Career Exploration AND Soft Skills:

Preparing Students for Success

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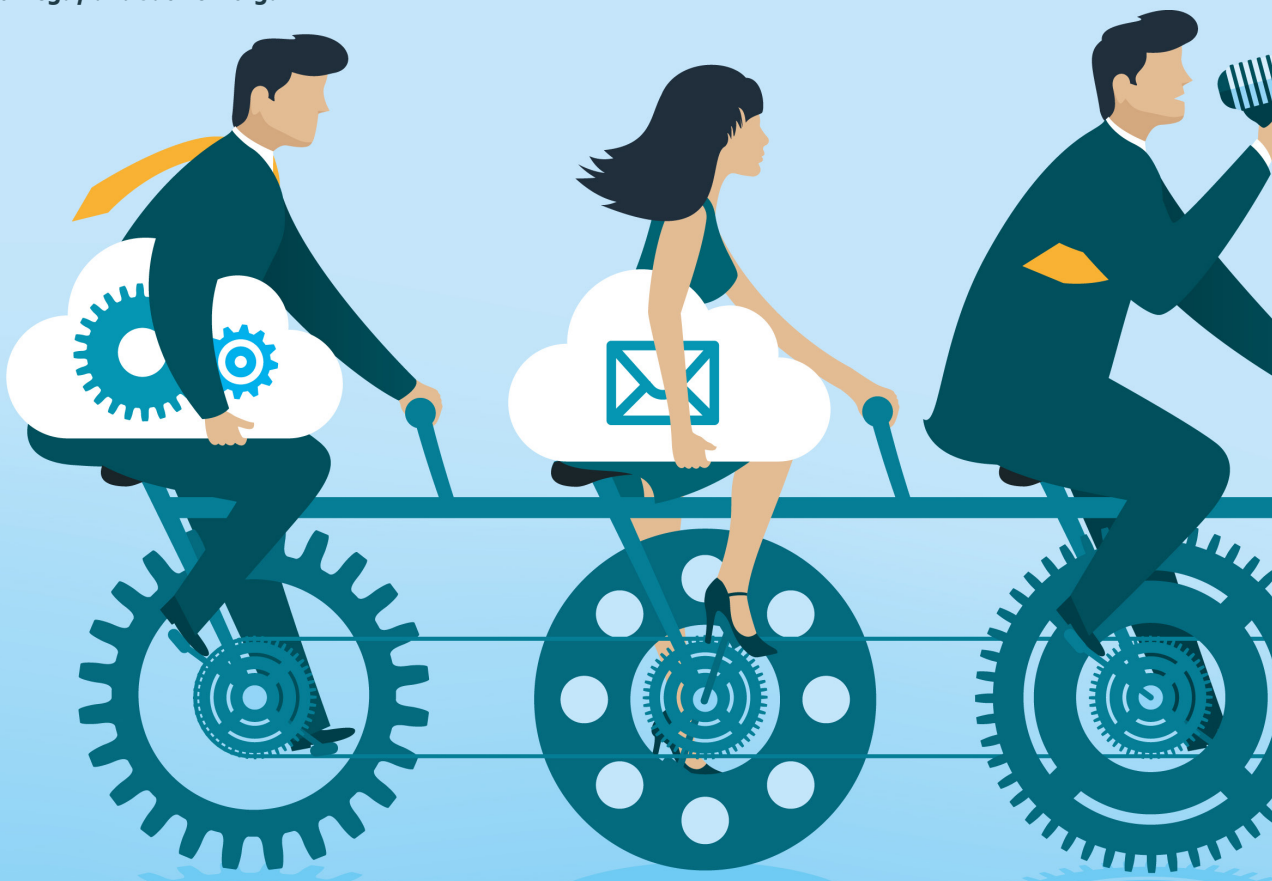

Imagine having to make a decision right now that could potentially impact the rest of your life. Now imagine having to make that decision while you're a teenager. Perhaps a conversation takes place that sounds something like this:

Teacher: "Today we are going to start thinking about what you would like to do for the rest of your life."
Student: "Huh? … The rest of my life?"
Teacher: "That's right, the rest of your life … after graduation."
Class: Stunned silence.

