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BRINGING COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS AND EMPLOYERS TOGETHER:
A GUIDE FOR EMPLOYERS AND CAREER CENTERS IN AN ECONOMIC DECLINE

A Synthesis Project Presented

by

JEFFREY D. CRAIG

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies, University of Massachusetts Boston,
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

MAY 2009

Critical and Creative Thinking Program

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JEFFREY D. CRAIG

Approved as to style and content by:

Arthur Millman, Associate Professor
Chairperson of Committee

Peter Taylor, Professor
Member

Peter Taylor, Coordinator
Critical and Creative Thinking Program

ABSTRACT

BRINGING COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS AND EMPLOYERS TOGETHER: A GUIDE FOR EMPLOYERS AND CAREER CENTERS IN AN ECONOMIC DECLINE

May 2009

Jeffrey D. Craig, B.S., Bridgewater State College
M.A., University of Massachusetts Boston

Directed by Associate Professor Arthur Millman

This paper emerges from my work as Coordinator of Job Placement at Bristol Community College over the last 19 months, in which I have had the opportunity to try new approaches to problem-solving and pursue professional growth as I serve students in higher education.

The recent economic crisis has left millions of Americans out of work across most sectors. Displaced workers are flocking to community colleges to upgrade and learn new skills with the goal of becoming more marketable to potential employers. Enrollments have soared, while costs have risen and budgets cut. These conditions place an undue burden on these institutions, which are responsible for educating and training tomorrow's workforce. This paper examines the role of community colleges in our society in the context of how an economic decline impacts their mission. Businesses, which depend on community colleges to supply a steady stream of talent so they can grow and prosper, are urged to continue on-campus recruitment programs despite dwindling recruitment budgets. A guide presents employers with a rationale and strategies for maintaining a strong campus presence.

Incoming students, who have been recently laid off, are presenting with emotional issues relating to lost jobs and adjustment to college, while the Class of 2009 is facing one of the worst job markets in decades. Career center staff is presented with a guide to support and motivate these students using a multi-faceted, holistic approach. Finally, advisory boards are explored as a tool to bring stakeholders—employers, faculty, career center staff, and students—together to work for a common purpose. These boards could serve as a laboratory for planning, implementing, and evaluating change using action research tools and strategies.

Dedicated to:

Patricia Condon, my colleague and mentor

and

My parents, who provide me with unconditional love and support.

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Confronted by ignorance and its companions—poverty, illiteracy, intolerance, and injustice—the people of the United States have always put their faith in education. That faith has sustained free inquiry, free expression, free men and women, the dignity of the individual, and access to opportunity. Wherever a community college or university is located, it shines as a symbol of the American people’s respect for the best that is in them: a beacon offering safe passage to freedom through knowledge and wisdom.¹

¹ College Board, 2008, pg. 11

INTRODUCTION

In August 2007, I accepted a job at Bristol Community College (BCC), located in Fall River, Massachusetts, as the Coordinator of Job Placement. It was a dramatic departure from my previous career in social work. I felt like I had “come home” as I enjoy my work immensely, including the environment, the culture, and the people.

Over the past nineteen months, I have developed a great appreciation for the value of higher education because I see how it transforms lives. Students leave with a deeper awareness of and appreciation for the complexity of their world and a greater sense of purpose and community. However, students are not the only beneficiaries: families are stabilized, employers gain access to a steady stream of skilled workers, and local economies grow through increased revenue, which allows governments to attend to the common needs of the community.

My interest in this topic developed last fall when I began noticing a steady decline in the quantity and quality of jobs sent by local employers, while student foot traffic was increasing considerably. Meanwhile, BCC had suffered significant budget cuts, which had potential to wreak havoc on a system already strained (I discuss funding in Chapter 2.)

Soon after I decided to research this issue for my synthesis project, the nation plunged into a deep financial crisis following the collapse of several banks and major insurance companies. I feared the crisis would exacerbate an already fragile situation. I felt an urgent need to respond, but I didn't know where to start. Under the guidance of Peter Taylor, the Coordinator of the Program in Critical and Creative Thinking (CCT), I came to realize that if I was to develop an effective plan, I'd have to separate myself from the micro aspects of what was occurring at BCC and, instead, put this issue in a larger context. I decided to reach out and learn how others

have coped in past economic downturns and how my colleagues in other career centers were responding.

In March, I contacted the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) and discovered that they were offering a virtual conference the following week on how college career centers can respond to students' needs in a down economy. The timing was perfect and the timing ideal! The conference, which drew over 500 career services professionals from across the country, empowered me to broaden my outreach. I contacted career center staff at community colleges in Ohio, Kansas and Florida to share information and strategies. This required me to venture outside my comfort zone; however, it was well worth the effort because I gained invaluable insight—and the chance to speak with some very gracious, forthcoming and dedicated staff!

This CCT synthesis paper is designed to reach multiple audiences. First, my intent—developed in Chapter 1—is to educate the public about the important and complex roles that community colleges play in communities across the country and to help readers develop a greater awareness and understanding of, and appreciation for, their strengths and vulnerabilities. My hope is that it will move readers to become advocates for their cause and provide the moral (and possibly financial) support they these institutions need to fulfill their promise.

Chapter 2 examines the various ways that a recession can affect a community college system. There are opportunities; however, recessions that leave millions out of work present significant challenges as well. More specifically, Chapter 2 describes how economic downturns result in soaring enrollments, which places a heavy burden on a system already struggling with rising costs and budget cuts.

Chapter 3 presents business leaders with some points to ponder as they consider trimming (or eliminating) their on-campus recruitment programs. Community colleges, after all, have provided business and industry with a pipeline of skills workers for over a century. And when the economy improves and a green economy emerges, community colleges will be at the forefront. Moreover, many Baby Boomers are expected to retire over the next decade, leaving leadership positions vacant. Businesses need to consider these factors and craft smart plans that make sense for the short- and long-term.

Chapter 4 provides career services professionals with a guide for supporting and motivating students during poor economic times. It focuses on two sets of students who are in greatest need: the Class of 2009, which is going to face one of the most challenging job markets in decades, and incoming students who have been laid off. The latter group is—understandably—fearful, frustrated, and confused about their job losses and what to do next. Chapter 4 suggests ways career center can respond by using a three-prong holistic approach. These “prongs” include: (1) the need for emotional support; (2) information/knowledge; and (3) and skills-building. Based on my research and conversations with colleagues, I describe the kinds of information sessions and workshops that can surround students with support that will provide the support and motivation they need to succeed. Finally, career centers are provided with strategies to adapt to these difficult times.

Lastly, Chapter 5 examines how advisory boards can provide the primary stakeholders—employers, faculty, career services staff, and students—with an invaluable tool to encourage camaraderie and a sense of common purpose. Advisory board functions are described, followed by scenarios to help the reader better understand their applicability in a community college setting.

My role at BCC is ever-evolving and growing, which presents a prime opportunity for professional growth. I am fortunate that my supervisors value and encourage creativity, which offers me flexibility to try new approaches to problem-solving. I believe these conditions present an ideal opportunity for me to apply some of the tools and strategies I have learned through the CCT program. Most notably, I feel that advisory boards could provide a laboratory for me to practice the approach of the Action Research course (Taylor 2009), namely, constituency-building, planning, implementing, and evaluating outcomes.

CHAPTER ONE

THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES IN OUR SOCIETY

Community colleges, also known as “junior” and “technical” colleges over the years, were established in 1901 in the United States. Their original mission was to provide the mass population with increased access to a college education and was thought of as a bridge from high school to a university-level education. At the end of World War II, President Truman vowed to make community colleges even more accessible, promising to locate one “within commuting distance of every American” (Phelan, 2000, p.2). Today, his promise has been nearly realized as there are 1,202 community colleges in the U.S. (AACC, 2008), and 90% of Americans live within driving distance of at least one of these institutions (College Board, 2008, p. 15).

Today, community colleges offer a vast array of programs, including:

- Associates degrees in arts, sciences, and applied sciences for students seeking to transfer to four-year institutions;
- Vocational preparation associates and certificate programs that focus on the cognitive and technical skills needed to enter and advance in professional, technological, and service careers;
- Customized training, retraining and skills improvement for emergent and incumbent learners;
- Adult Basic Education, English as a Second Language and General Equivalency Diploma (GED) preparation;
- Courses for high school students to help them improve their ability to excel at the post-secondary level while simultaneously earning college credits (e.g., Dual Enrollment); and
- Cultural activities and opportunities for lifelong learning.

These programs play a crucial role in shaping the destiny of students and their families, communities, business and industry, and the larger society. Individuals who earn an education, for example, gain an economic boost and self-sufficiency, which “can be the difference between life lived at the edges while worrying about paying the bills and a more comfortable lifestyle with the promise of being able to educate one’s children” (College Board, p.23). Businesses, in turn, gain access to a steady stream of skilled workers, which helps them grow and become more competitive. Moreover, businesses are drawn to regions that possess a highly educated and trained workforce, which tends to increase the quantity and quality of jobs. Accordingly, state and local economies benefit through increased revenue (e.g., taxes), allowing government to respond to the common good by supporting public schools, maintaining the infrastructure, and addressing other priorities. Finally, residents benefit from less unemployment, less dependence on welfare, lower taxes, and lower crime rates (Bragg, 2001a).

