

# ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF THE CHANGING WORKPLACE THROUGH THE SCHOOL-TO- WORK OPPORTUNITIES ACT: COLLABORATIVE EFFORT IN CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT, TEACHER TRAINING, CAREER SERVICES, AND MENTOR TRAINING

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Howard describes the key role that cooperative education played in school-to-work initiatives in her area, including federal funding and linking secondary and postsecondary education. She describes the services that her community college provides to local school-to-work partnerships, including the development and implementation of high school career courses and career centers and the training of workplace mentors.

The importance of collaborating with high school cooperative education programs became apparent to me some eighteen years ago when working as a faculty coordinator in the Holyoke Community College cooperative education program. When I was visiting employers to pick up evaluations and discuss student performance, especially in the spring semester, the discussion would invariably come around to replacing students who were graduating. Very often, the employer would express an intention to return to the high school from whence the present student had originally come and get a replacement student there. The employer would then give assurance that the student would be encouraged to go to the Community College upon graduation from high school and to participate in the College's co-op program. After hearing this again and again over time, it seemed a good idea to find out what was happening in high school co-op and see if there was a way to connect the co-op programs at the two levels.

In the fall of 1985, the College's co-op department sent out an invitation to area high schools to come to a morning workshop that would feature sessions on co-op at the postsecondary level and seek input from the high school professionals about what was being done at the high school level. We had no idea how this would be received but were pleasantly sur-

prised when the workshop was a resounding success. We were requested to repeat the workshop in the spring and to extend it to a morning and afternoon session, which we did. This collaborative effort has continued over the years on an annual basis and has resulted in many workshops on topics related to cooperative education as requested by the high school professionals. In addition, it laid the groundwork for what was to become an extremely strong working relationship between the College and the area high schools engaged in the school-to-work transition initiative.

### **Involvement in School-to-Work Transition**

Little did we know how our partnership with the high schools would develop in this initiative when the federal School-to-Work Opportunities Act (STWOA) was signed by President Clinton in 1994. This legislation had come about because of concerns about the lack of a transition in this country from school to the workplace, and a lack of skills, resulting in the inability of the country's workforce to compete globally. In fact, three years prior to the passage of the legislation, I had been contacted by the General Accounting Office (GAO) to be part of a study, which had been requested by Congress, of co-op programs at both the high school and college levels in the United States. Congress had had these same concerns in 1991, and it wanted to see how co-op might be a vehicle to address the concerns, especially since the United States does not have the extensive apprenticeship programs that exist in other countries. The GAO visited eight community colleges and eleven high schools in the country. In its report to Congress in August of 1991, the GAO made recommendations to strengthen cooperative education programs in the United States (Frazier, 1991). Three years later the STWOA was passed, and cooperative education, apprenticeships, and tech prep were all incorporated as components of school-to-work transition (Bay State Skills Corporation, 1994). Requests for proposals were then issued to the states to apply for the federal funding that became available with the passage of the STWOA.

The College was invited to participate in meetings facilitated by the Regional Employment Board (REB) of Hampden County along with representatives from the high schools, business, Department of Labor, and community organizations. Not only was this to obtain input into the state's proposal for federal school-to-work funding, but also to look at how the school-to-work transition initiative would be implemented if Massachusetts were funded. How would a system be crafted that would serve all youth, including at-risk students and dropouts as well? I was also invited to Boston along with other educators and business people to meet with federal representatives to talk about why the Massachusetts proposal

should be funded. As a result of that meeting, it became apparent that the tie-in with education reform as outlined in the proposal was something that had caught the eye of the proposal readers, and Massachusetts was indeed one of the first eight states in the nation funded for school-to-work transition in the first round.

The REB's were designated with responsibility for implementing STW at the county level in Massachusetts. The Hampden County REB divided the County into five local STW partnerships: Springfield, Chicopee/Holyoke, Westfield/Gateway, Quaboag Valley, and the Greater Pioneer Valley Education Collaborative. The adjoining Hampshire County REB established the Hampshire Educational Collaborative as the STW partnership for that county. As director of cooperative education, I became the chair of the School-to-Work Task Force at the College, and as such, attended meetings of a number of the STW partnerships and became a member of the partnership boards for most of them. This presented an opportunity to serve as a resource for them in applying co-op procedures that had stood the test of time (the College's co-op program is 27 years old) to the new STW initiative. Co-op had been doing basic transition all along and could offer much in the way of program design so as not to reinvent the wheel. This was true of both college and high school co-op. As an initial step, the College's School-to-Work Task Force offered a menu of services to the local school-to-work partnerships that included the development of career courses at the high school level, serving as a resource in the development of career centers at the high schools, and training of workplace mentors.

