Educator or Entrepreneur?

By Scott C. Brown

Career educators strive to develop learning outcomes related to the whole person through programs and services. However, there are a number of barriers to this goal: Usually, students are not required to use our services; we lack the consistent time and place of a classroom, and we do not have grades to motivate students in an ongoing way. In addition, when students do use our services, the use is often transactional in nature; we are often judged by “services we perform” vs. “students we help develop.” Finally, our offices have multiple and often competing priorities, and we almost always face limited financial resources. This reality leaves career educators with two big questions to resolve: How do we encourage students to use our programs and services when there are few or no requirements? And, once students are in our offices, how do we engage them more deeply to develop desired learning outcomes?
This article explores the educational entrepreneur approach to help career educators identify practical marketing and learning strategies to increase traffic to career centers and enhance learning, and to set clear, high, and assessable goals that address and reconcile multiple and competing priorities. One career development center that wanted to encourage student traffic and engage students more deeply in its learning mission used a model of educational entrepreneurship toward reaching its goals. The following details several aspects of the educational entrepreneur approach, and integrates these aspects into a generalizable, strategic framework with recommendations to guide policies, programs, and practice.

continued
Introduction

There is ever-increasing competition for the attention of today’s college students. It is a reality that we must address effectively by asking: What are some lessons that can be learned from the private sector that can help us get into the over-stimulated minds of our students? Can we borrow these without compromising the integrity of our missions?

One option is to think like an educational entrepreneur—with the heart of an educator and the mind of an entrepreneur. The goal is to capture students’ attention, compel them to act, and help them achieve desired learning outcomes. Educational entrepreneurship combines market research, business strategy, cognitive research, pedagogy, and learning theory. It is not just marketing, but using marketing and customer service strategies to enhance career-related outcomes. If our “product” is learning, our competition is often fear, over-scheduling, resistance, ambivalence, and misperception. To increase traffic and engage students more deeply, the Career Development Center (CDC) at Mount Holyoke College (MHC) used market research and customer service to develop learning outcomes.

Market Research

The educational entrepreneur approach requires that you get a sense of who your market is, what that market needs, and how your market perceives your office and services. At MHC, our “market” includes our primary constituency—students—but we also consider faculty, staff, employers, alumnae, and parents. In our research, we looked at

the Millennial generation, usage data/direct marketing, student advisory boards, focus groups, and branding.

Millennial Generation

A major market research concern is to know our students. For those of us on campuses with traditionally aged students, we have come to see how the “Millennial” generation has shaped the campus culture. To market to these students in more compelling ways; we need to appreciate the world from their point of view. We know that some key signatures of this group are that they are close to their parents, overscheduled, used to instantaneous information and gratification, and group-oriented, and operate in a world that is largely “self-service” and on-demand. They have also grown up in a digital environment where learning is “active, contextual, social, engaging, digital, and owned by the student(s), who expect to control when, where, how, and how fast they learn.”

Usage Data/Direct Marketing

Think about the potential power of direct marketing. How can the effective analysis and deployment of information help reach audiences in targeted ways? For example, on a large scale, customer choices are tracked any time one logs onto Amazon.com, and when users return to the site there are recommendations based on earlier selections. Direct marketers can have as many as 2,000 pieces of individual information on a household and are sophisticated enough to make marketing calculations down to the block where one lives.

In our case, we needed to understand how individuals were currently using our office. Who was coming in? Was there a difference between users and non-users? When students enter the CDC, they swipe their campus ID card, enabling us to capture each student’s class year, ethnicity, and major, as well as the month, day, and time of their visits. We created a statistical model from our usage data and found that the profile of the person least likely to use our services was white and a humanities or undeclared major. This told us we should consider efforts to that demographic. Similarly, since we do not have a monolithic student population, we stratified our students into four groups by usage and mindset as to why and how they use our office (i.e., psychographics):

- High-users (10+ visits) are identified by their focus and initiative, and are often international students. The CDC is the first place they come.
- Transactional users (6-10 visits) often feel they are “doing something” and use most services, albeit in a more functional, noneducational way (e.g., “please correct my resume”).
- Reluctant/low-users (1-5 visits) often feel that they have bluffed their way through school (the “imposter syndrome”), and often feel overwhelmed and that no one else is going through the same thing. Members of this group are often tentative; once they finally come to our office, they can be easily discouraged due to unrealistic expectations.
- Self-sufficient low/non-users (0 visits) are students who are typically confident and resourceful enough with their own connections and ability to get to where they want to go on their own.

