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Chapter 4

Helping Students Develop Successful Career Planning Skills

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Portland Community College (PCC) in Portland, Ore., has offered curriculum and services to distance learners in Oregon since 1978. Like many colleges, PCC has experienced significant growth in this area, especially in online instruction. Distance enrollment for the 1999–2000 school year was just over 12,000. The college has made major progress toward developing a full distance learning curriculum, offering comprehensive degrees and certificates to distance learners. With this growth and expansion, the college has experienced a growing demand for support services for distance learners.

Standards and Goals

In spring 2000, PCC adopted a set of instructional standards for distance learning courses that focuses on four areas: learning outcomes and content presentation, learner activities, evaluation, and instructional design. Several of these are directed toward improving students' learning skills and involving them in the learning process. These standards state the need to use course activities to connect students with academic support and advising staff.

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PCC is addressing these standards in two ways. First, the college is increasing access to academic support and advising services via the Internet and providing general information about student services (descriptions of services offered, office locations and hours, staff contact information, etc.) on its Web site. Several departments are developing distance delivery of services. The initial stages of online services, which PCC provided to students in fall 2000, focused on registration, student records, and billing services.

Students had limited access to some advising and admissions services, such as new student orientation, transcript evaluation, testing, and job placement. The college is beginning to explore offering student life activities online. Future goals include making a fuller range of advising and counseling services, in addition to writing and tutoring labs, available to distance learners via the Web.

PCC has partnered with Rogue Community College (RCC) in Grants Pass, Ore., to develop online writing labs (OWLS) at each college. A grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) will support this project for three years. The OWLS will be available to both on-campus and distance learning students and will focus on providing writing support to students in professional and technical areas. PCC and RCC plan to develop a model, and possibly templates, that could be followed by other community colleges in Oregon that are interested in developing OWLS.

The career help and college success department, which represents the academic side of the college's counseling and advising offices, initiated a second approach to supporting PCC's distance learning standards. Using existing curriculum, these offices developed four online courses to help build learning skills in distance learning college students: College Survival

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and Success, Career Development, Job Finding Skills, and Cooperative Education: A Career Exploration Seminar. Each course focuses on a different part of the learning process that students encounter in college.

These Web-based courses use WebCT as the course management system, although additional online tools are available to instructors. PCC first offered all of these courses by distance in the 1999–2000 academic year. Enrollment was 289 students over four quarters.

These learning skills courses integrate easily into existing student services, with direct referral to the college's advising and counseling services, career centers, job placement offices, and cooperative education services. Although these services are primarily campus-based, PCC plans to offer them on the Web in the near future. All of the instructors in the career help and college success curriculum also work within PCC's student services areas to provide direct support services. This gives our distance learners an additional level of access to student services, including advising, counseling, and job placement.

College Survival and Success

College Survival and Success is a 10-week course that helps students make the personal, academic, and social adjustments needed to succeed in college. It covers college terminology and information, class choice, degree requirements, library use, tours, and student services. It discusses personal learning strengths and weaknesses; balancing work, school, and home demands; forming study partnerships; and stress and time management. The course presents strategies for new and returning students, and the online version focuses on topics specific to distance learners.

The program is offered for one, two, and three credits. Learning activities include online discussions, quizzes, textbook assignments, and a

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final project paper responding to questions the instructor posts. The final project is submitted online and is available for peer critique. The textbook is *Keys to Success: How to Achieve Your Goals* by Carter, Bishop, and Kravits. Discussion topics correspond to the chapters in the text:

1. Becoming a Lifelong Learner: Opening Doors
2. Resources: Making the Most of Your Environment
3. Goal-Setting and Time Management: Mapping the Course
4. Self-Awareness: Knowing Who You Are and How You Learn
5. Critical and Creative Thinking: Tapping the Power of Your Mind
6. Reading, Studying, and Using the Library: Maximizing Written Resources
7. Note-Taking and Writing: Harnessing the Power of Words and Ideas
8. Listening, Memory, and Test Taking: Taking In, Retaining, and Demonstrating Knowledge
9. Relating to Others: Appreciating Your Diverse World
10. Personal Wellness
11. Managing Career and Money: Reality Resources
12. Moving Ahead: Building a Flexible Future

Students discuss these elements with the instructor and each other in an online chat room every Monday evening and through a threaded-discussion bulletin board. Each week, the instructor posts a timed quiz online.

