

Career development program catching on with students, business

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SONOMA COUNTY – Local students and young adults will soon have access to new career planning, job placement and online resume building programs, following an effort by county leaders to motivate and prepare youth for employment.

For the past three years, the county-run, Kaiser Permanente-sponsored work readiness certificate program has propelled dozens of young adults into employment by giving them skills and experience for entry-level positions. In an effort to foster greater utilization this year, the office and the youth council of the Workforce Investment Board decided to enrich and transition the program to a medium more familiar to the younger generation—the Internet.

“One of the biggest issues for the program has been getting a greater buy-in from youth, and we wanted to come up with a strategy that made involvement more appealing,” said county Career Development Specialist Dan Blake.

“We decided to move the program away from a really heavy paper process to something that can be stored and maintained in an online format.”

The new Web site Sonoma.youngjobs.com allows students or recent graduates to upload a resume, search through resources on career development such as interview skills and educational opportunities and, for the first time, find available entry-level positions. At the same time, employers can sign onto the site and post available jobs at no cost. Businesses can also search job-seeker profiles for a match.

In conjunction with the certificate program and new job site, the office is preparing to launch a school system-wide career planning and academic navigational program. The tool powered by Kuder Inc. provides Internet-based resources meant to motivate students to pursue a specific career.

The software includes information on 7,000 positions, including salary, educational requirements and the projected number of job openings. Students can also search for a college and see admission requirements and rankings of schools by program and major.

A recent study of 2,000 Northern California students that used the Kuder Career Planning System found that users experienced increased grade point averages or better ACT or SAT scores. Also on follow-up, the participants had fewer major changes once in secondary education.

The county office piloted the program in 15 schools last year and hopes to expand it to 20,000 students by the end of the academic year. The program is offered to schools for a fee, about 88 cents per student, but the department is rallying community groups to “adopt a school” so they can be offered for free to institutions.

“We think preparing our work force is a pressing issue in the county, and anything we can do to get our young people trained either through college or work experience we consider a priority,” said Sonoma County Alliance Executive Director Lisa Schaffner.

The business, agriculture and labor coalition is assisting the county department in promoting the “adopt-a-school” initiative to its members and the community.

“The Kuder program was really appealing because of the relatively small investment and significant and tangible results,” Ms. Schaffner said.

Once implemented at a facility, students set up an account on the site through an in-class orientation or meeting with counselors, and educators encourage students to explore the site at home.

The young jobs Web site was primarily funded through a \$10,000 grant from Kaiser Permanente, which provided the same grant for the certificate program the initial three years.

"As a major employer in the county, Kaiser Permanente understands the importance of career education in our schools," said Kaiser Marin-Sonoma Vice President/Area Manager Judy Coffey.

"It's especially important for students who may not be planning on college to develop both hard and soft skills early on to prepare them for entering the work force."

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