

**Career and Academic Forums: A Model to  
Connect the College Experience to Future Career Options**

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**Abstract**

Many students enter community college with unclear goals or little sense of how to link academic and career plans. We aimed to guide students' decisions about careers by providing career forums in the health, STEM and business fields where professionals spoke about their academic and career paths and follow-up academic forums where staff provided information about their department's services at Bronx Community College (BCC). In total, 163 students attended the health career forum and 205 students attend the STEM and business career forum. A majority of students who completed the post surveys reported the career forums were extremely or very helpful to their future academic plans and most reported they felt very much or somewhat more knowledgeable about their career path after attending the event. Almost half (49%) of those who completed the post survey for the health career forum indicated they would consider an alternative career path. Most students reported the academic forums were helpful to their future

academic plans. These results suggest that hosting career and academic forums may help students identify and enter programs of study that are appropriate for their goals and interests early in their academic career thereby helping to improve completion and retention rates.

## **Introduction**

By 2020, 65% of jobs in the United States will require some form of a post-secondary degree or credential (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013). Community colleges play a crucial role in fulfilling this need because they provide access to certificate and associate degree programs, which are becoming increasingly important in today's workforce. Community colleges are of particular focus on the national agenda as well. The goal of the college completion agenda is to increase the proportion of 25- to 34-year-olds who hold an associate degree or higher to 55 percent by 2055 (Hughes, 2012). In Fall 2011, over one third (36%) of all students enrolled in postsecondary education and almost half (46.7%) of all students enrolled in a public postsecondary institution were enrolled at a community college (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Grinder, 2012). With so many students now enrolled in two-year institutions, community colleges are instrumental in reaching this national goal.

Completing an associate and/or bachelor degree program can be an important first step in helping students access higher paying positions to support themselves and their families, especially for those who are minority, first-generation and low-income. Yet, many students are unable to complete their degree. Among first-time college students who enrolled in a community college in fall 2011, both part-time and full-time, 37.5 percent earned a credential from a two- or four-year

institution within six years (this excludes dual enrollment students); for Hispanic students it was 35 percent and for Black students it was 26 percent (Shapiro et al., 2017). The completion rate is even less for those who are very low-income. According to Ma & Baum (2016), 14 percent of students with family income in the lowest income quartile (less than \$30,000) who started at a public two-year college in 2003–04 completed an associate degree by 2009.

Upon entering college, students face many barriers to completing their degree including juggling school and work, financially supporting themselves (Johnson, Rochkind, Ott & DuPont, 2011) and caring for dependent children (Gault, Reichlin, Reynolds & Froehner, 2014). Additionally, many students enter college with unclear career goals and little knowledge of how their current academic course of study is linked to broader career options (Gardenhire-Cooks, Collado, & Ray, 2006). Community college students, in particular, are more likely to be first generation, and come from low-income families and historically underrepresented groups, and therefore may lack the information, robust social networks and guidance they need in making education and career decisions (Baker, Bettinger, Jacob, & Marinescu, 2017). Those students who are lacking in social and cultural capital may also be the least likely able to navigate the system and take advantage of the resources that are available at college. (Karp, O’Gara, & Hughes, 2008). Given the array of options available to them, students may struggle with making choices and end up selecting a major that does not fit with their personality and/or academic abilities. This could ultimately lead to them dropping out of school (Jenkins and Cho, 2012; Scott and-Clayton, 2011).

Students’ choice of major can have a significant impact on their experiences and affect retention and graduation rates. For example, Allen and Robbins (2010) investigated the effect of

personality-major congruence on whether students graduated in a timely fashion. They followed 3,072 students in 15 colleges or universities and 788 students in community colleges. Their results showed higher levels of personality congruence led to greater likelihood of obtaining a college degree in a timely fashion. There is also evidence that a clear, structured path with little deviation, can improve graduation rates as well. In Karp's (2013) literature review of the evidence on student decision making in community college, she cited Stephan, Rosenbaum and Person (2009) who found that students who attended private two-year institutions, with structured pathways that limited students' choice, were more likely to graduate than those attending community colleges. Another study she reviewed indicated that some institutions have moved toward structured pathways that enable students to explore their education and career options while progressing toward a degree (Dadgar, Venezia, Nodine & Bracco, 2013). Recently, the American Association of Community Colleges (2018) launched a national project to build capacity for thirty institutions to design and implement structured academic and career pathways for their students. Karp's (2013) suggests that improving program structure may reduce confusion and mistakes in course selection, however it increases the importance of students' choice of major before they enroll in a program because there are fewer opportunities to change one's mind.

