

A PERSONALIZED PLAN FOR LIFE

BY REBECCA M. DEDMOND

Personalized learning: Everyone knows it needs to happen, but how? It is one thing to believe in the importance of high school reform. It is quite another to embrace a system that helps every student leave high school with a diploma and plans for postsecondary education or training that lead to productive and self-sufficient adulthoods.

Although the current push to increase academic rigor is a vital component of high school reform, thinking that increased rigor alone will meet the goal of preparing all students for the 21st century workforce is naïve at best. Unless the high drop-out rates in high school and college are rectified—nationally, only about two-thirds of all students who enter ninth grade graduate with regular diplomas (Orfield, 2005)—too many students will not even be in the classrooms to benefit from these higher expectations and levels of instruction. As academic standards are amplified and exit exams become mandatory, failing students will drop out and apathetic young people will continue to flounder.



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PREVIEW

Ninth grade is the most significant year in determining students' futures.

Freshman transition standards allow for well-designed freshman courses that carry the same rigor, credibility, and status that traditional academic courses do.

The development of a 10-year plan is key to students' making successful transitions from high school to postsecondary study and self-sufficient adulthoods.

The Challenge of the Freshman Transition

Ninth grade is a significant year in determining students' futures. For more than two decades, schools and districts across the country have been trying to develop freshman transition-type courses or academies to address this problem. But because clear course guidelines are often not articulated beforehand, many of these initiatives fail. Some of these classes become little more than glorified study halls because instructors don't possess sufficient curriculum content to change their students' attitudes about education.

This situation is complicated by the fact that freshmen are usually taught by the least experienced teachers. Neild (as quoted in Viadero, 2005) finds that it "would seem logical for schools to place their strongest and most experienced teachers in the 9th grade" (p. 9) but discovered that ninth graders in many inner-city schools had the highest odds of students in any high school grade of being taught by inexperienced and uncertified teachers.

Given these challenges, what is needed? Taking a lesson from the success of standards-based instruction, it becomes obvious that high schools can benefit from a clear and defined set of standards for a freshman transition course. I have reviewed existing course-related standards from Texas, Tennessee, Maine, and Indiana that provide the framework to support career and life-planning issues. The Standards for the Freshman Transition Course were written and validated after consultation with experts. (The standards are available at <http://gsehd.gwu.edu/gsehd/FTI>.)

Working on the premise that individuals are not motivated to work hard until they understand the benefits of their efforts, the standards are designed to function as the blueprint for freshman courses. These courses carry the same rigor, credibility, and status of traditional academic courses and also increase school retention, academic achievement, and postsecondary matriculation.

A successful freshman transition course and initiative has five requirements:

- A 10-year educational and career plan
- A curriculum that meets the standards
- Well-qualified teachers
- A schoolwide implementation initiative
- Leadership continuity over the first four years.

Whether implemented as stand-alone eighth- or ninth-grade freshman orientation classes, used as the foundation for freshman academies, or integrated into such academic

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A 10-Step Plan

Reducing dropout rates, increasing postsecondary matriculation and completion, and seeing former students make the transition into productive, economically self-sufficient citizens are goals made attainable with these 10 steps.

Step 1

GATHER YOUR RESOURCES

Download a copy of the Standards for Freshman Transition Courses and sign up for the Principals' Forum of the Freshman Transition Initiative at <http://gsehd.gwu.edu/gsehd/FTI>. You'll also want to download your own copy of a PowerPoint Presentation to be used in steps two and four.

Step 2

CREATE A VISION

Present the 10-year educational and career plan concept and the Freshman Transition Initiative in a schoolwide meeting. Generate interest around what students have to gain from creating a comprehensive 10-year educational and career plan, and cast a vision for how the plan can be used by all instructors to motivate students to higher academic achievement (see steps 8 and 9 below).

Step 3

FORM A TEAM OF CHAMPIONS

Gather a committee of your most innovative teachers to develop a plan for instituting a standards-driven, freshman transition course that culminates in the development of a 10-year educational and career plan for all incoming freshmen (whether it is completed in grade 8 or 9). Their duties should include formulating and assisting with steps 4, 5, 6, 8 and 9.

