

To Merge or Not to Merge, That is the Question!

Introduction

Whether to merge Tech Prep or not has been looming on the minds of State Directors ever since reauthorization of the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Improvement Act of 2006 (Perkins IV). This brief will explore the opportunities and challenges facing states as they make this important decision, including highlights of how three states are addressing this complex issue.

What is the Purpose of Tech Prep?

In the early 1980's a broad-based reform initiative in career technical education (CTE) began with the goal of upgrading traditional vocational education to respond to changing economic and workforce development needs. In response, Congress made significant changes in education, resulting in the creation of Tech Prep, a separate funding stream for innovative secondary-postsecondary partnerships designed to "improve the academic proficiency of technical students and facilitate student transition from secondary to postsecondary institutions through articulation agreements."¹ In Perkins IV, Congress gave states increased flexibility in how they use their Tech Prep funds; with provisions in the law allowing an eligible agency to consolidate all, or a portion of, funds received in order to carry out activities described in the State plan.

Tech Prep was created as a separate funding stream for innovative secondary-postsecondary partnerships.

A Snapshot of the Dilemma

Many tensions exist that make the merge decision difficult. Is Tech Prep the best way to create an incentive for secondary/postsecondary collaboration? If you don't merge, can your state meet the 20 new accountability requirements² along with Title I measures? If you do merge, can you continue to financially support and continue the momentum of Tech Prep activities? How do you keep the identity of a strong, innovative Tech Prep program alive? What if you're looking to jump-start change in your state?

Some answers can be found in three states that have gone through the decision process: **Montana**, a state that chose not to merge; **Oregon**, a state that initially chose not to merge, but decided to merge after extensive conversations with regional consortia; and **Maryland**, a state that chose to merge Tech Prep.

Merge? No: Montana

by Arlene Parisot, Ed.D, Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education

Montana was faced with several issues that made them realize that they needed to redesign not merge Tech Prep in order to improve outcomes for their students, create an environment for innovation, and provide consistency of information and data. First, Montana is a large state in size, but a small state for funding. If the state merged the Tech Prep funds, the dollars would be spread too thin across secondary and postsecondary programs and the end amount of dollars that each school or institution would receive would not allow for much innovation. Second, although course-to-course articulation was extensive, only a small percentage of students

actually claimed a Tech Prep credit at a postsecondary institution. Several scenarios contributed to this: state policy which required the student to complete 12 credits at the participating institution before being eligible to claim the credit; students choosing to enroll in institutions that were outside of the regional consortium and did not recognize the articulated course; or, students who were simply unaware that a Tech Prep credit had been earned at the secondary level. Regardless of the reason, the benefits of Tech Prep to Montana’s students and parents had not been fully realized.

Advice from Montana:

Perkins IV opens the door to innovation. The decision to merge or not should not be made with a mindset of business as usual. The decision should be made in the context of innovation at both the local and state levels.

Montana looked at the merge option, but took the opportunity to innovate after first clearing their minds of the ‘business as usual’ approach. Montana realized that such an undertaking would not be without concerns: they knew that ensuring a statewide system of immediate, portable credentials for students would be a huge undertaking that must involve more than CTE alone.

During the transition year, Montana dissolved its five regional consortiums and awarded a new statewide consortium through a competitive process. This single consortium is designed to provide administrative leadership for Tech Prep; function as a clearinghouse for information and resources; designate other postsecondary institutions in the state to develop specific career clusters and related pathways; and provide the model for development of Big Sky Pathways (programs of study) for local Perkins projects.

To make this work, Montana established a State Leadership Board representing administrative leadership for secondary and postsecondary to provide oversight of Title I and Title II funds. Also, a State Advisory Committee will be appointed in 2008 to provide consultation to the Board and its staff. Its membership will represent state agencies, adult education, business and industry, teachers and faculty, counselors, administrators and community stakeholders.

Innovation means change and change is often met with unease and resistance. Montana recognizes that it has a long road ahead to gain the buy-in of students, counselors, teachers/faculty, and administrators, but in the end, it is all about the students and their opportunities for educational advancement. Keeping that in mind, it will be worth the effort.

Merge? No, then Yes: Oregon

by Jim Schoelkopf, Oregon Department of Education

The phrase “timing is everything” is appropriate in describing the convergence of several significant initiatives that have influenced Oregon’s decision regarding the use of Tech Prep funding. Perkins IV provided a lever to spur a thoughtful assessment of Oregon’s CTE system. Simultaneously, Oregon’s K-14 State Board of Education is redesigning the high school diploma to stress authentic student demonstration of proficiency, college and career planning/readiness and student access to college-level coursework when ready. Furthermore, community colleges

are promoting career pathway systems and ensuring secondary alignment is solid and in place as part of Oregon’s Career Pathway system.

The diploma redesign and the career pathway development make a perfect environment for the development and implementation of CTE Programs of Study, with state staff able to easily position programs of study as a capacity lever for implementation. But what does this mean for Tech Prep?

Oregon has a strong legacy of solid regional partnerships. Each of the state’s 17 community colleges maintains a consortium with high schools in the community college district. Many of these regional consortia have been functioning for more than 20 years and provide significant capacity for Oregon’s CTE system. These regional consortia have been the recipients of Perkins Tech Prep funding.

In an analysis of consortium work, early implementation examples of the new diploma requirements and career pathways emerged. Additionally, as they plunged deeply into the Perkins IV Programs of Study discussion with regional consortia, it became clear there was overlap, and in some cases, duplication between CTE Programs of Study and Tech Prep.

