Career Readiness Education (CRED) Program

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This paper describes the Career Readiness Education (CRED) program. Guided by research-based best practices, CRED is designed to create an educational pathway for students to obtain guidance on career choices and ensure successful transition from college-to-work. CRED's goals are for students to (a) assess their career options (b) test career expectations through direct exposure to workplace cultures and (c) recognize and value elements of professionalism. For each goal, we identify student learning outcomes (SLOs), activities and SLOs assessments. The implementation of this program seeks to enhance educational experiences of students and allow them to succeed in their life-long career journey.

INTRODUCTION

If an employed graduate had a professor who cared about them as a person, one who made them excited about learning, and had a mentor who encouraged them to pursue their dreams, the graduate's odds of being engaged at work after graduation was 59% compared to 30% who did not have any of those experiences (Gallup Purdue Index, 2014). The most alarming statistic, however, is that only 14% of all college graduates surveyed reported they 'strongly agreed' with statements describing they were supported in all three areas. Indeed, this lack of support relates not only to feelings of work place preparedness, but also to correlates of workplace engagement.

The same Gallup Purdue Index survey reported that when graduates felt their college or university adequately prepared them for life outside of college, the odds of them feeling engaged at work increased nearly threefold (Gallup Purdue Index, 2014). The opportunities college students believed prepared them best for life after graduation were internships, extracurricular activities, career-related organizations, and semester-long projects. These experiences allowed students to apply what they have learned and, subsequently, helped them develop expectations about their desired profession.

Colleges and universities are uniquely able to provide students with (a) knowledge and experiences that can prepare them for future careers and (b) training on how to identify and seek out workplaces that foster engagement. These two points emphasize the crucial role higher education establishments play in career readiness and *why* systematic research-based career readiness programs should universally be a part of collegiate curriculum.

National surveys have highlighted the importance of career preparation in college while simultaneously suggesting that college graduates are not adequately prepared for the transition from college to work. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *American Media Market Place 2012 Survey* published data on employers' perceptions of the role colleges and universities have on career preparation. The survey found that 31% of employers believe recent graduates are unprepared or very unprepared for conducting job searches and securing a position after completing their undergraduate degree (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2012).

The expectations placed on colleges and universities by students, their families, and the American public all presume college to be a transformative experience that creates a pathway towards higher paying jobs and upward social mobility. However, based on the above, there seems to be a clear disconnect between collegiate curriculum and transition of that education into workplace environments. With the widespread use of a systematic, research-based program, higher education has the power to change that. Based on empirically based best practices, we propose the Career Readiness Education (CRED) program designed to create an educational pathway for students to obtain guidance on career choice and, subsequently, have a successful college-to-work transition.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining Career Readiness

Career is typically defined as a "sequence of experiences in the world of work with objectives and consequences" (Sears, 1982; p. 137). The term *readiness* is often considered to be a synonym of *preparedness* in most disciplines (Camara, 2013). As such, *career readiness* is defined as "the attainment and demonstration of requisite competencies that broadly prepare college graduates for a successful transition into the workplace (National Association of Colleges and Employers, NACE, n.d.)." Key areas in career readiness include learning professional roles, understanding workplace cultures, and professional socialization (Trede, Macklin, & Bridges, 2012). Students seeking career readiness need to develop both an understanding of the professional requirements to be successful in the workplace and the relevant knowledge and technical skills related to their desired career (Daniels & Brooker, 2014).

Many experts presume that career readiness is not a static state (Sampson et al. 2013), with no defined end-point (Career Readiness Partner Council, n.d.). The mastery of career readiness varies as the student advances along a continuum. The changing dynamics of our current workforce requires a career-ready student to be adaptable and committed to lifelong learning.

