

Career Exploration Activities

Individual Plans of Study Tip Sheet

Regional
Educational
Laboratory Central

January 2025

Career exploration is about understanding one's own career interests and learning about the skills needed to succeed in today's economy.^{1,2,3} Examples of career exploration activities for middle and high school students include completing personal interest inventories and career research projects, experiencing work-based learning through field trips to businesses and internships, and learning about careers from school guest speakers.

Career exploration activities can help students feel prepared and make meaningful decisions about their futures.⁴ These activities can help students identify and articulate their interests, skills, abilities, values, and goals and how they align with specific careers. Career exploration is also a way for students to learn about themselves, try out new roles, and develop self-efficacy skills.⁵ When students have opportunities to learn about careers, connect their own interests and strengths to them, and reflect on their goals for life after high school, they can be more likely to make choices about postsecondary education and careers that are attainable and enjoyable.⁶

Individual Plans of Study in Kansas

Kansas requires all middle and high school students to have an Individual Plan of Study (IPS). An IPS is a personalized plan students co-create with educators to align their interests and strengths with their college and career goals and how to achieve them.

Career exploration is a key activity to help students make the most of their IPS. Other IPS activities are education and career goal setting, student e-portfolios, and workforce competency and skill development.

REL Central created this tip sheet in collaboration with educators leading IPS implementation in several Kansas school districts, including Hesston USD 460, Hutchinson USD 308, Northeast USD 246, Piper USD 203, Shawnee Mission School District, and Wichita Public Schools. **The tip sheet provides examples of how to integrate career exploration in classroom and school activities.** It includes links to tools, documents, and resources that have not been endorsed by IES, but which were provided by educators who participated in developing the tip sheet as examples that are currently used in Kansas.

REL Central has partnered with the Kansas State Department of Education and Kansas school districts to expand the use of promising IPS practices and increase student participation in them.

Why are educators encouraging career exploration?

Educators who partnered with REL Central to develop these tip sheets noted several reasons for embedding career exploration into the IPS and academic experience. Primarily, they highlighted that career exploration activities across different classroom settings bring a “real-world” connection that helps motivate students to do well in their core classes to achieve their goals for life after high school. Additionally, career exploration practices are connected to three standards within the Career Domain of the Kansas School Counseling Model Standards, which guide schools on skill-building opportunities.

Embedding career exploration: Example activities from Kansas educators

Two career exploration activities that Kansas school districts are using are a comprehensive career exploration program for middle and high school students and career-focused projects. Educators leading these activities aspire to create cohesive learning experiences that help students prepare for postsecondary success over time. Activities may occur during non-academic periods, often known as advisory or seminar classes, during content classes, or as one-time events.

1. Comprehensive career exploration program for middle and high schools

In the Shawnee Mission School District, counselors coordinate activities and support educators in a comprehensive, district-wide career development program for middle and high school students.

Middle school

All middle school students receive career exploration programming in seminar class, primarily through the online career and college readiness platform Xello. They also attend district-wide career fairs, which include professionals who present on high-demand careers in the community. Students use information from Xello interest assessments to identify which professions they would like to learn more about. Additionally, professionals from the community guest speak in seminar class about their jobs.

Counselors' tips for implementing in middle school:

- **Recommend the use of seminar or class time** for discrete activities to preview career exploration in developmentally appropriate ways.
- **Create templates for outreach** and promotional materials that community leaders can adapt to use at career fairs.

High school

Seminar class teachers receive training on how to engage students in [career exploration conversations](#), such as by asking questions like “How might this career help you live the lifestyle you want?” High school students also attend career fairs, where they learn more about needed skills for careers.

A programming highlight is an internship bootcamp, where students learn how to find an internship posting, write cover letters and applications, interview for internships, and present themselves professionally. In the fall, students in the bootcamp receive [feedback on their resumes](#) and build a self-pitch. While developing the self-pitch, students apply the information they learned about themselves during seminars to better articulate their skills and attributes. Teachers also [present on interview skills](#) like practicing answers to common questions, understanding etiquette and attire, and learning appropriate questions to ask interviewers.

Counselors' tips for leading implementation in high school:

- **Focus on distinct shorter-term activities**, like researching a career or attending an industry field trip, that all contribute towards a long-term career goal or achievement.

To kick off internship bootcamp, students begin with a [blank stick figure](#) to represent themselves and add a combination of images and words that represent their skills, traits, and goals. Other examples of internship bootcamp resources can be found [here](#).



- **Train multiple educators** within a school on topics like interview skills, resume writing, and career research so they can teach students about career development and professional skills.
- **Create an [easy-to-use calendar](#)** for career exploration programming that all teachers can use with their daily schedules and curricula.

2. Career-focused projects

English teachers across Kansas districts have creatively linked career exploration to English skills by offering career-connected projects and career research projects for high school students.

Career-connected projects

To support experiential learning, students in Shawnee Mission School District participate in quarter-long **client-connected projects** with leaders from local community businesses and other teachers in the school. Leaders present during seminar time at the beginning of the quarter **about their organization, the challenge they seek to address, and the impact student-developed solutions will have on the business**. Students then submit applications to their English teacher stating why they want to work on the project, why it feels important, and why they are suited for the role. Educators [assign groups](#) based on the applications, and each group is then matched to the client with the associated need.

Think about ways to work with clients who are community or local business leaders so that their problems (and solutions) are more relevant to what students experience and value.



More examples of resources for implementing client-connected projects can be found [here](#).

