PHOTO BY ISTOCK.COM

UNDERSTANDING AND IMPLEMENTING

PROGRAMS OF STUDY

BY ALISHA HYSLOP

What are Programs of Study (POS)? This question has been asked and answered in numerous ways since the concept was officially introduced in the 2006 Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act (Perkins Act). POS were one of the landmark features of the new Act, and have been one of the biggest areas of focus during its implementation. The current Perkins Act requires three elements for a POS:

1. Incorporate secondary and postsecondary education elements.
2. Include coherent and rigorous content aligned with academic and career and technical education (CTE) standards in a coordinated, non-duplicative progression of courses aligning secondary and postsecondary education.
3. Lead to an industry-recognized credential or certificate at the postsecondary level, or an associate or bachelor's degree.

In addition, POS may include the opportunity for high school students to participate in dual or concurrent enrollment opportunities. At minimum, each local Perkins recipient was required to implement at least one such POS. In many states, these requirements built on efforts already under way through Tech Prep, statewide articulation agreements and career pathways. However, this overlap often created confusion as to what exactly was required for a "Program of Study," and how the POS initiative should be different, if at all, from work already under way in all CTE programs. Even five years later, there remain concerns about uneven execution and questions about varied approaches around the country.

Laying Out POS Framework

In 2009, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE) launched an effort to further expand on the requirements included in the Perkins Act, and clarify the elements of a high-quality POS. To develop a new Program of Study Design Framework, OVAE worked with major national associations, including the Association for Career and Technical Education, other organizations, and state leaders. The Framework contains 10 key components that support the development and implementation of POS.

OVAE Program of Study Design Framework Elements

1. Legislation and Policies
2. Partnerships
3. Professional Development
4. Accountability and Evaluation Systems
5. College- and Career-Readiness Standards
6. Course Sequences
7. Credit Transfer Agreements
8. Guidance Counseling and Career Advisement
9. Teaching and Learning Strategies
10. Technical Skills Assessments

As Scott Hess, chief of the College and Career Transitions Branch in the Division of Academic and Technical Education at OVAE, explains, "Over the years, what we now call career and technical education has slowly been evolving. This evolution began with Tech Prep, which provided the foundation for other national projects and led to our current POS. Although the Framework components aren't new, this is the first time that there has been a national consensus, which 'sets the bar' high in defining quality career and technical education and encourages the much need consistency from state to state."

Documents outlining the Framework explain how it should be used, "Although all 10 components are important, they are neither independent nor of equal priority: State and local program developers must identify the most pressing components to be addressed given particular educational, workforce and economic contexts." Promoting the Framework and more intensive POS has been a priority of OVAE over the past two years.

OVAE Awards Six States Grants To Promote Rigorous POS

In the fall of 2010, OVAE awarded six state grants under its Promoting Rigorous Career and Technical Education Programs of Study project. The project was designed to promote the implementation of CTE POS using the Program of Study Design Framework developed by OVAE, and to include a comprehensive evaluation of both implementation constancy and outcomes. Essentially, OVAE wanted to test whether the use of the Framework elements led to higher student outcomes.

Arizona, Kansas, Maryland, Montana, Utah and Wisconsin were awarded funds under the grant, and they all have rigorous programs of study (RPOS) under way. Each state partnered with local school districts and postsecondary institutions in urban, rural and suburban communities to implement their selected POS. Since the grants were awarded last year, the states and their local partners have been working to ensure that the

"Collaboration and networking have been major themes of the development process—drawing in new partners and strengthening relationships between secondary and postsecondary entities, and between the education and business communities."

selected Program of Study is fully implemented in each local area. All Framework elements had to be in place by the beginning of this school year, when full implementation began and a comprehensive evaluation was launched.

Each state is focusing on a different career pathway for its POS, ranging from manufacturing in Kansas and Wisconsin to education and training in Arizona, and each state is concentrating on different elements.

In Montana, which is working on a construction POS, the focus has been on college- and career-readiness standards, and the teaching and learning strategies necessary to support those standards. As leaders there assessed their current POS, they realized that the weakest link was content alignment between secondary and postsecondary education—and the skills students need to make that transition. Lyle Courtnage, Montana RPOS project director, said they asked, "What is needed to truly make students college-ready?" One of the top answers was stronger math readiness, which has led to an aggressive implementation of the Math-in-CTE curriculum integration project in RPOS schools.

Building local connections and bringing secondary and postsecondary partners to the table has been a key focus of Utah's efforts in the first year of its RPOS grant focused on healthcare. While the state had a lengthy history of articulation and a strong concurrent enrollment program, there was still much more to be done in order to establish rigorous POS. Gary Wixom, assistant commissioner for academic affairs in the Utah System of Higher Education, says that many more people needed to be involved, and it took time to get all the pieces in place. "Even with a foundation in place, a substantial investment of time and effort is needed for true Programs of Study that span secondary and postsecondary education. Rushing doesn't work," he said.

Maryland has gone a slightly different direction with its RPOS grant, focusing on curriculum development and professional development related to that new curriculum. The automotive pathway within the state used NATEF (National Automotive Technicians Education Foundation) national standards, but did not have a complete, standardized curriculum to help instructors align content to these standards to ensure students are prepared for postsecondary transitions. The RPOS project allowed the state to bring together educators and industry representatives to develop a full POS curriculum, including objectives, key topics, information on depth of coverage, activities and learning indicators.

All of the new content is Web-based for easy access, and instructors have been provided extensive professional development as they implement the new curriculum. As Maryland CTE State Director Kathy Oliver emphasizes, "A

brand new teacher walking into the classroom now knows exactly what they need to do because everything is there, and courses are aligned to industry standards and academic standards in reading, writing, math and science, including the new Common Core State Standards."

States Report Progress, Challenges

Despite only being a year into implementation, all the states are already reporting benefits from the expanded focus on Programs of Study. Collaboration and networking have been major themes of the development process—drawing in new partners and strengthening relationships between secondary and postsecondary entities, and between the education and business communities.

In Wisconsin, grant participants are also reporting strengthened student awareness of careers in the manufacturing pathway, and the development of new tools and resources that will facilitate statewide adoption of the RPOS. In Maryland, work has led to more rigorous technical content standards and clear alignment with academics, as well as more consistent and high-quality content delivery. Several states also report improved data collection and analysis, leading to stronger programs and better student results. While the states are piloting work in only a few schools, many are already working to expand their more fully developed Programs of Study statewide.

The successes have not been without challenges, as some states have struggled to design accountability systems or ensure appropriate face time for key partners' collaboration. However, despite these challenges, the efforts appear on their way to success. While it is too soon to evaluate the usefulness and efficacy of the Framework overall, it has provided a common language for states to use to expand Programs of Study and college- and career-readiness for all students. T

Alisha Hyslop

is ACTE's assistant director of public policy. She can be contacted at ahyslop@acteonline.org.

ACTE Interested in exploring this topic further? Discuss it with your colleagues on the ACTE forums at www.acteonline.org/forum.aspx.