SIX STEPS TO A COLOSSAL CAREER PROGRAM
“Do what you love to do and you will never work a day in your life.” These are the first words I say to students when beginning career exploration lessons. I start by reading this quote and other similar ones to emphasize the central goal of career exploration. The goal, I remind students, in searching for a career is not to make a million dollars, not to be famous and not to drive an imported car. The goal is to find something that you love to do and get paid for doing it, to discover a career that you find challenging and rewarding.

Popular culture attempts to narrowly define to students, and to the rest of us, what it means to be successful. This places a great deal of unnecessary pressure on students and dictates what they need to wear, how they should look and what types of careers they should pursue.

Making postsecondary decisions is an important and difficult process. This challenge is often magnified by teens who can be overdramatic and who have limited experience in making major decisions. Career choice and postsecondary options are often the first experiences teens have in making major decisions.

With these social realities influencing students’ body image, purchasing patterns and postsecondary decisions, effective school counseling programs need to take a different approach to career development to neutralize these effects and help students map their postsecondary plans in a healthy manner.

So how do you develop a career program that emphasizes the importance of these difficult but important decisions without scaring the students along the way?

Motivate students to explore career options that will build on their passions and truly make them happy.
Career awareness activities can and should be planned early in the students’ careers. Many elementary counseling programs conduct career fairs in which students are asked to dress for school as their favorite future career. You will typically see lots of future nurses, professional athletes and police officers in school on those days, but at this point in their development age that isn’t important. The critical part is that they are being exposed to the idea of careers and becoming aware of the assorted careers that exist in their community. Also, it is important to have the students think and dream about their future with the assistance of professionals around them who encourage them to start thinking about their future choices.

This is especially important in schools with a lower socio-economic profile. Students may have had limited experience with post-secondary education, and their ideas of what they can pursue are often limited to what they see and experience around them. If career activities are conducted throughout a child’s educational career students will be less likely to experience the anxiety that can accompany this task when they get to high school.

First and foremost, career exploration should be fun and engaging, regardless of the age group. Students often receive strong signals from the adult world that shout, “You need to plan the rest of your life immediately.” This type of pressure usually results in a frozen silence that teens have perfected when asked about their postsecondary plans or a knee-jerk response about a career they haven’t really examined.

The good news is that engaging students is easy once you administer career interest inventories. Students, like all humans, are a little egocentric and enjoy learning about themselves while reading the results of a career inventory.

The self-discovery phase of career development is usually the easiest way to get students drawn into your entire career lesson. If they are excited to learn about themselves it is easy to slip in the basics of John Holland’s trait theory and its connection to career development. Make the experience for kids fun and enjoyable rather than further panicking them about the need to get serious about life after high school. They do need to focus, and they do need to get serious, but they do not have to plan the rest of their lives today.

Teens are adults in training, and you can expect them to make quick decisions without thinking, wait until the last minute to get things done and make seemingly simple mistakes. Taking a fun, light approach to career development can take a lot of weight off their shoulders and allow them to let down their guard and get involved and communicate.

Computers, in one form or another, are everywhere, as is access to the Internet and social media. Make your career lessons interactive, or use some type of multimedia to keep students interested. Teach students how to use the Internet as a source for career information. The Internet lets students examine career information any time, any place and without constant direction. In addition to the competitively priced career programs available, most states offer a wide variety of free resources, including career and college exploration, for students of all ages.

Effective career programs are placed solidly upon the ground of good theory and practice. The ASCA National Model stresses the importance of identifying standards and designing your activities to meet those benchmarks. The ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors as well as various state standards dictate the importance of data collection. This does not necessarily mean you need to become a full-time statistician, but you do need to pay much closer attention to the numbers. I believe an impressive number to present to your school board during your annual school counseling department report is zero. Zero, being the number of students in your entire building who have not participated in a career development activity.
By building an effective, visible career program that has an impact on all students in the building, you can help stakeholders realize the importance of the school counseling program.

If your career development programs is going to reach the level of prominence necessary to meet the needs of all students, it must become a part of and complement to the overall school curriculum. Add-on activities are easily dropped when they aren’t solidly connected to the school’s mission. You can coordinate with classroom teachers to integrate career lessons into regular classroom lessons. Furthermore, you can adapt your career lessons to strengthen the students’ writing skills and to help them practice essential standards.
Education’s goal is to develop healthy, productive members of society. This being said, I believe the school counseling department’s career efforts should be the most important and visible portions of their comprehensive school counseling program. A career program cannot exist simply within the annual large-group interest assessments. These efforts are fine and are a great addition to a comprehensive program. However, this cannot be the only means by which students learn about their values, interests and careers. School counselors and their programs need to be visible. School counselors need to conduct career lessons, with every student, in every grade throughout the school year.

Additionally, career programs, if they are to have a school-wide impact, need to be advertised and bragged about. Include blurbs about current classroom activities in your department newsletter, add career facts and information to the school newspaper, decorate the school hallways with information about careers and colleges, make your administrators aware of the students that are out on co-op or job shadowing experiences. Speak to your school board annually to share information about the career events you’ve done throughout the year.

Much of what we do is confidential, and without credible information from the school counseling department, students, parents, teachers and administrators may make assumptions about what you do. By building an effective, visible career program that has an impact on all students in the building, you can help stakeholders realize the importance of the school counseling program.

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