Step 4

GENERATE COMMUNITY "BUY-IN" FOR THE NEW COURSE AND 10-YEAR PLAN

With your team, make presentations to parents, community groups, and your school board. Lobby your school board to consider mandating a semester or yearlong classroom-based freshman transition course for all students in either grade 8 or 9.

Step 5

IDENTIFY A CURRICULUM THAT WILL ACCOMPLISH YOUR COURSE GOALS

Good curriculum is one with scope and sequence, where it is apparent to the learner what the results are for their efforts (in this case, a comprehensive—yet flexible—10-year plan for students' transition into adulthood). Seek out resources that provide your teachers with the textbooks, and materials required. Support your team in finding the best tool they can that meets the Freshman Transition Standards.

Step 6

RECRUIT YOUR MOST EXPERIENCED TEACHERS TO CONDUCT THE COURSE

This kind of course requires a high level of teaching skills. Ideally, by this time, your team of champions will become your pool of potential instructors. When recruiting, don't make the mistake of assigning the newest teachers or the least skilled. In addition, provide course continuity by identifying a master teacher who will commit a minimum of four years to the project. Provide him or her with the release time needed to train and to support both the course instructors and the schoolwide initiative (see step eight).

Step 7

PROVIDE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND COURSE PLANNING TIME

In order for course instructors to develop a comprehensive, rigorous classroom experience, they will need professional development and course planning time, particularly during the first year. Arrange schedules so all course instructors have at least one common prep time each week in which to meet and discuss the progress of their efforts. Send the complete team to appropriate workshops and conferences.

Step 8

MAKE YOUR FRESHMAN TRANSITION INITIATIVE A SCHOOLWIDE EFFORT

Provide professional development to all instructors on how to best use and support their students' 10-year plans. Because it is important for students to reassess their goals each year, develop a system in which each student revisits and updates their 10-year plans at least once per year within their sophomore, junior and senior coursework. Ask each department to identify where they can assist in this project.

Step 9

SHARE ALL STUDENTS' 10-YEAR EDUCATIONAL AND ACADEMIC PLANS

Provide each teacher with immediate access to each of their students' current 10-year plans. Every teacher then has increased insight when counseling and personalizing their efforts with each student. If a student is failing a course that is required for their desired career goal, any academic teacher, upon reviewing the student's 10-year plan, is in the position to counsel that student and either help them make up the deficit or rewrite their plan with altered expectations.

Step 10

RECOGNIZE AND REWARD

To maintain the energy of your best instructors and to keep the enthusiasm of the total school community high, it is important to reward and recognize excellence. One way to do this is to invite your local newspaper and news channel to cover your freshman transition initiative once it is up and running, with periodic updates. Encourage your master teacher to attend conferences and make presentations about your school's efforts. Ask students to vote each year on the teacher in each grade who most supports their dreams, and then recognize those "dream catchers" at a year-end assembly.

courses as English and math, the standards enable students to take ownership of their learning. Although they are flexible, the standards provide a scope-and-sequence series of learning objectives that lead to a personalized plan for students' educational and career aspirations. Teachers who incorporate the standards in their classrooms will have the formula for a class that culminates with each student developing a comprehensive 10-year educational and career plan.

One Program's Experience

One example of a successful program is described by Ron Schaefer, a retired Work Experience Career Exploration Program coordinator for the Cahokia (IL) School District. He saw many of his high-risk, low-income, mostly minority students come to school with "no focus, no sense of responsibility." Concrete data collected for the past five years at this site east of St. Louis, MO, reveal that students increased their mathematics and English scores by two grade levels in one year, parents and administrators want students to stay in school (before implementing the course, parents did not care if their child completed school), and attendance has improved remarkably.

"When our students come to us they don't see the relevance of school," Schaefer said. "We start by helping them create a vision of their future [a key component in the standards]. In a yearlong, classroom-based course, using a curriculum that meets the standards, we ask them to think about where they will be in 10 years, by the ages of 27 to 29. We teach them that vision plus energy equals success, a theme of the curriculum we use. This mantra is a constant reminder that we put on signs, on logos, on everything."

