Changing Horizons in the Community College: Reinforcing Career Coaching and Online Instruction

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Abstract
As many traditional disciplines become enriched by incorporating technology into their fields, education struggles to achieve the necessary requirements in order to deliver successful options to their constituents. Recognizing time and financial constraints, the need for clarity in selecting a vocation becomes more important in the face of the current economic crisis. Offering students a wider choice of programs and courses can present fiscal and logistical challenges. One viable method community colleges can utilize to achieve this undertaking, is creating a strong online career coaching and education program. The purpose of this study is to examine career coaching in conjunction with online education to better serve community colleges who are learning at a distance. This will lead to a better understanding of the role of technology in the classroom and in vocational education and utilizing career coaching to better prepare students and to enhance retention and student. success.

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INTRODUCTION

Hindered by a crippling economic status, resulting in escalating tuition rates nationally, our community colleges would be prudent to address some critical issues vexing future and current students. Community college leaders today face a number of difficult decisions related to increasing tuition and reductions in state appropriations. Despite unprecedented financial challenges, community college leaders should be proactive in addressing some critical issues facing current and future students. These leaders face a number of difficult decisions related to maintaining open access, increasing tuition, and reductions in state appropriations. Fully exploring the role that technology can play in both the classroom and in vocational education, will enable community colleges to offer opportunities to best serve their diverse constituents through online education and career coaching. Enhancing these programs will help to improve student retention, enhance student academic success, and better prepare community college students for employment in a global economy. Two primary concerns, financial resources and career guidance, are considered essential needs for most community college students (Rosensohn, n.d., OECD, 2004).

Many students contemplating applying to a community college desire a variety of options, including majors and learning choices, which can provide them a sharper edge in gaining employment after graduation. A vital need for any student considering entering community college is advisement on specific academic material to review prior to taking the entrance exam. Appropriate advising can reduce the amount of squandered funds typically distributed by federal and state entities (and currently utilized by colleges). Without proper advising students may take classes that are duplication of their knowledge base, which the student might have forgotten, due to exam anxiety.

One major student issue that is increasingly being discussed in professional literature, suggesting further empirical research, is career guidance. One topic related to advising at the community college which is increasingly discussed in the professional literature is career guidance. According to Dr. Fritz Grupe (n.d.), founder of MyMajors.com, 80% of college-bound students have not picked a major at the time they enter college, and once enrolled in college, half of all college students' change their major at least once. The lack of clarity of a career choice can diminish a student's natural talents, while they simultaneously accumulate financial burden, in turn often encouraging the startling attrition rates at the higher education level. In spite of this confusion and lack of preparation, many students make the ultimate

decision to continue their education by attending their local community college. The assistance of a career coach could help community college students to narrow their career path more quickly, efficiently, and less expensively.

An irrefutable event occurring throughout the past six years during the recent recession is the reshaping of the job market. The job market has changed, leaving more people, particularly the un-trained and under-educated, without jobs or hope of finding jobs. Many of these workers have experience in a field that may no longer be in demand or sustainable. This change has resulted in a constant reshaping of the pool of students applicants which feeds into the community college system, presenting many challenges for community college leaders. While these administrators strive to serve their students and the communities within the college's service region, one of the challenges they face is finding trained career coaches, particularly in rural areas where career opportunities may be most limited.

With the national high-school dropout rate defined as the percentage of 16 through 24 year olds who are not enrolled in school and have not earned a high school credential is over 9%, according to the U.S. Census (2011), as well as the rate for many non-dominant groups significantly higher (for example, the dropout rate for Hispanics is over 20% in some areas), there is a stronger need to encourage students to stay in school and continue with higher education. By October of the 2009-2010 school years, California had more than 383,000 students drop-out of high school, while New York State had 170,800 students drop-out. With these hefty numbers of students who fail to complete a 12th grade education, the question every state may consider asking is, can employing the services of an expert in guiding students towards a career that will potentially benefit both the employee and employer, while combining the students' natural talents and passion assist in curbing this failure rate? O'Neil and Chen (1963, 2008) suggested that career guidance efforts can help prevent high school drop outs, hence career coaches could be useful in preventing this trend. According to an article in the American School Board Journal (2005), nearly 53 percent of young people stated that there were not enough counselors in their high schools to provide them guidance about college or potential careers thus they were not prepared to attend college. Nearly the same amount of those students felt they were not even prepared to take college level work while in high school. These students are asking for guidance, but do not have enough counselors or career coaches available to help them. Career coaches identifies potential career options that leverage students talents, help students understand their strengths, provide interpersonal skills needed for college or full time position after graduation, basically provide options to

students who feels lost which can greatly impact students decisions to either stay in school or drop out.

