

Knowledge

Is the Key to Helping Students Choose Their Path

By Ashley Williams

How many high school students do you know who are going to college when they graduate? All of them, of course! Now ask them which college, what course of study, which degree they want to earn and how long it will take. Then ask them what career they plan to strive for and what steps they must take in order to be successful. While they may have their eye on a particular career and even the name of a college readily available, the rest is often very fuzzy or blatantly inaccurate.

Teaching employability skills and career exploration is a common practice for career and technical education (CTE). In light of many students' inability to articulate the proper career pathway for their chosen career, I wonder if we need to re-evaluate and/or expand our methods to guide them on their journey.

Many CTE programs offer work-based learning situations in which students experience an accurate representation of real-world scenarios. I think many instructors would agree this is immensely important to student success. Work-based learning plays a vital role in my classroom, but I had to ask myself if I was doing enough.





I teach the Veterinary Assistant program at Central Arizona Valley Institute of Technology in Coolidge, Arizona. The program focuses on three main career possibilities: veterinary assistant, veterinary technician and veterinarian. Many of my students' interests lie somewhere outside these three choices, so I have to consider how I can reach them and help them meet their objectives.

While not true of all students, some consider their CTE program a starting point for their larger career goals. In light of these observations, however, I took some time to reflect on my practices and asked myself, "When they leave my program, will they have made a decision on their career, and can they navigate the chosen career pathway?" Unfortunately, the answer was no. The majority of students were not prepared for these types of decisions or steps.

I decided to make a change.

Mirroring Industry

Industry professionals across multiple disciplines have to obtain additional training throughout their careers, often referred to as professional development or continuing education. Our students also need training beyond the scope of the curriculum. Keeping the industry standard in mind, I decided to create what I call "professional development (PD) workshops;" and I required my students to attend at least one PD in the school year.

I began using this new method at the start of the 2015–2016 school year. The first PDs were designed by me and focused on giving the students an opportunity to apply the research they conducted about a career, participate in a job shadow I set up and then reflect on their experience.

In the fall semester of the present school year, I continued to provide an instructor-led PD, but I added a second PD that was designed by each student. For both the instructor-led and student-designed projects, the PD was a three-step process:

- college pathway training and career research in the classroom
- a single job-shadowing day within the career they researched
- reflection on the experience and a classroom presentation

Setting the Foundation

At the start of the PD projects, I discussed college pathways, beginning with the requirements to obtain an associate degree and moving all the way through to a Ph.D. To make this easier to understand, we created flowcharts or career ladders for each degree. We included information about entrance requirements, the length of time and potential costs. Then we created career pathway flow charts for the three most common careers in veterinary medicine (veterinary assistant, veterinary technician and veterinarian), so that they could learn how to research and create a career pathway. Here we included education, special training, experience needed, potential for growth, length of time and costs. Again, we used simple flow charts to navigate the different steps it would take to pursue any of these three common careers.

By this point, the students were able to make connections between the college pathway and the career pathway. I recommend spending time discussing how these two pathways are intertwined if you choose to try this approach.

Since beginning the PD workshops, the feedback has been pretty consistent: They never understood how college "worked." In a nutshell, they knew college was an option and were hoping to go, but they just did not know the necessary information—the classes to take and how to register for courses, the difference between an associate and a bachelor's, the costs, etc.

Hearing this type of statement from students is not uncommon for CTE teachers. Relevance in the classroom is tremendously impactful, and all CTE programs are relevant. This gives us an advantage when we are trying to help students grasp a common, yet difficult, concept, and it increases their likelihood of success with a difficult project such as this.

