Developing a Comprehensive Senior Exit Plan in an Alternative High School Program

Danica Jensen
Counseling Intern Project
School Counseling Specialization
Portland State University 2005

Professional Responsibility: This project has been reviewed by collegial professional peers and has been submitted for on-line publication before being evaluated by faculty members from Portland State University. I am the author and take full responsibility for the project’s contents and quality. This work serves as a baseline for my professional school counselor skills and demonstrates what I have done to develop and/or assess my actions directed toward serving students and schools. In other words, this is a snapshot or one indicator of my work at this stage of my career.

Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................... 3
Project Proposal ............................................................................................ 3
Literature Review .......................................................................................... 6
Development and Implementation ................................................................. 11
Limitations and Areas for Improvement ......................................................... 16
Conclusion ..................................................................................................... 16
References ...................................................................................................... 18
Appendix A-Checklist ..................................................................................... 19
Appendix B-Letter of Recommendation Request Form ................................. 20
Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explain the implementation of a Senior Exit Plan in an Alternative High School Program in Portland, Oregon. The name of the school has been changed for reasons of confidentiality. This Exit Plan was developed and implemented during the internship hours of the author. This paper demonstrates the rationale for the Plan, reviews the literature concerning alternative schools, describes the process of implementation, and provides suggestions and additions for the Plan in the future.

Project Proposal

Seniors in a local alternative high school currently exit the program with some resume work and a completed exit form with contact information. It is the desire of the counseling program to build upon this exit process and enhance the activities to provide a more comprehensive and useful exit plan. A realistic time line and due date schedule will be developed to make the exit process productive, realistic and useful for the students. This exit plan will meet the needs of students by providing an individual planning component and implementing expectations similar to mainstream preparation for graduation (Oregon Department of Education, 2003). The students currently participate in four year planning throughout their time in the alternative program, but this exit planning will represent the culmination of work done over the four years by adding a written exit plan of action, a self-reflection piece, and a school service project.

The process towards the exit plan will begin 3-4 learning sessions before the students are expected to graduate. This is equivalent to a semester prior to graduation. Currently the students work on a resume in a career course taken their final year. This will be supplemented by extra workshops offered by the counseling intern, and individual
assistance on a need based schedule. The students will also receive a packet with resume examples, formatting suggestions, vocabulary lists, and cover letter information. Cover letter information is not included in the careers course, and it will be useful for seniors to understand this process for later use.

Students will request letters of recommendation from faculty and staff at the school. A resume will be submitted with the request including a paragraph giving more personal information about the student. Faculty and staff have expressed a need for information regarding composing letters of recommendation. Information packets will be distributed with examples of letters and tips for writing a successful letter for students. The counseling intern will also be available for questions and assistance. Providing this extra information should reduce the workload for faculty and staff, and improve the quality of letters of recommendation that are so important for these students.

F.A.F.S.A. application will continue to be a part of the exit program with the completion of the application and an information session on utilization of F.A.F.S.A. funds. The information session will also include alternative means of funding for education, trade programs and internships. The students will be introduced to the Oregon Career Information System and given time during the week to use the computer lab and work in the system. Currently the school has not implemented the system, but does have access to it through the district. This will connect to the self-reflection piece that the students will complete. A personal inventory assessment will be administered to the students and with the information from the Career Information system the students will write a 1-2 page paper on their personal aspirations for their future with flexibility on topics depending on the students’ individual interests and needs. This will also lead into
the written exit plan of action which is a more detailed document accounting for how the student will provide for themselves once they are exited from the school. This is an important part of the exit plan because it deals with the necessities of living such as shelter, nutrition, health, proper documentation and support systems. This document will be a form put together with input from the counseling program and the front office staff. It will be available in both offices and also contain contact information for the student.

For many of the students’ graduation is a time to explore how they will provide for themselves once outside the school community. The school has served as a protective factor for many of the students and realistic plans must be made to explore alternative sources of support (Benard, 2004).

The last piece to the exit plan will be a school service project developed by the student in collaboration with the homeroom faculty member and the counselor. This is an opportunity for the student to give back to the school community and learn a skill in the process. This project will look different depending on the student, but could range from an art project in the school, to servicing the kitchen staff, to implementing a program for students. The possibilities are infinite, and the student will be given guidance by faculty and staff to compete a project meaningful to them. The requirement will consist of completion or significant work towards the project, and completion of at least 25 hours work on the project.