We are most concerned about the transactional and reluctant users.

Student Advisory Board

Another way for offices to get the real “word on the street” is to form a student advisory board. This group can provide leadership opportunities for students and be a reality check

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between assumptions of how others perceive and actually experience your office. For example, we referred to our peer counselor/library assistants (trained student advisers) as “PCLAs.” After a full year of meeting with the student advisory board, a member stopped me and asked, “What does ‘PCLA’ mean?” We have since referred to them as peer counselors and dropped the alienating acronym.

Focus Groups
Another tactic is to conduct focus groups. Focus groups can provide a greater depth of understanding that might be missed through other means. To get a better sense of the perception of our office on campus, we conducted two focus groups with students who had never or seldom been to the CDC or only visited once or twice. We discovered that these groups perceived us as a last resort only to be used once all of their own resources were exhausted. They also believed that the CDC was only for people going into business. Some students felt the CDC was only for “stars” and took themselves out of the mix because they felt they were not exceptional enough to use our office. We also learned that a primary student interest in CDC services was to translate liberal arts into viable work-related, career-planning steps. Of course, this is what we have been doing all along, but the persistent myths and erroneous assumptions about our work negated this fact. Lastly, we explored students’ experiences with our services and were horrified to learn that many had experienced terrible customer service from our student staff—our front-line and face to the world. The focus group reported that the student staff ignored them or engaged in their own personal business, making individuals not want to return. Moreover, their experience meant others could be put off from using the CDC: As we know, people dissatisfied with a restaurant won’t necessarily alert management to their complaints, but will warn off others.

Serving as External Consultant/Campus Visits
As part of your market research, you will also want to get a sense of the “industry standard” by looking at other institutions. One thing I did when I first came to this field was join career consulting committees as a way to see what were the pervasive issues were in similar offices. It has been very sobering to hear a president, provost, and vice-president talk candidly about a particular office, identifying issues that we experienced on our campus as well, but probably had not been articulated as explicitly to us. It was also an opportunity to see people struggle with issues similar to our own and adapt their viable ideas to our campus.

External Review
It was critical to our market research to invite external consultants to do a review of your office. In our case, the external review had the intended effect of making more than 50 people (our president, dean of the faculty, dean of the college, faculty, recruiters, other office staff, and so on) think about our office more deeply. The main questions we sought to answer were:

- What problems do we solve for our primary stakeholders?
- How do we address and reconcile our multiple and competing priorities?
- What is our current image on campus?
- What is our ideal image on campus?

We drew out all of our stakeholders’ perceptions and have been able to get a more accurate picture that reflected these more explicit concerns in ways that would have been nearly impossible otherwise. For example, we now know that faculty members are less interested in hearing about our office’s “learning” mission, as they felt that was more their domain. They wanted us to be the masters of post-college life. This was helpful because in our interactions we are now able to communicate in a way that is much more compelling to this crucial audience.

Branding
Another powerful idea borrowed from the private sector is branding—the practice of marketing products by associating them with a widely accepted brand name so as to distinguish them from similar products. It precedes the “development of all sub-strategies and provides a blueprint for the marketing and franchising of a brand.” Regarding career services, it is the way we want our “customers” to perceive, think, and feel about our brand relative to others.

A brand positioning statement is a strategic mission and action statement that identifies a specific target consumer group and insights into the group’s needs, the competitive framework that the services will compete in, benefits and reasons that back up this claim and distinguishes the brand, and the “brand character.” The brand character tells us who the brand would be if it “walked through the door.”