The First Step: Research

Replicating the PDs in your CTE program is relatively easy to do. Once students have a better understanding of how college and career fit together for the highlighted careers of your program, have them research and create a career



pathway for their PD workshop. I require this research phase for both my instructor-led and student-designed PDs. This should occur before the job-shadowing piece because they may find that the career highlighted in their PD workshop has multiple career pathway opportunities. In my case, I asked my students to research and discuss the top three career pathways for



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Students recording observational data during the Wildlife Biologist PD at the Phoenix Zoo's mountain lion exhibit.

each of the instructor-led PD workshops they attended. For example, in 2015 one of the instructor-led PDs was zoo medicine. They were asked to research zoo veterinarian, zookeeper and zoo technician. I did not require this for the student-designed workshops, as those were much more focused career choices than the broader PD options I provided.

I suggest providing students with a range of categories to help guide their research, including: job duties, salary, schedule, worksite description, professional associations, education and training. You want to ensure that you include any categories that are relevant in your industry. I have found it works best if students are given an opportunity to share and discuss their findings

with other students who researched the same career. This gives them the chance to adjust their research in preparation for the next step—job shadowing.

The Second Step: Job Shadowing

Once the research has been completed, it is time to connect students with industry. Here, your options as the instructor

My Job-shadowing Experience

My job-shadowing day as an animal adoption coordinator was a wake-up call for me! I realized the job was nothing like I imagined. I knew that adoption coordinators helped people adopt animals, placing them into their forever homes, but that's the only thing I was right about. I thought of adoption coordinators like matchmakers, meeting both the pet and the owner to decide if they are a good match, performing home inspections and closing the adoption. To my surprise they did not do any of that because they would not have the time; instead, they skipped those steps and relied on applications from potential adopters.

I worked with two adoption coordinators during my experience at Pinal County Animal Care and Control, and they did a great job of helping me learn what this job is all about. Even though most of what they did was on the computer, it was still pretty exciting. Some of their duties include reading and answering e-mail, revising animal statuses within the shelter, checking for any possible adopters and communicating with animal rescue organizations.

I was there on their busiest day of the week. I was able to see pets getting adopted, pets being relinquished by their owners and a pet being euthanized. When the family walked out of the room crying, I was pretty confused, but then they explained to me what had happened, and it was a very sad moment. I was not expecting to see this during my job-shadowing day, but with the knowledge I have gained from Central Arizona Valley Institute of Technology and my research, I was not surprised that happened at a shelter.

Luckily, I was able to accomplish two of my objectives during my job shadow: to observe the animal adoption process and to learn how clinics work with rescue organizations to be more successful. I even got to help them out with some tasks! I did not get to experience all my objectives, because I learned that they do not perform all the tasks I had hoped to see in a shelter setting.

As an adoption coordinator, the animal's life is literally in your hands and that can be very stressful and sad. Overall, this experience has given me a greater appreciation for what an adoption coordinator does, but it has also made me change my mind about the career I want to pursue. I would much rather work directly with the animals in a hands-on position.

—Perla Solano, Grade 12

are determined by your preferences and resources. If you prefer to structure the experience, then you should. Consider inviting guest speakers, as well as “going” on virtual and traditional field trips. The key here is ensuring the experience is relevant to the curriculum, potentially eye-opening and enjoyable.

Students should be actively engaged in the job-shadowing experience, not just passive observers. In other words, this should not be the average field trip to the zoo where students look at exhibits and answer questions. If possible, empower them to design their own job-shadowing experience. If this is the path you choose to take, consider providing guidance so that they do not stray too far outside any set

boundaries. Additionally, it may be a good idea to practice with them how to communicate with industry representatives.

The three instructor-led PDs I offered in 2015 were the previously mentioned zoo medicine, as well as lab animal medicine and wildlife biologist. Each PD had an active engagement component. For example, the wildlife biologist PD occurred at the Phoenix Zoo. Students met with a zoo official with a background in wildlife biology and listened to her firsthand account of the career pathway and where it took her. Then she led them into the zoo to conduct mini observational studies on the animals. After the students collected their data, the group reconvened and discussed their findings.

I wanted to ensure an active engage-

ment component to the student-designed projects, as well. I asked each student to write three to five action-oriented objectives for their job-shadowing experience. Furthermore, they were required to come up with 10 interview questions to ask during their job shadow. In each case I checked their work for consistency and alignment with their research. Once these pieces were in place, they began to make calls to potential job-shadowing sites.

