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Career Everywhere: How Community Colleges Address Equity

Emerging Practices and Challenges of Career Development

Executive Summary

Across the nation, workplaces and educational institutions are wrestling with policies designed to level the playing field within a broader historical set of systems that are not yet equitable. Many marginalized people are left out from the kinds of educational and economic opportunities that offer prospects of improved livelihoods and financial security. In the workforce, equity gaps in career opportunities and earnings persist based on race, ethnicity, gender, and class. And we know from research that earning potential increases with higher educational attainment, but that labor market discrimination has a “powerful impact” on inequity.¹

The San Diego and Imperial Counties community colleges and Regional Consortium are committed to ensuring that its region’s students, particularly disproportionately impacted (DI) students, are afforded ongoing career development opportunities. Such career-focused experiences span a continuum from exploration and career relevance in course content to work-based learning (WBL), plus additional support to increase employment opportunities. The charge of the region is for students attending local community colleges to experience “career everywhere” and to reach their full potential.

Career development offers students direction, resources, and social capital necessary for career success. Career development, combined with San Diego and Imperial Counties’ strong career and academic programs and workforce partnerships, can produce positive outcomes: 1) Students, especially DI students, acquire in-demand skills and knowledge to attain rewarding careers and upward mobility. 2) Colleges see increased enrollment, persistence, completion, and employment rates, while building capacity to prepare more students for career success – thus, strengthening the region with a diverse and highly skilled workforce ready to contribute to the region’s economic growth. 3) Employers benefit from the diverse, skilled workforce which supports their own growth and innovation.

Introduction

In the San Diego and Imperial Counties community colleges, changemakers are striving to strengthen career development and success for students. These changemakers – career services staff, career counselors, and deans – recently shared updates and perspectives on the headway they’re making and the challenges they face. During spring 2023, 29 individuals from across the region’s community colleges engaged with WestEd in one of ten conversations, in which, a clear, palpable theme rose to the surface: A deep passion and commitment to the importance of embedding career development in meaningful ways, including integrated career and education planning, into the student experience to maximize impact.

These community college changemakers believe that “all counselors are genuinely committed to helping students find their *why*.” At the same time, these individuals want to change the narrative about career services and make known that “our goal is to make career planning inescapable.” They plan to “bring career focus to the forefront and expose students to career development every step in their journey,” rather than leave it to students to seek services and resources because, generally, students don’t.

For these changemakers, the call to action is equity driven: To improve the socioeconomic mobility of DI students, who may not have access to the advantages that can pave the way to higher education and well-paying careers and to equip students with career-focused experiences and information to become

¹ Carnevale, A. P. et al. (2021). [The Cost of Economic and Racial Injustice in Postsecondary Education](#). Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.

agents – empowered to successfully navigate their career journey through college and beyond.

With support of the Regional Consortium’s Career Navigation grants, the colleges are just beginning to embed career focus into spaces beyond the walls of career centers, while envisioning how to share collective responsibility for career development.² This summary is an abridged version of the full-length [practice brief](#), focusing on career development implementation in the San Diego and Imperial community colleges. The summary highlights the themes of emerging and promising practices at the colleges, the barriers they face, and calls to action, while the longer practice brief expands on the practices underway at the colleges at a time when cross-department teams are considering *What if?* to advance career development.³

Emerging and Promising Practices

The emerging and promising practices of career development are organized into five themes:

Career Awareness during Outreach and Orientation

How high school students engage in career awareness and how community college students explore careers during orientation.

Career Focus Integrated into Academic Pathways and Programs

How career focus is embedded into pathways through modified curriculum and instruction, counselors with pathway specialization, and student-facing portals and webpages.

Collaborative Strategies that Broaden Career Services Reach

Ways that career services partners with selected departments, faculty, industry, and learning communities to strategically offer career-focused experiences to students.

Technology and Career Exploration Courses

How technology is leveraged to engage students in career exploration and career readiness activities, and how

colleges employ strategies to better support undecided students.

Professional Development

How colleges provide professional development (PD) for counselors, faculty, and student-facing staff to better understand career development and conduct career-focused interactions with students across campuses.

Barriers

According to the changemakers focused on career development implementation, three significant challenge areas are limiting their efforts to improving the outcomes of students achieving their career and education goals.

