

Bridging the Gaps to Student Success: Fostering Workforce Readiness

University of Central Florida
Quality Enhancement Plan Concept Paper

Executive Summary

Workforce readiness is a critical component of UCF's focus and student preparation to meet workforce demands is a significant part of our charge. Unfortunately, students typically wait until a few weeks before graduation to prepare for post-graduation plans. Bridging gaps across academic content, disciplinary knowledge and career demands beginning in introductory courses will encourage student planning throughout their UCF careers. Such preparation will positively impact the employability and readiness of our graduates and meet student, institutional and employer needs. Success in integrating academic and career or graduate school readiness will also produce positive results related to retention, graduation and excess hours.

Moreover, student career readiness is a primary goal of all programs at UCF, regardless of discipline. Faculty and administrators across campus recognize that graduating students should reflect the content they have learned in classrooms through communication of their knowledge and skills to employers and others throughout the Orlando, regional, national, and international communities. Consequently, all stakeholders at UCF should support additional efforts to prepare our students not only to demonstrate the theories and practical application of their disciplinary specializations but also to adapt their educational skills to a variety of workplace scenarios and environments.

Undergraduates will benefit from focused attention on both scholarship and career preparation throughout their UCF careers. Our efforts to integrate these endeavors will enhance UCF's growing international reputation for undergraduate education excellence while providing additional opportunities for further diversifying our student body and including new populations and partnerships in the overall undergraduate experience at UCF. Consistent, coherent messaging and programming according to this model will serve the University's mission and result in undergraduates who are better prepared to succeed as graduate students, excel as capable and adaptable workers, and enrich society as engaged, productive citizens.

A variety of data resources support the goals of the "Bridging the Gaps to Student Success" proposal. In addition to various local, state, national, and institutional data resources, information justifying this proposal can be obtained from campus entities such as the offices of Operational Excellence and Assessment Support (OEAS) and Institutional Knowledge Management. Moreover, an array of existing student outcome assessment and final destination surveys can provide valuable information in these regards, as will innovative tools featuring e-portfolios, OBOJOB modules, the "Teach Live" program and the "Pegasus Path" initiative. In conjunction, these resources provide a multitude of venues for defining the issues being examined and assessing the impact of the project.

Student Learning Outcomes and Assessment Methods

There is an immediate and long-term need for workforce readiness skills development. Self-management skills allow students to more effectively participate in their learning experience at UCF. Student success and engagement can be enhanced through support that gives them clear, coherent pathways toward their goals and helps them integrate their academic learning and professional objectives. (McClenney and Dare 2013; Ehiyazaryan and Barraclough 2009). With a positive attitude for learning, understanding the value of leadership, and the ability to effectively communicate, students are

more likely to become engaged learners demonstrating involvement and higher levels of academic achievement. In addition, students will be better prepared to address the needs of employers or graduate school admissions committees. National and regional surveys conducted by educational and business organizations continually identify these soft skills as attributes associated with competitive applicants (Berrett 2013; "The Role" 2012; "Raising" 2010).

This QEP proposal would help students to:

- 1) Identify and understand a variety of soft skills and recognize their value as part of the undergraduate education and career preparation processes.
- 2) Work with advisors and faculty to determine clear and coherent pathways toward their career goals, including experiential learning and co-curricular learning opportunities.
- 3) Integrate the learning they do across curricular and co-curricular experiences, and gain strategies for applying this learning in professional contexts and endeavors.
- 4) Participate in coordinated soft skills building activities across disciplines from the GEP to the capstone levels.
- 5) Demonstrate their ability to apply soft skills in conjunction with disciplinary expertise in both academic and professional environments.

The CareerEDGE model (Experience-Degree subject knowledge, understanding and skills-Generic skills-Emotional intelligence) from Pool and Sewell (2007) suggests that fulfilling the lower level criteria (EDGE) leads to self-efficacy, self-confidence and self-esteem which are crucial elements of employability. As students are exposed to a degree specific curriculum, the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education & America's Promise stresses that they focus on becoming "intentional learners" looking to achieve essential learning outcomes. However, 22% of employers do support education specific to the student's chosen field. This may be contradictory since 63% of employers do not believe new graduates have the necessary skills for a global community (National Leadership Council for Liberal Education & America's Promise 2009). Providing students with a compass to navigate the education and extra-curricular options may therefore expand students' vision and improve employability opportunities. In a study published last year, Denise Jackson (2013) asked students directly about their perceptions of the importance of employability skills in undergraduate (business) programs. The students indicated that skill development in the areas of communication and team work are important for employability. These more generic skills are transferrable across industries including business, engineering and education. Pool and Qualter (2012) used teaching modules to include video clips, case studies, discussions and role playing in an emotional intelligence course. Evaluation was done with reflective papers, journal entries and case study write ups and results indicate that emotional intelligence can be learned. Using a simulated environment in a business environment or TeachLive can also be useful (Ehiyazaryan and Barraclough 2009).

