Holyoke Community College

Profile of an Early Adopter of Career Ready 101

Overview

Holyoke Community College offers various adult basic education programs on its main campus and at several satellite locations, at the Picknelly Adult and Family Education Center in downtown Holyoke, the Ludlow Area Adult Learning Center, and also in partnership with Springfield Technical Community College. Below is a summary of our January 2015 interview with Kermit Dunkelberg, Assistant Vice President of Adult Basic Education and Workforce Development on his experience using the WorkKeys™ Assessment.

> Describe the setting, participants, programs, and tools used. What was your goal in using the tools?

The WorkKeys™ Assessment has been used at Holyoke Community College for our Workforce Development programs longer than I have been at the college. There are three contexts where we use it.

We use it currently for all the three subject areas – Locating Information, Reading for Information, and the Applied Math pre- and post-tests for our Jump Start program, an employment program for those on unemployment.

In addition, we use WorkKeys as an eligibility screening tool for workforce training programs in Manufacturing, Advanced Call Center/Financial Services, Hospitality and Culinary, and Customer Service Trainings. With some of these such as Call Center Training, we have used the listening assessment as well as the three tests that lead to the National Career Readiness Certificate.

Awarding the National Career Readiness Certificate is one of our goals. Usually bronze level is sufficient. Previously in the workforce training, we used WorkKeys as a screening tool only, and didn't use KeyTrain or any of the other Career Ready 101 modules for basic skill instruction or remediation. But now we are looking forward to using Career Ready 101 and all the tools that lead to attainment of the Certificate.

We also used WorkKeys in an adult education setting with ESOL students (upper level - SPL 5). In 2008, we used a similar program to KeyTrain called WIN software along with the Massachusetts Career Information System (MassCIS) website for career exploration. Moving forward we anticipate using the diagnostic tools within Career Ready 101 rather than the formal WorkKeys™ assessment.

Our overall goal is to have a tool that clarifies for students, instructors, and advisors how the skill level relates to occupations and occupational goals, making educational goals more relevant. So instead of using WIN Software, the Massachusetts Career Information System and the WorkKeys™ Assessment, we now look forward to Career Ready 101 and using all these kinds of tools within one system.

WORLD EDUCATION

What participant needs were you addressing?

Tools such as MassCIS were good for working with students on their interests but don't address the skill level needed or help assess realistic goals. This came to a head with a student from Laos who went to three different Certified Nursing Assistant programs. She didn't get into any of them because she didn't pass the reading comprehension test, although she had tested out of our program with high scores on the REEP ESOL assessment.

We realized that we did not know what was needed to perform on the job as far as reading, writing and math skills. We were not connecting students' reading ability to their employment goals. We needed to be able to provide students with tools that helped them develop skills related to their occupational goal and use the career exploration part to work from the other end to match students to their interests.

The question is: what are the proficiency gaps students need to address to make these goals attainable for them? It was at that point that we began to think in terms of linking concrete skill assessment with career exploration.

As we use the tools we need to keep in mind that those non-native speakers at SPL level 4 and possibly 5 struggle with the text and will generally need instructor support.

The WorksKeys™ job profile data base is helpful because students can search by occupation and see what WorkKeys™ level you need for thousands of jobs. Having something like this that is benchmarked means that as an instructor we can say with confidence if we can get students reading up to the level listed in this job profile, then they should be able to get into the CNA program. We are excited that students can see these job profiles themselves in Career Ready 101.

How were the tools integrated into the program design?

Originally we thought if we gave students some time with the tools in an open lab that would work. We soon realized that we had to integrate it into the instruction. That is challenging to do because one of the benefits of the program is that they can work at their own level. But the more they are working at their own level the harder it is to bring that back to some type of group activity.

To be honest, we have never had students work on the software out of class time to the extent that we thought they needed to. We have not solved that, but part of that is compounded by the fact that some of our students do not have reliable Internet access and the public library is not a great solution, since you can only be on an hour or so. I know there may be other distance learning programs that might have been able to get students to complete out of class work, but we struggle with that.

One way we integrated the tools was to have a set classroom time where the instructor (or classroom assistants) would go around and have a conversation with people about what they were doing. This approach is motivational, helps to clarify, and keeps them on task. It made a difference.

We did not have students working on all three subject areas at one time. They would work on their weakest area or one that was important for them for their own interests and goals. So we would have them focus on one area at a time.

What outcomes have you observed?

For ESOL students, it took longer to move through the lessons and levels than what is estimated by ACT.

Students in the Call Center training program who struggled in class were those who also scored the lowest on the listening assessment. It seemed to be a good predictor to do well in that particular program.

There is some indication that business writing is also a good predictor of success in the related training programs.

What are the strengths and limitations of the tools?

In terms of college readiness and life-long learning the ability to use an online program like this is essential if you are going to be a working adult.

However, we need to beware that we don't solely depend on the tutorial software. The depth of learning cannot be as rich as one gets from working with an instructor. The software cannot give the full context and it cannot give a vast depth of knowledge. So we do a disservice if a student learns some superficial things and get the answer wrong often enough that they eventually get the right answer and score well enough on WorkKeys. But does that really mean they grasp the content? That is why software has to be coupled with classroom instruction.

For programs the real challenge is in knowing this is not the magic bullet and we need to know how to integrate Career Ready 101 into an overall strategy.

One limitation is that it is not designed with ESOL students in mind. The reading level is also hard for native ABE students.

The MassCIS site has great short videos, as well as state and regional labor market data. So we may continue to use MassCIS as well.

Do you have any thoughts about how you might expand the use of the tools?

We plan to use Career ready 101 more in our workforce training programs, especially the basic skills within KeyTrain.

In terms of ESOL there is an opportunity for connecting language learning to opportunities for occupational advancement. When programs begin to be more familiar with levels we can then make better referrals.

What sort of training or other assistance would you recommend for staff incorporating the tools into coaching and/or instruction?

Some training on how these levels relate to job requirements would be really helpful. And if we are talking about career readiness *and* college readiness, then different colleges use different measures of readiness, so some professional development on how these different levels relate to college placement tests would be ideal. For example, Math is tested in both but we need help knowing how these assessments relate and how they are different.

There are some things students need to know to get into college that won't relate quite the same to what they need to know to get a job. How do we emphasize these or bring those two conversations together? How do we bring

together the foundational skills for both college and career? I think there are a lot of challenges there. It is more than becoming familiar with the score levels for a specific occupation or Accuplacer cut scores. We need to understand what each test measures and doesn't measure and what skills at what level we need to teach.

From our experience, as programs begin to integrate the fleet of tools with Career Ready 101 there needs to be instructional and advising support, and all that should be an integrated approach. It is a good tool for advising on career ladders and time needs to be spent helping students work through the career exploration process, using the tools within the software.

> ## What suggestions do you have for other sites getting started?

The term *relevance* sums it up. Whether we are talking about using this tool for instruction or advising, it is an opportunity to make the students' educational experience *relevant* to their goals. If we are really thinking of what a student needs from an instructor or an advisor, then this is a helpful tool for letting us provide relevant instruction and advising.

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