**Elements, Reactions, Chocolate Chip Cookies, and Career Decision-Making with the Launchboard Program Data Snapshot Tool! By Lynell Wiggins**

Upon hearing the title perched above this little narrative you are immediately drawn to the idea that “***one of these things is not like the other***.” Nevertheless, I arrived at this concept through synthesizing a number of factors tied to how students in the community college system come to make decisions regarding their future. As a student services professional, our highest hope is for students to actualize their academic, career, and life goals with the least amount of collateral damage. Therefore, when I was contacted by Kathy Booth to share my perspective on how to leverage data for student support I became stuck in analysis. Unfortunately, this analysis turned into a bit of paralysis, as Kathy patiently waited for a few slides from me to include in our presentation.

Does having the right information, ***just in time***, lead students to the types of program selection and outcomes that will stimulate our workforce system in the same way our economy was resuscitated? I certainly believe it can, but if we are to do so we must not ignore the biological conundrums that find their way into our offices every day. The complexity of the California Community College student’s life can be astounding. Some of these intricate career pathway selection issues can be solved through the lens of biology. However, the last time I checked my college’s catalog, chemistry was a prerequisite for achieving success in understanding biology, so let’s begin!

**Hypothesis**: Career Decisions are like making chocolate chip cookies. We all know the type we like when we see or taste them, but we don’t always know how to reproduce what makes some batches more special than others.

**Observation**: The core challenge is that many of us have yet to identify the correct elements to include in the mixture, but more importantly, you must create the appropriate conditions to achieve maximum yield from each batch. The tools within the Launchboard system initiate just the right type of inquiry and should be equated with providing the necessary heat to produce the outcomes we’re looking for. We must not forget, it is important to have student service monitors involved in this process to help ensure that the oven isn’t left to its own devices, leading to an outcome that’s underprepared or overcooked; an even worse consideration is that we assume all of the “**elements**” in each batch of cookies bake at the same temperature. Have you ever witnessed how elevation can impact your baking process? Be sure to take your unique environment into consideration!

**Results**:The truth of the matter is that baking a great cookie, as well as being an informed decision-maker, is more ***art than logic***; it is more **heart than mind**. This means it takes practice and should be cultivated in an environment that utilizes assessment within an authentic reflective structure. Yes, you followed your grandmother’s ingredients of how to bake her famous chocolate chip cookies, but the individual “**elements**” have yet to produce what you’re looking for. The difficulty with facts such as labor market information is that they can be intensely rational and reason based. Our students can get their minds around why they should pursue a particular occupation based on available opportunities within a region, but for most, the right environment hasn’t been developed for them to grow in confidence and experience maximum production (WBL, job-shadows, internships, training, etc.). We must see ourselves as being in the ***passion*** generating business because once it’s initiated the learner makes a deeper connection with the work environment and opportunities that exist within a particular field. It is vital that we begin with the end in mind by helping students understand the value of acquiring a satisfying occupation that offers a living wage (on an individual or family basis).

**Materials**: What happened to our chemical reaction to better help us understand what’s going on with students when trying to make a career decision? Let’s look at the “**elements**” that contribute to making a great cookie. One atom of an element is the smallest piece of matter that can be measured. However, to make a great chocolate chip cookie you need to produce a compound that consists of different types of elements. So let’s look at our ingredients (each element):

**“Wet Elements” “Dry Elements”**
Butter + Sugar + Eggs + Vanilla = **Wet Compound** Flour + Salt + Baking Soda = **Dry Compound**

First, you need two sticks of butter, so consider them separately. The two individual elements create a molecule of butter. Next we add the element of eggs, which must be beat in a separate dish; so now you have eggs in a separate bowl, which creates a molecule of eggs. When you mix all of the “***Wet”*** ingredients together you have a compound called “***Wet”****.* When all the dry ingredients are mixed together (think of each as a separate element) you have a compound called ***“Dry”***. It is only when the “***Wet”*** compound is mixed with the ***“Dry”*** compound that the reaction is ready for the most important element, chocolate chips.

As Student Services Professionals we must help students cultivate career based engagements at every critical juncture of the work-based learning continuum. We should all be asking ourselves what are the appropriate “**elements**” that should be included in our plan to create a reaction significant enough to add chocolate chips (this is when decision-making crosses the threshold into a matter of art and heart). Our goal should ultimately be to change the culture of our campuses in a substantive manner by creating positive work-based learning experiences for our students. The best way to effect someone’s biological constitution is to introduce a reacting agent in their life that causes them to reconsider prior beliefs. Create impactful experiences and allow them to be your Girl Scouts who sing the praises of your career training and preparation programs because they were developed within an environment of care and concern for the whole student. Since our students are our most successful program marketers, consider designing a continuum based experience that relies on credible labor market data and “significant reactions” within a construct of multiple advising contacts.

This is our latest recipe at PCC and we welcome you to try it.

Warmest regards,

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