

Running Head: CAREER GUIDANCE CURRICULUM

Career guidance curriculum for freshmen students

Action Research  
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Professional Responsibility: This project has been reviewed by collegial professional peers and has been submitted for on-line publication before being evaluated by faculty members from Portland State University. I am the author and take full responsibility for the project's contents and quality. This work serves as a baseline for my professional school counselor skills and demonstrates what I have done to develop and/or assess my actions directed toward serving students and schools. In other words, this is a snapshot or one indicator of my work at this stage of my career.

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to share the results of an Action Research Project that focused on the effects of a career guidance curriculum in a high school setting.

**Introduction**

Urban High School is located in a middle to upper middle class neighborhood in an urban setting. It has a population of 1,850 students and is the largest public high school in the district. Twenty percent of the population is African American, seventy percent are European American and the remaining population is Latino, Native American and Asian. About 50% of the students at Urban High School are from the neighborhood with the other 50% transferring from other neighborhoods in the city. Twenty one percent of students are on free or reduced lunches. For the past three years, Urban High School has received a ‘satisfactory’ or ‘strong’ rating on their report card from the State of Oregon. However, similar to other high schools across the nation, there is an achievement gap in that the European American students score higher on standardized tests in reading and math than students of color. Also, more European Americans go on to four-year colleges than students of color.

This Action Research Project examined the effectiveness of career guidance curriculum for freshmen students at high school. First, this research sought to determine if students met the goals of the curriculum which were to teach students: (a) how to use an internet career program (b) identify a career(s) based on their personal abilities, skills and interests. (c) the education and skills needed to succeed in the workplace (d)select course work that is related to their career goals. Secondly, this study tried to determine if career guidance curriculum helped students choose careers based truly on their abilities as opposed to other influences such as gender, ethnicity or academic success in school.

## **Review of the Literature**

### *Career Guidance Curriculum*

Career education is so important for the growth and support of all students that counselors nationally and locally have recognized career education as one of the main focuses of a successful school counseling program. In fact, careers is one of the three broad developmental domains in the American School Counseling Association's National Model and one of the four broad developmental domains in Oregon's Framework for Comprehensive and Guidance and Counseling Programs (learn to work). According to the National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education (Career Association), Career Technical Education is an essential component of the total educational system in the United States and is critical to the country's ability to compete in a global economy. The Career Association also states that career education contributes to the goals of a high academic achievement, student retention and motivation, and the development of general and workplace and life skills (2001).

Before students embark on individualized experiences such as job shadows and internships, a career exploration guidance curriculum is recommended to prepare students for these experiences. According to Brown (1998), teachers and counselors who provide information about careers and school-to-work opportunities to parents and students made a significant impact in helping students prepare for these experiences based on their knowledge of the curriculum and students' interests and abilities. The Career Association also believes that a necessary component of any career education is providing students with the knowledge to succeed in careers (2001).

Career guidance curriculum is recognized nationally as an important tool for assisting students in understanding the skills and knowledge to succeed after high school. However, it also

plays an important role in Oregon's Framework for Comprehensive Guidance and Counseling Programs. The Oregon Framework states that,

“guidance curriculum forms the foundation for the school district's systematic delivery of guidance and counseling program content. One of the guidance curriculum delivery strategies is classroom instruction which is guidance-focused learning activities or units presented as part of a regular class (p.27)”.

In the State of Oregon, a career guidance unit is an effective method of assisting a large group of students with developing an education plan based upon their interests and current career goals. According to the Oregon State Department of Education (ODE), an education plan is a key component of the Certificate of Advanced Mastery (CAM), which is a state requirement for the class of 2008 (2002).

In addition, a career guidance curriculum demonstrates that a school is assisting students with meeting Oregon's Career Related Learning Standards (CRLS). The Career Related Learning Standards are personal management, problem solving, communications, teamwork, employment foundations and career development. Among many other things, a career guidance curriculum includes students working as a team to solve a real life problem (problem solving and teamwork), presenting their results as an individual and a team (communications) and helping students to obtain an understanding of their self and educational and career opportunities (career development) (2002).

