous.

Undoubtedly, there will be various implementation challenges due to the diversity of two-year colleges in Ohio. Therefore, there is no viable way a “cookie cutter mold” proposal may be put forth. Solutions will need to be customized accordingly to be effective and efficient within the context of each institution.

Finally, some institutions may believe now it is not a good time to focus on this new endeavor. There are always many challenges which compete for time and attention, and this dynamic has been exacerbated during the COVID crisis. However, due to the importance of this topic, serious assessment may convince leaders to expedite implementation. For leaders who prefer to defer implementation, a reasonable

timeline (alternative to what has been suggested in this proposal) could be developed.

CONCLUSION

Developing online career readiness, exploration, and development tools, as well as designing strategic opportunities for students to use them as part of the curriculum, is critical to a successful first year student experience. Academic and career planning should be carefully organized and reinforced to ensure students make well-informed decisions that align with their career goals. Each of Ohio's community colleges is unique, yet all are accepting more students who are deciding to learn online and who seek improved job opportunities. Using the recommendations in this memo, institutional teams should study the research and tools provided, and document their gaps, so they can identify appropriate next steps. Clarity and focus impact retention and completion. Designing a FYE for students that helps them focus on their goals and offers them the means to chart their course will help them learn, connect, and complete, so they can successfully achieve their current goals and prepare for the next.

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APPENDIX A – ONLINE CAREER EXPLORATION RESOURCES

The University of North Carolina at Wilmington hosts a web page, which provides an opportunity for students to “click on any UNCW major to discover applicable job titles, job and internship links, and industry information links.”

<https://uncw.edu/career/whatcanidowithamajorin.html>

University of Tennessee-Knoxville “What Can I Do With this Major?”

<https://whatcanidowiththismajor.com/major/>

The O*NET Program is the nation's primary source of occupational information.

<https://www.onetonline.org/>

O*NET Interest Profiler is a free career interest assessment backed by O*NET data.

<https://www.mynextmove.org/explore/ip>

This source for career exploration, training & jobs is sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor.

<https://www.careeronestop.org/Toolkit/toolkit.aspx>

Occupational Outlook Handbook

<https://www.bls.gov/ooh/>

APPENDIX B – ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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