Creating a Culture of COLLEGE and CAREER Readiness

By Terri Tchorzynski
College and career readiness is a term that has steadily gained steam all around the United States since its first inception in 2003 with the Standards of Success, which served as the first comprehensive set of college readiness standards. Since that time, various organizations have revised and developed their own set of standards and benchmarks used to measure college and career readiness for graduating high school seniors. The Calhoun Area Career Center (CACC) in Battle Creek, Michigan embraced this concept and developed a comprehensive, data-driven, student-centered approach to college and career readiness that created a culture in the building that all stakeholders — administration, teachers, support staff, students and parents — could work collaboratively to ensure CACC students will graduate high school ready for both college and future careers.

Systemic Approach
Developing a culture of college and career readiness is an essential ingredient in preparing students for their future career goals. The counseling department at the CACC knew that in order to truly make an impact for their students and to best prepare them for reaching their goals after high school, a culture had to be created in the building so that every aspect of student learning had an emphasis on postsecondary plans. This culture had to be sustainable and supported by all stakeholders so that college and career readiness became an expectation for all students, regardless of grade-level or program of study, and not just a topic of emphasis during a designated month or offered to only students who were identified as “college-bound.”
With 20 different career and technical education (CTE) programs, postsecondary planning looked different for various students in various programs, and the counseling department wanted to ensure that the needs of ALL students were being met. To help launch this systemic endeavor, a College/Career Readiness (CCR) Team was formed that consisted of two counselors, a work-based coordinator, an English Language Arts consultant, an Early/Middle College specialist, and a Perkins coordinator with a strong background in job skill development.

Baseline data was collected from staff to gather a better understanding of what was already being done at the CACC in regards to career readiness standards, and it was quickly determined that there were major inconsistencies between programs, which meant not all students were receiving the same type of college and career readiness services.

To ensure equitable access for all students, the CCR Team developed comprehensive goals to ensure all students were receiving services: career assessments; post-secondary research projects; interview skills and experience; college readiness and FAFSA workshops; resume development and completion of a post-secondary application, which could include a college/university, apprenticeship, job/career and/or military enlistment. Each of these activities was supported and implemented by instructors and CCR Team members with the emphasis around the needs of the individual students and programs.

According to a report by the Michigan Department of Education, Michigan Economic Development Corporation and the Talent Investment Agency in 2016, 96.4 percent of CTE students were placed in post-secondary education, military service, or employed by the third quarter of the year they graduated high school, so the CCR Team wanted to be cognizant in its recognition of all potential post-secondary paths available to CACC students.

The implementation of these baseline goals set the stage for the development of the desired culture because now all CACC staff members began to incorporate a common language, objectives and protocols that were all centered-around college and career readiness.

**Student-centered Initiative**

In developing this culture, the CCR Team knew the most crucial stakeholders would be the students and their parents/guardians. Because if the CACC was not specifically addressing the needs of these two groups, then the development of this new culture would not be beneficial to the identity of the community. The CCR Team developed questions for the student needs assessment already being administered by the counseling department, so that students could identify needs or challenges they were facing specifically around college and career preparation. As a result, scholarship writing workshops, weekly college/financial aid workshops, and FAFSA workshops for parents during parent-teacher conferences were established. These events were offered in addition to the initial college and career readiness activities, and the student needs assessment will continue to drive what services will be offered to students each year.

Each new year introduces new student needs. For the 2017–18 school year, the counseling department will also be offering a needs assessment for parents/guardians so additional data can be collected and used to drive counseling events and activities.

Through the use of the needs assessment, the CCR Team was also able to identify specific students and/or programs who needed more support in post-secondary planning. This data allowed the counseling department and CCR Team to target specific programs to offer support to those students who may not be getting the additional help they needed outside of the CACC. As highlighted by the National Center for Education Statistics, the immediate college enrollment rate continues to rise, but the enrollment rate for high-income families (83 percent) was higher than the rate for those from low- and middle-income families (63 percent each) in 2015. Similar data can be found in regards to first-generation college students, so the CCR Team wanted to be intentional about meeting the needs of ALL students by offering additional support so all present gaps can be addressed.
The CACC Student Leadership Team has played a significant role in supporting the college and career readiness culture in the building. This team of student leaders worked to develop new building initiatives and activities that not only focused on improving the culture and climate of the CACC, but also to develop new ideas behind postsecondary planning and preparation. As a result of this student-led team, the CACC has created a College Week themed around different colleges/universities; it has also developed a college fair that includes postsecondary institutions from not only the public state universities, but also the technical/trade schools and apprenticeship programs available in the state. This student initiative has also expanded to include a Military/Public Service Day, which includes all military branches and public service employees so students can learn more about those opportunities. Truly, the CACC has developed a culture around college and career readiness that is supported by all.

