

By Steve Rothenberg

**“The SPUR process has been remarkable and has given us the necessary momentum to build a stable platform to implement the best practices associated with preparing our students for success in their future educational and career pathways.”**

## The CRTC SPUR Process

**W**e all have epiphany moments. Mine came in April 2009 during the latter part of my first year as director of the Concord (NH) Regional Technical Center (CRTC). At that time, we were in the process of making the difficult selection of which current juniors would be invited to enroll for their senior year.<sup>1</sup> This process was enlightening for a new director because what was quickly evident to me was that our vision of the ideal student had little to do with what was communicated to our students in regard to their performance throughout the year. My job was to challenge our organization to face and resolve this discrepancy.

Further discussions with staff confirmed we were an organization with scattered values. It was clear that the group craved an operational philosophy based on CTE-centric core values centered around student preparedness for college and career. We imagined (and debated) what it would look like to become a “walk-the-walk, talk-the-talk” organization, where our mission and beliefs correlated to our day-to-day functions. The change needed to be more than words on a poster or a catchy slogan.

Also by this time, our state and district had already spent a number of years establishing course and program competen-

cies. In the case of New Hampshire CTE, a first iteration of statewide competencies had already been developed by secondary, postsecondary and industry stakeholders. However, our entire school (regular and CTE) was struggling with mixing together the demands of competency-based and traditional alpha-numeric reporting. It was, from the start, somewhat of a doomed marriage.

At the culmination of some deeply reflective meetings, our CTE team embraced the following foundational, transitional elements for a future plan:

- A newly proposed set of core workplace values based on industry success that we believed our stakeholders would embrace. Specifically, the introduction of a new set of center-wide accepted soft skills, or what we called at that point, “habits of mind.”
- A new model for assessment was necessary. Performance based upon competencies would no longer be data points on an obligatory report to the state, but instead would be a major element in our drive to create an environment to motivate and maximize student performance.
- A marketable identity applicable to all our programs was needed.



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Specifically, CRTC's particular mission was different, and a strong identity independent of our host comprehensive high school (Concord High School) was needed.

### The SPUR Process

Remarkably, what came out of those meetings and additional summer follow-up work was an assessment system we called the "SPUR" process, which stands for: Student Performance upon Understandings Review. We implemented this process for the first time—after a window of intensive innovation, protocol design and professional development—in October 2009, four months after our initial meeting in June.

The components of the SPUR system include:

- A quarterly, private 15-minute SPUR meeting between student and teacher to do a performance review around soft and hard skills, where protocols and expectations were made clear for both parties.
- A soft skill-assessment model<sup>2</sup> centered around five performance areas (collaboration and teamwork (leadership); conduct and attitude (professionalism); feedback and responsiveness (ambition); work readiness and work ethic (integrity); and resourcefulness and determination (grit), each with clear CRTC-wide rubrics. We

count soft skills as 40 percent of the final assessment grade (they do matter!).

- A hard-skill, competency-based model with defined developmental rubrics encompassing theoretical and practical understandings,<sup>3</sup> coupled with measurement criteria constructed around *Revised Bloom's Taxonomy*. As an example, in SPUR: Level 1 is knowledge of basic vocabulary (knowing the parts of the brake system), 3 is applying knowledge (achieving levels 1 and 2, and is able to do a minimal brake job and understand the core elements involved), and 5 is able to fully evaluate an advanced prob-

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lem, synthesize information, create a solution and implement it.

- A student Evidence Portfolio to store personal performance data grouped by particular hard and soft skills (now done on iPad or Android tablets in three programs).
- A new competency-based graphical report card showing skill development on hard and soft skills over a student's eight quarters.
- A customizable assessment/scoring model based on adjustable<sup>4</sup> performance targets, and the ability to associate different values to particular skills, which are translatable to a traditional alpha-numeric system. For example, if a student performs at a performance rating of 3 on a skill with a teacher-designated expectation of a 5 (five-point rubric), then the student's rating in our system translates to 75; but if the performance target was a 3, due to the fact that the skill was just being introduced, then a 3 equates to a 95. Likewise, a special-needs student may have a personal target of 2. This flexibility separates achievement (hitting personal targets and getting a good grade) from normalized criteria-based performance. This model proved to be an invaluable bridge from traditional grading to standards-based.
- A series of core branding messages about the tech center based around, “Own Your Education at the CRTC.”

The aforementioned accomplishments represent where we are now. From the start, we knew that the SPUR model would need five years to even come close to being mature. The September after that June 2009 meeting, I reiterated to staff that this process was not going to be an overnight experience. In addition, and despite our best efforts, it would be very messy and undoubtedly painful in the beginning. You never know if folks hear when expectations are ratcheted down in this manner, but in this case, they did.

But fast-forward almost five years later, and the SPUR process drives almost everything we do now. To understand this initiative, however, I must first explain what occurs during a SPUR meeting.