Research on Career Readiness

To foster career success, university campuses are now offering combinations of formal academic programs and auxiliary services dedicated to career planning and readiness (Rayman, 1993). In fact, the shift from job placement to career planning and readiness services began to emerge in the 1990s as a means to ensure college graduates successful transition into the workforce. However, between 2009 and 2011, fewer than half of recent college graduates found their first job within one year of graduating (Stone et al., 2012). Current college-to-work initiatives face the unique challenge of designing effective bridges to workplaces that focus on students' long-term development and adjustment (Lent, Hackett & Brown, 1999).

Students' transition to the workplace should not be viewed as a single event that occurs immediately after graduation. Rather, this transition should be a gradual process that evolves as students' progress through their collegiate education. Viewing the transition to work as a "process" instead of an "event" allows for a lengthy, carefully planned preparation, and an extended phase of adjustment to work and other life roles (Lent et al., 1999). Thus, career readiness interventions should be distributed across the entirety of college rather than a concentrated event during the senior year.

Understanding transitions and the life changes experienced by newcomers to the workforce will help higher education institutions develop better strategies to maximize students' success (Schlossberg, 2011).

For any student, the alteration of roles, routines and assumptions makes the transition difficult. As a result, the process of gradually preparing students for these changes (e.g. professional roles) takes time.

That being said, acclimating to the world of work is crucial for the success of college students. In fact, research has noted a direct positive relationship between adjustment difficulties and high job turnover (Saks, Uggerslev, & Fassina, 2007). Based on this, institutions in higher education need to prepare students for this transition by offering programs that extend beyond securing employment (Perrone & Vickers, 2003), and they address factors that contribute to low career readiness (Sampson et al., 2013). Listed below are variables noted by research that contribute to low career readiness.

Variables Contributing to Low Career Readiness

Limited exposure to career services may leave students confused about how to use resources such as self-assessments or job information that are available to them on college campuses. For example, when using a career interest inventory, students may not know when to seek assistance from a career counselor. This may be a challenge for students with limited experience who may be attempting to use self-help resources readily available in the library or the internet (Di Fabio & Bernaud, 2008; Sampson et al., 2013).

Inaccurate expectations about career choice and career services can produce unrealistic beliefs about the existence of a perfect career choice (Di Fabio & Bernaud, 2008; Wendlandt & Rochlen, 2008; Sampson et al., 2013). For example, students may have an inappropriate expectation that a career search engine system is the best option to match occupations with their characteristics (Krumboltz, 1985).

Negative prior experience with career interventions can result in anticipation of unsuccessful use of these services, resulting in self-fulfilling prophecy of failure when attempting to make an informed career decision (Williams, Glenn & Wider, 2009).

Cultural disparity between work and classroom (Nystrom, 2009) produces a weak understanding of organizational culture. Approximately 79% of recent graduates felt they had little understanding of work culture before entering the workforce (Sleap & Reed, 2006). Similarly, college graduates reported one year after graduation that they had a weak understanding of the work culture (Kammeryer-Mueller & Wanberg, 2003).

Lack of experience and skills prevents recent graduates from performing jobs at adequate levels (Perrone & Vickers, 2003). Survey results indicate that a mismatch between the skills graduates possess and those desired by employers (Perrone & Vickers, 2003). Results reported by Sleap and Reed (2006) indicated recent college graduates would like for colleges to place more emphasis on developing transferable skills during undergraduate work.

Unrealistic expectations of the workplace and role as an employee make students experience greater levels of stress (Louis, 1980). Research suggests students are often unfamiliar with the differences in culture between college and work and have difficulty anticipating change. These inflated expectations cause considerable disappointment and lead to low levels of job satisfaction (Perrone & Vickers, 2003). The effects of disappointment resulting from unmet expectations should not be ignored. Numerous students report that job satisfaction is related to lower levels of well-being, performance, motivation and high levels of turnover (Kammeyer-Mueller & Wanberg, 2003).