Beyond these measures, perhaps one of the most important hallmarks of the American community college system is that it opens the door of higher education to millions of individuals who may not have otherwise considered attending college. In fact, community colleges have been referred to as “the Ellis Island of American Higher Education” and “the crossroads at which K-12 education meets colleges and universities” (College Board, 2008, p. 15). Kevin Dougherty, a leading scholar of community college education, claimed that “the community college is the single largest and most important portal into higher education” (as cited in Bragg, 2001a, p. 95). If this is so, community colleges should be recognized for their open access policies, which allow admission to virtually anyone who has earned a high school diploma or GED, regardless of academic standing in high school or college entrance exam scores (Bragg, 2001a).

In addition to promoting access, open enrollment policies foster greater diversity. Indeed, when compared to four-year institutions, community college students are far more diverse. For example, they tend to be older, more likely to be female, and members of racial or ethnic minority groups. They are also more likely to be the first person in their family to attend college, come from a non-English-speaking family, and/or be recent immigrants. Moreover, studies show that open enrollment has made community colleges a primary gateway for racial or ethnic minority groups to enter higher education, either immediately after high school or later in life (Bragg, 2001a).

Community colleges are responsible for educating and credentialing a large portion of the workforce. They enroll 11.6 million individuals at 1,202 institutions nationwide, and award 555,000 associate degrees and 295,000 certificates annually (College Board, 2008, p.11). Nearly 50 percent of all undergraduates in the United States are educated at a community college (College Board, 2008), including 75% of the nation's mid-skilled workforce (Bragg, 2001b). Further, 80% of first responders (e.g., police officers, firefighters, emergency medical technicians) and 50% of new nurses are educated at community colleges (College Board, 2008).

Business and industry not only benefits from a pipeline of skilled workers, but also from community colleges' superior workforce training and development programs that are both flexible to the demands of the market and affordable—characteristics that other training programs and four-year colleges and universities cannot match (Motta, 1999). Moreover, leading corporations view community colleges as a primary source of training for high technology occupations that draw unemployed workers into the workforce and provide existing workers with the competencies to move into more demanding and fulfilling positions (Motta, 1999).

The President of the Des Moines Area Community College agrees, stating that “community colleges are able to react quickly to meet business leaders’ needs, shuttering programs that provide job training for which businesses no longer have demands and adding new programs as the need arises” (Dalbey, 2005, p. 3). In addition, data from the AACC points out that the faculty is well-versed in teaching non-traditional, diverse populations, and many have strong technical skills and ties to local industry, which helps keep curricula current (AACC, 2008). Also, Buono (2000) emphasizes how trainings can be offered at convenient times, on- or off-site, or using distance learning options. These attributes demonstrate great flexibility, adaptability, and convenience for employers seeking to increase the skills of their current workforce and create conditions where they will have continuous access to highly skilled workers.

These characteristics are not new. Since the early twentieth century, community colleges have been serving the needs of business and industry by equipping the workforce with skills that are paramount to maintaining steady economic growth. Now, we are entering a new era of jobs—one that holds the promise of generating millions of jobs as we explore ways of reducing our impact on climate change and creating new, cleaner alternative energy sources. Training for these “green jobs” will likely take place at community colleges since most of them are expected to require more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year degree. Finally, community colleges will be tapped by companies to provide short-term on-site workforce development training for incumbent workers in these new technologies (Abdul-Alim, 2009).

A recent report, entitled, “Going Green: The Vital Role of Community Colleges in Building a Sustainable Future and Green Workforce”, sums up the importance of their anticipated role as follows:

Community colleges—with their connections to local and regional labor markets and the flexibility to respond to emerging industries and their changing skill needs—are the perfect gateway to good green jobs, preparing workers with the skills and competencies needed for green industries, and ensuring that these industries do not face a shortage of adequately trained workers. (Green for All, 2008, p. 14)

Soon, community colleges are expected to be teeming with displaced blue collar workers who are eager to re-tool for jobs as wind turbine mechanics, solar panel installers, fuel cell engineers, and energy efficiency experts. And who knows where we will be in one, five, or ten years? “In the 1890s, no one foresaw a society needing automobile assemblers, machinists, flight attendants, X-ray technicians, punch-press operators, airframe mechanics, drywallers, or a host of other occupations that did not exist then but are in demand today” (Adler, 1997, p. 42).

As we shed manufacturing jobs by the hundreds of thousands each month, who can predict the kinds and quantity of jobs that will replace them and the programs needed to educate the workforce? One thing is fairly certain: community colleges will play a central role. They will be charged with developing new and updating existing programs so students are equipped on Day One with the skills and competencies that are in demand. Employers, recognizing the value of community colleges, should serve in an advisory role, in order to help shape educational outcomes and develop industry-recognized credentials for these new jobs. (This issue is explored in Chapter 5.)

Leading economists also recognize the value of community colleges. For example, in a speech to Congress, Alan Greenspan, the former Chair of the U.S. Federal Reserve, summed up the power of community colleges, asserting the following:

America's reputation as the world's leader in higher education is grounded in the ability of these versatile institutions to serve the practical needs of the economy by teaching and training and, more significantly, by unleashing the creative thinking that moves our economy forward. (Pluvoise, 2005, p.10)

In the meantime, community colleges are leading by example. For instance, Cape Cod Community College, located in Hyannis, Massachusetts, has a fleet of electric cars that eliminates hundreds of tons of airborne pollutants each year through renewable electricity. They also have an impressive recycling and water conservation program. Mount Wachusett Community College, located in Gardner, Massachusetts, is making similar strides. They reduced the institution's carbon footprint significantly by converting its all-electric main campus to a biomass heating system. These initiatives "help generate enthusiasm and support from students, faculty, staff, alumni, policymakers, the community, and potential funders" (Abdul-Alim, 2009).

CHAPTER TWO

HOW A RECESSION IMPACTS THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM

The State of the Economy

President Barak Obama and many prominent economists concur that we are in the midst of a financial crisis of proportions not seen since the Great Depression. Certainly, we have not experienced conditions like these in several decades. As expected, there has been great speculation and debate about the exact cause of the recession. Indeed, it is widely believed that reckless sub-prime lending practices triggered the recession. Yet, few argue the fact that the recession escalated in the fall of 2008 when a considerable number of banks, mortgage lenders and insurance companies failed, ushering in a so-called credit crunch that has crippled lending practices. As a result of this financial crisis, millions of Americans have lost their jobs, which has forced numerous families into bankruptcy and foreclosure.

To illustrate the scope of this crisis, consider that 3.5 million jobs were lost between January 2008 and January 2009—the highest number in a one-year period since the Great Depression (Aversa, 2009). Moreover, 598,000 jobs were lost in January 2009 alone, which represents the highest volume of jobs lost in a single month since 1972 (Aversa). Furthermore, as of January 31, 2009:

- A record number of Americans were receiving unemployment benefits with jobless claims soaring to a twenty-six year high ("Jobless claims soar," 2009);
- The national unemployment rate was 7.6 percent with 11.6 million Americans unemployed—(highest figures since September 1992 (Aversa));

- Productivity unexpectedly soared in late 2008 despite companies cutting hours—an indication of the high pace of layoffs ("Jobless claims soar");
- Average job search time had risen from 17.5 weeks in January 2008 to 19.8 weeks in January 2009 (Aversa).

Challenges and Opportunities for Community Colleges

A tattered economy and rising unemployment present opportunities and challenges for community colleges. Certainly, there is widespread agreement that as unemployment increases, so do enrollments at community colleges (College Board, 2008). At first glance, this may seem like a boon for community colleges; however, if there are not enough resources to accommodate the influx of new students, how do community colleges manage?

At minimum, the worsening economy offers administrators an ideal opportunity to showcase the full breath and quality of programs they offer. It also offers a chance for them to dispel some of the myths and misperceptions that have plagued community colleges for many years, such as:

- Students attend community college because they did not get accepted to their choice of four-year colleges or universities;
- Community colleges are only for people who want a vocational technical job;
- Obtaining a community college degree is not as useful as a university degree;
- It is not easy to transfer from a community college to a four-year university; and
- Community college students cannot succeed in a four-year university (Chen, 2009a).

In truth, community colleges are versatile institutions with an admirable reputation for helping inspire a diverse population of individuals who choose to pursue a range of vocational

occupations or continue their studies at four-year institutions. As prospective students and their families uncover the strengths and legacy of community colleges and realize how much money they can save, the choice becomes more and more obvious.

Why Enrollment Increases

As stated earlier, enrollments tend to increase at community colleges as the economy falters. But why is this so? The following section offers some explanations.

