

THE BEGINNING

To improve student onboarding and make early counseling more effective, Sierra College integrated career exploration into orientation. The larger goal was to improve retention and completion by ensuring students see meaning in their educational journeys from the outset and connect their education to broader objectives. The beauty of Sierra's plan was that it didn't cost extra or take long to implement. They repurposed funds for orientation and rolled out the change in a single semester.

At orientation, instead of starting with counselors, new students first meet with student ambassadors, who help them find resources, familiarize themselves with campus, and access email. The ambassadors administer a questionnaire intended to identify students' position on the Career Development Continuum:

- "Career Exploration," for students who are undecided or uncertain of their goals
- "Career Confirmation," for students who have a fair degree of certainty about their goals
- "Career Preparation," for students already set on a career pathway

Then, students in each group meet with academic and career counselors who lead relevant, targeted activities.

IMPLEMENTATION

Sierra took a single semester to recruit and train student ambassadors, get campuswide buy-in, and plan orientation activities (though they recommend allowing a year). The collaboration included counselors, deans, admissions and records staff, and high school outreach staff. Here's how orientation supports students along the Career Development Continuum:

- The Career Exploration group uses games and activities to help students inventory their skills and interests and to access career and internship opportunities. Guest speakers talk about their own career paths, and students sign up for field trips and company tours and eventually gain access to transfer exploration.
- The Career Confirmation group helps students research career and academic options; provides information about related apprenticeship, internship, and volunteer opportunities; helps students build portfolios and write resumes; and hooks them up with job shadowing opportunities.
- The Career Preparation group helps students practice interviewing, write cover letters, and create portfolios; matches them with experts in various fields; and provides workshops in "21st-century skills."

All students are introduced to academic and career counselors who continue working to help them reach their goals, wherever they are on the continuum. Structures for this post-orientation support are now being created.

EARLY CAREER EXPLORATION

STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Students have repeatedly asked for clearer paths from college to career. They want to understand the relationship among career options, educational steps to take toward careers, classes required, and how much time and money each option costs. Sierra is giving that to them on day one.

Students' feedback in surveys has been overwhelmingly positive, though they want more counselors and more time with them. Here are some samples:

“Very informative, and made figuring everything out simple.”

“Super helpful for returning adults.”

“Made me feel like the ball was rolling.”

“Made me think more about myself and my personality.”

EARLY OUTCOMES

Students have seemed hesitant about the phrase “Career Exploration.” Most sorted themselves into “Career Confirmation” and “Career Preparedness,” including those who were undecided and uninformed about potential careers and might have found value in the “Career Exploration” work. Sierra is trying to figure out if the language is too deficit-focused and is working on a new name.

In response to student requests, Sierra is introducing a one-unit, self-paced career-planning class to supplement the overenrolled three-unit class already available, and it's creating career-exploration courses more focused around the college's career clusters. They also are coordinating with high school outreach to begin these workshops earlier. In fall 2020, Sierra will offer a single-day workshop at the end of the high school year so students come to orientation with a better sense of where they are along the Career Development Continuum.

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