

## **Advancing Career Centers in Higher Education: Contextual and Strategic Considerations**

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Career centers in higher education are also known as career resource centers (Herr, Cramer, & Niles, 2004). Subsequent to their initial establishment in the West, they are undergoing changes and evolution in different parts of the world. In this special issue about “career centers,” contributors in the United States, South Korea and Hong Kong have provided insightful discussion about developing and delivering career services in the university campus. In response to the contributors, I have discussed themes identified from the different invited papers, which concern both the contextual and strategic aspects of designing and running a career center. Implications were drawn on how career service professionals in higher education can play a proactive role in both responding to social demands, as well as developing strategic service directions within respective institutions.

*Keywords:* career development; career center; higher education; student development

Career centers in higher education are also known as career resource centers (Herr, Cramer, & Niles, 2004). Due to changing circumstances, their roles have been further evolving and changing continuously. Watts (1997, 2006) observed that the roles were information-giving and guidance traditionally, but then expanded to include running career courses and enhancing work experience. A key issue for running career centers in Asia is how theories and practices developed in the West will be relevant and applicable in a different cultural context. Besides, in a specific institution, drawing up strategies to guide the development and operation of the center is also a primary concern. So, in response to the ideas and themes from the invited papers of this special issue, I shall attend to both the contextual and strategic considerations of designing and running a career center.

### **Contextual Considerations**

Career guidance cannot be separated from the context it is in (e.g., Herr, 1996, 2008). Heppner and Jung (2012) used the metaphor of “music and the dance” to illustrate how career centers in the United States (U.S.) should be changed with sifting student demographics. They foresaw that as college campuses in the U.S. are getting more and more diverse in terms of students’ racial and ethnic background, White American students will possibly become the minority in three decades. Accordingly, they proposed that career centers need to initiate changes in the critical areas concerning career assessments, career theories, the hiring and training of career center staff, the career center environment as well as specialized services to serve the diverse student population.

In response to Heppner and Jung (2012), I support and echo their view that career centers need to respond to changing student demographics. In Hong Kong, for instance, there had been rapid expansion of higher education in the 1990s prior to the reunification of Hong Kong with China, with the percentage of the 17–20 age group

entering into university increasing from 8.6% in 1990 to 18.8% in 1996 (University Grants Committee, 1996). The percentage since then maintained at that level. Prior to the 1990s, the education system was widely regarded as elitist, producing leaders and the cream of society. Armour, Cheng, and Taplin (1999) founded in a representative sample in a large-scale survey in Hong Kong that over 90% of university students had neither of their parents graduated from a university, and estimated that the majority of university students in Hong Kong at the time were first-generation university students. Lui and Suen (2005) found from substantial income data over five years that after the expansion of university student intake in the 1990s, the relative earning of local university graduates shrank. Lui and Suen concluded that this was very much due to the relative decline of the quality of graduates as a result of the admission of more students by local universities in order to achieve the rapid expansion expected of them. This is understandable as Hong Kong moved from elitist toward mass university education (Armour et al., 1999). Therefore, enhancing student's work competencies, employability and work experience has been a primary goal of career services in Hong Kong since the 1990s.

In their paper entitled "Using Career Education and Career Services to Enhance Employability: A Case of The Hong Kong Polytechnic University," Fung and Wong's (2012) discussion about the career services in their university illustrated well such priorities. They traced that The Hong Kong Polytechnic University was first developed in 1972 as The Hong Kong Polytechnic, and it gained full university status in 1994. In addition to managing a Career Information Centre, the Student Affairs Office of the university started to coordinate a university-wide summer internship program known as the "Preferred Graduate" development program in 1997 to promote application-oriented learning of students. Fung and Wong also reported their subsequent achievements in providing internship opportunities in cities in the Chinese mainland

and other countries since 1998, as well as receiving career practitioners from the mainland to have work attachments in its career service. With the return of Hong Kong to China in 1997, they emphasized that the internship experience in the Chinese mainland was designed to prepare students' future employment presumably with substantial dealings with the mainland.