1. High demand for new and enhanced skills. Laid off workers see this as an opportunity to update existing skills or learn new skills, acquire employment credentials (e.g. a degree or certificate) or even start a new career—one that they perceive to be better-paying and more stable. Others in the workforce who are motivated by stress over pay cuts or fear they may be next in line for the unemployment office also take advantage of this opportunity, which provides job candidates with a greater competitive edge when applying for jobs in the future (College Board, 2008).

2. Savings. Students and families are recognizing that they can realize substantial savings by attending a community college. With family budgets being squeezed and credit tight, community colleges are becoming more appealing because tuition and fees are substantially less than four-year public and private institutions. Because community colleges do not offer on-campus housing, additional room and board expenses are eliminated. Moreover, some families have watched their college fund investments plunge, making more expensive universities out of reach without a student loan. Furthermore, many parents are leery about taking out loans in

these unstable times, particularly as they contemplate their own retirement or questionable job security (Sphor, 2003). Also, students are cognizant that market conditions may inhibit their chances of finding a good-paying job upon graduation. As such, they are choosing less expensive community colleges to keep their student loans to a minimum (“Community colleges boom”, 2008).

3. Changing perceptions. The perception that community colleges do not offer a comprehensive, quality education has been disappearing for several years. Public relations efforts have helped a great deal. For example, students and their parents are more likely to choose a community college when they learn that nearly 50% of undergraduate students attended a community college at some point in their academic career, received a great education, and realized impressive savings (College Board, 2008). Word-of-mouth and more referrals from high schools have also played a significant role in changing opinions.

4. Population increases. There has been a significant population increase of traditional college age students as “Generation Y”—the children of Baby Boomers born between 1979 and 1988—are flooding community colleges. In fact, about half of community college students are 22 years or younger. This is a 10% increase over the past ten years—a trend that is expected to continue for several more years (Giordani, 2005).

5. Reverse-transferring. When attending an expensive four-year college or university is no longer economically feasible, students often choose to “reverse-transfer” to community colleges—a trend that becomes more pronounced in tough economic times. With lower tuition

and fees and the elimination of room and board expenses, students can save thousands of dollars by transferring to a community college.

Nationally, the American Association of Community Colleges notes that a third of its students previously attended a four-year institution. In fact, the recession has led to a surge in community college enrollments this year, and some experts believe that ‘reverse transfers’ are an important and sometimes overlooked portion of that growing student body at two-year institutions. (Moltz, 2009, para. 2).

The Cost of Rising Enrollment

In and of itself, rising enrollment is beneficial to community colleges, the individuals they serve, business and industry, and our communities. A problem occurs when it is accompanied by rising costs and dwindling public financial support, which can place a heavy burden on the ability of community colleges to meet the demands before them. A report by the National Commission of Community Colleges addresses this issue, warning that there is great disparity between the demands placed on community colleges and the resources they are granted to meet them. Their report stated the following:

A serious mismatch exists between the many jobs that community colleges are expected to do—educate students for whom English is a second language, provide developmental education to high school graduates without college-ready skills, offer occupational training programs for businesses, provide adult basic education and literacy services, and permit students to complete the first two years of a four-year degree—and the resources provided to get the job done.” (College Board, pp. 6-7)

The following section examines the dilemma of mismatched priorities and the underlying issues of funding, trends in public financial support, how community colleges are coping with diminishing resources in the face of rising costs, and how these obstacles are erecting roadblocks in front of those who are in most need of support in obtaining a post-secondary education.

Funding

Community colleges are governed and supported in a variety of ways, depending on local priorities and resources (Center for Community College Policy [CCCCP], 2000). Typically, funding sources include a mix of federal and state appropriations, local funds (e.g., usually from property taxes), tuition and fees, development funds (e.g., grants, endowments), and contract income from workforce development training and education. On average, community colleges get 60 % of their funding through state and local sources (“Community colleges boom,” 2008).

Over the past twenty years, there has been a dramatic decrease in public financial support for two-year colleges. In 1981, for example, state appropriations accounted for nearly half of community college revenue; today it has declined to 38 % (“Community Colleges boom,” 2008). At the same time, many states are dealing with significant budget shortfalls and struggling with how to allocate limited resources to address many competing and urgent priorities. Unfortunately, “the history of higher education in recent decades has shown that when state budgets have tightened, higher education inevitably suffered” (College Board, 2008, p. 6).

Community colleges are particularly vulnerable to budget cuts during declining economic conditions because they are funded in different ways than four-year colleges and universities. For example, the bulk of federal higher education funding goes to four-year schools, despite the fact that community colleges educate nearly half of all undergraduates (CCCCP, 2000). As a result, community colleges are more dependent on local and state funds and the health of their respective economies. Some states, including Massachusetts, deny community colleges access to local funds (e.g., revenue from property taxes), which makes them even more dependent on state appropriations. To make matters worse, some governors can draw down funding for community colleges without legislative approval—as is the case in Massachusetts.

The combination of dwindling funds, rising costs, and soaring enrollment is presenting community colleges with enormous challenges—and the effects can take a toll on meeting their priorities. For instance, without sufficient resources, community colleges are forced to forego or postpone updating or building new facilities and purchasing state-of-the-art training equipment, which is essential for technology programs. To close the gap—at least partially—officials “have been forced to raise tuition and fees . . . and replace full-time faculty with less effective part-time faculty” (Chen, 2009b, para. 2). Sometimes faculty is not replaced. As such, fewer courses are offered to accommodate the growing demands. Of course, there are more insidious costs such as “brain drain” — also known as “human capital flight”— which refers to the exodus of academic talent (e.g., faculty) as they search for more economically-stable communities.

Although community colleges are still considered inexpensive—especially when compared to some private institutions—higher costs may nonetheless force some of the most vulnerable students from school. For example, for low-income, minority, first-generation, immigrant, and part-time workers—even modest fee increases pose painful obstacles for potential and current students” (College Board, p. 28). The reality is that some of these students are less prepared to succeed academically, and as such they do not get the same level of financial support as those at other levels in higher education (Pluviose, 2005).

Obtaining financing can further compound matters: “As the market steadily slows, and credit, banks, and loan institutions are forced to tighten their budgets, students . . . express concern about affording community college, especially in light of . . . the plummeting availability of funds.” (“Planning for student loans”, n.d., para. 1). If costs keep rising, students may not be able to bridge the gap between financial aid and the cost of an education, particularly as a troubled market threatens the availability of private loans.

Surely, community colleges take pride in their mission of broad accessibility, but for some students, rising costs may spell the end of their education as institutions are forced to expand or turn away students (College Board, 2008). Norma Kent, spokeswoman for the AACC, stated that because two-year schools are intended to be open access institutions, it is an anathema to turn students away. She warned that “if there’s not enough faculty, not enough courses, we have a de facto enrollment cap” (“Community colleges boom,” 2008, para.18). Chen (2009b) warned that even small increases in tuition and fees can drive low income students from school and possibly relegate them to a life of poverty.

Issues such as funding disparities and shortfalls, rising costs, and students being turned away due to rising tuition should concern us all. Community colleges are an engine of our economy and can help us recover from this economic recession. An analysis by the National Commission on Community Colleges supports this claim, stating how “half of the new jobs created in the United States in the next 10 years will require at least some post-secondary education, even in high-demand science, technology, and mathematics (STEM) fields” (College Board, 2008, p. 6). Business and industry should play close attention to issues like community college access, affordability, and whether these institutions have adequate resources to prepare tomorrow’s workforce.

The next chapter provides specific strategies for how business leaders can and should engage with community colleges to ensure that tomorrow’s workforce has the skills necessary to build a strong, vibrant and competitive workforce that will drive our economy into more prosperous times.

CHAPTER THREE
FOR EMPLOYERS: RECRUITMENT CONSIDERATIONS AND STRATEGIES
IN A POOR ECONOMY

College Recruiting: Hiring Trends and Projections

Each year, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) publishes a report that summarizes survey results of its employer members regarding hiring and recruiting projections on college campuses. The results are compared and contrasted with the previous year to highlight important differences and trends. This year's report took on special significance in determining how recruiting efforts will be affected by the deteriorating economy.

The latest report, published in March 2009, reported on survey results from 174 employers from a wide range of sectors and compared 2008 actual figures with 2009 projections. The results were prefaced with a rather grim statement: "The economic recession that has gripped most of the world for the past year is now thoroughly reflected in college hiring expectations" (NACE Research: Job Outlook Update, 2009, p.3). The Update's more salient findings included the following:

- Employers expect to hire nearly 22% fewer graduates from the Class of 2009 than they actually hired from the Class of 2008;
- Much of the decline in college recruiting has occurred in the first few months of 2009;
- Sixty-seven percent of employers stated that the economic situation had forced them to reevaluate their college recruitment plans; of these, 91% expected to hire fewer new college graduates;

- Hiring expectations have decreased across almost all sectors;
- Projections show a significant decrease in finance sector jobs—a typically strong area for new college graduates; traditionally strong industries like accounting and engineering also declined;
- The difference between actual hires in 2008 and projected hires in 2009 was most dramatic in the Northeast, showing a 38.9% decline;
- Fifty-nine percent of employers reported that their recruiting budgets had been cut, 26% of them suffering a more than 20% decrease;
- For spring 2009, 22% of respondents reported they do not plan to hire at all; 43 % expect to hire fewer graduates; and
- Employers expect to be offering more internship opportunities and fewer full-time jobs.