The variables contributing to low career readiness can result in several negative effects for college students. These consequences result in behaviors that can adversely impact students' career success. Examples of negative behaviors associated with low career readiness include: (a) *premature withdrawal* from college when there are perceptions of difficulties in the use of career services and resources (Sampson et al., 2013) (b) *negative perceptions of skills* caused by anticipated failure in completing a work-related task, which in turn leads to discontent and embarrassment (Hirschi, 2009; Sampson et al., 2013) (c) *negative perceptions of interests* after perceptions of failure in applying skills associated with an interest (Hirschi & Lage, 2007, 2008a;) (d) *selective acquisition of incomplete information* may reinforce perceptions of not being interested or not able to succeed in an occupation (also known as self-fulfilling prophecy) (Corcoran, 2000) (e) *premature choice foreclosure* is used to avoid the risk or effort involved in considering other possible occupational options (Sampson et al., 2013) (f) *protracted exploration of*

choices, or a compulsive need to find the perfect option, helps avoid the risk failure (Yang & Gysbers, 2007) (g) *dependent decision-making* style involves deferring responsibility for a career decision to a significant other (Hirschi & Lage, 2008b) (h) *poor evaluation of options* may occur when the positive aspects of an occupation are underestimated while the negative features are overestimated leading to the conclusion that the option is inappropriate (Otto, Dette-Hagenmeyer, & Dalbert, 2010).

In order to prevent the aforementioned negative effects, variables causing low career readiness need to be taken into consideration and addressed by career readiness intervention programs. Models of organizational socialization that take into consideration these obstacles can provide a clear and organized framework to help students adapt to workplaces.

Organizational Socialization Model

Theories of organizational socialization align with traditional models of career development and further expand on explaining the process of newcomers' entry into the workplace. A three-stage organizational socialization model proposed by Wendlant and Rochen (2008) explains the unique experience of student graduates preparing to enter the workforce. This framework is based on well-researched socialization models proposed by Feldman (1976), Louis (1980), Porter, Lawler, and Hackman (1975), Schein (1978), and Wanous (1992) and integrates important concepts addressed in career development and transition theories. It is important to note that although the model identifies three stages, *the socialization process should be viewed as continuous and adaptable to the needs of individuals throughout their careers*.

The first stage of the socialization process proposed by Wendlant and Rochen (2008) is named *anticipation*. This is an exploratory phase that occurs before students enter an organization. For the duration of this stage, students collect and assess information related to their desired career, develop expectations about workplaces and the roles of employees, and identify their needs and wants in a career (Feldman, 1976; Louis, 1980; Porter et al., 1975). The evaluation of career information and results from self-assessments are crucial for career transition goals, career choices, and adjustment to workplaces (Super, 1990). The anticipation stage is viewed by transition theory as a "moving out" phase because students will perceive they are leaving something behind as they prepare to enter the workforce (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Thus, students undergoing this phase reconcile impending feelings of losing something familiar (e.g., college environment).

The second stage, *adjustment*, begins when students enter workplaces. During this time, students become familiar with the workplace culture (Super et al., 1996) and continue to learn new skills that are essential to their careers, clarify their roles as professionals, and learn to self-assess their performance (Feldman, 1976; Schlossberg et al., 1995; Wanous, 1992). The adjustment stage allows students to test expectations and clarify discrepancies between their visions and the realities of their desired career (Louis, 1980; Porter et al., 1975; Wanous, 1992).

The third stage of the organizational socialization model is *achievement*. Progressing to this stage requires students to assess workplaces. This phase involves adopting new values, an altered self-image, and new professional behaviors (Porter et al., 1975; Wanous, 1992). A successful organizational socialization suggests high levels of job satisfaction, reciprocal acceptance between the employer and the recently graduated student, organizational commitment and intrinsic work motivation (Feldman, 1976; Schein, 1978; Wanous, 1992). Although the assumption in the achievement period is that students have entered the workforce, for the purposes of our career readiness education program, the goal of this phase is to *prepare* students for a successful achievement stage.

