

College-bound and Vocational Students Benefit from Career Guidance

Mention "career guidance" and "workplace readiness" to most educators today and they will most likely think of vocational studies or courses for students headed into the job market after graduation. But English teacher Priscilla Gregory of Vonore High School in Vonore, Tennessee, has a different response. While agreeing that vocational students benefit from guidance and work readiness, she strongly supports the same prescription for college-bound students. In fact, Priscilla believes that preparation for the world of work should be a part of everyone's school experience, beginning as early as the eighth grade.

"Everyone is going to be in the workplace someday," she told us. "It's a fantasy to think that those who are going to college don't need these skills."

Priscilla's beliefs come from her wide range of experience with students in both middle school and high school, vocational and academic tracks. In the past few years, she has taught Applied Communications to 10th, 11th, and 12th grade vocational students, regular English to college-bound seniors, and reading to eighth graders. In all of her classes, she includes a career guidance component as part of the basic language arts curriculum.

Guidance Helps Students Decide

In Tennessee, all high schools are required to offer two distinct pathways: college-bound or vocational. At Vonore High School, vocational students can choose from a rich array of Tech Prep offerings, or decide to "co-opt," leaving school to work part of the day for credit and pay. College-bound students regularly take the mainstay academic classes, preparing for college entry by fulfilling requirements.

As early as the end of eighth grade, all students are asked to make a choice between which of these two pathways they will follow for the next four years.

"Eighth grade may seem too early to ask students to make that decision," Priscilla told us. "But in Japan and Europe, they've been doing it for years, and it's working quite well." What we don't do in our country, Priscilla believes, is give our young people a broad enough guidance opportunity for them to explore what their options are, and what they want to do in their lives.

"In our middle school, the counselors have so little time, with 200 students per counselor," she told us. "At best, they come into the classroom and give the students a battery of personal inventory tests. In the end, it's usually their parents who choose for them. No one ever stops to ask them about their dream - or even if they have one!"

But in her classes, Priscilla does stop to ask students what their dreams are. Beginning with her eighth grade reading class, she introduces comprehensive career guidance into the language arts curriculum using *Career Choices*, Possibilities, and the student Workbook and Portfolio to integrate both subjects.

"We are asking these young people to make a life-changing decision, and yet they have never stopped to think: Do I like working with others, or by myself? Do I want to work indoors or outdoors? Do I like being my own boss or working for someone else? In *Career Choices*, the surveys and exercises, especially in Chapter 2: 'Your Personal Profile,' help them to answer these kinds of questions and give them some sense of direction."

Since Priscilla is the only eighth grade teacher to bring a guidance component into her class, she can readily see the difference it makes for her students. "They're so much more realistic about their goals, and they know what it's going to take to accomplish them," she told us. When one student who wanted to become a doctor realized how much math and science he was going to have to take, he changed his mind and went on to explore other careers.

College-bound Need Direction

"It's sad that even in college students don't get any real career guidance," Priscilla told us. "They're just as lost the first year in college as they were in their freshman year in high school."

Priscilla laments the fact that many college students change their majors over and over again, becoming confused and frustrated, and eventually dropping out. The majority of students entering two-year colleges never do graduate, and as a result, can't get the jobs to pay off their financial aid loans. This leaves the debt for the taxpayers, who end up absorbing millions of dollars of wasted federal aid.

In her English 4 class, Priscilla hopes to save her students from a similar fate. For that reason, she takes her college-bound seniors through the entire *Career Choices* text, from beginning to end.

"I'm finding that in the three years I have used *Career Choices* with my college-bound students," she told us, "they know better what they want to do, and they feel more confident about their choices. They are able to assess the skills they have and what they're going to need in order to have the careers they want. I can honestly say that they know what's out there, what the demand is, and how to find the jobs." Certainly this is not something that can be said about the average college-bound senior in most high schools!

Two areas of the *Career Choices* curriculum that have proven to be the most valuable for Priscilla's students are covered in Chapter 11: Getting Experience, and Chapter 12: Where Do You Go From Here? In Chapter 11, they learned the basics of giving good interviews, not only for employment, but for the college entrance and scholarship application process as well. In Chapter 12, students wrote a plan of action describing what they would be doing in five and ten years from now. This particular activity was the culmination of their entire year's work and was based on what they had learned in the previous, sequentially-paced chapters of the book.

