What Colleges Can Do to Improve Career Development

By Beckie Supiano
New Orleans

Families and policy makers have made it clear that they expect colleges to do more to prepare students for careers — and colleges are feeling the pressure.

That message came through in several sessions and conversations here this week at the annual meeting of Naspa — Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education. (Elsewhere during the conference, attendees’ use of the anonymous messaging app Yik Yak caused some controversy, but it was difficult to gauge how many people were even aware of it.)

When students first enroll, few realize what career preparation really entails, Sheila Curran said during a panel that she and I participated in on Tuesday. "There’s often a perception that all you have to do is get into a good college," said Ms. Curran, chief executive officer of the Curran Consulting Group.

But there’s much more to it than that, as panelists discussed during a number of different conference sessions.

Career development is an unusual subfocus for Naspa. Career offices sometimes, but don’t always, belong to colleges’ student-affairs divisions. And there’s no clear trend toward or away from that structure, said Kathryn T. Hutchinson, vice president for student affairs at St. John’s University, in New York, during one of her presentations.

Some institutions are moving career development under student affairs, others are taking it out of that office and putting it into a different division, like enrollment management. That swirl, Ms. Hutchinson said, reflects that colleges are still trying to figure out
Despite the lack of consensus on where career development belongs, conference presenters had plenty to say about how it could be improved. Here are some of the themes that emerged in their presentations:

**Proactive Outreach Is Key**

"Sitting back and kind of waiting for you to come to the career center is not where it’s at anymore," said Ms. Hutchinson during a different presentation. At St. John’s, students who don’t interact with the career center in their first five weeks on the campus receive a personalized invitation to do so.

And outreach isn’t just for students. Presenters also emphasized the importance of connecting with alumni, employers, and faculty.

**One Office Can’t Do It Alone**

Even though most colleges have a dedicated career office, preparing students for their professional lives requires help from many other people on the campus. Career centers will never have large enough staffs to do this work alone, said Barbara Jones, vice president for student affairs at Boston College. At her Jesuit institution, she said, a priest encourages new students to use their time in college to ponder what they like to do, whether they are good at it, and whether the world needs it.

**Placement Rates Don’t Tell You Everything**

Historically, career centers have been judged primarily on their placement rates — the percentage of new graduates who have found jobs or are beginning graduate school. But who really controls the placement rate? "In my opinion, the employers do," said Kevin Gaw, senior director of university career services at Georgia State University.

Hiring, after all, is out of colleges’ hands.

Mr. Gaw described two alternative measures of career services’
success that he finds useful. One, the potential-candidate index, gauges whether employers are connecting with the kinds of students they might want to hire. For each employer, the index is calculated by dividing the number of potential candidates met by the total number of students met and multiplying by 100. So, for instance, if an employer met with 50 students and thought 20 of them were potential candidates, it would have a potential-candidate index of 40 percent, right around the "sweet spot" his university is aiming for.

To get the other measure, Mr. Gaw asks employers to track how likely each student they speak with is to move on to the next phase of the hiring process, whatever that may be. Those responses are matched to information on which career-services opportunities the student took advantage of to prepare for the interview. Mr. Gaw can then chart a correlation between students’ preparation and their likelihood of advancing in the process, to show his office’s impact.

**But Colleges Are Expected to Raise Their Placement Numbers**

In 2011 the trustees of St. John’s set a goal that its placement rate would hit 95 percent by 2014. That was a lot to ask — in 2010, the placement rate was 80 percent, Ms. Hutchinson said. As a result, career development became a big priority.

And it became much more data driven as the university looked for any way it could to nudge the rate higher, said Denise Hopkins, executive director of career services.

St. John’s hasn’t quite hit the goal, but its placement rate now is 93.2 percent, Ms. Hopkins said.

Looking at any one metric exclusively can be misleading. Focusing only on salary data could obscure that some graduates who aren’t making a ton of money — social workers, say — are doing just what they want to, Ms. Hutchinson said. In the same way, placement rates can be misleading because not all placements are created equal.

To broaden its focus, St. John’s also tracks the percentage of new
graduates whose jobs are in their industry of choice, currently 75 percent. After all, just because many students go to college to get a job doesn’t mean that just any job will do.

Beckie Supiano writes about college affordability, the job market for new graduates, and professional schools, among other things. Follow her on Twitter @becksup, or drop her a line at beckie.supiano@chronicle.com.

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12 Comments

The Chronicle of Higher Education

Frankie Bow

**Jerry Houser**  
3 hours ago

What's wrong with this picture?

