

Planning for Success: Role of IGP's and Assessment in Kentucky's Agricultural Education Curriculum

By Jay Morgan and Mike Stone

Education that does not incorporate career planning is a hollow promise. In the past, too often students were counseled and led to take courses that fit a learning or study model that had little relevance to their next step in life, especially if that step was toward employment. As Kentucky embarked on its comprehensive educational reform measures in the early 1990s, two key elements directed all students to focus on career choices and future plans. These two elements are planning and assessment.

In the first step of planning, each

student, with parental involvement, must develop (1) an individual graduation plan (IGP). This resembles an academic roadmap that each student will use to reach graduation. The second element is assessment. To complete this element each student must participate in an assessment test that contains job-readiness questions. These two actions are particularly important for students who concentrate in Career and Technical Education programs like agriculture, where applied learning techniques can lead to skill certifications and job placement after graduation.

Nationally, Career and Technical Education programs are paying more

attention to career preparation, which is required by the 1998 revisions to the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act. This 1998 Perkins revision sets the guidelines states and local districts must follow in implementing their Career and Technical Education programs. Therefore, it required more attention to career guidance and academic counseling so students were better able to choose a career path, understand the course of study and requirements to achieve that career, and develop a plan to meet their goal. In Washington State, Career and Technical Education was defined as "a planned program of courses and learning experiences that begins with exploration of career options; sup-



This student is working on an independent project using high tunnel and raised bed technology for strawberries. Independent projects include learning about careers in production and research. (Photo courtesy of Warren Hitz, Jr.)

ports basic, academic and life skills; and enables achievement of high academic standards, leadership, preparation for industry-defined work, and advanced and continuing education." Much like the state of Washington, the emphasis of "planned program courses and learning experiences" is what Kentucky has as its goal.

Where the Jobs Are

Jobs are important to emphasize in the classroom setting. While the majority of all new jobs will require some level of postsecondary education, most will require a skill specialization rather than a baccalaureate degree. Career and Technical Education programs prepare students for those skill specializations, not only in Agriculture, but also in Business, Health Occupations, Industrial Education (now called Trade and Industry), Marketing, Technology and Technical Fields, and more.

Career and Technical Education programs also recognize that students learn in different ways. Many students learn best by applying what they are taught in hands-on environments. In the 21st Century, this is increasingly important as students can test theory on the technologically complex equipment that dominates the workplace. Career and Technical Education embodies hands-on, applied learning.

The IGP

In Kentucky, beginning in middle school, students and their parents are provided materials and workbooks that detail 14 career clusters that individuals may pursue. They are encouraged to think about interests, what they like to do, and what they believe they are good at doing, all of which are applied to identify a particular cluster of work. Each cluster includes lists of possible jobs

and the steps needed to achieve that career. Agriculture is one of the clusters. Furthermore, counselors work with students to complete their IGPs and then help them track progress through school.

A successful Career and Technical Education curriculum incorporates skills needed in the workplace as well as at postsecondary institutions. Curriculum includes integration of academics with the technical knowledge and skills that will be encountered in the workplace. For students to be able to meet that need, they must be taught how to solve problems, process information, communicate, work in teams, relate to customers, accept responsibility, and learn independently. Other essential ingredients include: exploring a variety of occupations, examining skills needed, participating in work-based learning experiences, successfully articulating to a postsecondary institution, completing a successful job search, and maintaining their skills through lifelong learning.

Assessment

In their sophomore year of high school, all Kentucky students take a practical living/vocational studies assessment test, which is part of the Commonwealth Accountability Testing System (CATS). This assessment measures whether students grasp important elements of health and personal welfare, as well as their understanding of career planning and job development. Among the elements measured are the students' abilities to establish short- and long-term career goals, to plan for transition to postsecondary opportunities, to understand employer expectations for work habits, to use team skills in the workplace, to create a career portfolio, and to demonstrate interviewing and job-seeking skills.

The assessment is important in

ensuring that all students are presented with these critical pieces of information of getting and keeping a job. The point of the score is to determine whether Kentucky's high school graduates have received adequate instruction so they may become productive employees.

By utilizing the graduation plans (IGP's) and Continuous Assessment (CATS), Kentucky is beginning to strongly emphasize the importance of Career and Technical Education in the high school curriculum, therefore benefiting Agriculture Education and other areas. Getting students excited about a career is a key to keeping them focused on attaining their educational requirements and their goals for a job.

Conclusively, these processes merge to make Career and Technical Education programs work for everyone and makes Agricultural Education not only a model for the rest of the academic curriculum, but further strengthens its validity in the overall school curriculum.



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SOURCE: The Agricultural Education Magazine 74 no6 My/Je 2002

WN: 0212104741008

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