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Career services professionals know that collaborating with campus partners can be crucial to reaching students. But how can career services convince faculty and administrators that partnering with career staff will also increase students’ engagement with their courses?

By Scott Roberts, Ryan Curtis, and Crystal Sehlke
Career Services Usage

NACE’s 2013 Student Survey found close ties between academic major and early success in the post-graduation job market. In fact, 45 percent of students selected career connection as the reason they chose a major, but only 9.2 percent of students indicated they had used career services as a resource in making their decision, and only 42 percent of graduating seniors researched the job opportunities that related with their major.¹

Career services remains the favored recruiting option for employers targeting college graduates with almost have of 275 organizations surveyed for NACE’s 2013 Recruiting Benchmarks Survey chose posting positions on campus websites as the most successful outreach option.² Additionally, employers consider their internship programs an essential recruiting tool to fill entry-level positions. NACE found that 48.4 percent of more than 1,000 employers reported that their new hires came from their internship pool.³ Seventy-one percent of employers said they preferred to hire a candidate with relevant work experience, and nearly 60 percent of employers favored related internships or co-op experiences to experiences gained through other avenues.⁴

The most competitive candidates for post-graduation opportunities will have used career services resources and completed relevant internships (which career services can also help with). Then why aren’t students knocking down the doors of the career services office?

Lack of Engagement

One of the challenges career centers face in reaching and engaging students is that attendance at programs or participation in services is not required. The University Career Center & The President’s Promise at the University of Maryland, College Park found that only 30 percent of freshmen and 42 percent of seniors had created an account on the university’s online job, internship, and resources database (Careers4Terps) in spring 2012. That means that 58 percent of graduating seniors never accessed the career center’s job or internship listings or the free online career development resources. It also suggests that relatively few students who did not take the initiative early were being persuaded to do so later through traditional messaging and outreach efforts. Even students who plan on pursuing advanced degrees often underestimate the role that professional experience plays in graduate program admissions and future career options.

Among the students with a Careers4Terps account, “undecided” was the second highest student response when asked to indicate a career interest. The career center hosts career panels, fairs, workshops, site visits, and on-campus interviews that can help students clarify their career aspirations, but different strategies are obviously needed to engage students to take advantage of the resources and guidance to advance professionally.

Reasons for Not Using Career Services

The career center has met with alumni who admitted never using its services as undergrads, for reasons that include they did not have time, the office hours were restrictive, or they did not believe the career center

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could help them. They said they knew the services existed, but that until career exploration and job searching became a priority for them (i.e., after graduation), they did not see the value. While many students are using career center resources to locate experiential opportunities, other students and alumni say they wish they had known earlier how important internships were in developing career interests or making connections with employers. This indicates students underestimate the importance of early experience, lack the intention to actively pursue opportunities, and fail to participate in career center activities. As a result, far too many graduates find themselves less prepared and competitive than they expected to be. The challenge is to find a meaningful and sustainable way to bridge the gap between the academic development (that students are focused on) and their neglected career development.

Bridging the Gap in Introductory Courses

One approach to bridge the gap is to bring career services where the students cannot ignore it—the classroom. A pilot collaboration between the University of Maryland’s department of psychology and the career center was developed in which technology-based, career-oriented assignments were integrated into some sections of Introduction to Psychology (PSYC 100). The pilot’s primary goals were to:

- Increase students’ awareness of careers that rely on course content;
- Persuade students that early professional experiences (internships, research assistantships, community service) are essential to their future success; and
- Increase students’ awareness and use of resources and training offered by the career center.

Courses like this are ideal for such collaboration because they tend to be comprised of a large, young, and diverse group of students. For example, of the 505 undergraduates enrolled in the pilot sections of PSYC 100 in spring 2012, 77 percent were underclassmen and fewer than 25 percent were current or prospective psychology majors. By adding career-oriented assignments to the introductory course, students from a variety of majors considered career paths and interacted with the career center early in their college careers.

