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## Brief Report: Career Advisor Experiences in a 2-year College

### Introduction

The utility of U.S. tertiary education for its students has been increasingly contested among policy-makers, politicians, as well as in the public. For example, higher education institutions are experiencing heightened pressure to demonstrate its ability to add value to its students for funding purposes (Harnisch, 2011). Given the rapid technological changes and an increasingly globalized economy, the nature and the stability of work have become less predictable (Niles, Engels, & Lenz, 2009).

Unsurprisingly, technical and community colleges (TCC) are scrutinized for their ability to generate positive student outcomes such as high employment rates and earnings. Many TCC students are first-generation students, individuals of racial-ethnic minorities, and older (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Teng, Morgan, & Anderson, 2001). Thus, the provision and quality of career services have become targeted as a point of intervention to improve students' career-related outcomes.

In this report, we present our findings based on our examination of career advisors' experiences and preparedness in meeting the needs of students in a 2-year college located in the Midwest. Specifically, we focused on understanding the career advisors' work experiences, their training and preparation, and their received support.

### Procedures

Between April and June 2018, we interviewed five career advisors individually<sup>1</sup> in the Career Center located in one of the college campuses. Our interviews were semi-structured and guided by the purpose of our assessment. Sample questions included: *a) What training or education did you receive in order to become a career advisor?; b) What do you find to be most challenging about your role?; and c) What do you perceive to be pressing issues facing students' career development?*

### Findings

From our content analysis of the interviews, we identified themes that described career advisors' role and function, their support for students, and the systemic factors that interface with their work. These themes were subsequently organized under three categories: *areas of strengths, opportunities for growth, and constraints*. Areas of strengths capture themes that indicate positive outcomes and processes as experienced by career advisors. *Opportunities for growth* are factors that can be enhanced or targeted to more positively impact career advisors' delivery of services to students. Last, constraints refer to systemic factors that impact students' employment and career development, and by extension, influence career advisors' work with students.

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<sup>1</sup> Per interviewee request, one interview was conducted with two career advisors simultaneously.

## Areas of Strengths

### 1. Career advisors are committed to supporting students and are prepared for their multifaceted responsibilities

- *Advisors provide direct services (e.g., resume review, interviewing skills, coaching) and collaborate with faculty and employers to facilitate work opportunities for students.* For example, advisors noted their dedication in seeking information from employers so that they can convey to students the desired skills even as the nature of jobs evolve. One advisor noted, “The more I connect with employers, the more I know about what’s expected of me to come back and help our students think about what skills they really need and so forth.”
- *Advisors are flexible in their outreach efforts and tailor their engagement based on student preferences and needs.* For example, advisors described having an active schedule of classroom presentations (“... last year we served over 2,000 students through classroom presentations), workshops, events, and involvement in student organizations. One advisor noted being “mobile” and seeking students out where they were physically because many of them were not attending their scheduled appointments in order to engage with them.
- *Advisors are passionate about social justice and attuned to inequities that impact students.* Advisors are aware of the chronic barriers and concerns that affect different student populations, as well as the campus resources available to assist them. In addition to helping students navigate these issues, advisors noted being prompt to connect them with other offices (e.g., disabilities office, counseling services) for a fuller range of support. The office has also initiated interventions to assist students struggling with food insecurity as noted by an advisor, “I worked with my supervisor here [at the Center] and she helped me get... assistance for students to have a prepaid meal card.” More broadly, advisors noted their self-examination of their biases and reflections on their lived experiences to build empathy for students who may be navigating similar struggles.

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### 2. Career advisors have diverse training and educational backgrounds

- *Advisors have diverse graduate training and work experiences (e.g., student affairs, corporate human resources, counseling), and are certified Career Development Facilitators.* The training required as a part of the certification process has enhanced advisors’ “career coaching” skills and their understanding the “scope of [their] practice and [their] credentials.” Simultaneously, their varied training backgrounds and trajectories contribute to their familiarity with serving diverse students within a community college setting.
- *Advisors are actively involved in continuing education.* For example, advisors reported attending conferences such as those hosted by local associations to stay updated on trends and observations by other career professionals across colleges and to expand on tools or interventions to better attract and support students. Others also noted being members of professional organizations (e.g., National Association of Colleges and Employers) to stay relevant and up-to-date.

### 3. Career advisors are well-supported by their leadership

- *Advisors overwhelmingly endorsed feeling well-supported in their roles by supervisors and colleagues.* They reported that the organizational culture of flexibility, attention to work-life balance, and teamwork contribute to their success and satisfaction. Advisors also noted having the “freedom to create things and to make things happen” as well as receiving constructive feedback for areas of improvement.

