Preparing Our Best and Brightest

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In the midst of the worst economy in decades, it’s no surprise that college graduates of the new millennium are emerging from their campuses, feeling a sense of unfairness unknown to their generation. These aspiring young professionals are products of the economic glory days of the 1990s. They believed that if they went to college and applied themselves, that they’d get a good job that would allow them to live out their dreams. There was no reason for them to believe otherwise. Jobs were plentiful, as the United States enjoyed the lowest unemployment rate in years. Students were being recruited to jump on the dot com bandwagon, oftentimes before they received their diplomas. $5 -10 thousand dollar sign-on bonuses were commonplace. The possibilities seemed limitless in their eyes.

The graduating classes of 2001 – 2003 have felt the strongest sting. They entered college with the confidence that they would be able to land their ideal job after graduation. As long as such things had been on their radar screens, economic times were good. During the recession of the late 1980s, these students were in elementary school. Well over a decade ago, Generation Xers knew as seniors in high school that they had to go to college to get ahead, and even with a bachelors degree proudly displayed on their bedroom wall, they recognized that there was still no guarantee that wouldn’t be wearing a paper hat and handing out French fries at the drive-thru. They’d seen their parents become victims of corporate downsizing in the 1980s and were generally more nervous about landing a full time job after college.

Since the economic downturn began in early 2001, college career services counselors and engineering educators have shifted their focuses accordingly. Fewer students are coming to advising appointments with questions relating to evaluating job offers and more are asking what they can do to market themselves more effectively in a tight job market. Because of this shift, it is incumbent upon these educators and counselors to cultivate the relationship between their institution and employers for the purposes of increasing the students’ awareness of all available job opportunities. Indeed, post-secondary institutions should be increasing their efforts to offer opportunities for students to prepare themselves for a job search in a competitive market.

After several years in hiatus, the University of Kentucky College of Engineering has recently re-introduced a course intended for students who are entering their last year of study. This 400 level course helps to prepare students for graduation, the search for full time employment, and their first year on the job. The course was very popular in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and remained in the University schedule books throughout the decade. However, the economic boom of subsequent years led to declining enrollment. Given the economic downturn in
2001, the course was marketed more heavily to the students and was taught in the Spring of 2002 for the first time in years. The course was so popular that students filled a waiting list and asked for course over-rides.

The one credit, semester long course covers all aspects of the student’s job search. At the beginning of the semester, the students are given a tour of the University Career Center and are introduced to the services that are available to them. The University of Kentucky Career Center offers one on one career counseling, video-taped mock interview facilities, a suite of interview rooms for on campus interviews, an online job search management tool, and a library that houses books, magazines, videos, company literature, and internet accessible computers for resume writing and company research. The center is available to all students and alumni of the University.

After the orientation, the course begins with Resume and Cover Letter Development. During this section of the course, students break down into groups for an in-class exercise and peer review of their resume. Students share ideas with each other about how to build a resume that showcases their talent, while the instructor works along side the groups, helping to confirm and dispel myths surrounding the proper way to write a resume.

Following the resume writing component, the students are then asked to take a deep look inside their own personalities to determine what their best and worst qualities are. The premise behind this exercise is to encourage them to get to know themselves better, so that they can determine what their core values are. This will help them to become properly equipped to market themselves effectively in today’s business environment. A guest speaker may be brought in from the community to talk about the importance of networking and to share with the class the different organizations that they may want to consider getting involved with, in order to start building on their network. The most important lesson for the students to take with them is that “networking” is something that they will continue to do throughout their careers and that it is not simply gathering business cards that they use during a job search.

Early in the semester, each member of the class is assigned a mentor. An ideal time to assign the mentor to the students is following the networking component of the course. By that time, the student has pulled together an updated resume, and has received some guidance on and has begun thinking about how she can market herself effectively to potential employers. This will allow the student to feel more confident when making initial contact with her mentor.

The mentor is a working professional in their field of study that will act as a guide for the student. Perhaps the mentor will meet the student for lunch or coffee, invite him to attend a professional or business meeting, or help him to make contact with other professionals in their field, so that they can get a good idea of what life is like in the real world. Once assigned, the student is responsible for contacting the mentor to introduce himself and to set up an initial meeting. An effort is made to assign the students to mentors in the local community so that the logistics of face to face meetings are not a problem.