We used our marketing research and other marketing information we found to develop a focused brand positioning statement. We had believed that by and large, the word “career” was automatically linked to our office. But many different entities on campus offer career-related programs, and students did not necessarily connect them to our office since the programs were largely localized. Therefore, we have changed our frame of reference to include all post-MHC activities, to associate the CDC with all these activities explicitly, and to be the “first and last word on careers” on our campus.

Customer Service
If marketing helps get people in the door, customer service—broadly imagined—is to ensure they keep coming back. When you have a choice for a service, what places do you repeatedly choose? Why are you loyal? What is so great about this place that makes it deserve your repeated business?

The answers almost always reflect excellent customer service. Excellent customer service is critical to the
learning mission of the educational entrepreneur. What changes can we make to create more rewarding experiences? We looked at customer service in several industries, including entertainment (amusement parks) and healthcare.

**Disney**

One of the first things we did was to look at the masters of the form—Disney theme parks. Disney coined the term “guestology” to identify guests’ needs, wants, stereotypes, and emotions. **Guestology** is a combination of demographics and psychographics, getting a sense of who visits the Disney parks and ascertaining the mental state of their guests.

For example, Disney staffers know that people can have conflicting thoughts about some of the attractions. On one hand, park visitors anticipate the thrill of the ride; on the other hand, they dread sitting or standing in long lines in the heat, waiting for admission. Thus, Disney developed the Fast Pass™ system to decrease the time spent waiting in line for the most popular attractions. When guests who use the Fast Pass recall their Disney experience, they’re more likely to remember it positively. Disney also knows that consistent common courtesy creates a personal and satisfying visitor experience, so the organization instituted the rules that all “cast members” follow, such as greeting and welcoming guests, making eye contact, smiling, seeking out guest contact, and thanking each visitor.

Similarly, the Pike Place Fish Market in Seattle has its staff follow the four principles for legendary customer service: Choose your attitude, play, make their day, and be present.

**Moments of Truth**

Visiting Walt Disney World is one thing, but visiting the doctor is something else entirely. Unfortunately, students may consider visiting our offices to be as delightful as visiting the doctor. However, many health providers provide exceptional customer service, the standards of which also can be applied to career services.

Baker looked at customer service in the healthcare industry and discussed the idea of “moments of truth,” separate points in the client experience that can make or break the client’s feeling about the visit. Each moment of truth can be characterized as negative, positive (average), or truly memorable.

What do these moments look like in our offices? This was a critical question for us because our student staff members serve as receptionists—the first impression of our office. We had assumed that student staff understood they were expected to be friendly, but found that “friendly” can mean different things to different people. So during training, we had our student staff members develop customer standards and explicit criteria at each “moment of truth” for the customer, including contacting the CDC by phone, meeting the receptionist, swiping the campus ID card, waiting for a counseling appointment, entering the career library, meeting a peer counselor, meeting the professional counselor, and exiting the CDC.

Another customer service issue that we looked at is how to manage guest perceptions. Gladwell reported that the only difference between doctors who were sued for malpractice more often was because they spent, on average, three minutes less with a patient [than doctors who were not sued], failed to make orienting comments about the exam’s details, and did not actively engage the patient. If people feel cared for, their good will is sustained.

This issue came up in our office when we heard that we were not very helpful to students and just “sent them to the books in the CDC library.” Though no counselor would ever be this dismissive, this feeling, this perception, has lingered to the detriment of our office. Now, instead of simply bringing a student to the library, we actually pull a book off the shelf, open it, place it in his or her hands, and transition them explicitly to a peer counselor.

**Learning Outcomes**

Targeted market research and excellent customer service will help get students’ attention and create positive experiences, and help them develop a context in which to develop successful learning outcomes. Even though we know our work’s main purpose is to help students develop learning outcomes, there are some important realities to remember. Students don’t usually come to us for self-actualization. When someone is on fire, they don’t want the theory or story of fire, they want water! What students “want” is often different from what we educators feel they need, and a big part of our mission is to get students to eat their “educational vegetables,” that is, to help them learn what they need to learn. We can realize the educational mission by identifying learning outcomes, applying motivational techniques, and product testing our educational materials.

