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ABSTRACT

Career Tracks is an alternative for college and university career centers experiencing an increased demand for services in a time of reduced financial and human resources; committed to providing a quality practical training experience for those joining the career services profession; and seeking to establish a meaningful and highly visible collaboration with academic programs providing counselor education and training. This paper highlights the development and implementation of the Career Tracks program, including rewards of the program and important lessons learned. The authors conclude that the Career Tracks paraprofessional program has proven its worth as a means of top quality and immediate service to a growing student population, and serves as a tangible commitment to the future of the career services profession. (Contains 11 references.) (GCP)

# Career Tracks: A Collaborative Approach between a University Career Center and a College of Education in Building a Career Counseling Paraprofessional Program

by

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# **Career Tracks: A Collaborative Approach Between a University Career Center and a College of Education in Building a Career Counseling Paraprofessional Program**

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## **Introduction**

Career Tracks is an alternative for college and university career centers that are (1) experiencing an increased demand for services in a time of reduced financial and human resources, (2) committed to providing a quality practical training experience for those joining the career services profession, and (3) seeking to establish a meaningful and highly visible collaboration with academic programs providing counselor education and training.

The two “people” who benefit most from this program are the graduate career counselors and the students/alumni/faculty/staff utilizing the Career Center. A third “entity” that benefits directly from this program is the career services profession that is in need of experienced, well-trained, knowledgeable, and versatile career service professionals.<sup>1</sup>

In a centralized university career center serving over 27,000 students with three career counselors, the need for additional staff to conduct intakes and provide immediate assistance to students was paramount. Students were waiting to see counselors for three to five weeks, consequently many appointments ultimately failed to show up. The Career Center was perceived as difficult to access. With limited financial resources and university hiring constraints, the Career Center could not expect or afford to add to permanent professional staff in the foreseeable future. How could we maximize the use of our current staff, serve students in a timely manner, and improve our image on campus?

The solution seemed to lie in establishing a functional collaboration with the College of Education’s Counselor Education program that offers a Career Counseling specialization. The challenge was to develop something that would result in a win-win solution, not add to our budget woes, and not require more space.

## **The Career Tracks Model**

The first step toward creation of the Career Tracks model was to develop a proposal to present to the faculty in the career specialization. Two things greatly influenced this process. First, the director attended the ACES<sup>2</sup> conference in San Antonio and brought back ideas, resources and strategies for developing effective programming, teambuilding, supervision and professional standards. This information added to her previous experience coordinating an undergraduate paraprofessional program<sup>3</sup> and our prior experience with graduate interns at California State University, Sacramento, gave us a basis from which to work.

Second, the career counseling staff and the director formed a work group and agreed to meet weekly to research, outline, and develop a well thought out program that we could present to the College of Education. We wanted to be very clear about our goals, our priorities, and our commitment to follow through and deliver a quality program for the graduate students and an excellent level of service to our clientele.

We began developing the Career Tracks paraprofessional program on paper in January 2000, presented our proposal to the Career Counseling faculty in the College of Education in April 2001, recruited our first graduate Career Counseling Assistants (CCA's) in May 2001, and implemented the Career Tracks program in September 2001. We continue to have weekly workgroup meetings to resolve day-to-day issues, to refine job descriptions and the evaluation process, and to revise or develop policies and procedures as the program continues to evolve.

Our initial presentation to the career counseling faculty was very structured. We had two main goals: (1) to provide immediate quality assistance to every individual coming into the Career Center; and, (2) to provide a premiere experiential learning experience for graduate career counseling students.

We wanted to train graduate career counseling students to do triage. That is, to be able in 15-20 minutes to establish sufficient rapport with anyone walking in to the Career Center to (1) identify their most immediate need, and (2) to provide the service or connect the individual with the resources necessary to satisfy that need. Thus, the Walk-in Track became the backbone of our Career Tracks paraprofessional training program.

The Walk-in Track is the starting point for any graduate career counseling student working in the Career Center. We call these students Career Counseling Assistants (CCA's). They must be pursuing the career counseling specialization and they need to have completed Counseling Theory, Practicum in Communication, Career Development, and Appraisal in Counseling as basic preparatory coursework. We encourage students to apply for CCA positions early in their academic program in order to have a variety of experiences and to develop their practical skills as potential career services professionals. CCA's receive two days of comprehensive training before the semester starts to prepare them to work. This initial training is followed with weekly group training sessions lasting ninety minutes plus an hour of individual supervision with one of the professional career counselors.

Topics covered in Walk-in Track training include: CCA Policies and Procedures, NCDA Career Counselor Competencies,<sup>4</sup> Career Center Programs and Services, Career Information Library Resources, Computerized Career Guidance Systems and Databases, Critiquing Resumes and Job Search Correspondence, Career Development Process, Career Counseling Theories, Assessments, Counselor Communication Skills, Keys to Building Helping Relationships, and Front Desk and Reception Procedures. CCA's have multiple opportunities to staff cases with their supervising career counselor and to ask questions of the director and appropriate staff members anytime during their Walk-in hours, weekly training and supervision.