Further, according to a report by the Lumina Foundation (2015), today's postsecondary credentials are complex and fragmented and present significant challenges to students and colleges. In Carnevale, Garcia & Gulish's (2017) report on career pathways for college students, they summarize that it is difficult to assess the value of different credentials and help students figure out how their studies will ultimately relate to the underlying competencies that match job

requirements. College advisors are charged with guiding students in this decision-making process, but they often have limited time and resources. To help address these issues some colleges are using predictive analytics to identify course-taking patterns, completion rates, and other factors that might identify factors that lead to students' progress and success. Other states and colleges have also been looking to provide additional guidance to low-income first-generation students. Carnevale et al. (2017) gave the example of the Center for Urban Research at the Graduate Center at the City University of New York (2018). The Center has created a website that provides common career paths that exist in the New York City metro area to help students plan their career trajectories. Given that many students enroll in college with little idea of what type of program to pursue, there is an urgent need for more and continued focus on guidance and advisement activities that link course of study to careers, especially when students first enroll in a college and are faced with selecting a program that may impact their long-term career prospects and earning potential.

In 2016, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* recognized Bronx Community College (BCC) for its effectiveness in helping poor students move into the middle class, and ranked sixth in the nation for student mobility among all public 2-year colleges. This success comes from BCC's implementation of several evidenced-based student progress initiatives. For example, BCC is piloting CUNY's first campus-wide expansion of the successful Accelerated Studies in Associates Program (ASAP), which is a program that provides full-time students with MetroCards, textbook vouchers, academic advisement, and other retention support. A 6-year study found BCC's ASAP students have a 3-year graduation rate of 50% vs. 17% for BCC as a whole. (Strumbos & Kolenovic, 2017). For many students at BCC though, it takes an average of five years, and

sometimes as long as seven years, for them to graduate. In addition, internal data from BCC's Institutional Research and Assessment office indicates that many students change their major at least one time. This suggests that numerous students' may lack awareness and knowledge about different majors available at the College, their associated career options and the requirements of these majors to be successful. This lack of knowledge and awareness results in several students following a suboptimal pathway, meaning they acquire more credits than is needed to graduate from a two-year program (Bailey, Jaggars, Jenkins, 2015; Crosta, 2014). If students received increased and structured guidance and advisement about different majors and their career paths, as well as information about academic support services on campus, earlier in their academic career perhaps it could have a positive impact on reducing the amount of time students spend studying at BCC and improve retention and completion rates.

In order to address these potential barriers, we applied for and received funding from the College to design and implement career and academic forums through partnerships among BCC's academic departments and the Division of Academic and Student Success to guide student's decision making earlier towards a career path. Specifically, the forums focused on three core concepts: 1) knowledge: expose and inform students about various career options, 2) preparedness: encourage students to leverage opportunities by networking with faculty and industry professionals, and 3) connection: inform students about academic support services to excel in career choices.

We sought to assess the effectiveness of these career and academic forums at BCC by designing methods to answer the following questions:

- 1) Would students report an increased knowledge regarding:
  - a. career options and their academic requirements?
  - b. academic support services on campus?
- 2) Would students report the forums as helpful to their future career and academic plans?
- 3) Would students consider an alternative career path after attending a career forum?  
And if so what would they report as their alternative major?
- 4) What are the top three academic support services students would consider reaching out to in the future?

## **Methods**

### **Sample and Setting**

Our assessment was carried out at Bronx Community College, which is one of the oldest community colleges in the City University of New York (CUNY) system and a federally designated Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). BCC's student body (Fall 2017) is 61% Hispanic, 32% African American, 4% Asian, and 2% White; a majority (58%) are full-time and women (59%). Students hail from more than 100 countries. A majority of BCC's students (53%) are the first in their families to attend college. Nearly all (98.1%) of these students are minorities and 70% qualify for Pell Grants based on low levels of family income. Even with Pell Grants, many students struggle to meet transportation, food, and other living expenses, prompting BCC to create a food pantry and provide housing counseling, government benefit screenings, and other social service supports. BCC offers more than 30 academic degree programs, including nationally accredited programs in Nursing, Nuclear Medicine Technology,

and Radiologic Technology. As of Fall 2017, approximately 3,418 (31%) of BCC's 10,988 students study a broad range of sciences, including Biology, Chemistry, Exercise Science & Kinesiology, Public Health, and Pharmaceutical Manufacturing Technology.

