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Philosophy of Student Development/Career Services

College students develop in a different way and pace than previous generations. They source and process information and personally value things that are very different than their parents. They not only seek wisdom from authority figures but also equally respect learning from each other and sometimes complete strangers, who may or may not be credible. These millennials are the most connected generation, made up of “digital natives” (Mark Prensky, 2001)—savvy creators, consumers, and sharers of free and abundant information which often becomes passé or quickly outdated. However, millennial students are also increasingly diverse across age (graduate students vs. undergraduates, traditional vs. non-traditional), race, ethnicity/culture, gender, religion, sexual orientation, differing abilities, and socio-economic backgrounds. They have varying career-related issues such as parental/family expectations and pressures, K-12 educational inequities, lack of exposure or access to career fields or certain industries, pop culture/icons overly influencing career decisions, a challenging economy for the next several years, and sometimes unfair practices and discrimination in the job market. Is it any wonder that they are often overwhelmed and anxious when it comes to making career decisions and launching searches for internships and jobs? They are now seriously calling into question whether some graduate or professional programs are appropriate and necessary for their future success. Our challenge is to motivate and encourage them to move forward in spite of obstacles and the fear of failure.

These diverse needs and challenges further complicate the work of today’s career center. The dearth of cheap and quick information including online assessments and job search advice should make any college career center examine the relevance of career testing and workshop content. The ready availability of web 2.0 resources, such as social media, blogs, professional networking sites and interactive web pages, further alters the career center’s traditional mission. With higher education’s focus on efficiency, downsizing and budget cutting, new models of providing career services need to also reflect these realities.

In no way am I implying that we throw away everything that has been the mainstay of great university career centers. Paradoxically, the more we advance technologically, the more students will also crave getting personalized help from others. Student development is a process in which many of us inside and outside of higher education play a role. We also realize that there are not enough counseling hours in the day to serve every student one-by-one. Once career centers face up to the fact that career counseling is being conducted by parents, employers, alums, faculty, other students, administrators, and countless other influencers, their role evolves. The modern career center seizes these potential collaborations with academic departments, employer representatives, alumni volunteers, parent council members, trustees, chambers of commerce, professional associations, etc. In essence, with the help of the career counselor, the student assembles his/her own “board of directors” to help with career planning and exploration and, ultimately, the job search. We are no longer the “sole source providers” of career services. Our work is one of being “super-connectors” for our students.

Preparing students for work in a “new normal” world is an interesting and daunting task. Work is not necessarily permanent, full-time, or with only one employer at a given time. It is no longer fundamentally place-based or time-blocked. We are moving toward a “free agent nation” as Daniel Pink described in his book similarly titled in 2001. Increasing numbers of employers are hiring new grads temporarily, “on contract,” as independent contractors, as consultants, or as after-graduation interns. Teaching our students to self-manage their careers throughout their lives is a critical role that most career centers now embrace because the nature of work is changing and because students will change jobs and careers several times before retirement. This opens up a world of opportunity for career counselors to train all students to embrace entrepreneurially thinking, always touting their unique brand as potential employees and always looking for new opportunities much like musicians are always looking for the next “gig.”

As universities consider all of their options in challenging budgetary times, career services, among other departments, are being scrutinized. It is especially true when it comes to planning for a future of limited resources with growing enrollments, considering alternatives for what we provide are now readily available in cyberspace for no cost or low cost, satisfying the anytime/anywhere needs of students, and feeling the pressures from stakeholders to offer a return on the rising costs of college in the form of internships and jobs for all.

It is time for universities career centers around the country to face these realities and ask hard questions. First, are we leveraging internal technology so that career counselors have access to quick, integrated information that maximizes benefits for students they are serving? Are students able to easily access this critical data that sometimes resides across several unrelated databases that have no web-based user interfaces? Are we giving our career center staff adequate training, professional development, and tools to solve increasingly diverse and difficult career-related questions? Are we providing programs and services that worked a generation or two ago but are seriously outdated in the eyes of today's students?

This means putting more content online, investing in training and tools, and equipping career center staff with new or updated skills. Online content needs to be delivered in a fashion where information is constantly kept current, fresh, concise and entertaining to capture and retain the attention of our student audience. This means delivering services in real-time via video chat, emailing voice file resume critiques, making training live-streamed or saved on websites for real-time accessibility, and constantly leveraging social media to market programs, push/pull content, and drive user traffic to behave in a certain way or to access particular data. This also means offering personalized service, but finding new and more efficient ways to reach several individuals with similar needs in a time and space when and where each needs help. This could be using peer counselors to provide training sessions in a variety of locations at odd hours or creating groups or circles of students around similar concerns to share with each other and receive career counseling en masse. This means questioning the physical location of our career centers and how we use our space: seriously consider offering virtual, real-time counseling and programs, collaboratively share our technology and proprietary information with "student- and employer-friendly" faculty and staff external to the career center, and creatively use and invite guests into the career center space (e.g. recruiters in residence, academic advisor office hours, meeting space for career-related student organizations, co-working space for student entrepreneurs). Ultimately, are college career centers so invaluable to students and employers that they can't live without it and won't seek cheaper, more efficient services from outsiders?

This is a great opportunity for us to turn the career center paradigms of the past on their heads. If we succeed, we will have built a flexible model to adapt to challenging demands from stakeholders and the hyper-quick, changing world around us.