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Career Navigation in a Volatile Labor Market

Building critical infrastructure
to ensure success in work and learning

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Corporation for a Skilled Workforce is a national nonprofit that partners with government, business, and community leaders to connect workers with good jobs, increase the competitiveness of companies, and build sustainable communities. For more than 22 years, we have been an effective catalyst for change. We identify opportunities for innovation in work and learning and provoke transformative change in policy and practice. We have worked with dozens of workforce investment boards, state and local workforce agencies, community-based organizations, foundations, federal agencies, and colleges to create lasting impact through their collaborative activities.

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Context

Career navigation for the new economy

Unemployment hovers at 7% and economic volatility is the new normal. As a result, many aspects of the workforce system - including how we prepare for and obtain jobs - must also change. Fifty years ago, workers often pursued the careers of their parents or other family members and received advice on career navigation from these same people. A high school graduate could get a good job that paid a family-sustaining wage and be fairly certain they would remain in that position for many years. Today, workers change careers much more frequently, the same jobs require a higher level of education, and the progression through the labor market is anything but linear.

Low-wage jobs are often the first casualties of a recession, and these workers are forced to seek other options. Workers are increasingly aware of the potential labor market pay-off of education, and as a result many working adults (or those seeking employment) are trying to find ways to return to a learning environment. Too often, incomplete and unclear information, insufficient resources and time, and no good decision-making support result in poor learning decisions. As a result, workers enroll in programs with no clear labor market relevance, or have trouble navigating the learning system and program options on the way to credentials. Such missteps are difficult enough for well-supported and technologically-savvy consumers; they can be entirely derailing for lower-income adults who can't afford the lost time and money.

Employment volatility, the demand for higher levels of education, and an abundance of possibly-helpful-but-often-simply-perplexing information about work and learning choices all call for robust career navigation supports. Such supports must by nature be diverse – covering some traditional "academic advising" support across educational institutions, as well as ensuring a close ear to the ground of the local labor market. Good career navigation is a blend of supports that provide and help make sense of information about both work *and* learning, based on the assumption that decisions about learning should naturally be informed by data about work, and vice versa. Such an infrastructure reflects a set of competencies – a network of supports and information – that are unlikely to be found in one individual or organization. Instead, we argue *that communities must plan and build out a <u>set</u> of integrated career navigation competencies that reflect both "high tech" and "high touch" supports* towards helping workers make symbiotic, practical work and learning choices.

The time is now, to transform the way we think about career navigation. Career counselors have recently been flagged as a high growth occupation. The Department of Labor Job Outlook for high school career counselors estimates that the occupation will grow by 19% between 2010 and 2020, and the estimated rate increases to 34% growth for post-secondary career counselors.[1] Such occupational growth presents an opportunity to intentionally position career advising skills to supplement the overall function of the career navigation system in the years to come. These advisors are often on the frontlines in terms of initial contact with learners/workers, and can lead the way in realizing career navigation as a set of integrated competencies.

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[1] U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. *Occupational Outlook Handbook – School and Career Counselors*, April 6, 2012. Accessed at: http://www.bls.gov/ooh/community-and-social-service/school-and-career-counselors.htm#tab-6

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What's needed

This working concept paper is a deeper exploration of the career navigation competencies we introduced in *One-Stop Career Centers Must be Re-invented to Meet Today's Labor Market Realities* in June of 2013. While the paper focused on the reinvention of One-Stops to meet labor market needs, it also laid the groundwork for the definition of career navigation as a network of resources. "With a combination of competent staff and good web-based tools, a distributed model can make services available close at hand to diverse customers while being affordable."[2]

The One-Stop paper offers guidance pertaining specifically to One-Stop centers. This report offers our view of the seven essential competencies of a robust career navigation infrastructure. Such competencies are far more likely to be feasibly demonstrated by a network of intentionally integrated resources, rather than one person serving all functions. Because such competencies require diverse skill sets and information access, we maintain the needed infrastructure is most effective when built across agencies and institutions who can be intentional about a unified approach.

The Information Gap

What the data says about the data

Despite all the information now available through social media, online news and data outlets, job postings and educational options – it's not necessarily adding up to people making better career choices that leave them more satisfied and secure.

"Many young Americans have education-related regrets and lack enthusiasm for their current – and often 'mismatched' – jobs", according to a survey by the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS) of underemployed Americans ages 21 to 35.[3] The survey revealed that among these workers, 51% would have chosen a different career path; only 27% were satisfied with their current job; and 81% would consider switching careers in the future.

