

By Sally E. Arnett, Patti Kozlowski and Peggy Peach

# Careers: Going Green While Doing Good

IT IS EVIDENT THAT HIGHER EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE CONSULTANTS RECOGNIZE THE NEED FOR TODAY'S STUDENTS TO GAIN EXPOSURE TO SUSTAINABILITY OR GREEN CAREER PATHWAYS.

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**CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION (CTE)** is starting to turn green. Due to a host of reports, research, workforce initiatives and scholarly speaking engagements, it is evident that higher education and workforce consultants recognize the need for today's students to gain exposure to sustainability or green career pathways. But for secondary and junior high career development teachers, the *how* to implement green career development concepts is still lacking. In fact, Konopnicki (2009) challenged CTE to develop new academic approaches to sustainability and, further, to consider career pathway applications within the curriculum. Limited, if any, resources are available for classroom instructional strategies that connect sustainability with career development, thus giving purpose to a project in Illinois.

## Career Cluster Framework

To enhance workforce and career development, CTE has adopted the Career Cluster Framework. This adoption distances CTE from its former purpose of preparing students for one specific job to that of fostering workplace knowledge and skills within a career category. People change jobs numerous times throughout their employment careers; therefore it is sensible to provide students with workplace readiness skills in a variety of career-related options. The Career Cluster Framework links school-based learning with career-related experiences, so that students can recognize the relationship between what they learn in school and what they can do in the future.

The framework organizes instruction by the career cluster, career pathways and skill sets [of each of the 16 clusters]. Then a student can develop a program of study, including courses and work experience for a seamless transition into the workforce and/or postsecondary education. An instructional method that has been effective in exploring career pathways is service-learning (National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, 2007).

## Service-Learning

Furco (1994) defined service-learning as "any carefully monitored service experience in which a student has intentional learning goals and reflects actively on what he or she is learning throughout the experience" (p. 2). Service-learning emphasizes learning opportunities that are interdisciplinary, student-centered, and integrated with real-world issues and practices (Bradford, 2005), such as sustainability concerns. Jensen and Burr (2006) found that service-learning instruction provides a strong factor in motivating students to learn course content, which allows for the reinforcement of academics in an applied setting.

Effective use of service-learning can promote personal growth and instill a commitment to lifelong, civic engagement. Furthermore, activities that produce efficacious results usually contribute to interest development. Interest development can then spur students' motivation to acquire specific knowledge that in turn may clarify academic and future goals (Lent, Brown, and Hackett, 1996). In other words, students who take interest in a service-



learning project may discover a future career; ultimately this gives a teacher an opportunity to connect what the students are doing with future career plans.

### The Projects Undertaken

To connect sustainability, service-learning, career exploration and the Career Cluster Framework, Sally Arnett, an assistant professor at Northern Illinois University, partnered with two CTE teachers from Community High School (CHS) in West Chicago, Illinois. Patti Kozlowski (family and consumer sciences) and Peggy Peach (business education) were her partners on a research project. The outcome of the project produced an instructional manual that outlines instructions for 12 service-learning projects, including how to highlight a project, the career cluster alignment, instructional strategies (connects project within classroom for career exploration), and related skill sets [for each project].

A group of Peach's Cooperative Work Training students selected the marketing career cluster and decided to do "Selling Sustainability" as their group project. At lunch, students became aware of the large amounts of plastic water bottles being used; in fact it was determined that 18,900 disposable bottles were used by CHS students per school year. Students researched and developed a business plan to sell sustainable water bottles. Students presented their plan to the Education Foundation for starter money and were granted financial backing. Students designed and sold 250 sustainable water bottles and netted a profit of \$1,016. The profits were split between repaying the Education Foundation and the local food pantry.

As a result of this project, students were able to witness business-related careers as well as help their local community. Peach comments: "Students took ownership of their projects with a higher intensity. The projects were a sneaky way to determine a student's compatibility with their chosen



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career cluster. Those who were passionate about and actively involved in their project had their career suspicions confirmed. In fact, one student who chose to join a group whose career cluster didn't match his personal aptitude stated about halfway into the project, "No wonder I'm not getting into this; I'm not using my skill set!"

Kozlowski implemented the service-learning project "Prom Expo" with her high school Fashion and Technology 2

students. Students collected donated prom dresses and planned an event that featured prom exhibitors for cosmetics, food, limos and such, for students, parents and the community to be able to purchase and plan for an economical prom night. The sustainability component of this project was the reusing of prom dresses. Students were also able to become aware of careers related to the business and designing aspect of event planning.





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## THROUGH SERVICE-LEARNING PROJECTS EMPHASIZING SUSTAINABILITY, TEACHERS CAN FACILITATE STUDENT UNDERSTANDING OF THE RELEVANCY OF ACADEMICS, PROMOTE EXPLORATION OF SUSTAINABILITY CAREER OPTIONS, AND INITIATE A CAREER PATHWAY FOR STUDENTS.

“The students met every Friday to do a business report with the foundation representatives. Contacts were made to collaborate with the Chamber of Commerce. The professional business experience they had with this project wouldn’t be the same from traditional lecturing. The students developed the project, created the jobs needed, used their technical skills for advertising and marketing, ran a business meeting, wrote reports, kept statistical information and practiced quality control. These were all underclassman. How do I know it was successful? They all want to work with the project next year. They were so proud of their work,” said Kozlowski.

### Making CTE Programs Relevant

Overall, the projects gave students opportunities to use problem-solving skills and be involved through civic engagement. But more importantly, an underlying motive was achieved by incorporating career exploration. CTE needs to continuously add to or update programs to meet the demands of the current employment market as well as legislative intentions. The sustainability instructional manual provides a resource that integrates relevancy into the modernizing of CTE. Through service-learning projects emphasizing sustainability, teachers can facilitate student understanding of the relevancy of academics, promote exploration of

sustainability career options, and initiate a career pathway for students that creates a pipeline of future employees and employers, both beneficial to the community. For further information regarding the Sustainability Service-Learning instructional manual, contact Dr. Sally Arnett at [sarnett@niu.edu](mailto:sarnett@niu.edu). **I**

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