Data-driven

Data is always needed to offer a true testament of the progress being made and objectives being met, so the CCR Team and counseling department prides themselves on collecting and analyzing data. For example, a pre- and post-test is given during almost every lesson, workshop, presentation, or event so students' attitudes, skills and knowledge can be assessed to measure what learning objectives have been gained from that specific activity. This perception data is used to gauge everything from student involvement and engagement to specific mindsets and behaviors.

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) "Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success" provides the framework every student needs to achieve academic success, college/career readiness and social/emotional development. The CCR Team and CACC counseling department use these mindsets and behaviors to guide and assess the curriculum that is being offered to students to ensure the objectives align with national standards and benchmarks.

In addition to perception data from the students, the CCR Team analyzes outcome data to determine the effectiveness of the college and career readiness initiative. Similar to the National Student Clearinghouse, Michigan provides a data reporting platform entitled MI School Data. This data reporting tool is offered through the Michigan Department of Education and allows schools to track students' post-secondary progress. The CCR Team uses this data to track the percentage of students enrolling in a post-secondary institution the fall after high school graduation; the percentage of students who enroll in a consecutive semester/term; and the percentage of students who obtain a certification and/or degree. This data can also be disaggregated by household income, gender, race/ethnicity, and the team is hoping to add first-generation college-goers so that specific population of students can be better served. The only data points that cannot be assessed through this tool are the percentage of students who enlist in the military, the percentage of students who start an apprenticeship program or go straight into the workforce, so the CCR Team is searching for methods to collect that data as well.

Outcome data for the last three years have shown interesting trends that the CCR Team would like to continue to address through events and activities offered to CACC seniors specifically. On average, over 85 percent of CACC seniors indicate that they would like to attend some type of postsecondary institution (tech/trade school, two-year or four-year college/university), but the data consistently shows that approximately only 55 percent of CACC seniors are actually attending a postsecondary institution after high school graduation. As the CCR Team continues to assess this data and develop the college/career readiness initiative, we hope to see this gap decrease so more students who have aspirations of attending a postsecondary institution are able to accomplish that goal. The team also believes that being able to disaggregate the data and target specific student populations that are showing a greater need for support and interventions will help improve the number of aspiring students that matriculate to a postsecondary institution.

Next Steps

The 2017–18 school year will mark the fourth year of implementation for the college/career readiness initiative at the CACC, and the CCR Team is looking...
forward to providing students with some additional interventions of support to better prepare them for their postsecondary plans. One such intervention has already begun with the early/middle college program and is now looking to expand to all students. Led by the counseling department with a more direct focus on academic, attendance and behavior interventions, the program will focus on ensuring all seniors are eligible to register for credit-bearing general education college/university courses. It will include placement test preparation and explanation, as well as academic support from ELA and math consultants; attendance interventions that comprise small group and individual counseling for students with excessive absences (nine or more absences per semester); and behavior interventions that will correlate with the new GRIT (growth mindset, resiliency, initiative and teamwork) building initiative.

Employers continuously express that it is not the technical skills that students need to leave high school with, but more of the soft skills — the ability to show up on time, teamwork, collaboration, problem-solving, communication — the skills that are more difficult to measure but are necessary for success. In response to this need, the CACC developed an initiative that will assess and teach these skills so students can be better prepared to enter the workforce, as well as find success in college. That is GRIT. The counseling department and the CCR Team will work collaboratively on this initiative as it aligns with the ASCA mindsets and behaviors for student success. With the addition of these new interventions and initiatives, a true comprehensive program will be offered to CACC students so they will be both college and career ready.

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REFERENCES