In an economy where millions are unemployed for months or even longer, you might think that those who are employed would be feeling good about their jobs. Think again. A joint survey from PARADE magazine and Yahoo! Finance of 26,000 Americans found that almost 60% would choose a different career. Many of these workers lack the resources and requisite skills to simply switch careers, quit a job, relocate, or return to school for more training.[4]

So why are these poor decisions being made?

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[2] Strong, Ed. "One-Stop Career Centers Must be Re-invented to Meet Today's Labor Market Realities". *Corporation for a Skilled Workforce*, June 2013. Accessed at:
http://www.skilledwork.org/sites/default/files/OneStopCareerCentersVersionTwo.pdf

[3] "Underemployed in America; How the Underemployed View Skills and Education". *Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS)*, May 2013. Accessed at:
http://www.acics.org/events/content.aspx?id=5604

[4] Napach, Bernice. "Most Americans Not Happy at Work". *Yahoo Finance/Parade Survey,* August 29, 2012. Accessed at: http://finance.yahoo.com/blogs/daily-ticker/most-americans-not-happy-yahoo-finance-parade-survey-112833013.html

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Missing information

Some workers choose jobs that don't fit their skills and abilities because they lack access to information, obtain poor or incomplete information, or cannot interpret the information available. The latter is most common, as data collection is constantly improving and increasingly accessible via the internet. The Departments of Education and Labor, as well as One-Stops, already maintain immense amounts of data, but it is largely historical, static (not dynamic), and difficult to navigate. Real time labor market information is a relatively new resource that job hunters may not be aware of, but vendors like *Burning Glass*, *Wanted Analytics* and *EMSI* offer career planning tools, sector-based market analyses and regional occupational matching. To make the most of all of these resources, an essential function of the career navigation system is as a *translator of information*. We must make sure workers know what data is available, where to find it, and most importantly how to usefully interpret the information to make better choices.

Real time labor market information (LMI) is an important tool in the translation and communication of data, because vendors are already doing a large portion of the aggregating, sorting and synthesizing necessary to inform good decision making. Real time labor market information is a compilation of data from millions of jobs postings across a variety of sites. Accessing LMI resources is much more efficient and focused than doing the legwork individually. Another advantage to using real time LMI is that it gives the worker information on the occupation-specific skills and certifications a position requires, which traditional data does not. However, traditional labor market information is a better tool for historical and wage information – data that is not accurately reflected in online job postings. The Department of Labor, Census Bureau and State Employment Administrations, among others, maintain vast amounts of historical data on growth trends, annual vacancies and wage projections. "To balance the advantages and limitations of each data source, job postings data should be consulted in conjunction with additional labor market indicators, using a mix of data sets when making education and training decisions. While numerous traditional and real-time sources provide national and state labor market information, job developers and counselors should continue to work with local employers, chambers of commerce, and professional organizations to help identify where the jobs are." [5]

There is emerging evidence of the impact of closing the information gap. The Expanding College Opportunities research project examined how the outcomes of high achieving, low income students could be improved by informal, informational interventions. In the first phase of the project, ECO sent informational packets to high achieving, low income students to gauge the impact this individualized intervention would have on their college application behavior. At a cost of $6 per student, the materials included: targeted and personalized information on their college options, information on the process for applying, and details of the financial information relevant to their situations. According to researchers: "Not only did students apply to more-selective schools, but they were accepted and matriculated at such schools in greater numbers, and early evidence points to their academic success in these programs." [6] These findings suggest that an important reason why many of these students do not go to college or make

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[5]Milfort, Miriam and Jeremy Kelley. "Innovations in Labor Market Information and their Application". *Jobs for the Future*, August 2012. Accessed at:
http://www.jff.org/sites/default/files/GW_CTW_InnovationsLaborMarketInfo_072512.pdf

[6] Hoxby, Caroline M. and Sarah Turner. "Informing Students about Their College Options: A Proposal for Broadening the Expanding College Opportunities Project". *The Hamilton Project and Brookings Institute*, March 2013. Accessed at: http://www.hamiltonproject.org/files/downloads_and_links/THP_HoxbyTurner_FINAL.pdf

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poor decisions is *because they do not have enough good, functional information and/or they are overwhelmed by the process*.

