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Improving Career Readiness and Employability of College Graduates

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Improving Career Readiness and
Employability of College Graduates
by Megan S Packer
April 2022

Master's Project
Submitted to the College of Education
at Grand Valley State University
In partial fulfillment of the
Degree of Master of Education

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This year has been probably one of the toughest I have ever experienced and therefore, my support systems have been that much more vital in helping keep me going. My sisters, parents, friends, and most importantly, my fiancé, have been the raft that has kept me afloat this year. Without the moments of joy and love from them to break-up the hard work that goes into the completion of the project and a master's degree, it would have been a much more painful process. I cannot thank you all enough.

Abstract

Research shows that current college graduates are lacking in skills related to career readiness and employability upon graduation. Due to this, college students are entering the workforce and are landing in jobs that either do not require a college degree or are not the role that they hoped for upon graduation. In relation, career development as a whole is lacking in the college experience. This project will discuss the current state of employability and career readiness of college graduates. It will dive into potential methods and strategies for improving career readiness and career development of college students within higher education settings. This includes but is not limited to solutions within the academic context as well as big picture solutions such as industry advisory boards, the implementation of a career development assessment, and increasing involvement of faculty and employer partners.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Problem Statement

Today's college graduates leave higher education underprepared and unaware of the areas in which they may lack professional skills. Specifically, only about a quarter of employers believe college graduates are well prepared for the work force upon graduation, especially when it comes to their ability to apply academic skills and knowledge to their post-graduate professional roles (Hart Research Associates, 2016). Even more concerning is that college graduates do not appear to see themselves in this same light. In fact, employers are far more likely than college students to see the ways in which college graduates need improvement when it comes to gaps in career readiness skills and employability (Fox, 2018; Hart Research Associates, 2016). This has the potential to push unaware college graduates into the job market without the necessary skills and experiences to obtain employment within a role that matches their goals or desires. According to a survey by Career Builder found in Fox (2018) about 51% of college graduates have landed in roles that do not require *any* type of college education putting into perspective just how many college graduates are unable or unaware of how to obtain the roles they went prepared for in college.

Currently in higher education, the responsibility of ensuring post-graduate career readiness and employability of college graduates has been put on career services offices and professionals. However, a very small number of students engage thoroughly with career resources on college campuses. Despeaux et al. (2014) found

that about 69% of students are aware of career services resources but only about 15% engage in helpful opportunities such as career fairs. Related, Stebleton et al. (2020) reported that college students do not receive any sense of career development coaching or guidance from other institutional partners such as faculty members or student affairs staff. Unless college students connect with these specific resources, they have the potential to miss out on necessary career development within their college experiences. This problem is not something that is new, companies have been expressing a lack of employable and career ready college graduates for years, especially when it comes to students graduating from liberal arts education programs and institutions (Stebleton et al., 2020). This leaves employers frustrated because college graduates not only lacking in technical skills, but also basic skills such as teamwork ability, leadership, critical thinking, problem solving, personal management, communication, and interpersonal skills (Carter, 2018; Chicca & Shellenbarger, 2018; Ehlers, 2018; Hart Research Associates, 2016; Hogan et al., 2013; Mosca et al., 2019).

Along with these areas, employers also noted that college graduates lack skills employers placed the greatest emphasis on, the ability to apply classroom knowledge to real world situations (Despeaux et al., 2014; Hart Research Associates, 2016; Nell, 2003; Schlesinger et al., 2021). Not only are college students not obtaining the real-world skills and knowledge needed for career readiness, but employers are also losing faith in higher education to provide employable college graduates. Employers now must provide significant additional training for college graduates to meet position

requirements (Alfonso et al., 2012). Overall, college graduates exit college without the necessary skills to be employable and career ready. Higher education must shift to make the career development of college students a bigger priority.

Importance/Rationale of Project

In relation to the career readiness and employability of college graduates, one of the main reasons that potential college students decide to pursue postsecondary education is the return on investment that is associated with gaining relevant knowledge and degree completion. Many students entering college or currently enrolled believe that degree completion will provide them more employment opportunities (Hart Research Associates, 2016). Prospective students and their families and supporters consider which institutions and programs will provide the best post-graduate career outcomes for college students before committing to degree program (Cruzvergara et al., 2018; Fox, 2018). This means it is even more important for institutions to make career readiness and development of college students an institutional priority, a fact recognized by more and more institutions. Colleges and universities are beginning to recognize the need devote more resources to career services offices, employer and alumni engagement, and career development for students (Dey & Cruzvergara et al., 2014). This focus on career development is important not only for these reasons, but also because prospective students are beginning to steer away from higher education. Currently, only about 16% of Americans perceive a 4-year college degree as something that can help lead to a well-paying job and successful future (Cruzvergara et al., 2018). This could mean that

many Americans may choose to forego a college education and instead attempt to reach success without a degree. For the sake of recruitment, retention, and most importantly, the success of college students – higher education must make career development an institutional priority.

Background of Project

Traditionally, career centers have been the sole providers of career development on college campuses. Some opportunities that these offices may provide are resume and job interview preparation, assistance for students in obtaining internships, career related events such as career fairs, and more (Despeaux et al., 2014). However, college students do not utilize these resources nearly enough (Despeaux et al., 2014) and do not receive career development from any other aspects of higher education (Stebbleton et al., 2020). More recently, higher education institutions have begun to elevate career services offices and their services due to seeing the need for career development to be prioritized (Dey & Cruzvergara et al., 2014). But there is not enough current literature or research on best practices to truly support these new goals (Fox, 2018). Therefore, it is important that new literature is presented to assist higher education institutions in making career development a fully integrated institutional priority.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this project will be to explore and propose ways in which higher education as an industry can make the career readiness and employability of college graduates an institutional priority. This includes but is not limited to, how

career development can be integrated into academic settings, student affairs offices outside of career services, how career services can be improved, and how conversations about career development can be elevated at the senior leadership level. In further detail, this will involve the proposed implementation of a career development assessment, an industry advisory board, and the improvement of employer involvement in higher education. In association with this purpose, the end goal will be to develop and implement several ways to support the continued mission of ensuring career readiness and employability of college graduates. In addition, ensuring that career development is always at the center of institution's mission, vision, and value statements.

