One of the pressing needs of employers today is for workers with new and different sets of knowledge and skills, including positive attitudes, good work habits, the ability to learn a diverse set of tasks, and problem-solving, communication, scientific, and interpersonal skills (Connecticut Department of Labor 2001). Educators, especially those in career and technical education (CTE), are addressing these new and different sets of knowledge and skills alongside other, more traditional knowledge and skills. In addition, however, educators must communicate these new and different sets of knowledge and skills to employers.

Unfortunately, the traditional high school diploma and transcript do not communicate that information well to employers (Bridging the Gap 1993). Neither provides the information employers want on thinking, problem solving, teamwork, and group skills; transcript information may be inconsistent or difficult to interpret; a diploma often reflects minimum standards; and schools sometimes do not respond to requests for transcripts in a timely manner. This Digest reviews other ways secondary educators are using to communicate students' new and different sets of knowledge and skills to employers—passports, portfolios, and certificates.

A career passport may be characterized as "a formal product or document in which students present the many marketable skills they have developed through their life experiences (Charner and Bhaerman 1986, p. 1). A career portfolio is a similar product with a different focus; it is a working tool that organizes information and documents for career planning and self-assessment (Pond et al. 1998). A career certificate is a document issued by an educational agency formally attesting that a student possesses specific skills.

Career Passports and Career Portfolios

Portfolios have long been used in some professions to showcase professional work and skill. In education, portfolios have also been used for assessment, including self-assessment (Lankes 1995; Pond et al. 1998). Both career portfolios and career passports reflect this dual focus—students assess themselves in the process of developing a product, and the resulting product showcases and documents their experiences and skills. A distinction is sometimes drawn between a portfolio as developmental and a passport as summative (Bridging the Gap 1993). With portfolios, more emphasis is put on the developmental process of self-assessment, planning, and goal-setting; with passports, more emphasis is put on the final product that sums up the results of the process and communicates them to others.

In practice, however, both passports and portfolios represent a combination of developmental process and summative product. The value of the passport or portfolio is twofold: students come to an awareness of their own skills and experience, and employers have richer, more detailed information for hiring decisions than is provided in transcripts and diplomas. As early as the mid-1980s, Charner and Bhaerman (1986) advocated a Career Passport as a way for secondary students to identify and document their work and nonwork experiences and to translate those experiences into statements of skills specifically related to work. The process was necessary for students to understand what they had to offer to employers; the resulting Career Passport provided employers with critical information to supplement the information in school transcripts or even resumes.

The Career Individual Career Plan (ICP) and Career Passport.

The Ohio Career Passport is the capstone of students’ career decision-making process, begun before the ninth grade (Gahris n.d.). The planning and decision making involved in the ICP process lead to each student’s Career Passport, an individual credential housing an array of formal documents that students use in the next step after high school. Components include a letter of verification from the school; a student-developed resume; a student narrative identifying career goals and underlying rationale; a transcript (including attendance); diplomas, certificates, licenses, or other credentials; and a list of any specific vocational program competencies. The state recommends housing those components in a consistent, easily recognizable folder. Students develop ICPs through career interest and aptitude assessment, exploration experiences, preferably through job shadowing, and annual review and revision in high school. The ICP and Career Passport can be developed in any statewide curriculum area but most often this occurs in English or social studies, with assistance from the computer instructor and guidance counselor. Classroom support materials include elementary, middle, and high school Career Development Blueprints and sample activity packets (Classroom Support Materials n.d.). All Ohio schools are required to provide students the opportunity to complete the ICP and Career Passport in a structured classroom setting and local school boards may make the Career Passport a graduation requirement for their district, although parents may choose not to have their child involved.

The South Dakota Career and Life Planning Portfolio. The Career and Life Planning Portfolio is a collection of work that documents a student’s skills, abilities, and ambitions (Division of Workforce and Career Preparation 1999; “DWCP Wins National Award” 2000). Usually organized in a standard jacket with color-coded folders, documentation can include both examples of work and information on career and education planning, skills employers want, projects/work samples, and assessment results. The Portfolio, which is not required, can be used for a variety of educational purposes, but its ultimate use is to house the projects and work samples that demonstrate to a prospective employer that the student has the skills and talents the employer needs. Based on a model developed by the Sioux Falls School District and tested at 25 state high schools, the Portfolio is accompanied by curriculum materials, activities, and resources for teachers.

Career Certificates

The Wisconsin Employability Skills Certificate. The Employability Skills Certificate Program is designed for students who do not participate in the Cooperative Education Skills Certificate Program and the Youth Apprenticeship Program (Lifework Education Team 2000). The Employability Skills Certificate, issued by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, recognizes students’ mastery of the employability skills identified by the U.S. Department of Labor’s Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS). To participate in the voluntary program, local districts must provide three required components:

- Instruction and assessment of SCANS skills—Instruction can be provided in any curriculum area, and demonstration and assessment can occur either in the school or in the community.
- School-supervised work-based learning experience—Considerable flexibility is allowed for local districts in providing work-based learning experiences, which can include existing cooperative education, work experience, internships, or service learning programs. A minimum of 180 total work hours is required; occupation-related instruction is not required.
- Career planning—Working with parents and school personnel, each student develops a written Individual Career Plan (ICP) to make appropriate career, educational, and occupational choices. The ICP identifies tentative career goals and concrete, specific steps after high school to realize those goals; schools manage the...
Effective practices in developing and using career portfolios and passports involve defining the roles of different actors, addressing issues of portfolio or passport design, and facilitating students’ developmental process (Wonacott 2001). Issues related to career passports, portfolios, and certificates that have not yet been addressed include student outcomes and success (e.g., employment, starting salary), program coordination and cooperation across states, and the possible development of a national model.

References

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This project has been funded at least in part with Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education under Contract No. ED-99-CO-0013. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government. Digests may be freely reproduced and are available at <http://cete.org/acve/digests.asp>.