Northern Illinois P-20 Network Model Career Pathway Documents
Results of Focus Groups, Spring 2016

During April and May 2016, the Northern Illinois Regional P-20 Network Model Career Pathway documents were studied in 12 sessions by more than 100 middle school and high school students and by more than 30 staff members. Participants were selected from rural, suburban and urban communities. The questions asked were in three categories.

1. Usefulness of the documents
2. Effectiveness of the information on the documents
3. General appeal of the way the information was presented (pictures, colors).

In general, the documents were well-received and participants were interested and curious about them. They mentioned that they had not ever seen any document like these. All participants commented on how colorful and informative they were and that they could see them being used in many different ways with students and their families. All groups mentioned additional career pathways they would like to see developed, which means that there is a high demand for more of these documents. Many students reported that their parents would find them useful and had some ideas about others who would be interested. One high school senior said, “I would share these with my little sister and cousins”. One sophomore stated, “I wish I had this in 8th grade”. Another student said, “I would show this to my parents. My dad would like to see this and it would be something that explained what I am going to have to do.” A middle school student noted that her mother, “liked to see things laid out very clearly and this would be something she would like and probably put on the refrigerator at home”. The usefulness of the documents was supported by all stakeholders. One high school student mentioned that the documents could be used at a career fair. Several students made the following comment, “Let me talk to someone partway through the pathway.”

Specific feedback from these stakeholders about the content of the documents is divided between the two main sections: Career Information and Course Information.

Career Information

The front side of the documents containing the career information was well-received by all three stakeholder groups. Several comments about the “Did you know” section showed that this section caught their interest and included information that they did not know before reading it. Many focused on the salary information saying things like this high school senior, “Definitely like the salary
information. This dispels some myths.” Another student mentioned that salary projections might be information, since it will be a long time before they are working in the career. There was some disagreement on the pictures included. One group was particularly critical of the way the pictures distracted from the information. These comments were not supported by other student groups, even when they were asked directly if the pictures were distracting. One noteworthy observation from a high school senior, female student was that the photos were very gender-stereotypical; she challenged the authors to use men on the nursing pathway and women on the engineering pathway. Another high school student recommended changing the transportation picture from a truck since, “Transportation logistics doesn’t mean truck driving, does it?”

There were some suggestions about including local employers along with the national employers listed in the examples. A teacher leader mentioned, “They (students) may not realize that those jobs are open locally.” Several students suggested that available internships should be included. Several high school students said that listing local internships would be very helpful and most of the other students in the group heartily agreed when it was mentioned.

Course Information

The course information actually starts with the arrows on the bottom of the first page. Though students could easily find them and name the number of semesters, using the term “semesters” caused some confusion, especially where the documents list “four semesters” at the high school level. This was evident because, in general, students could not convert the number of semesters into the length of time the particular pathway required. A large number of students noted that the colorful arrows were helpful. Several suggested putting them at the top of the course information page as a guide to the charts replacing the text that is there. That specific text appeared to be completely disregarded by all participants.

Most of the comments by the stakeholders can be collected into three important issues.

1. What is the role of the community college in the documents?
2. Should the documents be used to increase the rigor of courses students take at high school?
3. Are the courses listed recommended or required?

These three issues are discussed below.

*What is the role of the community college?*
There was general confusion about the role of the community college in the pathways. Some students and faculty asked, “Is the point to promote community college?” Another high school student asked why there were two colleges listed. Other students mentioned that they knew that at some community colleges you can take some courses and then go straight to work, but that was not shown on the documents. A student planning to attend a technical school mentioned that English and other courses at the community college level should not be listed if you didn’t actually need those for the career (instead of the degree). Students were surprised and enthusiastic when the moderator mentioned that some employers might pay the tuition for their employees to attend NIU for completion of a bachelor’s degree, if the student had decided to go to work after receiving the credential in the community college. Many students, especially middle school students, mentioned that their plan was to go straight to a four-year institution so the documents weren’t as helpful for them. Several adults mentioned that there should be different community college options for each high school since all the students in the high school wouldn’t go to their feeder college.

