Rethinking the Faculty Role in Students' Career Readiness

> It's time for all of us on campuses, not just the people in career services, to step up and help offer the competencies employers say they're looking for, Rachel Toor writes.

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If we take seriously the problem of student debt, if we believe parents and students when they say that what they want out of a college degree is a good job (whatever that means to them), if we listen to what employers are saying about the disconnect between what students are learning in class and the competencies they need in the workforce, we might all start thinking about our jobs as faculty a little differently.

The core competencies identified by NACE, the National Association for Colleges and Employers (https://www.naceweb.org/career-readiness/competencies/career-readiness-defined/), are communication, critical thinking, equity and inclusion, leadership, professionalism, teamwork, and technology. That sounds to me a whole lot like general education goals.

Many faculty members see their role as exclusively to teach within their discipline and not to worry too much about what happens to students once they leave the nest. We've all seen what's happened in graduate education when professors believe only a mini-me version of themselves is worthy: the folks who don't win the job lottery end up out of academe and understandably bitter—and their numbers are only growing larger.

I know many faculty members—including those at my own university, especially in STEM and professional fields—help students get jobs. But many of us, particularly in the arts and humanities, don't think much about future careers for our students. We're teaching them how to think critically, we say and believe—not inculcating a mind-set required to nail a job interview.

Recently, my editor at the University of Chicago Press gifted me an idea for a reported book. She'd been hearing from people in different fields that college grads have no idea how to approach applying for jobs—that they make ruinous mistakes in their cover letters, résumés and interviews. Yet those graduates often boast, based on bad advice and with zero evidence, "I am the most qualified applicant for this job."

So, as I've been doing research and conducting interviews with hiring managers and recruiters, I've also started thinking about what happens on campuses.

Employers say students don't know how to translate what they've learned in the classroom and in co-curricular activities into useful real-world skills. I have heard this from people in investment banking, from Fortune 500 companies, law firms, community organizers, librarians, tech start-ups, marketing companies and publishers. The students who apply for these jobs come elite privates, regional state universities small liberal arts and community colleges.

That's not the fault of university career services offices. Those departments, even though often understaffed and underfunded, offer a host of resources to help guide students toward meaningful next steps. They are managed by trained professionals with access to technological tools to help students figure out how to connect their interests to actual jobs, and they offer one-on-one coaching about the application process. But according to data from NACE (https://www.naceweb.org/career-development/trends-and-predictions/nace-quick-poll-career-centers-alter-outreach-to-employers-students-from-marginalized-groups/), the median number of students per professional staff member is 1,735.

Plus, many students on campuses do not take advantage of those offerings. Instead, they come to people they know—professors like me—for help with cover letters and résumés. And while I can comment on language, until recently I had no idea about how most résumés are read first by a version of R2-D2 and his little robot friends who make up automated tracking systems. If an applicant doesn't include the right keywords in a résumé or cover letter, into the trash bin they go.

The truth is, I have not applied for a job in 15 years; for many of my colleagues it's been even longer, and some of them have never worked outside academe. It's not surprising that employers are seeing recent college grads—smart students, hard workers—who don't know how to present themselves as potential employees.

Recently I spent four hours on a Saturday morning at Gonzaga University's career services office participating in a training for their faculty and staff. I was invited to crash the party because I wanted to learn about resources available to students at a private, mission-driven institution, which is quite different from the regional comprehensive state university where I teach.

Ray Angle, assistant vice president of career and professional development, said he believes university offices like his need what he acronymizes as STAMP: space, technology, appreciation, money and people. With appropriate support, centers like his can help students figure out how to match their passions with a career. In a place where the values are built into the charter of the institution, there is great opportunity to do this.

Career centers on campuses can offer students coaching, resources and connections. But, as Angle points out, they tend to be a just-in-time service. They are also, he says, "scary places for a lot of students." Many young people don't want to face the reality of life after graduation. Often, it's a case of too little, too late.

Except, not everywhere. There is a movement toward real and exciting innovation in career services. When I talked to Tim Harding, assistant vice president for career development and engagement at the University of Tampa, and he explained their Spartan Ready program, my response was simple: *duh.* Brilliant ideas often seem obvious.

Over the phone, I asked Harding to describe how the program came into being. About 10 years ago, he said, he realized students were involved in plenty of co-curricular activities. But they didn't have an ability to recognize and articulate those experiences into the marketable skills employers were looking for. There was, he says, a real disconnect.

It was plainly apparent that the solution was to involve people from various aspects of the university to marry academic success and career readiness. When Harding listened to faculty members talk about their learning outcomes, he saw how closely they mapped to core competencies employers said they were looking for. A group of people got excited, and the program took off.

