Fall 2021

Building An Ecosystem of Diversity Talent Development Through Experiential Learning

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Recommended Citation

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Access to professionals and insider knowledge of industry is most often enjoyed by students from privileged families (Davis & Warfield, 2011). Higher education institutions have a moral imperative to create access for underrepresented minority (URM) students; the business case and industry demand for diverse candidates support this imperative (Tsusaka et al., 2019). This paper describes an ecosystem of high-impact experiential programs created by one institution to ameliorate underrepresentation in industry.

Academic support programs for underserved students focus on retention and graduation (U.S. Department of Education, 2016) yet few focus on career readiness for post-graduation success. Underrepresented students are motivated to work hard yet they participate in the high-impact practices proven to enhance student development at lower rates (Kinzie, 2012). Their knowledge of industry expectations and networks is also limited (Russ, 2015).

Institutional Context

The site is Stony Brook University (SBU), a public research university in the northeast enrolling a diverse student body of 26,000 and noted for success in creating social mobility (Chetty et al., 2017). Founded in 1957, our strength in STEM research led to our inclusion in the Association of American Universities, an elite group of the nation's leading research universities. Stony Brook University is composed of colleges of arts and sciences, engineering, marine sciences, communications, business, and schools of medicine, nursing, social welfare, dentistry, and health technology management /allied health programs. The career service, known as the Career Center, is a centralized function, serving all students in all majors, degree programs, class years (first years through PhDs, and alumni), and career intentions. The Center manages career exploration/preparation, student employment/work study, credit-bearing and non-credit experiential education programs, and employer outreach. In 2007 we responded to employer calls for more underrepresented candidates by creating the *Diversity Professional Leadership Network (DPLN)* to connect underrepresented undergraduates with industry mentors.

Initial success was measured by feedback from students and employer partners; small changes were made annually. *DPLN* was the beginning: in 2021 Stony Brook's Career Center coordinates several diversity talent preparation programs spanning multiple industries and diversity groups. Cohort-style programs include *DPLN* for URM juniors and seniors in business, engineering/IT and healthcare; *Future Ready Women in STEM* for first generation women in STEM; *JFEW SUNY Global Scholars* for junior and senior women aspiring to careers in diplomacy, international law and human rights; *Explorations in STEM Research* for first years and sophomores with little exposure to research, and recently, *Travelers Insurance Accessibility Support Career Prep* program and the *LGBTQ* Career Awareness* program. Additional programs, such as *SHEroes: Not All Superheroes Wear Capes, Diversity Internship Recruitment Fair,* and *Diversity Corporate & Alumni Networking Event,* are open to all.

Individual Programs

Given our unique portfolio of career development and experiential education offerings, we chose the National Society for Experiential Education (NSEE) Principles of Ethical and Best Practices in Experiential Education (NSEE, n.d.) to guide the creation and continuous improvement of these programs, described below.

The **Diversity Professional Leadership Network (DPLN)** is a year-long cohort program providing industry mentors and professional development

for juniors and seniors from underserved backgrounds in business, engineering, IT, and health care. Partners in academic support programs are leveraged for outreach to the target population. Requirements include a 2.5 GPA and some leadership experience. Applicants participate in a group interview with Career Center staff and a final individual interview with the company. Students are paired with corporate mentors, called professional buddies. Training for buddies and students occurs in September, followed by bi-weekly meetings coordinated by the Career Center for professional development, buddy-student engagement, and community building. Students speak with buddies bi-weekly at minimum, sometimes more often, and do a shadow visit at the corporate site.

Students learn about diversity, equity, and inclusion in industry, hear from people of color, those with disabilities, and those who identify as LGBTQ* about their workplace experiences, resilience in overcoming obstacles, and success strategies. They create a career action plan, design a business card and LinkedIn profile, and develop their 90 second pitch. They acquire professional attire, attend job fairs and other networking events, and participate in workplace site visits at host companies throughout the year.

"Year after year, evaluations consistently demonstrate that the program achieves its goals."

DPLN became a credit-bearing experiential course in 2019, so students have additional support of a faculty sponsor. Assessments are conducted annually; year after year students report increased knowledge of industry and business etiquette, improved soft skills, and most importantly, increased confidence. DPLN participants submitted eight times the applications and attended 30% more career preparation events than other students. DPLN has grown from 20 students and four companies in 2007 to 100 students and fourteen companies in 2021.