Objectives of Project

The objectives of this project include: the exploration and discovery of high impact practices that can be integrated in higher education classroom settings, the discussion and implementation of bigger picture concepts regarding career development such as industry advisory boards, the implementation of a career-related assessment for students, and other ways in which both institutional and community partners can help higher education engage in career development. All of these are linked to the ultimate objective of making college graduates more career ready and employable for post-graduate career opportunities. In addition, the greater goal of making career development of college students an institutional priority instead of a responsibility that only falls on career services offices.

Definition of Terms

The following key terms will be utilized throughout this project, the definitions of these terms are provided below to ensure understanding and clarity.

- *Active Learning* is any instructional method that engages students in the learning process (Fedeli & Vardanega, 2019).
- *Career Readiness* is the attainment and demonstration of requisite competencies that broadly prepare college graduates for a successful transition into the workplace (NACE, 2020).
- *Employability* refers to the capacity to gain and retain formal employment or find new employment if necessary. In addition, it is the probability that job candidates will make positive contributions to their organizations (Hogan et al., 2013).
- *High Impact Practices* are those teaching and learning activities that enhance student engagement and prospects of individual success and closely align with workforce needs (Kuh, 2008).

Guiding Questions

Some guiding questions that will be utilized and explored throughout this project are the following:

1. How can higher education make career development an institutional priority?
2. How can higher education ensure that college graduates are career ready and employable upon the completion of their college degree?

3. How can the current state of academics in higher education be shifted to better integrate career development and needed skills for post-graduate success?
4. What long-term, big picture ideals can be integrated to ensure that career development is continuously explored, re-examined, and implemented into the higher education industry?

Scope of Project

As stated previously, this project will focus on the career readiness and employability of college graduates. Therefore, it will not cover how college students enter higher education or how the K-12 setting can assist in making career development a greater priority. Overall, all aspects of education can assist in the career development journeys of students but for the sake of this project the literature and final solutions will focus on higher education. In addition, as discussed later in this project, Grand Valley State University will be focused on when it comes to potential strategies and methods of implementation.

Finally, career development is a broad topic that contains many components and competencies depending on desired career paths, type of student, pre-college preparedness, campus involvement, etc. This project will generalize the career development journey of college students and will make assumptions of where most students stand upon graduation. Many college students will face a diverse range of obstacles and victories regarding career development. Some students will be successful without additional career focused strategies and resources while others may fail even with additional assistance. For the purposes of this project the strategies

will be focused on assisting all students despite where they may stand regarding competence in various career related skill areas.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

As discussed in chapter one, higher education has traditionally followed a specific educational curriculum or academic structure (Ball, 1995; Ishengoma & Vaaland, 2016), which often is delivered through teaching practices such as lectures, assigned readings, and examinations. Literature shows that these methods are not effective, specifically when it comes to preparing college students for their post-graduate lives and careers (Alfonso et al., 2012; Brown & Hesketh, 2015; Hart Research Associates, 2016; Hogan et al., 2013; Muhammed et al., 2021; Stebleton et al., 2020). In fact, researchers have continuously pointed to the needed shift away from traditional teaching practices and move towards high-impact, experiential learning opportunities. The hope is that this will help in better preparing college graduates for post-graduate life regarding employability and career readiness.

This chapter examines research that highlight the necessary or sought-after skills that employers are seeking, which includes technical skills, life skills, and soft skills, will be examined. These ideals and methods for gaining competence in them will be discussed with support from Kolb (1984) experiential learning theory along with reflective pedagogy. These concepts will assist in evaluating the importance of experiential learning within a college student's academic journey. In addition, it will help formulate potential methods or processes for gaining valuable experiences, skills, and career development opportunities. Next, the application of how these different areas can be implemented into the academic environment within higher education

will be discussed. These methods include career development courses, usage of career services, capstone courses and projects, applied learning opportunities, internships, and several others. The benefits, limitations, and potential strategies for implementation will be explored for each potential method.

Theoretical Framework

Experiential Learning Theory

Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory paired with reflective pedagogy can be utilized to assess the career readiness and development of college students. This theory focuses on encounters that provide a chance for college-aged students to obtain and then apply relevant knowledge and skills to real-world activities or experiences in which they can learn and develop from (Guthrie & Jones, 2012; Kolb, 1984; Smith, 2011). The experiential learning theory contains four phases as a part of a proposed learning cycle: (1) concrete experience, (2) abstract conceptualization, (3) reflective observation, and (4) active experimentation (Guthrie & Jones, 2012; Kolb, 1984). These pieces provide a potential outline for the full experiential learning process in relationship to the career development journey of college students.

One of these phases, concrete experience, refers to the *actual* experience in which the opportunity to learn and develop is presented (Kolb, 1984). Some examples of these experiences include, participating in an internship or working through a case study in class. The second stage, abstract conceptualization, refers to how one processes or analyzes the experience. For the previous example, in the second stage a student may evaluate progress on learning objectives or how they have personally

experienced the internship or case study analysis. The third step, reflective observation, discusses how critically reflection can be beneficial for a student's developmental journey. This could include how that experience may influenced future perspectives, ways of doing, or future courses of action. For example, how a previous internship may prepare them for a future project within a post-graduate position. Finally, the last phase, active experimentation, is the ability to demonstrate the exact things an individual is wanting to learn or gain experience in that may be perceived as challenging. For example, presenting on a project for the first time during a student's internship for a large audience (Kolb, 1984). These steps within experiential learning theory can help students effectively engage in high impact experiences.

In addition to this proposed learning cycle, Kolb (1984) also proposed several theoretical considerations in which the experiential learning model must focus on. These considerations are: (a) focusing on the engagement of students to improve learning, (b) integrating students' ideas into learning for a better educational experience, (c) allowing for conflicts and disagreements, this motivated the learning process, (d) learning should focus on the real-world and not just the context of the classroom, it must involve the whole student, (e) Student engagement with their environments will allow for learning to happen, and (f) The process of learning involves the creation of knowledge (Kolb, 1984). These theoretical concepts present great opportunities for higher education professionals to shift their methods of teaching and engagement. Experiential learning along with these considerations can

allow students to deeply engage in the environment, with each other, and with themselves, to truly become better prepared for post-graduation.