#### Activities

We organized two career forums concentrating on the health, STEM and business fields where professionals spoke about their academic and career paths and two follow-up academic forums where BCC staff provided information about their department's services in BCC. All of the forums were conducted in 2017 during club hours on Thursdays from 12pm-2pm so as not to conflict with classes. The health career forum took place in March during the spring 2017 semester. A panel of guest speakers from the Bronx community who worked in a variety of health fields briefly discussed their career and academic paths and the responsibilities of their profession. The STEM and business career forum took place in fall 2017 and followed the same model as the health career form. A panel of guest speakers from the Bronx community who worked in various fields in STEM and business participated in the event (see Table 1). In addition, the speakers touched upon the core curriculum courses they were required to take during their academic preparation. After the speakers completed their presentations there was a question and answer session for students. Before students left the event, they were asked to complete the post survey. An announcement was made about the follow-up academic forum and students were encouraged to attend the event.



Table 1

List of Health, STEM and Business fields represented at the Career Forums

<u>Health Forum/Spring 2017</u>	<u>STEM &amp; Business Forum/Fall 2017</u>
Biological Research	Accounting
Nursing	Biological Research
Pharmaceutical Industry	Business & Information Systems
Physical Therapy	Epidemiology
Public Health	Geospatial Engineering
Radiologic Technology	Medical Laboratory Technology
Speech Language Pathology	Physicians' Assistant

The follow-up academic support services panels took place in April 2017 and November 2017. A panel of staff from a variety of BCC's academic service departments including career services, personal counseling, tutoring, the library, academic success coaches (advisors) and Single Stop (a service available for BCC students to connect them with available government and nonprofit programs, benefits and services through a coordinated "one-stop shop" solution) discussed the services they provided, hours and location and strongly encouraged students to use their services to help them succeed. In addition, two former BCC students participated in the panels as well and spoke about the strategies they used to help them succeed at BCC. After the speakers completed their presentations there was a question and answer session for students. Before students left the event, they were asked to complete the post survey. Promotional material from each BCC department was placed on a table for students to take as they left the event.

## **Selection Criteria**

The forums were advertised directly via targeted emails to all new students, as well as current students, whose majors fell within the range of the careers that were going to be presented at a forum. The forums were also advertised for new students at the New Student Orientation (NSO), promoted through First Year Seminar (FYS) classes and included in the college calendar of major events. Further, outreach to students was conducted by academic success coaches/advisors and faculty were encouraged to discuss and post information about the forms on their classes' websites and provide extra credit to those students who attended the forums. Additional incentives for students to attend the forums included a lottery drawing of prizes such as gift cards, school spirit gear and metro cards and lunch was provided for all students. For those students who registered online for the forums, follow-up phone calls were made to each student to remind them to attend the event.

## **Assessment Design**

Our design for this assessment of career and academic forums included quantitative methods. We collected quantitative data through pre- and post- participation surveys. Students were asked to register for the career forums online prior to attending the event and list their expected date of graduation and describe their current major and career goals. In the post survey, students were asked about how helpful this event was to their future career plans on a five-point Likert scale that ranged from "extremely helpful" to "not at all helpful". They were then asked if they felt more knowledgeable about their career path after attending the event on a five-point Likert scale

that ranged from “very much” to “not at all”. Finally, they were asked if they would consider an alternative career path after attending the event by answering “yes” or “no”, and if “yes” to list the alternative career path they would consider. The same students who attended a career forum were invited back to a follow-up academic support services forum about a month later. After attending the academic support services form, students completed a post survey that was similar to the first two questions in the post survey for the career forums, except that the questions were reworded to address future academic plans and knowledge of academic support services. The last question asked students to check off the top three academic support services/presentations, out of eight, that were most helpful to them (see Figure 1).

