CTE and Postsecondary Student Success Efforts:
The Importance of Integrating Initiatives

The typical college experience has been described by the Community College Research Center (CCRC) as having the structure of a cafeteria – though there are many programs, services and activities available, it is often left to the learner to make the choices that will lead them to successful program completion and entry into the workforce.[1] This structure has led to an environment where, even with increased access to postsecondary education, learners, particularly those considered "non-traditional," are not set up for success. Graduation rates for four-year universities are currently at 59 percent,[2] and for community colleges at a dismal 28 percent.[3]

In response to this situation, many postsecondary systems and institutions have established **student success initiatives**. These initiatives can and do benefit from integration with Career Technical Education (CTE), as many CTE programs employ highly effective learner support and engagement strategies that may augment newer student success strategies. Intentional alignment between student success initiatives and CTE programs is also critical because, in many cases, CTE learners are included in the target beneficiaries of those initiatives.

The Need for Student Success Initiatives

Postsecondary learners, particularly those from low-income backgrounds and those who are the first in their families to attend college, face numerous nonacademic barriers to completing their degree successfully and on time. These barriers include navigating complex college bureaucracies and balancing academics with external factors, such as maintaining employment and arranging for child and family care. Many learners do not attend college immediately after high school, and returning to a structure of going to class and completing homework is an adjustment. Community college students work an average of 19 hours per week, with 40 percent working over 20 hours per week. Many learners delay attending college, with 38 percent of all current undergraduates now over the age of 25. Almost half of college students are financially on their own, and half have their own financial dependents. [4]

BECAUSE OF FINANCIAL PRESSURES AND COMPETING OBLIGATIONS, TODAY'S STUDENTS ARE LESS LIKELY TO FINISH HIGHER EDUCATION.

38% OF STUDENTS WITH ADDITIONAL FINANCIAL, WORK AND FAMILY OBLIGATIONS LEAVE SCHOOL IN THEIR FIRST YEAR

11% OF STUDENTS LIVING BELOW POVERTY GRADUATE WITHIN SIX YEARS

53% OF STUDENT-PARENTS LEAVE COLLEGE WITH NO DEGREE

Figure 1. Statistics and graphic taken from the Lumina Foundation, https://www.luminafoundation.org/todays-student-statistics

If a learner manages to navigate all of these challenges, they still must choose and enroll in the correct course sequence for their program. Therefore, it is crucial that learners are presented with clearly laid-out pathways to completion, supported by suggested course sequences and ample availability of advising services.

Development and Implementation of Guided Pathways

While student success initiatives may look different across the many two- and four-year institutions now implementing them, there are some common strategies, including peer mentoring, summer bridge courses, seminars on navigating the college system and the use of sophisticated data systems to analyze learner outcomes by course and make informed adjustments to learner supports as needed.

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One model that has been particularly popular with community colleges is the **guided pathways model**, which is described as a total redesign of how community colleges work, with the main objective of improving learner completion rates. As of 2017, more than 250 community colleges across the country are implementing guided pathways, thirty of which are participating in the Pathways Project, coordinated by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC). The CCRC worked with the AACC to distill the guided pathways model into four main practice areas:

- **Mapping pathways to learner end goals**: Colleges create "maps" for every program offered that show learner suggested course sequences and what employment and education opportunities await them upon completion of the program.

    o **How CTE can help:** CTE programs have long been anchored on the employment opportunities offered upon completion, and routinely align course standards and curricula with requirements for attaining industry-recognized credentials, in addition to graduating. Quality CTE programs also utilize labor market projections to predict program needs based on future employment opportunities.

- **Helping learners choose and enter a program pathway:** Colleges help learners narrow down which programs they'd like to enter, and avoid allowing learner majors to remain "undeclared." Even if a learner does not know their desired major, colleges encourage them to enroll in meta-majors, which focus on learner interest areas and are designed for learners to test out a few different subjects within one meta content area, such as business, social sciences or health.

    o **How CTE can help:** CTE programs have been organized using The National Career Clusters® Framework since 2002 and the 16 Career Clusters are essentially meta-majors. The Framework was designed to expand the universe of CTE programs to include the entire world of work and to evolve the CTE system beyond preparation for a single job. As such, Career Cluster-aligned pathways are designed to encourage learners to take introductory courses that support a broad range of career options, and then focus on specific careers as they progress through a course sequence. This framework – and its 16 Career Clusters – can be a useful way to think of groupings for guided pathway meta-majors.

