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The 10-Year Plan: Long-Range Planning Motivates Students and Personalizes Instruction

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Many high school students, whether at-risk or college-bound, face the same challenge: maintaining the personal drive to stay academically focused and disciplined through the tribulations and pressures of their teenage years and early 20s. When young people are confronted with any of the myriad problems (academic, financial, personal) they are likely to meet on the path to adulthood, giving-up or back-scaling their goals is extremely tempting.

How can educators help ignite drive and enthusiasm in all students? How can a busy classroom teacher hope to “connect” with students and understand their unique motivators? One proven strategy that speaks to both questions is to facilitate the development of a comprehensive 10-year career and education plan. More than just four or six years, plans must be of a duration that takes a student beyond high school graduation through the completion of postsecondary training or college and articulate the transition into a dynamic adult role. M. Levine (personal communication, August 4, 2005) advocates “Students need help in taking the long-term perspective. They need to focus on their career or work life, and they need to be taught about the workplace and what awaits them.” Beyond academic and career plans, a comprehensive 10-year plan should include lifestyle and identity issues, setting short and long term goals, creating lifestyle budgets, and developing personal social, educational and career and lifeskills goals (Dedmond, 2005, p. 19). This surefire approach gets students to value education and make the most of their time in school while providing educators and counselors with insights into what sparks each student’s push to succeed.

You may be thinking, how can the average 13- or 14-year-old create a meaningful 10-year plan? The guide for this effort is the *Course Standards for Freshman Transition Classes* (for a copy visit www.freshmantransition.org), developed through The George Washington University’s Freshman Transition Initiative. Courses that follow these standards tie academic rigor to reality, highlighting life in the years beyond school and making it easier for students to understand how to match academic and educational effort to lifestyle expectations.

Schools across the country are implementing Freshman Transition courses that culminate in a 10-year plan. In Jacksonville Florida's Duval County School District, more than 11,000 freshman students, in 19 high schools, develop 10-year plans in the district's required year-long "Keystone" course. "Every 9th grade student takes our Keystone course," says Beverly Strickland, director of high school programs for Duval County Public Schools. "We believe whether you are a potential dropout or a potential star, you need assistance in determining details about your future and an understanding that there is a place for you in the future where you can be successful" (B. Strickland, personal communication, April 5, 2008).

The biggest payoff for educators striving to personalize their instruction is this formalized plan that provides glimpses of who their students are and, more important, who they want to become. Educators who can help young people create a vision of a productive adulthood that matches their lifestyle expectations and the plan to accomplish their goals will successfully motivate students to step outside their academic comfort zone, apply themselves to their studies, and acquire the education necessary to realize their career and life aspirations.

Increased student motivation begins when students can articulate why completing post-secondary education or training is necessary for entry into a productive and self-sufficient adulthood. Students who are actively engaged in creating 10-year plans in a course dedicated to this process—and then updating their plans with teachers or counselors throughout high school and college—develop an intrinsic understanding of the payoffs for exerting the educational effort necessary to succeed and graduate. In addition, in a standards-based course, students learn about the life-long consequences of dropping out and not getting a good education.

The biggest payoff for students is the planning process itself. Once young people can visualize and then create the detailed roadmap of their plan, fear of an unknown future lessens and confidence builds. When teachers and counselors guide students through a planning process built on personal contemplation and the thoughtful deliberation of cherished dreams and goals, students are less likely to give up their plans when roadblocks present themselves. This recommendation is in contrast to the four-year high school graduation plans popular today. A plan limited to high school completion does not provide the motivational ingredient required to make the necessary shift in attitudes, particularly for high-risk students. When graduation from high school is seen as an end rather than a means, students who question the value of education will see no reason to apply themselves to their studies, much less pursue post-secondary educational options. To have the impact necessary, young people need to envision and then plan for a career beyond school. "A planning strategy, such as the 10-year plan recommended by the Freshman Transition Initiative, can link middle school, high school, college, and career," says Dr. Victoria Bortolussi, former Moorpark College Dean. "This is an essential component whereby we shift our focus to student learning and success rather than to completing courses and grade levels within institutions" (V. Bortolussi, personal communication, July 12, 2009).

This personalized, real-world approach to learning makes a difference when it comes to student motivation and performance. Just ask Deb Crapes, a career specialist at Havermale High School, an alternative school in Spokane, Washington. "In my 15 years' experience working with disadvantaged youth, many whom are first generation high

school graduates,” Crapes says, “I cannot stress enough the importance of early career planning and exploration. When we can show students the correlation between school and the world of work, it can be the motivation they need to dream and then reach their career aspirations” (D. Crapes, personal communication, August 14, 2009).

Eighth grade students at Havermale research career options through their Life Skills classes and participate in activities to explore a variety of career interest areas. Through high school they continue to investigate and update their online portfolios and plans in English and social studies classes. “These opportunities help students start earlier learning to plan for college, create strong applications, and prepare for testing and other fees,” Crapes says. “Students are assisted to make career goals that are realistic with their strengths and abilities” (D. Crapes, personal communication, August 14, 2009).

Crapes notes an increase in the number of students opting for dual enrollment and meaningful and relevant learning opportunities as a result of this planning process. This is a natural outcome for schools like Havermale that intentionally provide formalized opportunities for students to revisit and revise their plans throughout high school.

For dropout prevention purposes (not only high school but also college), the timing for the development of the 10-year plan is important. Written at the beginning of students’ high school tenure, in either the 8th or 9th grade, this vision of a productive future provides the roadmap for keeping students on course as they tackle the higher order skills demanded of citizens of the 21st century.

As the country seeks to curb an alarming high school and college dropout problem, career and technology educators in collaboration with school counselors are in a unique position to assume a leadership role in this effort. Their experience and sensibilities make them ideal candidates to deliver the courses that culminate with the development of quantitative and meaningful 10-year plans and to participate in the review and updating of student plans throughout their course of study.

By advocating for the implementation of a 10-year plan for all students as a key school retention strategy, they can alter their students’ relationship with education, which in turn will impact their schools’ dropout rates. The result: students who can internalize the connection between school and work, thereby preparing them for a lifetime of productive employment and continual learning.

References

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Levine, M. (2005). *Ready or not, here life comes*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

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