

COMPREHENSIVE CAREER DEVELOPMENT FOR ILLINOIS: INITIAL THOUGHTS

This Illinois Career Development Task Force has been designed to enhance communication across multiple stakeholders and to develop recommendations regarding education and career development opportunities for the state's citizens – both youth and adults – throughout their elementary, secondary and postsecondary education experiences. Yet, before delving into benchmarking, modeling, and designing strategies for Illinois, it is useful to step back to examine why we should engage in a Pre-Kindergarten-20 (P-20) career development endeavor. What is career development, from both the perspectives of the student and the system? What evidence exists for the success of current and future career development programming and services? What conditions and events make this an ideal time for Illinois to explore statewide recommendations for comprehensive career development initiatives?

Defining Career Development

From the perspective of individuals, career development has been defined as "the total constellation of economic, sociological, psychological, educational, physical, and chance factors that combine to shape one's career" over a lifetime¹. School, work, and family environments are all thought to play an essential role in the individual's unique experiences.² Systemically, career development interventions are comprised of countless services and programs designed to improve career awareness, exploration, choice, and management.³

Evidence of Success of Career Development Initiatives

Simply put, career development benefits individuals in multiple ways. A number of recent studies demonstrate the success of career development initiatives. Research shows that, at all educational levels (P-20), career development interventions positively impact academic achievement,⁴ career maturity,⁵ educational motivation, coping skills, and self-esteem,⁶ and age-appropriate exploration and career decision-making.⁷ Early career exploration also provides opportunities for students to gain appreciation for the connection between traditional education classes and their future careers, which adds to the students' motivation to learn in the classroom.⁸

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The literature provides numerous examples of middle school-level interventions that are particularly influential in encouraging positive outcomes, including encouraging students to consider educational choices before making course selections in high school which may open or close doors to future educational opportunities.⁹

The motivational benefits of career development interventions continue into high school and college. In a statewide study of Missouri high schools, researchers found secondary schools with more comprehensive guidance programs¹⁰ were more likely to report students who (a) earned higher grades, (b) were better prepared for the future schooling, (c) had greater feelings of belonging and safety in school, and (d) experienced fewer interruptions by other students in the classroom.¹¹ The high schools enrolling these students made more career and college information available to their pupils and had a more positive climate than other high schools to which they were being compared. Most importantly, the students in these high schools experienced increased motivation to engage in learning opportunities because they saw a direct connection to preparation for postsecondary education.

A recent study by The Bridgespan Group, a nonprofit consulting firm, takes this discussion one step further by identifying and ranking "college-access supports," meaning factors other than rigorous academic preparedness which influence the likelihood of earning a college degree.¹² The study concluded that the two most critical supports are (a) an awareness of the link between college and career aspirations and (b) positive attitudes toward college attendance among an individual's closest peer group. The report recommends the creation of a college-going culture that is connected to career assessment and exploration.

Added to studies of K-12-age students, recent initiatives focused on adult learners emphasize the importance of career development and career guidance. Curriculum sponsored by community colleges and partner organizations is springing up throughout the nation. Career pathway programs for adults often emphasize noncredit, developmental and credit career-technical education (CTE) and academic course work to enhance student progress and promote persistence.¹³ Modular programs, curricular bridges, career ladders, and comprehensive support services are important vehicles to supporting adult learner retention, program completion, and credentialing.¹⁴ Within the area of comprehensive support services, career exploration and development is critically important to assist adult learners to make decisions about their future careers.¹⁵

Throughout these and many other studies, the value of career development is emphasized. As aptly expressed by Hughes and Karp, there exists a "general agreement that career development is a desirable part of schooling, and there is evidence that many different types of career guidance interventions are effective."¹⁶ Effective career-related interventions range from interactions with a career practitioner (e.g., individual career counseling, a career course at a postsecondary institution), to experiential learning opportunities that are complimentary to schooling (e.g., work-based learning programs, internships, shadowing), and to self-guided approaches (e.g., computer assisted career guidance programs).¹⁷ The findings of these national studies are echoed by members of the Illinois Career Development Task Force who have seen and experienced these positive influences with citizens of Illinois.

Illinois and Career Development – Current Gaps and Problem Areas

Workplace changes, technology innovations, and global competition are changing the landscape of the United States workforce. By 2014, more than 63% of all new U.S. jobs will require at least some postsecondary experience such as a occupational-technical or industry-based certification, associate's degree, bachelor's degree, or graduate degree.¹⁸ This need for formal and advance schooling is indicative of increased workforce changes into a knowledge-driven economy that requires high skills and an orientation toward life-long education.¹⁹ In addition, as the current labor force ages, the pressure to find workers with high-level skills will intensify. Given these changes, individuals working in the labor force today as well as those preparing for entrance in the future will be challenged to keep pace with advances in technology. They will experience increasing demands on their abilities to problem solve and thrive in an increasingly complex world.