Then they start to look at adult realities through such activities as Lifestyle Math. "It is meaningful to them.... When they learn personal budgeting, it helps them learn real-life skills," Schaefer says. "We show them the realities of salaries earned by workers who have a high school education, postsecondary training, college, and beyond. Then they begin to see the relevance of staying in school."

Helping students deal with reality—their own realities and the realities of employment today—is key. Students must embrace the notion, that "the individual worker is going to become more and more responsible for managing his or her own career, risks, and economic security" (Friedman, 2005, p. 284). The topics covered by a course that meets the Freshman Transition Standards will provide those aptitudes, attitudes and skills.

The 10-Year Education and Career Plan

One of the key strategies for personalization for high school students is the development of graduation plans that are grounded in each student's career goals. If high schools continue to promote the four- to five-year plans that are popular today, they are essentially saying that "the

ultimate goal is to get into college" (M. Levine, personal communication, August 4, 2005). If students don't know why they are in college, they will struggle to stay there and have difficulty making the transition into the workforce and creating self-sufficient lifestyles.

Levine (2005) argues that student plans must be of a duration that takes a student beyond high school graduation through the completion of postsecondary training or college and articulates the transition into a dynamic adult role. "Kids can't walk around without any idea of what lies ahead," M. Levine said (personal communication, August 4, 2005). "Students need help in taking the long-term perspective. They need to focus on their career or work life, and they need to be taught about the workplace and what awaits them." Beyond academic and career plans, a comprehensive 10-year plan should include lifestyle and identity issues, all of which can be cultivated with the right materials.

The challenge for educators, of course, is how to get 13- and 14-year-olds who can barely see beyond next Saturday night to come up with quantitative, 10-year educational and career plans. But young adolescents can receive the information they need to develop their 10-year plans when teachers follow a curriculum that meets the standards.

Silverado High School in Victorville, CA, addresses this need for a career, life, and education track by using a standards-based curriculum to guide students through the process of making their 10-year plans. "Most students spent a lot of time working on these plans," says Susan Levine, principal of Silverado High School. "Students were very surprised about all the decisions they need to make. It is a very important part of the class."



Freshman Transition Standards

- 1** The student learns to project into the future and to understand the consequences of their actions and the choices made today.
- 2** The student completes formal assessments and surveys to help them establish and consolidate their identity, becoming “identity-achieved.”
- 3** The student analyzes the effect of personal interest and aptitudes upon educational and career planning.
- 4** The student recognizes the impact of career choice on personal lifestyle.
- 5** The student recognizes the impact their commitment to education has on their future lifestyle and life satisfaction.
- 6** The student demonstrates the skills to locate, analyze, and apply career information.
- 7** The student knows the process for career planning and educational preparation.
- 8** The student can apply the skill sets required to succeed (both in the classroom and the workforce).
- 9** The student demonstrates the importance of productive work habits and attitudes.
- 10** The student knows that many skills are common to a variety of careers and that these skills can be transferred from one career opportunity to another.
- 11** The student knows the process used to locate and secure entry-level employment.
- 12** The student knows the effect change has on society and career opportunities.

These standards were developed using state standards from Texas, Tennessee, Indiana, and Maine, along with research findings and input from researchers and authors. Each standard includes indicators of what students should know and be able to do in that area.

Curriculum That Meets the Standards

Too often teachers are left to try to develop their own curriculum, and except in the case of a handful of extraordinary individuals, the results are usually disappointing and the student outcomes less than optimal. Principals shouldn't make the common mistake of assuming that instructors can pull together course material from various places. Just as English and math teachers aren't expected to create textbooks that meet their standards, teachers of freshman courses shouldn't be expected to create theirs. There are a variety of course structures to choose from.

Besides being used for a stand-alone freshman-orientation-type class (at least a semester in duration), the standards can be integrated into an academic course, such as English, (providing the theme for reading, writing, and speaking activities) or technology (providing keyboarding activities, along with software and internet applications). Within a freshman academy, the standards can provide the framework, theme, and direction for academic course work.

