What If Students Listened

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How one career center designed and implemented a comprehensive, structured four-year career curriculum.

All career centers have high aspirations to help students, but students do not always take the best advantage of the career services office. Though we can serve students from matriculation to graduation, they are often not required to use our offices, and when they do, it is often cosmetic in nature. This lack of engagement triggers many concerns. Students’ difficulty in understanding their backgrounds, skills, values, and goals can result in limited self-awareness about their competencies and values; avoidance of setting educational goals and/or assessing progress toward them; not taking advantage of opportunities that exist while earning their degree; difficulty translating their college educations to the world outside the classroom and post-college opportunities; not performing to their potential in application processes; and difficulty moving on to post-graduation opportunities.

This situation is frustrating for many career offices. First, we have many of the things that students need, but don’t use. Second, career offices experience increased institutional performance expectations and are often vulnerable to the potentially unrealistic expectations of a variety of partially informed stakeholders. Lastly, we often exist in an institutional context where there are multiple and competing priorities for scarce resources. What to do?

Your Plan

To address these issues, the Career Development Center (CDC) at Mount Holyoke College (MDC) created Your Plan, a four-year, developmental career “curriculum” to help students better maximize their career-related efforts. We asked, “Why don’t students use our programs and services more?” We then asked, “What if students listened to everything we said? What should students know and be able to do if they took full advantage of our offerings?”
to Everything We Said?

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YourPlan is a new framework to help students make connections between their academic program and opportunities beyond the college by accessing all the guidance and resources of our office more purposefully. YourPlan outlines expected goals for each class year, with aligned policies, programs, and practices to facilitate these goals. YourPlan enables the CDC to take the initiative to complement and enhance each student’s academic program; help students address post-graduate concerns more assertively; help students more intentionally reflect on their academic and co-curricular experiences; and, better prepare students for purposeful engagement in the world.

YourPlan Pilot

Overview
Over the course of the spring 2006 semester, the counselors explored six questions:

- What career-related goals should students attain by the end of each class year?
- What tools are currently in place to help achieve them?
- What new programs, policies, and products may be developed to support these goals?
- What is the impact of any changes on our priorities and resources?
- How can this program be marketed effectively?
- What other campus constituencies should be brought into the development and execution of this plan?

As YourPlan was being developed, feedback was sought from a wide variety of campus colleagues and constituencies, and several professional colleagues at peer institutions. All feedback helped the CDC refine the details of the pilot. The pilot was administered during the 2006-2007 year, with YourPlan available to all students in the 2007-2008 academic year. The key intended outcomes are to help students:

- Identify their career-related skills, values, and interests;
- Define and establish career-related goals;
- Develop and implement plans to connect themselves to key resources, people, and opportunities toward attaining their goals;
- Develop mastery of career-related skills;
- Articulate why any targeted organization or course of action (e.g., internships, jobs, fellowships, graduate school) is interesting, important, and/or exciting to them, and aligned with their values and interests;
- Create a range of effective career-related materials; and
- Articulate specifically how their knowledge, skills, and qualities match the organization’s selection criteria.

Pilot Participants
An invitation to a group of students was drawn from a random sample of 240 students, from each class year and a variety of majors and ethnicities, with a goal of targeting 100 to 145 students overall in the pilot (30 to 40 from each class year). Of the 140 students who agreed to be in the pilot (a 60 percent response rate), 39 were first-year students, 33 were sophomores, 29 were juniors, and 39 were seniors.

Career Curriculum
The CDC staff developed a curriculum with several guidelines: it had to be developmental, cumulative, comprehensive, understandable, scalable, and above all else, valuable to MHC students. The planning was informed by the authors’ collective professional experiences, various other career-related resources, and by some of Brown’s work, including students’ post-college decision-making processes, the ways students identify themselves and the effect on the career process, and a comprehensive career development framework that can help students integrate all of their aggregate college experiences, and apply them to their lives.

The Checklists
The YourPlan pilot was distilled into four class-specific checklists, comprised...
of the goals plus the primary and secondary tasks necessary to achieve those goals. The checklists were designed to be “one-stop shopping” for students. This represents the CDC’s programs and services distilled to their most elegant, basic design, in order to guard against the “tyranny of choice” that can overwhelm students embarking on this process.

- **Strands**

Each checklist has seven strands for each year—self-assessment, resume, cover letter, networking, research, interviewing/personal presentation, and job/internship searching. Juniors and seniors had added strands for fellowships/scholarships and graduate school.

- **Year-Specific Goals**

The target goals were developmental over time. Each successive year built on the previous year’s goals, accommodating the fact that students will probably opt in and out of this process at different points.

- **Primary/Secondary Tasks**

The goals are achieved by students completing one required primary task, and a choice of two secondary tasks (three tasks per goal total). Primary tasks are the ones most effective in helping achieve the goals. For the secondary tasks, the students were instructed to pick two out of a menu of choices. The choices represent multiple modalities that might support the achievement of the goal: web, print, workshop, or in person. This accommodates different preferences and allows students off-campus to work through their checklists.

