What world or community challenges do you want to solve? How do you know if you are doing your best possible work? What are you currently doing socially and emotionally, academically and career-related that is helping you prepare for your life after high school? If you could learn about anything, what topic would you want to learn about and why?

As school counselors, we ask our students these questions, right? How about our dedicated teachers; do they ask these questions during class? Do the engaged custodial staff member, the influential bus driver, the favorite cafeteria worker and the compassionate administrator ask students these questions? If you answer, yes, then consider yourself and the others in your school to be meaningful career conversationalists. If not, or if not yet, then let’s engage with one another for a practical tutorial.

Meaningful career conversations began with a story, a story that speaks to our “why.” A 2009 piece of legislation created individual career and academic planning (ICAP) in Colorado. This legislation resulted in a generalized list of grade-level expectations, which lacked meaning and fell solely to school counselors to complete.

ICAP has since grown into an integrated, aligned and robust practice of supporting students/individuals of all ages and grade levels in career development engagement – meaningful career conversations – by any influential adult. We learned that what we do in education in Colorado is for our economic story. We hypothesize that having meaningful career conversations as early as pre-K increases our own talent pipeline for employment, higher education and military placement. We aim to grow our own talent, attract the best talent and retain talent. This economic story correlates with our interpretation of the national definition for career and college readiness – note, we intentionally switch the C’s.

We coin our interpretation as post-secondary workforce readiness (PWR). PWR supports meaningful career conversations via a demonstration of competencies found within the following categories: entrepreneurial, personal, civic/interpersonal, professional and academic. Creating, fostering, teaching and guiding students to be “PWRful” enhances the alignment of why we do what we do. It enhances students’ – and communities’ – career development and career literacy. For the 2017–2018 school year in Colorado, educators in any content area, school counselors in any region, CTE faculty at any grade level, special education specialists in any ZIP code and administrators in any district are welcoming the model of creating a meaningful career conversation culture.

How does Colorado do this? It started by realizing our intentional work with ICAP wasn’t to keep fostering task-oriented, redundant, grade-level expectations and meaningless activities. Rather, it evolved into responding to the need for prompts, a menu of options, research-based indicators and guiding questions any educator could ask. ICAP is really about integrating meaningful career conversations within any educational context, environment and learning situation, including on the sports field or the school bus, within the hallways and the community. In 2015, when the phrase “graduation begins with ICAP” was included in Colorado’s revised graduation guidelines, this set the tone for administrators and school boards to truly embrace the “C” in ICAP as career – not college only. In combination with our economic data, this led to a contagious, legitimate movement for investing time and pedagogy in career conversations.

The Big Picture

What does a meaningful career conversation feel and look like? Writing this from a career and technical education (CTE) lens, there are a few practical application examples to share:

A meaningful career conversation feels and looks like an inspiring CTE teacher who is intentional about connecting the world of work to the content and experiential learning taking place in a CTE classroom. For example, a CTE program of study is a one-dimensional, two-page document charting out the course sequence; the relevant concurrent enrollment courses; certification options; inter-, intra- and extracurricular opportunities; postsecondary education options of all kinds and entry-level employment

statistics for each CTE pathway.

When CTE instructors engage their students with the program of study, perhaps have them build their own program of study based on their career aspiration (for a grade), the chance a meaningful career conversation will occur is large, and the chance a student is more engaged increases.

Meaningful career conversation prompts to use in this instance include: As you consider your career, what types of postsecondary training have you already explored? What types of technology and software do you use regularly, and how do you use it? What do you do if a class assignment becomes too difficult? Tell me about your responsibilities in and out of school.

We use the Colorado career cluster map, a color-coded organizational tool reflecting 17 career clusters, as a meaningful career conversation tool via color coding course guides by cluster, painting hallways or classrooms by cluster content being taught, hosting eighth-grade career fairs organized and promoted by cluster color and fostering the framework for work-based learning, which engages in career exploration and awareness, career preparation and career training.

Meaningful career conversation prompts to use in this instance include: What information would be important to know about a career? After taking the career assessment, what do you notice is important to you in a career? As you think about your future career, what adults might help you think about or reach your future career goals?

Consider a teacher, who offers a year-long credit-bearing course through CTE that includes seven career exploration events per semester aligned with high-demand careers organized by the career cluster map. The teacher conducts report-heavy outreach to local industry partners and intentionally builds a sustainable model for implementing career plan development with each student enrolled. Self-awareness, career awareness, financial literacy, employability and understanding career pathways are integral outcomes of the course.

Meaningful career conversation prompts to use in this instance include: What do you tell yourself when an assignment or an activity is hard? Tell me about a time you completed an assignment and
it made you feel proud. What would it take for our school to be amazing? What does success mean to you when it comes to a career? Why would self-control and self-determination matter for your future career? What would you do in college or a work setting if you didn’t understand something? How might speaking, writing and listening be important for your future career goals?

