OpenIDEO Challenge: How might we better prepare all learners for the needs of tomorrow by reimagining higher education?

Refinement Phase

Pick a Problem not a Major

Prototype

Prototype 1: Work with individual high school students, Berea, KY

Most of our students look somewhat startled when asked 'What problem do you want to solve?' but within a day or two it is giving them a broader view of approach to their future by not having such a narrow career focus or at least options with the same impact if they hit a wall in their primary career goal.

Students are often startled when you ask them the question but it sticks in their head. I asked a 14 year old the question on Wednesday night. He was disconcerted. He was sure he wanted to be an oncologist. The next day (Thursday) I overheard him in a discussion with a state official.

She had asked him what he wanted to be. His response was that he wanted to work on finding a cure for cancer. He hoped to be an oncologist but knows he will need to work with a team in order to solve the problem. He said he know that team would involve researchers as well as those who interact with patients like the people who helped his mom in her fight with the disease.

His primary goal had not changed but he had opened to the idea that broader perspectives and skills were needed to accomplish the goal and that a variety of skills would go into getting to the final solution.

Prototype 2: Silvia Pulino, John Cabot University, Rome

Professor Pulino is adopting this approaching her advising sessions and orientation classes. Asking people "what problem would you like to solve?" is also empowering as it takes for granted that they can solve problems and it forces them to consider the problems around them.

> While it is true that young people see the world differently from adults, but different is not "less". I have found they are actually in tune with topics that are closer to them, such as the environment, education and inequalities. When I tried this approach I got excellent responses, and much more than 20% of students showed engagement. If anything, the lowest response was from the seniors, who are very much focusing on career paths and their upcoming professional choices. This may not change the world overnight, but it works in terms of opening a new window for students and prime them to think of themselves as part of the solution.
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> I included the question into their introductory presentation to the class at the beginning of the semester, and dedicated 10-15 minutes of three consecutive classes to these self-introductions.

Day 1 - Students in the first group tended to give a job or a function as their aspiration for the future (remember I have a heavy bias towards business, marketing, finance and economics students), and I had to struggle to focus them on a problem they would like to solve.

Day 2 - In the second group they were focusing on big problems, such as the environment, hunger, development, etc., and I had to work on getting from a very high level aspiration to specific ways in which they thought they could be part of the solution.

Day 3 - By the third group, students introducing themselves had obviously thought much more about it and were trying to match their skills and what they enjoyed doing to ways in which they could further bigger goals.

I definitely think it adds value, I am not sure they are aware of it though, it acts below the surface to change the way they approach their future and their role in it - and I think that is how it should be

I had not prepared much myself, as this is new, but I am confident that next time I can get them to be much more specific and actionable in their ideas.

Prototype 3: Local Exploration

With less and less funding available for schools - particularly rural schools with a low tax base - trips can be problematic to fund. However, taking a bus route survey of issues discussed in a brainstorming session with individuals or groups of students would be a great starting point. Once they had a list, students could document/count what evidence they observed of the issues in their community through the lens of their school bus ride home, conversation with their friends and families. I have found that if they can 'back away' from the 'weeds' for a few minutes to do the evidence documentation they can analyze the need for their passion and help in a new perspective.

Students created signs for issues they had passions about. They had written issues such as: Child abuse, Obesity, Drug Abuse and other issues. The students started with outlining issues they had identified in their communities, worked with data from Kid's Count and other sources to validate that the issues were actual identified problems not just single occurrence or perceptions without substance. They then learned about advocacy and what skills, actions and professional input might be needed to address the problem. They were challenged to 'think outside the box' on how they could help make a difference and who should also be involved. Each student identified a problem they were personally passionate about and presented the issue as it related to their community, state and broader. The exercise gave them perspective.

With this mindset of passion with purpose, they started the exploration of college/majors/career choices utilizing the individual students' strengths and passions to help them reach the goal of having impact on solving their issue.