Transforming the Campus Career Center:
New Models for a New Era
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A college career center at the vanguard of higher-education career services functions a bit like a beehive, according to Farouk Dey, the associate vice provost of student affairs at Stanford University. It is a hub of hyper-connectivity and communication, and much of its work involves finding resources in the outside world as well as developing networks and communities both inside and outside the center. While some of those college career communities are increasingly being built through online technology, the ultimate goal is to create human connections that foster growth and development for both students and their higher-education institutions.

At many colleges and universities, however, career services and education remain relegated to an office on the periphery of campus. Their work often has been underfunded and understaffed. Few students have used their services, much less found it useful. But external pressures and a changing economy are spurring a growing number of higher-education institutions to think more about the importance of elevating the role of career education. And increasingly, the mindset that career-services personnel can meet the needs of students and their institutions by staying in their offices and critiquing résumés is passing.

“The new trends that we’re implementing for the future are not about transactional services,” says Dey. “They’re about building community. They’re about building connections and venturing out of the brick-and-mortar career center. Our campus is our space. Beyond campus is our space.”

The external pressures on colleges and universities to better help students prepare for navigating careers and the economy after graduation remain intense. Parents, students, and lawmakers continue to expect higher-education institutions to demonstrate value and return on investment, as tuitions continue to rise and the cost of delivering higher education grows. “There is far more attention now to outcomes and looking at what higher education is doing to prepare students for the world of work, so higher-education institutions are realizing they need to pay attention to what happens to their graduates,” says Marilyn Mackes, executive director of the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE).

While the economy has improved somewhat since the 2008 recession, federal data show the unemployment rate for college graduates ages 25 and older is now nearly double what it was in 2000. At the same time, more students are expecting higher-education institutions to help them get jobs: 86 percent of incoming freshmen cite getting a better job as a critical factor in their decision to enroll in college, according to the annual report The American Freshman, published by researchers at the University of California at Los Angeles.
And yet only one in 10 business leaders in the United States say a college education really equips students with the skills and competencies they will need for work, a 2014 survey report by Gallup noted.

Meanwhile, graduates say the career services they find on campuses are lacking. About half of college graduates nationally report that they visited the career-services office as undergraduates, according to the December 2016 Gallup-Purdue Index Report, which questioned 11,483 college graduates nationwide and focused on career education. Only 17 percent of those graduates say that their career-services office was very helpful.

But the survey found that campus career services play a big role in perceptions about higher education’s value. “Graduates who had a high-quality experience with career services are dramatically more likely to believe their university prepared them well for life outside of college, to say their education was worth the cost, to recommend their university to others, and to report making donations to their alma mater,” it states.

As a result, more colleges and universities are thinking about their career education, though some of them still are not investing resources to move beyond words to action. Many institutions have even decreased their budgets for career services, according to NACE’s annual benchmark survey, with the smallest institutions experiencing the most severe cuts. In various higher-education institutions nationwide, however, some leaders have begun to make substantial investments in career-services resources and staff and to think about new models for delivering career education and integrating it with academic coursework. “It has more to do with the particular culture of an institution and the ability of the institution as a whole to see career readiness and career preparation of students as part of their mission,” Mackes says.

### Career Service Quick Facts

- **Median number of full-time-equivalent career center staff:** 4
- **Median number of students to staff:** 1,765 to 1
- **Career centers providing internship assistance:** 92.5%
- **Career centers offering for-credit career classes:** 35.5%
- **Graduating seniors reporting they used alumni connections in their job searches:** 47.1%

Sources: NACE 2016-17 Career Services Benchmark Survey and NACE 2016 Student Survey
In a handful of cases, including Stanford, Wellesley College, and Wake Forest University, the institution’s leadership has chosen to signal the central role of career education by making the career-services executive part of the president’s cabinet.