Although NACE acknowledged the gravity of these findings, they closed the report with a hopeful message for the Class of 2009:

[Despite the challenging economy], this generation of graduates has inherent demographic advantages that their counterparts in the early 1980s, the last time the unemployment picture was this poor, did not have. This generation will still be required to fill the slots vacated by the retiring Baby Boom generation. Those retirements may not come as soon as many expected and will not help the current employment prospects of this year's graduating class, but they will come, and, when then they do, the employment opportunities for college-educated professionals should be plentiful, even if the economy does not grow at a record pace. (NACE Research: Job Outlook Update, 2006, p.10)

A recent study by the Collegiate Employment Research Institute at Michigan State University offers additional hope. It acknowledged that new graduates will almost certainly face potent competition with those who have degrees and are currently unemployed; however, labor markets generally favor young adults in recessions. In fact, in its current survey, 29% of

employers indicated they have shifted their hiring in favor of new college graduates over experienced workers, primarily because of costs (Hansen, 2009).

Beyond the issue of cost, why should employers spend diminishing resources on college recruitment programs in a poor economy? With mass layoffs at levels not seen in more than a generation, why should employers be concerned about hiring new college graduates when the marketplace is filled with laid-off experienced professionals? The following section explores these issues and offers employers points to contemplate, a rationale for maintaining crucial relationships with colleges, and guidelines for doing so, regardless of economic conditions.

The Rationale for College Recruitment Programs in a Poor Economy

This recession has hit hard across sectors. Millions of laid-off workers are flooding the marketplace—some willing to accept wages far below what they were worth just a year ago. Seasoned professionals are chasing after entry-level jobs, squeezing out opportunities for new graduates. Under these conditions, companies—many of which are struggling with declining resources—are questioning why they should continue to expend precious resources to recruit on college campuses. Wheeler (n.d.) argues that despite the decreased demand for many majors, there remains a strong rationale for establishing and maintaining college recruitment programs, even in poor economic times.

Flato (2009) stated that the best-managed firms capitalize on and exploit poor economic times when designing recruitment strategies. They know that other companies will halt their on-campus recruitment, which presents an opportunity for other companies to shift their focus to more prestigious schools, with higher caliber students, particularly if the cost declines. It also offers companies a chance to separate themselves from the pack. For example, students want to

join companies that are financially stable and those that offer growth opportunities. With fewer distractions for students, companies can make their case to multiple stakeholders—students, career center staff and faculty—that they have a vested interest in the success of these students. In short, smart companies see the larger picture—that building and maintaining these relationships will pay dividends when the economy turns around.

In addition, as Baby Boomers retire over the next few decades, they will leave a significant gap in leadership positions, particularly in the STEM fields (i.e., Science-Technology-Engineering-Math). Computer scientists, programmers, engineers, chemists, and others in the hard sciences will be in high demand as will healthcare workers when Baby Boomers age and require greater care. Also, as basic economic principles suggest, high demand for workers in these fields will escalate wages. Therefore, employers should invest *now* in ways that will keep the talent pool from drying up. Wheeler (n.d.) agrees, recommending the following:

Organizations need to do all they can to increase the potential pool of talent. This means investing in high school programs that encourage students to major in critical fields; it means working closely with colleges and universities to develop the programs that make their graduates employable; and it means hiring the fruits of that work. (para. 6)

At the community college level, employers can meet with career centers and faculty to devise informational sessions to educate and pique the interests of undecided students about the possibilities and rewards of working in various industries, thus planting the seeds for tomorrow's skilled workers and leaders. This is particularly vital as we enter a new era of green jobs. For example, Flato (2009) reminds us that future leaders start in entry-level positions and are trained and mentored by their predecessors. When companies suspend their college recruitment activities, they are interrupting the flow of new talent into their organization, and hence their capacity to mentor a new generation of leaders.

Bringing in fresh talent can revitalize an organization while saving the company money. For instance, college programs can effectively draw in energetic and highly capable individuals who do not demand the higher salaries that seasoned professionals often command. Moreover, new graduates are familiar with the latest academic theories and emerging research and are therefore capable of suggesting novel, creative approaches to solving problems. They may also excel at applying a critical eye to *the way we've always done it*. Dr. John Sullivan, an expert human resources management advisor, expands on this point:

Possibly the best thing about hiring recent college graduates is the fact that they don't know anything. Well, that's not entirely true. The truth is that they don't know anything about why you do things the way you do, so they are more apt to ask why. When such discussions erupt, that's often when new hires can introduce new thinking, new technology, and new approaches. Choking off the supply of individuals not subject to historical group think can stifle an organization's ability to evolve and be innovative. (Sullivan, 2009, para. 7).

Recruitment Considerations and Strategies

Following are some considerations and strategies for how employers can develop, maintain and strengthen college recruitment programs during an economic decline.

Computer Technology

Technology has transformed the way companies recruit new talent. The Internet, in particular, permits direct communication with students like never before, which has diminished the need for frequent, on-campus recruitment programs. Most Fortune 500 companies, for example, have developed comprehensive, interactive websites dedicated to recruiting new graduates. These sites offer a wealth of information—more than any individual recruiter could

provide at a job fair. With a few clicks of a mouse, students can gain a wealth of information about a company, including career paths, potential opportunities, benefits, company culture, application processes and procedures, and much more. Below are just a few examples of what students can expect to find:

- **British Petroleum (BP)**, one of the world's largest energy companies, offers a "How BP are you?" assessment that helps students judge if there is a good fit between their strengths and preferences, and what BP is seeking. They also offer a Program Wizard, which helps students decide what opportunities are available to them based on their degree (e.g., engineering, science or business) and career goals.
- **Macy's/Bloomingdale's Department Stores** provides interactive career-path flowcharts as well as video testimonials from new employees and interns. Prospective employees can view new employees and interns as they describe their experiences at the company, the various career paths available to them, and how diversity at Macy's has enhanced their work environment.
- **Raytheon**, a Waltham, Massachusetts-based defense technologies company with 73,000 employees worldwide, posts pictures and glowing biographies of select employees on its website, which demonstrates the worth it assigns to its workforce. This can be a powerful selling point since students want to feel appreciated and supported as new employees. In addition, Raytheon provides an interactive "Career Progression Ladder" that walks

students through possible career paths, based on his or her degree and goals.

- **Microsoft Corporation** offers new graduates a chance to meet employees via video testimonials and learn about employees' roles, daily tasks and routines, how their work has enhanced them professionally and personally, and why they chose to work at the company. New graduates can also view employees as they describe and demonstrate projects they are working on—essentially, a virtual job shadow session.

Although elaborate websites offer students a wealth of information, employers need to understand their limitations. For example, a student who visits a company's website already has some level of interest by virtue that he or she initiated the contact (Sullivan, 2009). This underscores the need for employers to diversify their outreach methods so they can reach students who may otherwise never hear of them. Of course, companies do not wait for students to find them; they are constantly researching new ways of reaching the best talent, wherever they may be.

One new service, provided by Career iNet, has caught the attention of many high profile companies. Career iNet provides a "Digital Signage Service" that enables employers to conduct on-campus recruitment—without ever having to step foot on campus. It works like this: For a fee, Career iNet broadcasts customized employer messages to students on high definition plasma televisions that are strategically placed across campus. Through a combination of video and moving text and graphics, employers can grab students' attention and imagination. A promotion video on its website asserts that students "have grown up with cell phones, high speed computers,

and iPods. It is what they respond to ... so put life-changing information in front of them in ways they won't miss" (Video promotion at www.careerinet.com, April 9, 2009).

Moreover, the company boasts that their service can "provide a means for employers to increase their qualified candidate pool, brand their business with students, and increase their visibly and student interest" (Video promotion at www.careerinet.com, April 9, 2009).

Recruitment can potentially take place every day, all day, at multiple colleges and universities—provided, of course, that these institutions have partnered with Career iNet. To encourage the latter, the service, equipment and installation is provided free to colleges and universities.

Employers have also discovered that social networking sites like Facebook and LinkedIn are a powerful venue to reach hundreds of thousands of students who use these sites to stay in touch with family, friends, and colleagues. Companies of all sizes—from local non-profit agencies to multi-billion dollar global enterprises—are using social networking sites to build virtual doorways to their organizations. Of course, there are some caveats to building an online presence. For instance, Sullivan cautioned that corporate pages on social networking sites need to be dynamic and interactive to hold students' attention. A "generic advertisement touting you as a great employer is going to be about as successful as putting up a billboard in the middle of Antarctica" (Sullivan, 2009, para. 8).

