

Techniques

CONNECTING EDUCATION AND CAREERS

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LAUNCHING STUDENTS INTO THEIR DECADE OF TRANSITION

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THE SUCCESSFUL
JOURNEY



FRESHMAN TRANSITION COURSES TAKE CAREER EXPLORATION AND DROPOUT PREVENTION TO NEW LEVELS BY HELPING EIGHTH- AND NINTH-GRADE STUDENTS DEVELOP 10-YEAR CAREER AND EDUCATION PLANS.

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Planning your 10-year plan

If today's trends persist, 75 percent of entering high school students will not finish the postsecondary education needed to thrive in our global world. Whether or not students leave high school with a diploma and plans for postsecondary education or training often hinges on the attitudes they develop in the eighth and ninth grade about themselves and their educations. Can they envision a future that is economically self-sufficient? Are they able to articulate a plan that will get them to that point? Do they understand the consequences to their life if they don't follow through with their plans?

In the 2007 edition of *Diplomas Count*, Education Week reported that nationally more than one-third of the students lost from the high school pipeline fail to make the transition from the ninth to the 10th grade ("Ready for What? Preparing Students for College, Careers, and Life After High School," June 12, 2007). This explains why, for more than two decades, schools and districts across the country have struggled to develop freshman transition activities and courses to address this critical transitional time for students.

Unfortunately, many of these efforts have failed to impact school retention because there has been no plan, no roadmap, no guidelines or standards to point the way to success. Teachers are left to their own devices to develop from scratch what should be a rigorous, comprehensive course. In far too many cases, due to lack of resources (*i.e.*, time, money and energy), the outcome does not meet expectations and, eventually, the program is abandoned. This is a frustrating cycle, to say the least.

A Clear Set of Standards Goes Beyond Career Orientation

It was this realization and the resulting Course Standards for Freshman Transition Classes that launched the Freshman Transition Initiative of George Washington University in 2004. In developing the necessary standards (validated in 2005 and available for download at www.freshmantransition.org), the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) for Career Connections and Career Investigation became the starting point to design the framework for this eighth- or ninth-grade course because they were among the best career exploration standards. It was also clear that in order to achieve the ambitious goal of

impacting school retention, the new standards had to go beyond traditional career exploration.

The TEKS courses held students accountable to many significant expectations, but because career exploration is only one facet of what motivates students to take ownership of their futures, additional standard measures were added to help students to establish and consolidate their identity, create a comprehensive 10-year career and life plan, master the skills and attitudes of a resilient personality, and, most important, understand the consequences of dropping out of high school, postsecondary training or college.

Working on the premise that individuals don't work hard until they understand the benefits of their efforts, the Course Standards for Freshman Transition Classes serve as the blueprint for well-designed freshman courses that not only carry the same rigor, credibility and status of traditional academic courses, but that also increase school retention, academic achievement, and postsecondary matriculation.

A successful standards-based Freshman Transition Course has five requirements:

- A 10-year education and career plan for every student.
- A curriculum that meets the Course Standards for Freshman Transition Classes.
- Well-qualified teachers.
- Leadership continuity over the first four years.
- A systemic and sustainable school-wide implementation initiative.

Whether applied as a stand-alone eighth- or ninth-grade freshman transition class, used as the foundation for freshman academies or career pathway programs, or integrated into academic courses such as English, social studies and mathematics, the standards provide content and themes that enable students to understand why high school matters. Upon completion of a semester or year-long course that is based on the Course Standards for Freshman Transition Classes, students come to make more informed decisions about what they want to study and tend to choose career pathways eager to stay focused. They also develop the aptitudes and attitudes necessary for their "transition decade" of high school, postsecondary education and training, and into a productive adulthood. And, ultimately, they are prepared to enter the workforce with the skills necessary to compete.

A 10-Year Education and Career Plan for Every Student

The four- or five-year graduation plan most schools require today is simply not enough to engage students in learning and prepare them for the realities of adulthood. Just think about it: A four-year plan might get students to graduate from high school. A five-year plan may get them into college, but we all know that 50 percent of college freshmen do not graduate. What about economic self-sufficiency? A CNN poll recently found that 48 percent of college graduates return home to live, and one year later 44 percent are still there. So it can't be overestimated how critical it is for students to develop a vision of a productive adulthood and a carefully considered plan for a self-sufficient future.

A Curriculum That Meets the Course Standards for Freshman Transition Courses

Two hours in front of a computer using an online career exploration program is not enough to impact the attitudes of the average 13- or 14-year-old. For early adolescents to embrace the notion that a self-sufficient future is not only desirable but also attainable, they need opportunities to contemplate, discuss, explore and research. Students must understand and learn the process of making important choices, and that can only be cultivated through interaction with others under the guidance of a skilled teacher. Using classroom-based curriculum materials that meet the Course Standards for Freshman Transition Classes, educators are equipped with the necessary tools to facilitate this sophisticated process. The Freshman Transition Initiative recommends that a minimum of 90 classroom hours be devoted to a standards-based freshman transition course and that the necessary tools, curriculum and texts be provided to the students and instructors.

