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ABSTRACT

The opportunities center is a new school service concept that can help students find opportunities related to their talents and interests in work, education, leisure, small business, or community service. The opportunities center model expands the career center model into an information search center offering multiple services that link academic learning to real-world challenges. The components of an opportunities center include a desktop publishing module, assessment module, telephone bank module, and various areas of study. These areas of study can focus on job search, leisure planning, educational planning, small business options, and community service. Centers can be designed to serve the needs of students and alumni and can be located in secondary, postsecondary, or specialized schools. One particularly promising aspect of opportunities centers is that they can be used to serve all learners, including special needs, gifted and talented, at-risk, and regular classroom students. (This overview of the opportunities center concept includes a discussion of the rationale for developing opportunities centers; descriptions of the desktop publishing, phone bank, assessment, job search, leisure search, small business, education search, and community service study areas that can be included in an opportunities center; a description of services that can be developed for alumni and families; and guidelines for starting a center.)
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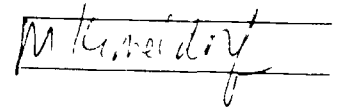
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Concept Paper

By Martin Kimeldorf



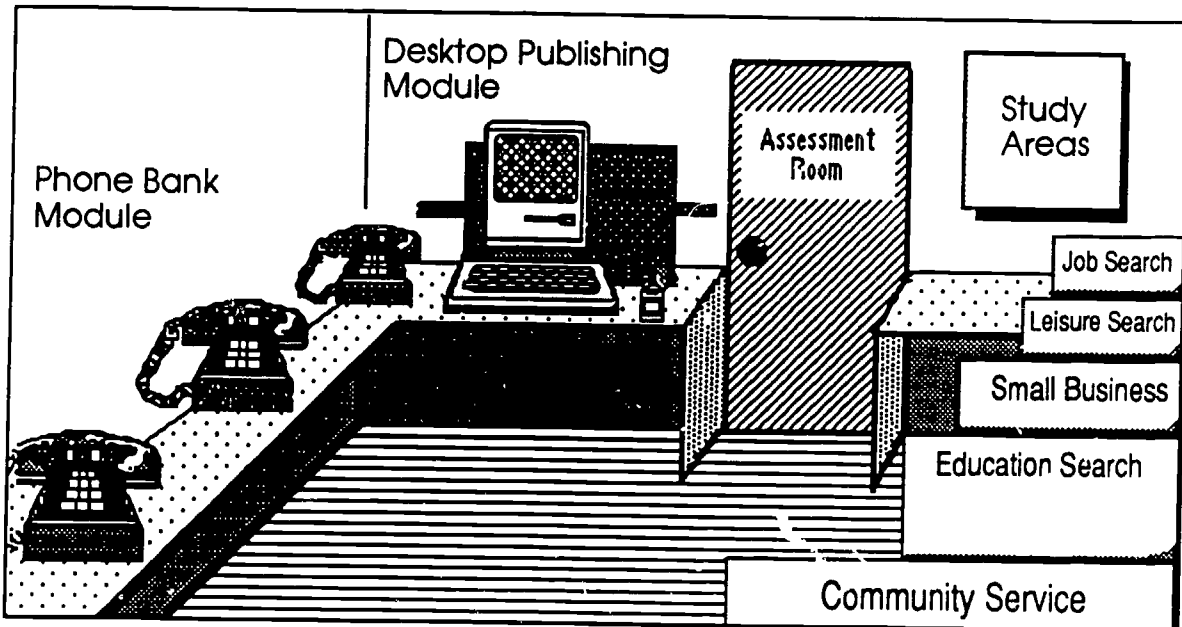
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An *Opportunities Center* is a new school service concept. The center can help students find opportunities related to their talents and interests in work, education, leisure, small business, or community service. It combines the best of what we have offered in the past with the best that we can envision for tomorrow. *Opportunities Centers* expand upon the concept of the career centers founded in the 1960's. The career center model is expanded into an information search center with multiple services. It links academic learning to real-world challenges. This paper will explore the rationale and possible operation of a model *Opportunities Center*. This paper will draw upon my previous work in the field of job and leisure search.