Recruiting Generation Y

There is little doubt that technology has provided employers with more options than ever to reach students. But they should also be mindful that the overuse of technology can backfire as students become skeptical and suspicious of companies they perceive to be abandoning quality, traditional outreach. Giordani (2005) warns that this may be particularly relevant with

Generation Y—the children of Baby Boomers, born between 1979 and 1988—who are highly tech-savvy. These students appreciate companies that use technology creatively, but they also value face-to-face contact. This has important implications when designing college recruiting programs. “Reaching, attracting, and wooing these students . . . does require some magic: For employers looking to succeed with these students, balancing high-tech and high-touch is perhaps the fundamental recruiting challenge” (p. 25).

Loyalty Matters: Looking Beyond the Recession

In a poor economy, when companies are being bombarded with applications from seasoned professionals and recruitment budgets are tight, it may be tempting to shutter campus outreach operations, at least temporarily. But employers need to think beyond this recession. As mentioned earlier, Baby Boomers will begin retiring in the next decade, leaving gaps in crucial leadership positions. But employers should keep another point in mind: Many workers who have wanted to change jobs or careers have remained in their positions because the labor market is so tight. But once the economy improves and more jobs become available, many will move on to other opportunities. In addition, many displaced seasoned professionals are underemployed where their skills and abilities are underutilized; indeed, many of them have taken substantial pay cuts. (Underemployment is further discussed in chapter four.) When the economy rebounds in the next year or so, as economists predict, these underemployed workers will likely be networking their way out the door to find higher paying and more challenging jobs. New graduates, on the other hand, are more likely to stay and grow with the company.

If employers are to attract the best talent in the long term, they need to look past this recession and begin to focus on understanding what motivates this new generation of workers.

This involves meticulously researching what messages appeal to them, and what venues and strategies make the most sense.

Focus and Flexibility

With diminishing resources, it is critical for employers to focus their recruitment efforts on the top few disciplines that the company most needs to attract. They can then locate nearby colleges that offer those programs and begin building relationships with select faculty and career center staff, for these individuals will serve as gatekeepers when the economy recovers. In addition, companies need to carefully evaluate whether the cost-per-hire ratio is reasonable and justifiable. If the company is spending a great deal of money recruiting students they do not hire, their recruitment programs should be re-evaluated. Moreover, their plan should not only be focused, it should be flexible (Flato, 2009).

Continuity

While company recruiting budgets may be suffering, managers need to understand the importance of continuity with respect to their college recruitment programs. This includes the need to communicate hiring plans to all affected parties—even when there are no jobs. NACE cautions employers: “You can’t have an effective college relations and recruiting program if you don’t have strong campus relationships to rely on—and you won’t have those relationships if you ‘bail’ when the going gets tough.” (“Maintaining your organization’s image,” 2009, para. 6). Carl Garraffo, director of human resources at Lennar Corporation, a New York-based home building firm, stressed the importance of maintaining strong relationships, arguing that: “A lot of employers have this impression that you can walk on a campus, make your presence felt immediately, and start cherry-picking talent.... You can’t just return after a significant absence and expect to pick up where you left off” (Mulligan, 2008, p.27). In addition to the continuity

with colleges, employers also need to establish and maintain relationships with students and not wait until they are about to graduate. Wheeler acknowledged the importance of this relationship, warning, “If the first time you have seen or spoken to prospective graduates is in the few months prior to their graduations, you are going to have a difficult time making the quality hires you are seeking” (Wheeler, 2007, para. 4).

Forward-thinking companies are looking past the current recession and plotting how they can design creative recruitment initiatives that are both low cost and productive, which can attract the best talent in the long term. For example, in the early part of the 21st century, the most recent significant economic downturn, companies retained relationships by offering services such as site tours, classroom-based information sessions, panel discussions, regular meetings with faculty, meetings with student clubs, among others (“Maintaining your organization’s image,” 2009). These kinds of initiatives are essential, particularly in a sour economy, because they build trust and demonstrate commitment. Moreover, forward-thinking companies allow their program’s objectives and scope to change, so their relationship with community colleges and with students will remain intact, preserving a crucial connection (Wheeler, 2007).

Mentoring

Lastly, companies can create linkages with local colleges to engage students in skills-building activities and to expose them to the world of work. For example, MEDITECH, a leading software vendor in the healthcare information industry, co-developed an *Employer in Residence Program* with Bristol Community College (BCC), located in Fall River, Massachusetts. For the past two years, the company has sent human resource professionals to BCC to offer resume reviews, mock interview sessions, and informal presentations on how to impress recruiters. In addition, the company has hosted job shadow days where students are

matched with professionals from students' areas of interest (e.g., software development, marketing, accounting) so they can observe typical daily routines and responsibilities. Moreover, this adventure provides students with an opportunity to have lunch with company employees who are also BCC alumni.

In addition, MEDITECH organizes special events for faculty. Last year, for example, faculty attended a breakfast event to discuss the kinds of high tech skills that employers are seeking in new graduates as well as to learn about existing and emerging career paths in the industry. According to Patricia Condon, the coordinator of career planning at BCC, these kinds of initiatives offer students an invaluable way to bridge their academic careers with the reality of the professional workplace (P. Condon, personal communication, March 12, 2009). Companies, in turn, benefit by establishing close relationships with students, which pays dividends. MEDITECH, for example, has hired many BCC students in the past few years. Other companies have created tutoring programs where employees are offered incentives to volunteer their time and expertise to tutor students from select programs (e.g., information technology, manufacturing) in math and science. This is particularly useful if the employees are alumni of the institution.

Greg Clarkin, a recruiting specialist for MEDITECH, states that their organization invests in students because they see great potential in them and are grooming them to stay for the long term. The majority of MEDITECH employees start in entry-level, a policy that speaks to the practicality of hiring new graduates. The practice might have something to do with their ability to retain workers: they have not laid off a single employee in forty years (G. Clarkin, personal communication, March 12, 2009).

Although MEDITECH invests and grooms students for the long term, Clarkin noted the poor economy has forced them to screen candidates more carefully than ever before. In fact, MEDITECH will not hire those who appear to be overqualified or those willing to accept significant pay cuts because their recruiters understand that when the economy turns around, these same folks will likely leave for more lucrative opportunities. Clarkin, along with many other astute recruiters, believes that new college graduates are a good match because they are eager to learn and content to wait their turn to climb the corporate ladder.

How Recruiters Really Feel About New Graduates

In 2006, NACE surveyed 250 of their employer members and asked them to rank the benefits of hiring college students. The results were as follows:

BENEFITS OF HIRING COLLEGE STUDENTS	PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS
Gives us the opportunity to mold future leaders of our organization.	90.7%
New college graduates are enthusiastic and motivated	89.1%
New college graduates provide fresh ideas.	79.8%
New college graduates have cutting-edge computer skills.	47.2%
Easier to identify a diverse applicant pool at the college level.	41.5%
Easier to fill positions because students are centrally located.	22.2%
New college graduates will accept lower salaries than college graduates who have several years of experience.	19.4%

(NACE Research: Job Outlook Update, 2006)

The survey results provide invaluable insight into how employers view new graduates. Certainly, employers relish the opportunity to train new leaders, and appreciate the motivation and enthusiasm that new graduates bring to the workplace. Moreover, they value creativity and appreciate students' ability to express their opinions. Importantly, only "20 percent of respondents cited 'lower salaries' as a benefit to hiring new college graduates. Clearly, this shows that the value new graduates bring to organizations goes well beyond payroll budget considerations" (NACE Research: Job Outlook Update, 2006, p.19). Given the high score of employers that enjoy molding new leaders (90.7%), it would be interesting to learn if these employers *prefer* new graduates over more seasoned professionals. For example, why do they enjoy molding future leaders? Is it because new graduates are perceived to be more flexible in adjusting to an organization's culture? Could it be that new students are more open to new ideas than seasoned professionals—that is, not wed to *the way we've always done it*? Also, it would be interesting to know if employers feel a moral inclination or obligation to shape tomorrow's leaders. In any case, the survey results are promising as they show that employers see tangible benefits in hiring new graduates.

CHAPTER FOUR
FOR CAREER CENTERS: A GUIDE FOR SUPPORTING AND MOTIVATING
STUDENTS DURING AN ECONOMIC DECLINE

The economic decline has certainly presented career centers with tremendous challenges. It has also placed enormous pressure on millions of displaced workers, many of whom are flocking to community colleges to enhance their appeal to potential employers (as addressed in chapter two). They are not only facing a myriad of emotional issues related to sudden job loss, but are torn between the need for a paycheck and the recognition that an education can provide them with a vital edge over others vying for fewer and fewer available jobs. Likewise, the Class of 2009 is under extraordinary pressure to find jobs in one of the tightest job markets in a generation.