This exit plan will hopefully give a more comprehensive approach to graduation for the student and give prospective on the work they have done while in school. It also serves to help the students meet high expectations with adequate support to meet those goals (Brush, 2002). If students are given adequate support and guidance these activities
can be accomplished. The plan will identify areas where the students may need extra assistance. Planning for support and resources is a preventative measure that may help the student when they are no longer immersed in the school community. The exit planning is intended to give the student a sense of accomplishment and a conceptualization of what their diploma will mean when they leave the program. The hope is that it will be a valuable component of their senior year and a rewarding experience for all involved.

**Literature Review**

Students in an alternative high school setting that receive their high school diplomas have different requirements to exit their program than students in mainstream high school settings. It is important to highlight their success and make it a meaningful and productive process. One way of doing this is to develop a comprehensive exit program that requires resume work, obtaining letters of recommendation, completing a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (F.A.F.S.A.), completing a written exit plan, a self-reflection piece, and completing a school service project. The importance of this exit process cannot be underestimated in an alternative setting. This is a project being undertaken at a local alternative high school program.

Implementing a structured, comprehensive program will help this alternative setting become aligned with the high expectations of Career Related Learning Standards, Certificate of Advanced Mastery and Certificate of Advanced Mastery. Giving students an opportunity to advocate for their future and work towards a plan of action provides a meaningful experience upon graduation. According to a report by the Oregon Department of Education, “If high expectations are given to students, they will meet
them, given necessary and appropriate supports” (Brush, 2002, p.7). By implementing this program with adequate support and applicability to different learning styles students can complete the modified activities for graduation. This program uses the standard requirements as a guideline, but recognizes that for these students an alternative exit plan is more appropriate. This program does not reduce accountability or simplify the process, but rather, holds the students to high expectations while providing flexibility and appropriate support throughout the process. Brush (2002) found that, “Alternative school students are no different from anyone else. They will respond to a challenge and are willing to meet that challenge if they know they will be given the help that they need” (p. 7). Because students at this particular alternative setting can graduate at the end of a learning session throughout the year there are usually a small number of graduates (5-10). This allows for individual attention concerning the requirements, small workshops, opportunities for counselor consultation, assistance from faculty, and flexibility in their school schedules to accommodate the extra workload.

The extra support that is available in this setting can assist students in completing the written exit plan which is an important component of the process. Not only does the written exit plan help in goal planning, but gives a concrete picture of realities a student will face upon exiting the school. Brush states, “Students need to know what they will do with their diploma as soon as they leave high school. Rather than being a place that solely provides education, the schools we visited also help students plan for their future and learn how to make that future a reality.” (Brush, 2002, p. 6). Making future plans a reality is at the core of the exit plan, and this plan deals with everything from the students living situation, nutrition, health care, and appropriate documentation (social security
cards, insurance cards, birth certificates) to plans for employment or school. For many of
the students exiting the school these concrete, realistic needs have to be addressed and
resources determined before they leave the school (Zweig, 2003). According to Kubik,
Lytle, and Fulkerson, “As the number of alternative schools and students attending these
schools increases, so does concern regarding health needs of AHS students. National
surveillance data indicate the prevalence of health-risk behaviors, such as violence-
related injuries, sexual behavior, substance use, suicidal behavior, physical inactivity, and
unhealthy dietary practices, is higher among AHS students than students attending
regular high schools” (Kubik, et al., 2004, p.119). The exit plan is necessary for these
students because they are vulnerable to these conditions. (Capuzzi & Gross, 2004). The
plan will identify areas where the students may need extra assistance. Planning for
support and resources is a preventative measure that may help the student when they are
no longer immersed in the school community. The school in itself serves as an
environmental protective factor for these students. (Benard, 2004). Along with
individual attention the students are exposed to a variety of resources for health-risk
behavior at no cost and at convenient times for the students to participate or utilize
services. Planning for their future must include dealing with hypothetical risky situations
that could occur once they leave the school.