An *Opportunities Center* has many different components. These components include a desktop publishing lab, assessment module, telephone bank, and various areas of study focussing on job finding, leisure finding, educational planning, small business options, and community service. The *Opportunities Center* recognizes that skills explored and developed in school can be used and re-used in many different arenas. This *Opportunities Center* underscores the notion that learning and occupational change are lifelong experiences today (and in the foreseeable future). The center can serve the needs of students and alumni. It can be located in secondary, post-secondary, or specialized schools.



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WHY CREATE AN OPPORTUNITIES CENTER ?

Finding opportunity in an information age may seem simple, but it's not. We are surrounded by information but we cannot always access the information we want...when we need it. Take for example the job seeker. Over half of the job seekers will look in the want ads because it is a visible and handy source. But only 5-15% of the available job openings are listed in the want ads on any given day. The rest of the openings are found by job seekers who know how to network and make direct contact. What this means is that opportunities for work are usually not advertised (at least 80-90% of the job openings are not listed). Therefore, a successful job seeker must know how to find the hidden opportunities, or how to find the jobs not listed in the want ads.

During the last several years I have applied this concept to my curriculums on job search education. Between 1985-88 I directed a national research project on school-to-work transitions for mildly handicapped high school students. In our project our teachers taught students how to find the hidden job openings through the use of self-directed job search methods. Approximately 80% of our students found jobs in the summer of 1987! Our staff found that finding work was only one of our students' concerns. For instance, 70% of our students wanted ideas on *what* to do and *where* to go in their leisure time. Our project attempted to meet this need by teaching students how to re-use job search techniques to locate leisure opportunities.

Quality Information Search Skills

This all boils down to the fact that the search for jobs or leisure opportunities is really the search for information. In an information age there is no more important skill than the mastery of information search skills (applied to leisure, work, education, etc). We are always looking for information. One student looks for information about colleges and scholarships. Another has an interest in kite flying. When looking for leisure, one cannot look in a leisure want-ad section. We must apply our research skills involving networking, phone surveying, library work, interviewing experts to locate scholarships, kite builders, or people who share our interests. If we are operating a small business we can re-use the job search concept by substituting the word *customer* for the word *employer*.

Each search has its own unique qualities. The search for work involves handling rejection while mastering job application and interview skills. The search for customers involves marketing, advertising and some financial planning. The search for leisure involves a free-association or gestalt analysis of our interests, styles, and preferences. A search for schooling involves life-planning or career planning focussed on learning needs, learning styles and long term goals. A search for community services or volunteer opportunities can include an assessment of motives and determination of the amount of time we can commit. In the end, all of the searches share similar processes. All of these searches can benefit from using a phone bank for making contacts and gathering basic information. All of the searches can be enhanced by the printouts of a desktop publishing system.

In the end, the success of any given search directly reflects the quality of information we gather about ourselves and our community. The more we know about ourselves (assessment), then the more targeted becomes our search. The more we research local options, then the more realistic becomes our goal setting and planning. The more we match our abilities and interests with what is available locally (or where we plan to live), then the more we increase our chances for connecting with opportunity. The steps involving assessment, research, and connecting are common to all the searches. The process involves knowing about others and *becoming known*. As we penetrate the existing social and information networks, we discover the hidden opportunities...the ones not listed in the want ad and news columns.

Serving The Needs Of All Learners

One exciting dimension of the *Opportunities Centers* is its ability to serve *all* learners.¹ This includes special education, talented and gifted, at-risk, and regular education students. This should make the center popular with teachers and especially parents.

Today many parents are concerned about the crowded-nest syndrome (students not leaving home after high school or college graduation). I believe that parents will soon be asking, "Why does my child leave school without any idea about what to do next, where to go, or how to get on with life?"

