

LEARNING ABOUT STUDENTS: DEVELOPING A CAREER-BASED CRIMINAL JUSTICE CURRICULUM

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Faced with scrutiny by the government over student loans, college officials continue to search for ways to keep students engaged and enrolled in their programs. At the same time, there is increasing concern over the access of education for all and the opportunity it provides. Private and public colleges now are re-thinking their practices to retain students in their programs. In many fields of study, there has been a push for career-based education. In this paper we propose that a curriculum focused on student learning, coupled with career-based courses, will help ensure college success and successful entry into the workplace. This article examines the process in which an online criminal justice program is developing a new approach to education utilizing a career-based approach to learning for students.

Keywords: career-based education, academically-defined fields-of-study, curriculum mapping, meaningful coursework

INTRODUCTION

Universities across the nation are confronted with finding solutions to lack of student engagement and declining retention rates. In 2009 the average first year college retention rate in the United States was 46.8% at four-year, private, for-profit colleges (National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, 2009). The six-year graduation rate at four-year colleges and universities in 2009 was 55.5%. The transition and completion rates from 9th grade through college were 20.8% (NCHEMS, 2009). It is also estimated that less than 30 percent of young adults earn a bachelor's degree by their mid-20s (Harvard, 2011). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development notes that in 2010 the United States dropped to 14th in industrialized nations in the percentage of 25-34 year olds with higher education at 42% (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2012). Lewin (2010) reported that some online, for-profit bachelor degree programs have graduation rates as low as 4-5%. Online programs have been particularly hard hit by falling retention rates. Corinthian College is the most recent college to close most of its campuses in response to pressure from the Department of Education. The Department of Education

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also has announced that they will begin investigating the manner in which student aid is administered at the University of Phoenix (Connor & Carapezza, 2014).

Background

Like other online programs Maple Junction's (a pseudonym) Criminal Justice Program would like to improve their attrition rate and provide their students a more meaningful education. However, student data supplied by Maple Junction shows that from 2010 to 2014 that almost seven times more students withdrew or failed than graduated from the program. Maple Junction has not been idle in addressing the problem of retention. Two years ago, Maple Junction took preliminary steps to respond to the needs of students and keep them enrolled. A major investment in a software program was developed to help guide students through lesson plans at a student's own pace. There also have been several revisions to the curriculum in recent years to attract and keep students in the program. The most recent changes included adding a specialty in Homeland Security to the existing four specialties (Law Enforcement, Forensic Science, Corrections and Generalist). The required credits in each of the five upper level specialty courses were more than doubled to appeal to students. As a result, many specialty level courses were added to the curriculum. Core criminal justice classes were cut back to accommodate the change. Maple Junction's administration believed that the old curriculum was front heavy in general criminal justice core classes. By moving more credits into the different specialty areas, the university hoped that students would have more classes in their interest area. The belief was that extra courses in the specialization areas would attract students to the university and keep them in the program.

Steps have been taken at Maple Junction to stabilize the attrition rate. The Criminal Justice Department set a guideline of a 25% attrition rate each reporting session (attrition was defined as student drops and does not include withdrawals) for online students in 2013. That goal was successfully met with an average attrition rate near 20% each session. The department utilized online and telephone student learning resources to address student retention. Despite an earnest attempt by the university, attrition rates remain high when student drops were added. With additional pressure and focus on private, for-profit universities, it was imperative that every effort be made to keep students enrolled and graduate them. Maple Junction decided to look more closely at the statistics behind the withdrawals and drops and to further analyze their program.

By taking a closer look at student retention rates, Maple Junction discovered that student retention and engagement were interconnected. Further statistical analysis on withdrawals/drops and graduation from January 2011 to June 2014 show that students in the Criminal Justice Program withdraw or drop early in their academic careers. A total of 60% of students in the program withdrew or were dropped before they had reached 24 credits. Even more surprising was that 34% of students left before they had earned any course credit. Analysis of the data at Maple Junction showed that students need to be engaged early, especially first-time students. First-time students were responsible for 87% of the drops and withdrawals in the Criminal Justice Program.

