

What Makes An Online Service Effective For Student Outreach Programs?

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Many student loan organizations, colleges, post-secondary education departments, and student-focused college access programs like you invest in student outreach services. A recent trend has been to invest in online products and services to enhance an existing online presence or provide enriched services to consumers – students, parents, teachers, and counselors. Online education and career planning services can be very effective at providing information and resources for consumers as a key component of your outreach program.

There is a vast array of services available for you to connect to your web site – everything from free Internet-based one-trick resources to comprehensive, integrated, licensed products. It is important to **understand the differences between these resources** and the characteristics that are fundamental to **satisfying the goals of your outreach program**.

Satisfying Outreach Goals

It is likely that the ultimate goal of your outreach program is **to increase the quantity of students going to college with a quality post-secondary plan**. While you may be providing outreach services as an extension of your core business, ultimately more college-bound students with plans benefits your core business in the regions you serve.

What are the key characteristics of online services that will help satisfy your outreach program goals?

- Stickiness
- Starting early
- Quality tools and content
- Comprehensive and integrated
- Qualifies for implementation

Stickiness

This has nothing to do with students eating their lunches near the computers. It is an information technology industry term for the qualities of a web-site or service that encourage people **to stay longer and return to the site**.

Why is stickiness important to an outreach product? Your goal of more college-bound students with quality plans will more likely be met if students appreciate the content and tools available in your service and return throughout their high school career to plan their transition to post-secondary school.

Education and career planning is not a one-time event. By providing a service that satisfies the needs of students with **breadth and depth of quality tools and content**, you will experience stickiness as students return to work on the different phases of their post-secondary transition.

If brand recognition is an important part of your outreach program then a sticky resource helps fulfill this need **by conditioning consumers that your brand is associated with a useful resource** that can be used throughout middle school and high school – from early career exploration to college applications and employment readiness.

The factors discussed below all help build stickiness in an online service.

Starting Early

It's never too early to start. **Middle schools** are designed to assist in the development of young people in many ways. One is helping them understand how their current educational and personal choices will affect their future lives including their choices for a career and post-

secondary training. **Exploration of options in the World of Work and creating a high school plan to support those options are key outcomes.** The effectiveness and stickiness of your outreach online service will be enhanced if it can serve the needs of middle school students and educators as well as high school students and educators.

Your outreach online service should allow middle school students to investigate their career options using a variety of tools without forcing them to make career decisions. To assist with exploration, content should include **relationships between current school work and career options** and information on post-secondary training required for success in a career.

To assist with the successful execution of the transition from middle school to high school, your outreach online service should include tools to **help students create a high school course plan** that matches their middle school career ideas. Many states and the U.S. Department of Education have defined career pathways or clusters to help students understand, in broad groupings, the relationships between careers, post-secondary programs, and high school courses. The inclusion of **career pathway content and connections** in your online service will help middle school educators achieve student outcomes and support implementation of your service in middle schools.

With support for the middle school outcomes of exploration and high school planning, your outreach online service can **serve students and parents in your region from 7th through 12th grade.** If brand recognition is an important goal of your outreach program, then providing a service that can be implemented in middle school provides additional and important years of **conditioning students and parents to recognize the helpful services provided by your organization.**

Quality Tools and Content

The 1993 New Yorker cartoon of a dog sitting at a computer saying to a canine friend “On the Internet no one knows you’re a dog” is a humorous way of portraying the fact that it is easy for anyone to create online resources that look good. However, **good visual appearance and lists of hyperlinks are not enough.** Your outreach online service needs to be assembled using quality tools and content.

You need to ensure that the content presented in a service is **accurate, up-to-date, and relevant.** Simply linking to national online government web sites is not adequate. Most do not provide age-appropriate information for students or provide sufficient information for building effective student plans. **Links to national resources also do not allow the online service to be customized** to meet your unique needs because they are controlled by a different national entity.

It is also important that the content present the appropriate **balance between local content and national content.** Local and regional information such as **wages and employment projections** for careers helps give students a better understanding of their local employment opportunities. National data allows them to make informed comparisons. **Local college profiles are important but so are national college profiles** for comparison and to provide a complete planning resource.

Effective services provide the **personalized** touch by allowing students to **search for colleges and careers using their own criteria** that may include the results of personal assessments. There are many different factors that are important to students searching for a college: size, location, tuition, majors, sports, or activities. Students need to be able to personalize their search and use the factors important to them. Comprehensive college searches are an important part of online outreach services because they give students **access to searching tools that work across schools** – something that is not possible on individual school web sites. These tools put all the school information into a common format that makes searching and comparisons possible.

For students to make effective post-secondary plans, they need **relevant content** (as noted above) and **effective tools for creating plans**. Relationships between careers, post-secondary programs/majors, and post-secondary schools need to be presented. Related careers and related programs need to be available to offer students alternative plans. Finally tools need to be available to help students see the **impact of their planning decisions** on their career and education plans.

Privacy of information is a significant feature of a quality system. If student information is to be shared with other entities such as colleges for recruitment purposes, then students and practitioners need to fully understand the uses of the information. **Students should be required to opt-in** to having their information shared with others, rather than being required to opt-out or having no choice.

