



Career Planning in an Online Environment for At-Risk Students

Lisa Napell Dicksteen, MAT: English, Teacher, GOAL Academy, Westminster Colorado Site

Career development. In Colorado today, it is similar to gravity: It's no longer just a theory, but rather, the law. At the end of September 2010, the Colorado legislature mandated that all students enrolled in public schools must have an individual career and academic plan (ICAP) by ninth grade. The official summary of legislation defines an ICAP as "an individualized plan developed by students and students' parents in collaboration with their school counselors, school administrators [and] school personnel that is used to help establish academic and career goals, which shall be updated yearly throughout high school."

This plan combines numerous disparate but related types of information—such as individual interests and aptitudes, career goals, potential target colleges, financial aid forms and processes—and the academic planning necessary to reach those goals and turn it all into one coherent action plan designed to guide students through high school and into post-secondary education or the workplace. This is only the ICAP portion of a comprehensive career development curriculum.

Naturally, the design and implementation of these programs varies from district to district, and sometimes from school to school. As a charter school, GOAL Academy has some specialized parameters to navigate, but being an online school presents the greatest challenges to useful compliance—the key being the word "useful," as compliance for the sake of being in compliance helps no one.

Soft skills needed

According to Rich Mestas, GOAL's chief academic officer, "The driving force behind our career development curriculum is our desire to equip our students with the soft skills that will ensure their success in the world of work." These skills include time management, workplace attire, interview preparation, appropriate workplace communication—all the things successful employees take for granted. While this information is relevant and important for all teenagers, it is especially relevant to GOAL's nearly 1,300 students, the majority of whom are designated as at-risk. GOAL Academy has students in 10 sites throughout Colorado and plans to more than double the current number of students and sites.

"Our students often don't have role models for long-term employment or the so-called soft skills that are essential to career success, making it doubly important that we give them the training they need beyond academic and vocational excellence so they can enter the workforce and then be successful when they get there," Mestas, said.

Abigail Esquibel, a GOAL social studies teacher, was part of the team that researched which



software to use in the career development program. The team selected KeyTrain, the curriculum of the WorkKeys system, which is owned by the company responsible for the ACT exam. GOAL has continued to use KeyTrain as the cornerstone of its career development program because administrators have seen an increase in adequate yearly progress, an increase in scores on state-mandated tests, an increase in ACT scores and a distinct benefit when KeyTrain is applied as part of the response to intervention process.

According to Esquibel, KeyTrain helps students “increase their basic knowledge in applied math, reading comprehension and command of various information gathering and synthesis techniques, such as reading maps, manipulating graphs and charts, searching for information and integrating that information into whatever project they are working on.” Not only are these skills important in post-secondary education and the workplace, but they are also part of Colorado’s mandates for career development.

According to Jill Toussaint, who handles GOAL’s concurrent enrollment and runs the career development program, “GOAL’s career development curriculum is aligned to each grade level (8-12), and includes the use of state-supported curriculum such as ICAP, alternative cooperative education, financial literacy, interest inventories—all the components of the governor’s career readiness certification (CRC) program.”

“These certificates, which are signed by the governor, are presented at graduation as additional documentation of a student’s career readiness at levels that are standardized across the state for reading, applied mathematics, writing and information gathering and synthesis,” Toussaint said. “Employers are aware of the extra training required to earn a CRC, so our graduates leave with a distinct advantage over many other high school graduates in the marketplace, whether they are seeking a part-time job to help pay for college or a full-time position as the start of a career.”

Measuring skills

Sheila Boyington, vice president of ACT Inc., said the Colorado CRC is part of a nationwide CRC program that ACT designed to provide a recognizable credential that “measures essential workplace skills” and serves as “a reliable predictor of workplace success.” Students who receive their state’s CRC are eligible to obtain the national certificate directly from ACT.

The organization’s website offers testimonials from companies large and small that are using this certificate as part of their screening and hiring process, indicating that it helps with finding and keeping the right workers, pinpointing employee skills, helping individuals achieve career goals, as well as other essential aspects of their individual selection and retention processes. Some use it to ensure potential hires



have the cognitive skills required to understand and complete their assignments. Additionally, some have found it so helpful they have mandated that external applicants without a workforce readiness certification will not even be granted an initial interview.

Violet Heath, HR manager for the city of Colorado Springs, said city administrators use the certification as a screening tool—primarily for clerical and administrative positions—to determine if applicants possess skills such as the ability to read for information, locate information, perform basic math calculations and write (as applicable).

“If applicants do not pass the WorkKeys tests identified for a city position, they are not forwarded to the hiring authority for an interview,” Heath said. “Therefore, those candidates who are offered employment have demonstrated they possess the basic skills needed for these types of positions. The Colorado CRC takes the guesswork out of determining if applicants possess basic competencies.”

Even when potential employers are not familiar with the document, it can be helpful to the applicant.

Greg Casack, father of 2009 GOAL graduate Jacob Casack, reported that at all of his son’s job interviews after graduation, the employers were impressed with the extra work his son had done to achieve the certificate. Casack said this helped his son sail through the interview process and land his first job.

GOAL assigns KeyTrain in conjunction with its proprietary MyGOAL curriculum and College in Colorado (CiC)—a state-developed career planning, guidance, tracking and portfolio development website—to create what Mestas called “a pioneering attempt to use backward design in the field of education.”

“With a successful career as the starting point, the career development team’s efforts are centered on ensuring that GOAL graduates are made aware of what it takes to accomplish long-term goals, including that of a successful career,” he added.

The CiC website offers a standardized approach to a number of the components the 2010 legislation requires, including:

- A log of high school and concurrent enrollment courses completed.
- Documentation of a student’s career exploration.
- Interest surveys.
- A written post-secondary workforce goal.
- Annual benchmarks for reaching that goal.
- Relevant assessment scores.
- Student’s college applications as prepared and submitted.

- Progress toward securing scholarships and other financial aid, including Free Application for Federal Student Aid applications.
- Any other data reflecting progress toward post-secondary education or employment.

CiC also makes each student's ICAP accessible to them, as well as to their teachers, counselors and parents or legal guardians so they can track their progress. For these reasons, it is an integral part of GOAL's career development program. As such, students register and create their free account at the start of their tenure at GOAL. Additionally, all GOAL faculty have professional CiC accounts through which they can monitor the students' progress and communicate with them.

As students progress through high school, they are scheduled to take one career development course per semester. This requires repeated visits to CiC, as they:

- Complete interest surveys.
- Write sample college application essays.
- Learn to write a resume.
- Gain interviewing skills.
- Develop and track personal, academic and career goals.
- Design and implement plans for achieving those goals.

As graduation approaches, GOAL's counselors work in CiC with students and their families to decide which local colleges they should visit, complete college and financial aid applications, understand employment advertisements, apply for jobs and practice interviewing skills.

GOAL Academy has created a career development program that takes the 2010 legislation into consideration. It is designed to ensure that future graduates will be able to navigate the gravity inherent in their lives after high school, whether they go to college or immediately start a career.

Lisa Napell Dicksteen is an English teacher at the GOAL Academy in Westminster, CO. For more information about GOAL Academy, visit www.goalac.org.