Later in the semester, students will be scheduling mock interviews with their mentors. To
give both parties an opportunity to set up an initial meeting, the class will continue with other topics prior to the component of the class that deals with proper interviewing procedures. The class is informed at this time that they will be required to meet with their mentor at least once prior to midterm, as their mid-term assignment will be to deliver an oral or written report about their experience with their mentor. This keeps the students on task and also allows the instructor to ensure that the mentors are cooperating and following any guidelines that might be set forth by the instructor or required by the institution.

During the interim period between the assignment of the mentor and the interviewing component, the course will cover job search strategies pertinent to each major, and students will hear a general lecture involving an overview of the current state of the job market. This is also an excellent time to schedule opportunities for question and answer periods during each class. It is also a good time to schedule special topic, or general guest speakers that might be of interest to the class. Prior to midterm, the course will then begin to cover the section on interviews.

There are several different options available to the instructor when teaching this portion of the course. If time and resources allow, the instructor can schedule a guest speaker to come in, perhaps a consultant from a local department store or other expert, to talk about proper interview attire. In-class exercises can also be conducted to simulate a practice interview.

It is recommended that this topic be broken into at least two sections, with the part of the lesson being dedicated to general interviewing discussion and the last being dedicated to specialized types of second interviews, like the luncheon interview, the plant visit, etc. If it is possible to do so, scheduling an actual luncheon or dinner with the students and having an etiquette specialist coach them through the meal, is a delightful and enjoyable way for the students to learn how to handle themselves properly during an interview that involves a meal.

As previously mentioned the midterm assignment will have the students reporting in on their first encounters with their mentors. They should be encouraged to share their experiences with other students by delivering an oral report, but depending on class size and time constraints, the instructor may offer students the option of turning in a written report as an alternative.

Students will also be informed early on that they will need to arrange a mock interview with their mentor directly after midterm. The instructor may choose either to suspend class meeting times, in lieu of these mock interviews or to ask the students to go through the mock interview experience in addition to regular class time.

The University of Kentucky Career Center has facilities available to students that will allow them to have their mock interviews videotaped. During a typical mock interview, the mentor would ask the students the same kinds of questions that would normally be asked in a real interview situation. The student is expected to dress and present themselves in the same manner. If video cameras are available, the mentor would tape the short interview, and afterward the two would play back the video tape and discuss the interview. The mentor would offer the student suggestions as to how she could improve upon her delivery and presentation, point out ways in
which the questions might have been answered differently, and in general provide the student with constructive criticism and feedback regarding the interview. It is quite typical for students to dread having to participate in a mock interview exercise, but without fail, they are grateful for having gone through the experience.

Following the mock interviews, the course shifts its focus slightly to emphasize the issues that arise once the student is ready to consider and evaluate job offers. Attention is also given to different career options such as research and development and entrepreneurship. Guest speakers are brought in to talk to the class about these options. During these lectures students are introduced to the concepts behind funding a research project, Intellectual Property and Non-Compete Agreements, and the like.

A good amount of time is also spent on salary negotiation strategies, weighing benefits packages, and the importance of taking the whole compensation package and the job offer itself into consideration, rather than focusing in on salary alone, when evaluating any potential offer.

Finally, in wrapping up the course, expert speakers are invited to the class to discuss issues related to their first year on the job. The concept of career advancement is equally important to a graduating senior as landing their perfect job. Topics run the gamut from conducting oneself professionally, how to get ahead in a cut-throat environment to maintaining good credit and responsible financial planning.

Throughout the course students are encouraged to work with each other, rather than against each other in their job search. In effect, the course becomes an informal “job club”, as students are given a handout that is compiled at the beginning of the semester that lists each student’s name and contact information, as well as their major, the kind of job they are seeking and their geographic preferences. They are encouraged to increase their efforts twenty-fold by helping each other out, passing along opportunities that they run across that would be suitable for a classmate, and sharing information among the group.

While no college or university can guarantee that each graduate will find the job of their dreams upon graduation, it is still the responsibility of those who serve the students to ensure that they are as well equipped as possible to enter the job market as educated, and well-rounded young professionals. Certainly, offering such courses, workshops, and seminars as this is a welcome first-step.