

HOW TO BUILD A SUCCESSFUL STUDENT EMPLOYABILITY STRATEGY

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PETER STOKES
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Colleges and universities are beginning to focus their efforts on matching their academic rigor with equally-as-rigorous career-preparation programs to boost their marketability to prospective students.

Many higher education institutions are struggling to launch measurable and effective student work readiness programs — yet the student demand for them isn’t subsiding. In the following Q&A, Peter Stokes, a Huron managing director, provides practical insights into what some institutions may face when seeking to launch an employability program, as well as some guidance for overcoming challenges.

Q: WHERE SHOULD INSTITUTIONS START IF THEY WANT TO IMPROVE — OR LAUNCH — A WORK READINESS PROGRAM?

A : The first step is to assess the range and effectiveness of current activities so that an institution can consider where potential gaps may exist in its current portfolio of activities. Every school is likely doing something, but the services may not be sufficiently integrated to drive optimal utilization, and it’s quite possible that more can be done.

If you want to have a more robust student employability program, ask yourself the following: What could be added to augment what we’re already doing to support students’ recognition of the link between career choice and major at orientation? How effectively do we link that activity to our first-year experience program, student advising and/or career services?

The next step is to conduct primary research with a variety of stakeholders — students, recent graduates, past graduates and employers in particular. Then, evaluate how these different stakeholders perceive your institution’s strengths and weaknesses from an employability perspective. These two steps should provide the fundamental inputs to inform the development of an employability strategy and aid the institution in setting clear goals and benchmarks for success.

Q: WHAT ARE SOME OF THE MAJOR CHALLENGES INSTITUTIONS FACE WHEN LAUNCHING THIS KIND OF INITIATIVE?

A : The first and most significant challenge is that it requires culture change, and not everyone in an academic setting thinks that employability is the responsibility of educators. It also requires the capacity and skill to develop strong connections with the local talent ecosystem. Those are two very significant challenges.

Supporting work readiness in a deep and effective way requires — starting from students' first day of enrollment — a genuine integration of study and work in very practical ways. This isn't something that should just be left solely to student affairs or a career services office to handle. Instead, faculty, students and administrators need to be involved, and doing this well requires a system-level integration of effort that can demand more than culture change. It can necessitate organizational change as well, to put decision making authority and accountability in the right places within the organization to achieve cross-functional collaboration and desired outcomes.

This all costs money, and it takes time — both of which are precious resources. These are important challenges to consider alongside those at the cultural and organizational level.

Q: IF AN INSTITUTION DECIDES TO LAUNCH A WORK-READINESS PROGRAM, HOW WILL THE PROGRAM AFFECT THE INSTITUTION AS A WHOLE?

A : Institutions often need to make modifications to their organizational structure to create better alignment among their existing services or aid in the development and delivery of new services.

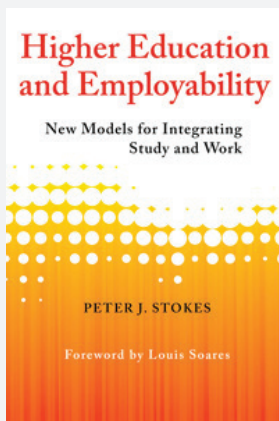
Ultimately, if you want to achieve employability outcomes, an institution's decisions about how to design, deliver and assess such programs are going to have to be driven by collaboration with the local employment market — it can't just be an internal conversation on campus. At the end of the day, that corporate relationship management piece is absolutely key in fostering work readiness. Bentley University does a very good job focusing on a few dozen crucial corporate partnerships, while gradually deepening its relationships with several dozen more. It pays to set achievable goals and focus on organizations that recruit the greatest share of your graduates.

Q: HOW LONG DOES IT GENERALLY TAKE TO LAUNCH AN EMPLOYABILITY PROGRAM?

A : It can vary tremendously. If you're tightening up a process that already exists, you could probably achieve a great deal in a semester. In other cases, you may want to take a step back and set a much broader strategy that targets one or two dozen employer partnerships — that could be the work of two or three years. It really will depend on the scope and scale of your initiative.

There are definitely high-value things you can do in a relatively short time frame — but there are also going to be some highvalue activities that will require greater persistence and a bigger commitment of time and effort.

If we look at the case of Georgia Tech University's Online Masters in Computer Science, which was developed with support from AT&T, that initiative went from an idea to a program with almost 400 enrollments in nine months. And a year and a half later, the program had approximately 2,500 enrollments. So there can be a sprint at the start of an effort and then a longterm commitment required to scale the project.



As a higher education managing director at Huron, Peter Stokes has worked with hundreds of institutions across the U.S. and globally to support their efforts of reaching new audiences and achieve compelling student outcomes through focusing on student work readiness and employability. His book, *Higher Education and Employability*, is currently available for purchase at <http://hepg.org/hep-home/books/higher-education-and-employability>.

Q : WHAT SHOULD INSTITUTIONS CONSIDER BEFORE LAUNCHING ANY KIND OF WORK READINESS PROGRAM?

A : It's important that the focus on employability does not dilute the focus on academic quality. Institutions should not be making a choice between one and the other, as it's really the effective integration of both study and work that they should be seeking to realize. This is what will achieve the most effective and compelling promotion of employability efforts in the end.



Student work readiness is an issue that will continue to gain momentum in the higher education field. If your institution is considering a work readiness program launch and is not quite sure where to start, Huron can help answer your pressing questions. To learn more, please contact:

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