#### **Career Forum (Pre-Survey)**

1. Expected year of graduation (circle a year):

2018   2019   2020   2021   2022   2023   2024   2025   2026   2027   2028   2029

2. What is your current major? \_\_\_\_\_

3. What are your career goals? \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Career Forum (Post-Survey)**

1. How helpful was this event to your future career plans?

Extremely helpful   Very helpful   Somewhat helpful   Slightly helpful   Not at all helpful

2. Please write down any suggestions you have on how we could improve this event for the future.

3. Do you feel more knowledgeable about your career path after attending this event?

Very much   Somewhat   Undecided   Not really   Not at all

4. Would you consider an alternative career path after attending this event?   Yes   No

If yes, please list it \_\_\_\_\_

**Academic Services Forum (Post-Survey)**

1. How helpful was this event to your future academic plans?

Extremely helpful    Very helpful    Somewhat helpful    Slightly helpful    Not at all helpful

2. Please write down any suggestions you have on how we could improve this event for the future.

3. Do you feel more knowledgeable about the academic support services that were discussed today?

Very much    Somewhat    Undecided    Not really    Not at all

4. Check off the top **3** academic support services/presentations that you would reach out to in the future.

\_\_\_\_ Library    \_\_\_\_ Academic Success Center    \_\_\_\_ Personal Counseling

\_\_\_\_ Former BCC students    \_\_\_\_ Career Services    \_\_\_\_ Single Stop    \_\_\_\_ Tutoring

Figure 1. Pre and Post Surveys for Career and Academic Services Forums

**Outcome Measures**

The measures for the pre-survey included expected date of graduation, current major and career intention. Our outcomes measures for the career forums were the helpfulness of the event for future career plans, increased knowledge about career path, consideration of an alternative career path and choice of alternative career path. The outcomes measures for the academic services forum were helpfulness for future academic plans, increased knowledge about academic support services and top three academic support services that students would consider reaching out to in the future.

## Data Analysis

We used descriptive statistics to summarize our findings for the pre and post survey data. For pre- and post-survey data analysis we used Microsoft Excel to generate data for the findings. Our analysis included summaries of total number of attendees, frequencies and percentages of responses.

## Results

### Health Career Forum

Students (N=163) who attended the health career forum and completed the pre-survey described a variety of career intentions in an open-ended question. The top answers included nurse (39), nutritionist (20), “to finish college” (14), doctor (13) public health (5) and “to get a job” (4). Most reported they expected to graduate from the College in 1-3 years at the time the forum occurred. The top six majors of those who attended the health career forum are listed in Table 2.

Table 2

Top Six Majors of Health Career Forum Attendees (N=163)

<u>Majors</u>	<u>Number of Students</u>	<u>%</u>
Dietetics and nutrition science	54	33%
Nursing	29	18%
Liberal Arts	16	10%
Biology	14	9%
Public Health	11	7%
Radiologic Technology	8	5%

Eighty-percent (80%) of attendees (N=119) completed a post-survey for the health career forum.

Eighty-one percent (81%) of students (N=119) who attended the forum found it extremely helpful or very helpful to their future academic plans. Eighty-six percent (86%) of students

(N=119) who attended the forum felt more knowledgeable about their career path after attending the event. Almost half (49%) of those students (N=58) who attended the forum reported they would consider an alternative career path after attending the event. The top alternative career choices listed were Radiologic Technology (10), Nursing (9), Public Health (9) and Physical Therapy (7).

### **STEM & Business Career Forum**

Students (N=205) who attended the STEM and business career forum and completed the pre-survey described a variety of career intentions in an open-ended question. The top answers included accountant (39), “to graduate” (27), nurse (19), “own a business” (13), undecided (12) and teacher (9). Most reported they expected to graduate from the College in 1-3 years from the time the forum occurred. The top six majors of those who attended the STEM and business career forum are listed in Table 3.

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Table 3

Top Six Majors of STEM and Business Career Forum Attendees (N=205)

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<u>Majors</u>	<u>Number of Students</u>	<u>%</u>
Accounting	51	25%
Business Administration	26	13%
Dietetics and nutrition science	23	11%
CUNY Language Immersion Program	15	7%
Nursing	14	7%
Computer Information Systems	13	6%

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Eighty-seven (87%) of students (N=148) felt very much/somewhat that the event was helpful to their future academic plans. Ninety-one (91%) of students (N=148) felt very much/somewhat more knowledgeable about their career path after attending the event. Thirty-seven percent (37%) of students (N=148) declared they would consider an alternative career path after attending the STEM and business career forum. The top alternative career choices listed were biology researcher (10), business administration (9) and epidemiology (5).