A Mind-Set of Humility, Eagerness and Curiosity

The genius in all this seems crystal clear: bringing together faculty and staff in student engagement, residential life, career services, admissions, marketing and communications, alumni, and development to work together to help prepare students to succeed academically and after graduation. Why wouldn't professors want to include in their curricula competencies employers say they are looking for? Don't we all want our students to succeed, not just in our courses but beyond them?

What surprised me most in talking to other campus career office directors is that while funding helps, some of these programs require not much more than a willingness on the part of people in different parts of the university to prioritize career readiness and be open to change. Junior faculty are often the most agile in connecting their disciplines to applicable skills. (They are also least likely to get all twitchy at the use of the word "skills" in relation to a liberal arts education.) Perhaps that's because they are all still drowning in their own student loans.

The University of Tampa is not the only place this kind of innovation is happening. Harding points to examples at the University of Minnesota (https://cla.umn.edu/career-readiness/consortium), Clemson University (https://career.sites.clemson.edu/services.php), Hendrix College (https://www.hendrix.edu/career/) and Dean College (https://www.dean.edu/support-success/dean-career-advantage/).

Heather Maietta, associate professor of higher education leadership at Regis University and former associate vice president of career and corporate engagement at Merrimack College, edited a collection (https://www.naceweb.org/store/2021/nace-cases-in-career-services-a-working-guide-for-practitioners/) of case studies of what different universities have done.

Maietta told me a story about her eighth-grade daughter's classwork where they built a bridge. What, she asked her daughter, had she learned? Well, all the things that went into building a bridge. Maietta, though, asked her to think about the skills she'd acquired along the way: problem solving, teamwork, creativity, open-mindedness, troubleshooting. How could she translate all of that into a story she could tell future employers?

One of the things I've found in talking to employers is that they all say the same thing. When someone applies for a job right out of college, no matter how many skills or credentials they've managed to acquire, they're still going to have to be trained to work in that particular place—whether it's in engineering, community organizing or ranching. The main qualities I've been hearing employers say they want are humble, hungry and smart. They skip over young adults who are selling their own brand; they want employees who will make their jobs easier. They want to see a mind-set of humility, eagerness and curiosity. Those are, I hasten to point out, also key ingredients for academic success.

In college, students understand it's all about them: their intellectual development, their personal growth, their anxiety disorders. (Many students these days introduce themselves with their diagnoses—and in a world with threats from everywhere, who can blame them?) But prospective employers don't care about any of that. What they want to know is: *What can you do for me?*

Students amass huge amounts of debt, not realizing how the mind-boggling numbers will double and triple with time and that their Social Security income can be garnished. You offer an 18-year-old a bunch of money? They're likely to say yes without understanding the consequences, especially when they come from less privileged families. How, I wonder, are they going to pay that back? Especially if they major in the arts or humanities at a nonelite institution?

It's time for all of us on campuses, not just the people in career services, to step up. What if we all focused on both academics *and* career readiness and we invested in making our campuses reflect that? If we embedded within our courses and co-curricular activities a focus on how to translate student experiences in ways that would apply in the world of work? Students love experiential learning, and many universities offer co-ops and internships. Faculty can help students understand how to understand and render in language those valuable opportunities. Universities can make it a priority with programmatic and coordinated backing.

That may mean that faculty could benefit from specific trainings given by their career centers, like the one I did at Gonzaga, which provides a financial incentive—a $500 grant to the department when faculty incorporate career development programming into their classes, departments and majors. Gonzaga also give grants to faculty members who bring at least 30 students to career fairs.

Even with a dangling financial carrot, not all faculty members can do the half-day Saturday workshop at Gonzaga. And even at universities that build career readiness into the curriculum, not

everyone participates, because they don't see it as a part of their academic jobs.

Just as for recent grads, having the right the mind-set is the most important part of a job search, if faculty can start to think just a little differently about how we teach, if we do the work to understand how our students are being perceived when they try to enter the workforce, we will be better at helping them succeed.

Academic success and career readiness should go together like chocolate and peanut butter. At some institutions, they already do. I think it's incumbent on all of us—especially those who know the back-breaking burden of student loans—to help our students get jobs.

Rachel Toor is professor of creative writing at Eastern Washington University in Spokane. Her most recent book, Write Your Way In: Crafting an Unforgettable College Admissions Essay (https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/W/bo24030506.html)*, was published by the University of Chicago Press. Her next book will be titled* Humble, Hungry, and Smart: How to Think About Applying for First Jobs.

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