CAREER ACTION TEAMS:

A Structured Approach That Taps the Power of Peers
Career services offices want to reach as many students as possible, but struggle with ways to get students to take best advantage of the programs and services that career centers offer.¹ ¹² ³ One of the primary influences on students’ post-college decision making is their peers.⁴ How can career services leverage peer influence to students’ educational advantage? Following is an overview of the Career Action Team (CAT) model developed at Mount Holyoke College. This is a structured approach that leverages peer influence, and includes tactics and tools to connect students to existing and often underused resources. Outcomes of the pilot and recommendations for future use on college campuses will also be discussed.

In fall 2007, the authors along with Orville Pierson, director of the program design team at Lee Hecht Harrison (LHH), embarked on a pilot program at the Daniel L. Jones Career Development Center (CDC) at Mount Holyoke. Pierson proposed testing LHH’s well-established Job-Search Work Team (JSWT) model for career support at the college level. JSWTs have worked to great advantage in outplacement, providing a group process to facilitate job-search activity for large numbers of employees in layoff situations, ranging from entry-to senior-level employees. It is a proven methodology—but could it be applied to colleges? Students would be a great target, as they are plugged in, overwhelmed, and often suffer in silence, not availing themselves of the programs and services at career centers. Working with the college modified JSWT model, this team piloted the system for the year at Mount Holyoke.

**CAREER ACTION TEAMS**

Drawing on a JSWT model, career staff worked with Pierson to modify the approach to fit the needs of college seniors.⁵ This resulted in Career Action Teams (CATs), which went beyond JSWT to include work on self-assessment and job-search preparation. The principal features of CATs are:

- A systematic, project management approach to job search.
- Instruction on the full range of job-search activities and their relative effectiveness.
- A group process that includes self-assessment, reflection, tool development, and quantitative progress measurements.
- Regular networking efforts, supported by the CAT.
- Group activities that provide personal connections and a job-search practicum as well as learning.

A CAT of 10 to 12 participants work together, supported by a career center staff member, to facilitate a group process and outcomes to further job-search activities. The team follows the same process at each meeting, but with flexibility as to the subject matter at the end of the meetings. To deepen commitment to the team, participants sign a statement of involvement. Participants agree to:

- Select a student leader and a second in command.
- Actively participate and keep records on their search process.
- Support one another in the search effort, sharing ideas and leads as appropriate.
- Send a progress update with a colleague if unable to attend a meeting.
- Maintain a focus on job search in general for purposes of discussion in the group.

The team meets weekly for 90 minutes. The team leader sets the time and place, reminds members of the meeting, and ensures that the meeting process is adhered to carefully. He or she sets the pace and tone, as well as reminding participants of the norms for constructive work. Each member is expected to attend, actively participate, and maintain a positive, supportive attitude.

At the meeting, the leader welcomes all participants and updates them on the activities of those who are not attending. Each attendee then provides a three-minute update: Numbers are provided for resume submissions, networking contacts, responses to advertisements, and work with agencies. Then three positive events are highlighted, priorities for upcoming job-search activities are cited, and one question is designated for group discussion in the second part of the meeting. If a member has secured a new position, then he or she is expected to recount his or her story of securing the job and what made this effort successful. (Often this takes longer than the three minutes allotted per participant!) The storytelling provides closure for the member who will be leaving the group and also provides encouraging news for all who are engaged in job-search activity. The leader may appoint a timekeeper to keep activity focused, and a recorder to post all data. So, with 12 participants in regular session, the total time is 36 minutes for collecting job-search information from all team members.

The remainder of the meeting is available for discussion of the questions raised. Each member votes for three topics; the items are prioritized with times allocated based on the complexity of the material. The leader opens the discussion of the topic and all members are involved in the exchange. If there are personal considerations or leads that emerge from these discussions, then participants are encouraged to meet afterwards to continue those conversations. This section takes the remainder of the meeting, approximately 50 minutes. The process is the same each week. It is

By Cori Ashworth and Scott C. Brown

Career services professionals at Mount Holyoke College developed a program that uses peer influence to persuade students to take advantage of the career center’s programs and services.
focused and efficient, keeps the group on task, and does not encourage support group discussions related to personal concerns, an important differentiation from other systems.

**OVERVIEW OF THE CAT COLLEGE PILOT PROCESS**

A recruiting meeting was held in the fall, with Pierson speaking on the job-search process and on the CAT model. This meeting was one-and-one-half hours long and students enrolled at the end of the meeting. A form for application to the pilot program was used to heighten engagement and commitment to the process. Questions included:

- What are your career interests?
- Where do you want to work?
  (New York City; Boston; Washington, D.C.; Chicago; other)
- When would you like to start work?
- How many hours will you commit to your search?
  o First semester
  o Over break
  o Second semester
- Why do you want to participate in the pilot program?

