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INTRODUCTION

As the State of Washington seeks to build and cultivate a culture that is conducive to Talent and Prosperity for All (TAP),¹ the importance of integrated services delivery has become more apparent. According to the American Community Survey, approximately 32.3% of Washington residents have a high school degree (includes equivalency) or less, and 12.2% are considered to be living in poverty. Fortunately, there are many workforce programs, public services, and funding sources that can help these individuals to move into meaningful, living-wage careers. However, the amount of knowledge, skill, and ability needed to navigate the multiple systems (e.g., workforce, education, public benefits, etc.) appears to be a full-time job in and of itself. Over the past several years, the concept of career navigation has emerged as a means for connecting under served individuals to these life-changing opportunities. The concept of career navigation has been defined as “assistance from an education specialist who coaches and empowers students to develop and pursue post-secondary, career pathway goals and employment.”² Whereas the term emerged several years ago as a means for connecting individuals to services and coaching them through the college and workforce system, the navigation role continues to evolve as community workforce systems and individual needs become more complex.

To better understand what is needed for effective navigation in the community, several interviews were conducted with exemplary individuals who are regarded as experts in the career navigation field (e.g., top-performing navigators, managers, funders, trainers, etc.). From those interviews, a strong theme emerged regarding navigation as a system. Many community-based organizations (CBOs) and workforce programs have shown the value of wrap-around services for participant success. However, navigation experts believe that there is untapped potential for carrying out these services with higher quality and more strategic delegation. It is common consensus that much of the onus for providing multiple services has fallen onto the career navigator, which can inevitably diminish quality. For example, in addition to coaching and connecting participants with services and funding, many navigators are also expected to engage in high-quality recruitment, outreach, employer engagement, and some forms of case management that involve serving as a liaison between participants, employers, colleges, and CBOs. As navigators attempt to take on multiple roles in addition to their 1:1 interactions with clients, it may not come as a surprise that services such

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as employer engagement often fall to the wayside. The main concern of navigation experts is that the realm of services expected of navigators requires different skill sets and a large time commitment to carry out each component well, yet all core elements need to be in place for navigation services to be effective. Therefore, it may be in the best interest of workforce programs and CBOs to begin conceptualizing navigation as a system within which multiple roles can be developed and carried out in an integrated fashion among navigation teams.

NAVIGATION AS A SYSTEM

Due to the changing nature of funding sources, organizational needs, and community resources, navigation experts have advocated against the development of a rigid, streamlined navigation framework. Instead, they have requested that a flexible, navigation system framework be developed that includes all the elements that are needed for navigation to be successful. They suggest delegating the division of roles and responsibilities within that system to individual CBOs and workforce programs as they see fit. For one program, all navigation roles could be distributed across various navigation teams (e.g., recruiting team, employer engagement team, participant coaching team, etc.). For another, the career navigator could specialize solely in 1:1 interaction with participants while collaborating with specialized recruiters and employer engagement specialists within their organization. Regardless of the ways in which organizations go about structuring navigation services, the important point is that to be a successful “navigator,” roles must be carried across all core elements of the system in one way or another.

NAVIGATION SYSTEM FRAMEWORK

The following sections entail a navigation system framework that was developed based on data from interviews with navigation experts, employers, and job-seeking residents of Washington. The navigation system encompasses a set of core elements that include: (a) Recruitment and Outreach, (b) Connecting Participants to Funding Sources, (c) Connecting Participants to Public Services, (d) Coaching Participants, (e) Connecting Participants to Employers, and (f) Serving as a Liaison. Subsequently, a comprehensive list of personal characteristics, knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to engage in high-quality navigation services is discussed. Lastly, information regarding training and evaluation needs, barriers, and needed resources is presented.
A. RECRUITMENT AND OUTREACH

To successfully recruit individuals who could greatly benefit from workforce programs, the consensus is that meaningful relationships need building within the community across CBOs, primary and secondary schools, DSHS, and other entities. To build these relationships, however, a strong communal value needs to be placed on the career navigation system. Many have reported that career navigation doesn’t currently hold the prestige that it should, and that the next step is a shift in the mindset of the community about the importance of career navigation. For this mindset shift to occur, there needs to be more stability within the navigation profession. For example, people across the board discuss the issue of high turnover within the navigator profession, which often leads to lost information and relationships with the community. Experts advocate for increasing resources around rigorous selection, training, compensation, realistic job descriptions, and retention of navigators for the sake of better community relationships that lead to more effective recruitment and outreach. As the community begins to perceive the stability and continual quality of the navigation profession, they may be more likely to welcome them into their doors to do outreach and recruitment.