CCA's are evaluated in the middle of the semester and at the end of the semester both for credit in their graduate program and for their performance as an adjunct member of our staff. Once a CCA has satisfactorily completed a semester of the Walk-in Track, they can apply to train and work in other Career Tracks. These tracks reflect all the different program areas and functions typically found in a full-service career center. Our Career Tracks include: Events, Marketing, Workshops, Experiential Learning, Student Employment, On-Campus Recruitment, Career Information Library, and Individual Appointments. Successful CCA's are also invited

to conduct some of the weekly walk-in training sessions. In this way CCA's already working in the center, meet and help to mentor newcomers to both the center and the career counseling specialization.

As mentioned previously, we initially presented a very structured and idealistic proposal to the career counseling faculty. They were impressed by the amount of time and careful thought that had gone into the planning of the proposed program. The concept of a full-fledged, sequential, practical training experience designed to complement and enhance the academic program went way beyond the idea of simply placing graduate students in the Career Center.

The faculty agreed that their students would benefit from an experience in the Career Center and that it would be a viable site. They had questions about the quality and quantity of interactions the CCA's would have with clients. Would they really get enough one-on-one time with clients to merit intern credits? Would their students really want to do this kind of work without pay? Why did we require that CCA candidates provide resumes, cover letters, references, and do formal interviews? Why was it important to us that a CCA do a full semester of Walk-in Track before teaching workshops or doing individual, hour-long appointments? What relevance did working on Career Center events have for a graduate student in career counseling?

Our response was that in the real world career counselors have private practices, portfolio careers, work in agencies, corporations, educational institutions, one-stop centers and many other diverse arenas. To be marketable, in addition to counseling, a professional in the field of career services must understand marketing, employer relations, economic trends, and technology, and be able to teach, present, recruit, and innovate. We were presenting graduate students in the Counselor Education Career specialization with a convenient and unique opportunity to gain six months to two years experience practicing the very skills being sought by employers.

For the Fall 2001 semester we recruited and trained six career counseling graduate students as CCA's in the Walk-in Track. Over the summer we had developed a training agenda and manual for that track. All the CCA's went through the two days of pre-semester training. Schedules were set to provide Walk-in services from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday and from 5:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m., Tuesday and Wednesday evenings. The first day of the semester, the CCA covering Walk-ins from 8:00 a.m. to noon, saw 35 students. His comment, "Wow, they really do come in with all the kinds of questions and needs you guys talked about in training! The training is really helpful!"

It appeared we were literally "on the right track" to get exactly the results desired in our model Career Tracks paraprofessional program; i.e., immediate, meaningful assistance for visitors to the Career Center, and a training experience that would take graduate career counselors from theory to practice to professional readiness. Our CCA's ranged in experience from second semester neophyte to final semester graduates needing only to complete intern hours.

In that first semester 5,079 students/visitors were seen through the Walk-in services. CCA's saw 80% of those Walk-ins. The cancellation and no-show rate for individual career counseling appointments was reduced from 40% to 8%. One CCA graduated and accepted an internship coordinator position at a private university career center; one was promoted to trainer in his human resources job and stepped out of the graduate program for a semester; one requested to continue another semester in the Walk-in Track; one interviewed and was accepted into the Individual Appointment Track; one chose to take a student assistant position in the On-Campus Recruitment program area; and, one did not complete the Career Tracks program.

It was a good beginning that brought many rewards and some challenging lessons. The rewards include and are the result of:

- (1) an internal organizational audit of the Career Center's programs, resources, and needs;
- (2) a vision of how a graduate level paraprofessional program could impact those programs, resources, and needs, both positively and negatively;
- (3) a major commitment of professional and administrative staff time and talent to developing, implementing, and maintaining such a program;
- (4) clearly stated goals, objectives, policies, and procedures for the paraprofessional program;
- (5) detailed requirements, job descriptions, recruitment forms, training materials, participant and program evaluation procedures, standards for supervision, and CCA supervision agreements;
- (6) consolidated effort by the director and career counselors to generate the support of the other Career Center professional and support staff and the endorsement of the College of Education career counseling faculty;
- (7) a manageable start-up plan of action; and,
- (8) a highly motivated group of graduate career counseling students willing to exchange their time and talents for experience.

The lessons learned in that first semester were critical for us. A plan on paper, regardless of its thoroughness, is still open to scrutiny. We learned that it is important to:

- (1) adhere to the major tenets of the start-up plan;
- (2) train, observe, assess, monitor, review, confront, evaluate, and acknowledge that it is not always possible to do everything the first time out;
- (3) bring concerns and issues, even if they seem minor, to the team for their information, support and insight as failure to do so may result in a breakdown of program structure; and,
- (4) have a clearly established protocol for communicating successes, concerns, and programmatic changes with the collaborating academic department.

