

## **Graduating Career-Ready Business Students**

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*This paper analyses three key components of a career development curriculum for business majors that has generated superior results, supporting undergraduates' transition from higher education to professional employment while teaching students career advancement skills that will be used throughout their lives. Students have expressed strong satisfaction with opportunities for coaching and mentoring, coursework facilitating experiential learning, and mandatory internships in their major. Analyses of qualitative data drawn from student assignments and course evaluations suggest these three elements of the program have positively impacted students' career-readiness, career aspirations and career achievements. Quantitative data shows increased student success in achieving their career goals*

*Keywords: career development curriculum, career-readiness, experiential learning, mentoring, internships*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Transformational changes have reshaped global labor markets as the digital economy has redefined the very nature of twenty-first century work. Such changes include shifting technologies and artificial intelligence, the complexities of globalization and persistent nationalism, a global pandemic, and an increasingly diverse society which have combined to make the workplace ever more complex. One of the primary goals of higher education has long been to help prepare students to succeed in these labor markets by developing in them the knowledge, skills and abilities needed to realize their potential and fully contribute to organizations as they adapt to constantly evolving expectations.

Regrettably, a Gallup study found that barely one in ten business leaders in the US felt strongly that a college education equipped graduates with the competencies that business needs, signaling clearly that higher education needs to innovate and adapt (Gallup-Purdue Index, 2016). Several other studies have also documented this persistent mismatch between what organizations are seeking as they recruit their newest members and what is being taught in management education programs (Bedwell, et al., 2013; Obi, et al., 2021; Rios, et al., 2020; Usdiken, et al., 2021). Some studies have also pointed out the problem is not simply the content of the curriculum but how the material is being taught (Bruni-Bossio & Delbaere, 2021, Niman & Chagnon, 2021). Fulmore, Olson and Maellaro (2016) specifically point out the inadequacy of the

traditional, passive delivery of relevant academic content, calling instead for active, experiential learning methodologies that are more likely to result in the transfer of the kinds of knowledge and skills that the workplace requires.

Just as there is a disconnect between what business organizations need and what is typically taught in most management education programs, so too has there been a failure to update career services so they meet the needs of today's students. Unfortunately, many college and universities are still providing the same types of career support that they offered well before the arrival of the twenty-first century (Friedman, et al., 2023). It is disappointing to see how slowly change has come to career planning, when critics have been consistently calling for innovation and personalization of career services. Chan and Derry (2013) convened a group of 74 premier institutions of higher education in 2012, who all agreed that it was a priority for schools to reexamine their existing models and construct new methods to help students successfully navigate the path from education to employment. Their subsequent paper, "A Roadmap for Transforming the College to Career Experience" highlighted the successes of several schools in hopes of inspiring other institutions to make students' career preparation a priority. They documented the various ways that career services can be improved by integrating the work of career services with that of senior administration, faculty, alumni, institutional advancement and parents to help ensure that students' lives and work after graduation are personally fulfilling. Since then, more and more research has been published showing how these needed changes are taking root, but much remains to be done (Bruni-Bossio & Debaere, 2021, Koys, et al., 2019, Krishnan, et al., 2023, Muslihati, et al., 2023).

One business school at a small midwestern university has effectively responded to the dual challenges of modifying their curriculum and redesigning their career services program. This paper examines the three most salient aspects of this program to show the importance of experiential learning, individual mentoring and required internships. Because of these changes, the school is now more effectively preparing its students to launch and continue to build their careers for the duration of their professional lives.

## **CAREER PROGRAM OVERVIEW**

This private university, founded in 1901, is located near a major metropolitan area, enrolling approximately 3500 students at the graduate and undergraduate levels. More than 50% of the undergraduates are first generation students, and the school was designated as a Hispanic serving institution (HSI) in 2011. The business school enrolls approximately 400 undergraduates and 100 graduate students and is accredited by the Association for the Advancement of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). The business faculty have a long tradition of supporting students' career development through a variety of different models and systems (Amoroso & Burke, 2018). Having recognized the increasing challenges the job market posed for our students, the faculty voted to adopt a sequential four course, one-credit career development program as part of the school's core curriculum in 2017. Making the career classes an integral part of the core ensured that every business major benefitted from the self-assessment and career preparation these classes offered. Additionally, the faculty approved transforming several existing classes to create four sequential, experiential business practicum courses, each infused with a broad range of co-curricular learning activities.