A review of the withdrawal/drop and graduation rates from the Criminal Justice Program at Maple Junction from January 2011 to June 2014 revealed that the more credit a student transfers to the college, the greater the chance they will graduate. Students who come into the program with no prior college credit withdraw or drop at a higher rate than students with college credit (57%). Students with the most college credit (over 90 credit hours) fail only 1% of the time. The inverse is true for those that successfully graduate from Maple Junction's Criminal Justice Program. Students that come into the program without any college credit comprised only 12% of the graduates. Students with 61-90 transfer credit hours composed 43% of the graduates. Recent research verifies that the more credit a student is able to transfer, the more likely it is that they will graduate. Monaghan & Atwell (2014) found that less restrictive policies on transfer credit led to an increase in graduation rates from 46% to 54%. Students without college credit had less success than students with some college. Students who came to Maple Junction's Criminal Justice Program had a 4% graduation rate. Students who graduated high school had a 23% graduation rate. The online format as structured for students without college experience was not conducive to graduation.

Full-time students at Maple Junction are more likely to graduate than part-time students. Students enrolled full time have a 44% graduation rate when compared to students enrolled full and part-time. Students enrolled less than half time have an 8% graduation rate. These statistics are similar to those reported in 2013 across the United States at private, for-profit colleges. The nationally reported rate in that survey was 42% for full-time students and 20% for part-time students (Ginder & Kelly-Reid, 2013). Further examination of part-time students shows that the more the commitment, the more likely a student is to graduate. Students who are enrolled less than one-half time have an 11% graduation rate. Students that are enrolled three-quarters time have a 21% graduation rate. Clearly students who make more of a time commitment are more likely to graduate at Maple Junction.

Student retention data from 2011 to 2014 shows that students at Maple Junction are likely to drop out or fail early in their college career. Retention efforts should focus on the younger, first-time student who is just entering college. Likewise, students who are fully committed have a better chance at graduation than students who enroll less than one-half time. To be successful, Maple Junction needs to engage students and keep them enrolled at or near full-time. Therefore, Maple Junction needs to focus their curriculum on the needs of the student. Students entering Maple Junction are different than students graduating from the college. A developmental approach to curriculum design that developed with the student and helped engage students was proposed. Maple Junction was more than willing to make that commitment.

Education That Has Meaning

Further scrutiny has been placed on universities to assure that students receive an education which serves a specific function. President Obama (2010) recommended that the education system becomes more effective and provides young people with the skills and qualifications that make entry to the labor market easier. There has been increased pressure on schools not only to improve attrition rates, but to improve the quality of education in preparing individuals for the careers in which they aspire. Hooley, Marriott &

Sampson (2011) describe the positive changes colleges can yield by incorporating a learning approach based on academic achievement and career development. By citing relevant research, the authors propose that a career development approach can not only improve retention rates, they also can increase academic achievement, improve the transition to the workplace for individuals, and have a positive impact on career success for their students.

Hooley, Marriott and Sampson (2011) further argue that it is imperative that students see the significance of their studies at the first chance possible.

The areas of retention, academic achievement, transition and career, and life success are highly interconnected. A young person needs to remain within the education system in order to achieve academically. The level and nature of their academic achievement impacts their chosen transition and the resources necessary in order to make this transition. Finally, all of these factors contribute to the way in which they experience success or otherwise in their life journey (p. 4).

Maple Junction made the decision to begin adopting a career-based approach to education that they hope will give further meaning for students. They also have confidence that students will not only become more engaged, but will leave the university more prepared to transition into the workplace. Maple Junction decided a career-based approach can best be accomplished through curriculum and course development. Their emphasis was to develop curriculum specialties that fit career pathways and appeal to their students' interests. Courses that fit within the career pathway would be developed utilizing problem-based learning and career-oriented activities as learning tools.