Despite this increasing need for advanced education, nationally, only one in three students who enters high school will receive a college degree. For students from low income backgrounds, the statistics are even more troubling, with only three in five graduating from high school and one in seven achieving a bachelor's degree.²⁰ The *Illinois State Report Card* from 2006 shows that Illinois' high school graduation rates are 87.8% overall²¹, and the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) shows college completion rates to be lower. The proportion of first-time, full-time freshmen who complete their degrees within 150% of the catalog time required was 58.9% at public 4-year institutions, and 61.9% at private not-for-profit colleges and universities.²² Recall from The Bridgespan Group study presented earlier that having a clear awareness of the link between college and career aspirations influences the likelihood of earning a

college degree.²³ Career development practitioners contend that this awareness of aspirations and goals develops and evolves over a lifetime of experiences.

Thinking about the state's P-20 educational system and economy as an integrated whole, Illinois is experiencing challenges with establishing and maintaining a qualified workforce for primary industry areas such as healthcare, manufacturing, and transportation and logistics. The Illinois Governors' Workforce Development Conference in 2003 outlined a number of causes for critical skills shortages across the state. Among the key issues were: (a) a lack of career awareness and clear career paths; (b) inadequate recruitment, particularly a failure to recruit nontraditional populations; (c) inadequate job matching; and (d) a lack of training capacity, accelerated training, alternative training options for continued skill development.²⁴ Each of these issues has strong ties to the career development processes of exploration, decision-making, and execution. Indeed, an outgrowth of the state's Critical Skills Shortages Initiative (CSSI) was the recognition that something needs to be done to enhance career development throughout the state, hence the initiation of this Illinois Career Development Task Force

The magnitude of the population currently in need of education and training coupled with the growing demand for trained workers presents a challenge to state- and local policy makers, educators, and employers and industry representatives. All types of institutions that seek to close the skills and achievement gaps need to recognize the part they play in supporting individual learners to make career choices and prepare a highly qualified workforce. Multiple educational institutions engaged in P-20 education, plus public and private partner agencies, are needed to meet the growing needs of the workforce. To this end, new policy / legislation can play an important role in creating an environment that aligns career development systems with education and training that prepares a more highly skilled and productive workforce.

In addition to the need evidenced by K-12 and adult learners for career development, educators at the P-20 levels report frustrations with the availability of adequate career services for their students. Counselor-to-student ratios average approximately 1 to 300 nationally, according to professional counseling associations. It is therefore not surprising that students and parents report difficulties with acquiring meaningful career guidance and counseling within high schools, community colleges, and universities. Despite the recent period when the federal School-to-Work legislation placed concerted attention on career development during the mid-1990s to early 2000s and the state of Illinois supported Education-to-Career (ETC), career development services are sporadic or illusive in many areas of the state.

Further, while career-technical education (CTE) is closely related to career development, the fact that high schools and community colleges offer CTE does not guarantee that career development is provided. Some CTE courses assume students make deliberate career choices before entering the curriculum. Thus, the CTE curriculum assumes students explore career options prior to focusing on education and training pertaining to a specific occupation, and this may or may not be the case. Without opportunities to pursue career options, students have little chance to determine the occupational fields that will hold their attention and motivate them to engage in school and prepare for careers.

How is this Career Development Approach Different?

Throughout the process of this exploration, the Task Force has considered that this is not the first career development effort in the State of Illinois. For instance, the Education-to-Careers movement, which was particularly strong in Illinois during the 1990s, can still be found in smaller local pockets of the state. In addition, numerous local programs and career-related activities have emerged across the state over time such as the implementation of career days and clubs in some school districts or career portfolio systems used at some universities. This leads to the question of how is this career development effort different? And, why hasn't Illinois experienced the full rewards of such programming?

The members of the Illinois Career Development Task Force find these to be essential questions for our response and efforts. Past career development efforts have not reached their full potential because they have garnered only sporadic attention, without an integrative or comprehensive foundation. This sporadic approach led to great variety in the programs, schools, issues, and strategies currently in place, which are difficult to track and bring together because of their local genesis with little conversation between localities, educational institutions, or industry contacts.

The solutions that we recommend differ in their sustained, systematic, and transparent approach to career development for all persons in Illinois. The approach honors the life-long nature of career decision making processes, as well as the natural, close relationship between education, careers, and the workplace. We believe that, for optimal impact, this comprehensive system should reach through and beyond traditional boundaries to include K-12 education, postsecondary institutions, community one-stop centers, and industry partners in a unified effort.