Oregon did not want to intentionally implement duplication. Instead, they wanted to provide models that are clearly understood and provide local capacity for diploma requirement and career pathway implementation. Conversations with the regional consortia resulted in the recommendation to consolidate efforts into CTE Programs of Study as the mainstream CTE model and merge Tech Prep funding into the Basic grant to support this focus.

As with many decisions, a change in the Perkins funding model has raised questions. It was confirmed by regional consortia that they wanted to maintain a regional allocation of funding to promote collaborative efforts and sustain regional momentum. In response, Oregon will use the Reserve Fund to sustain the regional momentum fostered by the regional consortia. Many of the Tech Prep functions will continue, just in a new context. The “former” Tech Prep Coordinators are energized with building on Oregon’s solid Tech Prep foundation and serving students within a CTE Program of Study model.

Oregon considered Tech Prep more of a process than a stand alone program, so the potential loss of identity for Tech Prep was not so much an issue as was sustaining the Tech Prep processes that are solidly in place. Furthermore, the utility of the new Tech Prep performance measures was a factor in that Oregon felt they would not provide the kind of continuous

<p style="text-align: center;">Outcomes for Oregon</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">*Sec-post-sec CTE Programs of Study that are based on standards, alignment & articulation, accountability and student support services.*Alignment & articulation will be inclusive of credit articulation and the continued use of Tech Prep elements to inform CTE Program of Study development and implementation.*Use of performance data to measure the effectiveness of student sec to post-sec transitions.

improvement data they would want. The decision to merge funding streams was the solution to relieve Oregon of the complete set of Tech Prep performance measures even though they will be retaining some for their in-state use.

Merge? Yes: Maryland

by Nina Roa, Tech Prep Specialist, Maryland State Department of Education

In Maryland, Tech Prep has been used as an innovative approach leading to the development of high quality CTE programs based on increased academic standards, improved student achievement and the advancement of students into postsecondary education and high wage, flexible career paths. Since the inception of Tech Prep, spending on all CTE programs has been aligned to the goals identified in Tech Prep including a more rigorous academic core and secondary to postsecondary CTE program articulation. As a result, for the past several years, over 50% of CTE program completers have met the academic requirements for entrance into postsecondary education in addition to the technical requirements of their programs.

The most recent National Assessment for Vocational Education (NAVE) report indicated that the components of Tech Prep were becoming more common in the delivery of CTE services under the basic grant. In addition, many states are organizing education around career pathways and when done correctly career pathways contain all the elements of the best Tech Prep programs.³ With the development of Maryland's Career Clusters, CTE pathway programs and career development framework, value added components were integrated into all CTE programs, not just those designated Tech Prep.⁴ Thus, the Maryland CTE/Tech Prep program development process became one in the same. An analysis of Tech Prep and Basic grants spending revealed such similar outcomes that it made sense to combine the two sources of funding.

Including the Tech Prep award in the formula grants to local school systems and community colleges allowed recipients additional time to plan their CTE initiatives and allow for purposeful decision-making, including appropriate budget planning. Although local school systems and community colleges submit plans separately, they are required to work collaboratively in the development and implementation of their CTE plans. The value-added program components such as articulated credit and industry certification are now applied to all CTE programs in Maryland.

Conclusion

What can other states take away from these stories? Collaboration and careful thought in the decision-making process were key ingredients in each state that provided their story for this report. Montana suggests that the merge decision should be made in the context of innovation at both the local and state levels; they were able to strengthen their existing Tech Prep program and take it in a new direction. Oregon recommends seeking out what is best for your state and CTE

April 1, 2008 is the deadline for states to submit their five-year State plans to the Department of Education. Will your state's decision regarding Tech Prep reflect your vision for CTE?

students, not what is administratively convenient. Maryland came to the conclusion that their CTE/Tech Prep program development process was one and the same and merging proved logical for their state.

Each state will need to find answers on the merge issue, and think through the consequences of their decision. States need to discuss “What is the intent of the new legislation as it relates to my state?” and ask:

- What are you doing right? What do you *want* to be doing right? Does your current Tech Prep program align with your vision of what CTE should be?
- What are the differences between your CTE Program of Study design and the elements of Tech Prep? Would merging clarify or complicate?
- Does Tech Prep need to be redesigned, or can the current system suffice?
- What are you doing with your reserve fund option? Can you use the reserve fund to continue Tech Prep activities?
- How will your state address the accountability requirements, and what will be the long term funding implications?
- Is Tech Prep proving to be the catalyst that brings your secondary and postsecondary together?

Think about what is best for your state, and involve all your stakeholders in making a decision which maximizes your Perkins funds, creates positive outcomes for students, efficiently uses your valuable (and limited) resources, and leads your state in the right direction. Tech Prep was originally designated as a program for innovation and became a catalyst for morphing vocational education into career technical education. So in considering the future of your Tech Prep program, what would you like the next evolution of CTE to be?

For more information about the Tech Prep issue, or for more detailed Tech Prep-related state plan information for Montana, Oregon, and Maryland, please visit the [Tech Prep Toolkit](#) on the National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education (NASDCTEc) website.

¹ Hull, Dan (2005). *Career Pathways: Education with a Purpose*. CORD Communications.

² The Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Improvement Act of 2006, Sect. 203(e).

³ Brustein, Michael, and Krvaric, Sheara (2007). *The Tech Prep Guide to Perkins IV (The Roadmap to Meaningful Accountability, Moving Beyond the Status Quo)*.

⁴ Policies and Procedures for the Development and Continuous Improvement of Career and Technology Education Programs. Accessed at <http://marylandpublicschools.org/NR/rdonlyres/FBCED237-BC72-4CAF-8905-5809B6E26E55/8820/January2006PoliciesProceduresforDevelopingCTEProgr.doc>.

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