Introduction

The States’ Career Cluster Initiative
9/01/02

Charles Losh, Ph.D., Project Director

The U.S. Department of Education Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE) has identified 16 career clusters representing career opportunities for the 21st century economy. These clusters will frame student opportunities as they pursue postsecondary education and a wide range of career opportunities from front-line to professional and managerial careers.

Helping students make their dreams become a reality was the driving force behind the nation’s Career Clusters initiative launched June 1, 2001. Twelve lead states and the District of Columbia were partners in the development of the tools supporting eleven career clusters which, when combined with the five clusters that have already been developed, will represent all career possibilities.

The National Association of State Directors for Career and Technical Education Consortium (NASDCTEc) and their Board of Directors assumed leadership for coordinating the project. This in itself was unique for a project of this scope. The Board and the State Directors organization believed that this initiative was of such potential impact on the Career Technical delivery system in the country that they needed to play this leadership role in the project, assuring that the materials had utility in their states once completed. Therefore, the NASDCTEc in conjunction with the State of Oklahoma (the project fiscal agent) prepared and submitted a proposal to OVAE in January of 2001. This proposal was funded at a $2.2 million dollar level, with expectations of a second year of funding of $2.5 million. The plan to develop eleven curriculum frameworks was very aggressive, given that each of the prior projects, designed to develop and pilot test materials for a single cluster, had received in excess of $1 million dollars for their multiyear development work.

The project was designed to establish curriculum frameworks and supportive materials for each cluster, with a broad-based advisory committee for each cluster, led by a state. There was also a National Advisory Committee consisting of members from each of the cluster committees, along with other stakeholders. The National and State Cluster advisory committees were responsible for identifying the frameworks, pathway and foundation knowledge and skills, and other supportive
materials. The committees included representatives from states, schools, education and training, business and industry, associations, and others directly impacted by the materials.

The development of materials for each of the eleven clusters was led by a different state, with business and industry at the helm. The lead states included: Idaho and Iowa (jointly leading the Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources cluster), Pennsylvania (Architecture and Construction), Ohio (Marketing, Sales and Service), North Dakota (Finance), West Virginia (Hospitality and Tourism), South Carolina (Business, Management and Administration), Kentucky (Human Services), Arkansas (Law, Public Safety and Security), North Carolina (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), Michigan (Education and Training), and Oklahoma and the District of Columbia/Washington D.C. (jointly leading the Government and Public Administration cluster).

The five additional career clusters included Health Science led by the State of Utah, Manufacturing led by the State of Indiana, Arts, Audio Video Technology and Communications led by the V-TECS Consortium, Information Technology led by the Educational Development Center, Inc., and Transportation, Distribution and Logistics Cluster led by the State of Illinois. These clusters plan to complete their work by June 30 of 2003.

To facilitate and coordinate the developmental work of the Cluster Initiative, staff was identified and housed at the Oklahoma Department of Career and Technical Education. The staff consisted of four Cluster Coordinators: Marsha Daves, Greg Dewald, Curtis Shumaker, and Pam Stacey. Additionally, Denise Christy provided research and web development support, Lisa Batchelder provided financial support, and Karan Smith provided administrative support.

Development work for the States’ Career Clusters Initiative began June 1, 2001, and the first meeting of lead states, OVAE staff, and cluster staff was held in Oklahoma City in mid-June. At this meeting, project objectives, general direction, timelines, and the initial research goals were identified. This work continued through the fall and winter of 2001 and included the identification of cluster advisory committee members, the development of cluster frameworks based on the prototype cluster models provided by V-TECS, and the identification of occupations and draft pathways along with degrees and certificates associated with the career specialties/occupations in each of the clusters.

In January of 2002, the lead state teams were brought together in Phoenix to begin the process of developing knowledge and skill statements for each of the cluster pathways and foundations. Contracted writers and lead state cluster advisory committee members, depending upon
the decisions of cluster leadership, carried out this work. A part-time editor in Oklahoma provided consistency across the cluster knowledge and skill statements. One concern that was addressed early in the process was the need for a “common look and feel” across the clusters. Ultimately, this was accomplished not only for the eleven clusters in the States’ Career Clusters Initiative, but also through close cooperative relationships between the projects, all the cluster knowledge and skill statements were developed (or retro-fitted) using the same format. This format includes a knowledge/skill statement with associated performance elements and measurement criteria. This format provides the tools needed for curriculum and assessment developers as they take the materials to the classroom.

The National Advisory Committee met in March of 2002, and reviewed the curriculum frameworks, credentials list, and lead state advisory committee memberships and structures, and forwarded those materials to the Executive Committee for the Project. The Executive Committee, made up of the Board of the NASDCTEc, also met in March, approved the materials and discussed the future actions needed to assure implementation of the cluster materials.

Originally, the project was designed for a minimum of two years and was to include the identification of 110 pilot test sites across the country, along with the development of assessments and certifications for the clusters. The Office of Vocational and Adult Education, however, determined in November of 2001 that the goals of the project were “too broad”, and terminated the project as of September 30, 2002.

Development of the products needed for curriculum and assessment was fast-tracked, with the knowledge and skill statements, performance elements and measurement criteria ready for validation by July 15, 2002. This was the result of a major effort of lead state advisory committees and staff responding to the shortened timeline and the need for quality product.

Given the efforts of the developmental teams, cluster advisory committee members were able to review and validate the knowledge and skills and supporting elements. Additionally, a national web-based validation was conducted from July 15 to August 15, 2002. All 50 states were invited to a dissemination meeting held in Charleston, South Carolina Sept 13, 2002, where the materials were distributed to participants for their use in updating their curriculum.

For further information on the status of the materials, go to the web-site, http://www.careerclusters.org/.