

## ***Fool-proof Planning Process Shapes Meaningful Freshman Seminar Course***

When **Silverado High School** in Victorville, Calif. received a federal Smaller Learning Community grant in 2003, its administration knew that turning the money into meaningful classroom experiences for 1,300 bleary-eyed freshmen would require a curriculum that would not only challenge students, but one that would also compel them to take ownership of their learning. So rather than rushing the process and implementing the first curriculum that landed in the school's mailroom, Silverado opted to take its time, effectively shaping its Freshman Seminar course with a set of texts that offered purposeful teaching and learning opportunities.

In the midst of a year-long search for curriculum, and at the suggestion of Georgette Phillips, Silverado's Small Learning Community coordinator, Principal Susan Levine inquired about *Career Choices* at a conference in Anaheim.

"Mindy Bingham handed me over her materials on the spot, which was very impressive," says Levine. "I looked over everything, was very excited about the website [[careerchoices.com](http://careerchoices.com)] and shared the materials with a few teachers."

Equally impressed with how organized and adaptable *Career Choices* appeared, and delighted to learn it aligned with California English standards, Levine and Phillips decided it was an ideal

complement to the integrated and rigorous course they were hoping to establish. Not only that, but they also knew teachers could easily hit the ground running with the materials.

"We knew that by adding the Freshman Seminar course we would be putting another thing on the plates of ten of our teachers," Phillips says. "But because *Career Choices* is so teacher-friendly in its organization, it looked fool-proof. We knew there was no way our teachers would stumble with it and put it aside in the corner, because it's so easy to use."

### ***Professional Development***

To further assist the teachers—and in keeping with the theme of wanting to plan, not rush, the development of this course—the school sent a handful of teachers to a *Career Choices* workshop in Santa Barbara, Calif. and then brought *Career Choices* trainers to campus once the course got underway.

"I can't tell you how supportive Academic Innovations has been," Phillips says. "The trainers and everyone in the office took a personal interest in us from the very beginning and have helped us so much. One of the most helpful things was when [one of the trainers] modeled the curriculum for our teachers. A bunch of lights went off in their heads when they were able to see the course in action.... Not only was it helpful to see how to use it correctly, but the teachers also appreciated learning classroom management strategies, like how to engage students, introduce topics, insert life experiences and wrap up discussions."

Levine echoes these sentiments and says, “The training Academic Innovations provides is very important, and we really appreciate [the company’s] willingness to come and help us. The personalized relationship we have with Academic Innovations is something you don’t normally have with a publishing company.... Academic Innovations is so approachable and we love that we can feel comfortable picking up the phone and calling if we need anything.”

### ***Generating Buy-In***

The personal support afforded to Silverado by Academic Innovations was crucial to getting skeptical teachers to embrace the course. “After one training in particular,” Phillips says, “some of our more difficult teachers said of the trainers and material, ‘Wow! This is a great curriculum and these are the nicest people we’ve ever met. A robot could teach this course because it’s so explicitly laid out and relevant to the kids.’”

Relevancy ranks high on the list of things Silverado loves about *Career Choices*, which explains why, after only one year of using the curriculum in the Freshman Seminar, the school saw a 10-percent increase in standardized testing and fewer students choosing to drop out. And, what’s more, parents are taking notice and appreciating a new kind of maturity in their kids.

“The parents are telling us how they wish they had had this kind of class as freshmen,” Phillips says. “And they love kids coming home asking questions about real-life issues.”

Levine adds that Silverado “had absolutely no objections from parents about implementing a course that has career and educational skills with it. They know their kids are not very organized or used to thinking about their futures in this way.”

### ***The 10-Year Plan***

Getting Silverado students to think about their futures and develop a 10-year plan was easy once students dove into the curriculum. “It wasn’t hard to get them to come up with a plan,” Levine says, “because they were given the tools to redo their plan if needed. It helped them to know that their plans could always be revised.”

Students revisit their 10-year plans in grades 10-12 while putting together their yearly portfolios. This annual follow-up not only reinforces the personal exploration students completed in the Freshman Seminar, but re-evaluating their goals provides them with opportunities to set new ones. The value of this is put best by Phillips: “This kind of long-term planning gives kids a chance to dream and a lot of them don’t usually do that because they are stuck in the hard reality of where they are...it’s really good for them to look beyond where they are.”

### ***Looking Ahead***

Now in its second year at Silverado, *Career Choices* is being taught by seven teachers who feel especially motivated to walk students through the material and help them develop personalized 10-year plans. “These teachers have really dug in,” Phillips says. “They were hired specifically to teach freshmen and now

the class is being validated as something very important. We predict higher test scores and improvements in our community as a result of freshmen going through this course. I can see a mandate coming in the future for students to get these important life skills at this time of their lives.”

*Career Choices* is also helping establish a positive freshman culture on campus, one that is needed given future plans to move all freshmen to a separate campus. “We have 1,400 freshmen this year and we know that all studies show that Small Learning Communities are the way students are achieving,” Levine says, “so in two years we are moving the freshmen to their own campus...we know that freshmen are not very focused and are easily led by upperclassmen who may or may not be the best influence on them, so we think it’s best to isolate them and give them a year of support.”

With this vision and the same kind of careful planning that led to the implementation of the Freshman Seminar, this generation of Silverado freshmen will have everything they need to discover who they are, what they want and how to get it.

*\*Susan Levine and Georgette Phillips are more than happy to speak with you about the Freshman Seminar course and Career Choices. They can be reached at [susan\\_levine@vvhhsd.k12.ca.us](mailto:susan_levine@vvhhsd.k12.ca.us) and [georgette\\_phillips@vvhhsd.k12.ca.us](mailto:georgette_phillips@vvhhsd.k12.ca.us) respectively.*