POS: **Observations on Process and Structure**

By Corinne Alfeld

PROGRAMS OF STUDY (POS), INTRODUCED FOR THE FIRST TIME IN THE 2006 PERKINS IV LEGISLATION, are now required for states receiving Perkins funding. The operational definition of POS defined by the Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE) is "a structured sequence of academic and career and technical education (CTE) courses that lead to a postsecondary-level credential." CTE policymakers and practitioners are interested in learning whether the POS requirement in Perkins is feasible and which key elements need to be in place.

A key component of POS is the link between secondary and postsecondary levels. Because the idea and model for POS evolved from prior CTE reform initiatives such as School to Work, Tech Prep, and career pathways, it is understandable that many education partnerships that look very much like POS had already developed in local communities, even though they may not have begun with that name.

Last year, the National Research Center for Career and Technical Education (NRCCTE) began a longitudinal, exploratory study of Programs of Study (POS) around the country. Our research team searched for sites that already had well-developed secondary-postsecondary partnerships in CTE to study how POS work. The process of selecting three sites for the research involved initial visits to eight sites around the country that were nominated by various CTE leaders. This article, the first report of preliminary observations from the study, will describe findings from these initial visits to all eight sites; future articles will focus on the three that were eventually selected for the longitudinal study.

It should be noted that several other sites that were highly recommended and met all of our initial criteria declined our visit on the basis of limited time and resources for hosting researchers. For this reason and because of our own limited time and resources, we do not claim to have conducted an exhaustive search of all possible research sites. However, what we do have is a range of approaches to the implementation of POS at the local level that we hope will help policymakers and practitioners better understand the elements necessary to meet the objectives of programs of study.

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Preliminary Findings

Several issues emerged from our visits that we believe are important in thinking about how POS work at the local level and what areas are still in need of refinement. We hope that these initial observations, both positive and negative, will provide topics for further discussion in the field.

1. Direction of Initiative. Most of the sites we visited told us that the college was the first to reach out to the high schools to begin building common curriculum sequencing and articulation agreements. This may have been because most of the sites we visited were colleges (as opposed to high schools); however, at the three non-college sites we visited, there appeared to either be a relatively weak connection or no connection with a local community or technical college. These high schools seemed to be constructing their own POS in somewhat of a vacuum, though all of them identified potential postsecondary and career options and were knowledgeable about their state's efforts with regard to POS. It may be that high schools need more guidance or resources from the state and/or from local postsecondary institutions to develop and sustain POS.

2. Advisory Committees. At the sites where POS was working well, there were active advisory committees consisting of secondary and postsecondary instructors and business representatives. Some sites also included alumni of the POS who were now working in the local community. The committees met at least once per year, but often two to three times, to discuss issues such as curriculum content, equipment, changes in industry standards, and local internship and co-op arrangements. Some advisory committees also regularly discussed regional industry needs and employment outlooks. To facilitate the meetings, which seemed to occur in the early evening, either the high school or the college offered space and refreshments.

3. Career Guidance. Most sites did not provide regular guidance to students about POS in high school. In only one technical high school we visited did we find that POS-focused career guidance was emphasized. In fact, the entire school was structured around students' career exploration and development, which meant that the guidance and curriculum included related planning activities, particularly in the freshman year. Career guidance for students was much less developed at the other sites. In some high schools, career exploration Web sites (such as ACT's "Explore" test) or other online tools were offered but not required.

When we spoke with guidance counselors, the majority were more focused on testing, scheduling, and four-year college applications than on helping students learn about and choose a POS. Some counselors were not even familiar with the term "program of study" and were unaware of and/or not involved in the course sequencing work that had been done between CTE teachers at the high school and the local college. That is, CTE was, unfortunately, barely on the radar for many guidance counselors at the high schools we visited.