The Association of Computer-based Systems for Career Information (ACSCI, www.acsci.org) is an organization of entities that create career and education information systems. One of the primary activities of this organization is publishing and maintaining standards for career information and planning systems to help purchasers and consumers judge the quality of systems. **Checklists are available from ACSCI** to let you compare online systems using agreed upon industry standards that cover items like the accuracy, currency, and relevancy of information; interface; confidentiality; and support services.

The difference between quality content and tools and a series of linked resources may not be readily apparent. It is important to talk to high school and middle school educators that currently use online services you may be considering acquiring to **understand the real world satisfaction** with the quality and effectiveness of the system.

Comprehensive and Integrated

Sticky solutions for education and career planning are ones that offer a variety of important services and information that are integrated together to **allow students to connect experiences and see relationships between results and content**.

Many so called “student portals” attempt to be comprehensive by providing links to many different online resources and tools. They seem to subscribe to the “more is better” web site philosophy. These disparate tools can present a variety of interfaces, differ in their quality, and can often frustrate students by resulting in dead ends. A student can finish an assessment and be left asking “So what?”

Online outreach services should provide a comprehensive set of resources and content, but the **resources should be integrated together** to let students connect assessment results and exploration findings together to build plans. There should be a **variety of quizzes and assessments** for students to use. Assessment and quiz **results should relate to planning components** like careers, pathways, programs, and schools. **Content should be connected** to allow students to see the impact of school choices on career plans, and the impact of career decisions on education plans.

An effective service should provide a variety of tools that satisfy different student needs and interests. Comprehensive career profiles, school profiles, financial aid information, a resume builder, job interviewing practice, employment information, real world interviews, and links to external resources are all important components for a student outreach service. You may also want a service where the **content and tools can be customized** to support your unique requirements.

An effective solution for integrating student work and plans is an **online portfolio**. A portfolio integrated into an online outreach service allows students to store their work, continue where

they left off when they return to the service, share work and plans with parents, and keep track of their planning efforts from middle school through high school. **Portfolios make the service more personalized for the student.** Educators like portfolios because they maintain a record of student outcomes and can be an effective student assessment tool. Some states and districts have recognized the importance and usefulness of student portfolios and have mandated the creation of planning portfolios as part of student graduation requirements.

Qualifies for Implementation

If a new word was created for this characteristic it would be “implementation-able” – defined as the ability to be **part of an effective implementation plan.** A key factor in the effectiveness and stickiness of an online outreach service is its ability to satisfy the needs of a **comprehensive career guidance program.** Whether it’s a career and technical education program or a post-secondary planning curriculum, the ability for your online outreach service to be implemented in schools and satisfy the outcomes of the program will play a huge role in the stickiness of the service and its use in your geography.

School counselors and teachers are required to deliver student outcomes that satisfy a program or curriculum. Finding and adopting tools to meet these goals is a challenge. If your online outreach service can **help these teachers and counselors achieve the outcomes for their programs,** your service will be adopted and implemented in the school resulting in stickiness and ownership of the service in the school. The **availability of a variety of implementation plans** that can be used to integrate the service into the school, including **prepared lesson plans and classroom activities,** is an important consideration when choosing an online service in which to invest.

Systems that can satisfy the **needs of all students** – the college-bound as well as those considering post-secondary transitions to the military, apprenticeships, vocational schools, or the workforce – are more likely to be integrated into comprehensive programs.

What kinds of outcomes should your outreach service address to meet program needs? A broad set including:

- Exploration of careers and education options
- Personal assessment (like interests)
- Documenting plans through a portfolio
- Reflective activities

If your online outreach service only satisfies one or a small number of outcomes, it is less likely to be implemented as part of a school program. In an area as potentially complex as the post-secondary transition, **educators are looking for tools that can easily satisfy many of the diverse needs of students.** Like those of us who juggle multiple remote controls for our home entertainment systems, educators do not want to have to juggle multiple disparate resources to help their students.

When something is working, like the rest of us, educators like stability. An “implementation-able” resource will provide a healthy long-term return on your investment as educators will appreciate its consistent assistance year after year.

Summary

If you are considering investing in an online student outreach service, or considering upgrading your existing service, creating a sticky service will result in return users, brand recognition, and effective results for you. Use the characteristics described above to assess the potential stickiness of your proposed solution.

Can the service start early in middle school and serve students, parents, and educators through middle school and high school?

Is the service composed of quality tools and content that are comprehensive and integrated together using a student portfolio?

Does the service satisfy the needs of educators to achieve student career and education planning outcomes? Since tools that can help all students are more likely to be implemented into a school, district, or state program will the service be useful and sticky for college-bound students and all other students?

If you can achieve positive answers to these questions as you evaluate a system then you are likely on your way to delivering an effective online student outreach service that will satisfy your outreach goals and the needs of students, parents, and educators in your region.

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Bridges Transitions
33637-B Highway 97 N.
Oroville, WA 98844

800-281-1168
www.bridges.com