Research & Evaluation

Needed Skills for Employability and Career Readiness

Currently, college graduates do not meet employer expectations when it comes to needed career related skills. These skills include competence in areas such as behavioral skills, soft skills, and even technical skills. However, career readiness and their ability to apply knowledge and skills in the workplace is something that many college graduates are lacking in (Barreiro & Bozutti, 2017; Brown & Hesketh, 2015; Carter, 2018; Chicca & Shellenbarger, 2018; Hart Research Associates, 2016; Hogan et al., 2013; Ishengoma & Vaaland, 2016; Mosca et al., 2019; Nicholas, 2020; Stebleton et al., 2020). The review of current literature revealed the main skills employers are currently seeking from college graduates are written and oral communication skills, teamwork, ethical decision making, critical thinking, problem solving, intercultural skills, analytical skills, technological skills, leadership, professionalism, general decision making, and confidence (Alvarez-Gonzalez et al., 2017; Chou & Shen, 2012; Cruzvergara et al., 2018; Fox, 2018; Hart Research Associates, 2016; Hogan et al., 2013; Muhammad et al., 2021; Schlesinger et al., 2021; Stebleton et al., 2020) However, the skill that employers placed the greatest emphasis on that college students are currently lacking in is the ability to apply classroom knowledge to real world situations (Despeaux et al., 2014; Hart Research Associates, 2016; Nell, 2003; Schlesinger et al., 2021).

Given this broad range of skills and the short period of time college students are enrolled in college, it is important to discover how higher education professionals can assist college students in obtaining these skill sets. Higher education primarily focuses on academics or classroom content as the primary mechanism for learning. This includes attempting to build students' career readiness through practices such as lectures, tutoring, exams, and papers (Ishengoma & Vaaland, 2016). As mentioned previously, these methods have proven to be ineffective and graduates have continued to struggle to translate their educational experiences into full-time careers and real-world application (Ishengoma & Vaaland, 2016; Schlesinger et al., 2021; Stebleton et al., 2020). This leaves college graduates struggling to meet employer expectations. Especially because employers place just as much importance on these skill sets as they do on a college degree or academic learning (Hart Research Associates, 2016; Hogan et al., 2013). This tells higher education professionals that there needs to be better ways to integrate academic learning with industry or skill-set learning within the college setting. Within this literature review several methods of developing employability and career readiness in college students will be explored.

Methods for Developing Employability and Career Readiness

To make a college education worthwhile to students, career development needs to become a greater priority. Several methods for integrating skill development higher education include career development courses, capstone projects, utilization of career services offices, campus leadership opportunities, applied learning opportunities, internships and on-campus employment, reflection activities, and

employer engagement within higher education. Through the exploration of these practices or areas, the potential for college student skill development will be discussed.

Career Development Courses & Career Services

Career development courses, though typically optional, are academic courses used to approach developing employability and career readiness among college students. These courses can be taught by career services professionals, faculty members, industry professionals, or even counseling professionals. In addition, they can range from being a one credit, partial semester commitment to a full-on college course. The majority of career development courses have been found to be strategic and beneficial in helping college students engage early in career readiness competencies, career exploration, career decision making, as well as career management (Folsom & Reardon, 2003; Reardon et al., 2015; Stebleton et al., 2020). These early introductions to career development can assist students in their current efforts for things such as resume building, networking, job searching, and interviewing. As well as post-graduate goals such as obtaining a relevant post-graduate job, getting admitted into a graduate program, or generally, the ability to be successful. The literature shows that gaining knowledge in these competencies led to college students feeling more confident to pursue a career post-graduation and articulate core competencies to future employers (Stebleton et al., 2020). As discussed early, career services departments are currently struggling to build

awareness of their services to college students (Despeaux et al., 2014), these career development courses offer that opportunity for connection to students.

Career services offices on college campuses are also positioned to assist students with employability skills and career readiness. These offices provide a wide variety of resources and opportunities that allow students to directly merge their academic interests with future career paths. Examples of these offerings include career assessments, career counseling, career fairs, professional development workshops, networking events, internship opportunities, career consulting, one-on-one assistance on a range of career related topics, interview preparation, and so much more (Ehlers, 2018). Unfortunately, however, research indicated that many students do not take advantage of these services (Despeaux et al., 2014), potentially preventing students from engaging with career development in the college setting. The more college students can relate to these services and career development resources, the more prepared they may be for future careers (Ehlers, 2018). What higher education professionals must focus on is how to get students engaged in career development throughout their college journey. Career services offices have primarily been the resource that faculty and staff rely on (Despeaux et al., 2014) but career development must branch outside of this. departments can potentially be utilized as a future bridge between students and other high impact practices that will improve career readiness and potential employability, but first students must begin utilizing these services.

Capstone Projects

Outside of a formal career development course, it is important that college students are engaged with career readiness development and post-graduate job preparedness opportunities within the general academic setting. One way of doing this is through capstone courses or capstone projects. Capstone courses or projects are defined as opportunities to practice integrative or real-world applied learning experiences that assesses a student's cumulative learning within an academic setting to prepare them for a future profession (Kinzie, 2013; Kuh, 2008; Muhammad et al., 2021; Schermer & Gray, 2012). These projects or courses allow college students the chance to critically think, problem solve, work with a team, reflect, communicate, and apply classroom knowledge to a real-world setting (Fedeli & Vardanega, 2019; Kuh, 2008; Nelson & Biaco, 2013; McNamara et al., 2015; Muhammad et al., 2021). All of these skill sets, or developmental opportunities fall in line with the needs of future employers and what they seek in potential job candidates (Alvarez-Gonzalez et al., 2017; Chou & Shen, 2012; Cruzvergara et al., 2018; Hart Research Associates, 2016; Hogan et al., 2013; Muhammad et al., 2021; Schlesinger et al., 2021; Stebleton et al., 2020).

Along with these specific skills, capstone projects and courses have also been proven to have other benefits regarding college student development. This includes assisting students in building confidence, developing independent thoughts, better understanding of cumulative knowledge, greater preparation for professional careers, and development of a deeper sense of responsibility in their own learning (Fedeli &

Vardanega, 2019; Kinzie, 2013; McNamara et al., 2015; Muhammad et al., 2021; Schermer & Gray, 2012). Requiring capstone courses and projects through all academic programs may assist to better prepare college graduates for their post-graduate life as well as their overall employability.