Furthermore, the ways in which navigators think about recruiting also seems to be shifting. When one navigator is in charge of many functions, he/she is likely to recruit in the most efficient ways possible to maximize time (e.g., going straight to the colleges to recruit participants into workforce programs). However, as navigation roles begin to be specialized among the navigation system, navigators are beginning to think about recruitment through a lens of human-centered design. For example, answering questions such as, “Where do people who need jobs spend their time?” “Who do they interact with?” “What does a day in the life of someone living 200% below the poverty line look like?”, may help shed light on creative ways to engage in recruitment for all (as opposed to focusing on people who are already on their way through educational endeavors).
B. CONNECTING PARTICIPANTS TO FUNDING SOURCES

One of the largest barriers for carrying out successful navigation services arises when the navigator cannot locate adequate resources to meet the participant’s basic needs. Whereas many workforce programs and public funders offer financial resources for housing, car repair, etc., it is often not enough. It isn’t uncommon for individuals enrolled in workforce programs to be living in their vehicles, on the streets, in shelters, or carrying their entire family from one friend’s house to the next. Of all the barriers identified, access to permanent housing and adequate transportation supersede them all. While there is no single answer to this complex problem, navigators have requested that the conversation be carried on by workforce professionals and funders that are seeking to create programs that work for all individuals. Many navigators believe that if more funding was available that provides for basic needs, program success rates would increase and costs would be offset. In addition to some of the common sources of basic funding (basic food and healthcare), there have been strong requests for funding that would cover nontraditional needs such as clothing for an interview, haircuts, and shoes. Throughout the interviews, it became apparent that there is an array of public funding opportunities that are known to a few people, but not to others. One characteristic that separates a good navigator from an excellent navigator is the knowledge one has about what is available. To ensure that all participants have access to the same source of knowledge, it has been suggested that public resources be dedicated to developing a comprehensive, centralized database of public funding sources that can be used across the state and in navigation training.

C. CONNECTING PARTICIPANTS TO PUBLIC SERVICES

While it is not the navigator’s responsibility to provide clinical counseling, substance abuse advice, or other forms of specialized services for participants, it does appear to be part of the navigator role to understand the services that are available and adequately connect participants to those services. Similar to the need for understanding available funding, navigators need to be privy to the multitude of services available in the community. It appears that the extent to which a navigator is aware of certain resources depends on his/her experience with those services and/or his/her manager’s experience. It was once again suggested that the navigation system would greatly benefit by a comprehensive, centralized database of public services, in addition to ongoing training where experts from various public services speak. There have been multiple efforts to accomplish this goal on behalf of various entities; however, many of services fall through the cracks or are not updated regularly. Many professionals in the field discuss having engaged in “resource mapping” numerous times throughout their career, only to find that their knowledge is only as good as the experience they have had, and that their database is as good as the person who keeps up with it. The next step may be to create a system that requires registering services through the state to ensure that all people have access to knowledge about what is available.
D. COACHING PARTICIPANTS

When employers are asked what characteristics they desire in any given employee, specific themes transcend industries. These characteristics tend to include the following: (a) attendance, (b) showing up on time, (c) positive attitude, (d) a willingness to learn, (e) clean appearance and grooming, (f) works well with others, (g) can admit mistakes and learn from them, (h) asks for the next thing when finishing a task, (i) remains disconnected from a cell phone when at work, and (j) baseline abilities in math, English, and reading.

