Let the Employers Speak!

Karen Clancy
University of Kentucky, kparr58@aol.com

Sarah Kercsmar
University of Kentucky, sarah.kercsmar@uky.edu

Let the Employers Speak!

Karen Clancy & Sarah Kercsmar
University of Kentucky

This article discusses how employers can be engaged to provide feedback and coaching for students who are developing employability skills. The focus is on the use of employer feedback in a professional practicum experience. The use of a rubric that may be used by preceptors to evaluate students on employability.

INTRODUCTION

With a growing number of students who pursue education for the return on investment (Donald, 2018, Cappelli, 2020) and an increasing number of employers who decry students' lack of career readiness, the evolving burden is on colleges and universities to address these interests while also upholding their pedagogical values. Implementing effective employability models that are engaging for a variety of programs and cohorts presents both opportunities and challenges for educators (Fraser, 2021).

Employability is the potential for an individual to find and gain employment. It also speaks to an individual's ability to move within organizations and between jobs. (Fugate, 2004) There are a variety of employability models that utilize intra-curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular models. (Cook, 2022) The Essential Employability Qualities framework is one such model developed by The Quality Assurance Commons that identifies key "knowledge, skills, abilities, and experiences" graduates need to have to be successful as they enter the workforce (The Eight EEQs, 2022). The model incorporates eight essential competencies that employers look for in college graduates.

Regardless of the employability model selected, the challenge for educators is to find effective ways to motivate and engage students uniquely to their fields of study and cohort characteristics. (Jackson, 2014, Patiar, 2021 Scott, 2021). The involvement of employers in the development and implementation of pedagogical strategies may be a highly effective strategy for engaging students and developing employability skills.

RELEVANT RESEARCH

The Clinical Leadership and Management Program at the University of Kentucky offers a Bachelor of Health Sciences degree. Students in the program come from a diverse student body including first-generation students, underrepresented minorities, females, and nontraditional students. Many of the graduates go directly into the healthcare workforce after graduation.

In 2020 faculty in the CLM Program redesigned the curriculum to focus on competency development and employability skills. The program achieved Essential Employability Qualities certification through QA Commons and the Kentucky Council of Postsecondary Education by integrating eight employability competencies into the curriculum; communicator, thinker and problem solver, inquirer, collaborator, adaptable, principled and ethical, responsible and professional, and learner. The certification was used to elevate the development of student employability skills. The competencies and skills are introduced across the curriculum and employers are often engaged in a variety of ways. Culminating experiences include the foundation and advanced practicums where employer preceptors evaluate students on their eight competencies. Students then reflect on those assessments.

TRANSPARENT & TRANSFERABLE APPROACH TO TEACHING

A. PURPOSE

The CLM program moved to competency-based instruction to improve student career readiness. The eight employability competencies were integrated into the curriculum. These specific competencies and skills were identified by the QA Commons and developed as a framework for consideration by many fields of study. (QA Commons, 2022)

B. TASKS

The employability skill set is taught throughout the program, and across the curriculum. The faculty have developed standardized rubrics to use for the assessment of student performance at the formative and summative levels. The rubrics evaluate aspects of student performance on selected employability skills on a four-point scale; meets and consistently exceeds expectations, meets and occasionally exceeds expectations, meets expectations, and does not meet expectations. Students also reflect on their employability skills development as they progress through the

curriculum. This article focuses on employer engagement and feedback through the practicum experience.

Foundation and Advanced Practicum Experiences

CLM students complete practicums at healthcare sites in their senior year. Practicums are experiential learning opportunities where students get real-world work experience under the supervision of an instructor and a preceptor. In the first course, the Foundation Practicum, students meet with the instructor weekly, while also working with preceptors to shadow, interact with others, and work on live projects in the workplace. In the classroom, students work with the instructor to further develop their employability skills. For the second course, the advanced practicum, students are further integrated into the workplace with more hours of experiential learning and less classroom instruction.

A standardized rubric was developed that allows the preceptors to evaluate student performance on the eight employability competencies for feedback and coaching. Training is given to students and preceptors about the assessment process. Preceptors assess students at the midpoint of each semester for coaching purposes. Students complete a written reflection paper about their midpoint assessment that is evaluated by the instructor. Preceptors provide a final assessment at the end of the practicum to see if the students have made improvements. The opportunity for students to interact with employers and gain professional feedback about their skills and competencies development has helped students to become more aware of the needs of the workplace. It has also helped students to reflect on employer perceptions of their skills. Students receive feedback including validations, encouragement, and suggestions for improvement.

Preceptor Feedback Survey

Preceptors are periodically surveyed for feedback about collective student readiness. A focus group was conducted in 2017 to identify the career readiness of practicum students. At that time, employers consistently identified one skill that they believed was lacking, the ability to create and use spreadsheets. Instruction on this essential tool was integrated into the curriculum. The next Preceptor Survey was scheduled to launch in 2020, however, it was paused due to the pandemic. Finally, in the spring of 2023, the CLM Preceptor Feedback Survey was launched in the form of a Qualtrics

Survey to gain information about the employer perceptions of the collective career readiness of CLM practicum students.

C. CRITERIA FOR SUCCESS

Successful engagement of employers in the practicum experience is gauged by the willingness of employers to precept students and provide feedback about the program. Other criteria for success include student improvements in their employability competencies and skills, and ultimately, successful employment rates beyond graduation.

