ARE YOUR STUDENTS CAREER READY?

New Initiatives Close Competency and Skill Gaps

ORAL AND WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

PROFESSIONALISM AND WORK ETHIC

TEAMWORK

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

CRITICAL THINKING AND PROBLEM SOLVING

CAREER MANAGEMENT

LEADERSHIP

GLOBAL AND INTERCULTURAL FLUENCY

BY MATTHEW BRINK

A re your students career ready? It is a question with differing answers. The national dialogue about whether students are career ready has a different tone depending on the source. The employment community's answer is an emphatic no. The higher education community's answer is a resounding yes. This difference is accentuated in the 2014 Lumina Study "The American Public's Opinion on Higher Education and U.S. Business Leaders Poll on Higher Education: What America Needs to Know about Higher Education Redesign," in which 99 percent of chief academic officers rated their institutions as "very/somewhat effective at preparing students for the world of work." In contrast, only 11 percent of business leaders strongly agreed that "graduating students have the skills and competencies their businesses need."

Myriad reports and national press coverage also point to this contrast. Regional and national elected officials and consumers of education are increasingly focused on the value of a college degree and its ability to ensure a more immediate return on investment through meaningful professional-level jobs secured before or shortly after graduation in a field of interest to the student or related field of study. Behind this focus is an expectation, or even a demand, for higher education to validate that graduates are career ready. Several bills have recently been introduced in the U.S. Congress, which could provide consumers with access to data provided by higher education institutions that can be used to evaluate and compare the average starting salary of graduates, percentage of graduates employed within six months of graduation, average amount of debt, and graduate success beyond the first job. These bills include language focused on accountability, transparency, and the value of a degree. Although the language does not specifically reference career readiness, the intent of this legislative activity is clear.

THREE NATIONAL NARRATIVES

The convergence of these dynamics reveals three national narratives from three distinct constituents that call on colleges and universities to address the career readiness of students. *Employers* are looking for how higher education can ramp up development of what they often refer to as "soft skills." *Consumers* expect their institutions of choice will deliver a campus experience resulting in students that are career ready. *Elected officials* are seeking to enact legislation that ensures transparency and validation of graduate outcomes.

One can make a valid argument that when employers, consumers of education, and elected officials refer to a lack of "soft skills" in students, job candidates, and new hires, they are referring to a foundational set of competencies honed through academic, cocurricular, and experiential learning engagements that ultimately prepare individuals for lives of meaning and purpose. It is important to note a contrary argument often embraced by some in the higher education community: the idea that academia is denigrated when curriculum addresses competencies. This point of view suggests such competencies are vocational in nature and too focused on education solely as preparation for a career. However, when one examines the core tenets of general education curriculum across institutions, there is substantive alignment with competencies, particularly for critical thinking, problem solving, and oral and written communication that are often foundational learning outcomes. These skills are central to competency frameworks articulated by a variety of associations, including the Association of American Colleges & Universities and the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE). Additionally, teamwork, collaboration, leadership, and intercultural fluency are among the learning outcomes embedded within the general education curriculum. Therefore, the argument can be made that higher education institutions that pursue efforts to implement competency initiatives within their curricula complement their institutions' approach to delivering a robust general education.

APPLYING LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION TO GLOBAL TECHNOLOGY

BY ANDREW CEPERLEY

Eligible students attending institutions in the Claremont Colleges consortium, which includes Claremont McKenna College, Pomona College, Pitzer College, Harvey Mudd College, and Scripps College, gain valuable experiential learning through a unique Silicon Valley immersion program. Students in the Silicon Valley Program (SVP) participate in an off-campus study experience in the heartland of global technology and business innovation that helps them apply their strong grounding in the liberal arts to the latest challenges facing the technology industry. The goal of the program is to leverage the talents, expertise, and experiences of the Bay Area and Silicon Valley alumni community to create a world-class mentoring environment.

Students access the resources of Silicon Valley employers and alumni of the Claremont Colleges consortium through the Silicon Valley Program.