APPLICATION OF THE ORGANIZATIONAL SOCIALIZATION MODEL IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The implementation of the organizational socialization model in a higher education institution requires the collaboration of many services and personnel to ensure its success. To meet the career readiness needs of our students, we propose the Career Readiness Education (CRED) Program. This

program will rely on career counseling and exploration activities, experiential learning programs, and career services activities.

Career Counseling and Exploration

In a report by the National Career Development Association (1999), 69% of young adults indicated that if they could go back to the beginning of their college career, they would try to get more career related information, and 39% would seek the help of some type of counselor during their tenure. These survey results suggest that the early years of the college experience are a time-sensitive period for gaining a sense of meaning and choosing a career path (Tirpak & Schlosser, 2015).

Many undergraduates experience difficulties in career related decisions because they are faced with too many choices, not exposed to enough options, and/or feel unprepared to make a decision (Gati, Krauz & Osipow, 1996). It is important to understand these challenges and develop strategies to assist students through career counseling. Meta-analyses research has demonstrated the use of classroom interventions as an effective strategy to help students explore and formulate a career plan (Oliver & Spokane, 1988; Spokane & Oliver, 1983; Whiston, Sexton & Lasoff, 1998).

During career counseling interventions, students have an opportunity to engage in career exploration activities to learn more about themselves and employment opportunities. In fact, career development theories propose that exploration is needed to avoid future problems related to indecision and premature negative career decisions (Super, 1990).

Career exploration activities are most beneficial for students undergoing the anticipation stage of the organizational socialization process. Effective career exploration interventions have been positively related to better person-environment fit in a chosen career (Grovetant, Cooper, & Kramer, 1986), increased occupational self-concept clarification (Robitschek & Cook, 1999), improved realistic career expectations (Stumpt & Hartman, 1984), higher number of job interviews and job offers (Stumpf & Hartman, 1984), and superior career establishment (Jepsen & Dickson, 2003).

Brown and Ryan Krane (2000) noted that the content of the career counseling intervention is more important than the format in which it is delivered. This indicates that interventions need to be comprised of specific elements that are important to the participant and improve effectiveness in career success. Results of a meta-analysis reported by Ryan (1999) and research conducted by Brown and Ryan Krane (2000) identified five crucial components of an effective career counseling intervention. These are (a) written exercises requiring participants to write goals, future plans and occupational analysis (b) individualized feedback on assessment results, goals and future plans (c) opportunities to research world of work information and career options (d) exposure to models of career exploration, decision-making and career implementations (e) activities designed to offer support for participants' career choices and plans.

An updated meta-analysis study conducted by Whiston, Li, Mitts and Wright (2017) identified three additional key factors as important in career counseling: (a) career counselor support (b) clarification of values (c) psychoeducation interventions about the steps involved in making a career related decision. Further, of the five critical components identified by Brown and Ryan Krane (2000), the factor with the strongest support for being an effective career intervention was written exercises.

Experiential Learning Programs

A prevalent student-oriented learning approach used in higher education is experiential learning. Experiential learning activities typically involves four interdependent stages: concrete experience, observation (analysis and reflection), generalization (forming abstract concepts) and application (evaluating new situations) (Plesoianu & Carstea, 2013). Instructional activities associated with experiential learning allow students to create meaning from direct experiences outside of the classroom, reflect on the experiences, and incorporate a new understanding into their lives (Bohn & Schmidt, 2008). Experiential learning activities combine experience, perception, cognition, and behavior to arrive at an integrative perspective (Wulff-Risner and Stewart, 1997). Experiential learning programs seem to be very

beneficial to students who have a general understanding of their career goals and are experiencing the adjustment stage of the organizational socialization process.