It may take a minute for the shock to wear off, but then it is time to get to work and tackle the enormous challenge of identifying relevant college and career options from seemingly endless possibilities. What's more, the landscape of the job market is constantly changing, and advances in technology mean that by the time today's students graduate, there will be career opportunities in fields that do not exist today.

The first challenge for teachers is finding effective tools and strategies to guide students through the process of exploring personal interests, learning about various career clusters, considering postsecondary education options, and developing both the academic knowledge and the technical skills to enter the workforce. The more difficult part of the challenge is to provide continual opportunities for students to practice the soft skills that are critical to success in the workplace. And finally, the process must be interesting, fun and meaningful for a generation that thrives on instant gratification, instant information sharing and an almost-all-encompassing obsession with social media.

Your heart is probably racing right

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about now because this is a tall order, but do not panic. There are resources available to help engage your students in a variety of ways as they prepare for the future. Oh, we forgot to mention—they are free!

Step 1: Explore

The Federal Reserve System offers several teaching resources focused on career exploration and developing human capital (or marketability) that are appropriate for grades seven through 12. These resources share some common aspects, such as activities designed to teach students to locate and analyze information from real-world tools like the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* **(bls.gov/ooh)** and the College Navigator **(nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator)**. But each resource also includes unique topics, employs different approaches and offers varying degrees of topic exploration depth.

Among the full lessons, short activities, online interactive tools and infographics, you are sure to find something that can stand alone or complement your current curriculum, as well as provide visual reinforcement of key ideas relevant to developing human capital and the career exploration process.

"Navigate: Exploring Colleges and Careers" **(dallasfed.org/educate/navigate/index.cfm)** is a six-part student workbook and teacher's guide designed for seventh- through ninth-graders. Unique to this piece is the creation of a graphic organizer for identifying the academic and extracurricular experiences colleges look for in an applicant. Students use the information they have learned throughout the workbook to create a personal action plan to set them on the path to success.

"Invest in What's Next: Life After High School" **(investinwhatsnext.org)** is an online, self-paced mini course designed

to help high school students prepare for what is most likely their first major financial decision: what to do after graduation. Unique to this piece is an activity that lets students estimate what it will cost to live the life they envision. The tool then calculates what income is necessary to support that lifestyle. There is nothing like a dose of reality to bring students down to earth!

Lesson 4 of the comprehensive personal finance curriculum, "Katrina's Classroom: Teaching Money Skills for Life" **(frbatlanta.org/education/katrinas-classroom/lesson4.aspx)** explores how increasing human capital through education leads to increased earning potential and a decreased likelihood of unemployment. The activities provide opportunities to collect, chart and interpret primary source data and explore labor market unemployment and teen unemployment statistics. The corresponding infographic, "Why Develop Human Capital?" **(frbatlanta.org/education/katrinas-classroom/lesson4/infographic.aspx)** provides visual reinforcement to remind students just how important it is for them to increase their marketability.

Similar to the previously listed resources, this lesson guides students through creating a matrix to compare the projected costs of a four-year degree at several institutions of their choice. What is unique about this piece is that it adds a layer to the school selection process that weighs the cost of attending a particular school against the estimated average annual starting salary in the chosen career. Assuming that many students will finance at least a portion of the cost of postsecondary education, the lesson brings in a budgeting exercise that includes planning for that estimated monthly student loan payment.

Step 2: Practice, Practice, Practice

Once students have explored career options and determined what education is required for their chosen career path, they must develop the necessary soft skills to get the job, keep it and be successful at it. Business and workforce development leaders have voiced concern over what they identify as a growing trend in the deficiency of soft skills in new hires. The skills most often identified as lacking are communication, professionalism and teamwork. New hires must be able to communicate clearly, work collaboratively, listen effectively, adapt quickly and interact professionally with their managers, colleagues and clients.