Some colleges and universities, 23.5 percent in 2016, now have career services report through academic affairs, according to the NACE survey, a slight increase from the 17.7 percent who did in 2006. Institutions choosing that approach reason that it has helped integrate career education into academic curricula, since faculty members sometimes challenge the idea of building career education into the prime mission of the institution. But the majority of institutions, 51.6 percent as of 2016, still have career services report through student affairs.

Regardless of their reporting strategies, colleges are rethinking the content of the career education and services they deliver to reflect the changing economy and labor market. “We all realize it’s about navigating a life of transitions,” says Richard Feller, a professor of counseling and career development at Colorado State University, who speaks frequently at national conferences about career education. “The relationship between major and job is a little less powerful. Now, we’re talking about skill development, because the jobs change so quickly. People change jobs more often in their careers. We
don’t know what jobs there will be. So how do we really teach a sense of resiliency and adaptability? That’s the key.”

Some institutions, public and private, large and small, are beginning that work in career education with freshman orientation as well as in seminars for first-year students. Those institutions include Ball State, Millikin, Rutgers, and Stanford universities. Beyond the freshman year, most colleges and universities also are seeking to create more opportunities for students to engage in experiential learning, cooperative programs, workshops, and internships, where they can gain work skills and make connections with prospective employers and alumni in their fields of interest. Various studies have shown such experiences not only increase student engagement and graduation rates, they help students have better placement rates in finding jobs, particularly as employers turn to internships more for their recruiting pipeline.

A growing number of institutions have adopted the model of directing students into interest groups, starting early in their undergraduate education, and then delivering career education and services targeted to those interests. “The concept of career communities has absolutely taken off,” says Dey, who is also dean of career education at Stanford. The model allows students to learn about themselves and explore their future within a community of people who have similar interests. The students can then explore career opportunities related to their interests and make connections with alumni and employers in those areas.

A variety of new online platforms and social media technologies now provide innovative ways for colleges and universities to engage and connect students, alumni, and employers, and to target information based on interests. The platform providers range from Symplicity, a company founded in 1996 that holds the market share, to startups such as Handshake and PeopleGrove, which are steadily gaining ground. Those technologies and social media allow students to access career information at all hours, and using technology to deliver that basic information frees career-services staff members to focus on more developmental work with students, alumni, and employers.

For a generation of students that expects information to be entertaining, college career services also are turning to delivering information through computer-generated animation as well as participatory online or in-person games.

All of those technologies and strategies require resources and institutional commitment to career education. “If higher-education institutions take a good, hard look at where they want to see themselves in the next 10 years, this issue of helping their graduates prepare themselves for the future and of providing the services and experiences that are needed will enable them to plan more successfully for their long-term goals as an institution,” says Mackes at NACE. “It’s really tied into integrating it into the full strategy and making sure it’s a shared responsibility across the institution. That means the academic experience needs to integrate well with the career-development experience.”
First-year students who play the online passport game at Rutgers, the state university of New Jersey, earn electronic stamps in a virtual passport each time they finish a career-development activity, from completing an online self-assessment to attending a workshop to explore careers and majors. The university’s career-services office advertises the game through social media, and students who earn 15 stamps by the end of their first semester are entered in a raffle where one student receives free in-state tuition for the next semester.

It’s just one of the many ways that Rutgers has set about increasing student engagement with career services since a critical external review of the department in 2012 found few students used the department or found its services valuable. That review, commissioned by the vice chancellor of undergraduate academic affairs, served as a catalyst for the university to dramatically change the structure, leadership, and resource allocation for the department.

Under the leadership of a new executive director, Richard Hearin, and a new senior director, William Jones, the career-services department and its approach were restructured from a focus on majors to a model based on career interest groups for students. This allows the department to target its programming to help students explore those areas and develop career contacts and experience. They call it a career cluster model, and the interest groups are based in 19 vocational interests that are centered around common skill sets for different occupations.

Along with the restructuring came a huge infusion of new resources from the university. In 2012, the department received a budget increase of 50 percent, and since then, it has doubled its staff to 40, including three new marketing staff members, a web developer, two mentoring program coordinators, two
employer development coordinators, and an alumni career-services position.