This chapter delves into these issues and introduces career center professionals to a holistic three-prong approach for addressing them. These “prongs” attend to: (1) the emotional aspects that displaced workers are facing; (2) the need for information about a wide range of job-search-related topics that can benefit *all* students; and (3) providing opportunities for guided skills-building activities. First, however, we will briefly explore how the economic decline has affected college career centers and the staff who provide and administer these services.

Career Centers Acknowledging Immense Challenges

Student traffic is up significantly with some career centers recording foot traffic increases of up to 500% (Hinkley, 2009). In addition, on-campus recruitment has diminished (as addressed in chapter 3) along with the quantity and quality of job opportunities. At the same time, results

from a recent survey of college career centers revealed that budgets are not keeping pace with the increased demand for services. For example, the average career center operating budget grew just 2.7 percent since 2006—a significant shortfall from previous years (“Key benchmarks for career services,” 2009).

Kathy Sims, a presenter at a national teleconference for career center professionals entitled, “Strategies for Delivering Career Services in a Down Economy”, warned that “rising costs, budget reductions, and diminishing revenues are going to leave staff strapped in being creative in delivering effective services (Sims, 2009). Sims, who is the director of the UCLA Career Center, advised some 500 listeners that career center staff must be proactive in documenting increased demand for services so future funding increases can be justified.

Career services professionals are weighing in on the severity of the economic downturn, and the consensus is rather bleak. Sims noted that “what we’re experiencing right now is very different from past cyclical downturns Job losses are permeating broader market segments and affecting employees all demographics” (Sims, 2009). Trudy Steinfeld, executive director of the Wasserman Center for Career Development at New York University stated that “it’s one of the worst economic conditions [she’s] ever seen” while Patricia Rose, director of career services at the University of Pennsylvania observed that she has not seen conditions this grave in her twenty-five years in the field (Mulligan, 2008, p. 27).

The Class of 2009

Career center personnel are certainly not the only ones feeling the pressure. The Class of 2009, for example, will be facing the worst job market in decades. They have worked hard to earn their degrees and are understandably excited to begin their careers. On the other hand, they

are anxious, fearful and frustrated at what they see is a lack of jobs in their respective fields. Certainly, fewer employers are recruiting on campus than in prior years as recruiting budgets have been squeezed (as addressed in chapter three). Some students have been fortunate enough to receive job offers only to have them rescinded due to a rapidly deteriorating job market and souring hiring projections. Meanwhile, a national survey of employers showed that salaries are flat, which is indicative of a lackluster job market (“Salaries flat,” 2009).

The Toll on Displaced Workers

As discussed in chapter two, millions of Americans have lost their jobs from a broad range of fields since this recession began in December 2007. Many of these individuals have flocked to community colleges to learn new skills or upgrade existing skills (i.e., re-tool) and preferably earn a credential such as a certificate. They understand that if they are to effectively compete for fewer available jobs, they must gain an edge. While this may seem logical to some, for others it is a near paralyzing experience. Many displaced workers have not seen the inside of a classroom in decades. They often lack basic skills in writing, reading comprehension, and math skills; some have never used a computer for educational purposes.

LeAnn Cunningham, an employer relations and internship coordinator at Johnson County Community College (JCCC), located in Overland Park, Kansas, stated that laid-off workers often express shock, disbelief, anxiety, fear, confusion, and frustration (L. Cunningham, personal communication, March 10, 2009). To be sure, they have a lot to worry about: mortgage and auto payments; food, healthcare and childcare expenses; and concerns about balancing school, work, and family responsibilities. Many of them have not had to look for a job in years, some for

several decades. Others lament over their age, wondering how they will compete in the marketplace with students twenty or thirty years younger.

Understandably, many displaced workers want to learn new skills and get back to work as quickly as possible. As such, they may be selecting programs based not on interest, but on the number of required courses (i.e., the fewer the better) or the potential for higher wages. This approach can cause unnecessary disappointment and anxiety when they learn they are required to take developmental courses, which can add substantial time to a program. Second, as students progress through a program, they may find that the field is not a good fit for them. Third, they may have neglected to consider job outlook. Surely, they will be disappointed to learn that they completed a program for which there are no jobs—leaving them where they started, out of work. For example, many community colleges offer a program in medical transcription. But with electronic medical records on the near horizon, Medical Transcriptionists will no longer be needed. Instead, IT programmers will be in high demand to convert records to electronic formats. For these reasons, displaced workers should meet with career counselors so they can take career assessments, and explore various career paths. If not, they could find themselves with a set of skills that are no longer in demand or doing work they do not enjoy, or both.

A Holistic Approach to Student Support

Certainly, students' needs are diverse and complicated in these challenging times, particularly for displaced workers or soon-to-be graduates. Career centers can address their needs by creating a holistic support system that surrounds them with opportunities to: (1) address emotional concerns; (2) learn about practical issues related to the professional job search; and (3) practice skills that will provide a deep understanding of how to market themselves to employers.

The chart below offers some suggested initiatives that can benefit all students. “Emotional Support” initiatives would be especially pertinent and helpful for laid-off workers who have recently enrolled in college. The next section provides a profile of select initiatives that are listed here.

INITIATIVES TO MOTIVATE AND SUPPORT STUDENTS		
Emotional Support*	Informational Sessions	Skills-Building Activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Career counseling ▪ “Job Clubs” ▪ Alumni panel discussions ▪ Individual and group mental health counseling to address issues related to sudden job loss (e.g., anxiety, fear, anger) ▪ Striking a balance: work, school and family <p>* Primarily for displaced workers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Social networking sites: the benefits and caveats ▪ Ethics and the job search ▪ Professional job search etiquette ▪ The prospect of underemployment ▪ Dressing and behaving like a professional ▪ Keeping skills sharp while unemployed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Resume, cover letters ▪ Mock interviews ▪ Networking ▪ Filling out applications ▪ Computer skills ▪ Finances, managing budgets, protecting credit while out of work

Emotional Support

Some colleges are responding in novel ways to address the emotional needs of laid-off workers who are returning to school. For example, Blackhawk Technical College in Janesville, Wisconsin, laid-off General Motors plant workers have been filing in to register for classes. Linda Brown, Blackhawk’s community relations specialist, described the scene: “We’re almost part of a triage team They come in and they’re in crisis” (Ziff, 2009, para. 8). Mass layoffs were so frequent in Blackhawk’s district that they decided to team up with the Rock County Job

Center to provide on-site “rapid response” sessions to help displaced workers cope with the news (Ziff). JCCC, mentioned earlier, started a “Job Club” to address students’ needs. LeAnn Cunningham, who organizes the group, believes that students need to talk to one another and find support. She stated that groups, facilitated by career counselors, can be an ideal place to (1) process emotional distress that can result from losing a job; (2) learn about new or brush up on job search strategies; (3) hold panel or roundtable discussions; (4) practice hands-on skills such as creating a resume; and (5) learn about various career paths (L. Cunningham, personal communication, March 10, 2009).

Informational Sessions

Social Networking Sites

More than ever, students are using the Internet to socialize through networking sites like MySpace, Facebook, and LinkedIn. In 2008, 83 % of graduating students reported having a profile on a social networking site (“Legal issues,” 2008, para. 3). Surely, these sites can serve as a great networking tool, particularly LinkedIn, which is geared more towards professionals. Students need to know, however, that employers are using these sites to gain insight into the character and judgment of potential hires. To be sure, times have changed:

‘Being online’ used to mean that you had a computer with an Internet connection. Now, it also can mean that positive or negative information about you is visible to anyone who has access to a computer with an Internet connection. Students—and other job seekers—who set up profiles on social networking sites should be aware of the possible consequences. (“The issues surrounding college recruiting,” 2006, para. 5)

Clearly, there could be legal troubles for an employer who withholds or rescinds an offer based on a candidate’s protected class or status like religion, disability, or sexual orientation.

But what if it is not so cut and dry? What if the student’s Facebook profile contained vulgarities, an unpopular political viewpoint —or perhaps a photo of the candidate smoking marijuana from a bong? (One might recall the Olympic superstar Michael Phelps “debacle” that cost him a lucrative endorsement contract when a photograph of him smoking marijuana from a bong circulated the Internet.)

Career center professionals should be familiar with how these sites operate so they can have informed discussions with students about the benefits and potential pitfalls of keeping an online presence. What may seem harmless to the student may be offensive to a potential employer. Staff can help students look at themselves through the eyes of an employer so they are able to understand and project the kind of image that recruiters respect. In addition, some sites offer sophisticated privacy settings that can limit access; students should be aware of them and how they are used.

Ethics and the Job Search

Kathy Sims, of the UCLA Career Center, warns that pressure can push students to intentionally or unintentionally engage in unethical behavior in their job search (Sims, 2009). She asserted that it is essential that staff explain what is expected of them regardless of how desperate they may feel. Similar to job search etiquette, students rarely—if ever—learn about job search ethics, its importance, or how it relates to their life circumstances. Staff should understand that teaching students about job search ethics, particularly those under pressure, can be tricky because, by definition, ethics teaches that some values transcend personal best interests, and that maintaining good ethical behavior may involve some loss.

