

Assessing Today's College Career Centers: Visions for the Future

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Dramatic changes in the economy, the work place, and in student characteristics have challenged or rendered obsolete many long-held assumptions about college career development/placement services. Currently, entry level jobs occur more frequently in small to medium-sized companies; the work place requires flexible, adaptive workers who understand that careers can move as readily in a horizontal fashion as they do vertically; and, students enter the world of work with learning styles as diverse as the backgrounds they reflect.

Despite these changes, career development professionals continue to employ the models and programs that reflect historical assumptions (and sometimes myths) rather than new realities. Providing opportunities for students to connect with Fortune 500 employers remains an assumed primary task, certainly for some. The availability of and attendance at job search workshops (such as sessions on résumé writing, interviewing, and networking) serve as indicators of office productivity and, therefore, success. (These may be important benchmarks for some.) By defining a developmental model that systematically pervades the undergraduate years with life/career planning as sufficient, career planning professionals often declare their assignment accomplished. (This is unfortunate at many institutions.) But, history suggests that we have not been sure of the effect of these practices, even under more certain economic conditions, much less during the turbulent times in which we currently exist. We have had little success in assessing the true value of any career center activities individually, much less how they interact with changing societal conditions.

These challenges come at a time when career service professionals are searching for assessment devices, preferably standardized or in current use, to

measure the outcomes of their programs and other services. Finding a tested instrument may save time; however, the measurements may not reflect the value added at the user's institution. The purpose of this article is to lay the groundwork for developing useful assessment devices by providing an understanding of the work being assessed, relating the strategic importance of setting a vision statement, and establishing parameters for an assessment environment. Specific assessment instruments, however, will not be found in the following pages.

THE ASSESSMENT CHALLENGE

Ironically, a rapidly changing environment requires assessment in order to respond to the needs of the organization's clients. The directives of external agencies, of university administrators, and of professional pride stimulate engagement in systematic assessment both for accountability and for improvement of services. In career services, however, little agreement exists on the nature of the profession's mission; there is even less consensus on "appropriate" practices. The response of individual students to our efforts varies with a multitude of inputs seemingly too numerous to count, much less assess. The demands of an every-changing economy challenge us to shift directions before understanding our current position.

Many professionals have adjusted to these challenges by "hunkering down" and providing data without truly understanding whether they reflect input (resources provided) or outcomes (what happens to students as they make their transitions into a world beyond college). We find out (or guess) how many of our students go on to professional jobs or graduate schools. We ask participants in our programs to provide their feelings on the effectiveness of programs immediately after these programs are absorbed. We evaluate (sometimes) the performance of professionals in our offices and use this as a basis for continuance of their employment. All this information is useful. Still,

many have failed to replace the traditional, linear models of career development and job placement that no longer reflect realities. That is, most of us have not dealt with the fundamental issues of **what** we are assessing and **why** we are assessing. More importantly, few have developed a shared vision of our mission with our various constituents in order to provide us with the **best answer** not only of **what and why**, but also of **how** we are to assess.

Assessment of college environments can be effective only if it is placed in the context of student learning, a context that begins with educational values. Astin (1991) declared this kind of assessment to be most effective when it reflects an understanding of learning as multidimensional, integrated, and revealed in performance over time. Note, the questions of "customer service orientation" or numbers of students "placed" become subsidiary considerations. Instead, Astin calls for integrated and longitudinal measures.

Extending this description to career development centers, assessment can only be effective if five critical steps are incorporated into our thinking: 1) recognize the significance of changing realities; 2) integrate current research on students, including their learning styles, into our conceptualization of career services; 3) establish a shared vision that enables all of our partners to participate in the continuous reformulation of our directions; 4) review the theories and belief systems with which we work to determine their current validity, including those related to the work place as well as those involving the theoretical realities of career development and choice; and 5) determine, based upon the previous four steps, which models and instruments of assessment will allow us to look not only at linear outcomes, but also at the factors that interact and impact careers in the "webs of work."

REDEFINING WORK AND CAREERS

To understand, then, what we **should be** measuring, we need to understand the redefinitions of work and career that have occurred. Chaos

appeals to few of us, especially those who appreciate neat orderly arrangements that appear to move in sequence towards some recognizable goal. Complexity scientists who contend that the order of things converges toward chaos while organizing in highly complex states or patterns believe that many independent agents are interacting with each other in a great many ways (Waldrop, 1992). Thus, the apparent sudden change in the economy is not really sudden; actually, the movement toward complexity began over twenty years ago. The changes, however, have manifested themselves in such ways as to challenge our basic concepts of economic organizations, work, and career.