Each interest area now has a career-services staff member with experience in that particular career area, unlike the generalists who worked with all majors in the past. Students are required to register through the career services’ online platform in order to receive any information or to access services and events. The students have to tag their interests when they register, so that all information and online tools they receive are targeted, along with opportunities to register for in-person career-development events. The university’s work with employers and alumni also is funneled and developed through the interest groups. “It’s really the gateway to everything that we do,” Jones says.

Technological tools have helped the career-services department scale up what it does to reach more students, through offerings including a virtual mock interviewing system and an online library of informational interviews with alumni, all of which are tagged by career interest groups so students can more easily find relevant information. “Technology in general has helped us to reach students who we haven’t reached in the past,” Jones says. “Social media has helped us get in front of the students who may not necessarily view us as the cool kids on the block. In a way, we represent what they fear most, which is transitioning into the world of work.”

The department’s growth has continued as career-services leaders have worked to develop a network of partnerships throughout the campus, and career staff members in each interest group have a portfolio of academic departments where they are assigned to cultivate alliances. Other departments and academic schools even help pay the salaries of some career-services staff members.

The career-services department, which reports through academic affairs, also works...
with various academic schools that award credit for the courses it offers, including a sophomore career-planning course for arts and sciences students that was begun this past spring, as well as an internship and cooperative planning course. The university’s elective first-year interest seminars, which are taught by junior and senior students who receive training, have been offered for 10 years but were moved under the direction of career services last year. The new courses previously had an academic focus and now have a career exploration and development focus around the interest groups students have joined.

The course credits are awarded by academic schools within the university that have study areas related to the interest groups targeted in the classes.

“When you talk about the new career services, that’s what we have to do: We have to be out there creating these partnerships,” Jones says. “The new career-services professional must be comfortable working with academic deans, with employers and alumni, and serving as kind of development officers, as well, or you’re never going to have the resources you need to impact, in our case, 50,000 students.”
At Lake Forest College, a liberal-arts institution just outside Chicago, the attention to career development has been so pervasive in recent years that in 2014, the college added a phrase about it to its mission statement: “We prepare our students for, and help them attain, productive and rewarding careers.” But the effort goes beyond rhetoric.

With the economic downturn of 2008, the college’s president and trustees decided to make substantial investments in Lake Forest’s career-advancement center. They hired a new leader for the center, Lisa Hinkley, who as associate vice president for career and professional development is now a member of the president’s senior staff. The college has tripled the size of the center’s staff, to nine. Even the trustees have joined in the effort: They formed a board committee in 2013 that meets regularly with Hinkley to review postgraduate outcomes and provide advice and information about opportunities based on their own career experience. Next up is moving the career advancement services to the main floor of Young Hall, the symbolic center of campus. “This relocation will highlight exceptional career preparation as a central part of our educational mission,” says the college’s president, Stephen Schutt.

The labor market is evolving in ways that are not temporary, Hinkley says, as technology is transforming jobs and as employers are investing less in recent graduates and expecting more from them. “We really have decided not to leave it to chance whether or not students are going to do well after graduation,” she says. “Career centers can’t be sitting on the sidelines helping students with résumés and cover letters. We have to be conveners and connectors.”
Toward that end, Hinkley and her staff created a Career Pathways strategy that allows students to select a career interest group that is designed to link them with a community of other students, alumni, faculty, staff, trustees, and external college supporters, all in that interest area. Each pathway is headed by a staff member who has expertise in that area and experience outside higher education. The college’s program takes students through four stages of personal exploration and career development to help them gain the skills and experiences they need, including internships, and make connections with people who can educate them and help land meaningful jobs.

The career advancement staff’s work begins in the admissions process, educating students and parents about the career services the college provides, and extends through freshman orientation and beyond. The college doesn’t offer for-credit career courses, but career advancement staff work with faculty members to help them answer career interest and development questions that students may have. “We are very visible; we are very integrated,” Hinkley says. “If you look across our structure at Lake Forest, there isn’t an academic or administrative department that the career advancement center doesn’t work closely with.”

