CAREER PREPAREDNESS: DISCOVERING THE NEEDS OF ONLINE STUDENTS REGARDING RESOURCES FOR TRANSITIONING out of COLLEGE

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Career Preparedness: Discovering the Needs of Online Students Regarding Resources for Transitioning Out of College

Synopsis:

This paper provides insight into Arkansas State University's online career center and methods to broaden student opportunities. The opportunities include assistance to obtain both in-person and remote employment after graduating. Specific research will focus on students preparing for graduation and their meeting preference, career type, and level. This research aims to assist program growth and pave the way for other universities to provide career assistance for online students.

This research study explores strategies for the Online Career Center staff at Arkansas State University to support online students. The research will look at the effectiveness of the programs and improvements that are needed to support online students enrolled at A-State regarding all career needs.

Abstract

Career obtainment and advancement are primary goals when completing an online program. While online programs are primarily independent, students should have the opportunity to utilize resources for their career objectives. A fundamental step within the ever-changing job market for students is earning a degree to gain employment, but the work is far from complete at this stage. Arkansas State University has piloted an online career center to help students with career obtainment steps, such as job application questions, resume assistance, and mock interviews.

This paper will provide insight into our online career center and methods to improve and broaden assistance for graduating students. Specific research focusing on meeting preferences and experience levels will factor into the advancement of the pilot program. We will utilize primary research to discover the career obtainment needs of our current online students. We will also perform secondary research to determine ways to make these plans work within an online setting. Our administration hopes to help students develop meaningful relationships and prepare them to enter the workforce. As we move forward with our career center, we will share our successes and setbacks and learn more about how students prefer to utilize this support.

Introduction

Employment after graduation is the common goal for students when applying to colleges. Khurumova and Pinto (2023, as cited in Stolzenberg et al., 2019) cite a 2019 study revealing that over 80 percent of students claim that employment after graduation is a critical factor in their decision to enroll in higher education. Ensuring students find the resources required to achieve fulfilling work after graduation should be a key objective in a higher education student support department. While in-person students may receive assistance from career departments on campus, such as one-on-one meetings and career fairs, online students must create these connections independently. When programs are fully remote, and students do not have access to an in-person career center, it is up to the administration to provide these resources in a way that is convenient for online students. Creating that initial career center is an important step for students to have those resources. Still, certain needs should be met before expanding into assistance based on career fields and education level, especially when students are learning fully asynchronously.

Our current career center serves the entire population of our online programs, which hosts more than six thousand students. We offer a variety of services, such as mock interviews, resume assistance, cover letter drafting, and help with applications. Our career center offers everything a student will find in an in-person career center except for career fairs. With a soft launch last year, we have seen just under 50 students. Most of these students visit our online center for content and organizational help with resumes and cover letters that have already been drafted. After analyzing our results from our pilot year, we sent out a survey asking our students about their career center preferences.

Purpose and Research Questions

This study aimed to determine how we can provide the best resources for our online students' career plans in a remote setting. We hoped our students would share suggestions for improvement that could help them gain employment after graduation. We were also eager to discover their primary goals after graduation.

The following research questions will be addressed in this presentation:

1. What type of career assistance is perceived as the most beneficial for online students in a mostly asynchronous environment?

2. How can the administration provide these services for students who prefer asynchronous communication?

Methods

A review of current practices within the online career center was conducted to understand the support services given to students in the program. After concluding the research, findings were presented to students in a survey to understand their level of satisfaction. A five-question survey was sent out via email to students currently enrolled at Arkansas State University as online students during the Spring 2023 semester. The survey opened on April 10, 2023, and closed on April 24, 2023, allowing students two weeks to participate. Students were not given an incentive for the survey. Over six thousand students were invited to participate in the survey, and 125 students completed the survey and consent form successfully.

Findings

The first question we sought was which students were completing this survey. This question would help us determine levels of expertise when applying for jobs. Nearly 56 percent of students who participated in the study were graduate students, while 35 percent were undergraduates, and less than 6 percent were obtaining a doctorate. When asked about their plans after graduation, 66 percent of students said they plan on seeking employment in their field of study. A small number of students plan on seeking employment outside of their area, at four percent. 18 percent of students mentioned continuing education, and 12 percent are still deciding about their future. When asked if students planned to seek in-person or remote work, 46 percent of students said they would seek in-person work, while only nine percent wanted to pursue strictly remote work. 30 percent of students said they are open to applying for in-person and remote work. 16 percent of students are undecided on this matter.

The question with the most detailed results asked students to rank what they wanted to see in an online career center. Our highest-ranked service was resume help at 45 percent. The next highest-ranked service was cover letter help at 34 percent. Students were split regarding having a virtual career fair divided by career fields, with half of our participants voting it first and half voting it last. Students seemed to be indifferent regarding mock interviews and application assistance. Table 1 shows the vast difference in preferences regarding online assistance.

