January 10, 2023

Career-Readiness Initiatives Are Missing the Mark

Instead of focusing on generic soft skills and internships, students need work-integrated classroom learning and pathways for building career readiness, Matthew T. Hora writes.

By Matthew T. Hora

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T he notion that the nation's colleges and universities are failing to prepare their

graduates feel underqualified for entry-level jobs, nearly three in four employers say they are having difficulty finding graduates with the soft skills they need and almost two out of five students regret their majors, making career readiness a hot topic for higher education conferences, boardrooms and op-eds.

Colleges and universities have responded to this widespread angst with campaigns encouraging students to develop job-ready soft skills, major expansions of internship programs (with placement rates proudly featured on glossy recruitment mailers) and efforts to elevate career services units alongside major investments in career-related online technologies. With efforts like these gathering steam across the postsecondary landscape, it looks like higher education is in the midst of a mission shift that positions career readiness as a strategic, campuswide priority.

What could be wrong with this development? Especially from the perspective of someone like me, who has long been an advocate for the transformative impact of experiential learning on students' social and economic mobility, and a critic of higher education's tendency to overlook students' career preparation in favor of other goals?

Unfortunately, as a researcher studying these issues at the Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions (CCWT) at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, I've come to the conclusion that the dominant discourse and logic driving too many career-readiness initiatives is flawed and merits an immediate course correction.

While a mission shift is long overdue, there are three problems: a misunderstanding of the nature of skills themselves, an overreliance on off-campus work-based learning as opposed to more accessible work-integrated learning in the classroom and a lack of guidance to help students navigate what can be a dizzying array of career-related learning opportunities available to them.

students who already face an uphill battle in the labor market—women, students of color and first-generation college students.

Fortunately, these problems can be easily remedied, and a solution that can bring about a true mission shift toward career readiness while minimizing the role that higher education plays in perpetuating normative accounts of "professionalism" is within reach. But the first step is to understand the problems currently plaguing the field.

Problem No. 1: Skills are not generic but deeply shaped by disciplines, culture and identity.

While terminological confusion abounds in the discourse around what are variously called "soft," "noncognitive" or "employability" skills, approaches toward cultivating them generally share one thing in common: conceptualizing human competencies such as communication or critical thinking in generic terms, as if context is irrelevant.

From skills assessment rubrics to soft skills microcredentials, this generic conception strips away critical information about how skills are defined, used and rewarded by actual human beings. Worse, as the anthropologist Bonnie Urciuoli points out, the discourse encourages students to see themselves as "bundles of skills," distilling their personhood to a commodity with market value.

The rhetoric also does not account for the different ways in which skills are used in different workplace contexts. For instance, the communication scholars Ann L. Darling and Deanna P. Dannels found that in engineering firms, professionals value communicators who can translate technical jargon to nonspecialists, an essential skill given the growth of cross-sector team projects in the field.

gendered workplace expectations. Underscoring the role that racial identity also plays in these dynamics, sociologist James R. Jones found that head nods among Black workers in the U.S. Congress act as a cultural gesture to assert a professional identity and solidarity in a workplace literally built by the institution of slavery.

But the roles that racial and ethnic identity, gender, social class, and disciplinary cultures play in what a soft skill looks like in practice is virtually absent from the current discourse. This means that students are likely learning watered-down versions of these complex, nuanced competencies in soft skills workshops that reflect normative views of "good" communication or professional behaviors. Unfortunately, the skills discourse tends to convey little awareness that these conceptions may only represent norms for one disproportionately powerful cultural group—white men.

Consequently, the first step in improving career-readiness efforts is to replace any frameworks or tools that perpetuate generic, normative views of soft skills with a more accurate view of skills as contextualized, culturally shaped modes of reasoning, interaction and behavior.

Problem No. 2: Work-based learning is exclusionary while work-integrated learning in the classroom is not.

When it comes to the causes of our nation's supposed failure to prepare students for the workplace, blame invariably settles on one group of professionals—the faculty. Criticism tends to focus on a curriculum that is overly abstract with limited applications to the "real world," few hands-on learning opportunities and a devotion to content decontextualized from the world of work.

As a professor whose research has involved spending hundreds of hours conducting

been gathering steam for decades, these efforts (and the faculty members engaged in them) are rarely part of career-readiness conversations and initiatives.

Instead, perhaps the most widespread institutional response to the career-readiness problem lies outside the classroom—the off-campus internship. These work-based learning experiences are widely seen as a "high-impact practice" that some argue *all* college students should experience before they graduate.

The problem, however, with internships is that millions of students are screened out from an opportunity that some call "door openers" to social and economic mobility.