The program is one of the nation's only semester-long, off-campus programs that combines full academic credit with career-building work experience. Students earn three or four credits in the semester-long program as well as take advantage of high-impact internships, related coursework, professional development, and networking opportunities. All interns live in the same community in Redwood City, one of Silicon Valley's most thriving areas. The living-learning community features multiple lounge spaces, a business/study center, a fitness center, and easy access to public transportation and freeways. Students work 36 to 40 hours weekly with academic coursework completed on Saturdays.

Now entering its seventh year, some 160 students have interned and studied in Silicon Valley, working in start-ups, established companies, and nonprofits, learning what it takes to be successful in areas such as product development, communications/marketing, human resources, and finance. Internships have been offered by: Microsoft, Hewlett-Packard, Google, Equinix, Cisco, and Vista Point, and dozens of early- and mid-stage start-ups throughout the region. Company supervisors are matched with an SVP academic intern for the semester and are encouraged to meet with the student regularly, maintain open lines of communication, and complete an end-of-semester performance appraisal.

SVP on-campus staff members work with students to fine-tune résumés, establish LinkedIn profiles, and apply proven strategies to landing internships with companies that appreciate their talents, passions, and aspirations. The SVP is buttressed by numerous professional development opportunities, including special class speakers, evening networking receptions, and athletic and entertainment events. The program also has a long-standing partnership with technology incubator, Plug and Play Tech Center, where classes are taught and where interns can engage with entrepreneurs developing new products and services.

Andrew Ceperley is director of the Silicon Valley Program at the Claremont Colleges consortium.

EFFECTIVE PATHWAYS TO CAREER READINESS

BY ANDY CHAN

Wake Forest University, a private liberal arts university located in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, with highly regarded business, law, divinity, and medical schools, is consistently ranked among the top 30 national universities by *U.S. News and World Report*. Approximately 90 percent is from the United States, and 10 percent is international.

Conceived in 2010 and launched publicly in 2012, Wake Forest's unified career services organization, the Office of Personal and Career Development (OPCD), includes approximately 20 full-time, part-time, and student staff members who support 4,600 undergraduate students and 700 graduate students in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. In addition, the office includes approximately 25 staff members in the School of Business who support 520 undergraduates and 675 graduate students. Wake Forest is regarded as a leader in transforming the college-to-career experience to be mission critical and an essential, distinctive component of the university's organization, offerings, and culture. Multifaceted efforts, backed by a broad leadership commitment, include authentic partnerships across the university, popular career education courses for credit, experiential learning opportunities, student-focused technology, alumni support, and a comprehensive career and life readiness model.

Career development for Wake Forest students begins on day one with a mandatory orientation for first-year students. With the support of Wake Forest President Nathan Hatch and the university's administrative and faculty leadership, it has delivered strong first destination results. Annually, 97 percent of Wake Forest's graduates are either employed or in graduate school within six months of graduating, based on knowledge of employment for 91 percent of the class of 2017.

Experiential career education prepares Wake Forest students for the workplace.

Career development at Wake Forest is not just about landing a first job before graduation, it is about students knowing themselves and their talents and building a career over a lifetime. It is about learning to fish for a lifetime, not just catching the first fish. It is about strategic, thoughtful decision making, a growth and entrepreneurial mindset, and career and life readiness competencies.

Two of the most effective methods for authentic career and life readiness are for-credit career classes and experiential learning opportunities along with the unique educational programming model surrounding them.

COLLEGE-TO-CAREER COURSE SERIES

The OPCD career education model offers students curricular opportunities to progress through critical steps in the career development process. Designed and developed by a Wake Forest Department of Education faculty member, the model includes five credit-bearing career development courses, offered in both in-person and online formats in small class settings consistent with the university's culture to maximize personalized attention, accountability, and learning. Wake Forest is one of a select number of higher education institutions to offer for-credit career education courses to all undergradu-

Such efforts can lead to higher levels of institutional effectiveness and better graduate outcomes, thus closing the competency proficiency and skills gap.

THE COMPETENCY QUEST

Back to the question at hand: Are students career ready? Based on NACE research conducted in 2018, the answer is no for six of the NACE career readiness competencies, and the answer is yes for the remaining two.