The information gap is so significant for high achieving, low income students, because of the economic consequences of not connecting them to opportunities that combat inequality. "Of particular concern, is the fact that there are already policies in place intended to make a great education available to them, as they are in the lower third as far as income. The best schools would cost them far less than the high income students, but the return on investment would be significantly greater."[5] The opportunities available to these students if they go to college, the reduced debt load, increased social mobility and labor market production could result in sweeping economic impact.

Role of Career Navigation

These examples point to where career navigators can make a tremendous difference - helping to filter through the mountain of data for what is needed to best help that particular learner, as well as keeping a finger on the pulse of the local labor market.

A navigator is defined as: *the person on board a ship or aircraft responsible for its navigation. The navigator's primary responsibility is to be aware of ship or aircraft position at all times. Responsibilities include planning the journey, advising the captain or aircraft commander of estimated timing to destinations while en route, and ensuring hazards are avoided*.[7]

As we consider how to 'navigate' the labor and learning markets, we must apply the components of this definition. Most learners/workers will be influenced by any number of people that support and advise them as they wind their way through their travels. An integrated approach will result in fewer becoming sidetracked, getting "lost" or overwhelmed, better use of scarce resources, and arriving at their intended destination in less time. While most literature focuses on the role of academic advisors or traditional, single-person career navigator functions, we posit that a network of cohesive and diverse individuals and organizations can best assist workers in maneuvering their careers. And the combination of high tech and high touch approaches among partners can strengthen the power of the network to be a lifelong workforce support.

Closing the gap with high tech, high touch approaches

When a worker today searches for a job, or a place to enhance her skills, the first place she looks is typically the internet. While certainly a valuable resource, the internet's worth is directly influenced by the knowledge and ability of the job seeker to filter and translate the available information into a set of reasonable and relevant choices.

A central assumption underlying our vision of career navigation is that with proper ongoing guidance, users will be able to seek out and aggregate large amounts of data themselves throughout their careers. The internet is one example of the way in which technology can greatly enhance individuals' ongoing access to current and relevant information. And we know personal supports are a necessary complement to available technology, in that they encourage progress, help to connect workers with other supports and resources, decode and translate data, and strengthen networking and career planning skills. The high touch component of career navigation community infrastructure involves the people who provide critical

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[7] Merriam-Webster, Inc. "Navigator" Accessed at: http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/navigator

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one-on-one support: advisors, counselors, supports coordinators, etc. within community colleges, One-Stops, high schools, and community-based organizations. These supports help ensure that workers can connect with and make the best use of the information and resources available to them.

Thus, we believe a set of both technology-driven and person-centered competencies are critical to building effective career navigation infrastructure.

Connecting the Dots

Key competencies for career navigation in the new economy

What follows is a list of the key competencies we believe are critical for ensuring a strong career navigation infrastructure is in place. Such infrastructure is most effective when built across agencies and organizations, thus capitalizing on the existing networks and expertise of each partner.

1. **UNDERSTANDING OF THE NEEDS OF ADULT LEARNERS**: This competency involves deep familiarity with the differences between traditional and adult learners, and the ability to advise and support them accordingly. Experience successfully serving non-traditional and working learners is key to helping assess challenges and identify opportunities.

2. **ABILITY TO ASSESS WORKERS' SKILLS AND SKILL GAPS**: Workers need help understanding their own skill sets and their relevance in the local labor market, as well as identifying feasible avenues for gaining the skills demanded in their target markets. Career navigation must include the ability to use skill and competency assessment tools and apply this data to a career plan. Arming the worker with knowledge about their strengths, weaknesses and preferences – and how these relate to the demands of the labor market and the opportunities of the local educational institutions – will inform their journey and increase the likelihood of success.

3. **INNOVATIVE USE OF DATA**: A career navigation system must be adept at monitoring, aggregating and synthesizing labor market data, job search platforms, and relevant educational pathways into usable knowledge to inform the decision making process. Deep knowledge of the latest tools – like those that use job-spidering of online job postings to obtain real-time occupational growth and skills needs – is a needed high tech competency. The career navigation system must be able to help workers leverage data to make positive, informed choices now and in the future.

4. **KNOWLEDGE OF LOCAL ECONOMIES AND EMPLOYER NEEDS**: Understanding local industries and in-demand skills is key to helping workers use their own skills assessment information alongside their career interests to build out tailored plans. The very best job preparation and educational attainment will not help workers if they are not ultimately relevant to the needs of the labor market.

