

Career Development in Students in Higher Education

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Abstract

Evening with Industry is a networking event organized by the Career Services Department to provide students a venue where they can engage possible employers and network while eating a formal meal. Students were expected to exhibit professional business etiquette throughout the whole event. Sample size included 84 students from a small, private, religiously affiliated and predominately Caucasian university. Only 59 students actually attended the event. The age range for participants was 18 – 21 years of age for traditional undergraduates and 22- 30 years of age for non-traditional and alumni. There were 57.1 percent females and 40.5 percent males, 2.4 percent chose not to state. Of the students that attended the event, 48.8 percent were Caucasian, 22 percent were Hispanic, 12.2 were Asian, 4.9 percent were African American, 7.3 percent were Pacific Islander and 4.9 percent declined to state their ethnicity. An online Likert Scale survey was used to assess how successful the Evening with Industry event assisted students in career development skills such as interpersonal communication and networking capabilities. The study found that there was a 5 percent increase in confidence after attending a preparation session and the networking event. Quantitative data, qualitative data, and field observations conducted indicated that this event supported the national CAS standards.

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Career Services and Employer Relations

Career Services' function and influence has changed over time. In this current climate of job instability it has become clear how important Career Services is as the principal contact between students and employers and creating meaningful events where students and employers can connect (McGrath, 2002). The tools utilized by the office of Career Services are also adapting to technological advances. Some of the ways technology is being implemented into the department are in their software acquisition and accessibility for staff and students to explore possible job leads and career interest (McGrath, 2002). Employers also recognize the importance of technology and have made great efforts to create enticing websites that provide information about their company and the requirements needed for jobs they offer. It has become common practice to turn in applications through employer's websites (McGrath, 2002). A study that surveyed 102 employers found that employers felt they had an influence in the development of students workers work related skills (Molseed, Alsup, Voyles, 2003). Another technique available to assist Career Services in performing their job is networking (Casella, 1990).

Engaging students and employers in intentional and productive interactions is Career Services' primary function but other notable activities include providing workshops on resume writing, having interview preparation and assisting students in finding their "interest, values, and skill" (p. 74) when seeking employment and a career (McGrath, 2002). There are many ways to foster interaction among students and employers such as on campus interviews, internships, career and job fairs, having employers be advisors, shadowing and mentoring (McGrath, 2002). On campus interviews are the most widely used activity by Career Services as it provides an occasion where students can meet with potential employers without going out of their way to find them. Employers benefit too because they can meet with a large number of potential

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employees at one location, minimizing their recruitment time (McGrath, 2002). However, there are some difficulties when working with employers such as employers not knowing or clearly describing the qualifications needed for the job being offered and not explaining the duties the position in question requires (McGrath, 2002). Sometimes employers do not send the most qualified person to administer the interviews and are not prompt in notifying the students of the interview results, which puts students in a challenging position when trying to make decisions for their future (McGrath, 2002).

Utilizing the employers' expertise is crucial when connecting them to students who are interested in an internship, because it is a great learning opportunity for both parties involved. During the internships students are exposed to their career of choice to see if it meets their expectations. They also learn how to work in a professional environment and all that it entails. If the experience is successful employers may offer students a permanent position within the company (McGrath, 2002). This experience provides employers with information on how the student learns and interacts with other employees (McGrath, 2002). Another opportunity for students and employers to interact is through career and job fairs. Students can interact with potential employers and ask all of their questions while employers take the opportunity to share information about the company and field they represent to as many students who will listen (McGrath, 2002).

McGrath (2002) found that it can be advantageous for students to interact with professionals in the fields they are intrigued by or would like to know more about. Job shadowing provides a learning opportunity for students to become familiar with the profession and employer they are interested in. This also allows the student experience what it would be like to work in a professional environment fulfilling the companies' expectations (McGrath,

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2002). Mentoring is also another fruitful way for student to apply what they are learning in the classroom and the field they are interested in (McGrath, 2002). Employers can further assist Career Services counselors by meeting with them and sharing information on what they are looking for when trying to fill a position and in turn counselors will be better equip with information when helping students (McGrath, 2002).