Applied Learning Opportunities

Due to similar benefits as capstone projects, employers also encourage and have seen students benefit from applied learning opportunities within a classroom setting (Carter, 2018; Chicca & Shellenbarger, 2018; Hart Research Associates, 2016; Mosca et al., 2019; Muhammed et al., 2021). Some examples of additional applied learning opportunities could include things such as collaborative class assignments, case studies, research opportunities, community-based learning projects, writing intensive projects, presentations, or technology-based simulations (Abad-Jorge & Kronenburg, 2020; Finley, 2019; Kuh, 2008; Linder & Hayes, 2018; Muhammed et al., 2021). These activities present the opportunity to integrate real-world work and examples that could apply to future career paths and have resulted in enhanced skills related to communication, teamwork, critical thinking, problem solving, social consciousness, creativity, analysis, and cultural awareness (Carter, 2018; Chicca & Shellenbarger, 2018; Cruzvergara et al., 2018; Mosca et al., 2019; Muhammad et al., 2021). Presenting these opportunities to diversify the classroom experience and focus on relevant professional skills may benefit students' career readiness and employability. Additionally, many employers stating they are more likely to hire a

recent college graduate who has participated in these types of opportunities (Hart Research Associates, 2016).

Reflection Activities

The final opportunity that can be presented within a classroom environment to help to improve career readiness and employability is the integration of reflection activities into the academic experience. The act of engaging in active reflection has been proven to benefit students in areas such as problem-solving capabilities, collaboration, communication, and personal development (Cruzvergara et al., 2018; Guthrie & Jones, 2012). Critical or active reflection can take place within a variety of settings including career development courses, academic courses, and alongside applied learning opportunities. In fact, reflection has been proven to be a key method for extracting knowledge from life experiences (Fenwick, 2001; Guthrie & Jones, 2012; Illeris, 2007). Critical reflection is a process of learning based on prior observations, reflections, or perspectives. The act of self-reflection may not be new to some college students, but formal and structured reflection may be. Assisting students in learning how to critically reflect as well as self-reflect can be extremely beneficial for future learning outcomes and the obtainment of needed career skill sets (Guthrie & Jones, 2012). Reflection is such a critical process that it was found that reflection needs to be a continuous process in which humans find ways to constantly connect, challenge, and inquire about their experiences (Eyler et al., 1996; Guthrie & Jones, 2012). Some examples of reflection activities could include journaling, group discussions in which prior experiences are discussed and applied given the course

content or reading material in which reflection is interwoven. Journals can be especially useful in assisting students in reflection as it is a tool for them to record their own reflections as well as what they observe (Guthrie & Jones, 2012; Stevens & Cooper, 2009). Journaling has also been proven to be beneficial in improving career readiness skills such as communication and critical thinking (Guthrie & Jones, 2012). Finding ways to integrate reflection throughout the curriculum as well as in environments outside of the classroom setting could be useful in preparing college students for post-graduation success.

Campus Leadership Opportunities

There are many opportunities on campus for students to develop necessary skills to improve career readiness and employability including, leadership development. Some examples could include a leadership role in a student organization, a leadership position within Greek life or another professional organization, peer mentorship, taking the role of a leader for a group project, or engaging in a leadership program. All these examples could be ways of helping students develop leadership skills and other relevant skills that employers are seeking (Cruzvergara et al., 2018). In addition to leadership skill development, these opportunities can help students feel empowered and build confidence, it can also be a way for students to directly increase career readiness (Cruzvergara et al., 2018; Fox, 2018). By investing in leadership development, higher education institutions can better prepare students for post-graduate opportunities.

Internships & On-Campus Employment

One of the most beneficial methods for developing career readiness skills and improving employability is participation in an internship or comparable on-campus employment experience (Alfonso et al., 2012; Cruzvergara et al., 2018; Garis, 2014; Hart Research Associates, 2016; Ishengoma & Vaaland, 2016; Jackson & Wilton, 2016; Kuh, 2008; Muhammad et al., 2021). Internships and some on-campus employment opportunities present the chance for college students to apply classroom content and perceived skills in a real-world environment. For many, this may be the first time they are working within a professional setting. Not only have internships been found to be beneficial for student development but students who complete internships are perceived as more employable by potential employers (Jackson & Wilton, 2016; Qenani et al., 2014). By encouraging or even requiring completion of internships, higher education institutions can purposefully integrate career development into the college experience. This can assist in setting students up for greater post-graduate success. In addition, many employers require completion of an internship experience or comparable experience to even be considered for employment (Hart Research Associates, 2016). Therefore, it is also important to engage students in internship opportunities early to improve employability. The earlier students can engage in internships, the better (Alfonso et al., 2012). This informs higher education professionals that employers feel internship completion is a needed achievement of college graduates for them to be properly prepared for a post-

graduate job. The success and support of internship programs prove that these experiences are a key piece of employability and career readiness of college students.

Employer Engagement in Higher Education

The final method of improving career readiness and employability is an informal method that can be interwoven into any of the experiences previously explored in this review: finding ways to greater engage employers or industry professionals within the higher education setting. In the review of literature, it has been found that the engagement of employers within a college student's experience can help them become more career ready upon graduation. Employers present the opportunity for students to ask questions and therefore decrease anxiety associated with career management and career development (Alfonso et al., 2012; Ishengoma & Vaaland, 2016; Ehlers, 2018). Similarly, to career services offices, employers can be future bridges to internship and employment opportunities once students get connected with them.

Some ways that students may engage with employers are through informational interviews, networking events, career fairs, or formalized internships or jobs. Employers can also actively engage with students through methods such as involvement in capstone projects, student club presentations, professional development group involvement, and more. In fact, literature shows that having employers teach in academic courses has positively impacted student connections with employers as well as future career readiness (Alfonso et al., 2012; Ehlers, 2018). Increasing visibility of companies and their employees on college campuses will

allow for barriers to be broken down and for students to engage more organically with future career opportunities. Overall, employers and career services should be interwoven into other higher impact practices as discussed throughout this literature review to create more opportunities for students to improve in career readiness and employability.