Student progress in filling the gaps for workforce preparation will be assessed in a number of ways. These include:

- 1) The Pegasus Path Initiative: Pegasus Path is a digital interactive tool for students that encourages academic and post-graduation preparation and integrates the two throughout a

student's career at UCF. The Pegasus constellation is the visual centerpiece for this tool that holistically tracks academic progress, career preparation, encourages planning, and collects data that can be returned as suggestions that are major-specific and relevant for future students. Pegasus Path student users will be able to centrally track and plan for academic and career or graduate school preparation, recognize the integration of the two, and be informed about activities, organizations and resource offices that support their intended academic/career/graduate school goals.

- 2) Student Outcomes Assessment: Measure of knowledge or content areas (pre/post-test).
- 3) E-Portfolios: Demonstration or evidence of learning experiences relative to professional development.
- 4) Final destination Survey: Completed by students at or after graduation to determine success with professional employment or graduate school admission.
- 5) Survey Student Learning Outcomes in soft skills as well as employer evaluations of student performance related to those soft skills in structured experience-based learning.
- 6) "Teach LivE" as an evaluation measure (pre- and post-tests).
- 7) Additional workplace-related modules (OBOJOB0) to aid students in preparing for experience-based learning.

Implementation and Scope

Student workforce readiness would be facilitated in a variety of ways both inside and outside of the classroom. Sample learning experience include:

- 1) Guest Lecturer Series: Vicarious experiences provided by social models occur when students are able to see others who have achieved success. The closer the others are in similarity to themselves, the more effective the experiences are. Examples of this are when successful recent graduates return to the university to give talks to current students about how they achieved their goals (Pool and Sewell, 2007). In order to incorporate this concept into UCF's QEP, each college would create an elective course that is a "Guest Lecturer Series." The class would meet once per week and employers/alumni would be scheduled to speak each week and share their experiences with current students.
- 2) Promote/Measure Existing Employability Development Opportunities: Ehiyazaryan and Barraclough (2009) pose the argument that the quality of employability in an institution is most effectively measured by the quality of the employability development opportunities offered to students. There are several areas within the university that are already offering employability development programs and services. Therefore, increased marketing and measuring quality of existing career related events could be another method of implementation. Partnering with the Office of Student Involvement (OSI) and other university partners to increase marketing of these events would also be required. Ehiyazaryan and Barraclough (2009) emphasize the idea that students must perceive employability programs to be connected to their core activities in higher education. A more integrated approach would allow students to see the value in attending employability opportunities. A Professional Development Certificate could be earned for

attending a certain number of opportunities. The certificate process would need to be centralized.

- 3) **Pegasus Path to Emphasize Student Advising and Planning:** Pegasus Path would serve as a tool to help students plan for and take advantage of coursework, co-curricular activities, and extra-curricular activities that would help develop their soft skills with specific career target(s) in mind. Further, Pegasus Path would collect data on current students that would suggest involvement and career preparation activities for future students in the same major. The system would be available to all students, native and transfer, through the myUCF portal and could integrate data from the PS degree audit, mapping and tracking benchmarks, CRM communications, student organizations and campus activities. Academic advisors would use Pegasus Path tool to assist undergraduates with course selection and to provide resources that support career readiness. OSI offers an involvement-related transcript and student tracking system. Faculty will be asked to integrate academic knowledge with career relevance and will also be asked to identify the critical skills required in their respective disciplines to assist in recommending clubs, organizations, trainings, events, etc. Community partners will be asked to inform on industry standards, avenues for career preparation and sought after skills to inform the career and graduate school options that are suggested to students.
- 4) **Program-Specific Pathways:** Career Services, the Office of Experiential Learning, and the Office of Student Involvement could work with academic colleges and departments to develop program-specific pathways sheets that guide students in selecting electives, minors/certificates, co-curricular activities, and professional development experiences aligned with their majors. These could be embedded in Pegasus Path.
- 5) **Experiential Learning Emphasis:** This proposal encourages students to bridge the gap between academic experiences and labor market realities through structured experiences such as Office of Experiential Learning (OEL) internships and co-ops, departmental internships, cornerstone, clinicals, practicums, etc. These will help the students connect the theory and practice and develop the soft-skills employers are looking for. Employers will serve an active role as co-educators of our students and directly influence and contribute to the development and adjustment of our students.