Curriculum Revision

The first realization for Maple Junction was that their specialty areas were not career based. Their specialty areas and courses were aligned along academic fields of study. A curriculum designed along career pathways varies from traditional programs that align specialties along academically-defined fields of studies. The curriculum as proposed by Maple Junction is designed to use a developmental approach where the student is introduced to both the criminal justice field and the different criminal justice career paths. Students continue through their academic career with career-based knowledge in their chosen career pathway. The curriculum as proposed would consist of an Introduction to Criminal Justice and Careers Core, and a Knowledge Core, of course, followed by coursework in a specialty area. The Introduction Core has been re-designed to introduce students to the criminal justice system and to careers in criminal justice. Students will be immersed in career fields at the onset of their academic studies. Each course will reflect the careers in criminal justice and the pathways available to them at Maple Junction. The Knowledge Core will consist of those classes students will need in the field of criminal justice. Law classes, victim studies, and other general knowledge classes will be located in this core. However, these courses still will be aligned along career paths. The Introduction and Knowledge Core can be thought of as gateway courses that introduce students to career pathways.

Aligning the courses along career paths has two distinct advantages. First, it directly benefits the students in that the individual courses are associated and connected

with each other. Students get the benefit of following a distinct track or pathway of their interest. Students who see navigable pathways leading to rewarding careers are less likely to become bored and drop out of school (Harvard, 2011). Specialties aligned along career pathways will be more rewarding to students who will get an idea of the ultimate goal of their education. If students have not discovered their pathway or wish to construct their own pathway, they may choose the generalist specialty.

Secondly, by using career pathways, it aids in structuring the curriculum. The courses as proposed are developmental in nature. As students successfully navigate through the curriculum, they not only expand their subject matter knowledge but also develop an understanding of their career. By building associations in the curriculum, it is probable students will come out of their college career with a more thorough understanding of their career. As noted by the Harvard School of Education (2011), “Far too many students graduate from college without a clear conception of the career they want to pursue, let alone a pathway for getting there” (pg. 24). In the proposed curriculum, even though there are less specialty credits, the focus is on structure and quality not quantity. Maple Junction, like other universities made the mistake of assuming more credits in an academically-defined specialty equates to a more attractive and specialized education for students. In reality, adding more credits to the curriculum created inconsistency in their curriculum.

A Logjam of Credits

Like other schools, Maple Junction decided five years ago to add more specialty courses to their criminal justice curriculum. By adding more credits to the specialty areas created a “logjam” of credits that had to be filled. A number of classes were used in multiple specialties, and new courses were brought in that were not supported or linked with other classes. To ease the burden of scheduling and fitting the credit needs, a number of individual courses were added across the board to multiple specialty areas. In some cases, these courses did not have a direct fit into the specialty area. Prerequisite requirements were removed so students in different specialties could take these multi-fit classes. Likewise, classes that were not supported by general education or core criminal justice classes were introduced because they fit into an academically-defined field of study. These classes also did not have prerequisites, and their only support in the specialty was that they were within an academically-defined field. The end product at Maple Junction was a number of courses within a specialty that were added to fill out a specialty area. The courses in the specialty areas did not have a common core and did not build on each other.

Academically Defined Specialty Areas

One of the more difficult hurdles for Maple Junction was their realization that although their specialty areas were within the field of criminal justice, they were not aligned along their career paths and didn’t take into account student development. They made the decision to begin the move away from the specialty areas structured around broadly-based, academically-defined fields of study and move towards career pathways. By identifying and linking courses based on career pathways, it eases the burden on students, engages students in their education and allows for more rigor in the courses through structured assignments and rubrics. Academically-defined fields of study may or may not define career

fields. They also may cover diverse subjects within the field of study. As proposed, a focus on career pathways does not mean non-academic. It entails an academic concentration utilizing a career-guided approach. The difference between both approaches is best described discussing the Forensic Science and Homeland Security specialties.

