Confessions of a Not-So-New Director
By Scott C. Brown

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Career services departments are like America; there are some Native peoples, some long-term settlers, and waves of new people from various backgrounds looking to come here for a better life. If you ask anybody how he or she got into this field, they usually say, “It’s complicated.” Everyone’s got a story. This is mine.

I entered the career development world in the fall of 1999. When I first came to Mount Holyoke College (MHC), Bill Wright-Swadel (my former colleague at Dartmouth College and current director of career services at Harvard University) encouraged me to write about my view of career services from the perspective of someone new to the field. He said it might be of interest to folks who are new to the field, those anticipating making the transition, and to the “experienced crowd” who might be interested in the perspective of a new director. He also thought it might provide a forum for discussing the issue of transferable skills, something that is often advised to our students and alumnae, even though the career field often seeks the person who “can hit the ground running” because they have done the job before. Because he had spent more than 25 seconds in career development, I took him at his word.

I am embarrassed to say that my interview at MHC was one of the very few times I had actually entered a career office. I originally applied to MHC for the director of residential life position, which felt like the right school but the wrong job. However, through the interview process, the dean of the college was interested in my background and asked to read my dissertation on the development of wisdom.

Shortly thereafter, they were searching for a new director of the Career Development Center. An internal review determined that they wanted a person to take the center to the next level and more directly connect its work with the educational mission of the college. Given this new focus, the dean phoned me and encouraged me to apply. During this call, I was thinking of how long I would have to wait to say “no thanks,” but luckily, some vestige of manners allowed me to say “I will think about it.” What did I know about career services?

However, I changed my mind after I spoke to a mentor who echoed the words that we often say, “Judge this job by what you get to do, whom you get to do it with, and whom you get to do it for—don’t get hung up on the job title or organizational location.” Hmmmm. Though my background was primarily in residential life and academic and student affairs partnerships, my research and professional involvement were all about creating powerful learning environments for a diverse community of student learners. Looking at this opportunity in this way, it was an exact match, and one that I could have easily missed because of my own myopia. So I threw my hat in the ring, lumbered through the interview process, and, because I beat my future employer in a three-card monte game (or my future employer’s faith that I had “vision” and could learn the basics), got the job.

Because career development is intricably intertwined with so many constituencies, I will talk about each of them in turn: staff, students, on/off-campus constituencies, and professional colleagues.

When I first got to Mount Holyoke, I knew I had a credibility problem. Not only had I never worked in career development, I had never been a director, and I was the youngest person in the office (“Hey, I have a son your age...”). So I compensated by wearing a coat and tie every day, looking as out of place as Richard Nixon in a suit on his beach walks. I had “substitute teacher” syndrome—I worried I would be mistaken for a student, even though I have a bald spot that can be seen from space and Mount Holyoke is a women’s college.

Entry

Upon my arrival, the staff was very warm and cordial, but I could tell they were thinking, “Don’t make any sudden or jerky movements, or say anything that might confuse or anger him.” Though I have been accustomed to being with people in charge for a long time, I underestimated how much being a “director” meant to others. I was a “boss,” and an unknown entity at that. I was used to being in the role of the regular guy, someone who took his work—but not himself—seriously, and it was strange to be observed in this particular way. The staff was understandably trying to figure me out. I didn’t make things any easier. I am not the Great Communicator. In my own natural habitat I mumble, talk too fast, make random references to 80s pop culture, and free associate like a “P” on a bender (“stop before I digress further!!”). I have also learned that my sense of humor appeals to about three people, and they all live in one house outside of Los Angeles.

As someone who has paid his dues in every other context, I appreciated that the staff would regard me as a bit of an interloper. Luckily I had come to an office that was solid enough they could take a relative risk by hiring someone with my background. Because I didn’t have the background one might expect in a new director, I felt like I had to put some points on the board quickly. It

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was hard to do this well because it was obvious that I lacked the nuts-and-bolts career stuff—what I brought to the position was very abstract. My hope was to make changes quickly to demonstrate my worth. Needless to say, it didn’t go that well. I made many rookie mistakes. Most of the snafus came out of me trying to expedite matters, and not clearly communicating my expectations. In the beginning, I was frustrated by the lack of movement. I kept wondering, “Why isn’t this working? Our goals are the same.” For someone who is generally a creative and confident risk-taker, I was becoming afraid to be wrong. I was new to this game and needed to be more comfortable with my own authority in order to both assert myself and engage others. The problem was I would either know less than every person in the room about a given topic, or I knew more than anyone else in the room when it came to things where I had direct professional/research experience. I was stricken with a bi-polar condition: I vacillated between no confidence and too much. I needed to regress to the stable professional mean—somewhere between feeling completely inept and being an insufferable, snot-nosed former grad student.

