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Article 12

**Competition Promotes Career Exploration for First-Year Students: A Housing and Career Services Partnership**

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Paper based on a program presented at these conferences:
- *NCDA - Roundtable Presentation, July 2 2009, St. Louis, MO*
- *Careers Conference – Presentation, January 27 2009, Madison, WI*
- *MidWest Ace – Presentation, July 15 2009, Chicago, IL*

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**Introduction**

Each semester, thousands of students fumble through choosing and changing a major, and many more struggle to figure out what they want to do after graduation. Career centers are designed to help with this ambiguity, yet many students still don’t know these services are offered on campuses. The prevailing assumption, for those who know about career services, is that the office is primarily for juniors and seniors. College students do not utilize career services to the extent that they should, and this is especially true for first-year students. However, when surveyed, students respond that they would like more career guidance (Noel-Levitz, 2007). If students are asking for career help, but not actively going to the career center, then career development must be brought to daily experiential student experiences. A potential method for career centers to market their services, as well as involve more first-year students, would be to engage in purposeful outreach over a given period of time.

**Competition and First-Year College Students**

The 2007 Graduating Student Survey conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), indicated that the “services like those available at the Career Center can give students an advantage in securing a full-time job after graduation.” In the same year, the 2007 National Freshman Attitudes Report surveyed over 97,000 freshman students and found that 66% of them wanted career guidance. More than 62% of the surveyed students reported they would like to talk to someone about occupations (Noel-Levitz, 2007). The first year of college is the most important year for overall student development (Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo, 2006). It is therefore a natural fit that career services intervenes during the first year in every possible
manner. Although effective, and thought to be helpful by students, many do not utilize career services. A program that is specific to first-year students will provide services to students who desire them, while exposing career development to students who are unaware of career services. Devising a program that is more than a one-time shot, and is customized early on in a student’s college experience, will ensure that career and major planning is on track. Career interventions should be tailored toward this population, and research has shown that services which are lengthier in content and context are helpful to students in major and career development (Green, McCord, & Westbrooks, 2005).

Reaching out to students is important, but the goal is to capture the attention and interest of all students. Utilizing an experiential approach with college students has proven to be effective. Many first-year students enjoy competitive environments that include hands-on activities to accentuate their learning styles (Gabe, 2002). Davis and Laker (2004) write that activities for college students should be fun and engaging. Activities therefore should be not only engaging, but active and not blatantly advice driven. The fact that these activities are held in students’ residence halls also provides an extra sense of comfort. Students may not participate in group activities in which they are not confident (Hess & Winston, 1995; Yan, Sheely, & Whalen, 2005). The career development activities should be centered on fun exploration that gives students a chance to succeed.

If career development is the goal, and attracting first-year students who under-utilize career services is needed to reach this goal, then taking career development to students is necessary. The best way to work within the students’ framework is to work within their environment where collaboration with residence life has been shown to be effective (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Scott V. Weston: Seek & Explore is a unique collaboration between The Career Center and University Housing that uses this technique to reach students. The goal is to have students start to think about career development from the very beginning of their college experience.

The first year of college is primarily spent getting acclimated to college life, not focusing on career-related topics. Hunter (2006) has asked institutions to allocate resources for first-year students to help through this transition. As was noted earlier, students want to get involved in career activities. Scott V. Weston: Seek & Explore is designed to involve students outside of the classroom in career related events. The more often that students get engaged outside of the classroom, the better (Hallenbeck, Dickman, & Fuqua, 2003; Stanford, 1992; Tinto, 1993; Winston & Anchors, 1993). The benefits toward students are not only for adjustment to college, but for overall development. Kuh (1995) writes that out of class experiences are associated with student learning. Outreach efforts also lead to increased classroom attendance (Marks & McLaughlin, 2005).

One of the two residence halls (Weston) that was involved in this program is a Living Learning Community. Living Learning Communities have been shown to increase critical thinking and foster interactive learning (Schein, 2005). This community interaction offers a great conduit for career development (Wang, Arboleda, Shelley, & Whalen, 2003). It is then necessary for career development specialists to take their work to the students in a structured, fun manner. This personalizing of programming will help students find academic success (Wlazelek & Coulter, 1999). Increasing academic success will lead to more confidence in a given area, which usually leads to further career
exploration. *Scott V. Weston: Seek & Explore* is designed to increase first-year student participation in career development. Research that focuses on first-year college student career development activities throughout their first semester at college will provide increased understanding of this population’s career needs.