Structure of the Economy

Historically, America's production system has operated under the premise of keeping unit costs as low as possible (Carnevale, 1991; and Boyett and Cohen, 1989). A process evolved in support of this system that required narrowly defined jobs, employed limited sets of low-level skills, and relied upon a high degree of control and supervision. Since standardization reduced fixed costs, workers at all levels were given little discretion in their job duties. The hierarchical organizational structure was created to support standardized production processes. This structure resembled a multi-tiered wedding cake with the first layer representing entry level positions and the top layer chief administrative officers. A worker's objective has been to take his/her bundle of educational and practical skills and climb the wedding cake to the highest level desired or obtainable. Career development theory followed closely behind; orderly progression allowed career counselors to channel clients along orderly paths. The wedding cake has been eliminated, however, through restructuring. Gone are the hierarchical, linear arrangements that easily identified our economic world and provided our individual career identity.

Today, the sheet cake best represents evolving organizational structures. While appearing outwardly dull, this type of cake represents an exciting,

dynamic, and complex organizational structure. Robert Reich (1991) describes this new organizational structure as webs of interconnected firms. Reich's web constitutes a strong core where decision-makers are located with filaments reaching out to a network of skill nodes (small to medium size firms) which can be called upon to solve a problem (e.g., develop a new product or service). Once the project has been completed, workers return to their nodes. Nodes located closer to the center possess more power and higher level skill requirements. Routine tasks are spun to the outside of the web.

Economic webs are re-spun daily. Plus, individual nodes can be involved in multiple webs. Webs extend into a global array, appearing boundaryless. Through this constant re-spinning and swirling of organizations and workers, a dynamic, energized economic structure sustains itself. What appears to be chaotic to those more comfortable with linear structures is actually very orderly, but highly complex. Entering the web is a challenge: traditional doors are gone and doors visible today may not be there tomorrow. Paths to navigate through the web are not easily marked. In fact, first employment opportunities may not signal successful labor market entry, even for professionally trained students. In the non-linear webs, attachment to the labor force takes longer; thus, successful transitions from college to work may not come until the second or even third job.

Work Place

Traditional work arrangements are being quickly replaced in employment ranging from investing to global computing. Young men and women once began their careers with the expectations of long term employment with their first employer, fulfilling a deep desire for security. Career advancement, based on longevity and loyalty, was supported by a network of employee-management relationships. Success was determined by the acquisition of specialty skills, usually technical with little incentive to branch out until reaching mid-level

management. Feedback was often limited to annual performance appraisals with pay increases occurring automatically, regardless of performance.

Different conditions require today's workers to utilize broader skills in creative and flexible ways. Workers are increasingly responsible for entire processes, requiring a breadth of knowledge, constantly upgraded through skill acquisition and education. Rewards will reflect contributions to and enhancement of the flow of information. Cross-functional teams will be the common work arrangement, strongly influencing the frequency of feedback and performance standards. Individuals and teams will take control of their work environments and have wide latitudes of discretion in how tasks are accomplished and problems solved. Managers will take on redefined roles as coaches. Few advancement opportunities will exist, necessitating moves to different firms with accompanying periods of unemployment that allow workers to prepare for the next part of their journey.

The boundaryless organization whose form dynamically rearranges and adapts will be the challenge for the future. Boundarylessness occurs as skill clusters replace job titles and teams replace linear relationships. The concept of careers shifts from a chronology of positions or a time-based expression of work experiences to one embedded in the accumulation of information and knowledge acquired through an evolving sequence of work experiences (Bird, 1993). Job titles will no longer be expressions of attainment in the work place; the accumulation and practice of knowledge will. Thus, the college experience prepares students for their second, third, or subsequent jobs rather than their first, when skills and knowledge can be integrated and applied to work processes.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CAREER SERVICES

Colleges, thus, must re-think the purposes of their career services centers. Counting the number of jobs held by seniors immediately after graduation may

serve only as a distraction in our effort to provide assistance to students in transition. Students' knowledge of the world of work, their awareness of the multitude of linkages between their education and careers, and their ability to demonstrate critical cognitive skills including communication and problem-solving may be more important measures of our effectiveness as career development professionals. Clearly, career development centers should be able to document now only that students possess these skills and knowledge, but also how they improve longitudinally as they interact both with changing external conditions and with career services interventions.