Summary

Research clearly indicates that there is a need to shift away from traditional higher education methods to boost employability and career readiness of college graduates. These traditional methods of higher education have proven to be ineffective and college students have continued to have trouble translating their educational experiences into full-time careers and real-world application (Ishengoma & Vaaland, 2016; Schlesinger et al., 2021; Stebleton et al., 2020). Related to this, it is suggested in literature that college graduates are not currently meeting the needs of employers with reference to their abilities to bring forth and apply skills that are needed in post-graduate jobs or workplaces (Barreiro & Bozutti, 2017; Brown & Hesketh, 2015; Carter, 2018; Chicca & Shellenbarger, 2018; Hart Research Associates, 2016; Hogan et al., 2013; Ishengoma & Vaaland, 2016; Mosca et al., 2019; Nicholas, 2020; Stebleton et al., 2020). By implementing experiential learning opportunities paired with reflection opportunities students can gain more from their educational experiences that will apply to their future post-graduate lives. In addition, this literature review revealed that practices which revolve around experiential learning such as, career development courses, capstone projects, internship programs,

applied learning opportunities, reflection activities, campus leadership opportunities, employer engagement and other high impact teaching methods, have a much greater influence on college students.

Conclusion

College student career readiness and employability has been highly correlated with experiential learning opportunities and high impact practices being implemented in the higher education academic setting. Career development courses and early connections with career services offices have been proven to directly correlate with improvements in career readiness and needed core skills competencies (Folsom & Reardon, 2003; Reardon et al., 2015; Stebleton et al., 2020). Another example includes capstone projects which have allowed for realistic application for college students to explore applying their learned knowledge and skills to professional projects (Kinzie, 2013; Kuh, 2008; Muhammad et al., 2021; Schermer & Gray, 2012). Like capstone projects, additional applied learning opportunities such as case study work, presentations, simulations, and more, have also been proven to improve needed employability skills such as communication, problem solving, teamwork, and more (Carter, 2018; Chicca & Shellenbarger, 2018; Cruzvergara et al., 2018; Mosca et al., 2019; Muhammad et al., 2021). Each of these opportunities paired with reflection skills and activities have been proven to allow for college students to obtain more from the content they are engaging in as well as assist in learning important skill sets (Guthrie & Jones, 2012).

Several other methods of high impact practice and experiential learning that were discussed include campus leadership opportunities, on-campus employment, and employer engagement in higher education. The most impactful of all practices explored was the completion of an internship program. This opportunity was shown to be most effective in developing career readiness skills and improving employability of college students (Alfonso et al., 2012; Cruzvergara et al., 2018; Garis, 2014; Hart Research Associates, 2016; Ishengoma & Vaaland, 2016; Jackson & Wilton, 2016; Kuh, 2008; Muhammad et al., 2021). The integration of some or all of these activities into a degree program can position higher education to be more beneficial for college students as well as better prepare students for post-graduate life and career paths. Now, it is important to explore how we can create these cross collaborations between industry and education. Both through these high impact practices and beyond, to continue ensuring college graduates are best prepared for their next steps after college.

Chapter Three: Project Description

Introduction

As discussed in chapters one and two, the lack of career readiness and employability of college graduates is a current problem facing higher education (Barreiro & Bozutti, 2017; Brown & Hesketh, 2015; Carter, 2018; Chicca & Shellenbarger, 2018; Hart Research Associates, 2016; Hogan et al., 2013; Ishengoma & Vaaland, 2016; Mosca et al., 2019; Nicholas, 2020; Stebleton et al., 2020). Multiple methods or practices to improve career readiness skills that employers seek were introduced in the literature review. Some of these methods included internship programs, capstone projects and reflection activities. Currently, higher education relies heavily on career services offices to facilitate the career development of students (Despeaux et al., 2014). Because these offices have a limited reach, students often leave college lacking basic skills and competencies that are needed in post-graduate life both professionally and personally. Some college students and their support systems question the quality and purpose of higher education (Cruzvergara et al., 2018), therefore it is imperative to integrate career development into the college student journey. Post-graduate employment is a significant factor that potential college students consider when determining whether to pursue a post-secondary degree (Cruzvergara et al., 2018; Hart Research Associates, 2016). Higher education has the opportunity to help improve the likelihood that students will be employable and career ready upon graduation. There are several ways in which the current issue of college students not being career ready upon graduation, could be tackled,

including the integration of several high impact into the classroom setting and the overall campus experience. In addition to changes within the academic setting, there is need for greater improvement within the higher education industry. This includes immense changes in institutional priorities as well as methods of continuous improvement relating to career development of college students.

Institution Overview

Grand Valley State University (GVSU) will serve as the setting for this project, allowing focused efforts for career development and related services and detailed description of implementation methods. However, many aspects of this project and proposed solution will be applicable to a broad range of institutions. To provide context, GVSU is a mid-size, predominantly white institution located in West Michigan. The college enrolls approximately 22,500 students in attendance, 19,000 undergraduates and approximately 3,000 graduate students. GVSU currently has a career services office spread across two campus locations, the main campus is located in Allendale, Michigan, a rural area, and the downtown Grand Rapids campus, a more urban area. The career services office at GVSU is a part of the lifelong learning division which includes areas such as Alumni Relations, the Graduate School Office, LEADs programs, and community outreach departments. GVSU's career services office offers a variety of services to students including semi-annual career fairs, career development workshops and presentations, walk-in hours, one-on-one specialized career advising appointments, employer information sessions, and more. Within these services students can learn about and gain specialized information on

subjects such as resumes, cover letters, interviewing, job searching, graduate school programs, internships, career fair preparation, etc.

The career services office interacts with other departments on campus such as faculty partners where collaboration between career services staff may occur. This could include guest speaking opportunities in a faculty member's course or a collaboration in creating a career focused event. In addition, career services collaborates with internship coordinators that are placed in academic departments. However, at GVSU specifically, not all academic departments have an internship coordinator or an internship requirement. Finally, the career services office also teaches several career development focused classes including an introductory course that explores career paths and covers the basics of career planning and resume development and a senior level course that is more focused on post-graduate life, job searching, and interview preparation. Both courses are optional, one-credit, 9-week courses. The career services office director reports directly to the vice provost of the Lifetime Learning division who reports to the provost and executive vice president of academic affairs.