4. Logistics of Dual Credit. There are many logistical considerations in creating opportunities for students to earn college credit while still in high school.

a. Location. Where the college-level course is taught to high school students varied across the sites that offered them. If the dual credit course is offered at the college, both semester and daily schedules need to be aligned between the institutions and transportation provided. Dual credit or articulated courses offered at the high school versus the college were about evenly distributed at the sites we visited. The school districts or the college needed to provide transportation, or else the students drove themselves to campus. Scheduling was a major issue that these sites had to work through to allow for students to leave their high schools for part of the day without missing any of their other classes. Colleges were often trying to develop arrangements with multiple high schools that are all on different schedules. Many creative and individual-

ized solutions had been worked out at the sites that were successful at dual enrollment, but this often came at a high cost to the college.

b. Teacher credentials. If the dual credit course is offered at the high school, either the college instructor needs to travel to one or more high schools to teach

course is taken (*i.e.,* transcripted credit). It was rare for us to encounter a "seamless" procedure for students to receive credit for their articulated courses once they enrolled at the college. At two sites, high school students were required to enroll as a college student in order to take the dual credit courses, so they were considered college students at the same time as they

students who were eligible for credit. At a few sites, it was incumbent upon the students to obtain, keep and present a piece of paper from their high school to the college in order to claim the credit. Not surprisingly, many students failed to do this and ended up retaking the same course at the college at full price. The sites varied in whether or not the college

increased enrollments; the school or the students paid for their books. Even when tremendous efforts had been made and the opportunity was clearly there, students did not always benefit. This was either because of logistical issues in the secondary-postsecondary arrangement (such as those mentioned above) or because of the students' own choices.

laboration with instructors from both levels), develop articulation agreements, arrange student schedules, and work with high school guidance counselors to make students and parents aware of the opportunities for students to begin earning college credit while in high school. A decision had been made by these colleges that it was important to invest resources into creating a seamless transition for students. In one case, Perkins funds were used for the staff positions; in another case the college and the state both contributed monies; in another, following several years of grant support, a budget to support four staff members dedicated to working with high schools is now a regular part of its operating costs. This kind of commitment on the part of a college seems to be a key to facilitating the development of POS that span secondary and postsecondary levels. In addition to the above, several other observations are worth mentioning briefly:

concerns; although these eight are still working out the kinks, all seem to have achieved some measure of success at what they are attempting. We are very grateful to each of them for opening up their schools to us so that we can learn about their approach to developing POS.

As mentioned in the introduction, this is the first report of a longitudinal research study exploring "mature" POS sites to learn how they are working. The purpose is simply to bring out "onto the table" in the larger CTE community some of the things that are occurring as POS are rolled out nationally. As this study moves forward, we will be studying three of the sites in much more depth. We think that the observations we have reported here are only the tip of the iceberg of the lessons emerging from initial implementation of POS. **T**

PHOTO BY MOODBOARD - FOTOLIA.COM

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That is, some students didn't want to miss classes or activities at their high school (at the sites where the college course was offered only on the college campus) or preferred to "make an easy A" by not taking the more rigorous college-level course. While many of the students in our focus groups told us they were taking a dual credit course because it was "free college," or "more fun than high school," only about half or fewer of eligible CTE students at the sites we visited took available courses for college credit while in high school. We believe that as POS are better developed and refined, the number of dual enrollments will increase.

6. Dedicated Staff. Perhaps related to the first point, in each of the mature programs of study that included dual enrollment options, we found that the community college had dedicated staff working with area high schools to do things such as align curriculum (in col-

7. **Curriculum Integration.** Curriculum integration appears to be a universal challenge.
8. **Smaller Communities.** Although they have fewer resources, smaller communities also have fewer layers of bureaucracy, which seems to facilitate POS coordination.
9. **POS on paper.** There is a disconnect between how many POS models (on paper) have been developed and how many POS (in practice) are actually up and running.

Conclusion

The above is a summary of some of the issues that educators need to consider and address as they move forward with the design and implementation of POS. The list is by no means complete; it simply reflects some of the most common issues we encountered in our conversations and observations at eight sites. Clearly, each community has its own idiosyncratic

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the course, or the high school teacher needs to have the proper credentials, either by showing relevant documents or by enrolling in college courses themselves to receive a degree. Because many high school CTE teachers have industry experience in lieu of a bachelor's degree, this was sometimes a hurdle.

c. Transcripts. Many high school students lose their college credits unless the college records them at the time the

were high school students. This way, their course credit went directly onto their college transcript and appeared when they enrolled full-time at the college. However, in most cases, the college did not have a system of recording which high school students had passed the course and were eligible for the credit. This was true even at sites where the program faculty at both levels had very good working relationships. The colleges claimed that their data systems were not set up to flag incoming

credits earned could be transferred to another college in the state; clearly, the credits are more valuable when this is the case.

5. Cost and Benefit. The question of who would pay the tuition for dual-enrolled students was a barrier that some of the sites had worked out and others were still wrestling with. At most sites the college covered the cost of the tuition and received more state funding for their