The **JFEW-SUNY Global Leaders Program** aims to reduce the gender gap in global careers by empowering women with the knowledge, skills, and experiences needed for career entry. Each year ten women are recruited from three SUNY campuses for a two-year program. The program, which includes scholarships and a paid internship, is funded by the Jewish Foundation for Education of Women (JFEW) and also supported by the State University of New York (SUNY) Global Center and each SUNY campus. At Stony Brook, the program is managed by Career Center staff with faculty partners in Globalization Studies.

During the academic year, students attend webinars focused on female global leaders and women's issues. The summer after junior year, they intern with a globally-focused non-governmental organization (NGO) and are matched with professional mentors. Internship sites include organizations as large as the US State Department, Council on Foreign Relations, and RFK Center for Human Rights, to smaller entities such as Asia Initiatives and The Institute for Economics & Peace. Interns attend briefings about world events, hear from female leaders about their work and life experiences, and visit NGOs. During senior year, seminars combine international relations with career development.

Since the first graduating class in 2013, Scholars have received Fulbright awards, earned prestigious diversity-focused foreign service fellowships, such as the Charles B. Rangel International Affairs Fellowship and the USAID Donald M. Payne International Development Graduate Fellowship, and acceptance to law schools and graduate programs. Several have gone on to live and work in local and federal government agencies, and overseas. Graduates describe the program as life changing. They can discuss complex and challenging global problems and issues that impact women. Most importantly, they develop confidence in their ability to interact with diverse professionals at all levels.

Explorations in STEM Research was created in 2013 with a SUNY grant to increase retention in STEM. The team included the vice provost for diversity and directors of two offices: Undergraduate Research and Career Center. A successful pilot led to institutional funding, and later, a signature corporate sponsor with faculty partners from biology, physics, electrical and computer engineering, and the Women in Science & Engineering Honors program.

The program prioritizes diverse students from low-income backgrounds with interest in STEM but little exposure to research. Academic partners help recruit participants. The goal is to increase retention by exciting students about STEM research, improving lab and professional skills, introducing them to mentors, and equipping them with the experience, skills, and confidence they need to pursue STEM careers.

Housing in the residence halls and a stipend are provided for ten weeks. Students work in a lab with a faculty mentor, postdocs, graduate student researchers, and undergraduate peers. Weekly professional development seminars offer topics on responsible conduct

of research, reading scientific papers, and presenting a scientific poster. They attend panels on graduate school and industry pathways, and connect with the SBU Center for Inclusive Education, which advances diversity in academia. A social and community building component encourages peer connections and support. Pre-COVID, site visits were conducted by the program team with each student and faculty mentor in the lab to discuss the experience. End of program assessments have led to enhancements each year.

Year after year, evaluations consistently demonstrate that the program achieves its goals. Most continue with research during the school year, and report increased knowledge of STEM career options and confidence in their ability to communicate science. Note, however, that they also report that the funding, especially the housing, was a critical factor in their ability to participate. An exciting unexpected outcome of the program's success has been the interest among faculty in securing additional funding streams to support more students in the program.

The **Future Ready Women in STEM** program prepares first-generation women for STEM careers. This year-long program is coordinated by Career Center staff and modeled after *DPLN*. Fall programming focuses on professionalism and career readiness. Weekly seminars introduce students to the career readiness competencies employers want (NACE, 2021) and offer career preparation activities, such as resume building, LinkedIn, internship search, and interview preparation. Students are expected to take action to secure an applied learning experience and participate in the Fall STEM career fair to meet employers. During the spring, students discuss their experiential placements (e.g. shadowing a health care practitioner in our university medical center, interning with a startup tech company in one of our incubators, or doing research with a faculty member). During spring 2021, industry projects were secured for teams of students to work on virtually as part of an academic course. Students present their final projects to industry representatives and earn micro-credentials in select career readiness competencies.

Assessments show positive results: all students reported improved communication skills and career readiness; 94% increased knowledge of career resources and industry connections, and improved professionalism. One student remarked,

> It was one of the most meaningful experiences that I have had throughout my time at Stony Brook. Everyone in the program was just like me: STEM major,

female, and first-generation. And that was a community that I had struggled to find . . . . I feel a thousand percent more confident.