Understaffed Career Services

Career services needs more capacity. Career centers are challenged by having just one, or in some cases, no full-time counselor, limiting their ability to provide students with the full array of career development services that students need – this, while providing other non-career-oriented responsibilities. The lack of investment in additional career counselors or staff is a critical barrier. Without the capacity, implementing and institutionalizing career planning in a meaningful way and conducting the important work of engaging students in the continuum of career development is very difficult. Because career centers are motivated to improve and provide career services, they lean heavily on part-time career center staff, if any, and peer ambassadors to conduct outreach (to prospective students), help with events (for current students), and support employment preparation (for outgoing students and alumni).

Resistance to Career Integration

Career services needs collaborators. Definitively, the lack of buy-in from academic counseling and faculty, who have yet to value career planning and career relevance, obstructs the ability of career services to collaborate and advance change. Career services staff acknowledge that integrating career into areas that historically have never addressed career development requires a big cultural shift. When faculty do understand the value of career planning and development, the

² Although an interview protocol guided the conversations, information gathered about career development practices and activities at the colleges was not exhaustive nor reflective of all efforts underway.

³ The full-length practice brief with the same title is the second in a series on career development. It can be accessed at the San Diego and Imperial Community Colleges Regional Consortium’s [My Workforce Connection](#) site, along with the first brief, [Integrated Career Planning and Education Planning](#) (2021).

behavioral shifts are difficult without support and PD, or as one individual said, “There may be shifts in heart and mind, but not behavior.” Since mindset shifts take time, they want to begin planting the seeds of change now.

Absence of Policy for Institutionalizing Career Development

Career services needs leadership to institutionalize career development so that it is embedded throughout the student experience and helps level the playing field for DI students. Without leadership support for policy, a systemic approach to ensure that students, especially DI students, experience the full range of career development opportunities toward achieving their education and career goals will never happen. Career services will continue to champion a cause in isolation with limited resources, limited access to centralized data culled from multiple systems, and few, if any, avenues for enacting the kinds of meaningful change that are needed to connect learning to career.

Calls to Action

1. Invest in career services.

Recruit and hire career counselors and staff, who reflect the demographics of students, to partner across academic departments and with industry for increasing integrated career development learning opportunities. Invest in their professional growth with PD.

2. Build community across student services and departments.

Plan intentional community- and trust-building activities to foster familiarity, conversation, and collaboration. Facilitation might involve examining similarities and differences between student services and academic departments, and include unpacking and acknowledging their cultural differences, making visible the codified language and practices of each, and reflecting their shared goals to support students’ long-term flourishing.

3. Develop institutional capacity in career development to increase student success.

Invest in building knowledge from research and the field on why career development matters to increase the socio-economic mobility of individuals and on how embedding career development into the student journey ensures that students

benefit from the advantages and opportunities it affords (see Resources in the full-length practice brief).

Incentivize faculty to participate in PD to build knowledge about the benefits of career development and career planning

for all students, in particular DI students, who often do not seek services on their own and have the most to gain. Provide training on evidence-based practices for having career conversations and embedding career into curriculum. Support faculty in non-CE fields, such as social sciences and liberal arts, in translating how their course content helps develop critical thinking skills necessary for advancing students’ socioeconomic mobility.

4. Engage institutional leadership to bolster and champion collaborative, cross-department work focused on career development for sustained, systemic change that benefits students.

Ensure that leadership supports shared responsibility among career services, instructional faculty, and counseling faculty, and that it makes space for innovating and implementing new career navigation strategies.

Looking Forward

With the San Diego and Imperial Counties community colleges having successfully realized a strong guided pathway model for the region’s students, they now are ready to take on the next challenge. The region’s new focus on career everywhere aims to ensure equitable access to career mobility by implementing innovative and intentional strategies that integrate on-going career development, including WBL, into the student-centered journey, while strengthening employer engagement to increase career opportunities. Career development is already gaining traction whether colleges are in the planning stage, early implementation stage, or somewhere in between. The changemakers are ready, sharing aspirations that include “implementing the student experience with a more robust career lens,” “seeing ACPs (Academic and Career Pathways) not as programs but the fabric in how academics and career are intertwined,” and “an institutional message that career guides students’ decisions.” However, the success of career development as an equity-centered approach that ensures DI students equal access to career opportunities throughout their journey depends on leadership to voice its commitment by investing in time, staff, and resources.