The proposed strategies for this project will include increasing the career services office's role(s) on college campuses, increased interaction and involvement with faculty and employer partners, the development of an industry advisory board, and the creation and implementation of a career development assessment tool. This chapter will examine each of these solutions and provide rationale, description, and methods of implementation for each proposed solution.

Career Development as an Institutional Priority

Career services offices are a key part of career development and planning within the higher education environment (Despeaux et al., 2014). It has historically been the role of career services professionals to find ways to engage college students in career development opportunities. However, limiting career development opportunities to interactions with career services offices may increase the number of college students who graduate lacking in career readiness and employability (Barreiro & Bozutti, 2017; Brown & Hesketh, 2015; Carter, 2018; Chicca & Shellenbarger, 2018; Hart Research Associates, 2016; Hogan et al., 2013; Ishengoma & Vaaland, 2016; Mosca et al., 2019; Nicholas, 2020; Stebleton et al., 2020). Therefore, it is important to make career development, career readiness, and employability of college graduates a broader that includes partners across the institution.

Career Consultants

Career services offices have the potential to create effective collaboration amongst institutional partners to better service students regarding career preparation. The first needed change is having institutional leaders address career services offices as consultants and leaders in career development. This includes utilizing career services staff members as resources when it comes to the implementation of high impact practices into academic settings. Examples of this could include the consulting of a career services staff member on the goals of a capstone class or project. It could also be utilizing career services to assist an academic department in creating an

internship program requirement and finding qualifying internship opportunities for students. Outside of these niche services, career advisors should be serving as consultants at higher levels within the institution as well. This may include career advisors or other career services staff being a part of institutional budget meetings, faculty meetings, student affairs programming, institutional goals discussions, etc. Overall, career advisors should be fully integrated into propelling the career development mission into all aspects of higher education versus just a career services office. Career services staff are the experts on career development within the higher education setting and they must be treated as so.

Increasing Career Related Resources

Some ways in which institutional leadership can make career development and career services offices a higher priority is by allocating a larger budget and resources to these departments. An increased budget could fund specialized career advisors focused on certain interest areas, majors, or colleges. Currently Grand Valley State University utilizes this model but, there is a need for more resources per college or specialty given the number of students served. Along with improvements in career advising resources, the role and perception of career advisors should also be shifted. As discussed previously, to make career development a priority, career services professionals should be considered career consultants for the institution. Due to this increased responsibility as well as involvement in institutional efforts, more staffing may be needed in these departments. This full integration and collaborative approach show that ensuring students are career ready is an institutional priority. In

addition, career development as an institutional priority allows for higher student success rates, career readiness, and postgraduate employability (Cruzvergara et al., 2018; Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014; Garis, 2014). Traditionally, career services may have carried out the mission of career development within higher education on their own. By increasing career related resources and making career development a priority institutionally, it will help in making greater strides towards ensuring college graduates are employable and career ready for post-graduate opportunities.

Collaborative Efforts

Along with institutional efforts, career services offices must also shift towards collaboration over independence. This may include a shift in departmental mission statements to include college-wide initiatives and a decentralized effort which puts career services resources within academic colleges across campus (Garis, 2014). This may be beneficial in making career related resources more accessible to students as well as other institutional areas across campus. For example, placing career services resources in academic colleges allows for faculty members, academic advising staff members, and academic college leadership members to become more aware of and connected with career services resources. One of the main issues that currently exists regarding the disconnect between career services offices and institutional partners is a lack of knowledge. Currently, faculty members are unaware of resources career services offices offer and the need for students to engage with these resources early and often (Schlesinger et al., 2021). By removing barriers and making career services resources more visible on campus, it may help faculty as well as other institutional

partners and students become more aware of and connect with these offices. In addition, career services must extend themselves to institutional partners and create relationships that create trust and rapport for future collaborations. These partnerships can lead to mutual respect, improved collaboration, better communication, and training opportunities for all parties involved (Cruzvergara et al., 2018; Garis, 2014). The movement towards becoming more collaborative with internal and external partners will assist career services offices in making career development an institutional responsibility which goes hand in hand with improving the employability of college graduates.

Career Competencies

The final component of making career services offices and career development an institutional priority is the creation of institution wide career competencies. As discussed in chapter two, these competencies could and should be linked to skills that employers are seeking such as, written and oral communication skills, teamwork, ethical decision making, critical thinking, problem solving, etc. (Alvarez-Gonzalez et al., 2017; Chou & Shen, 2012; Cruzvergara et al., 2018; Fox, 2018; Hart Research Associates, 2016; Hogan et al., 2013; Muhammad et al., 2021; NACE, 2020; Schlesinger et al., 2021; Stebleton et al., 2020) These skills can be utilized to create institutional career competencies which will allow for mutually shared goals between career services offices and other institutional partners. In addition, these career competencies create a framework in which departments and campus members can use as a guide when creating programming, academic content,

and program requirements. Based on market needs, institutional priorities, and academic programs, these career competencies can be reviewed and adjusted annually. Further details on these career competencies and a career development model will be discussed later in this chapter along with the implementation of an industry advisory board that can assist in the creation and editing of these competencies.

Increased Involvement of Faculty and Employer Partners

Faculty Partners

A key component of making the employability and career readiness and employability of college students an institutional priority involves increasing involvement of faculty and employer partners. This relates back to the previous discussion of the need for career services offices to become more collaborative. Faculty are some of the most influential members of the campus community who create some of the most impactful career moments for college students and therefore have a ton of influence on their career development (Despeaux et al., 2014; Ensher et al., 2017; Schlesinger et al., 2021). This impactful relationship between faculty and students provides a great opportunity for career services offices and faculty members to better collaborate regarding student's career development journeys. There are many methods for improving career readiness and employability of college students within the academic environment. Some that were discussed within the literature review included capstone projects, reflection activities, and applied learning opportunities such as group projects, case studies, or research. Alongside the

classroom environment, there are also additional opportunities mentioned in the literature review linked to academic programs such as internship requirements, employer engagement, career services office interactions, career development courses, and campus leadership opportunities.