An example of an academically-defined field at Maple Junction is the Forensic Science specialty. USLegal.com (2014) defines forensic science as, “the application of science to the law.” Forensic science includes multiple pathways and career choices that independently cannot be adequately covered in a college schedule. The current Forensic Science specialty curriculum at Maple Junction reflects at least four separate fields of study within the field, including biology psychology, investigations and cybercrimes. The courses are diverse and broad in nature. When offering courses in this manner, what generally occurs is that the outlier specialty classes have no depth and stick to very basic content that doesn’t stray from the text, or students fail and there is a high attrition rate. Either way it is a losing proposition. The end results are a select group of students who persist and graduate, students who fail, or those that become bored with the mundane nature of the coursework and withdraw.

The strength of the Forensic Science specialty at Maple Junction is in the investigative classes. The criminalistics courses were the cornerstone classes of the specialty. Maple Junction did not have the necessary general education courses to support biology or other specialized education in the forensic field. An analysis of careers in the investigative field showed promise for students at Maple Junction. Career pathways in the proposed Investigations specialty included police investigator, federal investigator, private security, and crime scene technician. The courses in the Investigations specialty would concentrate on investigative processes and on the careers within investigations. Many of the courses currently utilized in the Forensic Science specialty at Maple Junction were ideal for a specialty in investigations. The courses that would be offered lend themselves well to experientially-based learning opportunities for students. The courses also offer well qualified faculty to teach subject matter and career-based expertise in each class. Before the new specialty area of Investigations was proposed, a visual map of the courses was completed to show the relationship and developmental nature of the courses. Mapping of courses was essential and helped show how concepts and subject-matter knowledge are inter-related across the newly developed specialties. The related nature of the courses was quite striking when compared to the map of the Forensic Science specialty that was in place.

Homeland Security is another popular specialty that is currently offered across the nation at numerous colleges and universities. It was discovered that the courses offered were based more on the functions of the Department of Homeland Security than the career pathways available in Homeland Security. As defined in the Department of Homeland Security (2014) website, “The Department of Homeland Security provides the coordinated, comprehensive federal response in the event of a terrorist attack, natural disaster or other large-scale emergency while working with federal, state, local, and private sector partners to ensure a swift and effective recovery effort (2014).” The career pathways as noted in the department’s website are described as: Mission Support, Law Enforcement, Immigration

and Travel Support and Prevention and Response (Department of Homeland Security, 2014). There are many career paths in Homeland Security. Most of the individuals hired will work within one of the agencies that comprise the Department of Homeland Security. As described, ICE agents “utilize innovative investigative techniques and new technological resources to help prevent terrorism and other criminal activities (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2014).” It would make more sense to utilize the career pathways of Homeland Security versus the overall functions of the Department of Homeland Security. Maple Junction added courses that had a federal career focus in the Law Enforcement and Investigations specialties.

Another proposed change was adding a new specialty Human Services to replace the current Corrections specialty. Human Services is an evolving field that encompasses more career alternatives than corrections. Corrections will be a career path within the Human Services specialty. Current career opportunities within Human Services include administrator, adult services worker, child welfare worker, case manager, probation and parole officer, corrections, elderly services provider and substance abuse worker. With the focus in government away from incarceration and towards lower cost rehabilitation, the growth potential for careers in this specialty continues to expand. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (U/S Department of Labor, 2014), employment for human services assistants is projected to grow by about 34% through 2016. The long-term outlook for job opportunities is excellent, especially for educated applicants as employers are increasingly in search of employees holding degrees in human services. This specialty area has the potential of significant growth. A Generalist specialty area was kept in place for students who did not wish to commit to one of the four existing specialty areas.