In 2015, NACE President Sam Radcliffe initiated a career readiness task force charged to articulate a definition for career readiness and an associated set of support competencies. This substantive year-long effort resulted in the NACE Board of Directors' approval of the NACE Career Readiness Competencies (naceweb.org/career-readiness/competencies/career-readiness-defined).

For the past three years, NACE has conducted research on career readiness competencies through its annual Recruiting Benchmark and Student Survey. Participants include NACE members who work in a university relations and recruiting function and students enrolled at NACE-member higher

WHAT EMPLOYEES FIND ESSENTIAL VERSUS WHAT STUDENTS FIND IMPORTANT

Student ■ Employer ■

Competency	
Teamwork/collaboration	
Oral/written communications	
Critical thinking/problem solving	
Leadership	
Professionalism/work ethic	
Digital technology	
Career management	
Global/intercultural fluency	

0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%

Source: *NACE Student Survey, 2018* and *NACE Job Outlook Survey, 2018*

education institutions. While there is consensus among employers and students regarding the importance of each career readiness competency, results also reveal statistically significant proficiency gaps in six of the eight career readiness competencies.

ate students. Through the credit-based courses, students learn career and life readiness competencies that are often perceived by them as optional and not essential, a perception that may lead to unemployment or underemployment.

Approximately 20 percent of the 800 students in each of the last three graduating classes have taken at least one college-to-career course during their time at Wake Forest. Three of the courses follow the career development model of self-assessment, career path exploration, and the search for career opportunities or graduate school admission. Students are encouraged to take these courses as early as the second semester of their first year. The fourth capstone course provides students the opportunity to develop the professional and life skills to flourish and thrive in their first destination after graduation. Wake Forest also offers a fifth class, which covers the overall career development process in less depth. Each course helps students identify career path options based on their strengths, interests, and values; build skills and access to job shadowing and networking opportunities; and prepare for work and life after graduation.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Recognizing that high-impact learning also occurs outside the classroom, the OPCD takes career education beyond the boundaries of the Winston-Salem campus to a variety of locations, including Washington D.C., Charlotte, New York, Boston, and San Francisco.

Experiential career education at Wake Forest offers an immersive learning opportunity for students in the marketplace. This includes three distinct experiences:

- Career Treks are educational trips to cities and organizations of interest to students, often facilitated by supportive parents, alumni, and employers.

- Career Connect events are networking meetups for alumni and students.
- Targeted career fair events such as Diversity Matters and Student-Athlete Career Night are tailored educational and networking experiences for specific student populations, many of whom have greater challenges engaging in core career development programs and process.

The OPCD developed an educational programming model so that every experiential education opportunity instills authentic career and life readiness and learning among all student participants and optimizes the employer-student experience. The model includes three components: pre-experience preparation and practice; in-experience micro-coaching; and post-event educational follow-up. Subsequently, employers consistently report excellent Wake Forest student preparation and etiquette.

Financial support from foundations enables the OPCD to provide access for those students who need resources to participate. Donor support provides funds for travel grants and stipends for professional development, professional dress, and related needs.

REACHING ALL STUDENTS

While the Wake Forest pathways to career readiness work well, the university continues to develop new approaches. Currently, the OPCD is developing an innovative model to ensure that all students are career and life ready. The OPCD staff look forward to sharing the model and process sometime in the near future.

Andy Chan is vice president for innovation and career development at Wake Forest University.

EMPLOYER-RATED PROFICIENCIES VERSUS STUDENT-RATED PROFICIENCIES
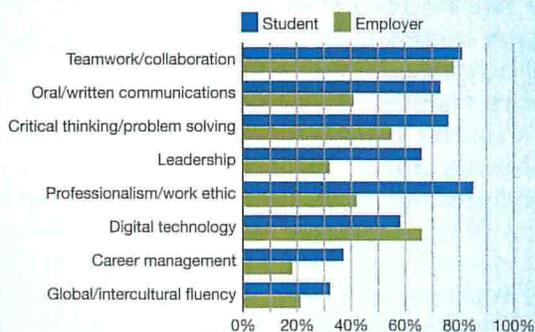
Source: *NACE Student Survey, 2018* and *NACE Job Outlook Survey, 2018*

Results point to a significant need for improvement for the following competencies: oral and written communication; critical thinking and problem solving; leadership; professionalism and work ethic; career management; and global and intercultural fluency. Regarding teamwork and collaboration, employers and students agree there is a better than adequate level of proficiency. Digital technology is the only competency for which employers ranked students as more proficient than did students themselves. Other national surveys have revealed similar findings that point to gaps in other competency and skills frameworks.