“We spent a year researching curricula to purchase with our Smaller Learning Community grant funds,” S. Levine said (personal communication, July 29, 2005). “One of the most important things for us was to have a curriculum as a base for the Freshman Seminar and at the same time to find a curriculum that [was] aligned with the California Standards in English and math. We found Career Choices at a conference. It is aligned to the California English Standards and is integrative and includes English, math, and technology, which is very important to us.”

The success of these courses is largely defined by the teachers who are recruited to teach them. When they are valued as highly as any academic course and taught by the most seasoned and innovative faculty members, these courses have lower drop-out rates and raised student expectations in dramatic ways. “We've learned that we need to carefully select teachers who are interested and want to teach our freshman seminar,” said S. Levine (personal communication, July 29, 2005). “This year we are looking for motivated, dynamic teachers who can integrate academics and social skills as well. Great teachers are a must to teaching this course.”

A Schoolwide Initiative

To be truly effective and guarantee results of increased academic achievement and educational attainment, it is important that students reassess their goals and 10-year plans each year. To do this, each academic department must identify how it can assist with this project. For instance, a 10th-grade social studies department could work with its students to reassess their 10-year plans once they study the workforce globalization issues of today. A 11th-grade English department can facilitate the annual reediting of the plans once the students read a literary works in which a character struggles

with his or her own life-planning issues. As part of a senior independent study project, students could update their 10-year plans to use in college or employment interviews.

The 10-year plans must be readily available to all teachers. Whether teachers receive an updated hard copy for each of their students or all 10-year plans are made accessible on the school's server (with password-driven areas), these plans will provide teachers with the information they need to give immediate, qualitative counseling and academic support to their students.

For example, imagine that Mary is failing geometry. Her instructor, Mrs. Garcia, goes online to review her 10-year plan and discovers that Mary wants to be an elementary school teacher. This provides a personalized teachable moment. Mrs. Garcia has the opportunity to point out to Mary that, upon review of her goals and dreams for her life, there is a problem if she doesn't pass geometry. It is required to get into college.

Pointing out the deficit, Mrs. Garcia can suggest strategies for getting Mary back on track with her geometry. If Mary resists, Mrs. Garcia can suggest that she will want to rewrite her 10-year plan to lower her aspirations to match her effort. Because Mary has completed a comprehensive, standards-driven freshman transition course, she will fully understand the consequences of that action and will be far more likely to buckle down and make the effort required to successfully complete her course work.

Continuity of Leadership

To institutionalize this new course and launch the school-wide initiative, there must be leadership continuity. A master teacher who will commit a minimum of four years should be selected the team leader for the freshman transition project. The master teacher should be someone who is respected in all departments, because the follow-up required in the sophomore, junior, and senior years is just as important to the success of the project as the freshman year efforts. Before making the choice, the master teacher should identify and ensure that his or her long-term plans and vision for the project match this requirement. Next, the master teacher must receive the released time not only to train and support the other course instructors but also to champion the schoolwide initiative. This person should not be promoted until his or



For more information on the George Washington University Freshman Transition Initiative, visit <http://gsehd.gwu.edu/gsehd/FTI>. From there you can:

- Download a copy of the Standards for Freshman Transition Courses
- Download a PowerPoint presentation on why a freshman transition course and the 10-year plan are important
- Register for the Principals Forum to receive e-mail updates of professional development opportunities and resources
- Take part in the ongoing research on freshman transition issues
- Read about schools implementing successful freshman transition courses
- Review a list of programs, materials, and curriculums that meet the Freshman Transition Standards.

her four-year tenure is complete. The master teacher should be responsible for training and orienting his or her replacement at least one year before a transition.

In summary, by providing the necessary resources, vision and leadership for a freshman transition initiative, principals can cultivate their students' sense of belonging, ownership of learning, and ability to make good choices during their coming decade of challenges and changes. Helping all students envision a positive future that transitions into productive adulthood is imperative to drop-out prevention, academic achievement, and postsecondary matriculation. Students armed with the insight and information that a comprehensive freshman transition course provides will be eager to master the rigorous course work required to make it in today's work world. They will be motivated to sit in the classroom and tune in to content that is newly relevant. Their motivation will be intrinsic—the very best kind—and they will become the lifelong learners our society requires in the 21st century. **PL**

References

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