

Using Progressive Career Dinner Events to Promote Career Readiness and Opportunities

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Introduction/Need for Idea

As educators, our number one goal is to prepare our students with the skillset they need to enter the workforce upon graduation. Through the delivery of content and an understanding of the interests and needs of our students, we can carefully cater lectures, assignments, and activities to further their knowledge and skills for their future dream careers. However, another item that we should also add to our class goals is the opportunity for students to network with other career professionals in their desired careers. While most universities proudly boast career fairs where hundreds of employers sign up to host a booth for a day-long event, these career fairs lack the personal experience that can stem from networking opportunities within classes. These career fairs are good opportunities, but to avoid producing frustrated graduates, as Christie (2016) advised, we need to think outside the box. In a junior and senior level course at NC State University, course instructors incorporate guest speakers for each major module throughout the semester and host a career progressive dinner at the end of the semester. Many of us utilize guest speakers in our classes, however, the career progressive dinner exceeded our expectations.

How it Works/Methodology

The course instructors understand that students can feel uncertain of what to do next as they prepare to graduate from college. This concern has also been raised by Christie (2018), who found that students worry significantly about uncertain transitions. To help students prepare for their future, course instructors record the students' career goals, majors, and expected graduation dates at the start of every semester. The future career aspirations are categorized to allow every category to have a career representative at the dinner. In the invitation email to the six to eight career representatives, they are given the background context for the event as well as suggested talking points for the dinner conversation. The career progressive dinner is held during the last week of class before the course final exams occur. It is viewed as a rewarding event for the students to celebrate the end of the semester while also serving networking purposes. For the fall 2022 and spring 2023 classes, the dinner was held at the university club and sponsored by several businesses, commodity organizations, and individuals in addition to departmental funds. The entire event lasts approximately two hours with students spending thirty minutes per career representative and dinner course. Prior to the dinner, course instructors provided career guests' bios, and students were able to sign up to meet with three invited professionals (one per dinner course). These career representatives were seated at tables throughout the room. From there, career professionals remained seated at the same table, and students would rotate between dinner courses (salad, entree, and dessert).

Results to Date

Following two semesters of hosting progressive career dinners, instructors found this dinner allowed the students and career professionals to engage in deeper conversations about their career journey and also discuss the student's interests. Students reported they valued this event more than the campus career fair due to the more individualized and small group approach. Several of the students walked away with internships and job interviews as a result. All walked away with business cards and new connections within their desired field. One student emphasized that this was the first time that she had the opportunity to talk with someone that looked like her in the ag industry, and that she appreciated not having to compete for their time like at a typical job fair. The students also shared that they did not feel rushed and that the conversations were inviting and engaging while providing plenty of time for their questions. The career representatives also raved about this experience. When possible, departmental and college

alumni are used as career representatives and they stated their appreciation for the opportunity to give back to students. In addition, some of the career representatives stated that they would be happy to contribute to the sponsorship of the event which further secures funding for the event to continue.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

As Christie (2016) noted, students should be supported in transitioning from college. This event is largely successful based on the student feedback and reflections as well as the feedback from the career representatives. Therefore, the instructors plan to make this a permanent event in their course. While it is impossible to find one career individual per student, the categorizing of career interests allows students to be grouped together within a career area. For example, students who were interested in working with commodity organizations and students interested in nutrition work had the opportunity to visit with a dietician who works with the Southeast Dairy Alliance. It is also important to select career representatives who are “chatty” and engaging. Career representatives are key to keeping the conversation going at the tables even though course instructors try to balance student personalities in the assigned rotations. In addition, because this event occurs outside of class time, an alternative assignment is given to those students who are unable to attend. The alternative assignment requires them to complete three phone or face-to-face career interviews where the students seek more information about specific careers that they are interested in pursuing.

To further the course networking, instructors also plan on creating professional groups through Google Groups, where each cohort of students can sign up using their personal and permanent email addresses. This will help track the student’s performance in their respective careers after graduation and create a pool of professionals from which future career invitations will be made. Instructors hope student cohort groups will provide a platform where students will keep in touch and share future opportunities that may unveil in their different job industries.

Cost/Resources Needed

Career progressive dinners require social capital, human capital, financial capital, physical capital, and time. First, the instructors incorporated the dinner events as part of the course syllabus to emphasize the worth of this assignment. Making these events part of the syllabus aligns with previous research recommendations where Gray (2022) emphasized that transition preparations should be integral to the course modules. Secondly, to cater to other types of resources like social capital, instructors use established connections with agricultural career professionals including departmental and college alumni as well as other leaders that are in their various networks. Physical capital is intertwined with financial capital. Instructors seek out donors to sponsor students attending this event, each student attending costs approximately \$40. The department pays for the cost of the career representatives to attend, and luckily there is not an event rental due to the university affiliation. Together from start to finish, this event incorporates approximately 20 hours to plan, facilitate, and evaluate.

References

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