National estimates indicate only 30 percent of college students ever participate in an internship—a select and fortunate sliver of the nation's student body. More troubling is our own research at CCWT, which shows that of the non-interning students, 67 percent actually wanted to pursue one but could not due to various factors including a lack of information, insufficient (or no) pay, too few positions, a lack of transportation, widespread pandemic-caused cancellations or an overly heavy course load. Making matters worse, for many students it is not a single barrier that prevents them from pursuing an internship, but the accumulated effect of multiple, intersecting forces that makes pursuing an internship—particularly in expensive cities like Washington, D.C., or Seattle—an untenable dream.

This is one reason why scholars in nations like Australia are advocating for the integration of career-readiness skills and topics into the classroom, or what is called work-integrated learning. The classroom is the one venue where it is easiest to equitably reach almost all an institution's student body and where quality control and curricular coherence are easier to achieve than in an off-campus business or organization. The problem is that work-integrated teaching methods, such as problem-based learning, are rather difficult to execute in the classroom.

But given that 40 percent of college students never visit their campus's career services office, while 100 percent will visit their classrooms at least once and be a captive audience, figuring out how to engage faculty in introducing hands-on learning and career-related information across the curriculum should be a national priority. Consequently, faculty must be seen as essential allies—and not solely as recalcitrant obstacles—in pursuing career readiness across the curriculum.

Problem No. 3: The siloed nature of career-related opportunities across campus contributes to a failure to provide students with a coherent road map.

An unfortunate truth about career-related learning opportunities on a typical campus—think internship fairs, courses featuring work-integrated learning or networking events with alumni—is that they are too often fragmented or siloed across various departments or career centers. The issue can be a lack of a centralized, cross-departmental office that acts as a one-stop shop for all career-related issues on campus, limited coordination between career offices and other student-facing units like academic advising or student affairs, or both.

While many campuses are attempting to remedy this situation by centralizing their career-related programming into a single office or via online solutions, uncoordinated, fragmented services have been a problem since the early 1990s and continue to this day. This may be one reason why only 16 percent of students reported that visits to career services were very helpful.

But the problem is not just the quality or location of campus career services offices. Instead, because career-related learning occurs across a wide range of units, courses

This problem of limited guidance amid an abundance of opportunities is what inspired the developers of the influential guided pathways model of institutional change in community colleges. Instead of greeting new students with an overwhelming and incoherent course catalog—what they called the "cafeteria model" of higher education—the idea was to provide students with a clear road map of the specific courses and experiences required to acquire particular credentials.

New students are not expected to navigate these complex and potentially intimidating programs on their own but instead are guided by an adviser who teaches them how to read these road maps and pursue their chosen pathways. Can you imagine a similar approach to helping students understand the career-related programming available across their campus and which courses, workshops and experiences they should pursue to strategically build their résumé and repertoire of skills?

Crucially, guided pathways is not just a technical fix, achieved through simply restructuring an office, launching a new app or appointing another dean. The point is a fundamental cultural shift, with student-centered advising and teaching at the core—a lesson that advocates of career readiness would be well advised to consider.

Toward a Classroom-Centered Transformation

It is time for a new approach. As part of our ongoing work at CCWT in this area, we are developing a new framework to help departments and institutions more intentionally integrate culturally responsive, broadly accessible and user-friendly career-readiness experiences throughout a student's pathway toward a credential.

In designing this approach we are mindful of the fact that individual faculty and staff members are key to serving as "bridges" among siloed units, but also that these

tradition, we contend that this core strength of U.S. higher education must not be sacrificed in favor of a vocationalist turn—a real danger in the neoliberal academy.

Thus, at the core of our approach is a commitment to building upon existing courses and career services programming at the level most impacting students—degree programs within departments.

The key steps in this vision are to: (1) articulate a desired set of disciplinary expertise *and* professional skills for graduates that accounts for cultural factors, (2) document existing opportunities for building skills and career readiness within courses and career services units, (3) identify and fill gaps in opportunities for skill development, providing training where necessary (e.g., training for faculty in work-integrated learning techniques), (4) provide a road map for how students can sequence courses and experiences to meet program goals, and (5) ensure that sufficient advisers are in place to guide students through this process.

The stakes are too high to be satisfied with the status quo. This is because fixing the career-readiness problem isn't just about assuaging the concerns of tuition-paying parents, but the skills employers covet—critical thinking, innovation, communication—also happen to be essential in dealing with problems like climate change, misinformation and threats to democracy. If colleges and universities are serious about meeting these challenges, they need to change gears and look to culture, the classroom and student advising as part of a paradigm shift in embedding career readiness across the entire college experience.

Written By

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