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Assessment for the Future: Looking Ahead at Career Services

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College and university career services offices serve many populations including students, alumni, employers, faculty, administrators, and parents. Annually, career services offices organize programs and services with the intention of meeting the needs of these populations. Yet there may be little evidence to suggest that they accomplished their desired goal and that the populations served actually benefited from the programs or services. Greenberg, Kit, and Mahoney (2005) acknowledged that career services professionals often make hurried decisions when it comes to implementing services and programs. Little thought is given to the actual need for the program and the impact it will have on the target population. Developing programs and services without determining the need and assessing the impact can be detrimental to fulfilling the mission of the career services office. Therefore, career services professionals should give more thought to their rationale for offering the services and programs and the effects they will have on the targeted population.

As many career services strive to maintain a presence on campuses and as they look to the future, assessment will be crucial to their longevity. As higher education institutions feel the pressure to demonstrate their worth and to assert how they have contributed to the life of college students, academic and student affairs departments will have to re-evaluate how they interact with and impact college students. Career services offices are not exempt from this call to assess how they contribute to the growth and development of college students. This article will focus on utilizing assessment to demonstrate the value of career services, and it will highlight the importance of assessment, areas to assess, and how to use assessment in career services.

The Importance of Assessment in Career Services

Although many career services professionals have become concerned at the thought of conducting an assessment, assessment is imperative to the organization and function of a department, division, or institution. As described elsewhere in this special edition, assessment is “the process of defining, selecting, designing, collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and using information to increase students’ learning and development” (Erwin, 1991, p.15). Conducting an assessment of an office will enable professionals to determine if they are indeed adhering to the mission of their office, meeting the goals outlined in the strategic plan, and satisfying the identified learning outcomes.

For career services professionals, accountability is an important concern especially when institutions are cutting budgets and questioning the existence of career services offices (Giordani, 2004). Career services professionals acknowledge that the future of their departments resides in their ability to accomplish their goals and to provide evidence of their accomplishments. In a recent survey conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), career services professionals showed concern for two areas related to accountability including “measuring the effectiveness of their office programs and services; and demonstrating and validating the value of the career services function at their institution” (NACE, 2005, p. 28). In an earlier study, Blanck (2003) found that the majority of the career services professionals who responded noted that although they may not be required to report data to their institution, they provide data with the intention of demonstrating the value of their offices. The findings of these studies are not surprising given the accountability movement within higher education.

Demonstrating value is problematic for many career services professionals because they are more familiar with producing quantitative rather than qualitative data (Blanck, 2003;

Hammond, 2001). For example, many career services offices will conduct a post-graduation survey with recent graduates (Rayman, 2001). The results of the survey indicate how many students secured employment or enrolled in graduate school. From the results, professionals may not necessarily identify their role in the students' post-graduation accomplishments. They simply have numbers that state the percentage of students who successfully found a job or attended graduate school. University and college officials use these numbers to publicize the placement of their graduates. Little information is provided on how career services impacted the placement rates or how prepared the students are to begin a job or enroll in graduate school.

In order to demonstrate their value, career services professionals will need to identify new methods of data collection. Instead of solely focusing on the number of students served or the number of programs offered, professionals will need to determine how they have affected the students served and how the content of their programs contributed to the development of the student. In essence, they will need to look more closely at the outcomes of their services and programs. Assessment at this level may be new territory for some career services professionals; however, it can be accomplished with careful assessment planning.

What Should Be Assessed?

Career services offices offer an array of services and programs throughout the year. All aspects of these services and programs should be assessed in order to clarify whether the career services office has accomplished their intended objective in establishing the services and programs. Rayman (2001) highlighted several areas that have traditionally been assessed in career services including client use of services, career planning and counseling needs, placement needs, programming needs, information needs, communication needs, and client satisfaction. Rayman also cited client outcomes as another area to assess, an area traditionally not given much

attention by career services. Assessing client outcomes involves examining the effect that career services has on students and other populations they serve. In order to perform this task, career services professionals will have to conduct an outcomes assessment.

