



The Career Pathway Model: Small Steps to Big Leaps

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Palm Beach Community College, a large urban public community college, offers Associate degrees as well as clock-hour based Certificates. In offering over 30 different Associate in Science/Associate in Applied Science programs, increasingly the college found that class enrollments were growing, but student degree completion rates were dropping. Research revealed that students were essentially creating their own programs of study by taking just the courses they needed to gain employment or the promotion they desired. In addition, the college needed to create a “next step” for its students in clock-hour based instruction that would allow them to get credit toward a degree for their learning.

Given these challenges, the college undertook a five-year project to realign programs, create more recognized exit points for students, and communicate those changes to students through the print and Web media. This project had several important steps that occurred simultaneously in different areas of the college. First, we developed a visual model of the goal and made presentations to various college audiences to gain input and refine the process. Second, we identified the major steps in this project – 1) examine clock-hour curriculum and determine how many credits these students would be eligible for in credit programs; 2) determine what new college credit certificate programs could be adopted from other colleges or created by college faculty to help students gain recognition for their learning; 3) redesign the college’s catalog to emphasize the career path approach; 4) redesign the college’s Web presentation of programs of study.

As the curriculum is at the heart of any educational institution, the work started there.

Collaborating with faculty and program staff, we developed a table of noncredit-to-credit course equivalencies that demonstrates to students that their learning in competency-based programs will transfer and be applicable towards an Associate’s degree. The second major curriculum project was the creation of over 25 additional exit points for students. These new exit points, called “college credit certificates”, consist of the major portion of the technical coursework of an Associate of Science or Applied Science degree. When the project started, the college had one college credit certificate – now four years later, 26 college credit certificates are now on the books, including six that were developed from the ground up at the college. These newly created certificates are now in the curriculum frameworks at the state level as models for other colleges to use.

Now that the work had been done with realigning curriculum and creating new programs, this information had to be delivered to students and staff. The first step in this process was a two-phase redesign of the college’s catalog. Phase one was reorganizing the college’s catalog in program areas where programs are grouped together, in such categories as Health Care and Public Safety. The programs are presented in a career pathway model with entry-level programs listed first, then college credit certificates which lead to the Associate degree programs. Study beyond the Associate degree is also listed through articulation with other colleges and universities and advanced technical certificates through the college’s efforts in advanced training. Facilitated through a Title III “Strengthening Institutions” grant, phase two of the catalog redesign project was to completely re-write the program descriptions using a model that gives detailed information about each program in a standard format

(<http://www.pbcc.edu/catalog>). Several college departments collaborated on this project including faculty, program staff, career center staff, the marketing staff and the curriculum office.

The final phase of the project was to move all of the information to the college's web site. Once the material had been written for the catalog, we used the same source material to build the web site (<http://www.pbcc.edu/programs>), which is organized around the programs of study categories. As the student clicks through the categories, the programs under that area are displayed with the same detailed information in the catalog, with additional links to other college web sites.

As the new programs are now all active, the number of certificate and program completions has increased, especially in the area of college credit certificates. This is a win-win situation for all involved – the student has a state-recognized transcribed award and the college program completion rates have increased, bringing additional funding. For other colleges considering such a project, the most important lesson we learned was that such a project requires a commitment to designing programs and exit points that meet student needs, as well as the ability to change in response to evolving student needs.