5. **COLLABORATION IN A HIGH IMPACT NETWORK:** A powerful career navigation system will target partners who reflect a high degree of collaboration, as well as proven results in one or more of these career navigation competencies. Career navigation requires establishing trust and ongoing involvement with multiple partners, including employers, workforce agencies, community colleges and community-based organizations. Connections with local providers of high quality work and learning preparation and skills remediation are particularly critical. Further, close ties to and understanding of available income and other support services must be maintained. Intentionally targeting collaborative partners with proven ability in these areas will

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position workers to draw on an extensive network of contacts that together facilitate opportunities for education and employment.

6. **UNDERSTANDING OF BEST PRACTICES IN WORK AND LEARNING INTEGRATION, ESPECIALLY CREDENTIALING**: Workers need support from a system that tracks, understands and applies best practices in the integration of work and learning – notably stackable credentials and career pathways within growth sectors. Such a system can not only connect workers with current opportunities, but also apply national learning to local systems in order to influence tighter integration of learning opportunities with labor market demands.

7. **ABILITY TO COMMIT TO AND CATALYZE ACTION**: Career navigation infrastructure must include some high touch support for workers seeking services and for partners across the network. Both cases require the ability to develop good relationships, establish and commit to accountability measures, and regularly check in on progress and challenges. Both individual workers and the broader career navigation network must establish overall objectives and benchmarks for success along the way to their goals.

By focusing on building and intentionally connecting these competencies into an integrated network of career navigation supports, communities or regions can ensure their residents have the information and support needed to map out and follow a clear learning and career path.

Leading the Way

Promising practices

There are some pioneers leading the way in helping to build the career navigation infrastructure we envision. They can be found in various industries, utilizing multiple delivery mechanisms. The following examples of promising practices demonstrate one or more of the competencies we argue are necessary to better connect workers to good jobs and the labor market-relevant learning that leads to those jobs.

inBloom – Using educational data
In 2012, an alliance of states, nonprofits, foundations and companies came together with the shared vision of "accelerating student achievement through personalized learning."[8] Shared Learning Collaborative (SLC) has since rebranded itself as a new non-profit startup called inBloom, which intends to help transform education by providing entrepreneurs, schools and districts with a better, easier way to make sense of and utilize big data. With $100 million in funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and other backers, inBloom seeks to use big data and shared technology platforms to help educators, schools and entrepreneurs unlock the value behind the tremendous amount of educational data available. According to inBloom's CEO, "this fragmentation and lack of portability has rendered data incommunicative, stripping it of much of its utility and, really, its value."[7]

The premise behind inBloom is that with data innovation, people will make better choices, increase success rates and connect with better jobs. inBloom will attempt to reach more learners with innovative technology platforms that offer a variety of classes from remedial to advanced, 24 hours a day, in a myriad

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[8] Empson, Rip. "With $100M From The Gates Foundation & Others, inBloom Wants To Transform Education By Unleashing Its Data". *TechCrunch.com*, February 5, 2013. Accessed at: http://techcrunch.com/2013/02/05/with-100m-from-the-gates-foundation-others-inbloom-wants-to-transform-education-by-unleashing-its-data/

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user-friendly formats. These new platforms will not only provide different instructional options, they will also collect and integrate educational data for ease of access by students. Learners will be able to view and save information on relevant outcomes for their chosen programs of study, geographical areas, gender and race. They will also have access to occupational earning reports, advancement data and real-time labor market information. For K-12 learners, data on high demand fields of study and jobs will be available, including projections for current and future demand. Nine states (representing 11 million students) are on board in developing the pilot and five states have already selected school districts that will be pilot sites.

The Aspen Institute College Excellence Program Report – Using labor market data

In 2013, the Aspen Institute published *A Guide for Using Labor Market Data to Improve Student Success*. Made possible with support from several foundations and Google, the guide aims to advance colleges' understanding of how to access and use labor market data to improve student success. It includes a description of how colleges can effectively use labor market data; an inventory of available data sources; and recommendations for what colleges can do to improve labor market data use and access.[9] The report includes brief summaries and web addresses for seven data sources that aggregate a wide array of metrics, in addition to outlining how to assist students in choosing a program of study, supporting students with challenges and developing programs tailored to specific high growth opportunities. The report represents a best practice because of the range of tools included and the multiple audiences targeted. These recommendations can be deployed by several different entities within the career navigation structure.