**Outcome Statements**

Below are listed 7 outcome statements that were created for *Scott V. Weston: Seek & Explore*. The first five outcomes focus on student’s ability to identify career and major related tasks.

1) Students who engage in *Scott V. Weston: Seek & Explore* will be able to identify three interests and express how these interests relate to majors on campus.
2) Students who participate in *Scott V. Weston: Seek & Explore* designated events will be able to list three primary values which the student deems necessary to have in a future career.
3) Students who engage in *Scott V. Weston: Seek & Explore* will be able to indicate three skills they want to utilize in a future career.
4) Students who engage in *Scott V. Weston: Seek & Explore* will be able to name five skills employers want from graduates.
5) Students who complete *Scott V. Weston: Seek & Explore* will be able to describe where to find three career resources related to majors on campus.
6) Students who participate in *Scott V. Weston: Seek & Explore* will be able to compare career options with majors they are considering.
7) Students who engage in *Scott V. Weston: Seek & Explore* will be able to report increased comfort levels with choosing a major.

**Goals of Research Include**

- To gather information on whether major and career programming with inherent competition and incentives built within the programmatic model has any influence on student’s attendance.
- To examine first-year student’s ability to reflect and identify career and major related information.
- To compare involved (attends events) first-year students’ career readiness to uninvolved first-year students’ career readiness.
- To examine major/career areas of concern that may go unidentified by the student themselves, staff, and faculty.
- To enhance first-year students’ awareness of career and major resources on campus.

**Methods**

**Participants**

Participants were residents at *Scott* and *Weston* residence halls at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Each residence hall houses approximately 450 students. Most of the residents were first-year students, but the program was inclusive of all
students living in these residence halls. However, only first-year students were included in research data. One of the residence halls (Weston) is a Living Learning Community that has a focus on major and career exploration.

**Procedures**

Two residence halls participated and competed against each other in *Scott V. Weston: Seek & Explore*. The semester long program was separated into three 5 week sections.

1. Know Your Self
2. Know Your University
3. Know Your Community

Every week, approximately five programs/workshops were classified as *Scott V. Weston: Seek & Explore* events. If students attend a program they received points for their residence hall. Students were randomly given prizes for attending an event and a grand prize (TV) was given to the winning hall.

The first section (Know Yourself) of the program focused on students having a better understanding of careers and employers based on their interests, skills, values, and personality. Increased outreach efforts for career workshops and access to assessments were included.

The second section (Know Your University) focused on students getting to know university resources. These events included: leadership development, experiential education, employment, research, etc. This aspect of the program was aimed at increasing student experiences which will better develop transferable skills related to major and career development.

The third section (Know Your Community) focused on students engaging in community service activities outside of campus. The goal was to increase networking as well as career exploration activities. Community service focused on student interest areas. The goal was to make career development as intentional and interesting as possible.

**Data Collection**

Research consisted of two rounds of surveys along with two rounds of the *My Vocational Situation* questionnaire (MVS). The survey and questionnaire are designed to gather information on first year students’:

- willingness to attend career programming to a greater extent if competition and incentives are included in the programmatic model
- ability to reflect on and identify specific information related to majors/careers (is career development occurring for first-year students who attend career/major based programming?)
- major/career related areas of concern that may go unidentified by the student themselves, staff, and faculty
- engagement in major/career development throughout the fall semester (are students who attended designated events more actively engaged in major/career exploration?)
All students living in Scott and Weston Hall were asked to fill out the *My Vocational Situation* questionnaire (MVS) and a short survey during the first resident assistant (RA) meeting of the Fall (2008) semester. Students were then asked to complete the same questionnaire and survey during the last RA meeting of the fall (2008) semester. The first survey and questionnaire were completed in August and the follow-up survey and questionnaire were competed in mid December.