A full-time director of Career Development was recruited and hired and, in the fall of 2017, two of four required, sequential, and experiential one-credit Career Development courses were offered. The career development classes focused first on students' understanding of their own values, goals and career interests, whereas later courses taught them the essential career skills of resume and cover letter preparation, internship and job search strategies, networking, interviewing, salary negotiations, etc. Each course also required participation in a wide range of co-curricular activities. A very important component of the career program was the recruitment of five "Executives in Residence" (EIRs), who had previously held senior-level positions in diverse industries. These individuals were either working part time or had recently retired and were pleased to serve as career mentors, providing personalized guidance and support. Several of the EIRs who had previously taught as adjunct faculty were also invited to teach one of the four one-credit Career Development courses. The following year, the last two Career Development courses were offered

and so transfer and first year students all began to benefit from the entire new curriculum. Below is a model of the three main elements of the newly adopted curriculum (Burke, et al, 2022).

**FIGURE 1  
CAREER DEVELOPMENT COURSES, PRACTICUM COURSES, AND  
CO-CURRICULAR COMPONENTS**

	First Year	Second Year	Third Year	Fourth Year
<b>Car Dev Curriculum</b> (1 Credit Hour Courses)	<p align="center"><b>Managing Your College Career</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Self Discovery &amp; Planning</li> <li>Dom/BSB Resources &amp; Opportunities</li> <li>Informational Interview</li> <li>Writing for Business</li> <li>Resume</li> <li>BSB Socialization &amp; Expectation Setting</li> </ul>	<p align="center"><b>Engaging Opportunities &amp; Exploring Possibilities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increasing Industry Awareness</li> <li>StrengthsFinders Application</li> <li>Capitalize on existing opportunities</li> <li>Business Etiquette</li> <li>Interviewing &amp; Networking</li> <li>Internship Search</li> <li>Dress for Success</li> </ul>	<p align="center"><b>Refining Your Presentation of Self</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Social Media Branding - LinkedIn</li> <li>Interviewing</li> <li>Presentation Skills</li> <li>Industry &amp; Career Knowledge</li> <li>Professional Job Search Process</li> <li>Public Speaking</li> </ul>	<p align="center"><b>Managing Your Career</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Transition from Practice to Profession</li> <li>Active Job Search</li> <li>Performance Management</li> <li>Feedback, Criticism &amp; Praise</li> <li>Negotiations</li> <li>Personal Money &amp; Finances</li> <li>Dealing with Conflict</li> </ul>
<b>Practicum Courses</b> (2-3 Credit Hour Courses)	<p align="center"><b>First Year Gateway</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Student teams developed a sustainable, profitable proposal for a business</li> <li>Developed presentations detailing their ideas</li> <li>Presented ideas to internal and external stakeholders</li> </ul>	<p align="center"><b>Entrepreneurship</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Student teams designed plans for their own small businesses</li> <li>Presented ideas to panel of business professionals</li> <li>Funding awarded to the most promising start-ups</li> </ul>	<p align="center"><b>Internship</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students worked at internships aligned with their major and career goals</li> <li>Internships vetted and approved to ensure meaningful experiences</li> </ul>	<p align="center"><b>Business Capstone</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Student teams implemented strategy in a competitive business simulation</li> <li>Experienced consequences of their teams' decisions for every functional aspect of enterprise</li> </ul>
<b>Co-curricular Components</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Community/Volunteer Projects</li> <li>C-Suite Lecture Series</li> <li>Executive-in-Residence (EIR) Program</li> <li>Networking Event</li> <li>Student Clubs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Community/Volunteer Projects</li> <li>C-Suite Lecture Series</li> <li>EIR Program</li> <li>Professional Conference Attendance</li> <li>On-campus interviewing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Community/Volunteer Projects</li> <li>C-Suite Lecture Series</li> <li>EIR Program</li> <li>On-campus interviewing</li> <li>Professional Headshots</li> <li>Study Abroad</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Business Consulting Projects</li> <li>CEO Roundtable</li> <li>Company-sponsored initiatives (onsite tours, leaders program)</li> <li>C-Suite Speaker</li> <li>EIR Program</li> </ul>

## EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

### Career Course Curriculum

Integrating four, one-credit Career Development courses into the business curriculum was essential to the success of the Career Development initiative. While there was some discussion about the wisdom of awarding academic credit for what a few faculty believed should be co-curricular activities, discussions helped to make clear that the information, experiences and learning offered by these classes was essential for all business students. Requiring career education courses as part of the core business curriculum also sent an unambiguous signal to students that the faculty considered this knowledge to be important and that students would be evaluated and graded on how well they developed the skills and abilities that were being taught. Furthermore, the career development courses were not offered as pass/fail, which is often the case with career exploration courses. Instead, faculty determined students would need to earn a letter grade to reflect the significance of the coursework and topics presented in the courses. Given that the overall culture of the university puts enormous emphasis on grades, students invested whole-hearted effort into the one-credit course work and assignments, since they knew they would have some impact on their cumulative grade point average.

Even more importantly, the four mandatory career classes guaranteed that every single student had to attend to this work, not just those who had the time, the personalities, or the know-how to participate in optional career-related activities and programs. This was especially crucial for those many students who were balancing school with demanding work and home commitments since their available time was greatly limited. In her research on how students from disadvantaged circumstances can benefit from school-based social capital, Farmer-Hinton (2008) points out the importance of setting high expectations and offering supervised and monitored experiential learning opportunities that enabled students to tackle those tasks that may have seemed beyond their capabilities. Her research documents how students were able to use classroom structures, resources and importantly, class-time to complete important developmental work that might otherwise be considered as optional.

Another major advantage of making career classes part of the required curriculum was that students were graded not just on their performance in the classroom, which included both individual and team-based activities and assignments, but also for their participation in out-of-class assignments which were largely experiential. For example, the career courses typically required students to attend and write up an evaluation of the “C-Suite Lectures” sponsored by the business school throughout the school year. These presentations were usually scheduled in the early evenings, and featured talks by senior level executives from high profile companies or by successful entrepreneurs. All speakers were advised in advance to tailor their comments to an audience that was also comprised of students. Because of the career classes, students not only experienced these lectures, they also were required to reflect on what they had heard and assess how it related to their own career aspirations. Moreover, activities in which students were able to connect with and build employer networks were regularly scheduled during the career class times.

As the program continued to develop and the successive levels of courses was offered, the school quickly determined that career courses would only be offered on three specific days and times that accommodated professionals’ workdays and students’ various responsibilities, including student athletic commitments. Each course met for just over an hour, once per week for the entire semester, and courses were offered on either Tuesday evenings, Thursday mornings, or Friday mornings, enabling the development of cohort learning communities that enabled students to benefit from peer-to-peer learning. Although the average class size for the career development courses was approximately twenty students each, by offering several courses during these time blocks, the Director of Career Development was able to provide programming for multiple classes, thereby increasing the number of students participating in employer presentations about future opportunities at their firms. During visits to the classroom, employers would typically discuss information about their organizations, describing the functional areas where they were offering opportunities and provide information on their recruitment practices for internships and/or full-time job opportunities.