ANALYSIS/ASSESSMENT

Willingness of Employers to Engage as Preceptors

Since the implementation of an employability model, the CLM program has experienced more ease in the recruitment of preceptors. In recent semesters, the program has received employer requests for more students than the number of students enrolled. And, more frequently students are given opportunities to complete higher-level tasks at their practicum sites.

Preceptor Feedback Survey Data

In Spring 2023, a Qualtrics Survey was sent to 99 preceptors. Thirty preceptors responded to the simple survey representing a 33% response rate. The majority served as preceptors for multiple students across time. Seven of the employers reported that they had served as preceptors for five or more years throughout the duration of the curricular changes. Eleven employers have served as preceptors for five or more students. Two precepted eleven or more students, while seventeen precepted two to four students.

Preceptors were asked how well-prepared CLM practicum students are once they complete their practicums. The employability competencies and the standardized 4-point scale used in individual student assessments were also used in this survey question. Most often, responding preceptors reported that students *met and consistently exceeds (*MCE) or *met and occasionally* (MOE) *exceeds expectations*. Preceptors rated students at *Meets Expectation*s or higher in all competencies except for thinker and problem solver which was 7% *Does Not Meet Expectations,* 37% *Meets Expectations,* and 56% *Meets and Occasionally or Consistently Exceed Expectations.* Two text box questions were included for preceptors to write narratives about key strengths and competencies, as well as skills they would like students to have more of at the beginning of the practicum. Preceptors reported

that they think CLM students are willing to learn, competent and knowledgeable, exceed expectations, and motivated, professional, and creative. They also wanted students to have even better spreadsheet, technology, data analysis, operations, and strategic planning skills. These themes are consistent and the data suggests that the faculty should consider integrating more data analytics into the curriculum.

Student Improvements Across Practicum Experiences

Data for the end-of-semester preceptor assessment of students in the eight competencies have been collected. Work is still underway to analyze that data. However, individual performance is consistent with the Preceptor Feedback Survey. Students typically improve their performance as they progress through their practicum experiences, and they tend to rank higher in areas such as professional and responsible and principled and ethical and their scores are slightly lower in thinker and problem-solver.

Post-Graduation Employment and Advanced Degree Rates - While rates vary from year to year, about 60% of our graduates go straight to work, while 40% go immediately to graduate school in fields such as health administration, business, law, medicine, and more. We have just begun to collect data on employment status in the three months after graduation, but anecdotally, we know most of our graduates are employed quickly after graduation.

APPLICATION TO TEACHING

Employer engagement is also highly beneficial for academic programs seeking to use employability models to help students work on career readiness. Employer feedback helps to inform the curriculum. And, the use of teaching strategies such as practicums, provides an opportunity for students to get real-world experience and employer feedback about their competencies and skills. Integrating employability models into the curriculum is more likely to improve the competencies and skills of students entering the workplace and the success rate of graduates finding jobs in the field.

REFERENCES

Clancy, K., & Kercsmar, S. E. (2020) Engaging community partnerships to elevate performance. [Virtual Conference Presentation]. Association of University Programs in Health Administration 2020 Annual Meeting.

Cook, E. (2022) A narrative review of graduate employability models: their paradigms, and relationships to teaching and curricula. *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability.13*(1), 37-64. https://doi.org/10.21153/jtlge2022vol13no1art1483

Donald, W. E., Ashleigh, M. J., Baruch, Y. (2018) Students' perceptions of education and employability: Facilitating career transition from higher education into the labor market. *Career Development International,23*(5), 513-540. https://doi.org/10.1108/CDI-09-2017-0171

Fain, P. (2017, October 8) Group Attempts New Twist on Accreditation. Inside Higher Education. https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2017/10/09/group-attempts-new-twist-accreditation

Fugate, M., Kinicki, A. J., Ashforth, B. E. (2004) Employability: A psycho-social construct, its dimensions, and applications, *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 65*(1), 14-38, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2003.10.005

Jackson, D. (2014) Testing a model of undergraduate competence in employability skills and its implications for stakeholders, *Journal of Education and Work, 27*(2), 220-242, https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2012.718750

Northern Kentucky Tribune. (2020, June 3) Kentucky campuses lead charge on employability; 13 programs certified for integrating essential job skills. https://www.nkytribune.com/2020/06/kentucky-campuses-lead-charge-on-employability-13-programs-certified-for-integrating-essential-job-skills/.

Patiar, A., Kensbock, S., Benckendorff, P., Robinson, R., Richardson, S., Wang, Y., Lee, A. (2021). Hospitality students' acquisition of knowledge and skills through a virtual field trip experience. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Education. 33(*1), 14-28. https://doi.org/10.1080/10963758.2020.1726768

Scott, F. J., & Willison, D. (2021.) Students' reflections on an employability skills provision. *Journal of Further and Higher Education. 45(*8), 1118-1133. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2021.1928025

The Lane Report. (2018, November 16) *CPE launches employability initiative to prepare graduates for workplace success.* https://www.lanereport.com/108131/2018/11/cpe-launches-employability-initiative-to-prepare-graduates-for-workplace-success/

The Lumina Foundation. (2017, September 19) *Next-generation quality assurance for tomorrow's talent.* https://www.luminafoundation.org/news-and-views/qa-commons/

The Quality Assurance Commons. *The Eight EEQs.* (2022) https://theqacommons.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/The-Eight-EEQs-September-2021-1.pdf
Retrieved from the Web 6/29/2022.