Figure 1

*Overall Rankings of Current and Planned Career Resources*
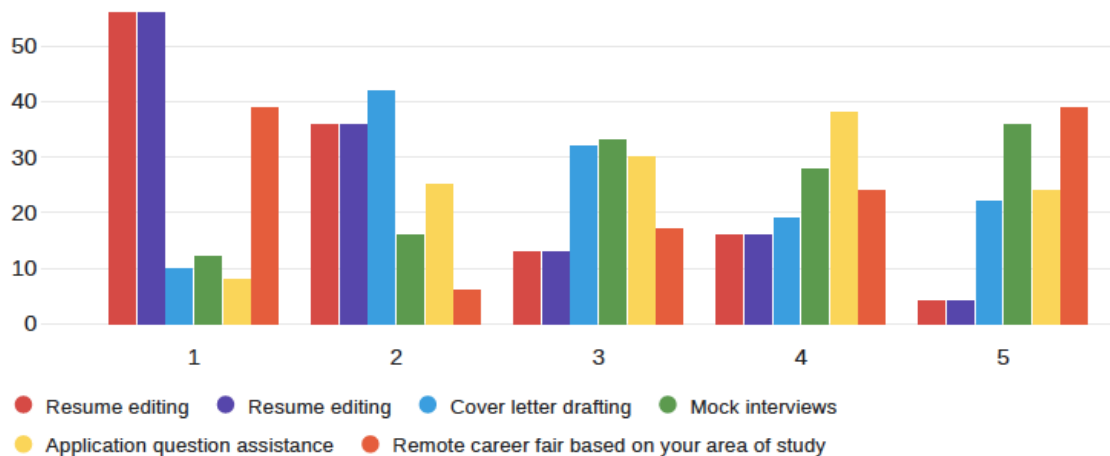
Note. Students ranked their preferred tools in an online career center (1 being most likely and 5 being least likely). The breakdown shows percentages of students' rankings.

We also asked students to provide a level of agreeing and disagreeing to 10 statements regarding how they want a career center to prioritize their goals. All the statements in our questionnaire received above a 5 out of 10 averages for importance, yet having the students' best interest in mind during the session was ranked the highest. The second highest level of

importance to students is that staff be consistently friendly and courteous when students contact them for assistance. The next highest priority is for staff to be eager to help. Overall, students informed us that how the staff treats them during the session means the most when utilizing these resources. Table 2 shows all the statements students were asked to rank from least important to most important.

Figure 2

Students' Overall Preferences for Career Advisors in an Online Setting
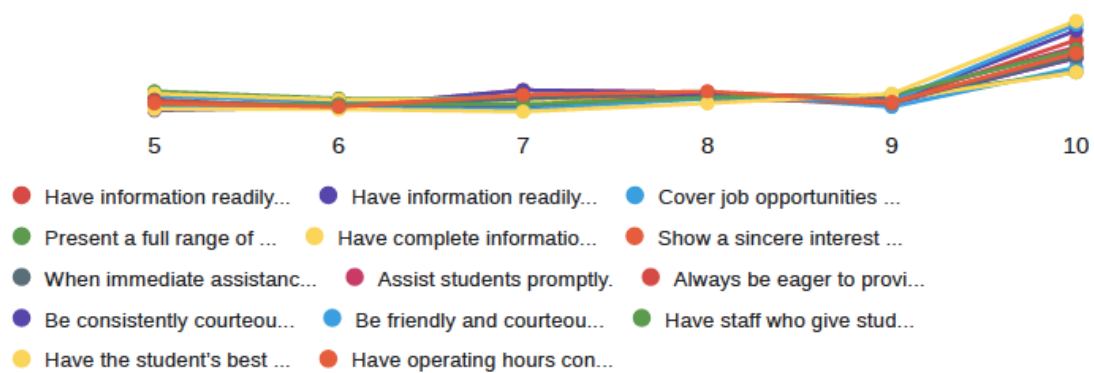
Note. Students indicated from 1 to 10 how much they agreed that the following options were important to have in a career center. No statement was ranked below a 5, so the table reflects a 5 to 10 range.

Discussion

Our findings show that remote students, although most plan to apply for in-person jobs, still prefer to utilize services asynchronously. While we expected the highest preference to be services that can be completed without a Zoom meeting, we did not expect the career fair to be split so evenly between students preferring it the most and the least. Hosting a career fair was not included in our pilot, but we plan to go about it in a way that welcomes asynchronous students.

In February 2023, Cornell University students were able to participate in an online career fair via Handshake, a web-based career networking site. Students met with over 100 companies from various fields, such as PepsiCo, Intel, and Lockheed Martin. Students learned about internships, co-ops, and entry-level job positions. Like an in-person career fair, some employers were able to collect resumes from attending students for future job openings. Students and employers participated in both one-on-one sessions and group sessions (Reyen et al., 2023). We would like to base our career fair on this model; however, we plan to find ways to incorporate asynchronous options such as online chat sessions and pre-recorded videos. Students can collect the employers' contact information to reach out after the career fair.

While we do not plan to cut any resource that we asked our students to rank, we will focus on generating assistance for resume and cover letter help and finding ways to assist more asynchronously. This assistance will include creating templates for students to use when working on their material, so they have a field-based example as a model.

As for what the students want the most out of a career center, the survey results tell us what they value most is working with staff who treat them with care and attention. Analyzing these answers tells us that working with staff on career obtainment can be a vulnerable action. We understand why they would ask for the utmost respect, attention, and fragility during an appointment. While we always train our consultants to be respectful, courteous, and attentive, we will expand this training in the future while keeping in mind the delicateness of this topic.

Conclusion

Career obtainment is the sole purpose of enrolling in a degree plan, regardless of if the outcome is continued education or immediate employment. Our online students want to gain the same level of employment as on-campus students. We must keep this in mind when continuing our career center, from sustaining asynchronous options, offering Zoom options with convenient times for all, or when approaching this sensitive and vulnerable subject. We want to give our students every opportunity to succeed in and outside of the classroom, and we are excited that our students see the need that we see in our career center.

References

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