**Scott V. Weston: Seek & Explore Survey**

The survey contained six sections:

- Student awareness of their own major/career exploration
- Specific major/career exploration activities student has engaged in
- Identify major/career resources student is aware of on campus
- Student ability to identify current interests, values, and skills relating to major/career
- Student awareness of skills employers seek from both current and recent college graduates
- Student comfort with major/career exploration

**My Vocational Situation (MVS) Questionnaire**

MVS provides an indication of career help students might potentially need:

- Identifies problems that are often neglected or that go unrecognized.
- Helps pinpoint areas of concern: lack of vocational identity, lack of information or training, and emotional or personal barriers.

**Scott V. Weston: Seek & Explore Follow Up Survey**

The follow up survey contained the six sections from the initial survey, plus one additional section for the “control” and “experimental” groups:

- Student awareness of own major/career exploration
- Specific major/career exploration activities student has engaged in
- Identify major/career resources student is aware of on campus
- Student ability to identify current interests, values, and skills relating to major/career
- Student awareness of skills employers seek from both current and recent college graduates
- Student comfort with major/career exploration
- Reasoning behind attending *Scott V. Weston: Seek & Explore* designated events (Experimental group)
- Reasoning behind not attending *Scott V. Weston: Seek & Explore* designated events (Control group)
Sample Scott V. Weston: Seek & Explore Programming
Included is a small sample of the programming that was designated as Scott V. Weston: Seek & Explore “events”

- Exploring Pathways in Career Success (EPICS) workshop
  - https://www-s.epics.uiuc.edu/index.aspx
- Do What You Are Assessment Activity
- Preparing for a Career Fair workshop
- Attending a Career Fair
- Meeting with a Career Counselor
- Finding a Major that Fits workshop
- Enrolling in a Illinois Leadership Center based I-Program
- Participating on a Get on the Bus Tour (One day group job shadow)
- Attending a study abroad or international job search seminar
- Taking the Strong Interest Inventory or MBTI
- Attending an employer panel

Results
Correlation analysis indicated two themes:
1. The students who attended at least one Scott V. Weston: Seek and Explore program indicated a decreased need for career information (MVS section 2). (Students with low vocational identity tend to express a need for a high amount of career information)
2. Students who attended at least one Scott V. Weston: Seek and Explore program expressed a greater degree of comfort in choosing a major (Survey Questions)

At the beginning of the semester 820 students completed both the survey and the MVS questionnaire. At the end of the semester only 190 completed both the survey and MVS questionnaire. However, only 145 of those 190 students had also completed them at the beginning of the semester. Results are limited, but show an indication that students who engage in some type of career development activity are more comfortable and better prepared to take next steps regarding their professional development.

Implication for Career Counselors

Scott V. Weston: Seek and Explore was a success. There was a drastic number reduction in the data that the researchers were able to collect from the beginning of the semester to the end, but overall the program appeared to serve students indicated needs. As an outreach program, hundreds of students became aware that The Career Center exists on campus and learned about the services and resources it provided.
Challenges of the Program

During the beginning of the semester, students seemed to have much more energy toward the competition. The amount of participation decreased as the semester wore on. On average during the first five weeks the “events” were attended by 40 students. At the end of the semester some “events” did not have any attendees. The idea of creating urgency diminished as the residence hall staff became very busy during the semester.

After reviewing the whole project it seemed apparent that having less “events” would serve the needs of the students and professional staff better. Offering one program per week seems to be an active, yet not overwhelming number.

Another positive aspect of the program was the amount of college men that participated. Career centers across the country struggle to get men to come to the services that are provided. Most institutions have a 60% female to 40% male ratio of service usage. Scott V. Weston: Seek and Explore seemed to entice more men to come to the “events” due to their competitive nature. During one “event” at the beginning of the semester 65 men attended and the competition was initially what drove them to the program (as was indicated by the men).

Scott V. Weston: Seek and Explore created more career development learning opportunities for students. Simply having a large amount of events in the residence halls seemed to expose students to the idea of career development/exploration. The competitive nature of the program appeared to help increase attendance, at least during the first eight weeks. Exposing students to the idea of career development is a positive first step, but ideally the student/s should engage in some type of productive activity that would expose them to various experiential activities.

References


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