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Self-Assessment and Planned Change of Placement and Career Services Center

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Self-Assessment and Planned Change in Placement and Career Services Center

ABSTRACT

In the 1990s, college and university career services and placement units face many challenges which may influence their success including (a) increased budgetary constraints, (b) changing student demographics, (c) increased availability of computer technologies, (d) new service delivery models, and (e) changing employer recruitment practices. In an effort to address these issues and examine its role within the university (Roth, 1994), the Placement and Career Information Center (PCIC) at Central Michigan University undertook a program of applied research, self-assessment and planned change. The purpose of this article is to briefly report our experiences in conducting this program of applied research. The assessment strategy is presented in the first part of this report. Next, the methods used to collect data and assessment, sampling procedures and response rates are described. Following this, highlights of the assessment results are presented including a summary of some changes already made and those planned for the future. The results of this study are presented in detail in Adams, et al. (1994).

ASSESSMENT STRATEGY OVERVIEW

The PCIC assessment was based on information obtained from the center's three main constituencies that consist of students, faculty and employers. To obtain information from these constituencies a variety of data collection methods were used (Malaney & Weitzer, 1993). Information from students was obtained by a mailed survey, a series of focus groups with student subgroups and a survey of students using the PCIC's services. To obtain information from faculty, a mailed survey was designed to collect both quantitative and qualitative information (in the form of comments). To obtain information

from employers, a survey was distributed to employers using the center to recruit potential employees during the fall semester of 1993. This mix of data sources and data collection methods provided multiple sets of information on which to base the PCIC assessment.

METHOD

Student Survey

The student survey consisted of 137 questions designed to assess student awareness, satisfaction and needs. The survey was distributed to a stratified random sample of 1,825 students living on- and off-campus. Due to the likelihood of differential response rates, the number of surveys mailed to students residing off-campus (1,290) was larger than the number distributed to those residing on-campus (535). Also, to ensure an adequate number of minority student respondents this group was purposefully over-sampled. Overall, the survey collected information from 551 students (249 on-campus; 302 off-campus). This number represents 3% of the population of students at CMU (overall response rate = 30%).

Student Focus Groups

A series of five focus groups (Kaase & Harshbarger, 1993; Jacobi, 1991), involving 41 students were conducted representing the following student groups: freshman and sophomores, juniors and seniors, nontraditional students, minority students and students leaders. The purpose of these focus groups was to collect information on student perceptions regarding the PCIC and to determine student needs for placement and career services.

Student User Questionnaire

A questionnaire designed to measure student perceptions of the services they received was distributed to students using the PCIC during the 1993 fall semester. Thirty students completed and returned this survey.

Information from Faculty

The faculty survey consisted of 26 questions designed to assess (a) the degree to which faculty refer students, (b) assess faculty experiences and perceptions of PCIC services, and (c) suggestions for improvement. Eight-hundred surveys were distributed to CMU faculty members and

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227 (28%) were returned. Faculty responding represented 35 different academic departments.

Information from Employers

Employers conducting recruitment activities at the PCIC were given a 10 item questionnaire. This questionnaire asked the employers to rate the staff and facilities of the PCIC. Information was collected from the six employer representatives who visited the center during the data collection phase of this study.

RESULTS

Student Satisfaction

Many student survey respondents tended to believe that the PCIC was a good place to go for help choosing a career (51%), to learn how to get a job (46%), to find a job (40%) and find out about internships (37%). The 30% of the students who used the PCIC did so as freshmen (22%), sophomores (22%), juniors (25%), seniors (24%) and alumni (5%). Survey respondent PCIC users were typically satisfied with the overall service they had received (64%), and 80% said they would recommend the center to a friend. The majority of these students felt welcomed by the reception staff (71%), felt the reception staff was courteous (80%), found the waiting area comfortable (76%), and felt their needs were met in a timely manner (67%). They also thought the center was helpful or very helpful for exploring their career interests (61%) and finding jobs (54%), and thought their PCIC advisor was helpful (72%). In addition, 30 students completed a brief questionnaire assessing the helpfulness of the service they received immediately following their use of PCIC services.

Student Awareness

Most survey respondents knew where the PCIC was located (69%), however, 80% agreed with the statement "I would like more information about the Placement and Career Information Center." Familiarity with specific services offered by the center ranged from a low of 7% (video taped workshops) to a high of 28% (Career Resource Center) indicating a significant lack of student awareness of services. Students received information about the center from a variety of sources and received information about job opportunities from friends (57%), and parents or family (53%). Respondents indicated they used a variety of information sources when choosing a career including friends (64%), parents or family (62%), major or minor advisor (48%), orientation (43%), academic advisor (36%) and professors who were not advisors (36%).

