

Seamlessly Connecting High School to College to Career

By Victoria Bortolussi

Closely linking high school and college can make a student's journey along the career path a smooth one.

“What do YOU want to be . . . ?” This is now the abbreviated question.

The heart of the answer should begin and end with the student, not with the career. General agreement about career changes in one's lifetime is widely accepted. But what is not widely agreed upon is focusing on the career or the student. Instead, we focus on institutional structure, be it high school or college. No matter how closely high school and college connect the career education with business and industry, that is not enough. The career path for the student should begin in high school and seamlessly continue through college. But what is the seamless career path? How do we make it happen?

The most important aspect should be the student's career path, not whether the student is in high school or in college. It should be the focus because it is upon this “seamless” career path that

the student travels.

The student, while he or she is in high school, could begin the career path in career academies, which are developing well. What happens, however, when the student leaves the high school career academy but is not yet ready to enter the career? Does he or she have to start over again in college? What a waste! What can be done to carve out the career path so that the student continues to follow it from high school, through college, and then to a successful career?

One answer is to have the high school and the college closely link so that the career pathway is intertwined. A model of how this is done is the High School @ Moorpark College (HS@MC), an alternative high school for juniors and seniors on a California community college campus. The students are taught using small learning community methodology in their high school-level classes on three afternoons a week. On Tuesdays, the students focus on careers.

They also enroll in college classes connected to their careers. High school and college faculty and counselors work together helping the student to travel the career path. Field trips, guest speakers, internships and other career activities are sprinkled throughout the educational experiences. Students receive dual credit for their college courses; thus, they usually graduate high school with at least one year of college completed. The students either continue at the community college then transfer or enter their chosen fields. Because the students are in high school and in college, what is important is not the institutional educational level but rather the competencies and skills, which need to be acquired in order to be successfully employed.



Photo by Star Hunter

Moorpark College multimedia/photography professor John Grzywacz-Gray talks to High School at Moorpark College students about his career field.

Structuring the Collaboration

Ideally, when a high school is actually located on the college campus, housed in classrooms that are also used for college classes, the organizational fabric of the collaboration builds the seamless pathway for students. The high school is developed as part of the college, not a separate entity. An example of this is how the HS@MC is structured and developed.

Initially, the college president gathered local K–12 superintendents to a series of meetings asking for partners in the endeavor. The state of California provided seed money, and the college president asked for a committed player. One K–12 superintendent stepped up to the plate; the others agreed to provide support by means of establishing a method for sending students to the HS@MC through interdistrict transfers.

With the K–12/college partnership, a memorandum of understanding outlined parameters. The high school principal would be paid for out of college grant funds and would be a college faculty member; the principal, however, would be credentialed as a high school principal. Giving the HS@MC principal status as a college professor has enabled him to be fully collegial with the college faculty.

A college screening process, the same as used for other college professors, was used to select the HS@MC principal. College faculty and administrators as well as the HS@MC faculty and administrators also served on the hiring committee. Ultimately, we have a principal formally recognized by both entities—high school and college—bridging an important part of the student career pathway.

As a college faculty member, the HS@MC principal serves on college committees, reports to a college dean, and is fully recognized as part of the college community. This recognition and participation brings the entire high school into the college community. It enables students to be fully aware of and part of all that the college offers, because the principal and the high school faculty are part of the college and encourage college participation.



Photo by Sar Hunter

Moorpark College's Academic Faire draws thousands of high school and college students seeking information on their next educational steps.

The leadership and collaboration occur between high school and college in activities in innovative teaching/learning methodology and in partnerships for monitoring of student outcomes.

High School/College Activities

Once a year, the Moorpark College leads high school and college student participation in the national Groundhog Job Shadow Day. Supported with funds from tech prep as part of the Carl Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act allocations, a high school career technician develops a database and matches up area high school students—not just from the HS@MC, but surrounding high schools as well—to requests from business and industry.

A new development now includes high school students coming to Moorpark College to meet with panels of business people and college professors. In this way, students not only find out about careers, but they are given specific college connections to keep them on their career paths. Moorpark College, with its tech prep facilitator, and the HS@MC, with its national grant career director, plan the entire event, which yearly has grown to connect with thousands of students.

Each year, the planning of the job-shadowing event brings high school and

college faculty working together with business and industry. This relationship continues throughout the years and is built upon each subsequent year of the event, which is now going into its eighth year. Working together for the high school and college student builds a seamless career path. The focus is on the path and how the student can follow it.