Career-Oriented Assignments

The career center and the PSYC 100 instructors developed career-oriented assignments for the students in the pilot sections to complete throughout the semester. To meet the center’s goals for the pilot program while minimizing extra work for the instructors, the assignments were tailored to fit within the existing structure of the course and incorporated technology to help administer and grade the assignments. The assignments created were:

Assignment 1: Careers in Psychology.

Students were already completing weekly online, open-book quizzes on the assigned reading. In the first quiz, some questions were added about possible careers in psychology. Students were given instructions on how to create an account on Careers4Terps and use a web-based resource to learn more about potential careers in psychology. The students then answered a few multiple-choice questions about some of the careers listed. Questions included, “Which of the following careers earns the highest average salary?” and “Which of these careers has the brightest outlook for the future?” The questions could not be answered correctly without using the resource.

Assignment 2: Alumni Experiences.

Career center staff and department administrators identified psychology alumni with careers reflecting the coursework. Short biographies describing their jobs and advice to undergraduates accompanied the relevant course readings. The student then answered a few multiple-choice questions on the biography.

Assignment 3: Applying Course Content to Internships.

Students in PSYC 100 were already completing short papers regularly throughout the semester, so one was added on applying what they had learned in class to succeeding in an internship. First, students were encouraged to use career center resources to locate an internship. They were not required to choose an internship in psychology per se, but were encouraged to seek one they found interesting. Students were directed to career center resources on cover letters and wrote one as though they were applying for the internship. The final part of the assignment was a one-page written explanation of three concepts learned in the course that they could apply to attain and/or succeed in this internship.

Instructors’ Reactions

The primary concern about the pilot program was the amount of work it would create for the instructors and students. By using the pre-existing course structure and incorporating technology, the assignments did not create an undue amount of work for the instructors. The online quizzes were automatically graded because they were submitted using an online learning management system. Multiple-choice questions on these systems were graded automatically, with immediate feedback sent to the students. The internship assignment was the only one that required extra grading. To help with that, a simple rubric was created that outlined exactly how to grade the assignment based on content and writing quality.

Another concern was that the students would complain that the assignments were just “busy work” with no obvious connection to the course. In reality, the majority did not complain and many
expressed their desire to pursue the internships they wrote about. The assignments engaged students, since they became more interested in the subject matter when they understood how it could benefit their future career.

**Evaluating Student Perceptions, Intentions, and Engagement**

Students in the pilot sections (spring 2012 and fall 2012) were surveyed at the end of the semester and compared to results from an earlier semester (fall 2011) in which the same instructor taught the course without the career-oriented assignments. For each of the five relevant survey items, students in the two pilot semesters reported significantly more positive attitudes toward the career center, a greater awareness of what employers seek, and stronger intentions to pursue an internship. (See Figure 1.)

It stands to reason that such significant gains in self-reported perceptions and intentions should be associated with a greater level of actual involvement in career center events (e.g., career fair, industry panels, and employer-led information sessions). The career center tracks participation and demographics for its events by having students check in by swiping their ID cards. Thus, rosters of the first pilot and control semesters could be crosschecked against the career center’s participation database. Student engagement in career center activities nearly doubled in the semester following the spring 2012
pilot course and remained unchanged for the fall 2011 control group. (See Figure 2.)

How to Add Professional Development to Introductory Courses

Instrumental to the success was the equal involvement of the department faculty, career center staff, and administrators on both sides. After expanding the approach to introductory courses in other departments, the authors have identified five key elements to launching a large-scale partnership between academic and career professionals:

• Share research on the importance of career services and experiential learning with faculty and administrators. The benefit of engaging students with career services is well documented, but even faculty who assume the value of professional development for undergrads are generally focused on achieving curricular goals. Similarly, administrators who track student outcomes in academic units may not be aware of how the integration of career-oriented coursework can advance their programs. Be prepared to have a scholarly conversation about the research that has been conducted and the opportunities to collect and link valuable data with their efforts (e.g., graduation surveys, career center participation trends, and course evaluations).

