

A Bad Rap for College Career Services

Career Services gets a bad rap. The latest evidence can be found in a new survey of 32,000 students by Strada-Gallup. Fewer than 20 percent of the *2017 College Student Survey* respondents claimed that their career center was helpful to them in applying for a job after graduation. That statistic is surely demoralizing for the thousands of individuals who work in these offices and care deeply about the futures of the students they serve. But it should also concern colleges that endeavor to prove the external value of the education they provide.



After a couple of decades leading career centers at Brown University and Duke University, and consulting to higher education on career initiatives, I have observed several factors that contribute to career centers' failing grade and challenge our ability to change student perceptions of the office's utility.

- 1. The typical Career Services model is not scalable, and there is a disconnect between what staff can provide and what students expect.**
- 2. It is difficult for students to become the architects of their own post-graduate success due to lack of data and transparency about the pathways from major to career at their college.**
- 3. Career Services often is touted by schools as the "go to" place for anything related to careers—even when many career functions like internships exist elsewhere on campus. Rarely is there an institutional, coordinated, strategic plan for careers.**

Evaluating and Scaling Career Services

Career centers often evaluate themselves based on student surveys of the quality of counseling and programs, the number of students who participate, and the volume of jobs posted on their recruiting platform. Student participation and satisfaction with services is important, but attendance and quality statistics are not enough. Few schools analyze the data to ensure that all students are served, rather than the self-motivated students who need career services the least. Missing from the websites of the majority of schools is an easily accessible tally of student outcomes by major at graduation and five years later.

It is not atypical for the ratio of students per career staff member to be in excess of a thousand to one. When Career Services is so under-staffed, it can best achieve its goals by using two strategies: first, providing the data and resources for students to take ownership of their career journey. And, second, by engaging all those who frequently interact with students in efforts to prepare students for life after college. This includes faculty, work study supervisors, and academic advisors, to name a few. Colleges that develop both internal and external career communities to provide supplemental career advice to students, represent the best model for scalability.

Encouraging Students to be Architects of their Careers

If students are to see career centers as valuable, they need information about what careers students have pursued with a degree from their own institution, not a generic list of careers to pursue with a degree such as French. Further, they need easy access to experts who can provide real-time advice on how to best prepare themselves for success in finding and pursuing their chosen career field. It is unrealistic to expect that career professionals, academic advisors, or faculty, will have expertise in the multitude of careers of interest to undergraduates—at Duke, we identified at least 25 major career fields students wanted to pursue—but this is where a managed network of alumni can be enormously helpful.

Promoting Career Preparation as an Institutional Responsibility

Part of the reason Career Services gets a bad rap is due to the fact that it is held out by colleges as the place to go if you need career advice, an internship, a job or anything else related to careers. This is a set-up for failure. True career preparation involves—to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the major—what happens in the classroom, co-curricular activities, internships, athletics and many other areas. And, successful student outcomes are also influenced by a student's interests, career-related skills, and personal characteristics. Career centers can help advise at every step of the way, and their involvement with employers is a critical component of their value to students, but they cannot, alone, be held responsible for outcomes.

Since 2008, when the economy crashed, a significant number of colleges have made great strides in upgrading Career Services. The [University of New Hampshire](#), the [University of Wisconsin College of Letters and Science](#), [Franklin and Marshall College](#), and [Dartmouth College](#) all come to mind, along with many others. But, too many schools have career centers that operate as they have for decades, without paying sufficient attention to evolving student needs, or the imperative for students to start repaying loans shortly after graduation. We recommend that colleges and universities consider a strategic plan for careers that results in a clear value proposition for students. A reverse-engineering approach that starts from desired outcomes and determines how all students can achieve them, would be an excellent first step.

The career leaders of the future will likely be professionals who can marry the needs and interests of students, employers, and institutions, and communicate the cross-campus roles that must be played to achieve desired results. No longer will career staff be primarily providers of direct services. Rather, they will become “orchestrators of opportunity” who curate resources and pinpoint how and through whom a student's career needs can be met.

One final consideration: The number one reason today's students come to college is to get a better job when they graduate. Yet, with the exception of pre-professional programs, truly integrated initiatives that link college to career are few and far between. Only when colleges demonstrate their active commitment to excellent career outcomes and long-term graduate success will Career Services stop getting such a bad rap.

Sheila J Curran is president of the Curran Consulting Group, which provides assistance to colleges and universities in creating a value proposition for their students. She is known as a subject matter expert in careers and is the author of Smart Moves for Liberal Arts Grads: Finding a Path to Your Perfect Career, Ten Speed Press.