### **Academic Support Services Forums**

Sixty-five percent (65%) of attendees (N=60) completed the post survey for the academic support services forum that followed health career forum. Ninety-five percent (95%) of the students (N=39) felt very much/somewhat that the event was helpful to their future academic plans. Ninety-five percent (95%) of students (N=39) felt very much/somewhat more knowledgeable about the academic support services discussed. The top three academic support services students would consider reaching out to in the future are listed in Table 4 and include Single Stop, Career and tutoring services.

Table 4

Top Three Academic Support Services (Health Career Forum) N=39

<u>Majors</u>	<u>Number of Students</u>	<u>%</u>
Single Stop	27	69 %
Career Services	21	54%
Tutoring Services	19	48%

Fifty percent (50%) of attendees (N=76) completed the post survey for the academic support services forum that followed the STEM and business career forum. Ninety-seven percent 97% of students (N=38) felt very much/somewhat that the event was helpful to their future academic plans. Ninety-five (95%) of students (N=38) felt very much/somewhat more knowledgeable about the academic support services discussed. The top three academic support services students would consider reaching out to in the future are listed in Table 5 and include the tutoring services, Single Stop and the library.

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Table 5

Top Three Academic Support Services (STEM & Business Forum) N=38

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<u>Services</u>	<u>Number of Students</u>	<u>%</u>
Tutoring Services	26	68%
Single Stop	24	63%
Library	21	55%

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## **Discussion**

Our findings are consistent with the existing literature. Some of the top majors of those who attended the career forums were nursing, nutrition, accounting and business administration. This is reflective of the ten most popular majors that college students pick nationally (Carnevale, Strohl & Melton, 2013), with the exception of nutrition. However, antidotal evidence indicates that many of the nutrition majors at BCC intend to complete their nutrition degree and transfer to a nursing program at a different school. These findings suggest that BCC students tend to choose the most



well-known majors and career path possibly based on the influence of parents (Chung, Loeb, and Gonzo, 1996), friends and financial benefits (Adams, Pryor and Adams (1994).

An overwhelming majority of students who attended the career forums and completed the post-survey found them to be extremely or very helpful to their future career plans. These results support the findings of a focus group study conducted with community college students about the higher education pathway by Public Agenda (2012). Their findings suggest that students want increased exposure to career possibilities so they can make informed decisions about their goals and the steps necessary for success. The majority of students of students who completed the post-survey also reported they felt more knowledgeable about their career path after attending the event. This may indicate that many BCC students may benefit from more advisement about how the majors available at the College are related to a wide array of career options. For example, at BCC our health-related majors are not concentrated in one department or “academy”, rather, they are separated over eight departments. BCC advisors are familiar with on-campus courses and programs but may not necessarily know how studies connect to a broad spectrum of health careers. Thus, the opportunity to map a course of study leading directly to career employment may be lost, and students may be at risk of dropping out, extending their studies and the cost of those studies, or losing motivation. As is the case with many community colleges, the information about majors and their related careers are available on campus but because of silos that exist among departments, advisement and career services, students are limited in their ability to find and enter programs that are a good fit for them (Karp, 2013).

The most salient finding from this assessment was the number of students who would consider an alternative career path after attending a career forum. Among those students who attended the health career forum and completed the post-survey almost half (49%) would consider an alternative career path and 37% of students who attended the STEM and business career forum and completed the post-survey declared they would consider an alternative career path as well. This reinforces the findings that many students have unclear career goals and lack sufficient knowledge of how their current course of study is linked to broader career options (Gardenhire-Cooks, Collado, & Ray, 2006). It also suggests that if students are exposed to professionals from their community who discuss their personal academic and career stories, they may be open to alternative career paths such as physical therapy, epidemiology and scientific research.

Almost all of the students who attended the follow-up academic forums and completed the post-surveys for both the health career and STEM and business career forums felt they were very much or somewhat helpful to their future academic plans. The students also reported they felt very much or somewhat more knowledgeable about the academic support services discussed. This reflects the findings of the report from Public Agenda (2012) in that students at BCC may be aware that the College offers a wide range of services, but they may have to hunt for specific information about what each of the services that provide. These academic forums provided a central meeting place where staff could present to students about their services. Students could see and meet a variety of BCC staff at one time and learn what services they provide and where their offices are located instead of having to go on a “wild goose chase” and navigating service silos.