The self-reflection piece of the exit process combines personal exploration and
career exploration. The school has access the Oregon Career Information Center on line
but is currently not using the service. This service will be incorporated into the exit plan
and self-reflection aspect of the project to help students in yet another aspect of their
planning. According to The Oregon Department of Education Office of Curriculum,
A prerequisite for self-direction is self-knowledge. Students need a variety of experiences to help them identify their own interests, their strengths and weaknesses in relation to those interests, and how those interests are applicable in social and work environments.” (The Oregon Department of Education Office of Curriculum, Instruction, and Field Services, 2000, p. 50).

Another piece of the exit plan involves a service component. The students already participate in service learning out in the community, and this is a different type of service that serves the school directly. This project can impact both the student and the school in many ways. The student has the opportunity to develop the service plan and make it their own. The Oregon Department of Education Office of Curriculum, Instruction, and Field Services (2000) stated this about students participating in such projects, “Through helping other individuals or joining in real problem-solving teams, they develop a positive sense of self. Instead of recipients of services, they become contributors to their own growth and development, as well as key resources for their communities.” (p. 59). This school service plan is an opportunity for students to use their skills and creativity to complete a meaningful service to the school.

This program seeks to provide high expectations and opportunities for participation that are evident in state programs such as CIM and CAM, but it also addresses components of the Oregon Framework for Comprehensive Guidance and Counseling. By focusing on individual planning this exit program can address the needs of students by addressing all of the career-related learning standards (Cobia & Henderson, 2003). Students work towards career development and employment foundations by participating in activities such as resume work, obtaining letters of
recommendation, and completing the F.A.F.S.A. According to the Oregon Framework for Comprehensive Guidance and Counseling Programs (2002), “Students are expected to demonstrate career development skills in planning for school and post high school experiences” (p. 25). The students have worked on these skills throughout their time at the alternative high school, and now they are able to culminate that work with their exit program. Their communication skills are also utilized by working with letters of recommendation and learning how to provide information about themselves for the letter to be written and the process of requesting a letter. The exit program being developed is also going to work on faculty education around writing letters of recommendation. This has been neglected, and many of the staff need examples and workshop sessions on the topic. Much of this exit process requires personal management and according to the Framework (2002), “Students are expected to exhibit appropriate work ethic and behaviors in school, community and workplace.” (p. 25). Students will be required to act professionally and responsibly when working on each activity. They must keep up with the checklist and follow the timeline given for each activity. The school service activity requires problem solving skills, and develops communication and teamwork. Depending on the project chosen by the student and counseling intern they student will use many of the career-related learning standards. This intense individual planning would not be possible in a mainstream high school setting, but the students in the alternative high school not only need the process of exit planning but will find more meaning in their accomplishment when they are done with the process (Connor et al., 2004).
Development and Implementation

Students in an alternative high school setting that receive their high school diplomas have different requirements to exit their program than students in mainstream high school settings. It is important to highlight this success and make it a meaningful and productive process. One way of doing this is to develop a comprehensive exit program that requires transcript evaluation, resume work, obtaining letters of recommendation, completing a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (F.A.F.S.A.), completing a written exit plan, a self-reflection piece, and completing a school service project. These pieces of the plan are all confirmed and checked off during a scheduled exit interview with the counselor. The importance of this exit process cannot be underestimated in an alternative setting. This project has been undertaken at a local alternative high school program.

In this alternative program students must complete 25 credits to graduate. This exit plan will serve as the other requirement for graduation. It was implemented for the June graduates 2-3 learning sessions prior to graduation (March and April). While providing the students with a concrete plan for post high school living this plan also implements a rite of passage and a meaningful experience in the process of graduation. In 2005 there will be 30 students graduating on June 3. It is important for these students to culminate their experience in this alternative program with a sense of accomplishment, recognition, and success.

Students met with the counselor and counselor intern to review their transcript for graduation. Regular transcript evaluation sessions were required because at Forrest Crest students can earn partial credit for course work, independent study, and hours outside of
Developing a Senior Exit Plan

This means that for students very close to the credit requirement individualized attention was necessary to make sure they were completing the requirements in a timely manner. During this session students were given a packet and a checklist for all the items they would need to turn in at their exit interview. The packet included a requirement sheet, an F.A.F.S.A. form, directions and questions for the exit plan, a list of documentation they should receive, letter of recommendation request forms and a checklist developed by the counseling intern. Students were also given community college information collected by the counseling intern and any other resources they required on an individual basis.