PROFICIENCY REALIGNMENT

A growing number of higher education institutions are now pursuing initiatives to address this dynamic. Approaches vary greatly in scope and impact from institution to institution. At one end of the continuum, change is driven by institutional leadership (president, vice presidents, provost, and deans) charging academic affairs units to advance structural and curricular changes that assess and measure competency development along with the traditional mastery of discipline-specific knowledge and skills. Student affairs units are charged to modify cocurricular initiatives, mapping specific experiences to competencies accompanied by assessment strategies to measure impact and outcomes. In some cases, student engagement strategies are implemented, supported by systems

TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCES FOR FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS

BY STEVE WESTBROOK

The adjective "transformative" is defined as "causing or able to cause a change, especially causing someone's life to be different or better in some important way," according to Merriam-Webster. When it comes to students who are the first members of their families to seek a postsecondary education, that word takes on extra meaning.

There is evidence that as early as 2020 up to 65 percent of the available jobs in the United States will require a postsecondary education. If this is true, at the rate institutions are producing qualified graduates, the demand for educated employees will exceed supply by almost five million.

A 2017 study published by the National Center for Education Statistics indicates that among high school sophomores in 2002 that later enrolled in a postsecondary institution, 24 percent were first-generation students. Evidence also exists that first-generation students complete degrees at much lower rates than their continuing-generation peers.

So, let's get this straight. The number of first-generation students that initially enroll in a postsecondary program is large. The projected gap between future job demands and qualified graduates is very large. First-generation students who access higher education are less likely to successfully complete their degrees when compared to their continuing-generation peers. It looks like a focus on this cohort not only addresses concerns with their success but the success of the country in filling new positions with qualified employees.

What can vice presidents for student affairs do? Do not be shocked to find that first-generation students enter college less equipped to employ the active coping strategies that new students are often encouraged to use when they face difficulties in their first year. That is why transformative experiences within that first year can be critical for the success of first-generation students. Persistence requires support after access. Consider the following strategies during the first year.

- **Connect first-generation students with other first-year, first-generation students.** First-generation students can shy away from engagement to avoid "impostership" and the perception among students that each suffers this feeling alone. Create opportunities for them to meet similar students to help ease the feeling of loneliness and strengthen an environment that promotes future engagement.

- **Connect first-generation students with successful first-generation upperclassmen.** This one is simple. We are all influenced by others with whom we share something in common. Connecting new first-generation students with students like them who have successfully navigated the first two years of college can be powerful transformative experiences for both.

- **Create high expectations paired with both academic and co-curricular support.** No one rises to low expectations. Sometimes we set lower expectations for students who face unique challenges, thinking we are helping them. The opposite is most likely true. Expectations for first-generation students should not be lower, but institutions should provide relevant and targeted support to help them achieve.

SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY

MENTORS BRIDGE CAREER READINESS GAP

BY JAMES J. TARBOX

Like other centers nationwide, the career center at San Diego State University (SDSU) must create opportunities for students to understand the world of work and build their professional networks. Five years ago, SDSU Career Services launched a mentor program that emphasized connecting students to SDSU alumni. The Aztec Mentor Program (AMP) started with the goal to enroll 50 business students in the first semester it was offered. More than 100 students enrolled the first semester, and students from other colleges across campus wanted to know how they could participate.

The Aztec Mentor Program at San Diego State matches students with professionals in their field of interest.

Some 300 professionals, including alumni and friends, registered to serve as mentors within the first year and the number continued to grow.

WHY THE PROGRAM WORKS

Five years and more than 7,000 matches later, the AMP continues to engage students and to bridge the gap in student career readiness. The mentor program works for five main reasons:

1. **A student gains an advocate in the career development process.** Student feedback consistently demonstrates that students value having someone other than a parent or faculty member take an interest in their careers and in who they are becoming as professionals.