Personnel Issues

In addition to gaining the trust of my staff, I was trying to get a better grasp on them. But at first everybody is two-dimensional. It is difficult to try to piece together, Rashomon-style, what had happened before I got here without inadvertently taking something as gospel when it might serve one member over another. I was cautioned that my normally fatalistically optimistic view of humanity might cloud my judgment; what would be presented to me may or may not be the whole picture. In addition, when I first arrived, three staff members resigned to take new positions. Although there were good reasons for each of the departures, I felt like the Angela Lansbury of the career development world; wherever I went, untimely resignations piled up. My first hire was a very close friend, and he joined a team of dedicated educators who were committed as much to their students as they were to their craft.

Organizational Change

One of the first things I needed to do in this position was understand the organizational milieu. How did this current arrangement come to be? What language is spoken here? What are the unique customs? Any person who comes into a new job will experience a steep learning curve, and if you’re new to this field that curve can be quite steep. In addition to starting the school year with three vacancies, it was apparent that the current configuration didn’t make much sense. Over the years, an odd series of evolutions had brought together a variety of offices, all living under one roof. It was important to be able to find ways to keep the organization growing by preserving research and development time to respond to a different direction for the office and new institutional priorities. Of course this had to be done in the fall with fewer staff, which is tantamount to trying to build a car while it’s moving. In my zeal to move forward, I forgot a critical fact—people don’t really like change. Over time I learned to be more patient and allow my vision to coalesce with the collective thinking of this seasoned and talented staff.

Budget

Money is important. Very, very important. A central aspect of my role of director is the budget. Before this position, I could get away with the “What do you mean there is no more money I still have checks” philosophy of fiscal acuity. As directors, we are the bottom line and we have to pay very close attention to where the money comes from and where it goes, so in difficult economic times we can know where we can take a hit and when to appropriately play our cards to advocate for more. Some entrepreneurial directors have augmented their budgets with a variety of innovative strategies. (Word of advice: It will be difficult for you to get institutional endorsement for a “CDC Blood Drive and Bake Sale.”)

STUDENTS

Counseling/Advising

This was the one transferable skill I was banking on. I have a degree in counseling and have had many experiences advising in a variety of individual and group contexts, including academic, social, extracurricular, and athletic. Though I had a good grip on the process of advising, I was less sure about the content for the career world. What specifically should I say? How deep do you go in 30 minutes? Should this be a one-shot deal? On-going? What do I need to know? What is reasonable progress? Also, because I am a terrible liar, I felt a very strong need to confess to students that I was new to this game. By immediately coming out as a new career professional, I wondered if this was comforting or would they ask me to prorate their tuition for inferior service? I was a bit terrified.

My first-ever contact with a MHC student didn’t go so well either. We lived in a faculty house on the edge of campus, and early one morning during the first week of classes, one of our dogs (large, male Rottweiler) bolted out of the house and chased (in a fun, frolicky manner, I swear) a student...
jogging by. I immediately sprinted after our dog in my pajamas, shrieking like a howler monkey. When I finally caught up to our dog and apologized profusely for the incident, I realized that I was not a vision of loveliness—I was squinting without my contacts, my hair was sticking up at several odd angles, and I generally looked like a furloughed mental patient. Coincidentally, this student happened to be one of my first counseling appointments.

General

In career services, my relationships with students in general have also changed. Being in the career office seems to inspire hope, despair, and guilt in students—sometimes all at once (“You are going to get me a job, right?” “Wait, there’s the director and I can’t even deal with a job search!” “Hi, I am a senior, I have never been to your office, I am so sorry...”). Also, the tenor of conversations with students is very pleasant—they are generally happy to see us. Unlike residence life, I haven’t had to have conversations about igniting couches on fire or issues related to personal hygiene, or had to deal with finding a drunk student mistaking my apartment for his girlfriend’s room. Also, I no longer have to walk around with a beeper. (I had developed an ability to pick up a distant siren, echolocate its coordinates, speed, and direction, and use some logarithm to accurately guess where it was going and how soon I would get the call.) If residence life staff are the emergency room surgeons of higher education, career services staff are the dermatologists—what we do is very important and often urgent, but often we can just apply ointment to the problem. And I am glad.