Some academic colleges or programs at GVSU have integrated some of these high impact practices. For example, the Seidman College of Business in several academic programs have added internship program requirements, capstone projects, group projects, case study assignments, and career services related classroom assignments. However, many other academic programs do not have these same requirements. Many academic program administrators and faculty may not know how to implement high impact practices into the classroom or may not know the importance of these activities. In fact, faculty often lack the ability to connect classroom content with career development as this is not where their expertise lies (Despeaux et al., 2014). Collaboration between faculty and career services offices can help link these gaps as well as create high impact opportunities to improve career readiness and employability of college students in all academic programs. Career services professionals can assist faculty in articulating what employers are seeking as well as teaching students how to relate their classroom experiences to the real world (Despeaux et al., 2014; Nell, 2003). These shared efforts towards career development can help better prepare college students for postgraduate careers as well as create better and more beneficial relationships between faculty and career services professionals. In addition to changes in academic programs, faculty can also ask more

of career services offices. It is not the primary responsibility of faculty to be able to fully connect academic content to real world experiences, this is what career services professionals do daily. So, although faculty must make larger efforts, they can also lean more on their career services counterparts to facilitate these discussions. This could include creating a classroom assignment that requires students to visit career services or having a career services professional visit the class to assist in linking content to the real world. Creating these introductions to career services offices can assist students in building career readiness skills earlier on in their higher education journey.

Employer Partners

Along with increased involvement of faculty, there is a need for increased engagement between employer partners and the higher education setting. Career services offices have become the primary bridge between industry and education; however, many areas of higher education can benefit from better relationships with employer partners. In fact, corporate recruiters have identified faculty relationships as one of the key pieces of recruiting the best students for internships and postgraduate jobs (Cunningham, 2010; Despeaux et al., 2014). At GVSU, the career services office integrates employer partners with career services efforts. However, the involvement of employers within the institution does not extend much past this office. Employers can assist campus partners such as faculty members, student affairs offices, and leadership members in developing career competencies, preparing students for postgraduate employment, as well as connecting the dots between academic content

and real-world career opportunities. Involving employers within the classroom setting and these other spaces can help adjust course content and institutional goals to meet employer demands (Alvarez-Gonzalez et al., 2017). In addition to benefiting higher education and college students, these partnerships between employers and higher education institutions have also been shown to benefit economic development (Ishengoma & Vaaland, 2016). Therefore, providing a mutually beneficial relationship and purpose for these career development efforts. This includes a need for greater faculty involvement, employer involvement, and general collaboration to improve the career readiness of college graduates.

An Industry Advisory Board

The next piece of the proposed solution is the creation of an industry advisory board. An industry advisory board could be a committee or group composed of industry professionals, academic professionals, career services professionals, and higher education leaders. This board would be focused on career development and the career readiness of college graduates. They would be charged with providing feedback, insight, and support regarding overall career readiness of college students (Cruzvergara et al., 2018). This could involve but not be limited to the development of institutional career competencies that were mentioned earlier in this chapter as well as the annual review of them. In addition, it could involve the creation of projects and partnerships between all three areas related to career such as scholarship programs, internship or co-op program development, professional development training, opportunities for students to tour or visit employers, suggestions for restructuring or

institutional changes related to improved career readiness, and evaluation of the employability of college graduates from that specific institution.

This board could also focus on assisting all areas in becoming more collaborative with one another such as finding ways for employers to participate in classroom settings, for faculty to gain industry knowledge to be able to better assist students, for career services offices to stay in touch with industry trends, and more. Overall, this board would serve as an advisory council for the entire institution when it comes to anything career related. The leaders of this board would include institutional leaders including the head of career services so for example, at GVSU the committee leaders would include the director of career services, the vice provost of lifetime learning, and the provost and executive vice president of academic affairs. However, this board would also include academic deans and local industry professionals including executive officers, university relations managers or specialists, as well as corporate recruiters or other talent acquisition professionals. This joint effort would not only create effective collaboration but also have the potential to improve career readiness and employability of college graduates. In addition, as mentioned previously, these efforts have the ability to improve local economic development as well (Ishengoma & Vaaland, 2016). An industry advisory board is something that does not currently exist at Grand Valley State University but is something that could benefit the institution, its partners, and the greater Grand Rapids area.

Career Assessment Tool

The final component of this proposed solution is the creation of a career development assessment tool. This tool falls in line with the goal of making career readiness and employability of college graduates an institutional priority. To create unity and alignment between institutional partners, it is helpful to have a tool in which students can be evaluated on regarding career readiness skills. In alignment with the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE, 2020) career competencies which include the following: critical thinking and problem-solving; oral and written communications; teamwork and collaboration; use of existing and adaptability to new and emerging technologies; leadership abilities including the leveraging, assessing, and managing the strengths and emotions of self and others; exhibiting professionalism and work ethic built on integrity and personal accountability; managing career goals and opportunities for themselves; and demonstrating global and intercultural respect. Higher educational institutions should create an assessment tool that will measure students' competence with each of these skill sets.

Along with the (NACE, 2020) career competencies, the proposed industry advisory board should also examine what career readiness skills are important to employers, higher education, and students. Once these core career competencies have been determined, the higher education institution should create an assessment tool that falls in line with them. This tool should be simple, accessible, and focused on measuring students' competence with each career competency as well as their high

impact practice experiences. The assessment should be optional, like a first destination survey or campus culture survey it should be sent to all incoming first-year students and then again once a student enters the workforce. The assessment could be sent out via email as well as through text message. In addition, orientation programming could create time and space for incoming freshmen to take the assessment during an orientation session. Incentive programs should also be created to motivate students to partake in this assessment both upon entering the institution and when graduation approaches. This measurement tool will allow for a framework for measuring success of higher education efforts regarding career development.

The career assessment tool should not be thought of as an end all be all, it should be continuously examined and changed based on industry needs and career readiness skill shifts. It should also be utilized as a talking point for career advising staff, faculty members, and employers who are assisting students in their career development journey. This includes referencing these competencies in early advising meetings, integrating these competencies into academic courses and content, making employers who are recruiting at the institution aware of these competencies and suggesting they integrate them into their interview questions or processes, as well as providing professional development opportunities for students that align with these competencies. This tool should be of high importance to the institution and should be discussed at annual review meetings as well as discussed among institutional goals and priorities. As this tool and other solutions become integrated into the full higher education institution they can continue to be examined, added to, and adjusted.