Student Needs

Most survey respondents thought the PCIC should be open during weekdays (72%), while some thought the center should be open on Saturdays (42%) and Sundays (15%). Respondents thought it was important for the PCIC to offer computerized career searches (69%), mail-in registration (64%), computer registration (62%), computer lab access (61%) and computer access from one's home (56%). Results of the student focus groups were generally consistent with survey results. These students indicated a general lack of awareness of center services and did not realize that it was important and appropriate to seek PCIC assistance early in one's student career.

Faculty Attitudes

Faculty respondents said they referred students to the center for information on permanent jobs (66%), to use the career library (66%), for information on possible occupations given a specific major (59%), for job interview skills training (52%) and to participate in mock interviews (48%). Fewer faculty referred students for information on internships (23%), graduate school information (19%) or co-op opportunities (10%).

Many faculty members recommended that students use PCIC services (84%), actually referred students to the center (79%) and thought that the PCIC was a valuable resource for students (73%). Some of the academic departments (46% of the departments represented by survey respondents) and faculty (40%) maintained their own placement information.

Faculty comments and suggestions concerning improving PCIC services were organized into four themes: (a) a need by faculty for more information about the PCIC's services, (b) a desire on the part of faculty to establish better relationships with the center, (c) several suggestions for services such as SIGI and Discover, and (d) awareness of and appreciation for the newsletter *Career View Mirror*.

Employer Satisfaction

All (n=6) of the surveyed employers engaging in on-campus recruiting during the time this study was conducted thought the staff was courteous, rated the reception and professional staff as good or excellent, and thought that appointments were appropriately scheduled. They also rated the waiting area and interview rooms as good or excellent.

DISCUSSION

Assessment results suggested that most student, faculty and employer users of PCIC services were generally satisfied with services received and also indicated

areas that could be improved. Since the study was conducted, the information obtained has been used in a variety of ways to make changes in the way services are provided. Study results were used to help focus center direction in the areas conceptualizing and implementing a comprehensive career development model, intentionally working to improve faculty and employer relations, and the development of an internship center.

Existing staff were involved in all aspects of the study including reviewing data collection instruments and discussion of the meaning of obtained results. Staff involvement resulted in staff understanding and support of a variety of changes which were indicated by study's results. The director also discussed the study and received input, prior to its implementation, with her immediate supervisor, the vice president for student affairs. The data collected helped the director, who was new to the institution, provide an understandable and empirical documentation for changes which she believed would need to be made so that students and employers could more effectively be served.

As a result of the data collected and subsequent discussions, the name of the PCIC was changed to the Career Services and Resource Center (CSRC). This name more accurately reflects the career advising and planning emphasis of the services currently provided by the office. Staff responsibilities were refocused and reorganized to be more responsive to student and employer needs. The data were used to justify the expenditure of financial resources to expand equipment and update computer technologies used to interact with students and employers. The availability of current information regarding student and employer's needs helped the office to be more responsive to constituents' needs. Currently, discussions are underway to expand the role of the CSRC and the office is moving to a new and high traffic location in the university center.

Many students and faculty at Central Michigan University were unaware of all of the services offered by the CSRC. Most students did not know that it was to their benefit to use center services early in their student career. CSRC has begun to develop various outreach activities specific to identified target audiences to inform students, faculty and others of the developmentally appropriate use of center services. Since students obtain considerable career and job information from parents and family, the center has begun to explore methods that would systematically target parents for education about its services and appropriate career development information (e.g. through Parent Orientation, a parent newsletter, etc.).

Computer technologies and additional alternative locations for service delivery were supported by many students. Computerized career counseling software (e.g. SIGI and Discover) was also suggested by some faculty. The center is exploring new technologies to both bolster existing programs, and as a way of cost-effectively establishing outreach activities (e.g. providing a computerized career exploration program from the institution's library, accessing the Michigan Occupational Information Service (MOIS) or other self-assessment and information databases through the main frame computer or through residence hall and other computer laboratories, using a local cable access television station to advertise programs and services, etc.).

There continues to be a need for faculty and center staff to form partnerships, communicate more effectively, coordinate their efforts on behalf of students, clarify departmental and center roles and responsibilities, and identify the areas where coordination and cooperation are necessary. Faculty and staff need to be educated about all the services offered by the center. In addition, a comprehensive assessment of employers needs and expectations regarding student recruitment has recently been completed. CSRC services will be enhanced by cooperating with and assisting the many sources which students already use to gather information about choosing a career and finding employment. Some of the sources include academic advisors, counselors, parents, family, alumni and residence hall staff.

CONCLUSION

Systematic data collection from constituencies served by the PCIC resulted in providing an empirical basis to document and justify needed changes to the office. A willingness on the part of the center's staff to openly "listen" to the results of the data collection and make needed changes quickly has resulted in the ability to provide better services to students, employers and faculty. Additional data collection is planned to further modify service delivery to meet the changing needs of the center's constituencies.

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