

# Career Services Offices: A Look at Universities and Colleges across Canada

Higher Education Strategy Associates Intelligence Brief 9

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## INTRODUCTION

Job-hunting for students has never been easy. Whether for the summer, year-round, post-graduation, internships, or placements, successfully finding employment can be an overwhelming experience. Thankfully, universities and colleges have recognized the value of having career and employment services to help students with the daunting job search process.

The emergence of career services in the post-secondary education sector was documented as early as the 1940s and 1950s; but it was really only in the 1970s and 1980s, as the spectre of graduate unemployment became more significant, that these offices began emphasizing skills-development and training to prepare students for a more competitive labour market. Since then, service offerings have broadened and expanded to keep up with current labour market demands, student accessibility needs, and changes in technology and social media (Dey & Real 2009).

Despite their critical role, little has been written about the Career Services Offices (CSOs) at Canadian post-secondary institutions. Past research on career services has largely focused on gathering primary data and presenting the basic composition of career service professionals' demographic make-up, educational background and career pathways, professional training skills, interests, and obstacles faced in the workplace. While this research provides a snapshot of the characteristics and common approaches of career services professionals, there is little information about what makes career services across universities and colleges distinctive and successful. This paper aims to fill bridge this gap.

One difficulty from which most studies of "effectiveness" suffer is that there is no measure of outcomes; in these circumstances, researchers tend to fall back on asking front-line practitioners their opinions on best practices, and leaving it at that (eg. Malatest 2002). For this research, we were fortunate enough to have student satisfaction data from *Globe and Mail's* Canadian University Report,<sup>1</sup> which asked students to rate a number of student services, including CSOs. This allowed us to identify institutions with below-average, average, and above-average levels of student satisfaction. Following this, we interviewed key informants at all institutions in order to identify the practices that differentiate high and low-scoring institutions.

We also wanted to include information about CSOs at Canadian community colleges. Unfortunately, because there are no public student satisfaction ratings available for colleges, we could not link practices to institutional performance. Instead, we adopted an exploratory approach to understand the structure of career and employment centres in colleges, and how they differ from those in universities.

The paper is organized as follows: section one provides a brief overview of our methodology and sample institutions. Section two summarizes the organization of career and employment centres at universities, specifically the services and activities available, the structural division, and the roles and responsibilities of staff. Section three compares centres within the university sector by institutional performance level, and identifies key practices of top scoring institutions. Section four explores the organization, services,

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<sup>1</sup> HESA conducted the annual survey on the *Globe and Mail's* behalf from 2010 to 2012, when the paper discontinued the survey.

partnerships, and quality review processes in colleges. We conclude by examining the shared interests and challenges of universities and colleges.

# 1. METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE

This study used a qualitative research design, involving in-depth telephone interviews with key informants from universities and colleges across Canada. Preliminary questions were general, asking about the range of services offered and particular initiatives of career and employment services. These questions laid the foundation for understanding career service centres’ relationships to clientele demographics, service delivery and administration, partnerships with faculty, campus services and employers, as well as feedback mechanisms for assessing service effectiveness. Taken together, the responses served as a basis for more specific questions.

Our sample of universities was chosen based on their overall satisfaction score in the 2012 Canadian University Report issued by the *Globe and Mail*. The sample served as a benchmark for comparing groups of high-, average- and low-scoring institutions against their peer groups. Across these three categories, a total of thirty-five representatives from twenty-five institutions were interviewed.

| High Scoring 7.0+ <sup>2</sup>          | Average Scoring 6.2+                     | Low Scoring >6.2                  |
|---|--|-----------------------------------|
| Mont Royal University                   | Grant MacEwan University                 | Memorial University               |
| Queen’s University                      | McGill University                        | Simon Fraser University           |
| Trinity Western University              | University of Alberta                    | Trent University                  |
| University of Guelph                    | University of The Fraser Valley          | University of British Columbia    |
| University of Western Ontario           | University of Manitoba                   | University of Calgary             |
| University of Western Ontario:<br>Huron | University of Waterloo                   | University of New Brunswick       |
| Université de Sherbrooke                | University of Western Ontario:<br>King’s | University of Regina              |
|   | Wilfred Laurier University               | University of Saskatchewan        |
|   |  | University of Toronto: St. George |
|   |  | University of Winnipeg            |

For methodological reasons, we decided against simply talking to “top-ranked” institutions. One problem with only looking at institutions with top scores is that there is a tendency to ascribe success to the totality of their practices and policies despite the fact that many of these practices and policies are also followed at institutions with much poorer outcomes. By gathering data at institutions with a wide variety of outcomes, this report attempts to identify the practices and policies typically followed at institutions with high outcomes.