**Identify Learning Outcomes**

What should students know and be able to do after interacting with your office? What is your “curriculum”? We developed a learning outcomes grid, modified from one created by the George Mason University career office, to help us create a vision of and a shared language surrounding learning outcomes for our office. We also integrated the outcomes more explicitly into our programs and services.

**Motivation**

Once we had a clear idea of what our students should be able to do, the next step was helping them do it! Motivation is a key aspect of achieving learning outcomes, especially if you have little leverage. Brooks has applied Miller and Rollnick’s work with reluctant substance abuse clients to a career center’s work with students. Brooks states that promoting change in reluctant clients requires using a number of different opportunities, such as natural change (impending graduation), brief intervention (a program or
“dose effects” (making short interventions more powerful), faith and hope (engendering confidence for success), counselor ethic of care (“no one cares how much you know until they know how much you care”), “waiting list effect” (give students self-help material that orients them while they wait for an appointment, or assign homework before an appointment), and “change talk effect” (capitalizing on cues of willingness to change—when the student is ready the teacher will emerge).13

Cognitive Interviews/Product Testing

To enhance learning, it’s important to get a sense of how effective your materials are in facilitating desired learning outcomes. For example, we are developing a very low-tech, five-step self-assessment worksheet that is designed to replicate the best parts of counseling. We are taking the time to hear students speak aloud about what they are thinking as they work through the document and render their thoughts more transparent and specific. We have learned that students can interpret an item in unintended ways and get off track, or worse, get stranded and give up. Without this feedback, we would have no idea if such materials were filling the intended purpose.

Applications

Model of Educational Entrepreneurship

The “Model of Educational Entrepreneurship” (see Figure 1) distills the broad range of ideas presented in this article. The model is derived partially from the author’s “Model of Wisdom Development,” a framework to facilitate the reflection, integration, and application of lessons that students learn; and the thinking that shapes the post-graduate decision-making process, that is, the way students actually make decisions, rather than the “ideal.”14

Learning outcomes are developed when students go through the core “learning from life” process, comprised of reflection, integration, and application. The conditions that facilitate a student’s learning by this process are his or her orientation to learning, experiences, interactions with others, and environment. Depending on how deeply and how often students were stimulated to go through the learning from life process, they experienced growth.15

Before an office can apply the model of educational entrepreneurship, there are some context-setting items that should be in place.

• First, develop a mission for your office that is communicated with confidence through all programs, services, and interactions (e.g., start with the end in mind). What do you want your students to know and to be able to do after they use your office?
• Second, create a baseline of what success is and control that perception (e.g., success for us looks like…).
• Third, develop S.M.A.R.T. goals (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely). This model will not only provide a framework to guide your policies and practices, but will also confirm your successful efforts that are already in place, why they are successful, and how they can be more consistently applied.16

Orientation to Learning

The first key condition for educational entrepreneurship—students’ orientation to learning—is influenced by their pre-college histories/values, qualities, preparedness, motivations,
and attitudes toward college. Students’ orientation to learning is also shaped by the lens of their experiences and their general paths. Career services staff can help students learn by:

- **Orienting students to your office and key processes.**

  First, use market research (satisfaction surveys, focus groups, external review, and so on) to understand the feelings associated with your office. Second, provide fact-based information and programs to combat debilitating myths about your office and target students’ specific concerns (e.g., “Is it okay to not have all the answers?”). Third, empower students to obtain successful experiences in your programs and services at every turn.

- **Developing a focused, comprehensive, communications and marketing strategy.**

  First, tout the benefits of your office and provide concrete evidence that will make it more compelling for students to more thoughtfully participate in your key processes. For example, we focus less on learning as the motivation to bring students to our office, and instead communicate that using our office is a way to reduce anxiety, save time, be a better candidate, and make better decisions. Second, grab students’ attention in an already cluttered information environment through a variety of targeted means. For example, Colorado College’s career center channels its marketing efforts through the “Toilet Paper,” a newsletter that is read by nearly every campus constituency. The paper is successful not only because it appears in a place where people will read anything, but because they alternate serious information with entertaining factoids, thus rewarding readers for their time. Third, personalize the process by salient dimensions of identity (e.g., by class year, major, ethnicity). Students associate most strongly along these lines, each a built-in community that is often connected to the other. Use usage data to segment your market (e.g., compared to others, white, first-year students who are undeclared/humanities majors are the least likely to use our office). Lastly, own your career services office’s message and relentlessly insert yourself as the expert so that no one on campus can imagine offering an opinion without deferring to your professional judgment.