Another collaborative opportunity is the Moorpark College Academic Faire, modeled after the “faire” held each quarter at the Evergreen State College in Washington. At the Moorpark College version, college faculty set up tables to get interested high school and college students in their respective courses and programs. Students from area high schools attend on one day, and students from Moorpark College attend on another. A feature of the high school day at the fair is that students from the HS@MC also have tables to display their senior projects, which focus on a career that each one has selected to study and shadow in depth. In addition, the college career fair is held in conjunction with the academic fair, so tables for employers are intermingled with faculty program tables. The festive fair environment brings a community together around careers and futures and pathways to take for students to reach goals.

Innovative Teaching/Learning Methodology

Learning communities are not only an organizational structure but are also methodological, which shifts the role of the teacher and the emphasis on teaching to the student as learner—with the emphasis on learning. This shift is a huge change for the teacher, primarily allowing for a greater role for the student in voice and in responsibility. For teachers to use this methodology, they themselves must become learners, practicing and crafting new approaches and strategies.

The HS@MC models learning-community methodology and adds a career link. High school courses are taught in an interdisciplinary blend in full afternoon blocks three days a week. The blocks are theme based and seamless. It is not the subject that is important but what the student is learning and how it is relevant to life and to career.

Many high schools across the country are structurally becoming smaller learning communities; however, the organizational structure is only part of this strategy. For teachers to learn and develop it, at Moorpark College all faculty—high school and college—come together at least once a year in a Summer Seminar, a professional development activity to learn and practice learning community teaching. This is an activity whereby students discourse on an assigned reading; and lead and organize the participation, while teachers watch and grade.

College faculty members often observe the teaching and learning at the HS@MC to see learning communities at work. College faculty use this strategy as they develop their college-level learning communities such as *Love and Death on the Santa Fe Trail* (English and sociology); *The Chronicles of Narnia* (English and philosophy); *The Lord of the Rings* (English and philosophy); and *Mind vs. Matter* (physics and philosophy).

The HS@MC students are more prepared as students when they take the college learning communities, since they have participated in this learning for

One cannot assume that each educational level blends seamlessly into the next.

two years in their high school.

At Moorpark College and at the HS@MC, a learning community is a group of students and faculty studying a theme or body of knowledge, unified by a common career goal. Faculty believe that learning is:

- relevant lifelong and responsive to change
- connected to goals, careers and professions
- active and student focused
- thinking across differences
- collaborative, supportive and relationship-building
- interdisciplinary
- creative, critical, analytical, stimulating and fun
- discovering self and society.

Partnerships for Monitoring of Student Outcomes

When we talk about a seamless transition from high school to college, we assume that the students can easily make the transition. The operative word is transition. To make it successful, we have found that we need to assist the students to change their expectations and study habits. College and high school are not the same. Teachers know that; students learn that, often the hard way, often by failing. If this happens in their first year of college, students may not continue. This is the hard way and the wrong way. It is not seamless; it is a tear or rip in the educational fabric that often is not repaired.

Since the students at the HS@MC are taking college classes while in high school, and since a collegial relationship is continuously being developed between high school and college faculty, the teachers work at both levels to focus on the how the student is actually doing and how to help the student improve.

Letters are sent to the college teachers specifically asking them to report on the academic progress of each of the high school students enrolled in their classes close to the beginning of the term. A high school and a college counselor, along with the high school principal, review the progress reports, a counselor meets with each student, and a strategy for success is developed early on in the course. By experience, it was learned not to wait and not to assume that all would go well.

The partnership, with high school and college personnel joining forces to help the student, makes a tremendous difference. If students have experienced how to succeed in college classes while still in high school, the positive habits acquired in the program will stay with them and ensure their future success.

The Future

Strategies to enable students to succeed are at the heart of HS@MC. One cannot assume that each educational level blends seamlessly into the next. High schools and colleges each have their own cultures and organizational structures and norms. It should not only be the student's responsibility to figure out how to make it all work but also the educator's responsibility to make the education work for the student. By educators blending the organizations together and making them student centered in every sense of the word, the seamless career path is created, and the student moves successfully on the journey through education to career.

More high schools on college campuses, truly blending together and serving as models with surrounding high schools and with business and industry, will enable more students to achieve career goals and success in the society in which they will live and contribute. That is the educator's ultimate goal and responsibility. ■

Victoria Bortolussi is the dean of Moorpark College in Moorpark, California. She can be contacted at Vbortolussi@ucccd.net.