The curriculum was structured to introduce students to the various careers during their freshman and sophomore years. Students would then be more informed to choose a specialty area within the curriculum and eventually make the transition to the workplace. Courses within the curriculum were developmentally aligned and interrelated. The new approach using career pathways as a guide ensured that courses should not be constructed independently but should be related within each specialty. The more robust the pathway is, the better the chance of students staying the course (Harvard, 2011). By interconnecting courses, academic rigor is maintained. By relating courses and encouraging critical analysis in assignments, there is more depth to the courses. Instead of disparate courses that rarely move beyond the text, students and instructors will be able to examine subjects in detail. Standardized rubrics in discussion boards and written assignments were developed. This will ensure that the standards expected of students are well understood. This takes the confusing guesswork out of assignments for students who can focus on the requirements of the assignment versus the mechanics of the assignment.

Although the credits within the specialty level upper core were reduced, the structured approach using career tracks provided a stronger curriculum with specialty areas that are appealing to students and consistent with current career paths in criminal justice. The focus now became on the individual courses in the specialty areas.

Developing Meaningful Coursework

A true commitment to preparing students for their career and engaging them means making education meaningful. At some point, colleges make the mistake of focusing on subject matter as the means to an end. The textbook becomes the provider and measure of knowledge. Discussion boards and writing assignments focus on the text. Students complete end of chapter questions as written assignments, discuss terms from the book in discussion boards and complete assignments based on definitions from the text. Assignments and discussion boards should be designed to provoke discussion, promote critical thinking, and inform students of subject-matter knowledge. The textbook-based assignments do not invite discussion or analysis; they solicit answers copied from the text. Some students survive in this environment. Other students, who came into education looking for meaning and context to their learning, disengage and eventually drop or withdraw. It's not surprising. Maple Junction fell into this trap as well. The move to add more specialty credits and add more classes to an academically-defined curriculum added to the problem. Maple Junction realized the issue and began to take steps to correct the problem.

Using a career-based curriculum provided a standard for course development and renewal. The focus on the new courses at Maple Junction will not be based solely on subject-matter knowledge. A new focus in course development has emerged. The courses are designed not only to challenge students intellectually, but should inform and immerse them in their respective career choices. The move towards a curriculum that is structured on career development is an opportunity to engage students and relate the course material to the reason they are in college. This is an important step forward, and it allows Maple Junction to give even more meaning and purpose to student learning. As noted (Harvard, 2011) students drop out of high school and college for a number of reasons, "But certainly a major reason is that too many can't see a clear, transparent connection between their program of study and tangible opportunities in the labor market" (pgs. 10-11). By adopting a curriculum structured on career choices and developing courses that combine academic achievement and career involvement, Maple Junction can engage students on another level and strengthen their retention levels. A work-linked approach to learning is extraordinarily powerful in engaging students versus a conventional classroom-based approach. A work-based approach is perhaps one of the most powerful ways of appealing to students who are not motivated in a traditional classroom approach to learning (Harvard, 2011).

The idea behind structuring coursework is to get students to think through subject-matter like a criminal justice practitioner would. Hooley, Marriott and Sampson (2011) argue that "Career development activities such as investigating the world of work and considering the real world applications of academic subjects can be about engaging young people in education and increasing the relevance and applicability of their learning" (pg. 15). Students are drawn to criminal justice for various reasons. Many would point out the "CSI effect" or the unrealistic effect that popular media has on students. Students are drawn to criminal justice because of the dynamic nature of the field. Criminal justice problems are complex, human-based problems that require critical thinking. This is the level at which students must be engaged.

Maple Junction's commitment to career-based learning and successful student transition into the workplace were exemplified in three specific courses structured to address student career choice and development. The second criminal justice class taken by students is an introductory level course where students experience career pathways in criminal justice. This course was developed to get the students thinking about their preferred career and get them started in their own professional development. In the course, students begin the process of completing a resume, cover letter and a self-assessment. The next career developmental course, as proposed, is a junior level course. In the course students will receive guidance that will prepare them for securing a job in their career field. The course will cover portfolio development, application basics, and networking. Quite often students enter their senior year in shock that they will have to find work. This course is an attempt to get students further prepared to enter the job market and to get expert guidance through networking professionals. As an alternative to the formal course, students will be encouraged to perform an internship or volunteerism.