#### *Career Guidance and Students of Color and Females*

Although career education can benefit all students, it is extremely important for students of color. Kazis & Pennington state that school to career programs are beneficial for students who are less likely to continue their education past high school, including African American youth. The most dramatic increase in the number of students participating in academic classes focusing on career interests has been within the African American population.

According to this study, African American youth find career activities engaging and a motivator for staying in school and challenging themselves academically. For Latino students, career activities expand their knowledge of career opportunities. A developmental study of Latino youth by Quiroz found that, unlike their middle class counterparts, Latino eighth graders were vague about the future and emphasized income and the potential material instead of the skills and education needed to succeed in that field. They also tend to select careers that are portrayed in the media and are unaware of other careers. The study said that even as juniors in high school, Latino students were unaware of career opportunities and the steps to reach career goals. Furthermore, career education is extremely important because it helps Latino students see the connection (relevancy) between school and post high school success. Quiroz (1997) also states that another study of inner city children found that none of the “at-risk students aspired to be professionals, nor did they have a picture of themselves as future members of the middle class.”

Similarly, the statistics for women in the world of work are alarming. Women earn less than men and women still tend to work in only 20 of the more than 400 job categories. (Clark, 2000) Yet, the majority of job requirements are unrelated to gender. Through career education, teachers and counselors can help students of color and females to learn more about job-related opportunities and the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in these fields.

**Methodology/Data Analysis**

In the fall of 2002, as part of a national and local high school reform movement, Urban High School implemented smaller learning communities at the freshmen level. One counselor is assigned to work with a team of freshmen teachers in science, English and Social Studies. Freshmen are randomly placed in one of six communities (approximately 90 students per community).

This year, the counselors and teachers added “Enrichment Time,” which is 45 minutes per week throughout the year. The goal of Enrichment Time is to allow teachers to group students based on specific needs and interests. The teachers and counselor decided from February – May they would rotate the students through a “Career Awareness” unit. The curriculum was developed to directly address the Learning to Work and Learning to Live developmental domains of the Oregon Framework mentioned previously.

In order to evaluate the career curriculum, the counseling department worked with the teachers in one community to develop a Human Subjects proposal. Using the format from a local university, the community developed a proposal which outlined their project idea, the measures that would be taken to ensure confidentiality (they stated that students would not be identified on any reports or publications), the assessment tool and their parent/student information letter. The principal approved the project and the proposal was submitted to the research department of the school district. The research department then worked with the counseling department to provide the permission slips which needed to be attached to the parent/student letter and the Human Subjects proposal was approved by the district.

One community of ninety students participated in the career curriculum unit. In groups of twenty, students were placed through a four week unit of career activities. For this study, twenty

students from different rotations were chosen to be evaluated. These students were chosen based on their ability to turn in their permission slip, attendance, ethnicity, gender and/or academic success. There were more students of color in this sample group than in the school population (50% compared to 30%) and academically this group had an overall GPA that was slightly lower than the overall student GPA of the student body. More males were represented in the study than in the student population.

Before the career unit was started, the students were given a pre-assessment “career” test. This assessment had been used by the school’s counseling department to determine knowledge of career(s) as well as to rate the ability to problem solve, set goals, etc. Students responded to questions on a scale from strongly agree to unsure. Four questions were chosen for this study because of their career focus and their correlation to the career related standards and the four-year educational plan.

The school district provided the internet program Bridges to use for the career assessment test and career exploration. A computer lab was necessary to implement this curriculum. The curriculum was developed with the help of the high school’s counseling department and has been used for the past two years. It is a combination of the curriculum units provided by Bridges and other internet career curriculum programs (see references for more information).

Urban high’s career unit curriculum:

Day One

Create a career portfolio, take the skills and interest inventory and identify your top three career choices.

Day Two

Continue to identify the three career choices and start work on a job ad for each of the careers.

Day Three

Continue work on job ad and do a “mock interview” with a partner on one of the three careers.

Day Four

Outline a “high school” plan for one of the three careers that you have chosen. In this plan address: high school courses you need to take, experience(s) in school and outside of school needed to do this career. Take post-assessment test.

After the students were rotated through the career guidance curriculum unit, the results of the pre and post assessment test and student career choices were analyzed.