Business and Professional Etiquette

Business and professional etiquette are very important for individuals interacting with employers or possible employers. Headley (2007) defines professional etiquette as the ability to communicate and form productive associations with colleagues in a work environment. It has become a common practice for employees and potential employers to share a business meal. This is important because though it is a different setting, less formal than an office, employers have the same professional expectations for their potential employees (McPherson, 1998). Advancement in the workplace can be at stake if the employee does not demonstrate an understanding of professional etiquette (Headley, 2007). That is why creating opportunities for students to learn business etiquette is very important to their career development (McPherson, 1998). According to Allison Schieli, an employment specialist:

Proper business etiquette is extremely important on the job. It is important that an employee demonstrates appropriate dress, manners, speech and communication skills in the workplace. In addition, it is very common for students during an interview to be taken to lunch or dinner. Students who exhibit appropriate etiquette techniques during these formal or informal meal meetings have an edge over others (McPherson, 1998, p. 104)

The Indiana University of Pennsylvania realizes the importance of educating their students on business etiquette and created an event to where students can interact with faculty and review etiquette procedures during a formal meal. Faculty assists in taking the place of potential employers during the meal (McPherson, 1998). Assessing inappropriate professional

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etiquette is always easy to spot and the ability to meet and greet is a fundamental skill in mastering professional etiquette (Headley 2007). During an interview Peggy Byran Newfield, an etiquette consultant says:

During the first seven seconds, people have already formed their opinions of you. Those first impressions can be good or bad depending on a lot of factors. People decide whether they like someone almost immediately after first seeing them. Turnoffs include: appearance, bad breath, weak handshake, lack of eye contact, poor posture, or a dull unsmiling facial expression (McPherson, 1998, p. 104)

McPherson (1998) gives the following advice when planning a business etiquette event. Provide a two meal selection, a meat and vegetarian option; too many options can create confusion. It would be helpful for students to have at least three courses and incorporate meals that are challenging to eat such as “foods with sauces and foods that requires cutting” (p. 105). These food choices would provide a great learning opportunity for students. Schedule at least two events at different times and dates so students can coordinate their schedule and attend. It is really important to dress in professional attire, because this will give staff the opportunity to point out errors in wardrobe choices and offer better options. Recording the event can provide ample learning material on how to behave in this type of situation and what not to do. There is a risk that students will not act naturally because they are self conscious knowing they are being recorded but it is still a very useful exercise. The atmosphere of the event changes when school administration and professors attend the business dinner and interact with the students. Advertisement and a low cost to attend are key components in obtaining maximum participation. An evaluation at the end of the event can provide useful information on how to improve and strengthen the event next time it is offered.

Long after people have interacted with someone their first impression and the person’s professionalism or lack of will always be remembered. Professional etiquette must be maintained

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at all times but it becomes challenging when sharing a meal with an employer. An employer or potential employer will always be observing and the employee may make a mistake by becoming too comfortable. Professional etiquette is expected at all times (Headley, 2007).

Networking

It is noted that 80 percent of all available jobs will not be found through job postings but rather through your networks (Butler, 2012, Bradford, 2005). Bearing this in mind, it is imperative to assess the need for cultivating networking skills within individuals. Networking is more than knowing how to greet a perspective employer, but also consists of knowledge pertaining to etiquette in all interactive situations. While it is essential to possess networking skills upon completion of college, introducing the concept to High School students can also be beneficial since more college students are employed through college than have been in previous years. To introduce networking to High School students, research cites classroom activities promoting networking skills as well as employment fairs to educate students on proper decorum with employers and establish connections before completion of High School (Despres, 2008, Butler, 2012).