Resume work was done with the school to work coordinator in the regular school-to-work courses that the students were required to complete for .5 credit in careers. The counseling intern and counselor reviewed and assisted students on an individual basis. Because the students work on resumes in this course there was not a need for a separate resume writing group or course. The students were provided with a resume packet that contained information, sample resumes and information on cover letters. This was created by the counseling intern and supplied to the students as supplemental information to what they currently receive in their course work.

Prior to implementing this exit program students were not requesting letters of recommendation from faculty or staff in the program. Because many of these students have a variety of strengths in spite of difficult situations it was important to the counselor and director that these students have a letter upon leaving the program that highlights those strengths. To help facilitate the process the counseling intern created a form for requesting the letter of recommendation with a requirement that the student give the
faculty or staff member at least 2 weeks to complete the letter. Staff and faculty were given an informational packet on writing letters of recommendation completed by the counseling intern. This packet contains informational forms, examples of letters, and suggestions for writing individualized letters. The counseling intern also spoke at a staff meeting and made herself available for the faculty if they required extra assistance. The counselor also distributed a sample letter for a student in that program to serve as a model.

This was one of the most difficult aspects of the exit plan to implement. Staff and faculty needed resources to write appropriate letters and the time in which to write them. Many of the students at Forrest Crest had unique situations and non-traditional journeys in education. A standard letter would not be appropriate for many of these students. That is why when the form to request the letter was created, it took into account special talents or situation these students experienced. It is with much hope that the faculty and staff will become so accustomed to writing these letters that it will bring them their own sense of accomplishment and joy. For these students, having a document highlighting their strengths can be one of the most valuable assets in their position upon leaving the program.

Assistance was given on an individual basis for the completion of the F.A.F.S.A application. Even if the student had no intention of attending school after graduation they were required to fill out the forms. This was to give them experience in requesting funds for education and as a backup in case they did decide later to attend community college. An informational session was held to assist the students as a group, and the counseling intern also assisted students on an individual basis. The counseling intern contacted all of
Developing a Senior Exit Plan

the community colleges in the area and obtained applications, catalogs, scholarship information and placement test information. This was not in the original design of the plan, but was an addition that was exciting and will be continued. Placement test information was announced and connections were made to obtain one of the placement tests at Forrest Crest. This is a first step in the process to bringing placement test to the students, and it is goal to hold more placement tests from other community colleges on campus in the future. The counseling intern and counselor also attended informational days at the community colleges to make connections, acquire information, and represent the program. It has become apparent that in the future a requirement to complete at least one community college placement exam should be an additional item in the plan.

Students were given requirements for the written exit plan which asked a number of questions. These questions are:

1. List specific information about where you will be living.
2. What will you be doing (ie: are you going to attend college, the military, work)
3. Where will you go if you are ill or need dental or mental health care?
4. Tell us about a person that you go to for help to solve problems.

After the questions are answered the student then has the opportunity to give feedback, both negative and positive about Forrest Crest.

Along with the exit plan there is also a document checklist which the counseling intern and counselor created. This document list attempted to cover any and all documents that a student would need and included social security card, insurance card, birth certificate, identification card, work visa, food handler’s card, verification of citizenship, and voter registration. The documents were required as they applied to each
individual students, and the counseling intern and counselor assisted students on an individual basis to complete the necessary forms to request such documents.

There was also a desire to have the students complete a self-reflection piece of the exit process which would combine personal exploration and career exploration. The school has access to the Oregon Career Information Center on line but is currently not using the service. This service would be incorporated into the exit plan and self-reflection aspect of the project to help students in yet another aspect of their planning. This part of the plan was not implemented, but the hope is to give the students enough time and sessions in the computer lab in the future and use it with the next round of graduates. As of now, small groups of seniors were gathered by the counseling intern who introduced them to CIS and guided them through using the system. Eventually, implementing this as a requirement with the written self-reflection piece will be the ideal.