The individual programs just described are signature programs we expect to offer annually, contingent on continued funding from our corporate, foundation, and institutional sponsors. Our success has allowed us to produce new offerings for additional diversity groups. The next two programs are new and small, and we are excited about their potential.

The **Travelers Insurance Accessibility Support Career Prep Series** provides exclusive workshops for students receiving services from the Student Accessibility Support Center (SASC). Travelers delivered a series of three curated workshops on resume writing, interview preparation, and workplace etiquette on campus. A networking event was organized at the company site with employees from their disabilities employee resource group. The ten students who participated witnessed how corporations are creating access points and support for professionals with disabilities. The program was postponed during the COVID pandemic; it will resume in 2022.

The **LGBTQ Career Awareness Program** was created through a partnership between the Career Center and LGBTQ* Services. Undergraduate and graduate students attend semester-long programming centered around the lived experiences of LGBTQ* professionals in the workplace, evaluating organizational culture and fit through an identity lens, and connections with companies actively seeking to recruit candidates who identify. Students attend a site visit with one of our corporate partners and meet with LGBTQ* professionals. All (100%) participants in 2019 stated they would recommend the program. One remarked,

> The LGBTQ Career Awareness Program helped me find the bridge between my PhD program and careers in industry and government . . . . the new experiences [company site visits, career coaching] and training provided from this program have helped me to develop a sense of progress and connectedness that is hard to maintain in my PhD program, as isolation and stagnation had previously been my norm.

This program was also postponed during the COVID pandemic; plans are underway for 2022. The success of the initial program prompted Career Center staff to apply for a small grant that will bring a DEI trainer to campus to coach career staff and others from student affairs in best practices in working with this student population.

Finally, the **Senior Transition Bootcamp** was created in 2021 in direct response to the COVID economic collapse. This program directed extra support toward underrepresented graduating seniors from low income backgrounds with GPAs <3.0, as these candidates would likely be most vulnerable in the challenging job market. A series of intensive career prep sessions were held every Saturday in May, covering job search essentials and foundations of money management, with individual intensive career coaching from industry experts. Participants were expected to attend our new *Just-in-Time Job Fair* in June. A summative assessment is forthcoming, although initial reactions from students were incredible gratitude for the opportunity to get prepared quickly for job market entry and increased confidence in their ability to secure paid employment.

Scaling Access

While we have been extremely pleased with the success of these programs, we note that the cohort model is staff-intensive, funding-dependent, and limited in terms of the number of participants. Scalable access is critical for institution-wide successes in these career readiness programs that advance economic, social, and racial justice. Grants from industry partners and foundations can make a difference.

Diversity Recruitment & Networking Event is a three-hour event with industry partners open to all students. It begins with a panel of employers describing their organizational values and DEI initiatives, including recruitment strategies and affinity groups. Students network in small groups with company representatives. Conversations are directed by student questions with samples provided at each table. In 2019, this program was featured on national television, Matter of Fact with Soledad O'Brien, highlighting Stony Brook's successes in social and economic mobility of diverse students. In 2020-2021, we recorded short videos of employers discussing their approach to diversity, equity, and inclusion, and commitment to hiring talent from Stony Brook University. Diversity student organization partners, such as the Society for Hispanic Professional Engineers, helped create the videos and coordinate the event.

Not All SHEroes Wear Capes is hosted during Women's History Month. The title signals that women need not be superheroes (vis-à-vis wearing a cape or brandishing indestructible bracelets) to be successful, nor be perfect to be considered a role model. In fact, we expanded that title by creating an acronym: Strong, Humble, Empowered, Resilient,

Original, Professional. SHEroes were sourced from our extensive list of industry partners, mostly mid to high level executives. An inspiring keynote by a female corporate executive is followed by small group networking sessions where students can ask anything. Keynote speakers have shared stories of overcoming gender bias, and personal views on the intersectionality of race, sexual orientation, and gender.

Summer Celebration of Research Achievements, a collaborative event among all summer research programs, is spearheaded by the Explorations in STEM Research team. Students in all summer research programs on campus present their posters to faculty and industry partners. Pre-college students in our summer bridge academic programs for underrepresented minority and economically disadvantaged students, and high school students from local underserved communities in diversity-based summer outreach programs attend to explore new science career pathways.