Team members agreed to meet once monthly in the fall and spring. This timeline fit with the time allocation that a college senior could make for the process. This also connects to YourPlan, a four-year developmental career curriculum at Mount Holyoke that helps students better maximize their career-related efforts, a way to scale career services’ offerings with strategic use of staff, giving students the benefits of high tech and high touch. Students could use the online YourPlan program along with the CAT process and make rapid strides in the job search.

Teams were identified for three major cities, with the idea that once these seniors moved to the city that they would have a cadre of young alumnae that they would know. New York City, Boston, and Chicago were the cities identified based on our student and alumnae demographics. There was also one group for “general” membership.

Consultants from career services were available at each meeting, serving as resource staff and instructors on topics of interest and as consultants for the group process. Pierson and Ashworth were available by e-mail and phone, and Ashworth also met with students individually on campus. The CAT process provided a place for ongoing learning and the specificity and depth of individual work was heightened due to the group program.

Following the initial informational session, all the fall semester meetings were held in a large conference room accommodating the four pilot teams. The program started with 49 students in October. Meetings followed for late October and November. The October meeting addressed developing a professional objective, identifying target industries and companies, and the elevator speech (a personal pitch a few minutes long), along with a framework for search techniques that related to the data collection model applied later in the CAT process meetings. In the November meeting, we taught interviewing and networking skills. Both of these meetings were conducted with CAT group processes applied. The team leaders asked for activity data, and then the larger group learned the new material together.

In January, we held a team meeting for a half-day to review group process, and to initiate the monthly meetings for job search in earnest. At this training we saw a significant drop in attendance, as many students had secured employment, and we started the year with 22 participants. Meetings continued in February, March, and April, focused on group review of activity following CAT guidelines. We ended the year in April with a team meeting, discussion of the year in review, with general agreement that the process was very helpful and should continue, in modified form, for the coming year. A small group of seven decided to continue to meet by phone during the summer.

**Outcomes**

At the April meeting, participants talked about what they learned during the CAT program. Feedback included:

- Students reported that they felt supported and positive about the process and model. Although similar material is available through a workshop series,

---

**Cori Ashworth** is director of alumnae career services and employer outreach at the Daniel L. Jones Career Development Center at Mount Holyoke College. She holds a master’s degree in education from the College of William and Mary and a certificate in advanced graduate study in counseling from the University of Massachusetts.

**Scott C. Brown** is associate vice president and dean of students at Colgate University and former director of the Daniel L. Jones Career Development Center at Mount Holyoke College. He holds a doctorate from the University of Maryland, a master’s degree from Indiana University, and a bachelor’s degree from the University of California, Irvine.
students felt special and appreciated the support they experienced.

- Students realized that they could act as strong resources for each other, offering leads and insights.
- Many students commented that they learned how to think through a challenge in the job-search process that was most helpful, and felt confident that they could solve the problem.
- Students felt a sense of responsibility to other group members; this motivated them to work harder, set goals, and adhere to deadlines to move the process forward.

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CAT SECOND-YEAR PROGRAM**

We also noted some processes we should continue doing, and some we should drop or change, including:

- Keep the first semester program focused on skills development.
- Offer a fast track group for the New York City financial firms to support seniors who are starting an intensive job-search process in the fall.
- Continue to offer training in January on group process.
- Give modest “homework” to further instill learning. Example: Prepare a cover letter for a top job which you have identified, create a list of your skills/strengths.
- Do not organize groups around geography or field early in the process; students are not clear on goals and may change ideas, creating changes in group structure and process. In addition, keeping the groups intact provides for deeper learning and support among participants.
- Processes and groups created a sense of accountability that was motivating and helpful for students; they pushed themselves to do more, and learned more as a result.
- Tie alumnae to the process later in the year to create links to them in cities of interest.
- Hold team leaders accountable for clear and timely communications; the model falters if there is a break in communications.
- Use some student career staff to help facilitate meeting process, with senior consultants providing training and consultation as needed.

**SUMMARY**

The CAT pilot process for 2007-2008 taught us that students like the group model for career work; they felt special, accountable, empowered, and supported—the types of things that Millennial students desire. This model allows career services staff to support more students in-depth training over their senior year, and allows students to form deeper collaborative relationships with peers.

The CAT process can be used in alumnae club locations across the country, and clearly could build to a model that is widely applied. We will continue this model in the upcoming year at Mount Holyoke with modifications for operations as outlined. We are confident that this model will be one of our major programmatic offerings for students in coming years.

**Endnotes**


6 Brown, Adler, Ashworth, and Chevry.