At the core of outcomes assessment is determining an office's or program's level of impact. Upcraft and Schuh (2000) defined outcomes assessment as

an attempt to show a relationship between an intentional intervention (student use of career services) and some desired outcome (finding a job), taking into account pre-college background characteristics (gender, age, race/ethnicity and others) and during-college experiences (major, place of residence, GPA, and others). (p.251)

Terenzini and Upcraft (1996) suggested that outcomes assessment should address the question “Is what we are doing having any effect, is that effect the intended one and how do we know?” (p.218). Career services professionals need to answer this question as they concentrate on the issue of accountability. Gathering such data will enable career services to reveal how they have actually impacted students; examining the impact can further lead to evidence of the office's value.

For the career services professional, assessing outcomes can become challenging because several factors may contribute to the outcomes identified by the career services office. Using the post-graduate survey example previously discussed in this article, career services may want to assess whether graduates who utilized career services were successful with their job search. The graduate's participation in career services may have contributed to their ability to search for a job; however, the graduate could have also received advice from an academic advisor or professors. In this case, career services should be specific about the impact of career services on the job search process. For example, they could ask the graduates if they found their jobs as a

result of using the career services on-line recruiting system. Banis (1997) concluded career service professionals will have to clarify their roles and boundaries in order to demonstrate their effectiveness.

Career services professionals can distinguish their role by using professional standards unique to their field. Professional standards such as those from the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) and the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) offer guidelines for practice and can also be used in developing and assessing outcomes. The CAS standards outline several learning outcomes for career services. For example, CAS (2006) highlighted realistic self-appraisal as a learning outcome. The role of career services in developing a student's realistic self-appraisal could involve administering and interpreting career assessments or asking the student to discuss his or her skills and abilities during a mock interview. This example illustrates how career services can clearly point to their contributions in the student's development.

Additionally, NACE offers a *Professional Standards for College and University Career Services Evaluation Workbook* (NACE, 2006) which assists career services offices with assessing their adherence to the NACE professional standards. Within the evaluation workbook, professionals are asked to assess their office's development and measurement of student learning outcomes. While the NACE evaluation workbook and the NACE standards do not offer examples of student learning outcomes like the CAS standards, NACE still holds career services offices accountable for identifying learning outcomes and demonstrating their influence on student learning.

While student learning outcomes has been the focus in this article, it is important to note that outcomes assessment is not limited to measuring learning outcomes. Outcomes assessment

may also involve assessing developmental and program outcomes (Bresciani, 2001). Student learning outcomes has been the focus because career services offices along with other institutional offices and departments are increasingly being held responsible for indicating how they have contributed to the overall growth and development of students. By developing and measuring student learning outcomes, career services offices will be able to recognize their impact on student learning.

How to Conduct an Outcomes Assessment

The following is an example of how to conduct an outcome assessment with emphasis on creating and measuring learning outcomes. To remain consistent with the learning outcomes model presented within this journal, the learning outcome model created by Hallmann and Barham (2004) will be utilized (see article by Poole in this issue).

The Independence University Career Services office recently reviewed the university's academic goals for the next five years. Within the goals, the university outlined the need to improve students' written and oral communication skills. The career services staff considered how they might contribute to this goal, especially since employers have also expressed concern with their students in this specific area. The following is the career services office assessment plan which they intend to implement in order to take part in the improvement of students' written and oral communication skills.

Step One: Develop desired learning outcomes

In response to the call for students to improve their written and oral communication skills, the career services staff developed the following learning outcome: As a result of participating in career services programs, students will be able to write and articulate their skills and abilities as they relate to internships and jobs of interest to them.

Step Two: Design program curriculum to address outcome

Currently, the office offers a career development series each semester which includes workshops on writing resumes and cover letters, interviewing skills, finding a job, and preparing for the career fair. Students who register to participate in this series make a commitment to attend all workshops. Each semester the office plans to conduct these workshops with the intention of improving students' ability to prepare for the job market. The career services staff has identified the series as a program where they could focus on improving students oral and written communication skills.

