



Demonstrating How Career Services Contribute to Student Learning

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Career services are too often thought of separate from the core learning activities in which students engage in classrooms, laboratories and studios. But dividing what students gain from college into academic learning (what happens in the classroom) and personal development (what happens outside of the classroom) is a byproduct of historical, physical structures in higher education institutions. Thinking about student accomplishment as bifurcated in this way does not serve either students or institutions well, as students grow, develop, and learn in a holistic fashion.¹

Career services professionals are well-positioned to bridge the gap between the academic learning and personal development outcomes. They are *educators* who help students *learn* how to explore career options, make career decisions, and develop career management skills that students will use throughout their lifetime. Career interventions are the medium through which career professionals provide these learning opportunities to students. We intentionally use the term “career interventions,” as opposed to “programs, services, and resources,” as the latter are static entities that focus attention on the activities that are carried out by career professionals. Interventions, on the other hand, focus on the process of helping students change, develop, or move from point A to point B — essentially, to help students learn.

Viewing career interventions as learning opportunities sets a high bar in terms of evaluating the effectiveness of career services on higher education campuses. If education and learning are to be at the core of career services, then learning outcomes must be measured to evaluate success. Fortunately, many career professionals in higher education are no strangers to the process of collecting evidence to show the influence of their work. They have been involved in gathering and interpreting data since the earliest days of the profession. Historically, the most common data-driven strategies for demonstrating the influence of career services have been counting participants, measuring satisfaction, and tracking placement rates. These data tell important parts of the story of career interventions — which students take part, how comfortable students are with their experiences, and where students go after their college experiences.

However, these types of data have limitations that fall short of what contemporary times demand. When participation rates, satisfaction, or placement numbers are low, few insights can be gained regarding how or what to improve. Additionally, these strategies can encourage a “more is better” focus on increasing quantity with little attention to quality. A different approach is needed for career professionals to demonstrate the quality of their career interventions and the difference that career interventions make in students’ lives. Career professionals must build upon past data collection and analysis experiences to rise to the challenge of conducting rigorous, meaningful learning outcomes assessments.

Viewpoint

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Conducting learning outcomes assessments can be daunting for many career professionals, as it is with many other higher education faculty and staff. One approach is to focus on well-defined programs and services that have clear boundaries — a resume review, a career exploration workshop, career counseling appointments, and so on. Doing so can help keep assessment efforts manageable. Additionally, career professionals can often clearly identify interested parties, such as prospective and current students, families, institution administration, faculty, and student affairs staff who want to know whether career interventions make a difference in students' lives. Understanding what these audiences want to know offers career professionals clues regarding the types of learning outcomes to focus their assessment efforts on, as well as with whom to share the results.

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Furthermore, career services professionals often draw upon established guidelines (e.g., CAS Standards, National Career Development Guidelines)² and theories (e.g., Holland's Typology, Planned Happenstance, Social Cognitive Career Theory, Super's Career-Life Roles)³ to inform their career interventions. For example, the National Career Development Guidelines offers specific outcomes statements regarding the mastery of career management skills. One such skill, related to career decision-making, is that career development clients should be able to take into consideration how personal priorities, culture, beliefs, and work values affect their decision making by: (a) recognizing the role that these influences play in decision making, (b) showing examples of how these influences have affected them in the past, and (c) evaluating the impact of these influences in current career decision-making processes (p. 10). Attending to the content of guidelines and theory documents such as this helps career professionals clearly express desired milestones or outcomes of career interventions that can be measured in assessment efforts.

Many career professionals are well-positioned to demonstrate the value of their services and career interventions through learning outcomes assessment. A continuing challenge is for career professionals to find a way to embrace the assessment of student learning in their day-to-day practice. Our advice is to think of assessing learning in terms of building a house. That is, have an overall plan, and start with activities that are of reasonable scale, and gradually build up, brick by brick. Focus on laying one brick at a time, no matter how small, and building a strong foundation—a rich body of evidence. Small, positive experiences with learning outcomes assessment can teach useful skills, build confidence and capabilities, and motivate future learning outcomes assessment efforts.⁴

More information on how career professionals can get started with learning outcomes assessment are described in a recent monograph from the National Career Development Association, entitled: *Learning Outcomes Assessment Step-by-Step: Enhancing evidence-based practice in career services* (<http://tinyurl.com/7sy6krl>).

¹ Ideas presented in this paragraph are influenced by scholarship such as:

American College Personnel Association. (1996). *The Student Learning Imperative*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.myacpa.org/sites/default/files/ACPA%27s%20Student%20Learning%20Imperative.pdf>

American College Personal Association, & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators. (2004). *Learning reconsidered: A campus-wide focus on the student experience*. Washington, DC: Author.

2 References for sample professional guidelines:

Dean, L. A. (Ed.). (2009). *CAS professional standards for higher education* (7th ed.). Washington, DC: Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education.

America's Career Resource Network. (2004). National Career Development Guidelines. Retrieved from http://associationdatabase.com/aws/NCDA/asset_manager/get_file/3384?ver=16587

3 References for sample career development theories:

Lent, R. W., Brown, S. D., & Hackett, G. (1994). Toward a unifying social cognitive theory of career and academic interest, choice, and performance [Monograph]. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 45, 79–122.

Mitchell, A., Levin, A., & Krumboltz, J. D. (1999). Planned happenstance: Constructing unexpected career opportunities. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 77, 115-124.

Reardon, R. C., & Lenz, J. G. (1998). *The self-directed search and related holland career materials: A practitioner's guide*. Odessa, FL: Psychological Assessment Resources, Inc.

Sampson, J. P., Jr., Reardon, R. C., Peterson, G. W., & Lenz, J. G. (2004). *Career counseling and services: A cognitive information processing approach*. Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole.

4 Ideas presented in this paragraph are influenced by scholars such as:

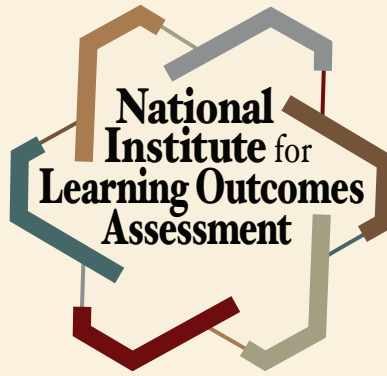
Keeling, R. P., & Associates. (2007, June). *Putting Learning Reconsidered into practice: Developing and assessing student learning outcomes*. Workshop presented at the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators' Learning Reconsidered Institute in St. Louis, MO.

Schuh, J. H. (2009). *Assessment methods for student affairs*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Suskie, L. (2009). *Assessing student learning: A common sense guide* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass

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