**Data Analysis**

The first question that was analyzed from the pre and post assessment test was:

**I know how to use the Internet to access career planning information:**

	<i>Pre-Assessment</i>	<i>Post Assessment</i>
Strongly Agree	8	8
Agree	5	12
Disagree	5	0
Strongly Disagree	0	0
Unsure	2	0

Based on the scores above, by the end of the session, all students felt that they knew how to use a computer to access career information. The number of “strongly agrees” remained the same however the disagrees and unsure all moved to the “agree” category.” The school felt this was a success because their goal was to have the student’s exposed to using a career program on the computer. Interestingly enough, half of the students felt that they had this skill even before

they began unit. Based on conversations with students and observations of the counselors, there were several reasons for this. Depending on the middle school, some students had used an internet-based career program sometime during their middle school years. Secondly, some students thought that before taking this curriculum unit they knew how to do this (they thought you just plugged “career” on to a google search). However, once they went through the unit they realized that there are various career programs that offer career tests, etc. Lastly, some students read the question as meaning their comfort level with using the computer.

The second question to be analyzed was:

**I have developed an awareness of my personal abilities, skills, interests and motivations.**

	<i>Pre-Assessment</i>	<i>Post Assessment</i>
Strongly Agree	6	5
Agree	7	9
Disagree	0	1
Strongly Disagree	0	0
Unsure	7	6

Based on the results of the pre-assessment, most students felt that they had a strong awareness of their abilities, interests, etc. even before beginning this unit. Also, almost a third of the students still felt unsure of their capabilities even after taking the interest test provided by the computer. The counselors who administered this test noted also that the students didn’t seem to learn anything new about themselves. If anything, students seemed to question the accuracy of the test.

The third question to be analyzed was:

**I have knowledge about the changing workplace.**

	<i>Pre-Assessment</i>	<i>Post Assessment</i>
Strongly Agree	1	4
Agree	9	7
Disagree	5	4
Strongly Disagree	2	0
Unsure	3	5

Only about  $\frac{1}{2}$  of the students strongly agreed or agreed that they knew about the changing workplace. When students explored careers, there was a section about challenges in their particular career and the skills needed now and in the future but based on the results above many of the students did not make this connection or knew what this question was asking.

The fourth question to be analyzed was:

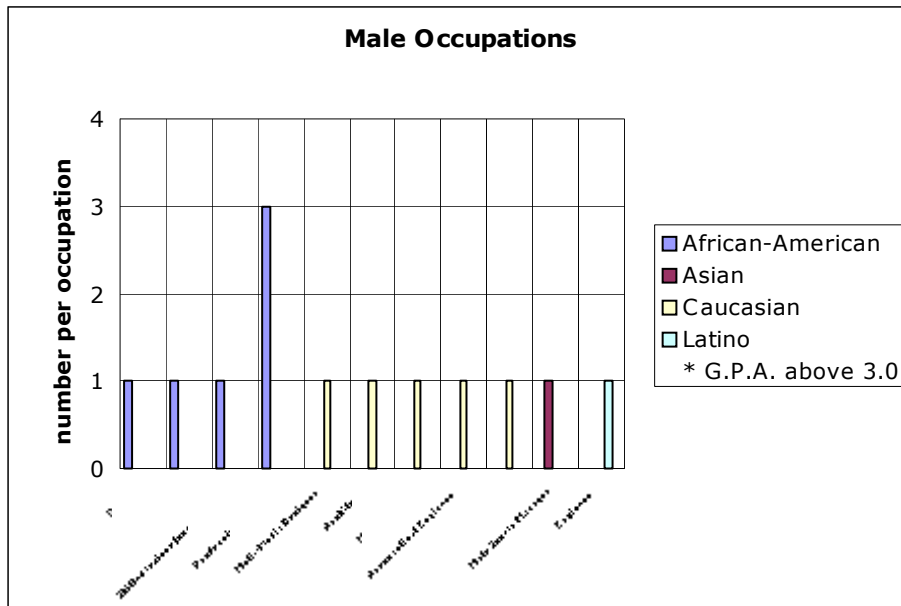
**I select coursework related to my interests.**