Assistant Principal Matt Maynor at Ridgeland High in Georgia knows firsthand the importance of giving teachers the tools and structure they need to create a successful vision for their freshman classes. Before implementing a curriculum that meets 90 percent of the standards, Ridgeland's "High School 101" course left a lot to be desired. "I had teachers in my office all the time trying to figure out what we were going to do with this course," Maynor says. "It was very frustrating for them to not have a clear path. Students and parents were asking me, 'What's this class for? What's the benefit of it?'" Luckily, we were introduced to the Freshman Transition Standards and the correlated Career Choices curriculum and I haven't had to battle that. I've had students and parents pleased with the class. The new curriculum has given teachers a vision for the class. They have a powerful tool to use and everything is mapped out for them so they don't have to struggle."

Well-Qualified Teachers

It seems obvious that well-qualified teachers are a must. Research shows, however, that freshmen—particularly in urban settings—are often assigned to the least experienced, least qualified teachers. What should principals look for when selecting teachers for this course? Most important is the desire and passion to want to help students navigate through a course like this. Ideally, this course should be taught by instructors who choose to apply for the position rather than by those who are assigned to it. In addition, teachers should be innovators and team players.

The key to any instruction is the teacher. Before students can actually grow and learn in the way a Freshman Transition Course asks them to, they have to have someone there who can genuinely recognize their growth and learning. Teachers are the connection between the student and the school, so it is crucial that the most nurturing, talented and consistent members of the faculty be recruited to teach this course.

Leadership Continuity Over the First Four Years

Ideally, a lead teacher will make a commitment of at least four years to the Freshman Transition program. It takes this kind of

continuity to institutionalize this effort. The schools that carefully select and provide professional development for teachers experience the results they are looking for—the transformation of struggling students into self-motivated learners.

A School-Wide Implementation Initiative

Students' 10-year plans are vital for successful advisory programs, career academies, and increased rigor in academics, so they should be updated and utilized beyond eighth or ninth grade. According to Mel Levine, author, pediatrician, professor, and co-founder of All Kinds of Minds, adolescents need to revisit their plans on a regular basis to update and verify that they are on the right track. The more realistic their plans, the more likely they'll be to exert the energy and effort to follow through with those plans. Each discipline in each grade can develop lessons that help with this process.

A review of the following 10-Step Plan advocated by the Freshman Transition Initiative provides a leadership plan that career and technical educators are well suited to implement.

A 10-Step Plan for Implementing a Freshman Transition Course and School-Wide Initiative

Step 1: Gather Your Resources. Download a copy of the Course Standards for Freshman Transition Classes and sign up to join the Freshman Transition Initiative network at www.freshmantransition.org. You'll also want to download your own copy of a PowerPoint presentation to be used in steps two and four below.

Step 2: Create a Vision. Present the 10-year educational and career plan concept and the Freshman Transition Initiative in a school-wide meeting. Generate interest around what students have to gain from creating a comprehensive 10-year educational and career plan, and cast a vision for how the plan can be used by all instructors to motivate students to higher academic achievement.





accomplishing
your goals

Step 3: Form a Team of Champions. Gather a committee of your most innovative teachers to develop a plan for instituting a standards-driven, freshman transition course that culminates in the development of a 10-year educational and career plan for all incoming freshmen (whether it is completed in the eighth or ninth grade). Their duties should include formulating and assisting with steps four, five, six and eight.

Step 4: Generate Community Buy-in for the New Course and 10-Year Plan. With your team, make presentations to parents, community groups, and your school board. Lobby your school board to consider mandating a freshman transition course for all students in either the eighth or ninth grade.

Step 5: Identify a Curriculum that will Accomplish Your Course Goals. Good curriculum is one with scope and sequence, where it is apparent to the learner what the results are for their efforts (in this case a comprehensive—yet flexible—10-year plan for students' transition into adulthood). Seek out resources that provide your teachers with the tools, textbooks and materials required. Support your team in finding the best curriculum they can that meets the Course Standards for Freshman Transition Classes.

Step 6: Recruit Your Most Experienced Teachers to Conduct the Course. This kind of course requires high-level teaching skills. Ideally, by this time, your team of champions will become your pool of potential instructors. When recruiting, don't make the mistake of assigning the newest teachers or the least skilled. In addition, provide course continuity by identifying a lead teacher who will commit a minimum of four years to the project. Provide him or her with the release time needed to train and to support both the course instructors and support the school-wide initiative (see step eight).

