

THE WORK EXPERIENCE PROGRAM – A COLLABORATIVE EFFORT BETWEEN FINANCIAL AIDS AND THE CAREER PLANNING & PLACEMENT CENTER

by *John R. Bazin and George Brooks*

Introduction

One of the most innovative acts in financial aids legislation in recent years has been the Higher Education Act of 1965 with pursuant Amendments in 1976 and 1980. The Amendments identify the "job locator role" and provide necessary funding for colleges to support the creation of such a position. This legislation encourages financial aid offices to develop financial aid support from the local community. It provides the opportunity to help students without regard for financial need, forms, or an application process. Designed to facilitate the employment process between students and local employers, this legislation returns some of the burden of the cost of education back to the local community.

For the past three years, the University of Missouri-Columbia's Financial Aid Office has participated in this program in collaboration with its Career Planning and Placement Center (CPPC). Together they operate a unique student service, "The Work Experience Program" which provides both money and experience to students, and a quality labor pool to the community. The Work Experience Program (W.E.P.), consistent with the federal legislation, was designed to help students finance their college education, recognize work experience as a valid career exploration tool, and increase their marketability upon graduation.

The Work Experience Program is housed in the CPPC where it now maintains contacts with over 400 local employers. The wide variety of employment opportunities has ranged from casual labor jobs to pre-professional, career related employment. In the past three years, it has posted over 3,500 part-time jobs; approximately 50-60% of all jobs listed were actually filled with UMC students.

The legislative guidelines specifically call for "satisfactory assurance that federal funds used to run a Job Locator program . . . can realistically be expected to help generate student wages exceeding . . . those funds." To demonstrate this, every six months UMC conducts a follow-up to identify wages paid directly to students. During the first year three times the amount to administer the program was identified as paid to students. The amount has grown at a steady rate: evaluators now identify wages at eleven times the expenditures on the program (see figure 1). The tremendous increase in "dollars paid to stu-

The Financial Aid Office at the University of Missouri — Columbia (UMC) is currently directed by George Brooks. The Job Locator function was instituted in 1978 with direction and support of both George Brooks and Alan Purdy, a renowned leader in the area of federal student aid legislation and development. John R. Bazin is the Coordinator of the Work Experience Program at UMC.

ents" from 1978 to 1980 is in part due to the sophistication of follow-up methodology, to better employer response, and most significantly, to the growing involvement of local employers who use the service.

Benefits of the Program

Students

The obvious benefit to students is in the direct information about current jobs and in the information describing where job opportunities have been in the past. This is valuable information for those looking for a specific type of employment to complement an academic interest. The exercise of seeking part-time employment is related to venturing into the labor market upon graduation. The CPPC has certainly taken advantage of every opportunity to assist students with this task, and this program provides the CPPC with another vehicle to accomplish its goals.

In addition, these efforts are supported by employers of graduates, who view the student with "a demonstration of interest in a given area" as a well-informed candidate who has a high probability of success. Work experience is a valuable lesson.

Employers

The benefits to employers are also obvious. In a community which is heavily dependent upon and geared toward the student body of the University and two small private colleges, employers seek to hire workers who are compatible with their clientele. As you would expect, the CPPC enjoys long standing ties with many businesses who hire students. Efforts through the Work Experience Program are making a significant impact in other, more traditionally "non-student employment markets." Although the legislation prohibits the displacement of currently employed people for students, there are many new markets available in this particular community. One of the clearest examples is that of a national manufacturer who moved to Columbia and designed a production facility specifically to tap the student labor pool. Others include the design of "internship" slots with city/county government and local corporations to accomplish specific tasks relying on the skills and knowledge of the student. There is a wide variety of needs and therefore opportunities for student workers.

University

Lastly, there are clear advantages to the institution, a large "Big 8 School" in a small community. Community relations with the entire University have been greatly enhanced by this stable and consistent service offered to local employers. Local employers perceive that the University is actually trying to help them, while aiding students. As an ad for the W. E. P. explains: "in every good business deal both parties benefit!"