Career development professionals, however, cannot declare any new reality to be the standard by which we are judged unless we and our constituent administrators, students, alumni, parents, and faculty share a vision of the interaction of college career services and the new economy. In other words, we need to first assure ourselves that we are speaking the same language and heading as a team in similar directions. But, how can this be done?

Developing a Shared Vision

Developing a shared vision is the critical first step in assessment because a shared vision provides the force necessary to create change (Senge, 1990). To develop a shared vision, constituents must identify the core values they believe to be related to significant operational components of the organization. In career services, five critical dimensions of our work seem to occur on a continuum for our clients, customers, and partners: 1) The degree to which career development is seen as an evolution rather than a one-time decision; 2) the perceived degree of student responsibility in career decision-making; 3) the perceived interaction of the curriculum and career choice, particularly within the context of liberal arts; 4) the expected responsibility of the college vis á vis job placement; and, 5) the relative value and expected impact of continuous input and support from our partners including employers, faculty, and alumni.

Before determining assessment steps, it is imperative that we arrive at some consensus on each of these dimensions, and there may be others. Without this consensus, individuals or groups can interpret data differently, and, thus, devalue both the data and the operations of the career services office. Thus, the fully developed shared vision provides the basis for assessment and, therefore, programmatic change since it allows all constituents to understand and support new and old initiatives in career services.

What Should We Measure?

Paul Salomone (1993) provides a simple model for us to follow, no matter how different our shared vision might be. He modified the Parsons career counseling approach and defined five tasks required in career development: 1) understanding self; 2) understanding the world of work and other relevant environments; 3) understanding the decision-making process (including affective components and opportunity limits); 4) implementing career and educational decisions; and, 5) adjusting to the world of work. If we look at each of these tasks or stages, particularly when they intersect, we will be able to determine what we know and what we don't know. More importantly, we will be able to determine what we should be designing for assessment programs that incorporate the impact of a changing world on each of these areas and reflects at the same time the directions mandated by our shared vision. The following provides a few significant questions that we might ask as we develop our assessment plan:

1) Do we know whether our students have a clear understanding of themselves? Have we evaluated their understanding as they entered college? Have we assessed not only whether we have helped them discover some of their career-related strengths, but also how that fits into new realities of work life including different definitions of security and skills, family and work interactions, and career aspirations as they relate to non-hierarchical

organizations? Have we adjusted our programs to respond to different levels of cognitive reasoning and learning styles?

2) Do our students understand the new, non-linear world of work; and what do we provide to improve that understanding? Have we taught about the world of work in economics or sociology classes? How have we educated the rest of the campus community (including parents, faculty, and students) about the world of work? Have we created experiential opportunities that expose students to workplace changes, including increased diversity? Have these activities improved students' understanding of the world of work?

3) Do our students make effective decisions for themselves that reflect their beliefs about what work should be and the importance of work in their lives along with their basic understanding of their own skills and interests? What does the career services office do to enable students to understand the limits of career decision-making as it interacts with changing paradigms and opportunities? In what ways do we gather systematic feedback on student decisions?

4) Do our students effectively implement their career and educational decisions? What do we do to provide them with a clear understanding of the multi-layered web into which they need to enter? How efficient is our provision of information on actual opportunities and/or people in the networks? How well does the career services office assist students in developing the confidence necessary to utilize information, to develop partnerships for long-term networking, as well as to perform well in interviews? Which interventions create successes? why do some fail?

5) Do our students adjust to the world of work or school in ways that allow them to contribute significantly to their new world? What is the experience of our graduates as they enter the job market and proceed through their first years of work and graduate school? How does the career services

office gather this information and both use it and share it for the future?

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Assessment provides nothing if it does not offer useful information that allows us to expand our understanding and reshape our vision in a continuous, integrative manner. Assessment must be designed to meet the needs of an organization's varied constituencies. More importantly, it must reflect the sometimes chaotic characteristics of the web our students enter and weave for themselves. Although what and how we assess will be tailored to our shared vision, the best approach will include measurements at times of transitions in order to record cognitive as well as affective change. Examples include freshman orientation interviews, sophomore interest/skills tests and surveys, senior assessments, focus groups throughout the four years, post-graduations surveys, and periodic alumni updates. The content of the assessment is much more important than the type or method of assessment used. Like our students, we must decide where our own programs will begin, and, in that beginning, discover new opportunities and unique understandings of the Career Services Center of 2000 A.D.

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