The third and last class will be the capstone class, where students must solve problems related to "A day in the life of..." In the class, students would use the knowledge they built in their career pathway coursework to complete a set of problems associated with their career choice. The use of e-portfolios as a structured assignment throughout a student's coursework has been shown to assist students with their coursework and has shown to have a positive effect on retention rates (Desmet, Griffin, Miller, Balthazor, & Cummings, 2009). The student's e-portfolios would be used as open notes for the capstone course and would document their progress through the program. The capstone would finalize a student's career and would be an assessment of the program based on the student's subject matter and career knowledge. All three courses would demonstrate Maple Junction's commitment to career-based learning and would validate the program.

CONCLUSION

The data shows that a new approach is necessary. Maple Junction had formerly taken an approach with their curriculum and courses that stressed academic content over student needs. This is a problem many colleges and universities make. By embracing career pathways, Maple Junction will invest more in student outcomes while assuring academic rigor and improving student retention. The evidence shows that students who can equate schooling with career development are more engaged in their education, and students that can equate their courses with career goals are more likely to stay in school (Hooley, Marriott & Sampson, 2011). Students are also more likely to perform better academically. Career pathways appeal to both low and high risk students (Harvard, 2011). In research conducted with police trainees, experiential learning activities were rated significantly higher than traditional classroom learning by police cadets in the police academy (Hundersmarck, 2009). Learners who are able to connect their learning with their career goals attach a value to their education. Identity coupled with a learning activity produce an engaged learner.

Although the curriculum has less criminal justice credit hours, there is more time on contact within the specialty area than the former curriculum. The former curriculum re-

lied on credit hours academically defined. It consisted of courses that were loosely related and non-supported. By utilizing career paths to drive the curriculum, the courses are interconnected and developmental in nature. Instructors will be able to provide more depth and rigor to courses that are supported across the curriculum. Course design is an integral part of the proposed changes. Every attempt should be made to avoid standardized textbook questions and assignments. Instead students should be engaged in critical thinking assignments that allow them to solve problems and think in terms of career professionals. Early in their academic career, students also should have an opportunity to examine and experience the different careers in criminal justice. These courses will introduce them to the different occupations in criminal justice, prepare students to gain employment and, finally, enter their careers and validate their occupational decision. While many colleges and universities claim to provide students with career-based education, they do so on their own terms.

In his 2015 State of the Union Address to Congress, President Obama (2015) proposed to lower the cost of community college education to zero. President Obama further proposed that community colleges be aligned with employers to “train workers to fill high-paying jobs like coding, and nursing, and robotics” (Obama, 2015). In order for any college program to be successful, whether free or not, colleges must design the curriculum and courses for student success. Maple Junction learned that education must have meaning and purpose for the student. Academically-defined fields of study that focus on credit numbers have no meaning to students. That is evidenced by falling retention rates. College credit in and of itself does not guarantee success. Education with meaning and purpose does. The criminal justice program at Maple Junction has taken the first steps in providing meaning to their education, engaging students, adding academic rigor and improving their retention rate.

Limitations of the Study

Critics would say that the data shows that Maple Junction needs to be more selective with their entrance requirements or take a different approach in the way they retain students. The entry level data is disturbing. It can be interpreted in any number of ways. However, this isn't a problem that is specific to Maple Junction. Universities and colleges across the country should re-evaluate their approach to student learning. Students who fail college fail twice. They do not receive the education that they aspire to receive, and they have accumulated debt that is harder to pay. The mere offering of college course credit is no longer enough to guarantee success.

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Received: 11/2014

Accepted: 1/2015

Hundersmarck, S. F., & Vasicek, M. (2015). Learning about students: Developing a career-based criminal justice curriculum [Electronic version]. *Applied Psychology in Criminal Justice*, 11(1), 52-62.