Step Three: Design assessment to measure desired outcome

Previously during the resume and cover letter writing workshop, the students were not required to submit a resume or cover letter either before or after the workshop. For this upcoming workshop, the students will be required to submit a draft of their resume. After the workshop, the students will submit a revised resume. The staff will use a rubric while evaluating the draft and final version of the resume. By utilizing the rubric the staff will be able to measure each student's progress. The same type of assessment will be used to review students' cover letters.

In addition, the interview skills workshop will be restructured in order to assess students' ability to articulate their skills and abilities. Prior to and after participating in the interview skills workshop, each student will be required to complete a mock interview with their career counselor. The career counselor will use an evaluation form which will include a rubric for assessing the student's ability to articulate his or her skills and abilities.

Step 4: Conduct program and assessment

At the beginning of the new academic year, the staff offered the career development series and implemented the changes outlined. Each semester the students who participated in the series were evaluated. Immediately after implementing the changes, the staff noticed a difference between the students' skills prior to the workshop and after the workshop. The students learned the techniques to improve their written and oral communication skills.

Step 5: Modify program to better address learning outcomes

While completing evaluations for the students' resume and cover letters, the career services staff realized that some students needed assistance with grammar and syntax. The staff is not necessarily trained in this area and thought it might be helpful in the future to refer students to the English department's writing lab, provide handouts on grammar, or ask a writing lab instructor to assist with the resume and cover letter writing workshop.

The staff realized that they neglected to gather the students' opinion of this process. They are considering allowing the students to evaluate their own written and oral communication skills prior to and after their participation in the workshop. By obtaining the students' opinions, the staff will be informed about the students' thoughts on their progress.

Overall, the staff was pleased with the outcomes of this assessment plan. They reported the results of the assessment in their annual report and even used the data to gain external support from employers and internal support from university sponsored grants. As a result of this assessment, the staff has decided to expand the career development series and enroll more students.

This example was just a glimpse of how to construct an outcome assessment. Conducting an outcomes assessment is no simple task, but this example may help give the reader an idea of

how to proceed with developing one. The learning outcomes model presented can make the outcomes assessment process more manageable if applied appropriately.

Resources for Career Services Assessment

The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) is one of the primary professional associations serving college and university career services professionals.

“Established in 1956, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) is the leading source of information on the employment of the college educated. The professional association connects more than 5,200 college career services professionals at nearly 2,000 college and universities nationwide, and more than 3,000 HR/staffing professionals focused on college relations and recruiting” (NACE, n.d.).

NACE provides resources and workshops addressing the assessment process. The *NACE Spotlight*, an on-line journal for NACE members, highlights career services offices and their best practices for outcome assessments. These best practices include examples of how career services offices have written and measured learning outcomes and program outcomes. Contributors have also discussed how they have used the data to improve their services and to illustrate their significance to their institutions. The best practices featured in this on-line journal can offer valuable assistance to the professional new to assessment.

NACE has also offered an assessment web seminar which provides guidance for career services professionals. Web seminars are worth considering because they enable several staff members to participate in the workshop in the comfort of the office and more people can benefit from the seminar. Some regional associations like the Southern Association of Colleges and Employers (SACE) provide workshops on assessment at their annual conferences. Typically,

career services professionals share how they have created assessment plans and how they have benefited from conducting an assessment.

Conclusion

Accountability is on the rise in higher education, and career services professionals must be prepared to produce evidence reflecting their importance to the institution and the populations that they serve. Outcomes assessment is one approach to highlight the significance of career services in higher education. An outcomes assessment enables the career services professional to obtain the data needed to move forward and to justify their services and programs. Although this form of assessment may be new to many professionals, such assessments can be conducted with adequate instruction on how to write and assess outcomes. The results may lead to a more productive and valuable career services office.

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