**Evaluation**

The YourPlan pilot was evaluated with an online pre- and post-program assessment. Each student in the pilot was surveyed on the same general outcomes and on class-specific outcomes that mirrored their class-specific goals.

Students provided qualitative feedback in the November 2006 and May 2007 meetings. On the post-survey, students were also asked open-ended questions. Results of the pilot surveys were used to make modifications to YourPlan as it is made available to all students in the 2007-2008 academic year.

The effectiveness of the YourPlan initiative will always be based on how deeply the students are engaged with it. Even though pilot participants were required to attend the meetings, less than half participated. However, in general, we found that students liked the program. One senior said, “It gave me a sense of accomplishment and of what types of things I should be doing.” A junior appreciated “having a comprehensive list in which I need to exert some effort; the pilot made the CDC more accessible and now I feel very comfortable there, and am fully aware what the CDC offers.”

One issue that arose in the pilot, was that the checklist was on paper and did not reside within an integrated CDC experience. While the checklists were a helpful guide, they did not explicitly hook students into the larger picture or continually reinforce the program content. Student comments helped the CDC to think about ways to deepen engagement. We are refining and recalibrating our programs and services based on this feedback.

In the pilot meetings, we also asked participants to talk about how we could have designed interventions that would have kept them on track. The idea is to make the YourPlan program more “sticky,” increase time on task, ensure it is designed in ways that account for the real lives and pressures of students, and tap into their motivational fears and aspirations. Following are some of the lessons learned through the pilot, which we will use to adjust the program as possible.

**Lessons Learned**

**YourPlan = CDC; CDC = YourPlan**

- Connect all YourPlan tasks to resources.

We are trying to create a world in which there is no program or service that is not within YourPlan, and vice versa. Every task on the electronic checklist links directly to the specific online and print resources, workshops, or in-person meetings. Our staff has made our learning goals explicit in the YourPlan framework, which allows us to reconsider the goals of our programs and services more intentionally. The programs we offer will be tagged so that every career resource corresponds to YourPlan.

- Create intrinsic incentives to go through the program.

We will communicate a number of proposed benefits to students. Students will identify key themes and patterns in their lives, and use lessons learned in the past to make more informed decisions congruent with their values and priorities. Students will develop more focus, which will diminish extraneous searching. This process will help students understand why they are interested in a particular opportunity and how to market themselves in a clear and compelling manner, and come out of the program with the concrete tools they need to compete effectively.

- Create extrinsic incentives to go through the program.

We know that we have to keep students’ attention. Extrinsically, we are offering rewards and reinforcements for activation of their YourPlans, and completion of their checklists. For example, our Alumnae Association offered to help us design “extraordinary experiences” with alumnae as a special reward. In order to drive students to the workshops (saving us counselor time), we have created punch cards—attend five workshops and become eligible for a drawing for $100 on their campus “One Card.” When possible, we will link rewards to modify student behavior.

- Showcase the most valued career resources.

We need to think about our library and web pages as “retail spaces” and merchandise the most valued items in places where students will find them. Our peer career advisers identified the resources that get the most use and will highlight them when advising students.
Our content management system can track the most often viewed web pages and allow us to see how people are accessing these pages.

Web Interface
- Integrate YourPlan with other electronic media.

Students already access and store information in many areas, so the more integrated the YourPlan, the better. YourPlan is now linked from the central log-in page for a suite of campus electronic services. In the future, YourPlan might interface with students’ electronic calendars, and allow them to subscribe to the CDC calendar.

- Allow YourPlan to be personalized.

Students are used to controlling content and want to have the ability to personalize their YourPlan, put their favorite links within their YourPlan pages, and provide space to record reflections/scrapbooks of their experiences.

- Enhance students’ ability to manage their projects.

We need to create searching capabilities and places where students can store versions of their career materials. Students are motivated by deadlines, so we will put in place CDC-suggested priorities/deadlines to nudge students along their checklists.

- Get feedback.

We have provided a “Suggestions? Stuck?” button for students to provide feedback. We might create “help” features on each page that link to an FAQ page, or direct them to a CDC “warmline” and an IM option to a peer career adviser. This will help students get “unstuck” when they need motivation.

Program and Information Delivery
- Have a disciplined marketing and communications strategy.

We are blocking out the whole year programmatically, looking for collaboration opportunities, and taking advantage of the optimal rhythms in the academic year. A monthly digest will highlight where students should be in their program and offer ways they can pick up some YourPlan “points.” We are creating a communications strategy to develop a consistent look and feel for all YourPlan materials. By listening to students, we have found we should advertise in laundry rooms and post on the daily dining services electronic menu.

- Target programming efforts more effectively.

Students told us to pick times for programs that are more in sync with students’ actual “migratory patterns.” We now offer more Friday programs because many students are more available then. Students said they want more “boot camps,” so we developed a “Jumpstart Your Job Search” program for seniors who have no job prospects at graduation and need some intervention.