Some students noted that they wouldn’t have guessed that some pathways included summer semesters and stated that should be clearly indicated because, “Some kids aren’t going to want to go to school in the summer.”

Should the documents be used to encourage students to take more rigorous courses students in high school?

All groups could identify that the nursing pathway included AP course options, but then they all stated that any other pathways with AP or dual credit options should clearly state those as well. Students mentioned that knowing the impact that AP and dual credit classes would have on their college courses would influence them to take more advanced classes in high school. Several said they would like more information about what score or grade would be required to actually receive the credit since they knew that just passing was not sufficient. The adult group had an extended conversation about the issue that not all community colleges will take the credit and that this would be a good opportunity for different community colleges to become more standard in their awarding of credit for programs. A teacher asked, “Is there an established partnership between the community college and high school for these?”

Students were collectively negative or confused about the pathways that listed “most rigorous course possible” for the math requirement. They wanted to know specifically if that meant calculus or not. One comment was, “My high school goes up to calculus, do I really have to take that?”
Several of the adults were worried that students would see the courses for their high school and think that they could not have the career if they had not taken those courses. A high school student asked, “Can you still do the career, even if you didn’t do it this way?” and another asked, “What if you change your mind?” One high school counselor summed up the concern like this, “I don’t want kids to think that if they did not take every one of these classes in high school then they can’t go down this pathway. Not all high schools offer all of these classes.”

Are the courses listed recommended or required?

This topic caused the most confusion for all stakeholders. There were overall positive responses such as, “This shows the long scope from high school to college” and “You can use it like a map to make sure you aren’t taking things you don’t need.” The adult group mentioned that it would definitely help students who comment vaguely that “I want to go to college.” However, if the main purpose of the back of the document was to clarify what classes to take and when to take them, then work needs to be done to improve the charts. Comments like, “make the classes bold that are absolutely required” and “why list drivers ed for some, but not others? What is actually required?” were common. Some wanted to use the charts like a checklist while others thought they could be more general. Most stated that specific high school courses were good but courses at the college level could be more general. One idea was to make a general note that listed graduation requirements and then in the chart list only the classes that would make a difference for that particular career. For example, specific math and science course for the engineering pathway and then maybe specific humanities courses for other pathways. Overall, everyone wanted to see their high schools’ options and all student and staff groups quickly disregarded the three less specific documents when presented as options to the NIU documents.

The final issue that was addressed by the focus groups was the question of putting the documents online. All groups were asked if they would prefer the information presented in a website. The response to having it online was positive, but it was not enthusiastic. All groups mentioned that they would want to be able to print out the documents and that even though online would mean more access to more students, having the pathways as a paper option was still very useful. A few student groups were more enthusiastic about an app and mentioned that then the user could choose different schools and maybe even compare schools or pathways. One high school student mentioned that if it was online, “Then smaller schools might not put their information in there and then they wouldn’t be available.”.
The recommendations from the focus groups are as follows:

1. Career information page
   a. Keep the pictures in the header and replace the gender-stereotypical ones.
   b. Expand the use of the “Did you know” section.
   c. List local employers in addition to state and national.
   d. Highlight any local internships and other workplace learning opportunities.

2. Course information page
   a. Clarify the role of the community college in the documents and clarify where “off ramps” are to employment.
   b. Produce two documents, one that lists high school to community college and mentions coming back to school and one that lists a path from high school directly to NIU.
   c. Highlight the impact on college coursework of taking AP or Dual Credit courses in high school along with the minimum grade or score that would be needed for credit.
   d. Highlight the fact that these documents are considered “model” pathways and that there are other pathways that would lead to the career.
   e. Differentiate between courses recommended for pathways and courses required for graduation. Consider a general statement about satisfying all state and local graduation requirements in the footnotes.

The Northern Illinois Regional P-20 Network thanks our school partners for their assistance in convening the students and staff for these focus groups: Whiteside Area Career Center, ROE 8 Middle School and High School Teacher Leaders, Eisenhower Middle School, Guilford High School, Oswego High School and Thompson Junior High School.