For example, accepting a job offer while continuing to pursue other employment options might be in the student's best interest; however, doing so would be a violation of ethics because that practice causes harm to others by possibly depriving another qualified candidate the chance to interview. Moreover, the employer would have to expend more resources to restart the search process. Staff can design effective classroom activities on these issues by breaking students into small groups and presenting them with various ethical dilemmas. Students can apply critical thinking to imagine how each party would be affected given the assigned behaviors and then project long term consequences. For instance, students could examine the possible outcomes of overstating one's accomplishments, inflating their G.P.A., or falsifying job titles on a resume. Long term consequences could include revoked offers, even termination (Fein, 2001).

Professional Job Search Etiquette

New graduates are under intense pressure to find work. They have worked hard to earn their degrees and are now understandably anxious to begin their careers. It is quite likely, however, that these students have never learned about professional job search etiquette. Career services staff, therefore, have a captive audience to teach these skills now, before they suffer potential "adverse reactions from those who may be able to influence [their] professional future" (Fein, 2001, para. 4) Staff can teach students what proper job search etiquette means, why it is important, and how to apply it. For example, students should understand that "job search etiquette enables people who are essentially strangers to explore the possibility of entering into a mutually-beneficial business relationship.... A violation of etiquette could strain feelings and raise questions about behavior that interfere with examining the overall fit between the job applicant and the job" (Fein, para. 1). Students should learn about protocols for the use of

professional references, arranging and conducting informational interviews, applying for jobs (e.g., proper correspondence), interviewing conduct, and follow-up, among others (Fein).

The Prospect of Underemployment

Students are understandably anxious, weary and frustrated about the lack of opportunities. They fear they may not find jobs at all, especially not the ones they had hoped to find. The reality is—they may not—at least not right away. Lisa Hinkley, Director of the Lake Forest College Career Advancement Center and presenter at a recent conference for career services professionals on this topic, urged career center staff to acknowledge the reality by having frank, meaningful discussions with students about what this means for them. She urged staff to help students focus on the positive. For example, the student's job may not be ideal, but it is exposing him or her to the professional world of work. They will learn skills that can be transferred to future jobs. The role of the career services staff is to (1) help students acknowledge the possibility of underemployment; (2) help students rethink and reframe expectations; (3) brainstorm skills they may acquire; and (4) develop a plan to document professional development even in a less than optimal work environment. For example, students might keep a journal to reflect on their achievements and mistakes, and record how they learned from each.

Keeping Skills Sharp While Unemployed

Connelly (2009) laid out some strategies for laid-off workers to stay on top of their fields, enhance their resumes, and impress potential employers. First, she advised them to return to school to learn new skills or upgrade existing skills, preferably with a goal of earning a credential. Quoting a search firm executive, she singled out those whose skills might be growing stale:

Technology and business models have changed so rapidly that anyone who got their education 10 or more years ago is no longer in the current market... That MBA from Stanford that you got in 1978 or 1980? That and a dollar will get you a cup of coffee. (para. 8)

Based on community college enrollment trends—discussed in chapter two—workers are heeding this advice. Laid-off workers with bachelors degrees, even masters degrees, are returning to community colleges to earn certificates in medical coding, Microsoft Office Certified Application Specialist, Thanatology, and Phlebotomy, among others. For these individuals, the goal is often to acquire a technical skill that will complement their degree. For instance, a recent enrollee at Bristol Community College (BCC) holds a bachelor degree in social work; however, she wanted to complement her background by earning a certificate in Thanatology, the study of how “loss affects physical, psychological, and social well-being” (BCC Academic Catalog, 2008-2009, p.149). Her goal was to broaden her market appeal by becoming a skilled grief counselor.

Second, Connelly (2009) advises laid-off workers to get involved with professional organizations, which can offer access to a plethora of workshops and seminars. Members can keep their skills sharp by lending their expertise to maintain websites, coordinate events, organize finances, or perform other essential tasks. Connelly stressed that it is not only important to join organizations, but to be active. By doing so, members have an invaluable opportunity to stay current in their fields and networks, enhance their resumes, and demonstrate they are motivated and dedicated to their respective professions.

Lastly, Connelly (2009) suggests that volunteering for a non-profit organization can go a long way in impressing a potential employer. Just as becoming active in a professional organization shows commitment to one’s field, volunteering demonstrates commitment to one’s

community. He recommends connecting with non-profits that can use the individual's area of expertise (Connelly, 2009). For example, a web developer should locate an organization that needs the cobwebs dusted off its website rather than one that will have her organizing groceries in a food shelter. The idea is to keep one's skills sharp while offering a valuable service. Laid-off workers seem to understand this concept: The Taproot Foundation, which connects volunteers with non-profits to offer pro bono services in strategic planning, annual report preparation, and marketing, has reported a soaring number of laid-off professionals seeking volunteer opportunities. In fact, Connelly stated that they have more volunteers than opportunities (Connelly, 2009).

How Some Colleges are Addressing Challenges

The following section offers samples of how some colleges are creatively helping job-seeking students cope with the economic downturn. The NACE encourages its member institutions to share strategies at www.nacweb.org.

- **Baruch College**, located in New York City, developed a “news and events” section on its website where career center staff members can post articles relating to the state of the job market, announce events such as workshops and career fairs, and post weekly job search tips. In addition, the career center coordinates panel discussions for students from various programs. For example, it recently offered a panel discussion for its business majors (80% of their graduates major in business) that included a finance professor, an alumnus who is a managing director on Wall Street, and a psychologist who addressed the impact of stress on the job search.

- **Carroll College**, located in Helena, Montana, developed a one-credit special topics course on designing a successful job search plan.

- **The University of Arkansas'** career development center launched a series of podcasts featuring human resource managers offering tips on resume writing and proper interview etiquette, and how to cope with and navigate a highly competitive job market.

- **Bridgewater State College**, located in Bridgewater, Massachusetts, recognized that managing finances has taken on a new urgency for unemployed students. To address the issue, they recruited a debt counselor from a non-profit consumer credit office to speak with students about budgeting and controlling debt while unemployed.

- **Inter-college partnerships** are developing where nearby institutions are pooling resources to organize regional career fairs that can reach hundreds of job-seeking students and alumni. This makes sense in many ways. First, career centers can provide students with a more lavish opportunity than they could otherwise provide within their own budget constraints. Second, employers can access a larger pool of talent from diverse majors and backgrounds—all in one venue, which saves resources. And students can meet with many more employers while networking with alumni from multiple institutions. In Southeastern Massachusetts last April, for example, the **University of Massachusetts Dartmouth**, **Bristol Community College** and **Bridgewater State College** teamed up to coordinate a Green Career Expo, which featured employers offering jobs in the new “green” sector.

The Big Picture

In her concluding remarks at a conference for career services professionals (discussed in Chapter 4) Kathy Sims, the director of the UCLA Career Center, offered the following advice to her colleagues across the country:

- Career center should be reflecting on how they talk to students so that they are communicating openly and honestly about the current state of affairs. To do so effectively, staff needs to be equipped with the resources and data so they can confidently guide students about career decisions and job search strategies.

- It is critical that staff keep the channels of communication open with employers so they can provide students and alumni with the most accurate information about various industries. Furthermore, the data should be gleaned from reliable, current sources.

- Staff needs to be proactive in reaching out to constituents—students, faculty, alumni, parents, employers, and administrators. We need to offer our ideas and gather a collection of viewpoints.

- Lastly, in tough economic times, certain sectors remain more resilient than others. Staff should educate themselves about market trends and growing markets and share this information. Students might be able to transfer skills into emerging or growing markets like alternative energy and healthcare (Sims, 2009).

Sims' thoughts provide timely and helpful advice for career service professionals. She emphasizes the need for proactive outreach to all stakeholders that consists of clear, honest, and open communication. Moreover, she underscores the need for staff to stay abreast of the latest trends by having access to up-to-date data and resources. In addition to Sims' views, it is important for colleagues from across the country to network, exchange ideas and strategies, and become active in professional development opportunities. This can be accomplished through organizations like the NACE (www.nacweb.org).

Finally, career center professionals have an unprecedented opportunity to provide students with the support they need to reach their full potential. The task at hand involves more than helping students find a job; it means instilling in them a resiliency that will stay with them for years to come.

CHAPTER FIVE

SYNTHESIZING FOR SUCCESS: HOW ADVISORY BOARDS CAN DRAW STAKEHOLDERS TOGETHER

In the preceding chapters, I discussed: (a) the role of the community colleges in our society; (2) how they are impacted by a recession; (3) considerations and strategies for employers during an economic decline with respect to college outreach; and (4) how career centers can support, educate, and motivate students at various stages of career development. In this chapter, I weave these topics together by taking a closer look at the primary stakeholders' interests and priorities and explore how advisory boards can serve as a powerful mechanism to draw them together so they can work together for a common purpose.