The question can be raised as to what degree an employer or an institution is responsible for the career development of a student. Programs that combine educational and career development are defined as including, “school-to-work, mentorship, internship, and vocational-technical and youth apprenticeship programs” (Molseed, Alsup, & Voyles, 2004, p. 162). School-to-work programs are similar to career development classes, programs, and events that promote career development skills such as creating and building one’s network. These programs aim to increase student awareness of career related skills by providing practice within a real-world work environment (Molseed, Alsup, & Voyles, 2004). With these programs, networking is essential to

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the student's development and comprehension, however the efforts are on the part of the student, not the professionals in the program.

Technology

Career Service Centers acknowledge the importance of networking to promote career development in students through events and appointments; however in recent years these institutions have begun to utilize social media to assist students in their development as well. As discussed previously, networking skills are essential to the professional development of students and Career Services Centers are attempting to meet this need through social media forums. In a recent study, it was found that Social Networking Sites (SNS) are being utilized as a way to promote career-related events, career services, general career information distribution, job search tips, and how to connect with employers (Osborn & LoFrisco, 2012). While technological advances can be costly involving time, support, and training (Venable, 2012) the benefits of being available to the student's professional development may outweigh the costs. Technology provides an additional tool for the professional as well as the student that can be utilized in furthering network connections, improving competencies in professional etiquette as well as increasing student's ability to obtain employment after college. However, it has been noted that some organizations don't stress college before employment, but rather attempt to educate students on the importance of networking after High School.

Together high school counselors and work experience coordinators created an event that prepared students entering into the work force, rather than college after graduation. Employment Day was created in 1966 as an opportunity for high school students to help prepare students with career development skills, such as resume writing, interview tips, network building, and employment opportunities and is still going strong to this day (Despres, 2008). This does not

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necessarily go against the ideas of college Career Service Centers, but rather introduces students to the ideas of networking so they can be employed before college or without college education. There is little research to connect technology to High School efforts to training students on networking skills, but it has been shown that there might be issues in the expectations of students in regards to entering the job market.

A High School event would introduce them to the skills necessary and curb some unrealistic expectations, but for incoming Millennial students, they are currently struggling with career expectations and reassessing their idea of an optimal career environment (Ng, Schweitzer, & Lyons, 2010). The Millennial student is more familiar with technology and desire more relational atmospheres to work in, they are stressing the desire to learn and connect with colleagues. With that, introducing SNS's to Millennial students would provide a natural tool for career development in terms of networking and job search skills (Ng et al, 2010, Osborn & LoFrisco, 2012).

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Methods

Research Question

This project assessed if the annual university-wide networking event, “Evening with Industry” assisted students in career development skills such as interpersonal communication and networking capabilities. For the purposes of this study, networking is defined as the confidence in one’s interpersonal and intrapersonal skills to communicate effectively and connect with other individuals. The CAS standards for a university career center were also examined to assess whether mission, resources provided, and career development objectives aligned with the purpose of the networking event. The specific CAS Standards examined include observation of the career services mission statement, job search services, programming offered that help students develop decision making, interpersonal and intrapersonal skill competency, and departmental relationships with institutional and external resources. Simultaneously, external research was conducted in regards to employer observation of student success.

Participants

Our sample for this study included 84 students at a small, private, religiously affiliated, and predominately Caucasian university on the west coast of the United States. The target group for this study consisted of junior and senior status university students, however, freshmen, sophomores, graduate students, and alumni were invited to participate. The participant age ranged from traditional aged undergraduate students to non-traditional students and alumni aged individuals. This group of participants was chosen because of their connection to the university and their desire to attend the networking event.

One limitation to this sample would be that students may be attending the event as a class requirement. This could significantly alter results. Another limitation to this sample could

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be the limited accessibility to the online survey conducted post-event. The sample size for this event may not lend itself to significant data because of lack of student commitment to attending the event. Sixty-one students actually attended the event. Some students may be well-versed in networking as a result of attending a preparation session introducing them to networking and the expectations of the networking event. Another limitation would be that the most significant data that is being utilized to measure if students who attended the networking event were successful in their growth and knowledge of networking was not collected until the day after event occurred, lending to the possibility of partial participation. Survey fatigue could also play a part in limiting accurate student responses (Schuh 2009; Porter, 2004). Aside from surveys specific to this research departmental surveys were also conducted.

