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Planning, Pondering, & Dreaming: Developing Middle School Futures and ECAPS

JANUARY 31, 2013 by *Karen Procopio*

When most middle school students are asked what they want to be when they grow up, they simply respond with a shoulder shrug. To this age group, adulthood seems much too distant for worry, and any sense of seriousness or healthy anxiety is premature. But when this question is asked of 7th-grade CB02 Computer Essentials students at the Mesa Academy for Advanced Studies, an enthusiastic barrage of answers ensues, complete with explanations of their four-year high school academic plans, SAT/ACT requirements from their colleges of choice, and salary ranges and market outlook of the jobs they'd like to pursue.

At the Mesa Academy for Advanced Studies, we believe the "middle school years" window is the crucial time for students to actively explore skills and career interests. Recently, the ACT (American College Testing Program) published a report titled: The Forgotten Middle: Ensuring that All Students Are on Target for College and Career Readiness before High School. According to the report, students who are on-track academically by middle grades are more likely to achieve in high school, college, and beyond.

Additionally, the report further elaborated: "Eighth-grade students who are not on target for college and career readiness face severe academic obstacles in high school and are substantially more likely to be unprepared for college and career when they graduate than students who are on target to become ready for college and career in the eighth grade."

<http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/pdf/ForgottenMiddleSummary.pdf>

How, then, can we as educators ensure that our middle-school students are on the right track academically as they head into their crucial high school years?

As a technology coursework instructor for the Academy, I explored the possibilities of [Kuder® Navigator](#) and quickly developed a month-long career prep unit which integrates technological skill-building tasks with career research activities. During this unit, students complete two assessments: the Kuder® Skills [Confidence] Assessment and Kuder® Career Interests Assessment. Next, students explore the assessment results and log the data. Topics of research included the following for three career choices: salaries, education, skills required, and market outlook.

Additionally, they research three college choices and the related tuition in and out-of-state, dormitory costs, five programs offered, five fun facts, student population size, male/female ratio, and graduation rates. Most of this information is provided within the Navigator system. Students are also encouraged to visit the web

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sites of their college choices to conduct further exploration. After completing their research, students create a multi-media presentation incorporating their data and use SmartBoard technology to present their findings to the class. The take-away from this project is a detailed, four-year academic plan, complete with required coursework and the grade levels at which the courses should be completed.

In Arizona, the State Board of Education requires ECAPs (Education and Career Action Plans) for all students, grades 9-12 (<http://www.ade.az.gov/ecap/>). Serving students in grades 6-9, Navigator has enabled the Academy students to jump-start their ECAPs and make preparations for college ahead of their peers.

In October 2009, the Academy principal, Robert Crispin, and I were invited to be guest speakers at the ACT Conference at Arizona State University. We selected four of our brightest 7th-graders to present their college and career presentations to a group of educators and politicians. Their presentations demonstrated a culmination of one-month's worth of technology integration and research, including assessment results, college choices, and career research. The educators were impressed at the depth of the students' research and were pleased we were implementing the curricula in 7th grade.

With Navigator, the Academy students can research the opportunities and possibilities of their futures. The results of the research can be measured by highly motivated students with clear paths to academic success. As the bold, black letters of my hallway bulletin board exhibits, "You are never too young to plan, ponder, and dream." This board has become the central focus for our students' quests to prepare for their futures; Navigator is the tool that provides the guidance and motivation they need to plan for their educational and career goals, ponder the possibilities, and, of course, dream.

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