Faculty

As with most institutions, many of our faculty members fall within a very wide spectrum; on one end there are some who would crawl through ground glass to help students, on the other, there are those who haven’t done anything since the first Roosevelt was president. Even at my institution, with a 10:1 faculty/student ratio and high student involvement, I can still hear such questions from faculty as: “Career center? Isn’t that for seniors going into business?” So we had to cast ourselves as supporters of their work, providing programs and services that will ultimately make their lives easier by handling pesky administrative processes, assisting with recommendations, and generally enriching their student interactions.

Development

When I first came here, I quickly became a part of development efforts. Career services can be a popular place to help cultivate donors: Many alumnae are looking to provide tangible opportunities that they never had themselves. I learned the importance of stewarding those that had supported the center, and how to help tailor the offerings of our office to those being cultivated. Our offices show our students in action, providing examples those alumnae can...
wrap both their heads and hearts around. In career services, I have become much more adept at finding the right story to tell to a particular person and make the ineffable aspects of our work compelling. I had to become more attuned to the college they left—it may be 2003 now, but could still be 1953 to them.

Other Offices
In order to illustrate their own value to the student experience, many offices such as athletics, residence life, and student programs want to help their students articulate what they have learned in these demanding extracurricular activities. Career offices can help students find language to describe the valuable knowledge, skills, and qualities they developed through these significant out-of-class activities.

“Other Duties as Assigned”
Being a director also qualifies you to be conscripted to be a part of other campus initiatives, some interesting, some less so; and some important, some less so. The college can require you to do things in the name of service that test your professional abilities. For example, as chair of the Student Employment Task Force, my first charge was to address the inequities of the student wage structure. On the continuum of my transferable skills, this was on the side of juggling live chainsaws. The student wage structure was very uneven; students were getting compensated based on the particular advocacy of their own supervisor. Something had to be done. However, the Constitution of the United States was framed more quickly than this new wage structure. For example, nude models for the art studio were one of the highest paid positions on campus. In our new wage structure, they should be in line with positions requiring advanced skills (don’t even start—you think you have the physical stamina, mental concentration, and aesthetic capability to hold an interesting pose for an hour?). But the art department wanted it to be in the highest wage bracket, on par with our “Administrative Fellow” paraprofessional positions. They threw everything at me: “It is hard to find anybody to do this work” (“Harder than finding a Romanian translator?”); “It is very important.” (“More important than EMTs?”); “It is hard to find people for the money.” (“More expensive than top-end computer workers?”). “They are nude.” (“If they are willing to do this, can we suppose that they are comfortable operating within these social parameters?”).

Finally I relented and the models were paid the higher wage. If people do their job nude, they will qualify for the higher wage, but only if it is central to their work—doing just any old work in the nude will not get you the higher wage, but rather, arrested. Shortly thereafter, I was invited to speak to our Student Government Association to talk about the new wage structure, and after spending two hours carefully explicating the creation, philosophy, and ramifications of this new policy—the first time I was ever quoted in our school paper was simply, “Because they are nude, that’s why.”

Alumnae
Alumnae and career offices have an important symbiotic relationship. On one hand, we try to access the voluminous generosity of alumnae who sponsor interns, recruit our graduates for their organizations, and serve on panels and as mentors. But, alumnae interest can be delicate; we have many enthusiastic alums who offer opportunities where we know there will be little or no student interest (“My taxidermy business in Nome, Alaska, has not had a taxidermy intern yet!”). We also need to provide services for alumnae who are in need of support. Institutional goodwill can rest on our shoulders, though our priorities and resources may be in conflict in trying to be all things to all people.

Parents
Parents have always figured in the career development process, but they are much more directly inserting themselves nowadays. They are very concerned. With the new crop of hyper-involved “helicopter” parents hovering over their “organization kids,” I’ve received gotten calls from parents with kids in 10th grade asking about our placement rate into medical school. And one parent who bonded with me confided, “My daughter, wants to be—I don’t know how to say this—an anthropology major…” The pressure to constantly get a leg up in the world permeating certain sectors of our society is unrelenting and does not seem to be flagging.

Employers/Graduate Schools/Other Evaluators of Students
This field is quite entrepreneurial. We spend a great deal of time trying to cultivate the best match of employers for our students, touting our students’ qualities and always keeping an eye on the name-brand employers that catch our bosses’ attention. We are at the nexus of many definitions of success and what that means to our students and our institutions.