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<sup>2</sup> Students who used career services at their university were asked to rate their satisfaction on a scale from 0 to 9, with 9 being most satisfied and 0 being the least satisfied. Results given are the mean ratings of the students surveyed.

As there are no publicly-available student satisfaction ratings of career services at Canadian colleges, we have no benchmarks with which to distinguish between high- and low-scoring college-level institutions. Nevertheless, we employed the same interview format with twelve representatives from eleven colleges across Canada: Red Deer College (AB), Douglas College (BC), Okanagan College (BC), Red River College (MB), Centennial College (ON), Fanshawe College (ON), Humber College (ON), Lambton College (ON), Loyalist College (ON), Seneca College (ON), and Nova Scotia Community College.

Participation from key informants at CSOs in universities and colleges was voluntary. We selected key informants based on their extensive knowledge of services offered to students, faculty, and employers; the structure and management of the centre; the roles and responsibilities of advising and administrative staff; as well as front-line experience with advising and counselling students. Among the key informants were directors, supervisors or managers, coordinators, front-line administrative staff, and career advisors and counsellors.

## 2. CAREER AND EMPLOYMENT SERVICES IN UNIVERSITIES

Across the twenty-five universities sampled, a wide variety of career and employment-related services are offered to students, many of which are similar in definition, with perhaps slight differences in delivery. These services include: i) career counselling; ii) online job boards and resources; iii) career fairs and information sessions; iv) workshops on résumé writing, mock interviews, and networking workshops; v) professional development and personality assessments; vi) classroom presentations on career opportunities; vii) organizing internship, placement, or co-op programs; and viii) assisting employers with recruitment and hiring.

CSOs' self-defined mission and goals, as expressed by key informants, varied somewhat across universities. They ranged from educating and motivating students about career goals and options, to providing students with career guidance and direction that helped students identify, manage, and successfully enter their potential career paths. Some key informants aimed to facilitate and engage students with career development by equipping them with the skills and knowledge to make informed career decisions. That said, the wording and nature of mission statements had no relationship to levels of student satisfaction with their university's career service centre.

CSOs are typically grouped into a series of major portfolios, such as "career counselling" (which consists of helping students identify long-term career interests) and "employment outreach" (which involves liaising with businesses and bringing them to campus in order to recruit). Institutions that offer experiential learning, such as co-ops or internships, sometimes run these activities out of a separate office – where they tend to be managed as a separate portfolio. There are also some institutions (mainly smaller ones) where the staff has no defined portfolios. Ultimately, we found no relationship between the organization of tasks and portfolios and levels of student satisfaction.

The categorization of employees of university CSOs generally parallels how their offices are organized. Employees can generally be divided into three categories. First, "career advisors" or "counsellors" assist students at all stages of the career development process by providing one-on-one advising about career options and development, and by teaching students job-seeking and networking skills. Next, "Career services staff" members tend to focus on employer recruitment and relations by hosting information sessions and career fairs, conducting résumé workshops and mock interviews, scheduling interviews on behalf of employers, and tracking employer recruitment and labour market trends. The final category is "administrative staff," who may also act as front-line workers, who support the centre by attending to student queries online and in-person, scheduling appointments, and updating job boards and online resources. While staff members assigned to specific portfolios adhere to their respective roles and responsibilities, many share duties and collaborate with other staff when appropriate. Most career services staff hold master's degrees, and all counselling staff held at least a bachelor's degree, mainly in disciplines such as education, human resources, and counselling.

The number of staff employed by CSOs also ranged, from a single advisor (responsible for everything from student advising to establishing employer and faculty relations), to up to twenty-five employees, each responsible for a distinct portfolio. Despite this, we could observe no relationship between staff size (or, by implication, the budget) of university CSOs and levels of observed student satisfaction. Nor,

incidentally, did we note any relationship between student satisfaction and the physical location of the career centre. Although a central location, especially in some kind of “one-stop-shop” for all student services, is considered to be a factor in improving students’ use of CSO services, it is not apparently related to satisfaction.

### **3. KEY ASPECTS OF HIGH-SCORING CAREER AND EMPLOYMENT SERVICES IN UNIVERSITIES**

In the previous section, we concentrated mostly on descriptive factors generally common to all CSOs. In this section, we look at different institutional practices that appear related to outcomes, as measured by student satisfaction. The first factor related to an institution's student satisfaction rating is the way that CSOs collect data and integrate insights therefrom into their strategic planning. The second factor is a greater emphasis on the delivery of hard skills in job-seeking, résumé writing, and networking (what we refer to as "employability skills"), and the third factor is developing stronger partnerships with internal and external stakeholders, such as university faculty and potential employers.

