

Using LinkedIn for an End-of-term Synthesizing Portfolio Project

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Introduction

The Cooperative Institutional Research Program for 40 years has regularly surveyed incoming college freshmen on why they decide to attend college. “To be able to get a better job” was deemed the most important (Stolzenberg et al., 2020). Likewise, employers are looking for individuals who demonstrate effective leadership skills such as teamwork and communication (Crawford & Fink, 2020). Employers also see having critical thinking skills and the application of learning in real-world situations as ‘very important’ (Finley, 2021). As educators, we need to ensure we are providing opportunities for students to develop and use these skills. Enabling students to critically think about the role of their classes and their ability to apply course content in their future careers may allow them to be more engaged in the classroom. End-of-program portfolios or projects are great opportunities to showcase what a student has learned from their academic career, and employers see e-portfolios as being “very helpful” in communicating those skills and in evaluating those graduates (Finley, 2021).

In our department we offer a minor in leadership for students all across Texas A&M University. Students declare this minor for multiple reasons. Many students see the minor as valuable to their future careers. Moreover, employers see having leadership skills and the ability to work as a team as something of great importance (Finley, 2021; Gray & Koncz, 2017). With students coming from academic programs across the university and having a variety of future career interests, it is important to provide them with flexible learning and application opportunities. These opportunities need to be relevant to each and every student, regardless of an academic program, previous leadership experience, or what they want to do as a profession after they graduate. Previously, the end of minor portfolio project included creating a website and writing a paper. Students were asked to include items such as, but not limited to: their definition of leadership, Gallup Strengths, philosophy for leading change, and their ethical code of conduct. This website was never shared publicly and was basic in its design. Based on student feedback and shifting job markets, the faculty coordinator for the minor determined the project needed to be redesigned to help students apply content to their desired future careers and highlight what they have learned about leadership through participating in the minor. Therefore, the project requirement shifted from a website to a professional LinkedIn profile with a supplemental paper.

Program Phases

The Leadership Studies Minor engages students from a wide variety of academic programs, across the university. All students enrolled have a wide range of leadership experiences and varied career aspirations after graduation. Most students want an academic minor to help them learn and apply the different leadership principles to their future careers. Applications to the minor are accepted year-round. Students complete five classes for the academic minor with an end-of-minor portfolio project as part of their last course in the minor.

LinkedIn is a tool used to showcase yourself as a professional and connect with other professionals. We felt it could be used as an effective platform for students to synthesize what they have learned during their time in the minor. When students enter the minor, they are told what the portfolio project includes. Students complete different assignments, assessments, and activities as they progress through the minor and incorporate this information into different

sections within their LinkedIn profiles. As they progress through the minor, they have the opportunity to start thinking critically about how they can apply these assignments in their future careers and how they can market those skills in their LinkedIn profile.

Not only will students be able to learn how to better market their leadership skills and abilities, but also develop their critical thinking skills. They were tasked with creating a narrative in their “About” section tailored to them with their leadership skills and abilities. They also include a creative video discussing reasons why what they have learned in the minor would be applicable to their future career goals. This video shows the student's personality, creativity, and critical thinking skills regarding how they anticipate applying their leadership competencies. Students also complete different steps in setting up their profile as they progress through the minor.

Results to Date/ Implications

Spring 2022 was the first semester we implemented the new portfolio project with the 28 students who completed the minor. Each student was given the task of enhancing their LinkedIn profile. The results, while positive overall, were mixed. Some students had established LinkedIn profiles, so it was much easier for them to adapt their current profiles. Other students were creating their profiles for the first time, which many found to be a challenge. The students who were the most successful created a narrative out of their experiences in the minor, which they directly connected to their career path. One student stated, “as a leader in the healthcare field I plan to influence and change my patients’ perspectives on how they view health.” Some students were more creative than others in improving their LinkedIn profiles.

Future Plans/Advice to others

Students are beginning to recognize the value of having a LinkedIn profile. They have opportunities to find jobs, connect with potential mentors and employers, and learn more about their intended industry before entering it. Enhancing their LinkedIn profile while in college helps them stand out against other profiles. Implementing this project has taught us that students need more than a single semester to build an effective LinkedIn profile to highlight what they have learned throughout the minor. Thus, we recommend that students build their LinkedIn profiles as they progress through the minor. Doing so gives students more time to critically reflect on and experiment with what they are learning in class, as well as learn how to better market themselves. Also, faculty should provide examples of successful profiles to help set expectations and assist students who are new to LinkedIn. These examples could be previous students' profiles, their own, or template profiles all students could explore.

Resources Needed

LinkedIn is a free social connection platform available to everyone. Countless resources are available on LinkedIn and other websites to help students improve and enhance their LinkedIn profile. Yet, faculty should also provide tutorials, example videos, and suggestions in a central location to help their students enhance their profiles and meet specific project expectations. Using a platform like LinkedIn allows students to continue to change and adapt their profiles to their current situations and goals.

References

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