Research has shown that experiential learning activities participants employ metacognitive skills and acquire the highest level of understanding and mastery of the targeted learning area (Bohn & Schmidt, 2008). Further, a study by Mahoney and Retallick (2015) reported that experiential learning activities enhanced students' learning by requiring them to use real-world life skills that transfer in their future careers. Participants of the experiential learning activities reported feeling more comfortable and confident as they entered the workforce. Mahoney & Retallick (2015) recommended that experiential learning activities should follow the eight best practices recommended by the National Society of Experiential Learning Education (2011). These are: (a) intention (b) preparedness and planning (c) authenticity (d) reflection (e) orientation and training (f) monitoring and continuous improvement (g) assessment and evolution (h) acknowledgement.

Undergraduate participants of experiential learning activities have shown improved success in organization, efficiency, and academic performance, as well as higher graduation rates than peers who do not take part in experiential learning programs (Dundes & Marx, 2006). The greatest benefits noted by students were professional growth and career preparation (Hunter, Laursen & Seymour, 2007). Further, experiential learning allowed students to define career goals and develop teamwork skills (Gilbert, Lees & Rhodes, 2014). Students report using these learning experiences to increase their knowledge and skills and make informed decisions about their future (Gilbert et al., 2014). Many view experiential learning programs as a way to assess or reinforce career goals and gain valuable experience for their desired profession (Gilbert et al., 2014). The value of student development demonstrated by research justifies the implementation of experiential learning programs at higher level institutions.

Career Services

The model of services in higher education institutions has evolved from job placement to a more comprehensive one (Herr, Rayman, & Garis, 1993; Hoover, Lenz, & Garis, 2013; Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2012). Among the services offered by this office are the career fairs, workshops, on-campus interview programs, resume writing programs, internship opportunities, career resources and assessments. The career services offices should be viewed as leaders in creating college-wide programs and systems (Shivy & Koehly, 2002). They should be recognized as dynamic, energetic, creative and a welcoming to all partners who are stakeholders (i.e., alumni, parents, employers and other organizations in the community) in the development of students.

Research has been documented on students' perceptions, preferences and attitudes toward career services (Fretz, 1981; Rochlen, Mohr & Hargrove, 1999). In general, students who approached career services with optimistic expectations were more involved in the process than those with more pessimistic expectations (Tinsley, Tokar, & Helwig, 1994). Students with higher self-efficacy preferred informational career counselors, while lower self-efficacy participants desired more involved counselors. Results of career services preferences indicated that students endorsed direct interaction with employers such as internship experiences, job interviews, and career fairs (Shivy & Koehly, 2002).

Shivy & Koehly's (2002) study also showed differences between undergraduates and graduate students preferences about the services provided by career services. Graduate students seemed to understand the complexities of planning a career and sought more involvement from career services. The typical undergraduate showed more interest in securing a job, resulting in less contact from career services. These results highlight the importance of educating students about the long-term aspects of career planning. In addition, students must prepare for the intricacies of career planning once they enter the achievement stage of the organizational socialization process. Understanding students' perceptions and preferences are useful for designing effective career services programs.

Empirically-Based Best Practices

To best support the career readiness of students, it is important to implement a university-wide initiative involving students, faculty, staff and administrators based on empirically based recommendations. Research best practices include:

- Use career resources and individual counseling interventions for students with low to moderate career readiness (Sampson, et al. 2004).
- Enhance the learning environment by following the seven principles proposed by Chickering and Gamson (1991): (a) student-faculty contact (b) cooperation among students (c) active learning (d) prompt feedback to students (e) time on task (f) high academic expectations (g) respect for diverse students and diverse ways of learning. Past research has indicated that the practice of these seven dimensions are positively related to desired cognitive and non-cognitive development during college years and future careers (Kuh et al., 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).
- Integrate the formation of students' professional identity and understanding of its role beginning in students' freshman year (Daniels & Brooker, 2014).
- Encourage students to reflect on their positional stance and develop strategies for improvement on how they can function more effectively as an entry-level professional (Hunter et al., 2007).
- Develop networking and career related exercises as an effective way to encourage students to visualize themselves in professional roles (Bennet, 2012).
- Incorporate experiential learning to encourage students to gain insight into professional settings (Cornellissen & Van Wyk, 2007).
- Connect students with external practice and relevant communities that will engage them beyond their college years (Wenger, 2006). This is of particular importance for students from low-socio economic backgrounds who have little exposure to professional networks.

