Middle Georgia State University

Center for Career and Leadership Development

Embedding Professional Development University-Wide **(5/2019)**

Introduction

In the last year our provost, Dr. Jon Anderson, has led us in making proactive steps to "…enthrone teaching and learning, elevate program-completion thinking, and extend research, scholarship and creative activities." As a result of these efforts and the hard work of the administration, the faculty, and staff, we have increased enrollment and added stability to a budget that has endured continuous strain. Without a doubt these efforts were completed with the "institutional resolve, intentionality, and agility" encouraged in the 20/20 Vision: Toward a Clear-Sighted View of Greatness White Paper published by Dr. Blake in January 2018. Written "to prompt thought and discussion as we begin the process of building a new Strategic Plan," Dr. Blake stated there is still uncertainty about "where, how and when our students can complete their certificate or degree programs, and in what formats; how best to structure and promote the differing values of residential, commuter and online opportunities; pathways to program completion across our five campuses; systematic planning for academic delivery through graduation; and sufficient academic plan that is student-focused and resource-effective." Since that time there have been several additional White Papers proactively providing the data, direction, and encouragement essential to greater success in retention and recruitment of students.

I submit that our collective efforts should also include a *student-centered, career-focused* curriculum that contains requirements for professional development in every school/major. At present this is not the case. Amongst faculty some require a resume and some do not. Some require interview prep, some do not. Amongst academic departments some require an internship, others do not. The point could be belabored further, but my hope is that there is an understanding and to some degree agreement of the need. The percentage of the MGA student population that will need basic career building tools (i.e. resume, cover letter, interview skills, job searching/application know how, experience in their field, networking skills, etc.) is in the majority, yet very few academic departments partner with Career Services – the only department in the university responsible for coordinating and administering professional development services university-wide. Career Services coordinates 40-45 professional development events and host nearly 100 employers *each semester* across all five campuses. At a minimum, the professional development services should be 1) created and administered collaboratively with the professionals trained on current pedagogy in career development and 2) proactively communicated university-wide as an integrated part of retention and recruitment efforts.

Data provided by the National Association of Colleges and Employers indicate that since 2010, the numbers of alumni and parents who participate in career services programming has seen a

notable increase (NACE, 2018). Typically, such a plan would be developed and delivered in conjunction with the university's career center which may be referred to by a number of names (i.e. Career Services, Center for Career Development, Career Resource Center) with the intent of appealing to students, parents, graduates, alumni, and community members.

At MGA this department is currently known as Career Services and will be renamed as the Center of Career and Leadership Development in fall 2019. The professional staff employed in Career Services at MGA, and the majority of institutions within the USG with our size in student population, possess a master's degree and a minimum of 1 year professional experience specific to higher education. They are trained to meet the demands of the faculty, staff, students, graduates, and employers. A well-balanced and thoughtfully constructed curriculum should foster require the completion of several academic *and* career-enhancing milestones, yield a combination of quantitative and qualitative outcomes, outline the administrative functions required of stakeholders, and publicize engagement timelines that lead to a defined career path by major or degree.

While there are students that enjoy the flexibility of a loosely structured career program, it is often a higher number that are disadvantaged to some degree by the lack of structure and requirements. Absent a balanced curriculum, the following questions are commonly asked of the career advisors from stakeholders.

Students: I wish I had more work experience; every job of interest requires an internship or 1 year of work experience! Who can help me?

Employers: I want to create an internship for your school, but there is very little on your website. Who is the point of contact, how do you distribute info to qualified candidates, and what forms are needed?

Faculty: My academic department would like to entertain a partnership with company ABC. Is there any history with this company already?

Staff: Company ABC has agreed to accept interns from *insert major*. What's the requirement for students in that school and where can I find the only paperwork for sharing with my point of contact?

Acknowledging my bias thinking that the primary goal of education includes greater career advancement, I have often thought that for all the good we do collectively absent a clearly defined plan for the delivery of career focused services across all campuses and all majors is a disservice to the students. More collaborative communication between departments, schools, and campuses - meaning encouraging faculty, staff, student, and administrator to talk in-depth about the services provided in the Career Center – is required. At present we lack a single point of contact for career-focused inquiries at the university, we lack a centralized location for obtaining or submitting required forms, we have little sharing of resources (i.e. timelines, cost, credits, etc.) across departmental lines; and we have very limited assessment of career-focused

initiatives with the sharing of that data university-wide. Moving forward there must be discussions yielding consensus on the level of career readiness needed and at what timeframe in a student's collegiate journey.

History

Prior to the summer of 2015, Career Services was comprised of one director and one administrative support personnel providing services in a reactive way – students walk into the office, request the service desired and the director responds based on the resources available. Services were provided to the 3-5 weekly walk-ins whose request primarily consisted of modifying resumes, editing cover letters, and assisting with the job search process. This type of programming is common at many schools and like with most things, received some favorable and some not-so-favorable reviews.