Off-Campus

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Colleagues
When I first arrived on campus, I was very surprised at the number of groups that we in the career center worked with closely; my dance card was quickly filled with the Five College Consortia, Six Siblings, Small College Career Alliance, and the Liberal Arts Career Network. I was also not certain of the types of relationships with other campus colleagues, and the mores that shaped these relationships.

I was very surprised at how freely my counterparts at other schools...
shared their triumphs and failures with apparently little censoring. Despite the fact that our institutions are often in competition out in the real world, I quickly realized that candor was the coin of the realm, and you can always count on your colleagues to understand the pressures of the field. When it comes down to it, only other career professionals know the reality—we are responsible for things that we often have little control over. That being said, I was very relieved when the daughter of a prominent career director graduated from MHC last year and got a job.

It was also interesting to hear some of the dilemmas of my new field: How do you advise a student who was the business manager of a prostitute in a small village in Africa before she came to college? What do you do with an alum who would love to come to campus for a program but is currently in prison? How do you advise an alum who has been working as a part-time submissive in the Southwest?

I was also fascinated how small the career world can be. Like a head coach getting a new job, the reverberations are felt within our small community when someone vacates a directorship and must be replaced. In my first week on the job, while they were still pinning notes on me so that I would get returned to my office, I was receiving invitations to apply for other high profile directorships.

Management of Information

There is also a lot to know in this field. Because “career” is such an unprotected term, everything could be argued to be worthwhile. How do you make sense out of all the information, vendors, and products out there? I often turn to the professional community to get a better sense of what needs to be known and what to monitor, which is most useful and why? In terms of technology, what problem is this solving? How much will this cost? Is it worth it? Or is the tail wagging the dog? What do you have to do to get ahead of the curve, stay abreast, and stay afloat? Outside of our information technology departments, there are few places on campus that require a department to be discriminate, judicious, and nimble in our response to the changing tech environment and our relationship to it.

Professional Associations

I immediately joined EACE and NACE, trying to glean as much as I could. I noticed a real cultural difference in the conferences that the college career world holds vs. residential life or general student affairs conferences. Maybe it was because I was a newbie and had not accrued any responsibility, but the conferences in career services are a lot more fun, and they’re structured with many more opportunities to connect with others in an informal way. The presence of employers changes the flavor of the conference. As a “decision-maker” (or “mark”), I forgot how I would be of interest to vendors. Also, one of the best things I did was join the EACE Consulting Committee, where I could bring a different perspective to sites that I knew a lot about, draft off of much more experienced colleagues, and get myself into other people’s shops and purloin their great ideas without remorse.

CONCLUSION

So what have I learned that might be of use to others? In the spirit of “Wise people learn from their own mistakes, wiser people learn from other people’s mistakes,” here are some thoughts for anybody thinking of taking a directorship, either from within the field or from the outside. These are some thoughts from one person’s experience, to be taken with a boulder of salt:

- You know more than you think.
- You know less than you think.
- Observe the “two ears, one mouth” rule. Listen more than you speak.
- Know your staff and let them know you.
- Find mentors, people who you can talk to who won’t penalize you for your candor.
- Understand your major constituencies. What makes them tick and what ticks them off? Who has a stake and why do they care? Translate all of your work into terms that your major stakeholders understand and value.
- Do ordinary things extraordinarily well.
- Know and steward your budget wisely. A foolish director and his/her budget are soon parted.
- Be an institutional historian, anthropologist, and cartographer, so you can understand your office/institution’s history, culture, and terrain.
- Students are consumers and products of our institutions, and we are responsible for both aspects.
- Whatever problem you are experiencing, your professional colleagues have been through it before and they will help you.

I love this job. I love that we can walk into the office, have problems that can be solved in two seconds, two minutes, two weeks, or two years. Much is demanded of us. We are expected to be organizational decathletes, masters of the economy, insiders in favored schools, diviners of the future, excavators of the past, SWAT team therapists, and relentless motivators. It is a job that demands all of you. Not only have I been required to draw on all of my previous professional experience, I have had to draw on my teen jobs of selling flowers on a street corner, flipping burgers, ushering in a theater, delivering pizzas, telemarketing insurance, and waiting tables to do this job at all, let alone do it well. But I love it. Anthony Quinn said, “They don’t pay me to act, they pay me to wait in between takes.” As for me, they don’t pay me to be a director; they pay me to wear this coat and tie.