The Virginia Community College System's "Education Wizard" – High tech tools

"Education Wizard" was launched in 2009 by the Virginia Community College System. Education Wizard is unique in that it is available to students at all 23 community colleges within the state. "The wizard brings together a variety of disparate resources and includes new, specially designed datasets to help a user select a career of interest, find the education requirements needed for a desired career, navigate the financial aid system and figure out how to pay for college, and even apply for admission to a community college or transfer from a college to a university."[10] Further, while it is an educational tool, the primary focus of Education Wizard is on helping all types of students design their career path. Students use the tools to determine the best career fit for their skills and abilities using comprehensive information tied to labor market trends. 'Ginny,' the website's talking avatar, guides users through the various features of the website and answers questions. Analytics show that students and career coaches in Virginia value the website's ability to synthesize and translate vast amounts of data from different sources.[9] Education wizard showcases the ability of a technological resource to increase the capacity of the career navigation system, thus allowing the community to reach more students, more efficiently.

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[9] Aspen Institute. "A Guide for Using Labor Market Data to Improve Student Success". *The Aspen Institute College Excellence Program,* 2013, Publication Number: 13/001. Accessed at:
http://www.aspeninstitute.org/sites/default/files/content/upload/AspenGuideforUsingLaborMarketData.pdf

[10] Choitz, Vickie with Louis Soares and Rachel Pleasants. "A New National Approach to Career Navigation for Working Learners". *Center for American Progress*, March 2010. Accessed at:
http://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2010/03/pdf/career_counseling.pdf

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iSeek, Minnesota's Career, Education and Job Resource – Creating a network to inform adult learners
iSeek is the comprehensive career, education and job resource for the state of Minnesota. "iSeek's Executive Board works with the state's workforce development and education authorities to develop and inform policy and to strategize services for career planning, education and e-learning, and workforce development".[11] The board consists of state agency leadership in education and economic development, with affiliate partners ranging from Health and Human Services and Workforce Councils to state industry partnerships and the Department of Corrections. Because of this broad, statewide support, iSeek is able to provide tailored support to learners with barriers to education and employment. The website offers resources and assessments for career counselors and links to information and planning tools designed specifically for veterans, adult learners, ex-offenders, immigrants and refugees, recently unemployed, parents and people with disabilities. In addition to the wealth of online resources, users can obtain face to face counseling at any step in the process, free of charge.

National College Advising Corps (NCAC) – High touch, individualized approach
"The college-applications process can be overwhelming for any high school student. But for low-income minority students with no graduates in their families to guide them, it is often paralyzing."[12] The goal of the NCAC is to provide information, encouragement and support to those who are hit the hardest by recessions. Low income students/workers are 30% less likely to go to college than their peers. In 2011, with a grant from the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, Director Nicole Hurd began training the first cohort of college advisors. Utilizing a similar model to AmeriCorp, the advisors are all under 25 years of age and live in the communities where they serve. They help students apply for financial aid, study for the ACT, learn to give presentations, write admissions essays and connect them to labor market data. To date, NCAC has reached 116,000 teenagers with its high touch, high tech approach. The individualized attention and the relationships built with students resulted in a 25% increase in application rates and a 34% increase in acceptance rates to four year institutions, over those students without a NCAC advisor.

Next Steps

In developing this working concept, we have found it challenging to identify examples of coherent, comprehensive career navigation infrastructure in action today. There are lighthouses that embody several of our identified career navigation competencies, but none working together in the kind of ecosystem we have outlined here. We are committed to expanding the critical role that career navigation can play in helping workers and learners to make good, labor market relevant choices that lead to better outcomes for all involved.

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[11] iSeek, *iSeek Solutions* ©. State of Minnesota, Accessed at: http://www.iseek.org/info/partners.html

[12] Quinton, Sophie. "A Key to Getting More Low-Income Kids to Go to College: Better Advising". *The Atlantic*, September 25, 2013. Accessed at: http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2013/09/a-key-to-getting-more-low-income-kids-to-go-to-college-better-advising/280000/

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Opportunities for further research & action

First, we intend to hone the set of seven competencies we have identified through additional applied research in partnership with communities concerned with assembling effective career navigation infrastructure.

Additionally, we plan to undertake work to position this set of integrated career navigation competencies as critical and effective within the education and workforce systems. And we will focus on further articulating the roles of community colleges, One-Stops, and community-based organizations in the kinds of networks we have described here.

Exciting advances in technology enable us all to do more with less, and in particular give workers a wealth of information about the labor and learning markets available to them. Such high tech resources, paired with well-informed and well-connected high touch supports, will enable workers to take full advantage of the choices available to them while better ensuring employer needs are met with the skills they require.

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