Recipe for Success

When building a meaningful career conversation mindset in your state, start with these steps:

Think about your own state’s economic story. Ask yourself how you, as educators, can support it. With an economic story to back you up, get administrator buy-in and then create a collaborative lead group composed of school counselors, CTE teachers, special education teachers and any champion teachers or administrators.

Download the ASCA Career Conversation Starters documents, found on www.schoolcounselor.org/careerconversations. Build a generalized crosswalk of conversation starters that would fit particular content areas best or school year happenings best or other environments that you know would be meaningful to your student body. If possible, extend invitations to your local workforce development council(s), a champion business or industry member and parent to further enrich the meaningfulness of the conversations.

If you have a process/curriculum similar to ICAP already in place, begin aligning the meaningful career conversation prompts to that process/curriculum.

Once you’ve got your basic tools in place, have the collaborative lead group practice the conversation starters with students, and encourage students to have meaningful career conversations with each other, maybe for a graded project.

Gather and train staff on practicing, utilizing and leveraging career conversation starters with their students. Sometimes having students there to practice with helps.

Model meaningful career conversations with each other; students listen and watch us all the time. And by all means make sure you’re promoting meaningful career conversations to all students, regardless of their drive, ZIP code, outgoingness or behavior issues. If needed, conduct training on equity. When it comes to helping students discover their career aspirations, leave biases, stereotypes, micro-messages and mindsets at the door.

Be sure to also bring parents into the fold by preparing a handout/cheat sheet for parents on meaningful career conversations to support at-home conversations.

Be prepared for a potential new or increased investment in CTE programming, work-based learning opportunities all along the continuum, guest speakers, informational interviewing, internships and apprenticeships, dual enrollment possibilities and industry certificates.

Be sure not to just rest on your laurels. Re-evaluate the process at least once a year. Seek insight and feedback from students and staff, as well as all adults involved.
Review your data. Consider the knowledge, skill, attitude and engagement shift in students and teachers. Gather promising practices and post them online to help other meaningful career conversationalists to learn from them as well.

Before you know it, you – and others in your school and community – will be expert meaningful career conversationalists.

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For more information visit:
• http://coloradostateplan.com/career-guidance/individual-career-and-academic-plan-icap/
• www.cde.state.co.us/postsecondary/careerreadinesshttps://www.colorado.gov/pacific/cwdc/colorado-talent-pipeline-report

CAREER CAB IN COLORADO

BY CASSIE PONCELOW

I don’t want to admit it, but sometimes I want to quit my job. It happens most often after a Career Cab, a program we started at Poudre High School, Fort Collins, Colo., about five years ago. Career Cabs are field experiences for students where they get a chance to see different careers in our community through behind-the-scenes encounters with professionals. We designed these small-scale field trips based on our own experience in Colorado State University’s career development institute class. This weeklong summer course is largely field-based and had us exploring long-term care facilities with certified nursing assistants and checking out the bottling process at some of Fort Collins’ finest microbreweries.

As we got these firsthand looks into various careers, I realized it was exactly what had been missing from my adolescent career development experience. My lens for careers was as wide as my adult world, most of whom were educators or civil servants. However, I hadn’t ever talked to anyone about their work, let alone sprayed a fire hose or been inside a Wal-Mart distribution center.

Help People Live Healthier, Better Lives

IS PHARMACY RIGHT FOR YOU? Ask Yourself:

▸ Do you want to serve the community and improve people’s health?
▸ Do you have strong communications skills?
▸ Do you like science and math?
▸ Are you detail-oriented and organized?
▸ Do you enjoy problem-solving?

If the answer is “yes” to one or more of these questions, then pharmacy may be right for you!
Hoping to give students those up-close-and-personal experiences, we created our Career Cab program. We partnered with a nearby high school to coordinate the trips, originally a monthly opportunity. We trained as small-vehicle permit operators and became licensed to drive small buses and bring 14 students on each trip from each school. We typically plan to visit two sites on each Career Cab trip, ideally linked between a career opportunity and a postsecondary education gateway. For example, we’ve visited a salon – and had a student get a haircut – and then visited a local beauty school.

As students board the bus for these trips, which are open to freshmen through seniors, I frame their experience in the context of my own. I have a degree in interior design. Although I loved the program and excelled in it, my internship experience was miserable, largely because it wasn’t until then that I realized interior designers spend a lot of their time in front of a computer doing detailed CAD work. I had never actually met any interior designers or asked them what they like or don’t like about their job or what they wish they would have done in high school to help them succeed in their current career.

These are the types of questions we frame our experience on Career Cab trips, and students ask them. Over four years, 87 percent of students have reported a significant increase in interest in the career they saw and just over 10 percent a significant decrease in interest. This seems valuable as it points to students truly gaining a lens for potential career fields, for better or for worse.

Poudre now has full-school pathways for all freshmen, and each school counselor is assigned to a pathway and facilitating Career Cabs.

This year, we hope close to 400 students will get these real-world experiences. I will get them there, but I cannot always guarantee a ride home. Some of the stuff we see is just too cool, and I might be asking for an application.

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