Strengths of this sample would be the possibility of complete privacy in response to the final survey which was emailed to students and allowed for completion at home leading to more accurate and honest responses. An additional strength of this sample would include the access to funds provided by the career services department used as an incentive of a raffle prize for completion of the emailed post-event survey. Departmental data collected immediately after the event could also serve as appropriate data for statistically significant data analyses.

Materials

This research project utilized multiple instruments to collect data. Initial Likert scale pencil and paper surveys were conducted to collect pre-event information from students who participated in networking preparation sessions before the event. This survey measured student's knowledge regarding networking and the effectiveness of attending a networking preparation session. A pen and paper Likert scale survey was facilitated immediately after the conclusion of the networking event. This survey measured departmental learning outcomes. Post

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event surveys seeking further information about the students' experience were created using Google Doc's survey creation tool and emailed to students the following day. This survey used a Likert scale and focused questions on the development of interpersonal and networking skill growth. This survey measured student confidence in defining terms such as networking/interpersonal skills, confidence, anxiety, and depression levels. Additionally, a document review of the career services department was conducted to determine if the career services department's mission statement aligned with the networking event. Further document reviews were conducted to examine the resources provided by the office and if they aligned with the CAS standards. Employer impressions of student success were measured through surveys provided at the end of the networking event. Employers measure success in terms of observation of student preparedness. Qualitative research was conducted utilizing the comment sections of all surveys returned and anecdotal information received via email. Lastly, informal environmental observations were conducted the evening of the event.

Procedure

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used in this study. Qualitative methods used include field observations conducted during the progression of the networking event. Interactions between students and employers were noted. A document review of the career services center's mission statement was also conducted. Quantitative data was conducted after a week of post student survey data collection via an online survey program. This data procedure included identifying correlations between students who attended the networking preparation sessions prior to the networking event and confidence levels during the networking event.

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Results

Among 42 respondents to a post survey, students who identified as 18, 25, 27, or 28 years of age made up 2.5% of their specific age groups. Five percent of student attendees were 23 years of age while 10% were 19 years of age. Fifteen percent were 22 years of age and the two highest groups of attending students with 22.5% being 20 and 37.5% being 21 years of age. Ethnic backgrounds for student participants were Caucasian (48.8%), Hispanic/Latino (22%), Asian American (12.2%), Pacific Islander (7.3%) and African American (4.9%) with some declining to state (4.9%). Although the majority of participants were Caucasian the college campus that the event occurred within is a majority Caucasian campus. When gender is addressed, the participants were majority female (57.1%) with 40.5% comprising the male population and 2.4% declining to state. Majority of student academic backgrounds (majors) for participants were Business (28.6%), Psychology (14.3%), Communication (9.5%), and International Business (9.5%). Accounting was signified as a current major within 7.1% of the participants with Alumni participants, Business Administration, Finance, and Youth Ministry each being represented with 4.8% in the participant population and Education, English, History, Marketing, and Applied Exercise Science are each being represented with 2.4%.

A hierarchical regression was conducted and found that the background characteristics of Age and Confidence after a networking prep session contributed less than 1% to the variances in confidence after a networking prep session. After controlling for background characteristics gender contributed an additional 1% to our dependent variable. In the final model, age ($B = .08$, $p < .05$) and gender ($B = .08$, $p < .05$) contributed less than 1% of the variances in confidence after a networking prep session. Students who participate in a networking prep session prior to the event have a possibility of increased confidence. Networking Prep Sessions encompassed

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a 5% increase in confidence, showing that there is a moderate relationship which is negatively correlated ($r = -.05$, $p < .01$).