A school service component to the exit plan was implemented and the students were able to give back and find meaning in the program that worked with them on their success. The students already participate in service learning out in the community. The exit plan service is a different type of service that serves the school directly. This project can impact both the student and the school in many ways. The student had the opportunity to develop the service plan and make it their own. This school service plan is an opportunity for students to use their skills and creativity to complete a meaningful service to the school. Students selected areas in the school they wanted to give service to and spent a portion of their independent study time, after school time or lunch time giving service. Some students worked in the student store, completed teacher appreciation projects, worked in the kitchen and assisted teachers. In the future more opportunities
will be developed, but currently this part of the plan worked well and the counselor confirms the work during the student’s exit interview.

Limitations and Areas for Improvement

The initial implementation of the plan has been met with success. A few areas that can be improved upon include the time-line for requirements, group work, the self reflection piece, more school to work focus, community college placement test requirement, and more opportunities for school service projects. Because of inconsistent attendance by the students at Forrest Crest the senior exit plan could be implemented earlier, even 5-6 learning sessions before graduation. This would allow time to add such requirements as the self-exploration piece which utilizes the career information system. It would also allow more time to plan dates and hold the community college placement tests for all three colleges in the area. Implementing more small-group time to focus on career exploration and school to work transitioning would also be a great addition to the plan. It became apparent that the students were either not utilizing the current school to work courses and programs or they were not meeting the needs of these students. Implementing this as a major focus would benefit these students tremendously.

Compiling a list of school service projects and faculty and staff willing to support these projects will also be useful for the future and will be created for the next round of graduates. This will help many students come up with ideas for their project and develop even more creative ways to serve the school.
Conclusion

This comprehensive exit plan will change and grow in the years to come with the basic intent to meet the needs of these very special students. It has already implemented a form of ritual and celebration for these students, given them additional tools for success, helped them to discover their own strengths, and served the school community in a variety of projects. It is exciting to see the work that the students have completed and to share in their feeling of accomplishment. Some of these students were so close to not graduating and this exit plan and the individual attention they received from the counseling intern and counselor made the difference in a number of cases. This is a project that also gives the community of Forrest Crest a sense of accomplishment and recognition. Having formal rituals and rites of passage are important, not only for the students participating in them, but for the families, staff, faculty and administration. It is the responsibility of the program to exit students in a way that will help them be productive members of the community. According to Brush, “Students need to know what they will do with their diploma as soon as they leave high school. Rather than being a place that solely provides education, the schools we visited also help students plan for their future and learn how to make that future a reality.” (Brush, 2002, p. 6). Forrest Crest is a place where students can get the concrete skills to build on their future plans. This exit plan not only assists them in reaching goals, but gives them a great piece of work to reflect upon.
References


FORREST CREST
SENIOR TRANSITION/EXIT FORM

TO BE COMPLETED BY STUDENT

Student name: _________________________________

Date: ____________________

Information/Documentation I need
(check all that apply):

___ Voter Registration
___ Social Security Card
___ School ID
___ Drivers License/State ID Card
___ Green Card
___ US Citizenship
___ Copy of Transcript
___ Birth Certificate
___ Food Handlers Card
___ Health Insurance Card

Assignments Completed
(check all that apply):

___ Discussed Career/Education Goal
___ Current Resume
___ 2 Letters of Recommendation
___ Completed F.A.F.S.A. Application
___ SAT
___ ACT
___ Community College Placement Testing
___ Written Plan of Action
___ School Service Project

__________________________________________
Student Signature

__________________________________________
Counselor Signature
Appendix B
Letter of Recommendation Request Form

COPY COMPLETED
FORM TO COUNSELOR

Letter of Recommendation Request Form

******************************************************************************
Fill out this form and give it to the person (teacher, employer, internship supervisor, family member, etc...) that you want to write your letter of recommendation 2 WEEKS before the deadline.
******************************************************************************

Student Name: __________________________

Teacher: ___________________________ Date Given: ___________

Describe your plan after graduation:

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Describe work, internship and/or community service you have done:

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
Did you participate in any school activities (sports, dance, clubs, projects) or have any classes you especially liked?

Is there something special or unique about you, or any obstacles that you have overcome which you would like to have mentioned in the letter?