AC 2012-3438: DECENTRALIZED EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION SERVICES: ARE WE REINVENTING THE WHEEL OR PROVIDING SPECIALIZED SERVICES?

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Decentralized Experiential Education Services: Are We Reinventing the Wheel or Providing Specialized Services?

Models of Career Services

In the United States, there are several models of career services. Every major university recognized the need to provide its students with career counseling and an infrastructure to access positions suited toward a student's major. The majority of career services on US campuses are in a centralized office: About 88 percent, in 2009-10 versus 12 percent using a decentralized model.¹⁾ In a centralized office, all career counseling and most employer development is handled in that particular office, with more or less contact with the academic units on campus. The amount of contact varies from one campus to another, and might even, as it was the case at the author's institution, vary based on the staff member that was assigned a certain major or college. The degree to which the career services office cooperates with academic units also depends on the leadership of the center and in the college.

The author's institution would now be classified as the decentralized career services, although this is not true for all majors. The Colleges of Agriculture, Communication, Engineering as well as Business & Economics have started to organize internal career services, while Arts&Sciences, Fine Arts and others are still utilizing the Career Center exclusively. All of the colleges are still using the centralized career services' infrastructure, such as the building in order to have their employers conduct interviews, and the job posting and application service provided by the Career Center. The Career Center also spearheads the career fairs, but the colleges are advertising them to their key constituencies.

History of the Decentralization Process

Before the switch to decentralized career services, the College of Engineering's Administration and Students had been dissatisfied with the centralized career services office on campus. High staff turnover, low morale, and changes in mission and leadership had changed the quality of service to students and employers significantly over the years. The move to decentralize services came when the career center lost their "engineering liaison", who staffed a satellite office in engineering 2 days a week, and a replacement proved difficult to find. At the time, the College of Business had already benchmarked decentralized career services on other campuses, and secured funding and donations for their career services office, and it became apparent that they would remove the career counseling part from the centralized office.

The co-op office has its own employer contacts, many are also working with the Career Center, in order to hire degreed, full time engineers. However, some employers who recruit their full time employees exclusively from their co-op pool, never interacted with centralized career services, and thus were often unaware of outreach events, such as career fair, resume critique events etc. The co-op office in the College of Engineering was their sole point of contact at the university. Other employers, who mostly recruited graduates for full time positions, often did not receive the personalized service from the College, if they worked exclusively with the career center and its online job postings.

The Dean of the College of Engineering then re-tasked an industrial extension specialist and engineer, who had been working for the college in a program that had ended, to become the career services director, with the co-op advisors as her staff. The Co-op program has always been housed in the College of Engineering.

Outcomes of Decentralization

While the decentralization process is relatively new, and the college has not had the chance to evaluate and assess the quality of service provided to students and employers at this point, there is some anecdotal evidence that both sides are benefiting from the re-organization.

Career events within engineering

Since the college has hosted employer information sessions in house, rather than in the Career Center, which is geographically located at the edge of campus, and average student turnout has increased by about 100 percent. Employers have given positive feedback about the quality and number of student attendees. The college has hosted several resume critique and mock interview events, which have attracted record numbers of student attendees as well as employers willing to spend their time critiquing student applicants. Employers, by working with staff that meets and advises the students in the co-op and engineering career services offices, feel confident that they are getting the best possible access to qualified applicants. Students have commented on feeling that they are receiving more personalized service through personal meetings that can be on a drop-in basis or planned. Because of engineering career counseling being located within the engineering buildings, students do not have to make an extra trip to the edge of campus in order to drop by for a quick consult.

Communication between faculty and career services

Another benefit clearly has been the integration of career services into the overall infrastructure and administration of the college. Faculty members are aware where to send students and request presentations from career services because they know the staff in engineering in person. They also refer more employers to the engineering career services office than they did to the career center, which, with high staff turnover and segregated roles between employer services and student services, were sometimes confusing for faculty to deal with. The connection between research and experiential education is now easier to make, because the engineering career services staff know more about ongoing research and faculty specialization than the centralized career center cannot be aware of for each major and college.