Students who learn how to become self-directed opportunity seekers can become far more independent than those who simply withdraw because they lack search skills and can't effectively compete. In the Portland school-to-work study/project, our job and leisure search graduates achieved higher rates of employment (about 80%) as compared to a control group of students who received "normal programming" (ranging from 20-62% employment). The students in our project classes who had not found work (20%) were twice as likely to keep looking for work than those in the control group. Thus, our students exhibited a higher level of self-directed search behaviors. We can provide an invaluable service when we encourage students to explore their talents and interests while training them in the art of self-directed search skills.

For instance, in the project we taught mildly handicapped high school students how to identify their leisure interests first. Later they worked on identifying their vocational interests. The staff found that the leisure search was very liberating. Students did not feel that they were having to commit to a lifelong career-label. Leisure assessment involved no strings but still resulted in the identification of skills and interests. After identifying leisure interests it was much easier for our students to identify vocational interests. Thus, we felt the students who completed our course were more empowered to answer the question, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" as well as possessing the skills to embark on a pathway into adulthood. By first practicing their networking and research skills for a leisure interest, we paved the way for increased mastery of related job seeking skills.

COMPONENTS

Below is a description of the various components in an *Opportunities Center*. It begins by describing the general purpose modules which serve all of the search study areas. The different search study areas are clustered into topics (job and leisure search, community service, small business). These search areas can be organized for individual work as in a study carrel or for classroom instruction by using various workbooks.

The Desktop Publishing Module

This is a micro-computer bank hooked up to a laser printer. The resource can serve many purposes. First, it can produce quality resumes. Secondly, it can create posters, brochures and other advertising products related to small business projects. The module can serve a larger school purpose by outputting newsletters, school newspapers, club newspapers, art work, cards, and poetry book.

The freedom (and stimulation) of the press is directly related to those who have access to it. Students can create impressive printed outputs with Desktop Publishing. This alone can stimulate student writing projects. It may also stimulate teacher curriculum production when teachers view the publishing options now open to them. Speaking from experience,

¹The different kinds of learners discussed here refer to typical programs found in a high school. The notion of serving different students with different strategies is easy to adapt to post-secondary settings.

three of my last six books were considered for publication because the curriculum was submitted in typeset quality format, thus reducing the publisher's development costs.

Phone Bank Module

Phones have proven to be key job search training tools. A job seeker can canvas far more employers in a given phone session than ever possible on foot. Furthermore, the phone helps people who are initially too shy to go in person. The same techniques used in telemarketing are taught to job seekers. Phone call role-playing and practice help students develop the ability to articulate their skills. Thus, telemarketing techniques become a tool for teaching communication skills. Finally, a phone bank is based on using the phone book creatively. Today most of the new jobs (80%) are created in small businesses. Therefore, the ability to use the phone book and a phone are critical job search skills.

These same phone skills are used in canvassing opportunities for leisure, small business customers, and community service agencies. The phone bank adds a certain special quality to *Opportunities Center*. It turns it into a "work center." Students realize that this is a place to conduct serious business. Phones are easy to monitor and can help log student efforts. Phones and modems are one of the best ways of tapping into the riches of the information age.

Assessment Module

This is primarily dedicated to the assessment of career interests but it can be extended. It begins with low-tech paper and pencil interest tests. Computer tests about work or leisure interests and aptitudes can also be used. Finally, a full-blown work sample battery like MESA² would be appropriate for the vocationally undecided. It is important to realize that a skill identified has many outlets: work, leisure, community service and business. The fact that a vocational test is used does not limit the exploration of that skill to vocational areas.

Job Search Study Area

The job search study area provides students an opportunity to practice all of the self-directed search skills mentioned earlier. The Assessment module relates directly to this study area as does the desktop printing area (resumes). The phones are a key ingredient. The school's job search study area symbolically shows that the school realizes that job search skills are as important as any other basic skill being taught.

An important feature of this study area is the open door policy. A student may enter at any time to enroll in the scheduled job search class. Then the student can re-enter later to brush up on skills when looking for the second or third job. The center should also provide a job search support group to assist those students through the tough stages of rejection that precede success. It has been demonstrated that persistence is the key to success. A support group helps keep the students motivated, organized, and polished.