For many individuals who have been out of work, formerly incarcerated, or who are coming from various cultural backgrounds, navigating a new work culture or training program can be difficult. Part of the navigator’s role is to educate the participant on what will be expected of him/her, and to provide the necessary coaching to help the participant navigate the work culture and requirements successfully. It is important to have a navigator that has the competencies (i.e., a through j above) as well, so he/she can serve as a role model for the client and have an understanding of what the client needs to move forward. For example, SkillUp Washington has recently focused on the importance of ensuring that navigators have adequate training in subjects such as math, which can result in better 1:1 conversations between the client and navigator regarding how math fits into various career pathways and certain sectors for the client (e.g., aerospace). This also equips navigators to appropriately work with instructors to identify students who are struggling in math, and connect them to tutoring as needed.

Whereas attendance, timeliness, and other outcomes are desired by employers, these concepts should not be confused with the behaviors that are needed to carry them out. For example, an individual may want nothing more than to be on time for work. However, if the person has never had the experience of learning time management or planning skills, showing up on time may feel like a never-ending struggle. Many navigators are at the forefront of coaching, such that they use multiple tools to help participants plan out their days, identify which bus they will take, identify and plan for barriers, have a plan for meals, and know who to call if they need help.

As participants move closer to becoming employed, navigators can begin working with them on resume/cover letter writing, interviewing, and other forms of communication such as appropriate ways to disclose a criminal background. A large complaint by employers is that some people engage in undesirable behaviors during their interviews (e.g., taking phone calls during the interview, not using good judgment on what to disclose and not disclose, and failing to provide elaborate responses regarding their strengths and experiences). “Desirable behavior” in and of itself is largely a social construction; however, to set participants up for the greatest success with employers, it is important that they have opportunities to practice and receive feedback on their interview skills and other forms of communication. Navigators often engage in activities such as mock interviews, scenario-based discussions, and other forms of structured conversation that will help the participant to communicate in ways that align with employer expectations.
Effective Coaches Need Ongoing Training. Serving as an effective coach for program participants is often easier said than done, according to navigators and employers. Some individuals still perceive coaching as an activity that involves *telling* the participant how they should handle situations, and providing advice. However, best practices in the new paradigm of coaching also entail the *art of asking the right questions*, which is an ability that requires training. Being able to interact with a participant and ask the right questions (and follow-up questions) that will draw out of them the solutions to their unique situations not only leaves them with an action plan that will work for them, but also helps to create the neurological structures needed to continue engaging in such strategic thinking in the future.

E. CONNECTING PARTICIPANTS TO EMPLOYERS

Some of the most successful workforce programs are those that have strong relationships with employers. Depending on a program participant’s individual strengths, experiences, background, etc., a given company may or may not be a good fit for that person. There was consensus throughout the multiple interviews that for navigation to work, a strong employer engagement component must be part of the navigation system. Whether it is the same individual that is working with participants, or an employer engagement specialist, it is crucial to have good rapport with many employers, know what kind of employees they desire, know who will hire people with a criminal background, and be able to connect participants to job-shadowing, internship, or apprenticeship opportunities.

From a different perspective, job seekers have continually reported that one of their biggest barriers to employment is actually knowing who to contact and how to get their “foot in the door.” Job seekers say that applying for jobs online is like throwing one’s resume into a “black hole,” only to make them feel worse when they do not receive a call after days of applying for jobs. When asked what would help them the most, these individuals have clearly stated that having someone that can connect them to a real person and provide them with an opportunity to be face-to-face would be the most helpful.