CAREER READINESS EDUCATION (CRED) PROGRAM: THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Career Readiness Education (CRED) program seeks to facilitate the organizational socialization process of each student and prepare them for a successful transition into the workforce. Outlined in the following pages are three broad goals consistent with the organizational socialization process framework proposed by Wendlandt & Rochen (2008). This framework describes how job seekers can successfully reconcile job perceptions and realities as well as acclimate to the expectations of professional environments (Wendlandt & Rochen, 2008). CRED's goals are broken down into the three stages of organizational socialization: anticipation, adjustment, and achievement. Figure 1 shows the goals, related student learning outcomes (SLOs) and the corresponding stage of the organizational socialization process. We also propose assessment and implementation processes to document the success of students' learning under this program. Below we outline the assessment and implementation for each goal.
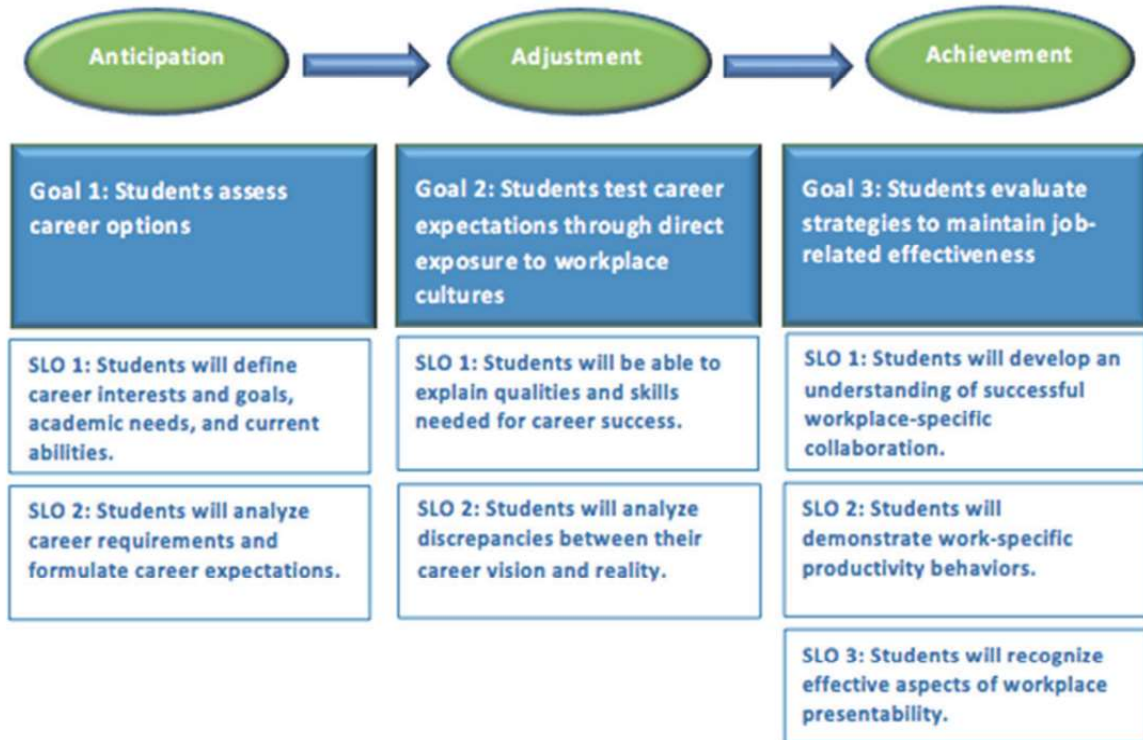
CRED Goal 1: Students Assess Career Options