A further important benefit of the four sequential courses was that they were embedded in students’ program of study each year, for four years, while the students themselves were maturing and developing. As a result, students slowly began to recognize that they were in college not just to earn a degree in their chosen discipline but to prepare for their career. This was regularly communicated in a variety of ways because essential career development skills and aptitudes were taught, repeated and reinforced every year. Research has shown that career development programs that begin working with students beginning in their freshman year prove to be more effective because they help students develop a comfort level with the expectation that career growth and development are an inherent aspect of the college experience, and a fundamental process for preparing for what is ahead. (Morgan, et al., 2018; Ryan & Ream, 2016).

### **Career Course Sequence**

In the first year, the goal was to ensure that students understood that their career launch had literally begun the first day *that* they started college. During the semester, they were taught how to make the most of their college experiences and helped to develop some basic career understandings and skills. They learned how to register in “Handshake,” a technology platform that provided students with continual updates on career events, internship and job opportunities and enabled them to schedule meetings with Executives-in-Residence. They also began to methodically consider their unique interests, abilities and

goals as well as learn strategies to develop and expand their social and cultural capital. In the second year, students completed the Clifton Strengths Assessment, and were guided in how they could leverage these strengths. They explored what the assessment results meant in terms of prospective careers, considering their interests, values and passions. Students also developed a better understanding of industries and job functions as they engaged in systematic and progressive exploration of the labor market.

During the third year, students spent time considering the difference between “making a living” and “making a life.” They sharpened their presentations skills, both written and oral, and learned how to improve upon their networking and relationship building skills. They also spent time preparing a LinkedIn Profile, complete with a photo taken by a professional photographer, an opportunity made available to all students who attended school sponsored networking events. On survey responses, students commented extensively about the value of the “headshot” as showcasing a “real professional image at last.” Another student wrote: “the Headshot was a game changer for me because now I looked like a professional but I never would have done that on my own.” In the third year, they also developed and then implemented a coherent internship search and prepared for interviews as they sought out internships. Mock Interviews were greatly appreciated and students commented on surveys how important it was to be able to practice with a stranger who was there to help them improve. One student explained:

It was incredible to see how bad (sic) I stumbled on some questions but then the woman I was talking to told me exactly how I could have answered better. It really built my confidence that I could do better because she was so supportive.

Another student reported being surprised that she was “not so scared when (she) went to a real interview for an internship” because she “had practiced.” Students also honed their public speaking and presentation skills, until they could comfortably explain to prospective employers what their major in accounting, marketing, international business, etc. had prepared them to do. They consistently forged more and more connections with the business community as they attended career fairs, the school’s C-Suite lecture series and the Business and Ethics Leadership programs where they interacted with a diverse range of alumni and business professionals. With each of these encounters, their professional persona became better developed and the world of work became less mysterious and more understandable.

During the fourth-year class, students began to learn how to manage their future careers, as they concentrated on the transition from student to professional. They engaged in numerous experiential activities that improved their skills in managing conflict, communicating with diverse constituencies, dealing with difficult co-workers, negotiating salaries and handling performance reviews. This class also offered specific instruction on understanding their pay checks, including health care, insurance and retirement benefits. Increased attention was also given to managing finances after graduation so that students had a greater knowledge about how to handle their student loans as well as achieve some of their financial goals, such as purchasing a car, or attending graduate school once they were employed full time. Finally, advanced interview skills were taught since, increasingly, highly selective companies were utilizing “case study interviews” during the recruitment process. These interviews presented a business problem to students, often leaving them only an hour to come up with a possible solution. Case study interviews can be particularly challenging if students were not comfortable with quickly developing and presenting new ideas, especially to a potential employer. The fourth-year class taught students to expect these types of recruitment challenges and gave them the concrete experience of navigating case study interviews, thereby increasing their confidence and sense of self-efficacy.