New Career Directions

Governor Mike Beebe (2010) of Arkansas, states in the Arkansas College Times Newsletter, " Getting students involved in planning for their future and excited about their possibilities will mean great things for them" (para. 3). The Governor also honored 43 career coach trainees for their participation in becoming high school career coaches. Two of the coach trainees were celebrities, former professional football player Marcus Monk and Forunda Brasfield, who participated in the national reality show, America's Top Model. Both are slated to help coach students in the most poverty-stricken areas to discover their passion, talents, and learn how those attributes can be developed into skills that employers may want in the near future.

In general, a career coaches' objective is to develop students' career plans, share insight about what employers are truly seeking in employees, videlicet namely soft skills, technical expertise, etc. While the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) has a reputable career coaching program in place for high school students, they have yet to extend these services out to first-year students throughout their 23 community college campuses.

According to the VCCS website, in 2010-2011, the career coach program assisted 19,253 students in developing their educational and career plan (VCCS, 2011). This service is financially free to the students in the program. Initial evaluations of the program, conducted by the VCCS, show promising potential for career coaching to be used as a tool to increase students' awareness of career aspirations. Employee engagement and community college retention rates could increase exponentially as a result of career coaching at the high school or first-year college level, which appears to be a win-win situation, though with no career coach in place, no one is winning. Governor Beebe (2010) asserts that this service can be beneficial not only to the students being served, but also to the guidance counselors at the schools, who many look to for career guidance (pg.1). With limited time and resources, often due to their strenuous work schedule, few guidance counselors have time to address career planning for students.

One glaring question pertinent to the success of students, is why this program has not been implemented into community colleges across the nation? Can this type of program be implemented in other states? Are community college leaders around the nation interested in sharing ideas on how to address the high school drop-out problems and other issues related to career readiness? Do community colleges, as a whole, believe that this service would

not be useful to the high school drop-out student who is probably not aware of the potential careers available, or the dislocated worker, whose experience is based on a position that may no longer exist?

Educational leaders in Chicago believe in the potential that career coaching has, and endorse the success of implementing them into the school system. According to Catalyst Chicago, Everett Edwards, principal at the School of Entrepreneurship at the South Shore campus reports his "career coach sent 60 percent of 2008 year graduates to college, compared to the 34 percent that attended college in 2007" (para. 8). The program in Chicago is now expanding its' services to include work-related credentials and jobs for the students who do not wish to continue their education but to join the workforce after high school graduation. One untried method which could fill the void, is online career coaching, providing options for the growing digital generation. FACTS.org is an online academic advising site that helps Florida-resident students plan their education and career goals starting at middle school level on up to college. Another program in the same vein, Virginia Education Wizard offers similar online academic advising services.

Community College Program Challenges
Moving into the second decade of the New Millennium, one method a community college can undertake in order to present a stronger presence is through use of the virtual world for both career coaching and education. Not only can this innovation reinforce a colleges' existing degree programs, but it also encourages the creation of new programs, which will allow the college to be competitive. For-Profit higher education entities recognize the need for expediency and career clarity that is often lacking in community colleges, and market themselves by design. A growing competitive market, ripe with rich publicity campaigns, for-profits typically attract students that have often been overlooked by their local community college. Competing for constituents while stoically committed to outdated methods and programs, community colleges have been "missing the boat" in regards to community needs. Reaching people who might not be able to attend an institute of higher learning either due to being physically isolated, pressing family issues, or lack of local programs presents many challenges for our nation. Extending services to these underserved populations will prove to be momentous, especially as our country attempts to forge a stronger global foundation.

In this 21st century, virtual career coaching emerges as a service in demand, mainly due to the ease of obtaining advice when it is convenient for the student and within the comfort of the student's own home (Bradford, 2008). To give students career coaching services, a career counselor would no longer require obtaining brick and mortar facilities, purchase furniture, pay for extra utilities, or other expenses associated with a traditional business. Instead a career coach can administer their advising through online career tools such as, webinars, social media, e-newsletters, as well as virtual offices. Some of the essentials required for virtual career counseling would include: a computer with internet access, a telephone, webcam, and most importantly, training in career counseling which could include a license or certificate in career counseling. Having these basic essentials provides the initial start-up to become an online career coach (Cohen 2009). Students can complete career assessments online, and if students did want to engage their counselor face-to face, they can use free video-chatting services, often built-in search engines. Overall success of the online Career Coach and their program will be relative to what the student deems as eventual goal achievement. Traditional career coach programs success are based on the same parameters as online career coaching services. Helping the students discover their passion and create tangible goals underlines the success of the program.