- Provide content in a variety of media.

To provide more ways to deliver content, we are exploring podcasts and audio slide shows, and we are exploring whether or not to record our workshops for the web.

- Get out more.

The CDC is perceived to be “faraway,” so we plan to hold more programs in the dorms, the student center, and the library. Our trained peer staff will serve as CDC dorm liaisons to provide a presence where students live.

Key Collaborations
This program will only thrive with support from the members of the community. We know that the groups with much influence on the post-college decision-making process include professors, parents, and peers, therefore we must increase the recognition of the program so that all these stakeholders know about it.

- Faculty.

We have spent a great deal of time thinking how to best engage our faculty. We told them about YourPlan in different ways, including inserting a monthly flyer in the faculty reading packets, during new faculty orientation, and getting on the coveted “all academic advisers” meeting agenda at the start of the academic year. We are also launching a faculty liaison program, assigning a point person counselor to several departments, and meeting department assistants to find ways to share print and online career information and programs.

- Other student service offices.

It is clear that key players on campus need to be involved in supporting this program. The more we talked with our campus colleagues about the program, the more it was clear that we all dealt with similar student issues. For example, we must compare our calendars so we don’t counter-program; and we should promote each other’s programs, find ways to take advantage of speakers on-campus for informal career programs, and serve as a resource and referral agent for one another. We will collaborate on programs with groups like the alumni association, Weissman Center for Leadership, class boards, and academic centers.

- Peers.

We need to get those students with formal and informal sway, such as athletes, student government leaders, orientation leaders, and residence staff to become YourPlan apostles. We want to connect students with each other more effectively. We are exploring online chats as a way to do this. We are also exploring the use of job-search work teams (peer-led groups that work together on a regular basis with a structured search methodology).

- Parents.

Parents are heavily involved in their traditional-aged students’ college careers. As part of our roll-out, we will send information to parents, participate in parent orientation, and have a presence on MHC’s parent web gateway.

Policy, Operational, and Organizational Changes
The CDC does not have the human resources to implement the YourPlan without changes to how we do things. We needed to think about scalability, because what we may have been willing to absorb in
the past, we can no longer sustain. We need to have the capacity to fulfill our mission of serving all students. Therefore, changes to consider include:

- **Redirect students to other resources to enhance counseling.**

  We have trained our receptionists to direct students to use CDC resources before appointments and will send electronic messages to students before scheduled appointments to update and/or review their YourPlan. During appointments, counselors will review students’ progress within YourPlan.

- **Create more student accountability.**

  If a student cannot attend a counseling appointment or recruiting interview, he or she must notify CDC reception as soon as possible. Failure to notify the CDC may result in denying the student future access to CDC services and programs. Although in the past, we accommodated students who didn’t show up, students now must RSVP and are held accountable for no-shows (e.g., charged for a spot or charged for food served). We are not, at this time, making students go through YourPlan before allowing them to participate in our recruiting program, but will reconsider this in Fall 2008.

- **Review and reorganize staffing.**

  We took advantage of a staffing vacancy and combined our experiential learning and recruiting areas. This created a better organizational infrastructure to serve employers more seamlessly and has made it easier to enhance opportunities for students.

**Final Thoughts**

- **It takes a lot of time.**

  It was necessary for our staff to agree on a shared vision and shared language of the program. The pilot’s main value was forcing us to make our CDC curriculum explicit and articulate exactly what we wanted the program to achieve. But because it required both intensive macro and micro thinking, it took 18 solid months to finally hammer it out.

- **Build internal consensus, then build in feedback.**

  The size and scope of the program required full staff buy-in. Unfortunately, in an effort to move the program along more quickly, we erred by using feedback from others while we were in the process of setting up the program. As a result, staff ownership of the program was undermined, and they needed to be reengaged.

- **Broaden the circle.**

  We needed to make YourPlan a central part of our work so that any member of the college community can see what the program is. We reframed this initiative as a campus priority. We worked with communications to develop YourPlan talking points, a professional logo, resonant tagline (“It’s all about you”), and leave-behind postcards for all audiences; and commissioned an article for our campus news and events web page as well as in our Alumnae Quarterly.

- **We have done a lot of things, but that doesn’t mean they all work.**

  Going forward, we need to evaluate our offerings in light of how much they contribute to the specific goals of the program. This will mean tossing out some of the less useful materials we have around our office.

- **YourPlan is a process and a product.**

  It is easy to speak about this program as an object, but it requires continual, dynamic engagement with students.

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Career professionals struggle with the challenge of fulfilling our missions with a sustainable career services model. YourPlan represents a comprehensive, intentional intervention to help realize our most cherished purpose in ways that all our stakeholders value.

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Note: Other career services offices exploring and implementing comprehensive career approaches include the University of Illinois (EPICS), George Mason University (PACE), Connecticut College (e-Portfolio), and Hobart and William Smith (Pathways).

For more information on YourPlan, visit www.mtholyoke.edu/go/yourplan.

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Endnotes