Resource Requirements

In addition to those already maintained by UCF, this proposal requires the following resources to be effectively implemented:

- 1) Resources required for Guest Lecturer Series class: faculty to “teach the class” and coordinate/schedule guest speakers for each session, classroom space for class to meet, ability to record guest speakers and place recording on web courses.
- 2) Resources required to Promote/Measure Existing Employability Development Opportunities: professional marketing staff to market all events effectively and manage certificate process.
- 3) Resources required to implement Pegasus Path: First we would need mapping and tracking. For the M&T project, we would need a project manager at UCF, an internal committee, College advisors/departments and 1-2 consultants. For the actual creation of Pegasus Path, we will need 2-3 Java programmers for a 6-9 month timeframe or 1-2 Java programmers for a 1 – 1 ½ year timeframe.

Bibliography

- Berrett, D. (2013, Sept. 18). Employers and Public Favor Graduates Who Can Communicate, Survey Finds. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/EmployersPublic-Favor/141679/>.
- Burstein, R. (2014, August 29). Here are the crucial job skills employers are really looking for. Retrieved from <http://time.com/3198142/here-are-the-crucial-job-skills-employers-are-really-looking-for/>.
- The Chronicle of Higher Education, & American Public Media's Marketplace. (2012, December). *The Role of Higher Education in Career Development: Employer Perceptions* (Rep.). Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/items/biz/pdf/Employers%20Survey.pdf>.
- Data Analysts and Research Consultants. (2001). *Findings from the 2000 survey of florida employers of ucf graduates* (Ser. 5, Rep.). Orlando, FL: Office of Institutional Research and Planning Support University of Central Florida.
- Data Analysts and Research Consultants. (2001). *Ratings of satisfaction by alumni in the 2000 survey of baccalaureate alumni* (Ser. 5, Rep.). Orlando, FL: Office of Institutional Research and Planning Support University of Central Florida.
- Ehiyazaryan, E., & Barraclough, N. (2009). Enhancing employability: Integrating real world experience in the curriculum. *Education + Training*, 51(4), 292-308. Retrieved from <http://www.emeraldinsight.com/>.
- The Florida Council of 100. (n.d.). *Closing the talent gap: A business perspective* (Rep.). Tampa, FL: The Florida Council of 100.
- Jackson, D. (2013). Student perceptions of the importance of employability skill provision in business undergraduate programs. *Journal of Education for Business*, 88(5), 271-279. Retrieved from <http://www.tandfonline.com/>.
- Lancey, P., & Salazar, M. (2005). *Ucf spring 2005 graduates first destination survey report of preliminary results* (Rep.). Orlando, FL: UCF Operational Excellence and Assessment Support.
- Lancey, P., Nair, U., & Straney, R. (2013). *2011 national survey of student engagement: Seniors with undergraduate research experiences* (Rep.). Orlando, FL: UCF Operational Excellence and Assessment Support.
- McClenney, K., & Dare, D. (2013 June/July). Designing New Academic Pathways. *Community College Journal*, 21-26.
- National Association of Colleges and Employers. (2013). *Job outlook 2014* (Rep.). Bethlehem, PA: National Association of Colleges and Employers.

National Leadership Council for Liberal Education & America's Promise. (2009). *College learning for the new global century* (Rep.). NW, Washington, DC: Association of American colleges and Universities.

Office of Disability Employment Policy. (n.d.). *Skills to pay the bills: Mastering soft skills for workplace success* [PDF]. United States Department of Labor.

Pappas Consulting Group Inc. (2007). *Proposing a blueprint for higher education in florida: Outlining the way to a long-term master plan for higher education in florida* (Rep.). Tallahassee, FL: Pappas Consulting Group.

Pool, L., & Qualter, P. (2012). Improving emotional intelligence and emotional self-efficacy through a teaching intervention for university students. *Learning and Individual Differences, 22*(3), 306-312.

Pool, L. D., & Sewell, P. (n.d.). The key to employability: Developing a practical model of graduate employability. *Education + Training, 49*(4), 277-289. Retrieved from <http://www.emeraldinsight.com/>.

Raising the Bar: Employers' Views on College Learning in the Wake of the Economic Downturn. (2010, Jan. 20). Association of American Colleges and Universities and Hart Research Associates. Retrieved from http://www.aacu.org/leap/documents/2009_EmployerSurvey.pdf.

The Role of Higher Education in Career Development: Employer Perceptions." (2012 Dec.) *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/items/biz/pdf/Employers%20Survey.pdf>.

Schneider, C., Ph.D. (2004). *Quality enhancement plan* (Rep.). Jamestown, NC: Guilford Technical Community College.

Tarr, R. W. (n.d.). *Rapter* [PPT]. Orlando: Rapter.

University of Central Florida. (n.d.). *Pegasus path* [PPT]. Orlando: University of Central Florida.

Zogby Analytics, Zogby, J., & Zogby, J. (2014). *2014 global survey of students* (Rep.). Zogby Analytics.