Secondly, the metaphor of "music and the dance" also implied that career centers should examine the broader contextual changes affecting their services. In their paper entitled "Career Centers in Higher Education in South Korea: Past, Present, and Future," Yang, Lee, and Ahn (2012) traced the history of career centers in South Korea from 1980s up till now from "undifferentiated" toward "comprehensive" delivery of services. They found that significant growth and development of career centers were related to the Asian financial crisis in 1997, and subsequently to the social issue of graduate unemployment since 2004. Government policy and funding have been instrumental in the "visible transformation" of career centers with changes in their roles and services. Against such a background, career centers are naturally expected to focus more on the immediate employment problems of graduates. As Yang et al. remarked, a further challenge will be how career centers in South Korea develop systematic approach and long-term visions.

Moreover, Heppner and Jung (2012) specified that in facing changing student demographics, career centers should reexamine six critical areas, namely the career counseling process, career assessments, career theories, the career center environment, the hiring and training of career center staff as well as specialized services for diverse students. It involves a thorough reexamination of the theories, practices and services to meet the needs of an increasingly diversified student population. As theories and practices of career centers originated from the West,

career centers in Asia will need to adapt theories and practices that are relevant in their cultural contexts. It also concerns the advancement of career counseling profession and indigenization of career theories in Asian contexts (Cheung, 2009). While comprehensive coverage about professionalization and indigenization in Asian countries are beyond the scope of this reaction paper, a critical successful factor to achieve professional advancement in Asia is the continuous dialogue and close collaboration between practitioners and academics in developing indigenous research and theories to inform practice, as well as career assessment tools that are culturally relevant in their own countries.

In retrospect, while the metaphor of “music and the dance” highlights a universal concern about the importance of changing student profiles and social contexts, the “music” is often different in different countries and so are the “dances.” In Hong Kong, the music is about the rapid expansion of higher education and the concern for the quality of mass university graduates in an increasingly competitive employment market. In Korea, it may be the changing economic situations and the corresponding difficulties in graduate employment. Career professionals in both cases responded to changes and expanded their service scope and quantity. Theory informs practice. In the long run, irrespective of geographical locations, there is a need to continuously strengthen and advance the career counseling profession and its expertise in terms of career theories, assessment tools and service delivery, which can only be achieved with close collaboration among academics, practitioners and policymakers.

### **Strategic Considerations**

In addition to considering the influence of external environment, a career center will also establish its strategic directions within a higher education institution. There are two major issues. The first is the priority of service development, say putting emphasis on job placement, career

development, work experience or other services. The other concerns how career services are organized within a university. According to Watts (1997), the core activities of career guidance in higher education traditionally included individual and group guidance, information services as well as employer liaison and placement services. Hustler et al. (1998) mentioned that the career service in the long run might possibly be embedded within higher education as part of a “core curriculum.” They predicted that career service in a university in the United Kingdom might emerge as curriculum consultancy, in the form of an academic or teaching unit rather than a student service. In their paper entitled “Current Status and Future Development of Career Centers in the United States,” Garis, Reardon, and Lenz (2012) addressed to these issues. They put forward useful continua to understand and analyze services of a career center, namely involvement in career development, involvement in experiential education, locus of placement, and locus of funding. The first two continua addressed to the service priorities while the last two concerned the administration of career services in the institution. According to the continua, a career center classified as “high involvement” in career development, “high involvement” in experiential learning, “centralized locus” in placement and “government locus” in funding can be considered to be a “comprehensive career center.”

Fung and Wong (2012) provided a highly useful case study of career service development within an institution in Hong Kong. Career-related services in their case were developed and organized by the Student Affairs Office. They traced how services were first developed in a career information center and subsequently expanded to cover general education, a university-wide internship program and institutional assessment evaluation of student work-related competencies. It demonstrated how career services responded proactively to institutional goals to meet changing student needs with pioneer programs in

accordance with the strategic plan of the university. To meet changing circumstances, new services were innovated in the areas of career education and experiential education.

Yang et al. (2012) provided valuable survey data from 15 university career centers in South Korea for understanding the services relating to career exploration and career placement. Applying the framework of Garis et al. (2012), I find services in South Korea spread over different areas of career education, experiential education and placement. Yang et al. pinpointed an important question of the relative balance between career exploration and placement services. They observed that career centers in South Korea tended to put greater emphasis on placement and regard career exploration largely secondary because of the government and students' expectations on placement services of the university career centers.

