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.

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.

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 were 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 individualized...
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 expe-
rience in lieu of a bachelor’s degree, this
was sometimes a hurdle.

c. Transcripts. Many high school
students lose their college credits
under the college records them at the
time the 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
were high school students. This way, their
course credit went directly onto their col-
lege 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 had
kept a record of the students’ coursework
and their grades. As a result, many students
were still wrestling with. At most sites
the college covered the cost of the tuition and received more state funding for their
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 arrange-
ment (such as those mentioned above)
or because of the students’ own choices.

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
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 arrange-
ment (such as those mentioned above)
or because of the students’ own choices.

IN EACH OF THE
MATURE POS THAT
INCLUDED DUAL
ENROLLMENT OPTIONS, WE FOUND THAT THE
COMMUNITY COLLEGE HAD DEDICATED STAFF
WORKING WITH AREA HIGH SCHOOLS TO MAKE STUDENTS AND
PARENTS AWARE OF THE OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS TO BEGIN EARNING
COLLEGE CREDIT WHILE IN HIGH SCHOOL.

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.

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 avail-
able courses for college credit while in
high school. We believe that as POS are
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
tings such as align curriculum (in col-
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 con-
tributed monies; in another, following
several years of grant support, a budget
to support four staff members dedicated
working with high schools is now a
regular part of its operating costs. This
kind of commitment on the part of a col-
lege 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:

7. Curriculum Integration. Curric-
ulum 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 discon-
nect 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
concerns; although these 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
there 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.

For more information on the “Mature Programs of Study: A Longitudinal Analysis” study and other current research visit www.nrccte.org

Corinne Alfeld, Ph.D.,
is senior research and evaluation specialist at the National Institute for Work and Learning. Academy for Educational Development (AED) is a partner in the NRCCTE. She can be contacted at calfeld@acte.org

Interested in exploring this topic further? Discuss it with your colleagues on the ACTE forums at www.acteonline.org/forum.aspx

How much do you know about workplace safety? Take CareerSafe Online! www.careersafeonline.com

CareerSafe

For only
$18 per student
OSHA 10-Hour Cards

®

CareerSafe

Have you heard the Healthcare Safety Initiative?

CareerSafe Online - the workforce safety program that makes the Federal Government’s Healthcare Safety Initiative Cost Free for every 20 employees in a single school district.

- 1 Teacher at work...
- 1 Killed Every 5 Days
- 1 Hospitalized Every 7 Minutes
- 1 Sustained Injury Every 2 Minutes