Career Development in a College Success Course

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The Institution

Cuyamaca College is a public community college located in El Cajon, California. It is a commuter college that offers a variety of programs in vocational education, transfer studies, and courses for personal enrichment. Because the College is located in East San Diego County near the Mexican border and several Native American reservations, it serves many diverse, first- generation, developmental, immigrant, and low-income students. Approximately 9,000 students attend Cuyamaca College; 56% are female, and 40% are over 25 years of age. Many of these students attend part time, which makes the full-time equivalent student enrollment 5,800.

Description of the Initiative

In 1991, Cuyamaca College completed a study (i.e., telephone survey) of a 1,000 students who were enrolled in the fall 1990 semester but failed to re-enroll in spring 1991 to determine their reasons for leaving college. Of these students, 78% considered themselves to be successful because they accomplished their goals (i.e., positive attrition). The remaining 22% were classified as negative attrition since they either did not successfully complete their courses or did not accomplish their goals. When comparing the positive and negative groups, significant differences ($p < .001$) were found in whether or not these students had a definite goal or college major. Students without a defined major or college goal were at high risk of dropping out without achieving success (Fralick, 1993). Based on this research, in 1992 a one-semester, three-unit, college success course with a career development component was designed to improve student retention and success at Cuyamaca College: Personal Development Counseling 124, Lifelong Success (PDC 124)

PDC 124 is built on the foundations of social science and vocational psychology and is taught by faculty with a master's degree in counseling. The course is associate degree applicable and transfers to both the California State University System (CSUC) and the University of California (UC), which has the highest requirements for academic rigor. It is notable that the course transfers as a general education course to the CSUC in Area E, Lifelong Understanding and Self-Development.

The course is recommended for high-risk students who are undecided majors or lack basic skills and moves quickly from theory to practical application. For example, when personality theory is introduced to students, they complete a personality assessment and then apply the theory to their personal lives by exploring majors that match their personality types.

PDC 124 has become part of the culture of the college and has high enrollment. The college offers approximately 50 sections of the course each year, enrolling about 2,000 students in a balance of traditional face-to-face, hybrid, and online formats. It is also offered in 10 local high schools to

help juniors and seniors prepare for college and functions as a bridge to aid in successful transition from high school to the community college or university system.

The class is not required, but it is highly recommended by counselors during orientation and counseling sessions, as well as by faculty, to students struggling to be successful in their courses. Because of high enrollment and relatively low cost of the program, the Personal Development Counseling department, which houses the college success course, is one of the top income-producing academic departments in the college.

The demographics of students enrolled in the program match the demographics of the College with two exceptions. Students in the course tend to be younger (i.e., 45% of the students in PDC 124 are less than 20 years old compared to 22% of the general College population) and slightly more diverse (i.e., there is a slightly greater percentage of ethnic minorities enrolled in the course).

The career development component is designed as part of a personal development process in which students explore personality type, learning style, interests, and values. Once students have learned about their personal preferences, they complete career research to match their personal characteristics with the job world, taking into consideration preferred lifestyle, career outlook, and salary information. This component is approximately one third of the course content and is fully integrated into the curriculum.

The theoretical framework for the program is based on personal development and career exploration. Parsons, credited as the father of vocational guidance in the early 1900s (Patton & McMahon, 2006), identified three key elements of career selection:

- ◇ Self-understanding, including aptitudes, abilities, interests, and other qualities
- ◇ Knowledge of the world of work, including requirements, advantages and disadvantages, career outlook, and compensation
- ◇ Matching personal qualities with the world of work

In the course, students embark on the self-understanding component through a four-step process. They begin by exploring personality type using the Do What You Are (DWYA) personality assessment (Tieger & Barron, 2007). The assessment helps them identify their natural gifts and talents as a foundation for self-understanding and career development by assessing personality types based on typical college situations or scenarios. These scenarios are easy to read, and students can readily identify with them.

Personality type is a central theme throughout the course. Once students have their personality assessment results, they gain a deeper understanding of their personality type through journaling and interactive classroom activities. In addition to career decision making, personality type is related to several topics throughout the semester, including learning style, time management, communication, and appreciation of diversity. Personality type influences how students learn, manage their time, and communicate with others who may be different from themselves.

Students continue the process of self-exploration by gaining an understanding of their learning styles and related learning strategies to help them better assimilate new knowledge and become lifelong learners capable of dealing with a rapidly changing world. Students take the Productivity Environmental Preference Survey (PEPS; Price, 2009), a comprehensive inventory that measures preferences in 20 different areas within five categories: (a) perceptual, (b) immediate environment, (c) emotionality, (d) sociological, and (e) physical. The PEPS learning style inventory provides a description of students' learning styles, including a summary of the most important factors affecting their learning style, and a list of learning strategies helpful in learning the new and difficult material that students find in college and on the job. Based on survey results, students are able

to describe their learning style and list matching learning strategies, which is one of the student learning outcomes in the course.