Staff members have many opportunities to become involved with the local community, thereby increasing the productivity of the job development efforts and enhancing the linkages important for success.

Program Development

The Work Experience Program began with a staff of one person. Program

priorities for the first year included a public relations campaign designed to attract listings from employers and to inform students of the available service. The decision to house the program in the CPPC guaranteed a traffic flow and a developmental flow which was consistent with the career development interests of students.

Designing an office and record-keeping system was also part of the day-to-day activity in the first few months. Procedures for answering the telephone, listing the jobs, and recording the information for future follow-up were designed, tested, and implemented. Many of these procedures have since been altered as activity has grown and priorities have changed.

As more employers began to rely on the W. E. P. for employees, we realized the need to be able to retrieve the names of students who were interested in doing a specific job. In response, we developed a "people bank". Students identify jobs or categories in which they are interested, and the staff is able to give the employer the names of interested students. Each year a Summer Job Fair/Camp Day is sponsored to promote the creative use of summer employment. Last year, over 80 organizations were in attendance, and over 2,000 students explored summer employment opportunities.

Philosophically a commitment to "open listings" is maintained. This approach is based on the idea that the employment process is a learning experience which can assist students with personal development. Student initiative is fostered through the active pursuit of employment opportunities. This exercise brings an understanding and perspective which will be fully realized when the full time job search begins.

As the program grew, so did the services which were offered. Successful attempts were made to organize employment opportunities by job title. This procedure served as a valuable tool during the recession of 1980 when the number of jobs listed dropped, allowing students to become informed "part-time" job seekers by contracting the employer directly. The utilization of a computer over the past year has served to greatly reduce record-keeping problems and has helped by simplifying the production of follow-up reports.

The one to one contact with students, while easily offered in the beginning, soon became difficult to provide as the number of students served increased. In response, staff developed a "self directed information system" to more effectively assist the students. Uncountable contacts continue to be handled as thousands of students each year seek the assistance of the W. E. P. in locating part-time jobs.

Job Development activity is an essential feature of the program and requires a liaison between the local community members, faculty, and students. The unique characteristics of the community play an important role in determining job development efforts. Traditionally Columbia, Missouri's industrial base has been concentrated in three main fields: education, health care and insurance. More recently attempts to expand this base to include light manufacturing companies have been successful. Light manufacturing combined with

the retail sales and service occupations allow for a variety of opportunities for our students.

An active door-to-door campaign, utilization of mailing lists, etc., were important in the early stages of the program. As the program evolved, random outreach gave way to selected visitations to organizations employing large numbers of students, those in which students were interested, and new businesses in the community.

Alternative forms of developing jobs might include committee involvement with local organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce or the Personnel Managers Association. Community service groups (Kiwanis, Rotary etc.) can be another important vehicle for developing jobs and community relations. In addition, there is probably significant activity with respect to employment in most communities through the high schools, Job Service, CETA, or private agencies. A priority for the job locator is to establish for the program a rightful place in the community's employment spectrum. Often, college students represent a significant population in the work force; as their liaison, the job locator should represent them well. Social situations provide an excellent means for spreading information about the program and for discovering leads for jobs. Appropriate action in following up these leads often uncovers quality employment sites for students.

Conclusion

The University of Missouri-Columbia experience demonstrates that it does not take long to develop a meaningful service for students and for the community. The expansion from the "letter of the law" to include career development services has added a meaningful link which employers agree benefits both them and students directly. Students begin to realize the value of work experience long before graduation. As we look to the future, the role of the Job Locator Program will include the responsibility for assisting students not only with the financial burdens of higher education, but also with the transition from the world of education to the world of work. The linkages with career development provide an excellent opportunity to move in this direction.

Available research supports that the retention and success of students are linked to "meaningful involvements" while in school. Work experiences rank as one of the most common and productive involvements for all college students. The Job Locator legislation should be viewed as a valuable contribution to the responsibilities and role of the financial aid administrator.