2. **The program is accessible.** Students can access the system easily 24/7. Once in the system, students and mentors often move to other media and to in-person meetings to facilitate professional development.

3. **It offers two familiar parallels to student life.** Students register for the system in a similar way that they register for courses, and the program is offered on a semester basis. Mentor programs with ongoing, open enrollment tend to miss the mark when it comes to the semester framework.

- **Surround them with intentional and inescapable involvement.** A first-generation student can sometimes resist involvement because of uncertainty about how he or she might be received. Student affairs professionals must create environments that make it safe for these students to discover they are just as "worthy" as any other student.
- **Dissolve the line between on-campus employment and learning.** First-generation students often seek on-campus employment to help meet financial obligations. Campus employers can help these jobs serve as transformative educational experiences as well. With their support, students can develop and articulate the marketable skills they are gaining on the job, including teamwork, communication, influence, decision making, and organization.

First-generation students face obstacles that do not magically disappear when they enter college. Sometimes they even loom larger. It can be hard to engage with students who may not be motivated to interact and who often have limited time available due to family and work obligations. The fact that higher education must address this issue at a time when higher education resources are stretched complicates this work. Perhaps senior leadership could learn from first-generation students. They took a chance entering a world where they were less than comfortable. They are seeking a transformation. Surely, higher education can do the same.

Steve Westbrook is vice president for university affairs at Stephen F. Austin State University.

for tracking progress, including student-facing systems that provide students with access to personalized dashboards that measure their progress and may also award digital badges for completion of program elements. Additionally, a few institutions bring academic affairs and student affairs leaders together to coordinate efforts or, at the very least, share strategic plans.

On the other end of the continuum are institutions in which a group of like-minded professionals from a limited number of departments collaborate on competency implementation initiatives. In these cases, strategies to implement competencies are employed to transform individual departments and/or a specific set of programs. Embedded in this approach is the goal of persuading and influencing institutional leadership to adopt a more comprehensive, institutionwide approach based on the successes and progress made by these limited efforts.

Regardless of the scope and scale of the approach, higher education institutions in pursuit of implementing competency initiatives do so to increase institutional effectiveness and graduate outcomes. In light of the national dialogue focused on the value of a college degree and reports that point to competency and skills gaps, it is imperative that higher education institutions respond to these concerns by defining and articulating the value and contributions they bring to their students, institutions, communities, and society as a whole. LE

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④ **This program helps students stay current in their abilities to understand the world of work and build professional networks.** Despite providing resources, such as business journals, internship listings, and a full series of career readiness-focused workshops, many students graduate without being informed or connected. Mentoring provides these two essentials: information and connection. Because mentors are active in their professions and care about SDSU and its students, this program truly benefits students.

⑤ **SDSU alumni and friends of the university are motivated to make a difference.** This desire to make a difference is not bound to the San Diego region. Motivation for mentors has no geographic boundaries. The program includes mentors in 34 states and 16 countries. If students want to relocate, mentors provide the link via valuable insider information and connections to the region.

QUICK CAVEATS

Here are a few quick caveats to running a successful mentor program. First, a good online management program is helpful. However, no management system replaces the need to monitor and interact with mentors and students. Your center will need

staff to monitor e-mails, make mid-semester phone calls, plan thank-you and other local and regional networking events, and meet regularly to assess the system with campus partners. Coordination and collaboration with the alumni association, university relations, and other groups on campus that connect with parents are crucial to mentor program success.

A BRIDGE TO CAREER READINESS

Mentoring programs are a pivotal part of the bridge to career readiness. Other components include an active internship program, supplemental engagement via experiential learning, and residence-focused programs with a career emphasis. Career readiness and programs that support it need to be flexible and responsive: Career center professionals and their counterparts in student affairs need to monitor how regional, state, and global economies are changing and how these changes impact the advice, programming, and services that are offered. In this capacity, student affairs professionals become intentional change agents and valuable advocates for students, alumni, and employer partners.

James J. Tarbox is executive director for career services at San Diego State University.