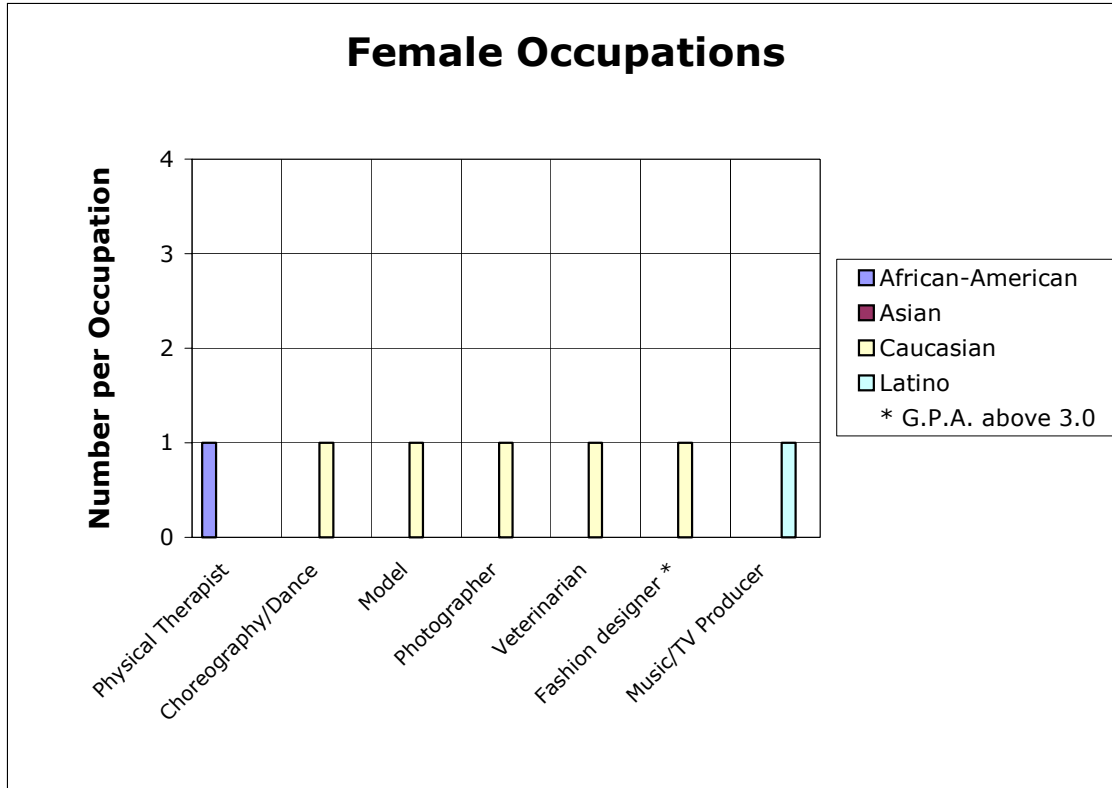
	<i>Pre-Assessment</i>	<i>Post Assessment</i>
Strongly Agree	8	10
Agree	10	4
Disagree	0	1
Strongly Disagree	1	0
Unsure	1	5

The goal of this question was to determine whether students saw the relevancy between school and the world of work. The results were inconclusive. Before the students participated in the career unit, eighteen out of twenty students felt that they chose coursework related to their

interests. After the career unit, only fourteen students felt that they selected courses with a career in mind. One could interpret this in many ways. It could mean that students changed their career focus during the career unit and realized that they had selected coursework for the following year that was not directly correlated. It also could mean that they already saw the connection between school and the world of work before they even started this unit.

This action research project also examined the impact of the career guidance unit on students of color and young women. During the unit, students were asked to develop several career ads based on their career test and/or careers they had an interest in pursuing after high school. Then they were asked to give their counselor their “top choice” of a career. The results were as follows:





Based on their results of the top career choice, all but one African American male chose a career that required at least an undergraduate degree and only two chose a career that needed some type of post-high school education. Four chose a career based on their personal interest however it doesn't necessarily mean their career choice was based on ability. Of the white males, many chose careers that required using math in their career. The females chose professions mainly in the arts. For the most part, they also chose professions that earn less and have less job stability than those chosen by their male counterparts. Again, females seemed to choose careers based on their personal interest rather than their ability. It is interesting to note that students were not impacted by their GPA in school when it came to choosing a career. The two African American students who want to pursue advanced degrees did not have the highest GPAs. While this career unit might have helped students expand their knowledge of careers,

personal interests seemed to play the biggest factor in determining what career they would like to pursue.