Florida District Adopts Freshman Transition Model

In 2007, Duval County School District in Jacksonville, Florida, committed to the Freshman Transition model for nearly 11,000 students enrolled in mandated freshman 'Keystone' courses at 19 high schools. By intentionally assigning lead teachers at each school and taking advantage of professional development opportunities provided by The George Washington University and the curriculum provider, Academic Innovations, Duval County has 95 focused, energized, well-equipped teachers who are already making progress with students.

"Students can now see for themselves the correlation between what they are doing in school now with what they will be doing after high school graduation," says Judy Cromartie, supervisor of guidance services for Duval County Public Schools. "Overall, students have been connecting to the course and have made connections to teachers early in their tenure there. We are hoping that this early connection will result in greater academic success in grade nine, where we currently have our largest failure rate."

The progress these students make over the next four years will be documented with pre- and post-course surveys and carefully evaluated by a team of researchers at George Washington University. Together with the lead teachers and key administrators, the researchers will quantify for Duval County the impact the Keystone courses had on the graduation rate and students' overall attitudes (and, therefore, effort) toward their education and futures. The survey is anticipated to measure both student gains and teacher effectiveness.

Success 101: Silverado High School

When Silverado High School in Victorville, California, received a federal Smaller Learning Community grant, its administration knew that turning the money into meaningful classroom experiences for 1,300 bleary-eyed freshmen would require a curriculum and focus that would not only challenge students, but one that would also compel them to take ownership of their learning. The *Career Choices* curriculum, which meets more than 90 percent of the *Course Standards for Freshman Transition Classes*, became the perfect fit for Silverado's freshman seminar course, Success 101. After only two years, the school saw a decrease in suspensions and an increase in students requesting to take Advanced Placement courses. Silverado guidance counselor Vicky Mullins says, "Since *Career Choices* has come onto our campus, the freshmen are more focused—they're more anchored in knowing what they need to do to move on in high school."

Getting Silverado students to think about their futures and develop a 10-year plan was easy once students dove into the curriculum. "It wasn't hard to get them to come up with a plan," says Small Learning Community Coordinator Georgette Phillips, "because they were given the tools to redo their plan if needed." Students revisit their 10-year plans in grades 10-12 while putting together their yearly portfolios. This annual follow-up not only reinforces the personal exploration students completed in Success 101, but re-evaluating their goals provides them with opportunities to set new ones. Now in its fourth year at Silverado, the freshman course is being taught by seven teachers who feel especially motivated to walk students through the material and help them develop personalized 10-year plans.

Step 7: Provide Professional Development and Course Planning Time. In order for course instructors to develop a comprehensive, rigorous classroom experience, they will need professional development and course planning time, particularly during the first year. Arrange schedules so all course instructors have at least one common prep time each week in which to meet and discuss the progress of their efforts. Send the complete team to appropriate workshops and conferences.

Step 8: Make your Freshman Transition Initiative a School-Wide Effort. Provide professional development to all instructors in your school on how to best use and support their students' 10-year plans. Because it is important for students to reassess their goals each year, develop a system in which each student revisits and updates their 10-year plans at least once per year within their sophomore, junior and senior coursework. Ask each department to identify where they can assist in this project.

Step 9: Share all Students' 10-Year Educational and Academic Plans. Provide teachers with immediate access to each of their students' current 10-year plans. Every teacher then has increased insight when counseling and personalizing their efforts with each student. If a student is failing a course that is required for their desired career goal, any academic teacher, upon reviewing the student's 10-year plan, is in the position to

counsel that student and either help them make up the deficit or rewrite their plan with lowered expectations.

Step 10: Assess, Recognize and Reward. To maintain the energy of your best instructors and to keep the enthusiasm of the total school community high, it is important to recognize and reward excellence. Invite your local newspaper and news channel to cover your freshman transition initiative. Encourage your lead teacher(s) to attend conferences and make presentations about your school's efforts. Ask students to vote each year on the teacher in each grade who most supports their dreams.

How to Get Started

Start your research by visiting The George Washington University's Freshman Transition Initiative Web site, www.freshmantransition.org. There you will find the Course Standards for Freshman Transition Classes along with a variety of resources, such as a PowerPoint presentation on why a Freshman Transition Course and the 10-year plan are important. By providing this opportunity for all your students, you will change the culture of your school and help successfully launch students into their decade of transition with the skills and attitudes needed to succeed in the highly competitive 21st century. The insight they glean from a carefully crafted Freshman Transition Course culminating in a 10-year plan will provide the incentive needed to help them become self-motivated learners—which is the only surefire formula for personal success. ■

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