Students enrolled in the Freshman Year Experience (FYE) course will define their career interests and goals, needs, and abilities (Goal 1-SLO 1) by completing the following career assessment surveys: Career Exploration Surveys (Stump, Colarelly, & Hartman, 1983), Career Self Efficacy Survey (Heppner, Multon, & Johnston, 1994), Career Competency Survey (Francis-Smythe et al. 2013), and Perceptions of Employability Survey (Berntson & Maklund, 2007). Based on the results of these self-assessments, students will write a reflective piece where they report on their career interests and goals, their current abilities and strengths, and the academic and professional skills needed to achieve their career goals.

Students enrolled in the FYE Course will also have an opportunity to analyze career requirements and formulate career expectations (Goal 1 – SLO 2) through informational interviews of professionals working in their field of interest. Based on this research, students will present to their classmates the requirements of the career they researched. Faculty teaching the FYE course will grade the presentations using a rubric and provide students with a quantitative score of their presentation and qualitative written feedback.

CRED Goal 2: Students Test Career Expectations through Direct Exposure to Workplace Cultures

Sophomore and junior students will enroll in courses identified as upper level CRED courses. These courses will offer significant amounts of experiential learning for students to be able to explain qualities and skills needed for career success (Goal 2 – SLO 1). Faculty teaching these courses will assign a research paper based on these experiences. Faculty will (a) grade the research papers using a rubric, provide quantitative scores and qualitative written feedback, and (b) facilitate a discussion about the qualities and skills required to succeed in chosen fields of study.

Students enrolled in the upper level CRED courses will also have an opportunity to analyze discrepancies between their career vision and reality (Goal 2- SLO 2). As students complete a series of experiential learning activities that promote direct exposure to workspaces, students will write two reflective papers. The first paper will ask students to describe their expectations for their desired career. After completing the experiential learning exercise(s), students will then review the first paper and write a second paper to reflect on discrepancies between their original vision of career expectations and the actual expectations derived from their experiential learning project. Faculty teaching these courses will use a rubric to grade the papers and discuss discrepancies with students.

CRED Goal 3: Students Recognize and Value Elements of Professionalism

Students enrolled in senior level and capstone identified CRED courses will develop an understanding of successful workplace-specific collaboration and productivity behaviors (Goal 3 – SLO 1 & SLO 2) by competing in Career Day competitions. Career Day is one-day competition planned by the Career Services Department where students will have an opportunity to learn about different topics related to career readiness and compete in a number of career readiness activities. One of the competitions will require a team of senior students to address a current issue and deliver a professional presentation. A panel of judges comprised of local employers and faculty will evaluate each group's presentation, collaboration, and project execution skills. Student team members will also rate the collaborative behaviors of their peers using a Behaviorally Anchored Ratings Scale (BARS) that defines standards of successful workplace collaboration.

Senior students will also have an opportunity to recognize specific aspects of workplace presentability (Goal 3 – SLO 3) by competing in the Mock Interview Job Competition at Career Day. A panel of judges comprised of local employers and faculty will evaluate each participant on the following criteria: résumé, appearance and poise, and presentation skill. Students will be evaluated using a rubric and will receive written feedback on their performance.

The vision of the CRED program is to create a culture of life-long career learning. The three goals that support this vision provide a blueprint to use existing university resources. These goals will also help build a culture where students will learn valuable career ready knowledge and skills, and practice strategies that will allow them to succeed in their careers. In pursuing these three goals, our university will (a) create greater alignment of curriculum with career readiness activities on campus (b) create a more coherent experience for students (c) foster cooperation among faculty, students and university service departments. Our assessment plan will allow administrators and leadership to document the impact and value of our CRED program. Improving the college experience should focus on ways to provide students with more emotional support, and with more opportunities for deep learning experiences and real-life applications of classroom learning. By taking action, colleges and educators can enhance students' educational experiences and allow them to thrive in their life-long career journey.

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