### Experiences

The second key condition of the educational entrepreneurship model is student experiences, in and out of class, and on and off campus. The experiences that have the most impact on students are challenging, provide them with a new perspective, and promote self-reflection. Thoughtful customer service also is a key aspect of effective experiences.

- **Increase efficacy of programs and services.**

  First, design programs that provide students with identifiable, concrete benefits that they readily understand and value. Second, provide programs and services that offer enough structure to develop confidence in the process. For example, the “For Dummies” book series is wildly successful because the publisher acknowledges and appreciates that readers probably have some trepidation about the subject. The books are designed in such a way to engender confidence, prompting the reader to take baby steps and providing relevant information through a variety of effective ways, such as pictures, facts, and anecdotes. In the same vein, we have modified our fairly dogmatic “Teach a student to fish and he or she eats for a lifetime” philosophy to include “Give students a couple of fish to tide them over as they gain confidence.” Third, create stated learning outcomes of all your office’s interventions and reinforce the whole (e.g., we have created a manageable checklist of necessary steps to negotiate our key processes with specific direction to resources to help students attain desired learning outcomes). Fourth, maximize reflective opportunities throughout the student’s entire experience with your office (e.g., we are piloting a pre-appointment information sheet for students to fill out while waiting in our lobby, and we already use a “prescription” sheet during the meeting that details action steps and homework).

### Interactions With Others

A third key condition to the educational entrepreneurship model is the wide range of interactions students will have in and out of class, including those with faculty, staff, other students, friends, and family members. The key attributes of influential people in helping students achieve learning outcomes are their support and willingness to provide feedback to students, and willingness to facilitate connections to key resources and opportunities.

- **Maximize all staff interactions.**

  To extend the educational entrepreneur approach, all staff members must embrace this idea. First, staff members must define themselves as educators first who support, offer feedback to, and facilitate connections for students. Second, staff members must empower students by couching interactions so that students take responsibility for their own lives (e.g., more coach than counselor). Third, salient professional development must be provided for staff members so that the entire staff is well versed enough to effectively serve a range of students and deliver consistently high-quality goods and services. For example,
in our office, we asked ourselves, “How sensitive are we to our sizable Muslim population?”

- **Collaborate with other campus offices.**
  It is also important that everyone on campus realizes that we all deal with the same students and need to approach them in a client-centered way. You can collaborate in a variety of ways: For example, participate in campus-wide resource fairs, co-sponsor activities, and communicate through class boards, and with academic deans, chairs of committees, and those who work with groups based on gender, major, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation.

- **Maximize peer influence.**
  Use “buzz” marketing by targeting formal and informal peer leaders who are instrumental in achieving a strong word-of-mouth reputation. Use students to interpret the office mission in ways that will resonate with other students. For example, the career office at the University of Richmond has a four-student marketing squad that shapes the look and feel of the office’s materials. Lastly, co-sponsor targeted programs with class boards and student groups to leverage their infrastructure and access to their students. We created a peer career adviser-residence hall liaison program to partner with individual residence life staff members to reach residents in a productive way (e.g., ready-made bulletin boards).

- **Educate advisers/faculty/staff/supervisors.**
  Create materials that cast all advisers, work supervisors, and faculty members as allies to your office with customized, easy-to-implement information. For example, from our research, we know that professors are key to our office’s success, so we developed a one-page flyer for the faculty packet that goes to everyone before the monthly faculty meeting.

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**Figure 2. The CDC Brand Positioning Statement**

**Target group/need:**
Students and alumnae under five years in pursuit of meaningful post-MHC opportunities. (High [10+], transactional [5-9], reluctant [1-4], self-sufficient [0].)