Overall, this assessment will assist higher education professionals and partners in making career development an institutional priority which (Stebleton et al., 2020) outlines will help college students in articulating and applying their career readiness competencies post-graduation.

Implementation

Implementation of these potential strategies for improving career readiness and employability of college graduates will differ dependent on the institution. However, the first initial step must involve the alignment of all institutional partners who may assist in this initiative. This should involve a meeting led by the head of career services, at GVSU this individual would be the Director of career services. Partners involved in this meeting should include division leaders, at GVSU this would include the vice provost of the Lifetime Learning Division, the provost, and the executive Vice President of academic affairs. This meeting could also involve other potential partners or supporters such as faculty members, career services staff, student affairs staff, and others. The purposes of this meeting will to inform institutional members of the importance of career development as a part of a college students higher education journey. From there, the meeting should focus on how career development can be integrated institutionally versus primarily within a career services setting. Based on current initiatives, organizational structure, and academic programs the meeting should then shift to how career services proposes that high impact practices or experiential learning opportunities should be integrated into the institution. In addition, career services should discuss methods for long-term solutions

such as the industry advisory board, career development assessment, and other strategic initiatives. The goal at the end of this meeting is to obtain buy-in and goals for future initiatives related to the overall improvement of career readiness and employability of college graduates.

From here, an investment from the institution will be needed, this will involve pouring more money into the hiring of additional career services staff members, an investment into an industry advisory board, as well as increasing the career services offices budget so they can begin to invest in both internal and external partnerships. Once these resources have been improved, implementation will first involve the development of career competencies in which the institution will commit to and determine how to integrate into various settings such as academic advising, career advising, orientation, academic programs, etc. These career competencies should be created within the industry advisory board where higher education professionals, industry professionals, and career focused professionals can determine the most relevant competencies. Once these competencies are created, a full integration of career development into institutional efforts will begin. This should be led by the career services office and more specifically by career consultants as discussed previously within this project. These consultants should assist in educating faculty and staff on career development as well as assist these individuals in building content and opportunities into various institutional spaces. This includes educating institutional members on the importance of experiential learning opportunities as discussed by Kolb (1984) as well as within the literature review. The hope from there

is that the implementation will become a collaborative effort with career consultants serving as advisors or resources to other institutional members. The career competencies will hopefully serve as a framework in which current and future content and institutional initiatives can be formatted off.

Once the career readiness and post-graduate employability of college students becomes a higher institutional priority, the integration or rather involvement of faculty and employer partners will really take off. Hopefully, the participation of these partners will become organic through the formation of the industry advisory board. Ways of collaboration are discussed earlier in chapter three within the discussion of faculty and employer partnerships. The final piece of this implementation will be the creation and launch of the career assessment tool. Methods of creating this tool are discussed within the career assessment tool section of chapter three. Once this tool has been created, implementation would be sending it out to the incoming first-year student class for them to take the assessment. The plan will then be to have these same students take the assessment at the end of their college career at their specific institution. However, this assessment could also be taken annually when this tool and career development as an institutional priority first launch. This could assist institutional members in making changes and improvements with this being a new initiative. In the future, the assessment could be used as intended to record career development upon entering college and upon graduation to determine the career readiness and employability of college graduates. This assessment should be evaluated every five years to determine if there are needed

updates to assessment methods as well as institutional career competencies in which the assessment should be built off.

Evaluation

There are many methods in which these proposed strategies could be evaluated in the future to determine success. Beginning with the general success of improving the employability and career readiness of college graduates, there are several ways in which this could be measured. The first being the measurement of post-graduate success regarding an increase in the number of students obtaining post-graduate employment that relates to their desired career path. In addition, it could involve feedback from employers in which college graduates work for upon graduation. This feedback could include the strengths and weaknesses of their new employee and overall, where that individual could potentially improve regarding career readiness. In addition, tracking the employability of college graduates through post-graduate salary offers, amount of job offers a student receives, etc. Finally, the overall career readiness and employability can be best evaluated through the improvements in their career development assessment. This evaluation will be able to show a student's competence in the career related competencies that career services, employer partners, and academic partners determined to be the most importance regarding post-graduate career success.

There is also potential for other ways of evaluating greater success such as economic improvement which could include the tracking of local unemployment

rates, the number of alumni that remained within the institutions area upon graduation, and alumni engagement in career development at the institutions after graduation. In addition, tracking of student interest or engagement in career development could be looked at to determine success. This could involve seeing if there is an increase in students' usage of career services, tracking the number of students who engage in early career opportunities such as internships, job-shadows, or co-ops, as well as how early students are engaging within career services. Finally, the evaluation of improvements in career services collaborations with internal and external partners could be evaluated. Ways of evaluating this could be examining the number of employers who attend the institutions career related events as well as those who return after attending an initial event. It could also include the tracking of faculty and career services staff member collaborations in the form of classroom presentations, classroom assignments, career related event creations, etc. Same goes for faculty and employer partnerships in which these same engagement opportunities could be tracked. Overall, there are many methods of evaluating the success of these initiatives and is important that they are examined regularly to determine that there is an impact being made. A key piece of tracking this information will be establishing methods for reporting, analyzing, and summarizing these various data points.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are many methods to assist in making college graduates more successful in relation to career readiness and post-graduate employability. This includes smaller solutions such as those discussed in chapter two, as well as big

picture solutions such as those outlined in chapter three. Ultimately, for these changes to occur, career readiness must become an institutional priority. Institutional alignment and shared responsibility of career development for students will be a vital piece in ensuring that career readiness of students can be improved. This goal must also stretch outside of the institution by including and leaning on employer partners and industry relationships. Overall, the lack of career readiness and employability of college graduates is a problem in which potential strategies for improvement exist. However, this is an issue that should be taken seriously not only within career services offices but institutionally. The need to improve post-graduate career readiness is important not only for a student's own success but also for higher education institutions regarding the recruitment of future students. Ensuring college graduates have the needed skill sets and career related competencies to obtain relevant and favorable post-graduate employment needs to be at the forefront of future institutional discussions and practices. This project should serve as a starting point in which future research and career development strategies can continue to build from.

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