

2020

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Angela Andrei, V Scott Solberg. "Personalized career and academic planning - a promising policy and practice." 2019 Annual Conference of the International Association of Vocational and Educational Guidance. Bratislava, Slovakia, 2019-09-09 - 2019-09-12.

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Personalized career and academic planning - a promising policy and practice

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Abstract

This proposal explores the career development policy and practice strategies used in the United States of America (U.S.A.). It discusses what it means to implement and evaluate an Individual Learning Plan (ILP), named Academic and Career Planning (ACP) in middle and high school in the state of Wisconsin. The methodology comprises: a review of literature, analysis of reports, artifacts and documents related to the ACP and an interview with a decision-maker at district level. It discusses how ACP is integrated in the school curriculum, who is responsible for the activities, how staff is trained, what kind of professional resources are used, how schools cooperate with family, community and businesses. It also analyses how activities are evaluated, what benchmarks and indicators are used, how stakeholders and beneficiaries are involved in the process of evaluation, how the participation in ACP influences the students. In addition, the strengths and challenges faced in the ACP process are discussed as well as the adjustments made.

Keywords: career guidance program; implementation; evaluation; Academic and Career Planning (ACP); secondary education

Introduction and objectives

Evidence-based research indicates that having a fully implemented comprehensive guidance and counseling program makes strong contribution to students' academic achievement as well as to their personal, social and career development. The Academic and Career Planning (ACP) is

a personalised program that aims to prepare students for college, career, and life. It is successfully implemented in the state of Wisconsin and integrates three domains of college and career readiness (academic, personal/social, workplace) to ensure student success in high school, a post-secondary pathway and life.

After a preparatory process which took place between 2013 and 2017, the ACP implementation state-wide started during 2017-18, accompanied by monitoring, evaluation, improvement and enhancement as well as process updates and annual training. During 2018-19, data were collected, analysed and evaluated for process improvement, research outcomes and examples of good practice shared, partnerships with businesses and institutions of higher education were integrated into the process (Wisconsin DPI, 2016).

This proposal aims to: present a theoretical framework for ACP by taking into account the evidence based research; examine how ACP is implemented and evaluated at district level; discuss strengths and challenges faced in the ACP process.

Theoretical basis

Career development programs and services should change the focus from supporting individuals to make appropriate career decisions on helping them to develop decision-making, proactive and resiliency skills. This new paradigm is used to develop the individual's self-exploration, career exploration, career planning and management skills as well as positive youth development outcomes, such as proactivity, resiliency, self-determination, self-efficacy and motivation (Solberg and Ali, 2017).

Based upon several years of research in the United States, the Individualized Learning Plans (ILPs) support youth in becoming college and career ready. An ILP is a document consisting of: (a) course taking and postsecondary plans aligned to career goals and (b) documentation of the range of college and career readiness skills that the student has developed (Solberg et al., 2014).

This proposal discusses how the Academic and Career Planning (ACP) is implemented and evaluated in a district from the state of Wisconsin, U.S.A. A requirement for Wisconsin school boards from 2017 onwards was to “provide academic and career planning services to pupils enrolled in grades 7 to 12 in the school district” (Wisconsin DPI, 2016). The vision of the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) from Wisconsin is that “all students should graduate from high school academically prepared and socially and emotionally competent by possessing and demonstrating proficiency in academic content (knowledge), application of knowledge through skills such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity (skills) and behaviours such as perseverance, responsibility, adaptability, and leadership (habits) ” (DPI website, 2020).

The ACP is a process that helps students to engage in academic and career development activities as well as a product that is created and maintained for the academic, career, and personal advancement of students. It empowers them to: understanding their own interests, strengths, values, etc.; creating a vision of their future; developing individual goals, and a personal plan for achieving their vision and goals (Wisconsin DPI, 2016). The ACP model was created based on research recommendations for incorporating career development throughout K12 for self-exploration, career exploration, and career planning and management. It includes four stages, each with appropriate activities: (I) Self-Awareness – Know: self-assessment of interests and strengths; reflection and goal-setting; financial knowledge and understanding of resources, etc.; (II) Career Exploration – Explore: career exploration activities and opportunities; world of work and labour market needs; understanding and comparing different pathways; (III) Career Planning – Plan: development of the planning skills and of the middle/ high school plan; (IV) Career Management – Go: executing and updating the plan with new information and artifacts; conferencing and mentoring, etc. (Wisconsin DPI, 2016).

Methodology

The methodology comprises: a review of literature on the evaluation of career guidance programs in the U.S., analysis of reports, artifacts and documents related to the ACP and an interview with a decision-maker at district level. The interview was conducted at the premises of the district office. The participation was voluntary and the interview was audio-recorded for note-taking purposes, transcribed, coded by theme and analysed. The main topics discussed during the interview were: how ACP is implemented and evaluated in the school district at middle and high school level, how the participation in ACP influences students, what are strengths and weaknesses of the ACP program, the overall opinion on the implementation and evaluation process. The interview added rich insights into the process of ACP from the perspective of a decision-maker.