An additional goal of the college success course is to help students gain proficiency in the use of technology to enhance student success and career development. Approximately half of the courses are taught using the CollegeScope Student Success Program (2010) in online, hybrid, and some face-to-face courses. This program is an interactive online textbook with integrated career assessments. Students begin the program by taking the DWYA personality assessment and the PEPS learning style inventory. The text is personalized for each student based on the results of these inventories. For example, in the chapter on personality, the student's personality results are included in the chapter. The program includes a student portfolio that contains results of the assessments, online journal entries, and quiz results. Faculty can monitor student progress by looking at the online student portfolios and communicating with students about their progress. Faculty are trained in the use of online course management tools (e.g., Blackboard) and post assignments, syllabi, and grades online. The remaining half of the students uses a traditional textbook with online access codes for taking the DWYA and PEPS (Fralick, 2008).

The third step in the self-understanding element is discovering multiple intelligences. Gardner (1983/2003) formulated a more inclusive definition of intelligence and defined it as "the ability to solve problems or to create products that are valued within one or more cultural settings" (p. x). Multiple intelligences include musical, interpersonal, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, linguistic, intrapersonal, and naturalist intelligences. Using a checklist of examples of these multiple intelligences, students examine their abilities and talents. This activity is followed by journal writing on the topic.

Finally, interests and values are considered using Holland's (1973) career development theory, which classifies the basic categories of occupational interests as realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional. Interests and related careers in these categories are explored through classroom activities and by matching their interests with occupations listed in the Occupations Finder (Holland, 1996). The Choices Planner, which includes the Interest Profiler and Work Values Sorter, is also used to investigate interests, values, and related careers. Lastly, students journal to summarize what they have learned about themselves in this dimension.

Students take advantage of technology to facilitate their exploration of the third element of Parson's model, gaining knowledge of the world of work to match personal qualities to a career or major. The DWYA, PEPS, and Choices Planner are all online assessments that can be accessed any time or any place. Faculty introduce the assessments in class, providing directions, samples, and descriptions of the benefits of doing them. Students then complete the assessments as assignments done outside of the course. Faculty monitor progress by viewing the student online portfolio, which summarizes the assessment results.

Both the DWYA and the Choices Planner lead students to a database of careers, O*Net, developed by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Students begin the exploration of the database by researching careers that match their personality types and interests. The online portfolio provides the opportunity to branch out to related careers or to access any career in the database. The database contains information about how the career matches the Holland categories, related occupations and majors, knowledge and skills required, job tasks and activities, and wage information. The Choices Planner also has an extensive database of careers for students to explore based on career clusters or alphabetical order. A list of online career resources is provided, including the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* (2010-2011) and the *Occupational Outlook Quarterly*—both published by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Toward the end of the semester, students are required to meet with a counselor for career and educational planning and use their career assessment results in this session to assist them in choosing a major and charting their academic course.

Research Design

A program review for PDC 124 was completed in 2005, which included an examination of persistence data provided by Institutional Research. Fall to spring persistence data from fall 2000 to spring 2004 for PDC 124 students were compared to all College students. Data on student success, defined as completing a course with an *A*, *B*, *C*, or *CR* (credit) grade, were also compared between PDC 124 students and all students at the College. As part of the program review in 2005, surveys were administered to a randomly selected sample of 198 students attending classes in spring 2004. They were asked if PDC 124 helped them to choose a career.

Findings

Program review data showed a greater persistence rate for students who successfully complete PDC 124. The average persistence rate from fall 2000 to spring 2004 for the entire College was 57.8 % compared to 85.4% for PDC 124 students.

An analysis of data on student success showed a higher rate of success for those enrolled in PDC 124 as compared to the general population of the College. The average of all student success at the College from fall 1999 to spring 2004 was 65% as compared to 73% for PDC124 students. Half of the students (52%) completing surveys as part of a program review indicated that the course helped them choose a career. An additional 35% of these students had already chosen a major and were taking the course for personal development or to meet graduation or transfer requirements.

Conclusion

PDC 124, with a strong career development component, has improved student persistence and success at Cuyamaca College and helped students choose a major. While the research findings do not directly link the career component to these improvements, there is a long history of studies documenting the positive effects of career courses in improving student retention and achieving other positive outcomes. Folsom and Reardon (2003) completed a comprehensive survey of the literature on this topic, examining studies conducted from 1978 to 2001. These studies show various positive outcomes of career courses, including increased semester to semester retention rates; increased college completion rates; increased retention rates for targeted populations, such as female, undecided, and African American students; fewer course withdrawals; and higher graduation rates. Other positive outcomes include improved self-knowledge, positive effects on career development, increased course satisfaction, increased cognitive development, and improved locus of control.

Incorporating career development as part of a college success course has benefits for students, colleges, and society. When students understand their personality types, learning styles, interests, and values, their personal development is enhanced, and they are more prepared to make better choices related to a college major and career. Making informed choices about a major and having clear academic and educational plans help students stay in college and complete their education.

Embedding college success and career development content in social science and vocational psychology courses can facilitate approval of such courses for graduation and transfer. If students receive credit for the course, they are more motivated to enroll. Increased enrollment in courses that enhance student success is financially beneficial to colleges, not only in increased income, but also in increased retention and lower recruitment costs.

Finally, there are many benefits to society. Technology is a powerful tool for career exploration and prepares students for using technology in other college classes as well as in the job world.

Including a comprehensive learning style component in this type of program helps students be successful in college and become lifelong learners who can excel in rapidly changing work and economic conditions. College and career success courses can help institutions achieve their mission of preparing students to be successful citizens who can compete in the global economy.

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