In order to comprehend the personal wellness of the students in relation to their confidence, a series of questions were asked regarding emotional and mental health. When asked about social and mental health participants, 58.6% stated they do not feel anxious at least three times a month while 31% stating they do experience anxiety at least 3 times a month with 9.5% strongly agreeing. Although 92.9% expressed they do not feel sad or depressed at least three times a month, 7.1% stated they are sad or depressed at least three times a month. Despite these statistics, 97.6% have a positive opinion of themselves and only 2.4% expressed a negative opinion of themselves. With personal wellness in mind, 90.2% felt emotionally prepared for the event with only 9.8% did not feel emotionally prepared for the event.

Based on an independent sample t-test, there is a significant difference between students who met with a career counselor prior to the event ($t = 18.134$, $p < .01$), *Evening with Industry*, and confidence in obtaining a career after graduation ($t = 29.51$, $p < .01$). Students who met with a career counselor are more confident that they will be able to obtain employment after graduating with a degree from their academic institution. In order for participants to gain the confidence that they will be able to obtain employment, variables related to networking situations were addressed. Sixty four point three percent of participants agreed that they were more comfortable speaking to unfamiliar individuals after this event and 31% strongly agree that they were more comfortable, with only 2.4% disagreeing in regard to comfort levels when interacting with unfamiliar individuals. In terms of approaching unfamiliar individual, 66.7% of participants agreed and 26.2% strongly agreed that they were more comfortable approaching unfamiliar individuals while 7.1% disagreed. When talking and introducing themselves to

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employers, 54.8% agreed and 42.9% strongly agreed that they were more comfortable with only 2.4% disagreeing in regards to comfort when talking about one self and introducing themselves to employers. Participants expressed an increased awareness of nonverbal communication (61.9% Agree, 26.2% Strongly Agree, 11.9% Disagree) and 85.7% of participants stated that as a result of this event they were able to more accurately define networking (47.6% Agree, 38.1% Strongly Agree, 14.3% Disagree).

Discussion

Data analysis yielded to a 5 percent increase in confidence of students who attended a preparation session. This proved as a moderate negatively correlated relationship based on Pearsons R square. Based on our data analysis, both quantitative and qualitative, and field observations several suggestions for future networking events and research regarding the development of career related skills in the university setting are included in this report. Data analysis suggests that students who attended a preparation session prior felt more confident participating in the networking event. In order to increase student confidence further preparation sessions should be made mandatory prior to attending. Offering more than two preparation sessions spanning across many different days and hours would most likely result in an increase in attendance in the sessions. Field observations yielded to the observation of students' inappropriate business attire. It may be beneficial to incorporate more interactive activities in the preparation sessions that accurately describe the important aspect of professional attire in the networking arena.

Per student comments it may be beneficial to address the many different majors attending the networking event. Many students felt the event was targeted towards business majors. One student noted, "I felt that this was mostly geared towards business majors. I would have liked

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to see more options that could be geared towards different majors as well.” Ensuring that many different student majors are addressed in the invitation of employers would be important in order to obtain more accurate data regarding a diverse student engagement opportunity. It is interesting to note that 54.8% of attendees were comprised of the following majors: Business, Business Administration, International Business, and Finance and Accounting. This percent may be correlated to the fact that the Business Department of the university did not hold its annual Etiquette Dinner event. It may be beneficial to offer several different networking dinners targeting many different majors and departments.

Assisting students in debriefing their experience in this event may also provide further development of career related skills. Post event debriefing with students through small group discussions or post emails with instructions on appropriate follow up procedures with employers may be beneficial. For this event an email with follow up instructions was sent. One student commented, “I wanted to say thank you for sending out this e-mail. It motivated me to send a thank you email to the employers I met. Doing so has helped me get an interview with two of the companies. Thank you for your dedication and eagerness to help all those who attended!”

Through our data analysis, document review, and field observations we can confidently state that the CAS standards explored were supported through the Evening with Industry networking event.

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