Results

The results present the context, the ways in which ACP is implemented and evaluated at district level, examples of students' outcomes, the strengths and weaknesses of the program. The main topics addressed were: how ACP is integrated in the school curriculum, who is responsible for the activities, how staff is trained, what kind of professional resources are used, how schools cooperate with family, community and businesses, how activities are evaluated, what benchmarks and indicators are used, how stakeholders and beneficiaries are involved in the evaluation, how the participation in ACP influences students.

The interview took place in one of the first districts from the state of Wisconsin that implemented ACP and changed the process almost yearly for the last five years to learn from what went well and to make adjustments. An ACP Committee was established at district level, being responsible for the preparation, implementation and evaluation of the activities.

An ACP curriculum is available for the 6th-12th grade students and must be completed through an Advisory period which is taking place every Monday for 35-40 minutes. Students are assigned to an advisory teacher which remains with the same group of students for 2 years. At middle school level,

the focus is on Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), communication, creativity, innovation and collaboration. Then, in high school students focus on college and career. The ACP is not graded and is not included in the report card. School staff has access to professional resources and meets weekly to discuss the ACP activities. Parents are informed on ACP through letters, newsletters, links to the Vision of the graduate and Career Cruising website where they can monitor the work done by their children. The school district is organizing each year a partnership breakfast for representatives of local community and businesses who are providing mentorships and internships for students. Some of the most successful ACP activities mentioned during the interview were: a career fair day for students and visits in companies for secondary teachers. In this way, students and teachers can better understand the importance of the ACP.

A vision of the College and Career Ready (CCR) graduate includes the knowledge, skills and dispositions that students should acquire to be successful. The benchmarks of college and career readiness contain academic, career and life-ready indicators. For example, the career indicators are described based on the following benchmarks: national career readiness certificate, industry credential, success in career related high school coursework, career-based learning experience, attendance, extra-curricular activities. The life-ready indicators mention: the ability to apply the ACP process, to meet the financial literacy and service based learning benchmarks, to exhibit positive dispositions for success. A student Blueprint was elaborated to measure the progress for each student. Any parent can check it to see if the child is ready to graduate towards career and college indicators. Students are involved in the process of evaluation, e.g. during ACP Junior conferences when they lead the discussion and talk with their parents and the school counselor about their plans. During the interview, the decision-maker spoke about the role of the student during the ACP conferences: 'During ACP conferences, the students lead the discussion and they have their ACP in front of them. And they should be able to talk to their parents and the school counselor. For example: *This is what I want. This is my 6 years plan.* Counselors are checking a box saying

if students are able to do that. Here actually are the real indicators they need to hit’.

A survey with the participation of staff, parents and students from the school district showed highly positive experiences for the participants of 2018 (Hanover Research, 2018). Parents reported that their child (student) (86%) and family (87%) are actively involved in the ACP process. Staff mentioned that they understand why ACP is a priority in the district (94%) and feel confident in their ability to guide the students to courses available to help them reach their goals (73%). The students said that they are able to identify careers of interests (92%) and can describe their own skills which are needed for their future plans (84%). The survey also shows that more students understand better ACP in 2018 (85%) if compared with the past years (79% in both 2016 and 2017). The strengths of the ACP program revealed that school staff understands the importance of ACP; a graduate vision, a student Blueprint and benchmarks for career and college readiness are available; business and community partners are strongly involved in the activities; the process is monitored and survey results are available. The challenges are related to finding better ways of communication with the parents. In addition, ACP is not graded which may cause some difficulties in implementation.

Conclusions

The discussion concerning ACP implementation and evaluation highlights the main features of a successful career guidance program: it is based on a graduate vision, a student Blueprint and benchmarks for career and college readiness; the implementation is well prepared in advance and adequate funding is allocated; it is integrated in the school curriculum; it follows a continuum from elementary, middle to high school; it involves the whole school community; it has allocated a specific time for activities; it should be graded to get more credibility; the teacher - advisor stays with the same group of students at least two years; the staff is well trained on ACP; the school staff meets frequently to discuss the learning activities; teachers cooperate closely with the school counselors, career and academic

learning advisers; parents, community and businesses are well informed and involved in the ACP activities; a website and online learning resources are available for students, teachers and parents; the implementation is permanently monitored, strengths and weaknesses are identified and discussed; the impact is assessed and improvement measures are implemented; benchmarks and indicators to measure the impact are prepared; the beneficiaries are actively involved in the audit of the activities.

Acknowledgements

Thank you very much for all the support generously offered by Professor V. Scott Solberg, who was my supervisor at Boston University during my Fulbright research scholarship on the topic 'Evaluation of career guidance programs' in the period October 2018 - March 2019.

We are truly grateful to the school district leader from the state of Wisconsin, the U.S.A. who shared openly the views on the process of ACP implementation and evaluation.

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