Virtual schooling, or the practice of offering educational courses via distance technologies, has rapidly increased in popularity since its inception in 1993 (McGreal, 1998). Although effective interaction with and support for students in these environments requires a unique set of skills and experiences, teacher education programs currently place very little emphasis on teaching and facilitation competencies for virtual school education (Davis, et al., 2007).

While considering offering online courses and degree programs, prioritizing financial and technical issues, and defining the human element must be the first steps a community college develops. Leist and Travis (2010) report: "Online courses pose at least three major resource challenges for many rural community colleges: fiscal issues, a shortage of faculty and staff members, and digital divide concerns" (p. 18). Administrators responsible for course building need to review financial commitments for growth, and pursue additional funding prospects (grants, endowments, federal funding, etc.) if necessary. To some community colleges, this task may seem daunting, but hiring a Distance Learning Administrator (DLA) who would be responsible for hiring information technology [IT] individuals and other pertinent personnel, while managing and supervising the program is a vital key to success. These key individuals should be in place in order for the community college to create a solid and effective action plan. One of the challenges that institutions face when commencing new online programs, is determining the beginning process, and

outlining the strategies that will provide for the greatest return on investment. Identifying the target audience and defining the scope can prove to be challenging unless a plan of action is enacted. According to authors Shelton and Saltsman (2005), to begin offering a complete degree program the "provision of a marketable product to a specific target audience" needs to be addressed first (pg. 25). The design of online environments usually is a team effort that brings together different, although complementary, skill sets.

A major change is required in perceptions of the instructor's role when moving from a traditional classroom setting to an online environment. Conceicao (2006) describes adult educators in a distance learning class as facilitators, who move from the front of the class (in the traditional setting) to the sidelines and allows the students to be co-creators of the course. This can cause a major paradigm shift, especially for instructors who have a firm mindset of their teaching style, but eventually it should lead to more robust discussions in class and afford the learner a solid foundation of the material, as they construct the concepts themselves.

Courseware Development and Methodology
One method that can assist instructors, while alleviating technical woes, is to hire an instructional designer (ID) to construct course templates, and begin the process of creating the course as the curriculum and instruction initial setup, helps to organize the individual courses. Having a course template that is personalized for the individual institution offers uniformity for online programs (which are highly visual components of an institutions presence), as well as easier course creation for instructors who may be masters of their particular discipline but who are technologically challenged. To offer a successful online program, the conditions of distance learning make it a necessity to have the following in place: long-term instructional planning, cost analysis, curriculum and course development, instructional materials development and maintenance, delivery plans, and detailed evaluation rules (Bourdeau & Bates, 1996, Cornner, 2010).

While providing instructional designers in the initial set-up, faculty members (infrastructure) need to feel supported and prepared, especially in terms of pedagogical shifts, not to mention technological tools. From research, very few faculty members state that they would require additional compensation, if they could get help developing and delivering courses (Marek, 2009). Having a distance learner administrator, ID and a project manager eliminates the faculty member from serving in the multiple roles of content developer, instructional designer, technical support staff and administrative student services.

Instead, the model suggested allows the instructor to concentrate on the delivery of the course, which should lead to greater student success (Restauri, 2004).

Though the transition from face to face (F2F) delivery methods to online can be daunting to some instructors (our recommendation for a beginning program is to focus on using instructors' who are interested in teaching online, rather than making it a requirement of fulfilling instructional duties- unless there are no "volunteers"), the overall experience can be exciting and bring new life for some who have reached a plateau in teaching. Not only does this create new teaching opportunities, but it opens up the community college in offering new programs and drawing in new students by properly creating online community college programs, which offers positive opportunities for all entities involved.

CONCLUSION
By offering both career coaching and programs in an online environment, any community college can improve educational and vocational opportunities not only within their own geographical communities, but across the country and globe. Providing unique and individualized career coaching can reduce costs and wasted time on unnecessary academic ventures, while focusing on the students' talents and passion. In turn, students' educational success rate can improve and empower them while attending online classes.

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