

Setting Sail: A New Rudder for Career Development

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Unlike Philip Nolan forever sailing at sea with nary a word nor image about his country [1], career centers at liberal arts colleges daily see the growth of their institutions and achievements of their students, faculties, and administrative officers. But very much like the fate of Aaron Burr's fictional coconspirator, career centers never seem welcome at the main ports of call.

In student affairs, theory casts a line to career development, but practice and perspective stay glued on campus life; the career center leaves port too often in its work to cast its line back to student affairs. In academic affairs, career development is presumed to organize a mutiny at every turn, casting ever off course, towards dark and rough waters. With college advancement, the career center is so far below the deck, no connection is ever imagined, and the work of those below is to keep the galley stocked. And why should students not stay away? After all, the career center only trains them on the proper way to walk the plank.

Batten the hatches! All hands on deck! Steer the vessel into dry dock, and rebuild it so we can chart a new course.

The first step is to assess the nature of the current craft. Career development is not a science. It is not a social science. The theory is merely foundational, providing only a vague or overly specific starting point. The tools are few and marginally useful. Setting off on a career path is dynamic; career centers are set up for a static approach. Job searching feeds into a largely arbitrary and capricious process, and the selection protocols in our culture are essentially bizarre rituals. The evolution of career development in higher education is attitudinally flawed. Pioneering professionals placed the emphasis on credential files and on-campus interviews scheduled with only those organizations possessing the resources to travel off-site. Career counselors still use inventories (the epitome of static learning) that failed our students in middle school.

Beyond the campus "bubble," in that "real world" to which our students refer, the work culture is seen as a blinding array of narrow and confining little job boxes. The U.S. Department of Labor and the Bureau of Labor Statistics publishes its dictionary

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of occupational titles that breaks up work in America into a system that makes the Dewey decimal system appear cryptic. It places the emphasis on the function (job responsibilities) of work and totally ignores context. Yet it's thinking beyond function and considering context that will open more doors for our liberal arts graduates.

In thinking of our students, let's consider just a few generalized assumptions:

- For seventeen successive years, in most cases, students have operated under expectations over which they had little influence, and under rules they did not set and have most typically been evaluated (i.e., graded) without their input—no wonder their personal statements and cover letters are replete with passive phrasing like “gave me,” “provided me,” “let me.”
- Many presume too large a correlation between academic disciplines and career fields.
- Most lack information about their options, and have too few opportunities to test their interests and promise.

So what might be the architecture of a refitted ship?

Liberal arts colleges should consider a relationship-centered model of career development, with the new rudder cast on a frame of relationship-centered access. The templates of the traditional center should be thrown overboard, for templates are but an invitation to mediocrity.

Relationship-centered possibilities include:

- Career center staff will design initiatives that enable them to know students, faculty, and alumni outside the counseling and administrative cubicles.
- Alumni and family members are heard, involved, and engaged.
- Career center staff members learn to effectively broker and steward relationships in the broader college community.
- Intentional design establishes a range of opportunities for student-alumni mentoring, following a progressive immersion pattern, from 90-minute informational interviews, to day-long fireside chats, to ten-day externships with alumni home-stays, to alumni-sponsored internships that look more like field research, to six-month funded apprenticeships for new graduates (particularly international students under their “practical experience” visas).
- Students take “road trips” to connect with alumni in a particular field and across a variety of contexts.

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- Each year, each member of a different small team of tenured faculty members is granted “service release” and partners with the career center officer in conducting practice interviews with seniors.
- Recently retired alumni help build a constantly growing professional network.
- Each September, every senior who does not opt out receives a list of six alumni expecting their calls.
- Alumni clubs in urban centers offer weekly, informal support groups for new graduates and interns in their cities.
- Themed class projects (e.g., social justice, public health, microfinance, intercultural awareness, venture philanthropy) offer younger students the option of initially undertaking career exploration as part of a team or group.
- A parent exchange is established for externships and internships.
- Finding a few faculty willing to experiment in their own weeklong externships with alumni to renew and freshen perceptions of applied work in, or close to, their disciplines (and perhaps cross-disciplinary options).
- Hiring a talented retired career specialist from another college or organization to serve alumni from a remote location (they need not be on campus).
- Establishing an honorary counselor-in-residence post that connects alumni with students and faculty across an interdisciplinary career cluster.

Another key opportunity flows from a fundamental (and universal) flaw in higher education career development—the assumption that a college education is a four-year process and that a significant proportion of our students will determine a concrete career goal by commencement. Our career centers are designed to fail when the entire program is designed (and funded) on this four-years-and-done model. Not only should we build a model that spans six to eight years from matriculation, new graduates in transition should both serve their successors and be served by their predecessors (as well as by faculty/staff). This is not only educationally sound, it promises sustainability.

To help determine the true critical mass of those students and others that liberal arts college career centers should serve, consider the following observations:

- As recently as twenty years ago, for new college graduates that were unemployed (or not yet admitted to graduate school) after commencement, they were likely to be asked in interviews, “Why don’t you already have an opportunity nailed down?” Presently, it is rare that this question is even asked.

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- Many liberal arts colleges intentionally hold back on surveying their newest alumni regarding their primary post-baccalaureate activity until at least six months following graduation.
- It is far from uncommon that students remark, “I’m going to take a couple of years off.”
- According to a recent national study, baby boomers born between 1957 and 1964 held an average of 10.8 jobs between the ages of 18 and 42. [2]
- Transition programs (e.g., Peace Corps, Teach For America, AmeriCorps) appear to represent the fastest growing segment of post-baccalaureate employment.

Beyond offering career counseling, research services, and infrastructure management, a reinvented career development model for the 21st century of liberal education works primarily to connect students with work and a liberal arts life, in a multitude of configurations, primarily with alumni and “friends of the college.” With this wide array of access to the world of work and service in place, all we would need to do next is get out of their way!

Should there be any doubt that alumni would come aboard, consider this quote from an externship host: “When I am on [deck] with my externs, and they talk about their hopes, their dreams, and their futures, I remember I still have my own.”

Time to set sail.

References:

1. Reference to “The Man Without a Country,” a short story by Edward Everett Hale published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1863.
2. “Number of Jobs Held, Labor Market Activity, and Earnings Growth among the Youngest Baby Boomers: Results from a Longitudinal Survey.” Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, June 2008; the report is available on BLS website at www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/nlsoy.pdf .