### The SPUR Meeting

SPUR meetings are held between a student and teacher in a private room. One of our CRTC practices, based on industry, is to start the meeting on a positive, personal note. The assessment portion starts with the teacher referencing a particular hard skill competency and asking the student to present his/her performance in this area. To get ready for the meeting, the student prepares a presentation, prepares a CRTC Evidence Portfolio (some hard copy, some digital), studies the rubric and completes a preparation checklist. The portfolio, designed the same way for every program, is a loose-leaf binder with tabs to separate each hard and soft skill. Students are expected to be regularly gathering evidence (labs, performance notes, tests/quizzes, projects, etc.) throughout the quarter and to file the data in their portfolios and in

preparation for the meeting. Preparing for SPUR is its own unit in the first quarter.

During the SPUR meeting, our agreed upon standard is for the teacher to be patient and not “fill the void” with evaluative comments. The teacher must have a recording tool (laptop) fully visible to the student, as well as a copy of the competency developmental rubric, between them. The student is expected to coherently assess their performance against the criteria. (If the student is not prepared, there is no meeting.)

The teacher listens to the student and responds to the self-assessment with clarifying thoughts, data and questions. In most cases, students are harder on themselves than the teacher is. These steps are repeated for each active hard and soft skill. A plan is briefly discussed at the end of the meeting, notes are taken, and a 1–5 assessment score for every skill is recorded. A follow-up meeting will take place if a remediation plan is needed.

### Gaining Traction

Elements of the SPUR process have filtered throughout the CRTC. For example:

- Clear competency rubrics with student involvement through co-constructing criteria are pervasive. From a backwards design standpoint, if the student does not fully understand the criteria, he or she will inevitably miss the performance target. Likewise, a cause of concern is the teacher poorly defining criteria by using too much vague and/or technical language not understood (or owned) by students. We've evolved to consider these practices not just weak, but fundamentally unfair to students.
- Providing detailed feedback has been a new science for us. The SPUR process has pushed us to provide more precise and targeted feedback. It is now clearly a norm for us to separate soft and hard



skills, as well as theoretical and practical understanding for assessment purposes.

- The concept of the SPUR as a professional performance review has replaced any form of regular school grading. Our various program advisory boards have all embraced the SPUR meeting. Our shared definition of workforce readiness is far more understood than at any time in the past.
- We know our students. Through the SPUR process, our teachers have gotten to know their students in an entirely different light and at a deeper level.
- We are providing a guaranteed curriculum. We are better focused on what we do and our related outcomes.
- We are a team with a strong focus on improving SPUR through professional development. As a

team, we've attended a number of one-day assessment workshops by the likes of Bob Marzano, Tom Guskey and Rick Wormelli, all of whom heavily influenced our constantly improving design. In addition, we have dedicated a great deal of time to Anne Davies' work on assessments for learning, including co-constructing criteria and regular use of exemplars; Carol Dweck's work around growth mindsets and feedback; Dylan William's work on formative assessments; and most recently, Angela Duckworth's work around grit (emphasized in Paul Tough's book).<sup>5</sup>

- A natural result of this process is newly formed connections between previously disparate programs, such as Automotive Tech and Cosmetology. With collaborations involving assessment and