### **Development of High School Career Seminar for the Chicopee/Holyoke STW Partnership**

The first opportunity came when I was asked to work with the faculty in the Chicopee and Holyoke school systems to develop a pre-work career development course and a career seminar concurrent with work for the students enrolled in the STW program. The high schools needed help in developing a career seminar based on the required seminars, which are an integral academic component of the College's co-op program. (As one of the activities under the collaborative effort begun in 1985, I had already worked with West Springfield High School in 1989 to develop a career seminar for students in their diversified work experience program, which has been offered ever since.) I met with the faculty from both the Chicopee and Holyoke high schools to help develop the course outlines for both courses and to prepare the paperwork required by the school committees in both cities. Meetings began in the fall of 1995; and in the fall of 1996, the

career seminar was offered for the first time in both cities.

In Holyoke, both the pre-work career development course and the career seminar were taught by high school faculty. The City of Chicopee decided to have the Chicopee faculty teach the pre-work career development course but contracted with the College's co-op department to conduct the career seminars at both Chicopee High School and Chicopee Comprehensive High School. In the fall semester, the seminars were conducted by two co-op department members; and in the spring of 1997, they were conducted by a single individual from the department. Students in the seminar developed a portfolio that included the following:

- work values inventory
- learning agreement
- self-directed search
- employer evaluation
- self-evaluation
- resume
- cover letter
- follow-up thank you letter

Students enrolling in the College upon graduation who had worked in a job related to their major and who had completed the career seminar would also be able to earn three general studies credits after completing one semester at the College. The College also awards co-op credits to incoming students in the hospitality and retail management programs through articulation agreements, which require the completion of a seminar and/or required course work as agreed upon by both secondary and postsecondary faculty.

### **Resource for High School Career Centers**

The career advising component of co-op presented yet another source for collaboration. A number of high schools in the local school-to-work partnerships were given funding to establish career centers that would provide staff and resources to facilitate the entry of students into the workplace. Once again, the co-op department at the College was called upon to serve as a resource to the high school staff who were charged with that responsibility. Therefore, print and computerized materials as well as procedures were suggested, which then were incorporated into some of the centers.

### **Mentor Training**

Another opportunity to serve as a resource and to link co-op with the STW activities at the high school level evolved from the need for mentor training for supervisors in the workplace. The community colleges in

Massachusetts had received requests for proposals from the Massachusetts Community College Office of School-to-Work Transition to develop mentor training manuals. Several colleges, including the author's, developed separate manuals through funding from these proposals. These were then condensed into one manual representing the best from each of the separate manuals. The author and the Director of Workforce Development (also a member of the School-to-Work Task Force) were then contracted by one of the local school-to-work partnerships (Lower Pioneer Valley Collaborative), and the first two mentor training sessions for workplace supervisors were conducted in June of 1997.

### **Combining Co-op, Career Services, STW, and Tech Prep**

It should be noted that the College's co-op department absorbed the function of career services in 1989 and became the Department of Cooperative Education and Career Services. This included overseeing the Career Resources Center, which then tripled its size in terms of space and capacity to serve students. In 1994, as previously mentioned, I had been given responsibility for coordinating the tech prep initiative for the College. In existence since 1991, tech prep subsequently had been incorporated into the STWOA. Now into its seventh year of Perkins funding, tech prep is also becoming involved in activities to transition students into the workplace ultimately, including the development of career pathways, career advising, and student exposure to the workplace through job shadowing. Another related tech prep activity is that of teacher externships, upon completion of which teachers are better able to bring the realities of the workplace into their classrooms. At the College, co-op has been the base, and career services, school-to-work transition, and tech prep have been included in a cohesive effort to further develop linkages with high schools and businesses through the vehicle of the school-to-work local partnerships.

### **Summary**

The major components of the school-to-work legislation—school-based learning, work-based learning, and connecting activities (Bay State Skills Corporation, 1994)—are all epitomized by cooperative education programs, albeit to differing degrees depending upon the individual programs. Co-op has been an excellent resource in the development of school-to-work partnerships and the implementation of school-to-work activities. It has also served to strengthen the links between the secondary and post-secondary levels and provides the next rung on the school-to-work ladder. Students who do a work experience in their major in the eleventh and twelfth grades in high school can continue in that experience or in another

placement while they are at the community college, participating in co-op at the appropriate time. If students choose to go to work upon graduation, they have already made the transition to the workplace and have a good chance of being hired full time by their co-op employers or obtaining full time employment in their fields elsewhere. If they transfer to a four-year college or university after graduation from the community college, they can continue working in a co-op position and participate in co-op if available at the four-year school.

For the past 12 years, Holyoke Community College has provided co-op for junior and senior students at a four-year state college in a neighboring city. Students can conceivably graduate from a community college co-op program and enter their full time careers with three or four years of work experience in their major or go on to graduation from a four-year program with five or six years of work experience in their majors (a truly seamless path of work and learning). Cooperative education is an essential element of school-to-work transition. The involvement of co-op in the local school-to-work partnerships has resulted in invaluable linkages that have benefited the students, and these collaborative efforts have also brought co-op to the forefront as an essential participant in the school-to-work transition initiative.

### References

- Frazier, F. (1991). *Transition from School to Work—Linking Education and Worksite Training*. Gettysburg, MD: General Accounting Office.
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