The Final Step: Reflection

Whether structured or autonomous, we want students to be able to reflect on their experiences and be able to definitively say, “Yes, this is the career for me!” “Absolutely not!” or “I still think it is an option.” After the workshops, students must reflect on the experience by updating their career pathway research to include potential schools they could attend and create a presentation. Because my goal was to have students be able to navigate the career pathway, the presentation did not focus on the experience they had with industry. Instead, their presentation focused on what their misconceptions were going into the job shadowing; what they learned from the job shadowing; and, finally, whether or not it was still a career they were interested in.

The resulting presentations were more than I could have hoped for in our first year. The 2016 presentations had to be pushed further into the semester due to some challenges I discuss in the next section, but I anticipate similar results. One of my favorite revelations came from students who attended the 2015 wildlife biologist PD. Many of them did not know there is a heavy research component to this career, and many of them remarked that this was not something they could see themselves doing. For others, it was exactly what they were expecting and were even more excited about their choice.

Challenges

Aside from the day-to-day challenges we face as teachers, I ran into several roadblocks along the way in both school years. Two of the three (zoo medicine and wildlife biologist) 2015 PDs were fairly easy to organize and arrange with industry because they took place at the Phoenix Zoo, which has an education program

with guided tours that fit in line with my objectives. However, the biggest issue I faced during the first year was that the industry sites did not play an active role in the job shadowing aside from about an hour of discussion with the students. I think these experiences would have been even more valuable if the students had had the chance to work alongside professionals and had been able to reflect on their experiences throughout the day.

In 2016, the biggest challenge for the student-designed projects was locating job-shadowing sites that were willing to take on individual students, as opposed to a group. I had 21 students complete this project, and only nine were able to schedule a job-shadowing day by the project deadline. Several of these locations required an official letter from the school detailing our insurance coverage for the students. I was able to provide this information, but it took a fair amount of time. Others just wanted to speak with me to verify the project details. In light of the low number of students who successfully scheduled a job shadow, I extended the deadline and allowed them to choose a backup career.

My goal for the next school year is to increase awareness of the value these experiences can provide. From what I have observed, I believe the students grasp

the value well; it is the industry members who often need encouragement. The industry sites are sometimes hesitant, but if a student represents him/herself well, these companies are usually excited to have us back. Often the students are offered jobs afterward, and the sites then want to be a larger part of the program because they see the potential for recruiting knowledgeable and experienced employees. A single job-shadowing day may not convey this as well as an internship, but I believe there is still the potential for the site to benefit from a relationship with the program.

Was It Worth It?

I know what many of you are wondering: How much time is this going to take? Well, it is definitely not a quick bell-work assignment, and I would suggest making it a larger project in the gradebook. We want our students prepared for the careers they have come to learn about and are considering pursuing. They may be able to perform every skill we have taught with 100 percent proficiency, but if they tell you they will get a bachelor's degree in two years from the local community college, we have to realize we have failed them along the way.

Encourage students to take ownership of that nebulous thing called their future,

allowing them to conduct the research while making some mistakes along the way. Let them go out into the world and live in their choice for a day. They can address their misconceptions and adjust their choices in the classroom before they pay thousands of dollars for coursework they do not need, winding up in a career they do not like.

All in all, I found the time spent was well worth it! I plan to continue using the PDs every year. Adjustments will have to be made as new challenges come up, but I am ready to tackle these obstacles.

My students ended these projects able to describe their entire experience from research, to job shadowing, to reflection. They told me how the PDs changed their view of a career they once thought was right for them but now know is definitely not. Some of them have a renewed passion and ambition for the career they originally selected. Best of all, they can now answer me clearly and concisely when I ask, "What are your next steps?" **Tech**

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Students meeting with a wildlife biologist at the Phoenix Zoo.