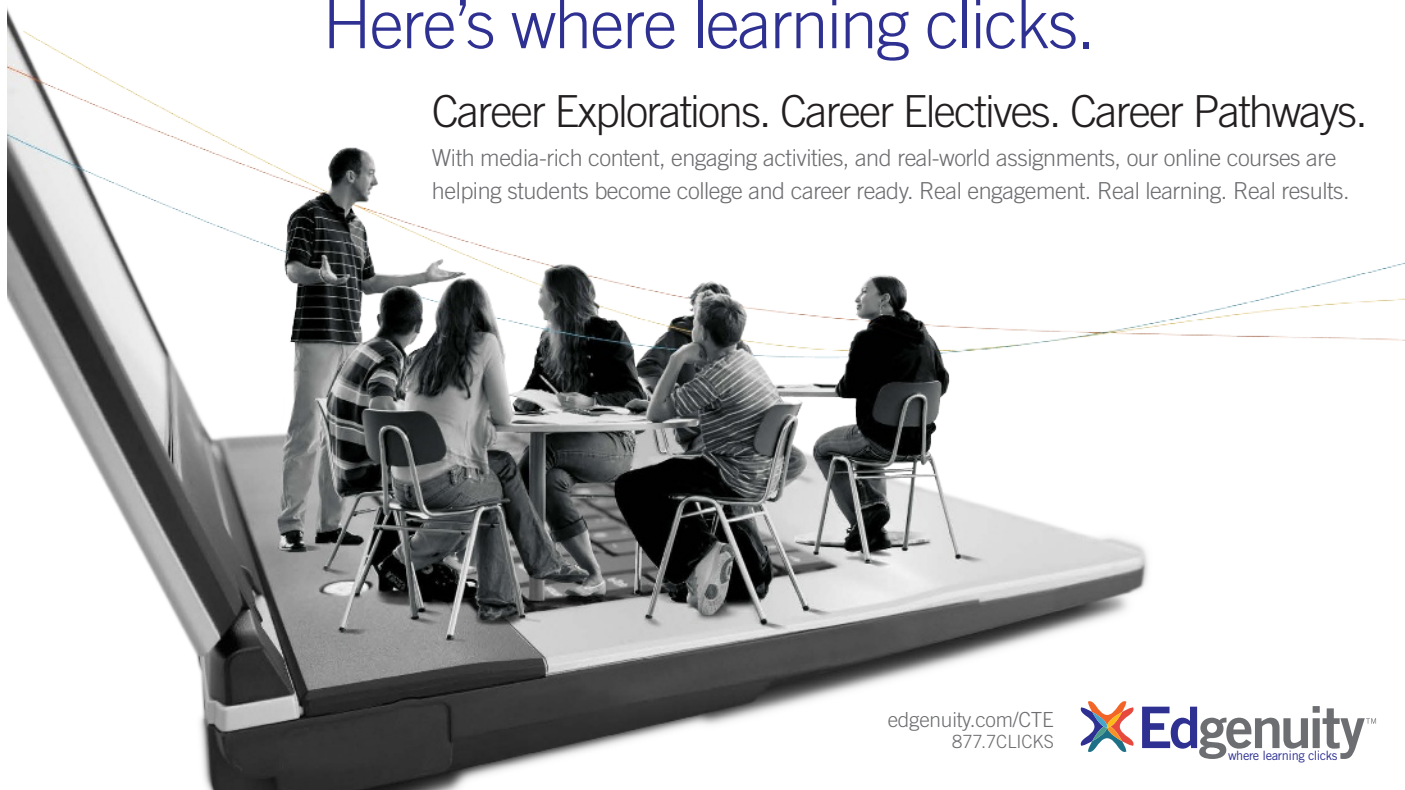
pedagogy and not curriculum, these productive relationships have become possible.

We are proud to say that student performance upon what we value is significantly more vivid, and the process to select students to return is completely guided by the SPUR experience. When students come to me to review why they were not accepted or were wait-listed, I start the conversation by inquiring about what areas of concerns were expressed to them in their past three SPUR meetings. (I wait patiently for a response if necessary, a la SPUR). All students so far have referenced (with details) the concerns reviewed at their SPURs, so much so that as the director, I now publicly announce my guarantee: If you don't know why you are not invited back, and we can confirm you were not informed during the SPUR process, then I, as the director, will personally approve your enrollment for the coming year.

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## Making It Work

Time is what seems to drive much of what we do in education. We are constantly asked, “How can you stop classes and do SPUR meetings for 10 or so days per year and make it?” It is because the SPUR mentality is embedded in our culture. Yes, we have lost time to curriculum, and that does cause some anxiety (we’ve also been innovative in the past few years and have been able to hire outside specialists to run three-day mini units during the SPUR window). We respond that the SPUR meetings and their resulting gains are supported by all our key stakeholders—students, parents, and most of all, our industry partners. Its value is tremendous, and the outcome is clear direction. Our advisory boards are very supportive, so much so that one, Acura of Boston, is using the CRTC soft skills rubric<sup>6</sup> in their evaluative and training processes.

As a final note, the majority of time for our department meetings is now spent do-

ing relevant and practical professional development. For lack of a better term, our teachers are on the same plane and want to help one another improve. Our debates are vigorous and our sharing is pervasive. This change has moved us from a department of individual programs to a professional community eagerly supporting one another, while at the same time setting our own ambitious agenda for future improvement.

My job has been to keep the train moving, provide professional development opportunities and to ensure quality control throughout the CRTC, including integrating new alternative-certification teachers into the model. Our staff has evolved from being vocational teachers to pedagogical leaders in the building (and statewide leaders through presentations to other CTE centers adopting our model).

The change has been remarkable and has given us the necessary momentum to build a stable platform to implement the

best practices associated with preparing our students for success in their future educational and career pathways. **I**

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## ENDNOTES

1. Senior enrollment is an annual event in most of CRTC’s 10 programs, and is based on the center’s model where two junior classes feed into one senior class.
2. To see the rubric, go to <http://tinyurl.com/CRTCSoftSkills>
3. Based on the Tennessee Competency Attainment Rubric. This document helped to create the SPUR process.
4. To see the CRTC grade conversion tables for 2013–2014, visit <http://tinyurl.com/CRTCConversion>
5. How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character by Paul Tough.
6. To see the soft skills rubric, go to <http://tinyurl.com/CRTCSoftSkills>

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