Students work in groups for the duration of the project using a [shared framework](#). They post weekly project updates on a team blog. Each group member has an identified role, such as team historian, team leader,

project leader, or communications coordinator. Teams track their time using teacher-designed [digital time sheets](#), which only the teacher monitors. To complete the project, **students learn about research using these examples and complete research about the industry, the client’s challenge, and solutions the client has tried before.** Students can also gather [data](#), which they do via surveys or observations, and analyze the data to include in the [final recommendation and presentation](#). They pitch these recommendations to the client **via in-class presentations that all clients attend.** To conclude the project, they submit an [individual report](#) where they reflect on their project, review or consider feedback about their group, and list any outstanding questions they may have.

Educators’ tips for implementing client-connected projects:

- **Invite educators and business leaders** to pitch problems with tangible solutions.
- **Teach students about professional skills** and presentation skills to pitch solutions confidently.
- **Teach students how to work together in groups** as a core career exploration activity.

Senior capstone projects

To support ongoing reflection and self-development, students in Wichita Public Schools and USD 246 complete senior projects in the fall of each year. Senior projects. Seniors pull information from [their Xello](#) lessons, such as career matchmaker, and design a personalized presentation that features the key information from those activities. In some projects, they choose two career pathways and conduct research on what that career entails and how to achieve it. Seniors work on the project throughout the year and present their projects to community members and school staff on Presentation Day. [School staff are trained](#) on the importance of the project.

These districts have uniquely designed projects, but all encompass the full range of a senior’s academic achievements and key career development components. Project descriptions and examples [in this folder](#) represent multiple school and district perspectives.

All seniors are required to complete the project and presentation, based on [comprehensive guidance](#). The project includes a [PowerPoint](#) presentation and a [personal statement essay](#) that

they prepare throughout the semester. The essay is intended to be useful in applications for college, scholarships, and jobs. During class time and as homework, students conduct research that pertains to their career choice, including average salary and compensation, education requirements, and geographic considerations. They also investigate personal goals about the kind of life they want, including homes, cars, families, and hobbies, to see if their potential careers will allow them to achieve that lifestyle. Students prepare findings and reflections in their [PowerPoint](#) presentation.

Presentation Day for the senior projects is important for the whole school. English teachers invite educators across the building and community members and leaders to attend. Each student presents to a panel of two or three adults, and students support and learn from other students by attending their peers’ presentations. Panelists use a [scoring rubric](#) and a list of [interview-type questions](#) to ask during the presentation. Although students receive a grade, the rubric is primarily intended to offer feedback and encouragement for the work they put in. One school used ACT WorkKeys testing day as Presentation Day, which led to 100 percent participation.

Make Presentation Day interesting—and required—for students by offering incentives such as a pass to miss one assignment for completing the presentation. You could also align it to an important day (for example, a state testing day), when more of the school community is likely to be present to offer support.



Educators’ tips for implementing senior projects:

- **Start small,** for example, with one teacher or class, to grow out the project.
- **Promote the project** as a highlight of senior year to generate enthusiasm.
- **Provide as much guidance as possible,** like this [Capstone Handbook](#), to students to understand the project’s goals.

Recommendations from the field

Kansas educators with experience in supporting students with IPS indicated that educators interested in implementing these career exploration activities in the classroom **do not need to start from scratch and they don’t need to do it alone.** Educators state that it takes intentional collaboration among school staff to

embed these practices across classrooms and to contribute to a school culture that prioritizes career planning.

“It didn’t just happen. These were intentional sets of decisions that took several years to turn into a comprehensive program.”

Middle school principal

Recommendations for classroom use from educators

- **Give students** choices about what topics, clients, or careers to study. Giving choice and agency increases interest in and connection to the project.
- **Start small** with specific, simple activities and slowly add more activities over time so you don’t overwhelm students.
- **Seek out other teachers or counselors** with time, experience, or other resources who can help implement your activities or programming.

- **Vary content** to appeal to students with different needs or goals. You can do this by offering different versions of lessons that cover similar topics, designing several options of final projects for students to complete, or asking students what interests them.

Strategies for generating buy-in

- **Use incentives**, like tying presentations to [WorkKeys participation](#) days or giving a “no-homework pass” to entice students to participate in activities.
- **Provide a compelling rationale to students, families, and school staff.** The person implementing any career exploration programming must show the value in bringing it to their curriculum and come from a place of caring about students.
- **Provide detailed guidance** so that every student knows exactly what to do.
- **Embed career exploration activities into multiple classes**, not just seminar time. Connect those activities to a grade-level or school-level theme like “knowing yourself.” This contributes to a school culture of career exploration that makes buy-in easier.

Endnotes

- ¹ Patton, W., & Porfeli, E. J. (2007). Career exploration for children and adolescents. In *Career development in childhood and adolescence* (pp. 47–69). Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789460911392_005
- ² Porfeli, E., & Lee, B. (2012). Career development during childhood and adolescence. *New Directions for Youth Development*, 2012(134), 11–22. [10.1002/yd.20011](https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.20011)
- ³ Porfeli, E., & Skorikov, V. (2010). Specific and diverse career exploration during late adolescence. *Journal of Career Assessment*, 18(1), 46–58. [10.1177/1069072709340528](https://doi.org/10.1177/1069072709340528)
- ⁴ Shen, Q. (2021). The importance of integrating career planning education into high school curriculum. *Proceedings of the 2021 4th International Conference on Humanities Education and Social Sciences (ICHESS 2021)*. Atlantis Press. <https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.211220.364>
- ⁵ Mortimer, J. T., Zimmer-Gembeck, M. J., Holmes, M., & Shanahan, M. J. (2002). The process of occupational decision making: Patterns during the transition to adulthood. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 61(3), 439–465. <https://doi.org/10.1006/jvbe.2002.1885>
- ⁶ Bridgeland, J., Dilulio, Jr., J., & Morison, K. (2006). *The silent epidemic – Perspectives of high school dropouts*. The Gates Foundation. <https://docs.gatesfoundation.org/Documents/thesilentepidemic3-06final.pdf>