It isn’t difficult to imagine how much time navigators would need to spend developing relationships with a host of employers to which participants can be connected when ready. Therefore, it is crucial that organizations seeking to fund and/or employ navigators consider employer engagement as part of the navigation system, rather than solely as the navigation role. Some suggestions have entailed career navigation teams that include specialized employer engagement navigators, while others have recommended that navigators should partner with employer engagement experts that already have made the connections. Whichever direction an organization chooses, the important point is that relationships with employers are crucial for program success. Therefore, to set participants up for lasting employment, employer relationship strategies should be well thought-out and receive a significant portion of program resources.
F. LIAISON BETWEEN COLLEGES, EMPLOYERS, CBOS, AND PARTICIPANTS

The final element of the navigation system entails playing a role in developing and maintaining relationships between the participants, colleges, employers, and CBOs. For example, some of the best navigators are known to be present at the colleges several days per week to gain an idea of the material being taught in class, or to connect with the instructor to see if he/she can be of any assistance. Having relationships with the instructors, financial aid representatives, tutoring departments, and even complaints offices enables navigators to have a broad knowledge of the college system. Having this knowledge empowers navigators to provide coaching to participants on enrollment processes, financial aid, placement testing, what classes to take, how to access college-based resources, etc. With many of the budget cuts that colleges have experienced, navigators are uniquely positioned to provide this high-intensity service to participants.

To successfully manage the multiple relationships across college departments, navigators must be adaptable in the way that they speak with different audiences, and must be able to see and understand the big picture of how organizations work. Some major barriers discussed by navigators tend to involve situations where a participant cannot get their financial aid approved, or where they weren’t able to provide proof of previous education records. Without help navigating these complicated systems, these seemingly “small” issues have shown to throw participants off track and sometimes result in withdrawal. To best serve these individuals, navigators need to understand how all the college systems work together, and how to speak the cultural language when working across departments and with participants.
PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS, KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, AND ABILITIES MAKING UP THE NAVIGATION SYSTEM

Best practices in Human Resource Selection entails conducting a rigorous job analysis for a given position, and identifying the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAOs) needed to perform successfully on the job. Once these have been identified, it is important to develop selection methods that directly measure the KSAOs (e.g., structured interviews, work sample tests, etc.) so the right candidates can be chosen.

In addition to identifying the major elements of the navigation system, the KSAOs needed to perform successful navigation were identified through a structured interview approach with the aforementioned navigation experts. Because the navigator role hasn’t yet fully evolved into a navigation system, there is ambiguity about how the roles should be separated. Therefore, the following list is all-encompassing of the system. It will be up to individual workforce programs and CBOs to decide how they can be split up into different navigation positions to maximize resources and quality. Nonetheless, these KSAOs can be used when developing hiring strategies, interview questions, work sample tests, and other methods for selecting high-potential career navigators.

A. PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS
Whereas the success of navigators is often measured by the extent to which participants transform and grow as a result of their interactions, the interactions are often driven by the personal characteristics that reside at the heart of navigators. Common themes regarding personal characteristics of successful navigators are:

- Truly passionate about engaging with participants
- Empathetic
- Reliable
- Encouraging/Positive Demeanor
- Active Listener
- Maintains boundaries
- Patient
- Self-motivated
- Proactive
- Adaptive
- Organized
- Psychologically empowering
- Doesn’t take “no” for an answer; knows how to get answers
- Good public speaker, can speak to diverse audiences (e.g., participants, college professionals, employers, etc.)
B. KNOWLEDGE

- Understands community resources.
  - Public funding sources (Work Source, BFET, Medicaid, CHIP, WIC, basic childcare resources, WIOA funding, opportunity grants, ITA, Dislocated worker, Unemployment, etc.).
  - Public services (counseling, ACRS, Jewish Family Services, Pioneer Men’s Housing, Mary’s Place, undocumented worker resources, child support modifications, domestic violence support, food banks, Neighborhood House, etc.).
  - Educational Resources (internship opportunities, college tutoring, financial aid, OJT resources, apprenticeships across the industry, complaints, etc.).
  - Workforce Resources (e.g., Seattle resources-- Trac Associates, Pacific Associates, Workforce Development Council, Vets Administration).
  - Regional Initiatives/Learning Communities (Road Map Project, industry association meeting, etc.) (A centralized calendar for all of the initiatives for learning communities so navigators know when things are coming up).
- Understands workforce and training industries, traditional pathways for careers, and ways to reach one’s specific goals.
- Knows who big employers are; understands their hiring needs.
  - Knowledge of who hires people with a criminal background, veterans, people with disabilities, etc.
- Understands concepts of college readiness and preparedness.
- Understands hidden norms regarding behavioral expectations in colleges and the workplace (e.g., how to be a student, how to talk to teachers, how to talk to students, take notes, ask questions, etc.).
- Understands the college bureaucracy system (e.g., financial aid, assessment testing, advocates, bottle necks around financial aid and books, etc.).