- **Keeping learners on a path:** Colleges implement advising systems with built-in alerts for when learners are at-risk of falling off track. Advising systems must also work to eliminate institutional barriers for learners, including inconvenient scheduling and lack of course availability.

    o **How CTE can help:** Career advising is a crucial part of CTE programs, with advisers and faculty working together with learners to monitor progress towards graduation and make adjustments as needed. A recent survey from Gallup and Strada Education Network found that postsecondary learners cited work-based advice about their major and course choices as the most helpful, but the least used of other advice sources.[5] The career advising process should involve more than school faculty or advisers, and include other community partners and employers.

65% JOBS REQUIRING POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION OF SOME FORM BY 2020

$500,000 EARNINGS HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES MISS OUT ON BY NOT OBTAINING AN ASSOCIATE'S DEGREE

Figure 2. Statistics and graphic taken from the Lumina Foundation, *https://www.luminafoundation.org/todays-student-statistics*

- **Ensuring that learners are learning:** Colleges must design their programs around a coherent set of learning outcomes, which should align with requirements for success in further education and entry into the workforce.[6]

    - **How CTE can help:** CTE course and program standards often require employer input and validation before they can be approved by the state, system or institution. State and institutional CTE leaders are generally well-versed in working with industry partners to ensure that programs are teaching the appropriate knowledge and skills, with many program standards undergoing regular review and updates every few years, depending on state, system or institution requirements.

Connecting the Dots with Career Advising

According to CCRC, in more traditional settings, "academic advising focuses more on next semester's registration plan than on long-term goals. Career counseling is often conducted in a different location by separate staff and is usually focused on job placement." Learners are better served by an integrated advising system, which connects career advising with academic supports, and is consistent across secondary and postsecondary.[7]

Recently, the **New Jersey** Department of Education (NJDOE) partnered with the New Jersey Center for Student Success – an initiative run by the state's Council of County Colleges, which is the coordinating organization for the 19 community colleges in New Jersey – to hold a career advising and development training conference for both secondary and postsecondary career advising and development professionals.

The Center for Student Success is one of many success centers across the country focused on expanding access and equitable outcomes for postsecondary learners. The event, with planning led by the Center for Student Success, took place in March 2017 for a sold-out crowd of 250 practitioners and featured speakers from the NJDOE, the state's Department of Labor and Workforce Development, the New Jersey Career Assistance Navigator website and individual community colleges. The NJDOE plans to continue the partnership with the Center for Student Success by working together on future conferences, as well as collaborating on and coordinating efforts for aligning career advising and development initiatives across secondary, postsecondary and adult education.[8]

[1] Bailey, T. R. (2017, December 03). Guided Pathways at Community Colleges: From Theory to Practice. Retrieved March 25, 2018, from https://www.aacu.org/diversitydemocracy/2017/fall/bailey

[2] NCES Fast Facts Tool (National Center for Education Statistics). (n.d.). Retrieved March 25, 2018, from https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=40

[3] Chen, G. (2017, January 04). The Catch-22 of Community College Graduation Rates. Retrieved March 25, 2018, from https://www.communitycollegereview.com/blog/the-catch-22-of-community-college-graduation-rates

[4] Today's Reality: Lumina Foundation. (n.d.). Retrieved April 02, 2018, from https://www.luminafoundation.org/todays-student-statistics

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[6] Bailey, T. R. (2017, December 03). Guided Pathways at Community Colleges: From Theory to Practice. Retrieved March 25, 2018, from https://www.aacu.org/diversitydemocracy/2017/fall/bailey

[7] Karp, M. M., & Stacey, G. W. (2013, September). Designing a System for Strategic Advising. Retrieved March 25, 2018, from https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/designing-a-system-for-strategic-advising.pdf

[8] The State of Career Technical Education: Career Advising and Development. (2018, February 01). Retrieved March 25, 2018, from https://careertech.org/resource/state-cte-career-advising-development

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