In the fall of 2016, Career Services assumed new leadership and programming became proactive targeting support of faculty, staff, and administrators in hopes of reaching a broader base of students with a new emphasis of extending outreach to graduates and employers as a "one stop shop" approach. This type of programming is more favorable by institutions of our size and with a similar mission of producing graduates who are educated and impactful in the community. The goals of such structure includes a closer relationship with faculty and staff, better preparedness of students and increased sponsorships from community employers.

Research suggest that several services are fundamental to a solid career preparation so standard programs were expanded to include holding career assessment testing, interview prep sessions, workshops on various soft skills, assistance locating part-time/internship/grad school opportunities, professional headshots, and more career fairs. By summer of 2019 contacts for students and graduates averaged 325-375 monthly. The staff now includes an executive director and two full-time career advisors (the admin assistant was promoted and a new hire was made). The career advisors hold private advising sessions, present at Orientations/Open Houses, conducted classroom presentations, coordinate the career fairs, host conferences, facilitate mock interviews, coordinate professional dress events, emcee panel discussions, and a series of events tailored to the request of the faculty and staff.

As students and graduates often see the role of the Career Center as being transactional (e.g. I need a resume so I will go to Career Services) and applicable primarily in time sensitive circumstances (e.g. My job interview is tomorrow so I will go to Career Service to obtain help with my interviewing skills today), efforts must be made for greater marketing. At MGA very few students form a relationship with their career advisor more that spans more than one-two years although numerous studies recommend specific career related activities for nearly every major throughout all four years of undergraduate study. Regretfully, we have a large population of students who still attend their classes and maybe participate in a student organization, but overall continue their life oblivious to the support services included in their tuition. Very few express their understanding that the services conducted by our career

advisors extends off campus as well (i.e. coordinating internships, job shadowing opportunities, and company tours). Few realize that employers are routinely welcomed into a partnership by the career advisors and various members of faculty and staff. Repeatedly I find that the challenge is tri-fold: educating students and graduates, supporting faculty and staff, and recruiting employers and community partners.

The National Association of Colleges and Employers provides a guide to career planning for undergraduate students that is embedded within the core curriculum, but that guide is not closely followed by students, faculty, or staff. The meaning and importance of internships, co-ops, and service learning opportunities are without a doubt misunderstood and/or undervalued. As a result, the full range of services offered by the Center is not highly sought after by the departments and school. In most situations, those collaborations and relevant points of contact remain the knowledge of individual faculty, rarely shared with the Career Center or assessed for an understanding of our students' professional competencies. As a result of the personalized relationships, documentation of the engagement is often too sub-par for future follow-up or shared utilization throughout the university. Many times employers will have multiple contacts within the same division leading to great confusion during negations. What remains is a somewhat ambiguous process lacking much needed conversations amongst members of Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, and community members.

Recommendation

The centralized career services office will be the university leader in partnering with and offering its research expertise and systems to other departments wishing to provide career services to their students and alumni (Garis et al, 2012).

While the student is responsible for their own career development, as an institution of higher learning we must present a new plan that includes a vision of what embodies a baseline of career readiness. Career development needs should be college or school-centered but not college or school-exclusive. There must be a sharing of information on partnering companies/employers, recruitment efforts, the registration process, and the results of such efforts that the support and improvement is university-wide. Faculty, administrators, advisors, and mentors must be collaborative stakeholders partnering with career advisors who are trained and experienced in supporting faculty, staff, students, and graduates in a variety of capacities that enhance professional focus. To meet the demand of greater communication several university-wide initiatives supporting the Momentum Year's goal of leading students on a path toward their ultimate goals, interests, and career path may need to be created with the involved of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs.

Faculty must recognize and support the work the career advisors as a partner to professional development of students all majors. Offices that solely support the career development of students (i.e. Career Services, Center for Career and Leadership Development, etc. Career Services Career advisors are typically the first point of contact for employers and students alike)

therefore Career Services should be seen as a centralized location for the collection, storing, and dissemination of career development info to students, graduates, faculty, staff, administrators, and employers. At MGA we must build a more systematic, integrated approach, will aid faculty, staff, students, graduates, administrators, and employers alike to link together fostering a career prep curriculum that is sufficiently coordinated for specific majors and assess it routinely for improvement. The resources needed should be well publicized and assessments regularly conducted for continuous improvement.

Best practices have shown us that faculty and staff must be comfortable within their advising roles, trained in what to say specific to career development, and supportive in providing assessment. With the ending of the MGA Quality Enhancement Plan in two years, the role of Experiential Learning Liaisons may be ending so the question begs to be answered, who will perform those duties with or without the additional compensation that they are currently paid? Who will serve as a liaison between the academic departments and the employers?

The scope of this paper is not intended to project how to train faculty or staff although we know best practices for those sharing any role in career advising includes a combination of formal courses, seminars, workshops, conference, and mentoring. Instead, this work simply advocates for a strategic plan that includes a systematic approach to embedding professional development milestones into the curriculum of every major. Coordinated by Career Services, faculty, staff, administrators, employers, students, and graduates should include the list of stakeholders having ownership in the process. The outcome/decisions should be publicized university-wide so that every student expects to graduate with a basis level of career-ready tools (i.e. resume, cover letter, interview skills, understanding the importance of soft skills, a professional headshot, internship experience, etc.).

Citations

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