Leisure Search Study Area

As indicated earlier, a leisure search is a new concept and closely linked to other kinds of searches. Exploring one's leisure-life is probably going to become increasingly important in the future as people discover that their work lives can only employ part of one's potential. The founder of vocational evaluation, Johnson O'Connor, felt that the average person was born with 3-5 aptitudes. O'Connor went on to state that the average job only required one or two of our aptitudes. Therefore, the lifelong search for fulfillment can be seen as a response to our unused talents or the aptitudes crying out for expression.

² MESA is a computerized vocational aptitudes test involving work samples.

Talented and gifted students often find it difficult to focus on a single talent in a single job. The opportunities center communicates the idea that there are multiple outlets for their talents. It also asks the talented student to focus on one interest at a time (job, leisure, small business, etc.) Likewise, special education students often face a lifetime of lower-skilled jobs and under-employment. These students deserve to learn the tools that will help them uncover hidden opportunities in their leisure lives. Finally, the regular education students can explore in leisure their interests, without worrying where it will lead. Leisure exploration becomes an exciting educational exploration that lasts a lifetime.

Small Business Study Area

The small business sector of our economy is one of the most vibrant elements around. In this part of the center students explore how their talents could be utilized in a small business. They study entrepreneurial styles, methods, regulations, and practices. Students might typically set up a small business project and test it out. The desktop center now becomes an advertising center.

It has been shown that many people at mid-life seek a career change. These changes often lead people out of wage-work and into small business. These career-changers hope to actualize their hidden talents in a work they design for themselves. Knowing how small businesses operate can improve chances for successful changes and decision making later in life. Other researches believe that the rise in small business is a response to declining opportunity in the labor market. Whatever the reason, it is an important part of the American landscape.

Education Search Study Area

Planning future educational pathways requires an assessment of one's lifelong goals. With the cost of education rising today, future educational decisions should be carefully planned. This planning benefits the student's immediate educational goals when it is linked to long range plans. These plans should be realistic and can become even more realistic after exploring interests in various paid and unpaid (volunteer) work experiences.

This study area includes lots of information about schooling and scholarship options. It should also include information related to self-directed and lifelong learning. It can focus on adult education opportunities related to careers or self-enrichment. Some educational planning will focus on informal rather than formal (school-based) education. For example, students can learn how other people have explored new pathways by joining clubs, participating in self-study, and volunteering.

Community Service Study Area

Community service or volunteering has always been a part of our community experience. Americans are known for their generosity. Today there is a renewed interest at both the college and high school level in community service programs. Volunteer service offers many learners increased options for exploring their talents and opportunities. Students in one talented and gifted program studied local service agencies and then set up a volunteer service bureau to fill some of the local service gaps. In special education, students often engage in unpaid work to gain vocational experience.

Volunteering has helped students find greater relevance in their education. Many regular students felt that volunteering helped them to feel like members of the adult world. Students report that volunteer projects gave them a chance to have adult responsibilities, make decisions, and be taken seriously. In addition, many colleges now look for extra-curricular activities as an example of a well rounded personality. This can be demonstrated through community service experiences. Some schools now require community in order to graduate.

In the area of alternative education we find that volunteer service provides new paths for credit. Judy Kimeidorf used to teach an "action learning" class on pet care. The low reading, at-risk students studied responsible pet ownership. Many of the students were pregnant and needed to learn parenting skills quickly. The crossover between responsible pet ownership and parental responsibilities was easy to make. These students went to middle schools and presented lessons on responsible pet ownership. The action learning class involved reading, writing and preparing presentations as part of a reading program.

SERVICES FOR ALUMNI AND FAMILIES

The *Opportunities Center* could be open not only to current students but alumni and parents as well. Too often, we see graduates who return to teachers and the first words of wisdom they speak are, "I wish I had been more serious about..." Typically the students are referring to career preparation. They feel as though they squandered some of their educational time. But it is simply a case of not being ready during school.