On the strategic level, fostering collaboration within the university is a critical success factor for career centers. In the future, irrespective of its organizational location in the university, it is unrealistic and not necessary for a career center to provide on its own all the services that a university needs. Career centers need to collaborate proactively with other departments like academic departments, academic advising, counseling centers, alumni and employers to enhance career development of students. Through the collaborations, the career center can possibly extend or tailor their services to meet the diverse needs of different sectors of students in the campus.

In addition to the service delivery, career service practitioners might consider forging more partnership within the campus with academic departments in offering credit-bearing career planning courses. Consultancy or tailor-made services can be offered by the career center to specific academic departments on need basis to enhance career

education of students in a specific discipline. With university-wide collaboration, career centers may work toward making career education an integral part of university education with other stakeholders. In this way, the career center may perform its key role in campus placement services on the one hand, and become a provider, facilitator and champion of career education in the university on the other. Therefore, I share the vision of Garis et al. (2012) on the collaborative role of career center:

This centralized office is not the sole provider of career programs because this is unrealistic at large universities with many academic programs. Rather, the centralized career services office will be the university leader in partnering with and offering its research expertise and systems to other departments wishing to provide career services to their students and alumni. (p. 23)

In addition to collaboration, Garis et al.'s (2012) vision statement for future career center irrespective of geographical location included two other integral themes. Firstly, the services should be comprehensive and centralized, and addressed to different parties of students, alumni, employers, university faculty/administrators, and career development professionals at national and international level. Secondly, services should cover different areas of career development counseling and programming, experiential education, and centralized employer relations/recruitment services.

A long-term strategy for a career center is to pursue the model of comprehensive career center, in which the center integrates services, teaching and research relating to career development of students in a higher education institution (Vernick, Garis, & Reardon, 2000). How far this can become the ideal model of a career center depends on its developmental stage and strategic location in its organization.



Established comprehensive career centers worldwide can share their exemplary practices in professional conferences and exchanges.

### **Concluding Remark**

In reading and responding to different papers in this special issue, I find common themes and great enthusiasm to further the development of career centers. Heppner and Jung (2012) highlighted a fundamental concern on changing profiles and contexts. Garis et al. (2012) has provided valuable conceptual tools for analyzing and categorizing different career services relevant for career centers in different parts of the world. In retrospect, it is crucial for career service professionals in a specific country to understand the contextual and social demands on career services, and play a dynamic role to react to social challenges with their service innovations. In this aspect, Fung and Wong (2012) have contributed a case study in the Hong Kong context, while Yang et al. (2012) have provided much needed survey data about career services in South Korea. These are valuable case and survey data in the development of career centers in the Asian context.

In conclusion, this special issue helps to bridge theory with practice. It provides a valuable opportunity to review theoretical framework, contextual development and service planning for designing and running a career center in the university setting. In furthering development of career centers, both contextual and strategic considerations should be carefully made. In this quest for career service excellence, further sharing and professional standards like the NACE Standards mentioned by Garis et al. (2012) will be useful. In sum, I find this special issue provides a special opportunity for fostering professional dialogue between East and West, academics and practitioners, as well as administrators and counselors. Such excellent efforts for cross-fertilization should be further encouraged in the form of international collaborations in conferences, research and other projects.

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### 職業生涯中心在高校的發展：社會背景及策略取向的考量

高等教育機構中的職業生涯中心亦稱為職業資源中心（Herr, Cramer, & Niles, 2004），最早成立於西方，其後在世界各地不斷演變和發展。本專輯主題為職業生涯中心，來自美國、南韓及香港的作者就高校開展和提供職業生涯服務作出了討論，並提出了洞見。本文回應各特邀文章，總結其共同主題，從社會背景及策略取向兩方面探討如何設計及營運一所職業生涯中心。文章並指出，各地從事生涯發展的專業人士，可以在回應社會需求及發展校內服務策略方面，發揮積極主動的角色。

關鍵詞：職業發展；職業生涯中心；高等教育；學生發展