### **Summary of Results**

This action research project was designed to evaluate the effectiveness of the curriculum based on the four questions of the studies. After completing this unit, all students felt comfortable with using a career program, knew how to access the program, etc. Several students stated that they used the program at home and shared it with family members/friends. This unit was extremely effective in exposing students to career research.

It is obvious from question two that the students at the ninth grade level have a strong sense of their interests and abilities. This curriculum unit seemed to reinforce the importance of knowing ones personal interests but it did not necessarily help students to expose them to possible other interests.

The third question about the changing workplace seemed to be a weakness of the curriculum unit. Only 50% of the students seemed to agree they understand the changing workplace. The results from the question are not surprising considering the amount of time that was spent covering this particular topic and the “vagueness” of this question.

The fourth question directly addresses students choosing coursework based on career goals which is an extremely important component of the CAM. The impact of this curriculum was not clear because students seemed to make less of a connection after taking the unit. Again, this could be a result of how the question was stated and if students had the opportunity to write a written response they might have been able to explain for this discrepancy.

**Limitations**

Research in a school setting has many limitations. First, the researcher is unable to isolate the many variables that influence a student and their career exploration experience. Many students talked about having conversations with friends and family about careers. These conversations seemed to have a tremendous impact on their choice of career but this study did not cover the impact of relationships on choosing a career. Secondly, Urban High School has sixteen middle schools that feed in to their school. The exposure of career curriculum varied among many students and this was not taken into consideration. This study was impacted by the structure of the delivery of the curriculum. Students sometimes went two weeks without Enrichment Time because of holidays, etc. Also, some classes had more time than others because of assembly schedules or teachers making last minute adjustments to the time. The “space” was also very awkward. Students used a computer lab but the lab was not conducive to discussion and sharing of results. Lastly, the study did not take into account the teachers’ attitudes toward students being taught this curriculum. Some teachers were extremely supportive while others were concerned they didn’t have enough time to cover their own curriculum.

**Recommendations**

The first recommendation is that this curriculum unit needs to be expanded. Four weeks is not enough time to cover the material. Also, it limits the ability to have meaningful discussion. The researcher found that many students wanted to discuss their results but time and space were very limiting. Also, stretching the curriculum over four weeks seemed to lose the continuity and impact of the curriculum

The curriculum also needs to do more work around personal abilities and interests. Discussions and research need to focus more on their personal interests since obviously

at this age that is a big influence on career choice. For example, having a discussion with a student who wants to be a professional athlete about other careers that work with athletes and the steps one needs to take to get there.

Also, the school has to realize the purpose of a career guidance curriculum. It is to provide students with the exploratory tools to research careers. However, it can not take the place of providing students with “hands-on” experiences. The school needs to provide opportunities such as job shadows, career fairs, internships and project-based learning which helps students understand the “changing workplace” and reinforce what they are learning in school.

It is obvious that students are influenced by relationships outside the classroom. It is recommended that the school work with parents to educate them as well. This school has meetings with parents of color and that would be an important group to work with. One student shared with the researcher that she “gave up” on one of her careers because her mom told her it needed a lot of math and she wasn’t good at math. In reality, this career did not require as much math as her mom thought. Also, another student said that he knew he had the math ability to be an engineer however there was no way his family could afford a college education so he needed to look for another career.

For study purposes, three things need to happen. A follow up study of this group would be helpful because it would address developmental issues. The researcher felt that the maturity level of some students impacted their answers. Also, it would be helpful in future studies to address issues such as previous exposure to career guidance curriculum and other resources students use to learn about careers such as parents, friends, the media, etc. Lastly, there needs to be some type of evaluation of the career program itself. There are many career programs available to schools and the quality of the program varies among the programs.

## References

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## Curriculum Resources

Bridges: [cxonline.bridges.com](http://cxonline.bridges.com)

Chicago Public Schools: Instructional Internet, [www.intranet.cps.k12.il.us/Lessons](http://www.intranet.cps.k12.il.us/Lessons)

NCPublicSchools.org: [www.ncpublicschools.org/curriculum/guidance](http://www.ncpublicschools.org/curriculum/guidance)