For example, all people are not ready to search for a job when they are in school. But, once leaving school, employment becomes a serious affair for most graduates and their families. Why can't the students return? Can't we serve at-risk youth *after* they leave and become more mature? Could we start night schools to enrich our service delivery? And, aren't there parents who would like to brush up on job search skills? A leisure search class is an excellent way to meet new people with similar interests. The growing number of single parents could enjoy meeting others in the wholesome atmosphere of an *Opportunities Center* class. If we really believe learning is lifelong shouldn't we demonstrate it by opening the buildings?

GETTING STARTED³

As you can see, creating an *Opportunities Center* involves a slight shift in thinking. It begins with the integration or rejuvenation of many previously successful education practices. It also means tapping into the excitement, software, and hardware of the information age.

Instructional Options

There many ways to make the *Opportunities Center* available to all students. One method is to offer small classes in the center. Students might take a one-semester Vocational English class with a focus on resume production. A freshman group might explore leisure and volunteer service. Another approach is to make the center available to the freshman career class, the senior career class. Still another teacher provides an alternative English or Social Studies credit for a writing project where students collect oral histories and photographs from senior citizens.

Students in the Talented and Gifted program could conduct their own explorations with the help of the center's staff and resources. Their initial search might terminate in a mentor program experience. Regular students might get credit by completing learning packages on a competency basis. Special education classes could spend an entire semester in the center or until they find work or leisure.

³ This material is not copyrighted. Please copy, duplicate, improve upon this paper. Please let me know if you found these ideas useful. I can also furnish a list of curriculums and reference books that will help in the start up of an *Opportunities Center*. Write to me at: (work) Work/Leisure Transition Project, Special Studies Dept, PO Box 751, PSU Portland, OR 97207; or (home) 6705 Gold Creek Dr SW, Tumwater, WA 98502.

The center can become a multi-use classroom. For instance, the journalism class can enter the age of electronic print media with the Desktop hardware and software. The art and drafting class can learn about computer drawing. The print or reprographics class and the business class join with the creative writing and drama class in learning about the powers of word and page processing. The special education or alternative education teacher helps at-risk students produce short stories about their lives. Publishing projects stimulate writing and include the advantages of bibliotherapy.

Staffing

We start with one step at a time. No one teacher can run an *Opportunities Center* by him or herself. Most likely, the person will be someone with career education background. The center's coordinator should function as a facilitator. The coordinator facilitates the expertise of others. For example, the coordinator might hire a desktop publishing expert to come in and provide teachers with training. This would be followed by a summer project where teachers developed student learning packets. Or, the facilitator might develop a volunteer service fair (like a job fair) sponsored by an *Opportunities Center*. The facilitator might invite an expert in to discuss leisure wellness for adults, students, and families. Small business workshops could be run by local volunteers from the business community. All of these mini-functions will take place over time and probably be developed with grants and other forms of external funding.

Supplies

Investment in hardware, software, phones, assessment materials and curriculum would constitute the initial start-up costs. All of this could be done on a limited basis and expanded later. An initial start up system might include the following:

- Desktop publishing computers (3) and laser printer.
- Phone bank (5).
- Films and software related to occupations.
- Curriculum materials about work, leisure, colleges, community service.
- Assessment software and self-scoring tests.

A more elaborate system might involve an instructional aide operating the vocational assessment center while another aide operates the desktop publishing module. The coordinator focuses on instruction and management of speakers and community experiences. This set-up might have these additional features:

- Additional desktop publishing equipment: computers, scanners, printer, art tools.
- Additional Phones (10).
- Copy machine.
- MESA assessment center.
- Instructional Aids.

EDUCATION FOR THE 21ST CENTURY.....

Now is the time to begin thinking about education for the 21st Century. We have evolved from hunting in the primitive jungles to hunting in information jungles. As in the past, the good hunter needs to be trained. The successful hunter will possess many skills; the key ones being: self-directed or confident behaviors, problem solving and organization skills, and persistence.

The tools have changed but not the rules. Educators and their related systems need to be daring and creative if we are to train tomorrow's information hunters and gathers. "Jan 1, 2000 AD" is calling out our name. The dawning of a new century will stir our imaginations and propel us on to new experiments...perhaps into an educational renaissance.

Martin 