## Opportunities of Growth

### 1. High level of coordination with stakeholders in internship programs

- The decentralized organization of internship experiences for students based on their departments make it logistically demanding for career advisors to track over time. While we also noted that career advisors are designated “specialty areas” (e.g., specific industries, internship opportunities) which may streamline career advisors’ scope of coordination, we also found that such effective coordination requires strong relationships with faculty departments and employers, as well as familiarity with changing work demands and individual student needs.

### 2. The cultivation of student “workplace skills” as a pressing concern

- Career advisors identified student “soft skills” such as effective communication, self-confidence, teamwork, and adaptability as “gaps” reported by employers. As one advisor noted, “I think those [soft skills] are things that we could push... but can you really do that?” Relatedly, vocational psychologists have advanced career adaptability, defined as the capacity to cope with work-based transitions across the lifespan (Savickas, 1997) as a pertinent skill for students and employees to gain in today’s rapidly changing economy.

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### 3. The promotion of equity and employability

- Career advisors are tasked with enhancing equity in employment. While we noted significant attention paid to these efforts (e.g., gender parity in “non-traditional occupations”), we also noted that there continues to be systemic concerns (e.g., unpaid internship opportunities) that present as barriers that affect students, some more than others.
- Career advisors seek to clarify misperceptions around the value of technical education and its credentials. Advisors pointed out the common student belief that “technical colleges don’t get you anywhere” and that they need to pursue a bachelor’s degree. Advisors further noted being positioned to help students reflect on their academic motivations and life circumstances in order to arrive at more thoughtful decisions regarding their education.

## Constraints

### 1. Limited resources and funding instability

- This is best summarized by a career advisor who noted that, “There are limited resources, whether it’s time, money, space, you name it. We have a really talented team and there’s so much we could do, but you know it’s limited and in resource. Over close to 80 percent of the staff are funded on grants.” Others reflected on the need to attend to “what do they actually need to do for their numbers” in order to have their funding for the positions renewed, which impacts the focus of their work with students.

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### 2. Consequences of economic fluctuations

- Changes in public policy and the economy affect student enrollment, job availability, wages, and unemployment. These potentially volatile conditions make the quest for stable employment that provide living wages all the more challenging, and one that career advisors have to be keenly attuned towards in order to best support their students in navigating these circumstances.

### 3. Discrimination

- Advisors provided anecdotes of their students' real and feared struggles with navigating their studies and employment opportunities because of their minoritized and marginalized statuses (e.g., low sense of belonging, discriminatory practices). Many reflected on the ways in which they work to acknowledge and support their students emotionally, but also to encourage them "be your best self and put your best foot forward" because "on the other side, it could be anything." Some also reflected on their commitment to share information regarding harmful practices that companies endorse to students so that they are aware of these institutions and take precautionary steps.

## Implications

Overall, the career advisors are well-supported by a collaborative work environment that is characterized by strong relationships with their supervisors and coworkers. This appears to mitigate funding uncertainty and burn-out from their high demands. Furthermore, the diversity of staff's personal and training backgrounds contributes to the strength of the team and reflects the diversity of students who present to the Center.

The *growth opportunities and constraints* presented are mutually informed. The Center and the students served will benefit from the availability of greater resources to support the longevity of advisors' tenure, programming to improve students' "workplace skills" and overall career development, as well as the promotion of access for students who are disproportionately affected by discrimination.

With respect to advisor training, there are efforts by professional organizations (e.g., National Career Development Association) to develop competency benchmarks to standardize the training of career professionals. As a profession, there are efforts to streamline the roles and function offered by career professionals and to educate the public, including policymakers, on the legislative importance of career development as a point of intervention (Niles et al., 2009). Thus, we recommend close attention to these developments and continued education to provide empirically-based best practices to students.

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**Note:** Consistent with our mission to capture students' voices, experiences, and insights regarding career-related issues, the CCWT is available to conduct program evaluations and needs assessments such as the one reported here. Our procedures are guided by the rapid ethnographic assessment method and can involve quantitative and qualitative data sources including surveys, document analysis, focus groups and interviews. After analysis, customized technical reports can be provided to institutional partners.

## References

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The mission of The Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions (CCWT) is to conduct and support research, critical policy analysis, and public dialogue on student experiences with the transition from college to the workforce in order to inform policies, programs, and practices that promote academic and career success for all learners.

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