• Learn more about how courses are being taught. The more career services knows about the content, the existing course structure, and pedagogical resources available, the easier it will be to develop, propose, and implement sustainable collaborations. Nearly all campuses in the United States use online learning management systems such as Blackboard, Moodle, or Canvas. Understanding their capabilities and how instructors are using them is essential to promoting and providing ideas for new assignments to be built into the existing framework.

• Develop templates that can be easily tailored to a wide range of courses. The authors’ approach involved three components that can be helpful for any such collaboration. The first, which involved requiring students to access the online resources to learn about careers related to the academic discipline, is the easiest to prepare on behalf of instructors. A one-page document with instructions for accessing those resources and a handful of multiple-choice questions can be modified to fit the

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course and careers students will be learning about. The second component, alumni biographies, requires more time to prepare for individual majors, but career services staff may benefit from working with the school’s alumni and development offices to identify and feature accomplished graduates whose bios highlight the value of academic and career development. Those bios and a few questions can be embedded in existing assignments or offered as small extra-credit activities. Finally, the internship cover letter assignment is also easy to provide as a template document modifiable for each field.

• **Encourage administrators and faculty instructors to participate by minimizing the demand on their time.** Even the most agreeable and forward-thinking faculty members may be reluctant to implement career-oriented assignments in their courses if it increases their already cumbersome workload, especially if the course is large. Many electronic learning management systems enable the instructor to prepare online quizzes that collect and automatically score responses and import them into existing courses. Thus, career services can offer professional development activities to administrators and faculty with hardly any effort required on their part. Regarding the internship paper, the biggest hurdle is grading the written work. One recommendation is that the assignment be collected electronically and scored as either completed or not, which requires no grading—but also does not necessarily encourage and reinforce the desired level of student effort. A more institutional strategy might be to offer supplemental resources to support a few undergraduate teaching assistants (with the appropriate background) to score the papers and provide some basic feedback to students on how to improve their professional documents.

Relative to the cost of advertising career center services on campus through traditional mediums, this requires a small investment with a substantial return in the form of student attention.

• **Present the program as a win-win to academic administrators.** This pilot was conceived and initiated by the department of psychology, so it was an easy sell to the career center. However, when proposing a collaboration to academic departments and instructors, have a cohesive case for how the partnership serves everyone’s interests. With the proliferation of online (and free) courses and a growing debate on the value of a campus-based education, institutions and departments are increasingly being evaluated in terms of student outcomes. The short-term investment in integrating career services in coursework can lead to long-term gains in the form of stronger career and graduate outcomes. Thus, the integration of academic and professional development is instrumental to the strategic plans of academic units. Partnerships can be leveraged as a recruiting tool for promising young scholars and as an intervention strategy for underperforming students who lack the direction that helps sustain motivation and effort.6 Finally, linking course content with corresponding career-related application, instructors can increase the relevance of what students are learning and their level of interest and engagement in the course.

**Collaboration Results**

The substantial increases in perceptions, intentions, and participation suggests that integrating career-oriented assignments in introductory-level courses is a promising strategy for engaging students with career services early in their academic tenure. The total time required of instructors, students, and career center staff was rather minimal, but the significant impact of those assignments underscores the importance of removing boundaries between academic and career development. By occasionally placing course content in the context of career applications, students could see the relevance of what they were learning, and considered fields and industries they may not have otherwise known about. Even students who do not intend to pursue the particular discipline may find the real-world connections useful. Finding opportunities to organically involve career services resources in academic domains exposed some students to those resources who may not have otherwise taken the initiative. That translated to remarkable gains in attitudes, awareness, and participation. To better serve students, career services must advance beyond the assumption that “if we build it, they will come,” and develop partnerships that reinforce the connections between scholarly learning and professional preparation. Neither classes nor career services alone are sufficient to prepare undergraduates for a competitive job market, but introductory courses provide an ideal opportunity to bridge the gap between the two.

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**Endnotes**

5 Example Career Assignments: http://ter.ps/careerassign.