One of Priscilla's students, a young woman with a child, who ranked 11th in the graduating class, decided to pursue a scholarship sought after by every valedictorian in the county. During her final interview, she was asked what she thought she'd be doing five years into the future. Fully prepared, she rolled out an impressively detailed plan of action. She knew from class that she wasn't legally required to mention her child, while the other female candidates, less aware, included plans for children and families, and cut short their chances without realizing it.

In spite of her competitors' higher grade point averages, the young woman walked away with the scholarship. "When students know where they're going," Priscilla commented, "and they've explored a career of choice as well as daydreamed about it, colleges see them as more of a sure bet and want them."

Local Company Adopts School

"I tell my students that the same kinds of basic questions are asked at employment interviews as at college and scholarship interviews," Priscilla told us. And thanks to a unique arrangement with a local company who has "adopted" Vonore High School, students in both of Priscilla's college-bound and vocational classes have been given an opportunity to practice their interview skills in a real employment setting.

The Mashusta Refrigeration Company of America, otherwise known as MARKA, originally approached the school with a request for teachers to give them a "wish list" of contributions the company could make to the school. Money for books and supplies was on top of the list—an easy request to fulfill, since it meant a sure tax write-off for the company.

But Priscilla wanted something that would link her students more meaningfully to their community. She asked MARKA to send a panel of their people into her classrooms to address both her vocational and college-bound students about what it was like to work for the company and how jobs were acquired.

"Students got a great chance to use what they had learned in *Career Choices*," Priscilla reported. Her 12th grade Applied Communications students, whose focus was more on job readiness, asked panel members scores of questions about what were the sacrifices and rewards of their jobs, what kinds of dreams did they have when they were younger, and what they had to give up to be where they are today. "They never would have asked those kinds of questions if they hadn't been looking at those issues in class," she commented.

Out of this experience, a special relationship was formed between Priscilla's students and MARKA. The company was so impressed with the students that they offered to provide funding and resources so students could come to their plant and participate in mock interviews and job shadowing. They even offered to videotape the interviews and give feedback to the students on their performance.

"The MARKA people were floored when the students showed up neatly and appropriately dressed, well-prepared with applications already filled out, complete with cover letters and references," Priscilla told us. "After the mock interviews, they invited several students to come back the day after graduation for another interview, only this time for a real job."

"Eight of the ten students who participated last year are now employed with MARKA at \$8.50 an hour," Priscilla told us, "which is very decent wage in this community." College-bound students were also invited to return when they were finished with college, to interview for possible management level jobs.

"A lot of my students can now afford to be picky," Priscilla reported, "because they are so much better at interviewing than others. Some are getting bids from different employers, while most people are practically arm-wrestling for the scarce jobs in our community."

MARKA also offered to help Priscilla purchase more *Career Choices* books in the future. "When I need more books, I go to them and they're always very gracious," she told us. "My students each get a *Workbook and Portfolio* to go with their *Career Choices* textbook, something our school couldn't afford to pay for on its own."

Priscilla points to her experience as proof that there is a "bigger picture" to consider when making the decision to include career guidance in the curriculum. "Academic level students are all going to be entering the workforce someday, regardless of whether they graduate from college or not," she remarked. "It seems only fair to include them in our efforts to get young people ready"

One thing seems for sure, if Priscilla Gregory gets her way: We taxpayers will be saving a bundle of money on those defaulted loans!

"Students who have had the *Career Choices* curriculum in the eighth grade are generally not the ones flip-flopping back and forth between the pathways in high school," she said.

In the Tech Prep setting, it is not unusual for academic and vocational pathways to become intertwined. Students interested in architecture or engineering, for example, are encouraged to take technical classes, such as drafting and building trades, while also taking academic math and English for college entry.

But for many others, switching between the vocational and academic pathways is a signal that a student has no clear goal. Priscilla believes that this can be the beginning of a pattern that continues after high school and into college, where so many students can't decide on a major or don't have an end goal in mind.