**Needs:**
Excellent, concrete, relevant resources and guidance to help translate MHC/life experiences into exciting and meaningful opportunities.

**Competing framework:**
All post-MHC experiences.

**Competing/collaborating mainly with:**
Academic departments (major-specific panels, do not share opportunities, alumnae association separate alumnae mentoring, “Life after MHC” program for seniors, and student programs (leadership skills programs, “Real World 101” etiquette dinner).

**Benefits: Rational:**
One-stop shopping for top-flight, concrete, and relevant resources; and guidance to help translate MHC/life experiences into exciting and meaningful opportunities.

**Emotional:**
The power to attain your dreams (reduce anxiety, be happier, save time and energy, and be a better candidate).

**Because (reason why):**
Range of exciting opportunities and knowledgeable counselors who offer clear guidance no matter where you are in your process or what you want to do; timely, useful workshops; and state-of-the-art print and web resources.

**Brand character:**
Approachable, direct, savvy, role model “older sister”

**Brand personality:**
Katie Couric, Suzy-Lori Parks, Oprah Winfrey

**Consumer insight:**
“I’m the only one who doesn’t know what to do.” “I know I should do something but I don’t know what.”

**Use parents/families.**
This important constituency has much sway over our traditional-age students, and should be well informed. First, communicate to parents what your office does. For example, we send out a letter to the parents of first-year students and seniors to get an extra “push” into our office. Some institutions address a postcard with pertinent information to the students at their home addresses, knowing that the parents can read the information without violating their children’s privacy! Second, dovetail your office’s efforts with other parent-oriented initiatives (e.g., parent orientation, parent organizations, and parent web sites).
• Alumnae/alumni.

MHC alumnae are a valuable resource because they are often seen as the cool “older sister/aunt,” whereas we in the CDC are seen as a parent figure. Alumnae give the same advice that we do, but it sometimes carries more weight. Connections can be facilitated by collaborative programs, panels, and access to a searchable database where students can identify alumnae who have a similar major, field of interest, or postgraduate education. Connections can also be managed by developing multi-pronged mentoring opportunities. Our alumnae association hosts more than 20 events each year where alumnae come back to campus for association-related business. To tap into the resources already on campus, we piloted a program where we asked for a spare hour in their schedules, then asked attending alumnae if they would be willing to meet with students. To enhance interest in the event, we sent an e-mail blast to our students, and within three days we had more than 70 students and 29 alumnae signed up for a Friday night program. This is also a way to forge a deeper alumnae connection to the school without asking for money.

Environment

The last condition of the educational entrepreneur model is the environment—physical and virtual. The environment can contain cues on how individuals should act and feel and can appeal to your five senses to invoke an emotional response. First, wear your students’ shoes and perform an environmental audit of your entire office as they experience it. Disney imagineers literally walked through their resorts on their knees to better appreciate the child’s perspective, which is why things are scaled to children’s height, such as the secondary children’s keyholes on the doors. Second, organize the flow of people and ideas, create a coherent visual identity, and manage information as judiciously as possible. For example, we try to imagine our career library as a web site, and make sure the items that students intuitively need are easy to find. We also took a cue from for-profit bookstores and started “student picks,” short synopses of available items to make the collection more inviting to other students. Third, for every ounce of treatment, we provide a ton of treat. We started “Popcorn Fridays” because we know that the smell, touch, and taste of popcorn have powerful and comforting associations (e.g., going to the movies or circus, or watching movies at home). Other career services offices have purchased automated espresso makers and created an inviting “café” feel.

Conclusion

Career educators strive to develop the whole person, and must use the greatest variety of effective tactics to realize that core mission, taking cues from any source—inside or outside higher education. The educational entrepreneur approach provides a framework for career educators to maximize their educational impact on students, identifying the way they actually go through the career center, using tried and true tactics applied from business, marketing, and education. This framework can help increase student traffic to career services centers and help students develop desired learning outcomes.

Endnotes

9 Disney Institute.
21 Disney Institute.