Partnership with Bottom Line (BL), a non-profit organization operating in several US cities that supports college success of low income first generation college students, is enabling us to better support these vulnerable students. More than 100 BL students are on campus, each with a dedicated BL advisor who works closely with them throughout their entire college experience. The Career Center provides career readiness workshops for these students and hosts BL gatherings on campus to ensure that they are fully aware of the resources we have to support them. This partnership is a good example of ways to maximize support for vulnerable students.

Lessons Learned/Implications for Teaching and Learning

Consistent with the NSEE Principles of Ethical & Best Practice in Experiential Education (NSEE, n.d.), all of our programs are assessed and evaluated. We know that the programs achieve their goals and develop students' career readiness competencies. Evaluations show high satisfaction, increased knowledge of industry culture, acquisition of a professional network, heightened self-knowledge, improved skills and increased self-confidence. Participants have earned competency-based micro-credentials and secured internships, jobs, fellowships, and graduate school admission. The Career Center's reputation as an inclusive service is evident in the growing numbers of underrepresented students who engage (e.g. in 2020, nearly 85% of students in diversity-based academic support programs utilized our services). Our campus

reputation as an agent of change and strong contributor to students' social and economic mobility has also enabled us to grow partnerships with faculty and staff.

Moreover, the success of this ecosystem has led to new employer partners, new institutional funding for expansion of programs and added staff lines, and the inclusion of career development in faculty-led grant applications. More faculty are highlighting the career readiness components of their existing courses and programs, and are seeking support for ways to embed career readiness and experiential learning with industry involvement in their courses.

However, challenges still exist. How do we measure long term impact? How can we scale access and support for all students? In a post-COVID world, how do we find the right mix of virtual and in person connectivity that maximizes resources and best supports students? How do we continue to educate ourselves and our partners about the varied and complex challenges students face as they navigate their way through college?

Recent research affirms the importance of very targeted and specialized support for students from underserved communities (Bloom, Dyer, & Zhou, 2018; Linn et al., 2015) that reach beyond retention and graduation. Combining career readiness with professional identity affirmation and sense of belonging (Lewis & Yates, 2019), exposure to career options and workforce preparation (Carnevale et al., 2018; Carnevale et al., 2019) and access to industry mentors and networks (Hvide & Oyer, 2018) could signal the future of how institutions define student success.

Recommendations

If your institution is ready to think differently about the economic and social justice approach to student success, diverse student talent development, and career readiness through experiential education, we offer these recommendations.

First, expand your definition of educator. There are many dedicated people within your institutions whose job titles may not signal their potential as educators and mentors in this ecosystem of support you are seeking to create. Staff in a variety of student-facing and back office positions may jump at the chance to contribute. Share your vision for the ecosystem, invite their input and participation, then train, develop, and support their contributions to the cause.

Second, use your institution's analytics and engage stakeholders to focus on target populations. Traditional outreach may be less effective, especially if there is a limited history of engagement with students from underserved communities. Partnerships with faculty and student organizations can amplify your message and motivate student engagement.

Third, consider varied approaches given your campus context, academic programs, demographics, as well as existing alumni and industry relations. For example, one initiative might focus on hybrid or remote corporate internships and another could connect project based learning in local community organizations. Disruptions to the global economy and its continued transformation will require a workforce with advanced technical and communication skills (Parkers, 2020), so be sure to emphasize the acquisition and practice of these career competencies.

Fourth, recognize that social capital is built through direct exposure to professional environments (Cui et al., 2015; Green & Brock, 2005). Industry connections build students' social capital, skills, and confidence in their professional identity (Davis & Warfield, 2011; Russ, 2015); aim to engage industry partners from the start.

Fifth and finally, commit to a long-term strategy to build a career readiness framework at all levels. An ecosystem is not built in a year. Engage faculty in identifying and extracting the career readiness competencies already present in the existing curriculum. Make those transparent to students and show them the connections. Look for partners in career development, alumni relations, and human resources, and others. Start small: pilot, assess, revise, build, scale.

Conclusion

Far more than a single diversity preparation program for a small cohort, Stony Brook University's ecosystem of diversity talent development and career readiness through experiential learning has resulted in a culture of diversity, equity, and inclusion with positive impact on student self-confidence in their future career success, and long-term social and economic mobility. The authors firmly believe that career development and experiential learning are inextricably linked to the career readiness and long term success of underrepresented students, and are committed to long-term transformation of our entire campus as an agent of change. ∎

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