The college’s enrollment is 1,600, so the nine staff members also can work individually with students. That ratio of students to staff means the college can use technology and social media for career services in different ways than larger institutions do, as support tools to foster more in-person connections. Those technologies include a computer-based matching system that the college uses to sort students and professionals and create schedules for its annual speed-networking event.

The combined efforts have brought strong results: More than 90 percent of students work with the center’s staff before graduation, and 97 percent of the class of 2015 had secured jobs or enrolled in graduate school within six months after graduation. “Our work needs to demonstrate results, both in student engagement and in actual outcomes,” Hinkley says. “To do what we do requires institutional support and having it be a priority, and it requires the level of commitment that ultimately has funds that come with it.”
Career education at Stanford goes by the acronym BEAM: Bridging Education, Ambition, and Meaningful Work. The driving philosophy behind it emphasizes self-exploration and helping students toward purposeful careers by engaging them with communities of other students as well as alumni, faculty, and employers. Dey and his staff established the new model and restructured the department’s staff in 2014. “This is not your typical college placement and career counseling center anymore,” Dey told the faculty senate this past spring.

Career coaches on his staff who have industry expertise and experience are assigned to groups of students based on academic majors and degrees. Three career coaches work specifically with freshmen and sophomores, since Stanford students don’t declare majors until their third year. The career educators meet with students to help them explore career paths, identify and apply for meaningful internship and employment opportunities, and cultivate networks through mentoring and experiential learning. “We deliver all of our programming and insights and information and services through that community,” Dey says. The aim is to give students specialized support from a career coach who is connected to their academic discipline and network of advisers and understands their concerns and potential career trajectories.

Students are encouraged to join site visits to various companies and organizations to learn about the world of work and connect with potential recruiters. An online mentoring...
program, provided through the startup company PeopleGrove, matches students with alumni based on career interests and fields of study. In 2015, working with another startup company, Handshake, which provided the technology platform, BEAM launched an online service that connects students with a diverse range of employers, events, and opportunities. “They’re creating this one network for universities, where the opportunities that come through Stanford are available to students at another university in another state, and vice versa,” Dey says. “It helps democratize job opportunities for students.”

Dey’s department also partnered with Stanford’s d.school (design school) to create the Life Design Lab. The endeavor applies design thinking—creative problem-solving strategies used by designers—to the process of helping students design a plan for their life, education, and vocation. The lab teaches courses, delivers programs and tools, and conducts research. The “Designing Your Life” course helps students learn gratitude, generosity, self-awareness, and adaptability through design-thinking exercises and tools, and it has become the most popular elective course among Stanford students. (The two professors who developed the course, Bill Burnett and Dave Evans, published a book based on it last year.)

In the four years since the restructuring of Stanford’s career education, the number of students connecting with alumni mentors has tripled, a wider array of employers have begun engaging with students, and enrollment in career courses has quadrupled. Students are also thinking about their careers earlier in their education: At least two-thirds of freshmen now engage in career-development activities, Dey says. “It all stems from that philosophy of transforming students’ education and vision into meaningful work. We’re not here just to get you a job.”
Conclusion

The external demands for colleges and universities to be held accountable for the value their education provides students for life after graduation are unlikely to subside. At many higher-education institutions, however, there’s more talk than action about improving the quality of career education and engaging students in thinking about their future lives and work. Yet a few, forward-thinking colleges and universities have managed to forge new models for career education that are producing strong results in helping students develop the skills and the mindset they will need for an evolving economy.

Most of those successful college and university career-education programs across the country have received increased institutional support and funding. They are using technology in innovative ways to engage students, customize how information is delivered, and generate data to inform decision-making.

Those career-services staff members also have developed partnerships across their campuses, seeking to integrate career education into the academic curricula and graduation requirements, and have built substantial networks with alumni and employers. “The trend of the future is that most of our work happens outside our facility,” says Dey, through an ecosystem of communities and connections.