The Call for Career Development

This is a particularly appropriate time for discussions around comprehensive career development in the state of Illinois. These workforce trends have been specifically acknowledged within the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity's (DCEO) *Critical Skills Shortages Initiative* reports. A driving force for this Illinois Career Development Task Force has been a series of industry task force reports²⁵ that echo recommendations for “a larger effort to establish a comprehensive career development system in the schools in which individuals can explore and plan for all careers.”²⁶ There is a clear readiness on the part of key Illinois' stakeholders to engage in a conversation regarding career development as a potential strategy to address economic needs.

Yet, career development is not solely a rallying point for Illinois' government, workforce development and industry representatives. Education advocates from K-12 schools, community colleges, and 4-year colleges and universities also have a strong voice in preparing Illinois' citizens for not only their academic, but also their career-oriented, next steps. Public and private sector employers also acknowledge the importance of individuals understanding career opportunities and preparing for careers that are vitally important to the new economy. In fact, career development may be seen as one common denominator to connect education, industry, and government efforts into a unified approach for greater impact. After all, the bottom line for each of these primary stakeholders is the same – to establish programs that have the greatest potential to positively influence the academic, personal, and professional development of youth and adults in Illinois.

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The Vision

The Illinois Career Development Task Force envisions a purposeful, integrated, and inclusive career development system that serves all learners, ranging from traditional-age students to returning adults. The system that is envisioned places equal value on helping individual learners to make decisions about their career paths and assisting the larger educational and economic systems to work collaboratively to create a high quality workforce.

In developing the aforementioned vision statement, members of the Illinois Career Development Task Force worked collaboratively to identify key terms, phrases, concepts, and practices that were thought to be indicative of a successful career development initiative for the state. Among the many ideas shared within the group, the following points resonated with a majority of members.

- ❖ Illinois' career development systems should be inclusive of all people – “all learners”.
- ❖ Illinois' career development system should be *universal* – crosses borders, creates common ground.
- ❖ Illinois' career development system should have no age limit – it should be comprehensive (life-long) because career development is continues throughout the lifespan.
- ❖ Illinois' career development system endorsed by the state should recognize the value of work, and it should recognize the role education, business, industry, government play in creating a qualify workforce and healthy economy.
- ❖ Illinois' career development system should have the following characteristics: Be purposeful, deliberate, systemic, foundational (not an extra).
- ❖ Illinois' career development system should emphasize alignment and integration between curriculum and career development services and activities, including aligning and integrating academics and career-technical education (CTE) and educational, occupational, and career development standards.
- ❖ Illinois' career development system should recognize that the process of career development is akin to problem solving or decision making, and therefore individual problem solving and decision making are crucial. Individuals who experience Illinois' career development system should experience transferable problem-solving skills for other aspects of life tasks..
- ❖ Illinois' career development system should recognize its alignment with human developmental, integrating theory and practice to support positive human development needs and recognizing the cyclical nature of career decision making.

Scenario I – Coordinated

This scenario focuses on providing greater visibility to career development services, resources, and activities that already exist throughout the state of Illinois. The focus of this modestly enhanced system of career development would be to:

- Improve recognition and coordination of existing career development resources at the state and local level throughout Illinois
- Create a highly visible and user-friendly website to disseminate information
- Support an enhanced state level networking and infrastructure to better utilize existing resources in the state

Scenario II – Integrated

This scenario includes enhanced coordination mentioned in Scenario I, but also adds new dimensions. The primary focus of new activities include integrating career development into curriculum and alignment with the state's academic learning standards, appropriate occupational standards, and national career development standards. Specifics of this middle-road scenario include:

- All of Scenario I
- Tie national career development standards to state learning standards
- Curriculum integration efforts
- Provide teacher / educator training to support curriculum integration
- Conduct academic/career curriculum integration pilot programs
- Develop this curriculum for ALL levels (K-12, community college, 4-year post-sec, community one stop) and ALL audiences (traditional / nontraditional, youth / adults, etc)

Scenario III – Comprehensive

This scenario is the most comprehensive of the three, emphasizing activities associated with Scenarios I and II, but also adding infrastructure. Thus, this scenario is not only the most extensive but also likely to be the most costly. Key components of this scenario include:

- All of Scenarios I and II
- Create an online curriculum warehouse
- Document best practices in academic/career integration and career guidance support
- Build in local career guidance staff (fund network of career specialists throughout the state)
- Require and support a system to make student individual career plans (ICPs)
- Require and support a system to make student educational/career portfolios portable
- Fund early college placement tests and link to statewide college-level policy and practice
- Strengthen work-based learning efforts managed by career guidance staff

Key Components of the Proposed Illinois Career Development System

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Outcomes and Benefits of the Proposed Illinois Career Development System

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Resources Needed to Implement and Sustain the Proposed Illinois Career Development System

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