#### **A) INTEGRATED DATA INTO QUALITY MANAGEMENT PROCESSES**

All CSOs we interviewed indicated that they regularly receive feedback from students, either verbally or through feedback solicited through student surveys and/or feedback forms distributed after activities, such as one-on-one advisement sessions, workshops, information sessions, and career fairs. Other mechanisms for collecting feedback include: organized meetings with faculty, campus service partners, and employers; consultations with student focus groups; and after experiential learning experiences, like co-op programs and job placements.

While the collection of data is universal, the manner in which the data is used seems to have a major effect on student satisfaction outcomes. CSOs that receive high student satisfaction ratings are, for the most part, more adept at operationalizing data through regular service delivery strategic reviews.

At many high-scoring CSOs, key informants noted that time is frequently allocated to staff meetings and/or review sessions to discuss comments received from students, employers, faculty, and campus partners, and that this feedback serves as an internal self-assessment tool, enabling career staff to identify areas of strength and weakness. Lower-scoring CSOs also use feedback for service improvement, of course; what distinguishes the top-scoring ones is that they tend to have regular formal planning mechanisms that allow them to funnel feedback into programming changes.

It should be noted that a common reason given for not having more thorough data collection and response processes was that the CSO possessed insufficient human and technological resources. Interestingly, those giving this response were among the largest CSOs in the country.

#### **B) EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS PROMOTION**

The second strategy used by high-scoring CSOs is an emphasis on engaging students in developing job-seeking skills (i.e. the ability to find jobs, write cover letters and résumés, and interview successfully), rather than solely providing them with career-related information and resources.

Many CSOs focus on offering a greater variety of resources in addition to trying to make career development and management an enjoyable process. While these approaches are important, they tend to spoon-feed students with career information, instead of empowering them with practical career preparation skills that will allow them to link personal values with career choices. It is not enough to

offer career resources and information to students; equipping them with the appropriate skills is equally important in preparing them for future career success.

Career advisers are increasingly aware of the need to focus on both short-term learning needs and benefits of career preparation and placement, and on equipping students with effective long-term transferrable skills for finding employment. At higher-scoring CSOs, this means a greater emphasis on mock interviews to build confidence, information sessions with employers to build networking and interpersonal skills, and completing learning portfolios and self-assessment tools during every stage of co-op and internship placements.

### C) PRO-ACTIVENESS IN PARTNERSHIPS AND OUTREACH

Engaging in partnerships and outreach is second nature to CSOs – it is literally their *raison d'être*. The difference between higher- and lower-scoring CSOs is the degree to which they initiate and maintain strong, positive, and consistent partnerships with internal clients such as faculty advisors, professors, and other campus services.

At lower-scoring career service units there is a strong emphasis on responding to requests and supporting partners' needs by providing workshops, presentations, career fairs, and information on an on-demand basis. In contrast, high-scoring CSOs tend to provide these services as a matter of course. They also take the extra step to organize joint meetings with internal partners about services, new projects, and to address any pertinent concerns or requirements for future collaborations.

Successful relationships with internal partners rely not only on frequent communication, but also on the development and maintenance of a mutual understanding of the value that these collaborations hold for students. Faculty advisors, professors, and other campus services can all serve as conduits for promoting career services to students. Although professors tend not to view their role as including preparing students for specific careers, students tend to view faculty as front-line workers and look to them for information. Therefore, when CSOs offer career presentations in class and encourage professors to incorporate job-seeking information in their class material, CSOs move career planning into the very centre of the university's teaching mission.

Several key informants described the process of initiating dialogue with faculty from non-professional disciplines that do not traditionally facilitate co-op or internship placements (eg. social sciences and humanities) as "challenging." However, by encouraging these faculties to engage in outreach initiatives and encouraging them to understand the foreseeable value in career services, students become more aware and informed about career options related to their program of study.

Outreach, of course, occurs both internally and externally, and can be similarly reactive or proactive. Some CSOs focus on simply bringing in a large pool of employers to meet with students at particular events; others maintain active and personalized contact throughout the year, integrating employers into frequent networking or information sessions.

## 4. KEY ASPECTS OF CAREER AND EMPLOYMENT SERVICES IN COLLEGES

If there is little data to documenting CSOs at Canadian universities, there is even less precious data documenting the country's college sector. Unfortunately, we lack student satisfaction ratings of career services for the college sector, making comparisons between colleges difficult, and thus rendering impossible an analysis of CSOs parallel to the one we conducted at universities. Instead, we adopted an exploratory approach to understanding the structure, management, and operations of career and employment service units within the college sector.