The desired outcomes for this course are familiarity with the community college system and resources, effective use of personal and college-related tools to achieve academic success, awareness of peer support groups, and a positive mental attitude. These outcomes are

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especially important for distance learners, who often feel separated from help systems within the college. The course's instructor refers to these outcomes collectively as "empowerment" of the student.

Student feedback about the course is strongly positive relative to these outcomes, with students reporting increased familiarity with PCC and its structures, and increased self-confidence and the ability to overcome barriers. Many students have related how much they learned from reading other students' responses to questions and personal life stories, or have talked about the value of learning online.

Career Development

Career Development helps students make informed career decisions. The course introduces interest testing and self-assessment of skills, values, and attitudes. Students learn how to locate occupational information, conduct informational interviews, make decisions, and set goals. The course also covers choosing a major.

The program is offered for one, two, and three credits. The textbook is *The Career Fitness Program*, by Sukiennik, Bendat and Roufman. Learning activities include participating in online discussions, completing textbook assignments, conducting informational interviews, researching occupational areas, writing reports on various careers, and developing a working résumé based on skills and interest assessment. Students are introduced to a variety of relevant Internet resources.

Assignments and career reports are posted on a bulletin board for peer review and comment. Students discuss these postings and other assigned topics with the instructor and each other in an online chat every Monday evening and through a threaded-discussion bulletin board.

Outcomes for Career Development include an ability to identify values,

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skills, and personality style; understand current patterns and future trends in the workplace; identify self-defeating behavior or barriers; and develop a plan of action for achieving personal and professional development.

Students report high satisfaction with the course, and appreciate the opportunity to interact with other career explorers and share career information they have gathered. Completing the course helps students set academic goals and choose courses of study. Because the class only introduces the concepts and practices of career development, students are referred to a career counselor if they need additional assistance. Student feedback about the online version of the course is strongly positive.

Job Finding Skills

Job Finding Skills promotes an overall understanding of the job search process and explores a broad range of job search techniques, including building a job network, compiling information for job applications, targeting cover letters and resumes, and developing responses to typical interview questions. Students develop skills that will help them attain full-time, part-time, summer, and internship employment.

The course is required for professional-technical students in several career curriculum areas, including accelerated computerized accounting, architectural design and drafting, automotive service technology, building inspection, industrial design and drafting, interior design, and publishing technology. It is also recommended in several other career programs where cooperative education or an internship is either required or a technical elective. In 2000 this course was converted to distance learning to meet the needs of students in curriculum areas that were already full.

Job Finding Skills is a self-paced, one-credit course. There is no required text. Students access online lectures and activities customized to

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their majors and explore real companies and jobs via the Internet. Students develop job search materials that are critiqued by an employment specialist who is responsible for placing students. Contact with the instructor is available in person and by e-mail, fax, and phone.

The outcomes for the course are an understanding of the job search process; the ability to develop job search tools, including a résumé, cover letter, and application; demonstrated strategies for successful interviewing; and the ability to develop a job search plan. Some instructors require majors to develop a mini-portfolio showing work samples. Job Finding Skills students are strongly encouraged to use the college's job placement services. The course seems to be especially effective now that PCC has made employment services available to distance learners via the Web and e-mail.

Student evaluations have shown a strong level of satisfaction with the course content's relevance to "real life" and with the online course's ease-of-use. Students seem to strongly appreciate the ability to approach the topic areas that interest them at their own pace. Completing the course also ensures that students prepare the job search materials they will later need for placement in cooperative education work experiences.

Cooperative Education: Career Exploration Seminar

Cooperative Education: Career Exploration Seminar is a required seminar, supplementing the cooperative education experience, in which students explore their interest in and suitability for a career through work situations in selected occupations. The seminar offers a flexible menu of online assignments exploring the topics of job search, job success, and personal achievement.