One of the top academic support services students reported they would consider reaching out to in

the future was Single Stop. It is not surprising that Single Stop, which connects students to government and nonprofit programs, benefits and services, is listed as a top academic service they would connect with in the future. According to the United States Census Bureau (2018), 43% of those living in the zip code where BCC is located are living in poverty. Many of our students struggle to meet their living expenses and are impacted by food insecurity, housing issues and domestic violence. Increasing students and awareness and knowledge about the services of Single Stop is vital to their success. Single Stop (2018) reports that their services can increase retention by double digits. Pierce (2016) states that scholarships and loans are not enough for low-income students to overcome the financial barriers to attending college. They need help applying for public benefits such as Medicaid, childcare and food assistance. Students often do not take advantage of these benefits because they are unaware of these programs, do not think they are eligible or get frustrated with time it takes to complete the paperwork.

Another top choice for academic support services was the career services office. This further supports the finding that students want more exposure to career possibilities and career counseling Public Agenda (2012). It also reflects that our students are receiving academic advisement that helps many of them successfully navigate College requirements and complete their studies but it may not always be linked well with career counseling. Our career services office is separate from advisement services, as it is in most institutions. Students are often referred to our career services office for further discussion of career goals, job opportunities and internship placements. In Karp's (2013) literature review she suggests that academic and career counseling work together and complement each other. She cites two studies where there is evidence that the integration of academic and career advising improves student outcomes (Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person,

2006; Goomas, 2012). This finding suggests that a future direction for our College may be finding ways to further integrate advisement and career services.

Finally, tutoring services and the library were also selected by students as the other top services they would reach out to in the future. Tutoring is provided for all courses at BCC and the library offers a vast array of services to students as well including instruction on conducting research and a variety of workshops on different topics. Students who participate in tutoring generally tend to have higher GPAs and pass rates (Boylan, Bliss, & Bonham, 1997). Pierce (2016) reported that one of the six strategies for boosting low-income students' success is empowering them to use the available resources on campus. A strategy in the future at our college may be requiring students to attend academic support forums so they become more aware of the services on campus, where they are located and what services they offer.

## **Future Plans**

The career and academic forums were successful at BCC. Over 160 students attended the health career forum and over 200 students attended the STEM and business career forum. Many students attended the follow-up academic forums as well. The forums were conducted during club hours, which is one of the busiest times on campus. During this protected time, when no classes occur, students have the opportunity to participate in over thirty-five different organizations and clubs as well as special events on campus. The forums had a high participation rate during a time when there are many competing events, this is further indication that students valued these forums. Given our findings, we would like for the career and academic forums to be institutionalized at the

College and integrated into BCC students' college experience. The forums could provide information to new and continuing students about the link between academic majors and career possibilities and the academic support services available on campus to help students reach their goals. These forums could be an additional tool used by the College to increase retention and graduation rates. This is similar to the work that is being done through "The College Experience" project at Saint Petersburg College (2018). The goal of the project is to prepare students to succeed in their courses and finish what they start by focusing on five main components of the college experience including expanded out-of-class support, integrated career and academic advising, improved new student orientation, an enhanced learning plan and an early alert and student coach system. Increasing BCC's focus on career counseling and academic support services through the use of these forums could strengthen the link between students' studies and their career choices thus improving their chances of graduating. A recent report from "The College Experience", indicated that of the students who enrolled in classes in summer 2017, 61% made a career decision and had a significantly higher course success rate than those without a career decision (The College Experience: Student Success, 2017).