College CSOs tend to be significantly more diverse in their structure than those in universities. Most career service units at colleges exist as centralized units offering similar services as their university-based counterparts. However, of the nine colleges where career services were a self-contained entity, career advice was sometimes a sub-unit of student services, or partnered with a unit responsible for co-ops. Particularly where the CSO had five or fewer staff members, it was not uncommon for staff to take on several roles under the umbrella of career counsellor, in addition to duties directly related to career advising. For example, at one college, career counsellors also taught classes in an unrelated subject. Two other colleges did not have a separate career service office but still offered career guidance through an overarching and centralized counselling department that combined career counselling, academic advising, mental health, and personal counselling services. In general, college career advisors were less specialized and more likely to be implicated in diverse aspects of the college's mission than were comparable advisors at universities.

Even though college CSOs tend to be smaller and offer a narrower range of services to students than their university counterparts, there is no reason to think that college students are at a disadvantage. The main reason CSOs have fewer resources at colleges is because the responsibility for linking students with employers and embedding career planning in course content is mostly assumed at the level of the individual program. Simply put, since career preparation is traditionally at the heart of the college pedagogical approach, there is less need to confer that task to an ancillary unit.

As a result, CSOs at Canadian colleges do not face the same challenges initiating partnerships with faculty and employers as their university counterparts. Half of all colleges noted direct involvement by faculty in delivering course content related to résumé writing and career preparation. In some cases, job-seeking skills content was embedded in the curriculum, and students were tested on it. In contrast to key informants at university CSOs, none of the key informants at college CSOs noted a resistance to integrating greater career preparation content. In fact, when career advisors came into classrooms to deliver workshops, it was usually at the behest of faculty.

At one college, the CSO described the majority of recruitment as being faculty-driven. At another college, a key informant indicated that faculty took the lead in maintaining links with employers because they managed the practicum programs. In a majority of cases, college CSOs indicated that faculty would come to them in order to initiate programs and services, rather than the other way around.

Partnerships with other college services were generally described as positive. Specific associations tended to be with student services, counselling services, and, unlike at universities, the library. At some

colleges, career services received referrals from financial aid and learning centers. In most cases, college CSOs' contact with other units was not the result of an official agreement, but rather appeared to have developed organically. One of the reasons for this might be the smaller size of the institution. One college career counsellor reported receiving referrals from various units across the college because everyone knew each other.

College data and feedback collection policies are generally comparable to those of universities. CSOs gather statistics on use, often through online surveys, monitor attendance at events like job fairs, and follow up with participants following individual and group workshops. In addition, a smaller number of centres go a step further by acquiring statistics on career placements. College CSOs were likelier than university CSOs to indicate that such data was used to drive change in service offerings; however, they were less likely to report that such changes occurred because of formal planning processes. Rather, the small size and relative informality of the college CSOs meant that changes to service provision could be quickly made following relevant feedback.

## CONCLUSION

Despite their increasing importance, little research exists on the efficacy of practices across Canadian CSOs. Through qualitative research interviews with key informants, this study aimed to bridge some of this knowledge gap by understanding how CSOs choose to prepare students for the workforce at Canadian colleges and universities, and – in the case of universities at least – see if there are specific sets of practices that correlate to high levels of student satisfaction with careers services offerings.

We found little evidence to suggest student satisfaction was related to organizational structures or mandates, or even the size of the career service office. What we found instead were three “habits” of highly effective university CSOs: they have formal processes by which they turn data insights into improvements in service delivery, they focus on providing students with job-seeking skills rather than just providing information on job opportunities, and they put significant emphasis on *internal* partnerships and outreach within the university. The good news here is that these are changes that all institutions could put in place should they do so; they do not require investments in infrastructure or large amounts of money; they are simply changes in orientation.

We were unable, due to data limitations, to examine college CSOs in the same way we did university ones; nevertheless, our scan of practices noted some important structural differences between them and their university counterparts. The reason for this lies in the very different attitudes towards career preparation in the two sectors: in universities, the tendency is to see career services as something “extra” that is done outside of class; in colleges, career preparation is seen as a shared responsibility between colleges’ academic programs and their services. Thus, while high-scoring CSOs at universities initiated many of their internal partnerships, this was simply unnecessary at colleges because academic staff usually took the lead in inviting CSOs to make in-class presentations and integrating résumé writing into course content. College academic staff are also much more likely than their university equivalents to take a direct role in introducing students to employers, which to a certain degree means that college students simply have less need of CSO services because those needs are met directly by teachers.

Our interviews revealed that career preparation at colleges and universities diverged not because of differences in organizational structure or resources, but rather because linking students with employers was traditionally at the heart of the college’s mission. At universities, CSOs were sometimes awkwardly grafted on to an institution where the most important members – the faculty – did not view their role as preparing students for specific careers. That said, CSOs with high student satisfaction ratings shared certain practices noted above that can serve as a model for universities seeking to better prepare students for the work force.



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