The course is a self-paced, one-credit seminar. Students are required to

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complete a journal in which they respond to questions about their work experiences. They also complete an informational interview, usually at the work site, responding to questions provided by the instructor. Students choose five learning activities they need to complete from an online menu of 10 to 15 readings and activities to earn the credit for the course. The instructor changes these activities in response to class needs or newly available materials. Current topic selections include salary negotiation, portfolios, sexual harassment, workplace safety, and stress management. Students can also create their own activities from online sources, with instructor approval.

The primary outcome for the course is a realistic evaluation of whether a particular career is relevant to an individual's interests and aptitudes. Instructors expect students to demonstrate self-reflection when evaluating their work experience and the information they collected through the seminar activities. An additional outcome is that students become familiar with using the Internet as a source of information on careers and employment.

Student feedback about the seminar has been positive. Students particularly like the flexibility of the online assignments and often repeat the seminar to gain additional work experience, choosing different learning activities from the menu. Like Career Development, this course may help students make career and academic choices. When this occurs, students are referred to a counselor or advisor for further assistance.

An important benefit of the online format is that it makes the seminar available to students who work outside of the college's district. Last year, PCC had cooperative education students around the world (in Japan and Saudi Arabia) and across the country (in Washington, Alaska, Utah, and Florida).

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Other PCC programs often use the online seminar in lieu of their own face-to-face workshops. For example, business majors (management, marketing, and accounting) are required to attend a weekly seminar in conjunction with their co-op work experience. Students who are unable to attend that seminar may use the career exploration seminar to fulfill the requirement. Since no business instructor is available during the summer term, students who participate in the work experience are required to teach the “live” seminar.

Plans for Online Course Offerings

PCC’s Career Help and College Success Department offers other courses that may work well in an online format. The college could target those courses to distance learners alone, or could use them for both distance learners and traditional students who seek the flexibility of an online course.

Study Skills for College Learning provides information, techniques, and strategies that help students become more skilled at time management, studying, listening, and taking notes and exams. This course is more focused than College Survival and Success is, since it targets behaviors and strategies that are directly linked to learning. It may be a natural addition to supporting learning skills for distance learners. The number of PCC students taking distance learning courses is growing, and many are new to the medium. These learners would greatly benefit from more advanced instruction in study skills.

Today’s Careers may also fill a niche in PCC’s distance offerings. This course gives a broad overview of careers and what it takes to succeed in them. It seems to interest people who are considering entering or re-entering college and are exploring the value of such a choice. Given the

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career exploration and industry resources available through the Internet, it would probably be easy to convert Today's Careers to an online format and tie it to online career databases such as America's Learning Exchange.

Other courses PCC could adapt for distance delivery are Stress Management, Values Clarification, Decision Making, and Stopping Test Anxiety. These courses often have low enrollment. Perhaps they could be offered online as self-paced, continuous enrollment courses.

Ideally, PCC could tie several career growth courses together to support learners throughout their college experience. For example, a student could explore possible careers and the corresponding college options with the courses Today's Careers and Career Development, then take College Survival and Success and Study Skills for College Learning to develop the skills needed to achieve their goals. Students could use what they learn in Job Finding Skills and Cooperative Education: Career Exploration Seminar to ease the transition into the workforce.

Distance delivery of learning support courses is important because distance learners often cannot directly access advising and counseling services and because traditional students may have difficulty fitting face-to-face support classes into their busy schedules. Potential students who have not yet committed to attending college may find online exploration an attractive option.

As more and more of PCC's student services go online, the college will need to make its career growth courses and support services available to distance learners. PCC already refers students to Web-based job placement services. Students might use other courses to connect to online advising, counseling, testing, and tutoring services as they become available. This approach would help PCC meet instructional standards for distance learning courses and fulfill its plans for distance delivery of academic and

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student services.

Conclusion

Portland Community College is committed to helping distance learners develop their learning skills. The instructional standards for distance learning courses adopted in 2000 address this important part of the college's program. PCC is moving toward its goal of offering admissions, advising, counseling, tutoring, and employment services online, and offering learning support courses via distance learning strengthens this commitment. In the future, PCC will offer more courses and services to further support its distance learners' learning skills development.

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