C. SKILLS

- Skilled in basic competencies that are required of program participants (e.g., math, reading, English, etc.)
- Connects participants to public and educational funding sources when needed.
- Connects participants to public and educational development services when needed.
- Coaches participants through resume writing and interviewing.
- Coaches participants through disclosing a criminal background.
- Connects participants to employers that are a good match with their background and KSAOs (e.g., previously incarcerated, previous experience in a certain field, individual strengths, etc.).

NAVIGATING HIDDEN NORMS

“There are hidden norms about behavioral expectations in colleges and in the workplace. The navigator is uniquely positioned to help participants understand and navigate them.”

-Rosanna Stephens
Workforce Development Professional
D. ABILITIES

- Builds relationships with employers in the industry.
- Builds relationships with instructors, tutors, deans, financial aid staff, college staff, and security at the colleges.
- Ability to engage in meaningful conversation with participants regarding their background, family history, career goals/interests, disabilities, language proficiency, wage expectations, etc.
- Ability to establish clear and healthy boundaries with participants that are conducive to the wellbeing and comfort of the navigator and participant.
- Ability to inquire to participants about their barriers and identify resources needed for success.
- Ability to utilize multiple approaches to best fit the need at hand.
- Effectively networks in the field to continue learning about what is available.
- Converses and coaches participants with an appreciative approach, listening and asking questions to draw out action plans and motivation in the participant.
- Coaches participants in college readiness and preparedness.
- Provides feedback to participants when needed in a way that is well received.
- Know when subsidies end, and ability to help participants adjust to the changes in a positive and adaptive way.
- Ability to coach participants on the art of navigating the hidden behavioral norms and expectations of colleges and workplaces.

E. WHAT NAVIGATORS NEED TO BE MOST SUCCESSFUL

- Resources dedicated toward improving the navigation reputation and bettering the navigator experience.
  - Selection systems that select for high-potential navigators
  - Ongoing training to stay current in resources, services, employer relationships, coaching, maintaining boundaries, etc.
  - Retention efforts to decrease high turnover and increase stability within the navigation profession (e.g., established career pathways for navigators, specialized training, opportunities for upskilling, higher compensation, etc.).
- Funding Commitments: Navigators need time to learn and master the art of navigation. To do so, long-term commitments from funding sources will be needed.
- Housing: Places that clients can go to live while they complete training are needed to eliminate major barriers and enable participants to thrive.
- Car Repair: Having designated mechanics that are partnered with programs to provide high-quality work at a fair price would support participants in arriving to classes/work on time, and would ensure that they were getting the best deal possible.
- More time to engage in high-quality recruitment and employer engagement.
- Increased willingness of public and CBO professionals to invite navigators into their facilities to recruit participants.
- More freedom to enable participants to pursue their dream career (rather than fitting them into labor demand buckets).
TRAINING AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT STRUCTURES

Identifying key components and KSAOs needed to carry out navigation functions is only the first set of steps involved in developing a navigation system that is conducive to continuous improvement. Navigators will require various forms of ongoing training to continue growing in their role, and leaders may require training for creating a navigation system that works for their organization under budget constraints. Furthermore, evaluative techniques that target key objectives for the navigation system should be included from the start so that leaders and navigators can continue improving the system over time.

TRAINING FOR NAVIGATORS

Rigorous selection systems often specify which KSAOs need to be present in candidates upon hire, and which ones require training after being hired. It will be important for CBOs and organizations involved in providing navigation services to be specific about what types of training regimes are needed for individuals to build the KSAOs necessary to carry out their roles effectively. Many navigators often report that they are not comfortable carrying out many of the functions that arise in their jobs. For example, it isn’t uncommon for a navigator to find him/herself in a position where the participant is seeking therapeutic counseling because they have nowhere else to turn. Being confident and skilled in setting healthy boundaries and connecting the participant with the appropriate forms of resources is important for the success of the participant and navigator. However, some of these situations may be uncharted territory for navigators and require adequate training for building confidence and skill.