The U.S. Department of Labor offers a free curriculum (with supporting videos) to help high school students develop these skills. "Soft Skills to Pay the Bills: Mastering Soft Skills for Workplace Success" **(dol.gov/odep/topics/youth/softskills)** contains 30 easy-to-implement

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activities that can be used in virtually any class or organized group activity to offer numerous opportunities for students to practice these critical skills.

Step 3: Make It Meaningful by Taking It Social

A large percentage of young people are very active on social media. However, all too often the manner in which students use social media is not appropriate for the workplace and may in some cases negatively impact their job search. Since social media is such a large part of their lives, incorporating social media in school can teach responsible online activity and provide reinforcement for positive behaviors.

At a recent professional development program, a teacher shared an idea that is a simple, yet brilliant, approach to effectively integrating social media as a tool for positive reinforcement, while simultaneously demonstrating responsible, business-appropriate use of social media. Through the use of several targeted hashtags, students, teachers and parents have gotten on board to showcase student successes.

Here's how you can get started: As allowed, create or use the social media accounts (Facebook, Twitter and/or Instagram) for your school, department or class, etc.

Create a main hashtag that incorporates your school name or mascot to organize the posts (*e.g.*, #EaglesOnTheJob). Encourage students and/or parents to use the hashtag when posting photos of students modeling positive soft skills. Parental involvement is critical because they play an important role in reinforcing and providing positive feedback.

Additionally, it is never too early to start building positive behaviors so that younger students can also get in on the fun. Examples of positive behaviors for younger students could be doing chores, helping others, success on a school project, etc.

Create secondary hashtags for each of the critical skill areas. Use both the main hashtag and appropriate secondary hashtag(s) to further organize the posts.

The following are some ideas for secondary hashtags and appropriate activities for developing the content:

#EaglesOnTheJob #Communication
- Students create a social media campaign to inform others about what business classes are doing.
- Students create and post public service announcement-type videos specific to school activities.

#EaglesOnTheJob #Enthusiasm
- Students post photos of themselves dressed appropriately for a job interview.
- Students create videos that model turning a negative situation into a positive one.

#EaglesOnTheJob #Teamwork
- Students work together on the social media campaign to develop content and create a schedule for future tweets or posts.
- Students post pictures and tweet examples of working as a team (academic, sport, service project, etc.).

#EaglesOnTheJob #Networking
- Students identify business people, businesses or professional organizations to follow, and invite appropriate individuals and organizations to like and follow the students' posts.
- Retweet upcoming job fairs or other local business news.

#EaglesOnTheJob #Problem Solving
- Students identify a simple problem or situation at school that they would like addressed (*e.g.*, hallway congestion or locker access).
- Students post a photo of the issue and request feedback from others on ways to address the problem. Follow up with posts of the suggestions that provide the best solutions.

#EaglesOnTheJob #Professionalism
- Post group photos of students with perfect attendance for the week, month and semester.
- Students post pictures of accomplishments like academic honors, scout badges, athletic competitions, artwork, etc.

Add hashtags that focus on career pathways. For example, create a social media-styled year book with "most likely to succeed" categories for career paths such as accounting, finance, healthcare or technology.

#EaglesOnTheJob #FutureAccountant
- Students participating in a job shadowing opportunity with a bank or accounting firm can post a photo and comment about the experience.

#EaglesOnTheJob #FutureBuilder
- Students interested in manufacturing or engineering could tour a plant or request a Skype session to discuss careers with a local manufacturing representative.

#EaglesOnTheJob #FutureLawyer
- Students interested in law or related careers could visit a court room or interview a local attorney.

The possibilities are endless, but hopefully this list will get you thinking about ways to get your students excited about preparing for their future careers. Using a tool like social media works because it is already an integral part of students' daily interactions. Capitalize on that comfort zone!

Integration Is Key

Students must learn to adapt over time to a job landscape that is constantly changing. Integrating career exploration with soft skills development can make the daunting task of figuring out what to do for the rest of their lives much easier. Combine social media with positive reinforcement and it can even be fun! The most valuable takeaway is this: Embrace it! Get excited! Get ready! There is life after high school! **Tech**

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