I DARE any university to demand all graduating students to have basic math skills, but make math classes optional. Tell the math department that we will measure all graduates on a final math test, but then cut the math department budget and refuse to make math classes mandatory. Tell the math department that they must ATTRACT students to learn math through events, speakers, workshops, alumni, and pizza. Then criticize the math department when half of the seniors can't do math well.

That is exactly how ludicrous it is for a university to expect students to be career ready for graduation when it's not required. If you want an outcome, it must be part of the required curriculum.

NACE surveys show that 60 - 80% of students barely or never use the career center. It's not required.

All this hand-wringing about students being unprepared is quite disingenuous. Career centers do an exemplary job of providing programs and resources, but it's all optional. You can't win games if you don't show up for practice.

A 2014 NACE survey showed that career center funding has actually been cut during the recession. Career centers simply can't do the job that colleges want, and shouldn't be expected to. It takes a village.

This isn't rocket science, it's simply connecting the dots. We need a culture change, and that means politics and commitment from people in power.

**Christine Harriger**  
4 hours ago

Great article to start a healthy discussion! Of course, nothing operates well in a vacuum so collaboration is the key! Good communication and connections with other offices, such as academic advising, orientation and admissions is really important! It starts at the top and the universities that have support from the top will be the most successful. Incorporating system-wide career courses would be ideal but it may be difficult to have the manpower and resources to make that happen. But as we know it "takes a village"... In the end, it's all the best interest of the student so administrators need to focus on what may work best for their institution and build strong connections all across the campus.

**DanielHardman**  
5 hours ago

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Make sure to always read the fine print when reviewing a career centers placement rates. To quote an anonymous program, they claim "96% of our students had full time jobs 6 months after graduation." Their fine print stated how they only surveyed 23 students from the class of 2014. These centers need to stop lying about their rates, as it is only doing students a disservice. Student see these amazing statistics and believe all will be fine with them, when we all know that is not the case. The only way placement statistics will rise is if student start focusing on career exploration early and often. Too many students ask for career guidance when it is too late for them. Yes you seniors! Programs need to make career development meetings a requirement each semester and award those who attend workshop, session and fairs more frequently.

Law schools did this for many years while using those phony placement and salary statistics to justify their outlandish tuition increases, which have very handily outpaced undergraduate tuition growth since the 1990's. Virtually every law school would claim "95% employed at graduation at $160k starting salary!!" even if it was patently untrue. The only reason law schools stopped engaging in these practices is because Senators Boxer (D) and Grassley (R) wrote some pretty pointed letters to the ABA during the summer of 2011 about the organization's ability to continue as accreditor of law schools in light of these fraudulent numbers. And the good senators only knew because of years of online complaints by disgruntled and un/underemployed law school graduates, which were eventually covered in the NYT, WSJ, WashPo, and so forth.

I agree with Daniel; the students need to start early with career services. What I have been seeing here at TCTC, is the students will not seek out the services until they really need a resume for a job interview. It would help if every instructor added us to there curriculum so the student must use career services as part of the grade.

"What Colleges Can Do to Improve Career Development"?
Offer some. I graduated from purportedly one of the best liberal arts colleges in the US (at least according to USNWR) a decade-ish ago. On-campus recruiting was almost nonexistent. Post-graduation "help" was limited to things like "Have you signed up for a Monster.com account? Have you signed up for a Hotjobs.com account? Then you'll be fine. Don't ever contact us again until you have money to donate."

Not sure how the folks at NASPA have time to talk about work, given that Yik Yak reported they were "having sex every day" at the conference. Busy, busy.

Until faculty feel it is part of their teaching (and research) responsibility to reveal real opportunities for the students after they graduate, it won't get better. We need to use our connections to not only keep up our move to tenure or pay raises, but to inform the student and encourage them to move steadily toward real goals as they progress through the curriculum.
bigstac → lukedance · 4 hours ago
As I understand it, faculty must be careful about directly linking students to employers as labor laws may be broken. That information comes from our career center.

robstol → lukedance · 6 hours ago
I think yours is a fair point but should tenure or pay be linked to the business cycle?

mycantarella · 6 hours ago
Indeed there is much colleges can and should do to help students connect the dots about the college/career nexus. It is not transparent and it is a process that begins day one. It includes understanding the skills students will gather in all of their courses and how they relate to the workplace. While I have written much on this theme, especially for students, this blog is more for colleges: http://bit.ly/1y3WYwX