In addition to new-hire training, best practices in organizational effectiveness include ongoing training for continuous learning and growth. Providing navigators with opportunities to learn new techniques in coaching, appreciative inquiry, motivational interviewing, and other ways of drawing out potential in participants will be crucial for the success of the participant. Ongoing training should also include information on up-to-date resource and funding opportunities, changes in the workforce, changes in the college system, etc. By providing navigators with ongoing opportunities for growth, they are more likely to remain in their positions, feel confident and engaged in their work, and provide higher-quality services.

TRAINING FOR SYSTEM SET-UP

As the paradigm shifts away from “navigation as a role” to “navigation as a system,” budget line items may look different as organizations get creative in how to fulfill the various needs of the system for utmost functioning. Some CBOs, for example, may choose to have an employer engagement team, a coaching team, and a college navigation team. To ensure that CBOs and workforce programs are set up for success, adequate training should be provided for leaders in setting up the core components of the navigation system to align with the resources available in their unique departments/organizations. Due to tight budgets and short-term funding, leaders often feel forced to sacrifice various components (e.g., employer engagement) for ones that are more immediately needed (e.g., 1:1 interaction with participants). With some guidance and training on how to creatively set up a complete system on a tight budget, leaders can hopefully find themselves doing more for less.

EVALUATION AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

It is inevitable that the navigation system will need to evolve over time, and may not be set up perfectly from the start. Instead, navigation experts recommend that leaders adopt a continuous improvement mentality. Identifying and measuring important metrics that reflect effectiveness of the various components of the system (e.g., connection to supports, employer engagement, etc.) can help leaders to have a continuous gauge on how well things are working and when changes need to occur. In addition, it is of great importance to set up a formal structure for receiving ongoing participant feedback that informs those changes. To supplement the everyday conversations that participants have with their navigators, participants should have the opportunity to rate the effectiveness of the services they are receiving and provide qualitative information regarding their experience. This type of data collection should occur in the easiest way possible for the participant such as ongoing text surveys, or paper-pencil surveys that they can fill out when they are already on site at their CBO, college, or other service provider. As a means of getting even more specific, it is recommended that focus groups and 1:1 interviews be set up periodically to delve more deeply into the survey data that is collected. Whereas the details regarding rigorous quantitative and quality evaluation are beyond the scope of this paper, CBOS and other organizations participating in navigation services should begin thinking about how to set up a structure for evaluation and continuous improvement from the onset of their programs.

SUMMARY AND TAKEAWAYS

The role of the career navigator is an important one, such that it can make the difference between a person remaining in or moving out of a cycle of poverty. Due to the realm of systemic injustices that hinder groups of people and social classes from accumulating forms of cultural and social capital that result in upward mobility, an intervention to break the cycle of inequality is greatly needed. While inequality is a multi-dimensional problem that will require multi-dimensional solutions, it is widely believed that career navigation systems have a role in the solution. Career navigators are uniquely positioned to spread their knowledge of resources, cultural norms, employer expectations, and more to their participants so they can engage in the system and live into their fullest potential.

As a result of multiple interviews with experts in career navigation, employers, and Washington residents, a navigation system framework was developed that can shed light on the evolving role of the career navigator and the core elements needed to make the navigation system work. The hope is that the reputation of the career navigator develops into one of great prestige and importance, and that organizations move toward a systemic conceptualization of navigation that includes the core elements discussed in this framework. The evolving nature of career navigation has major implications for policy, which include: (a) long-term funding to ensure that specialists across all core elements of navigation have the time needed to master their role and carry it out in an expert fashion, (b) funding to cover the various elements needed for successful navigation, and (c) state-wide databases that house public funding, resources, and programs.