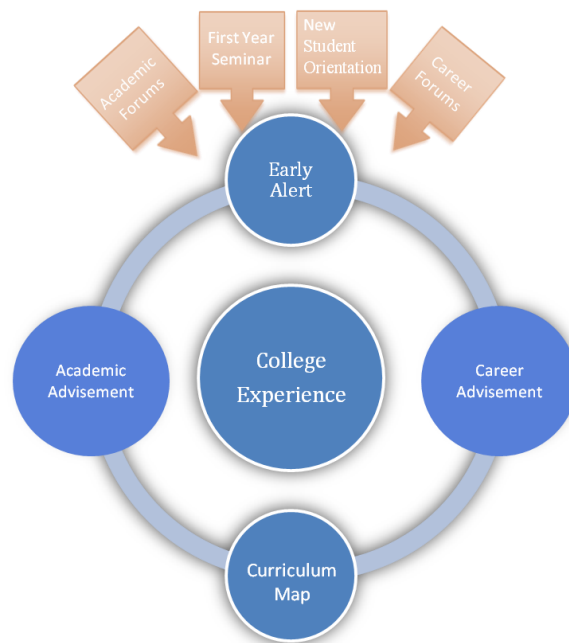
Our model is comparable to the one being used by Saint Petersburg College (2018). (see Figure 2). Some of the main components are an early alert system, which is already being successfully used at BCC, the academic and career forums and the First Year Seminar (FYS), which is a one credit class at BCC that focuses on orientating students to college learning in their first semester. An optimal way to implement the forums at BCC's may be to include them as a continuation of new student orientation (NSO). BCC's NSO is a mandatory 4-hour, on-campus session designed for newly accepted and transfer students. It is a program that provides essential information and

engages students in activities to prepare them for their college journey. According to the Association for Orientation and Transition and Retention in Higher Education (NODA) (2012), part of the definition of orientation is deliberate programmatic and service efforts to help new students transition into the institution and can include multiple day activities. NODA believes that retention is one outcome of successful student transition, which can be facilitated by effective orientation programs. The forums could be conducted in the weeks following the initial NSO session and advertised to all new students as additional NSO activities they would be required to attend. Students would have the choice of picking one career forum and must attend one academic support services forum in their first semester at BCC. The forums could be advertised to all continuing students as well. Including the forums as part of BCC's NSO would allow for all students whether they are part-time, full-time or in one of the special academic support programs on campus, such as ASAP or College Discovery (a comprehensive academic support to assist capable students who otherwise might not be able to attend college due to their educational and financial circumstances) to gain exposure to academic majors, career options and the array of academic support services available on campus. Students may feel more integrated in the College as a result. It may also help to bridge some of the silos that exist among advisement, career services and our academic departments. By bringing faculty, professionals from the community and BCC staff together for these events new connections can be made toward building better pathways to careers for our students.

Further, the forums could be used in combination with other strategies such as exposure to high-end online career reference materials and career inventories. We would like to seek funding in the future to build an online repository of career reference materials. Advisors, career counselors and faculty could use the site for their own reference as well and refer students to the site. The site

would contain supporting materials, videos and other learning documents, so that advisors, especially, would have a central trusted resource to use to inform students about their career options and link it to academic courses of study to close the gap. These online reference materials could further breakdown the silos that exist among different departments and place more students on track earlier toward graduation and the right career path by giving them the knowledge they need to succeed.

Figure 2. Student Success Model. Improvement of College Experience with Early Alert System



### Conclusions & Potential Model

Our experience demonstrates the feasibility and success of implementing career and academic forums for community college students. We hope these forums can serve as a potential model for other colleges to use, and incorporate into their current efforts, to help increase retention and

graduation rates. By directing more students to the right career path and academic support services earlier in their academic careers they may be more likely to stay in school and graduate earlier. Our findings indicate that students are highly receptive to and influenced by career forums that include speakers from their community who share their academic and career path stories and advice. In addition, the academic support services forums provided a central location where students could meet and learn about a variety of support services that were available at the College. Students met and communicated with staff in person, learned about the academic support services they offer, their location and hours of operation. These types of forums, especially if they are built into mandatory NSO activities, could have the potential to increase students' knowledge of the academic support services and reduce the amount of time students may have to spend on their own figuring out what services are available, what they offer and where they are located.

This model also has the potential to bridge the silos that exist among diverse departments at colleges and assist in closing the gap that exists between students' choice of program major and career options. By bringing together staff, faculty and professionals from the community, the forums can increase opportunities for real connections and an exchange of knowledge around majors and career pathways. In addition, the forums could be combined with other strategies, such as high-end online career reference materials and career inventories, which have the potential to further improve student's knowledge about academic and career paths and increase retention and graduation rates, which can ultimately improve students' access to better paying jobs and financial stability.



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