Academic and career advising

Often, the career advising will touch on academic advising and vice versa. All advisors, career and academic, in engineering are part of the advising network in the college, and thus in constant communication with each other. When there are academic issues to resolve in order to facilitate experiential education, the issues are easy to discuss and communicate between departments and career services.

The same communication takes place when it comes to curricular development. Curricular feedback that is received from co-op students has always been fed back to the departments for

consideration. Now, with the closer integration of summer interns and part-time student workers into the college career infrastructure, feedback will be collected from these students as well as employers working with the college on finding permanent hires.

Feedback and assessment

For specialized curricular programs, such as the co-op program, it has proven successful for years to organize these within the college. The co-op program has been a source for feedback, assessment and other data for the College of Engineering for years, and this can now be expanded to other areas, such as shadowing opportunities, service learning, part-time jobs, summer internships and full time employment.

Development

Regarding alumni, the decentralized model has also proven successful: Alumni who come back to recruit on campus like working inside their former “home college”, and appreciate the opportunity to give back by participating in college career events. Communication between engineering career services and the alumni development office, which is also housed within the college, has been very productive. Alumni and engineering development now easily have access to those companies and alumni that benefit the most from College of Engineering hires and career services. It will be the source for future “asks” by the development office, or other potential cooperation between alumni, their companies and the College of Engineering.

Considerations in Decentralization Process

Cost

At least one new staff member has to be funded with salary and benefits. Due to the nature of the position, funds for job development and employer visits have to be allocated. Because there was an existing co-op and a career services satellite office in the college, the operating funds for the satellite office were used to fund the career services operating expenditures. Engineering Career Services -the former stand alone co-op office and the new in house career services - now co-ordinate employer visits in order not to duplicate efforts.

Cross-disciplinary recruiting efforts

Companies who hire across disciplines need to receive special attention and require the colleges to co-ordinate efforts with other units and centralized career services. Because all decentralized offices still use the same online jobs system, all positions are posted in one central place. Career fairs are still coordinated by the Career Center, with colleges reaching out to their employers in order to boost participation in their students’ major areas.

Student major changes

If a student switches out of engineering, he or she must also find new career advisors. This is another issue a student would have to deal with in addition to meeting a new academic advisor, faculty and so on. But given the amount of other changes in finding new advisors and getting acclimated in the new college, it appears to be a minor issue.

Potential for inconsistent advising across campus

If each college has its own career advisor or career services office, and the staffing in this office is decided by the college leadership, qualifications and caseload among colleges might vary widely. The College of Engineering at the author's institution chose to employ an engineer with significant ties to industry and a background in academia (as industry extension specialist). However, the counselor had no prior knowledge of counseling or little experience in student advising. Career Center counselors at this institution are required to have a counseling degree, and are all certified to administer personality tests and assessments, such as the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI).

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that decentralizing career services creates a certain amount of duplication of efforts. At the author's institution, duplication of efforts has been minimized by drawing on the infrastructure provided by centralized services and providing services that the centralized office had been unable to provide. While the process of decentralization takes financial resources and significant dedication by the college staff and leadership, preliminary evidence seems to indicate that it has helped our institution generate greater interest among and better communication between students, employers, faculty and advisors. There appears to be a more concerted effort in the college to promote each others' programs: research, internships, co-operative education and service learning – and their integration into the academic curriculum.

The author argues that this is because traditionally, staff turnover has been much lower in the College of Engineering than in less academic "service units" on campus, and there is now more communication between the different areas on campus, such as faculty, academic advisors, career advisors and corporate representatives.

Time will tell whether we are actually gaining more feedback and assessment tools from this reorganization, but even after only about 10 months we already see more verbal feedback from our students and their experiential placement and career paths than we have ever seen from students outside of the co-op program, and higher student turnout at employer events. Employers seek out the engineering career services office as an initial point of contact to communicate with faculty about research, capstone design project, and class presentation, with students about hiring, and with the engineering development office for student organization support and other financial support for the college.

¹⁾ Middle Tennessee State Career Development Center: *Career Services 2020, March 2010* - quoting from: National Association of Colleges and Employer's (NACE) *2009-2010 Benchmark Survey for four-year colleges and universities*