As the Career Center's Career Tracks paraprofessional program continues, the proof of the rewards garnered and lessons learned lies in the continued delivery of quality service, our readiness to respond to needed program adaptations, and support from the academic faculty in encouraging graduate career counseling students to participate with us. Persistent effort to establish and maintain effective communication between all parties involved in the collaboration is essential. All of us believe this collaboration is beneficial to everyone involved. It serves our shared responsibility for preparing graduate students to join and contribute effectively to the career services profession.

Career Tracks is a program that can be integrated into most career centers serving post-secondary institutions. At CSUS, we had the advantage of having a graduate program in career

counseling on our campus. However, similar collaborations could certainly be established between separate institutions; e.g., placing graduate career counselors in community colleges or neighboring four-year colleges. It is the quality of planning and respectful integration of visions, needs and resources that makes such a program work. Career centers considering such a program should begin with an internal organizational audit and a review of existing models and resources for developing and utilizing paraprofessional staff. A short list of Recommended Resources is provided.

Designing and implementing the Career Tracks paraprofessional program for the Career Center at CSUS has been a time- and labor-intensive process. Three forces continue to drive our collective commitment to the Career Tracks model: (1) reduced financial and human resources in the face of increased demand for services; (2) commitment to providing a quality practical training experience for those joining the career services profession, and (3) desire to establish a meaningful and highly visible collaboration with academic programs providing counselor education and training. Career Tracks reflects a conscious choice on the part of all Career Center staff and program areas to change how we use key personnel and resources.

An internal organizational audit focused our need to provide immediate quality assistance to students and other visitors to the Career Center. The audit also made it clear that a university career center is a complex operation offering multiple opportunities for graduate career counselor skill development. The planning team broke the operational components of the Career Center into eight training tracks and the Career Tracks paraprofessional program model was conceived. Since the first priority was immediate service, we made an obligatory semester in the Walk-in Track the fundamental training track for all Career Counseling Assistants (CCA's) working in the Career Center.

It was planned that once a CCA had successfully completed a semester of walk-ins, s/he could apply for other tracks of interest depending on completed coursework, department approval, and Career Center needs. The goal was to develop a superior practical training program that graduate students would voluntarily participate in to gain needed experience. The faculty in the career counseling specialization agreed to consider granting students internship units for their hours in the Career Center.

After three semesters the Career Center has reaped excellent rewards from the Walk-in Track including improved service to students, greatly reduced no-show and cancellation rates for individual appointments, and improved relations with other student affairs and academic programs. With CCA's assisting students with resumes, job search strategies, occupational research, and exploration of majors, the career counselors are seeing the students who are struggling with more complex career development issues. The time the career counselors devote to training and supervision of the CCA's keeps us challenged and engaged in our professional development as well as that of the CCA's.

In the course of three semesters, we have also learned to adapt the original Career Tracks concept to the reality of maintaining a viable program with integrity and consistency of purpose. Based on feedback from the career counseling faculty, we made several significant changes that proved beneficial to all concerned. We reduced the number of counseling courses required for CCA's applying for the Walk-in Track which brought interested graduate students into the Career Tracks program earlier and for potentially longer periods. The Walk-in Track position description was rewritten to clearly focus on career counseling skills. The rewrite made it easier for the

academic department to approve internship hours for CCA's. We also introduced the Individual Appointment Track with a comprehensive training schedule in order to encourage qualified CCA's to continue working with us. This track is especially important in the summer when our counseling staff is reduced to one full-time career counselor.

### Conclusion

The Career Tracks paraprofessional program has proven its worth as a means of providing top quality and immediate service to a growing student population. Money and space for CCA's are perpetual topics for discussion. Careful scheduling generally makes the space problem manageable and is really only a concern during peak on-campus recruitment periods. The CCA's do such excellent work and add so significantly to our center that we are looking into ways and means of providing stipends in the future. Some form of remuneration would make recruiting qualified CCA's somewhat easier; however, we do not want the continued success of Career Tracks to be dependent on the availability of funding. It remains important that Career Tracks stand on its own merits as a highly regarded practical training opportunity for future career professionals.

Creating, implementing, maintaining and sustaining a model graduate career counseling paraprofessional program for a career center serving a large public university is challenging, demanding, and rewarding work. It is the way we have chosen to address the basic problems of too few permanent staff, too little money, and an increasing demand for services. The creation of the Career Tracks program can also be viewed as a tangible commitment to the future of the career services profession. As career professionals in a university with a graduate program in career counseling, it is our responsibility to be active in the training and preparation of students seeking to join the profession. Working with the CCA's and our collaboration with the graduate program encourages us to set high standards for ourselves individually and programmatically. The Career Tracks paraprofessional program reminds us each day to model the competencies put forth by the National Career Development Association.

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Greenberg, R. In search of career services professionals. NACEWeb Publications, 2002

<sup>2</sup> ACES Conference, San Antonio, TX, 2000

<sup>3</sup> Missouri model, Career Planning and Placement Office, University of Missouri, Columbia

<sup>4</sup> Introduction to Career Counseling Competency Standards, NCDA, January 2001

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