Certainly, the primary stakeholders I have referred to throughout this paper—employers, career center staff, faculty, and students—each have their own interests, values, and goals. For example, faculty want to educate students skillfully and effectively; employers want to hire skilled workers so they can grow and prosper; career center staff want to assist students define their career goals and to help them market themselves effectively to employers; and students want to obtain an education that will help them succeed in their chosen fields. But they also share a common purpose and vision: to make their lives and the communities they inhabit a better place to live.

These stakeholders are not cogs in an impersonal machine with mutually exclusive agendas. Rather, they are interdependent on each other's success. Many community colleges recognize this and have created systems within an environment that encourages creative problem-solving. One of the most commonly-used and effective tools for doing so involves the use of advisory boards.

The Role of Advisory Boards in a Community College

Community colleges are held accountable to their communities to educate and train the workforce. Indeed, if businesses are not pleased with the quality of graduates, they will not hire them. Therefore, faculty and staff have an obligation to solicit feedback that will help their institutions design programs that will prepare students most effectively. On the other hand, business leaders have a vested interest in the quality of community college programs because these graduates will play a crucial role in the growth and prosperity of their organizations. Accordingly, business leaders have a responsibility to communicate their needs to the institution. One of the most useful ways to accomplish these goals is through the use of advisory boards, which can help stakeholders identify common interests, values, and goals. Participants can engage in creative problem-solving to address issues that are critical to their individual and collective success. Figure 1 illustrates how advisory boards serve to identify common interests, values and goals that transcend members' individual agendas.

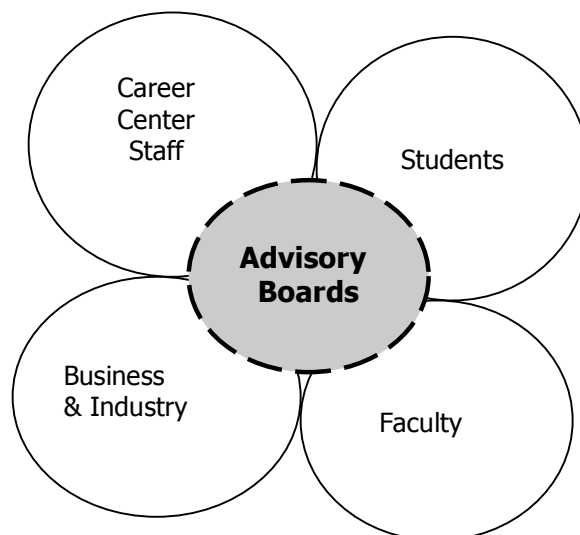


Figure 1: Community college advisory boards draw out common interests, values, and goals to help stakeholders—businesses, faculty, staff, and students—tackle issues that transcend individual agendas.

How Advisory Boards Work

Community college advisory boards are typically populated with:

- Volunteers from organizations that have a vested interest a program's success;
- Faculty;
- Professional staff (e.g., career center staff);
- Program alumni; and
- Current students.

Advisory board members:

- Solicit and process feedback from those who have a vested interest in the program's success;
- Evaluate learning outcomes;
- Explore how to implement new or changing institutional or government regulations;
- Identify internship sites;
- Identify professional development needs and opportunities for faculty and staff;
- Brainstorm ways to market the program;
- Address consumer concerns;
- Gauge future trends in the field;
- Identify up-to-date learning materials;
- Brainstorm solutions to complex problems; and
- Implement programs and evaluating outcomes, among others. (P. Condon, personal communication, May 9, 2009).

Advisory Board Functions: A Closer Look

All programs at BCC are mandated to form an advisory board and to hold at least one meeting per year. The Program Coordinator is charged with recruiting volunteers from the community who have a direct interest in the program's success. He or she also serves as the board's chairperson. Members may include representatives from organizations that might hire or have hired BCC students, program faculty, staff (e.g., career center staff), program alumni, and one or two high-achieving students from the program.

Their functions and tasks—as listed above—vary significantly. To help the reader develop a clearer understanding of how these functions and tasks might unfold in a community college, I have provided a brief scenario for each function. (The examples are designed to illustrate the duty and are not necessarily factual.)

1. Solicit feedback. One of the most common duties of an advisory board involves soliciting feedback from the business community to ensure students are being taught appropriate and marketable skills that are crucial to their businesses and to the broader industry. This is particularly essential for technology programs that experience rapid changes such as information technology and health science occupations (P. Condon, personal communication, April 28, 2009).

Example: The advisory board Chairperson (also the program coordinator) for the Occupational Therapy Assistant (OTA) program shares the outcome of this year's Board exams. The statistics indicate that students need more training in hand therapy. The advisory board brainstorms various ways to address this issue. Do they assign a book?

Do they develop a special curriculum unit? A member who is a hospital administrator offers contact information for an Occupational Therapist (OT) educator who recently implemented a new technique at a community college in Georgia.

2. Implement Board requirements. Members may be charged with brainstorming ways to implement a new state regulation.

Example: In 2010, the Massachusetts Board of Registration in Nursing will require that all new nursing students at BCC get at least 30 hours of cross-cultural competence training. Members—possibly including an internship coordinator at a local hospital, a recent graduate, and a human resource professional at a local nursing home—brainstorm ways to incorporate the new requirement into the curriculum. They plan to evaluate the program each semester and report findings to the Dean.

3. Internships. Advisory boards can provide cooperative education programs with feedback on what kinds of internships would provide students with an appropriate and challenging internship opportunity. Members can provide leads of companies that may be interested in hosting interns.

Example: The Coordinator of Job Placement at BCC, a member of Cooperative Education Advisory Board, shares that he spoke with the owner of a local start-up biomedical company. The owner stated that he was expanding and wanted to hire interns for the summer, and there is a possibility that these internships could turn into permanent jobs if they receive a state grant.

4. Address consumer concerns. Advisory boards take consumers' (e.g. students, parents) complaints, comments and suggestions very seriously. As mentioned earlier, students frequently sit on advisory boards and can provide a voice for other students in the program and family members.

Example: A student in the Clinical Lab Sciences (CLS) program (who sits on the CLS advisory board) states she was highly disappointed with this year's Health Sciences Job Fair that is coordinated by the Career Center. She shares that she left her clinical internship early to attend the fair to meet with representatives from several hospitals that indicated they had jobs for CLS students. When she arrived, however, all of them turned her away, stating that they did not have opportunities at this time. A Career Center staff member, who sits on the board, shared that organizations indicate what positions they will be hiring for when they register, which occurs up to two months prior to the fair. The Career Center staff member promises that he will look into the matter and report back. He follows with representatives and discovers that hiring plans had changed dramatically between the day they registered and the fair. He relays the information to the CLS Chairperson. They decide that it may be a good idea to contact organizations one week prior to the fair to verify that their hiring plans were still accurate and notify faculty and staff if there are any changes.

Advisory boards offer an ideal environment for evaluative and reflective practice. For example, members could reflect on the following questions, design interventions, and develop methods to evaluate outcomes:

- Employers: These are the kinds of skills we require. How can we improve these outcomes?
- Are our students getting jobs? If not, why not?
- Are they graduating with the skills they need to succeed?
- Are businesses content with the quality of our program?
- Let's talk about how we can work with the Career Center to encourage on-campus recruitment for our students?
- What are the program's strengths? Its weaknesses?
- Why is enrollment decreasing? Is this a trend?
- How do students feel about their placements? Are they challenging enough?

Final Thoughts and Next Steps

As Coordinator of Job Placement at Bristol Community College, I facilitate relationships between students and employers and help students prepare for the marketplace by offering information sessions, counseling, and skills-building activities. I also build relationships with employers by informing them about our programs and services; providing opportunities for them to meet with our students (e.g., through job fairs); posting job opportunities; and referring them to our faculty and internship coordinators. I am also a conduit who passes information between and amongst stakeholders so they are cognizant of others' needs and expectations.

In the past eighteen months, I have come to think that my title—Coordinator of Job Placement—trivializes my role at the college and in the community. It misrepresents and underestimates the scope of my work because I do not “place” students in jobs. The term *place*, I fear, propagates false expectations, particularly with faculty, students, and parents. (Colleagues in other parts of the country have also expressed this concern.)

I raise this issue because I feel it speaks to the need to rid ourselves of rigid, inflexible roles and attitudes. In these difficult times, job titles and personal egos have no place when so many people are out of work. More than ever, we need thoughtful collaboration, creative thought, and flexibility.

Over the next year, I intend to become more involved with advisory boards at BCC. I believe they could provide an ideal environment to apply some of the tools and skills I have learned in the Critical and Creative Thinking Program. For instance, making changes within a community college requires skill in reflective practice, constituency-building, designing interventions, implementing actions, evaluating outcomes, and revising approaches. Advisory boards could provide a laboratory to practice these skills.

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