### **Academic Practicum Courses**

As with the Career Development classes, the four sequential Academic Practicum courses were all organized around applied, active learning. As a result, students saw themselves not just acquiring, but using the knowledge and skills that they recognized as essential to their professional development as well as their academic success. The ability to practice newly learned skills and benefit from appropriate feedback, either from professors or peers, is crucial for the integration of new knowledge (Bedwell, et al, 2014). Whether

developing their own small business plans and then explaining them to a panel of judges, analyzing and presenting case study assessments to their classmates, role playing to develop improved negotiation skills, or competing in teams pitted against each other in simulations, students also always found themselves working collaboratively. They were assigned realistic projects that were designed to synthesize the content they had learned and utilize the professional skills they were acquiring.

In recent research, this type of education methodology is referred to in several different ways: professional development engagement (Blau, et al., 2019; Haug, et al., 2019) experiential learning (Alfaro-Barrantes, et al., 2021; Bedwell, et al., 2022; Fulmore, et al., 2023; Humpherys, et al., 2022, Niman & Chagnon, 2021), action or active learning (Carter, et al. 2019; Krishnam, et al., 2023, Perusso et al., 2020) and more recently, as work integrated learning (WIL) (Bayerlein et al., 2021; Morgan et al., 2018). Regardless of the terminology, experiential learning is all clearly designed to promote those employability skills of oral and written communication, critical thinking, collaboration and problem solving that are so highly valued in the labor market but frequently found lacking in current business graduates. (Klein & Scott, 2021; Obi et al., 2021; Rios et al., 2020). Such active learning educational practices have been found to be so important that teaching them is currently mandated as a requirement for business accreditation by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), the premier accrediting body for management education, globally (Humpherys et al., 2022, Koys et al., 2019). Further research, analyzing student experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic found that interactive, project-based work, when compared to synchronous traditional instruction, is much more beneficial to students (Bhuwandeep, et al., 2022).

The seminal work on experiential learning was completed by Kolb almost four decades ago, as he explained how knowledge could be developed when learners engage in a concrete experience, reflect upon it to gain perspective, are able to transform their experience to develop a sense of meaning, conceptualize it and then utilize it in subsequent activities (1984). Kolb's view of meaningful experiential learning shows the essential importance of the learner acquiring specific experience, but then facilitating the synthesis and abstract conceptualization of the experience through reflective observation and active experimentation to create knowledge (Obi et al., 2021). Such experiential learning is perfectly suited to business education given its applied subject matter, and business educators need to increasingly employ the wide range of experiential activities available to them (Carter et al., 2019). This type of experiential learning differs somewhat from Kolb's self-directed learning experiences because these classes offer guided learning experiences created to achieve a specific set of learning and developmental goals. (Niman and Chagnon, 2021). Active learning challenges students to take the lead in solving problems or engaging in discussions of potential solutions. To do this, they may recall earlier learning that can help them to devise strategies to complete an assignment or to experiment using trial and error to solve a problem. Unlike passive learning, which expects students to receive and accumulate knowledge through traditional lectures and presentations, active learning and effective feedback enables students to integrate their new knowledge and skills with existing abilities so the learning is more naturally cumulative (Krishnan, et al, 2023).

Research has also shown that when students are engaged in active learning by being assigned to work in teams to solve unstructured problems, their collective efforts lead to better outcomes and solutions (Mukesh, Pillai, & Mamman, 2019, Perusso et al., 2020). Experiential or engaged learning also prepares students for the types of work they will encounter once they begin professional employment. Engaged learning activities require transferring theory to practice, and calls for collaboration, leadership, and conflict resolution skills (Mukesh et al., 2019; Garjost & Lawter, 2019; Perusso et al., 2020). Though our students often complained about being assigned to work in teams and pointed out the problems of scheduling team meetings, or getting all the team members to complete their assigned tasks, they eventually embraced the experience, as one student commented on a practicum course evaluation:

At first, I really did not like working on team projects because it just took too much time, and too much planning and too much talking, but I know why (the professor) made us work that way, and I guess it works and what we produce is better and gets us better grades.

Another student described her surprise when her team was selected by her classmates to be one of the three finalists in the “Entrepreneurship Business Idea Challenge, which meant that she and her teammates would be “pitching” their small business idea to a panel of business executives who were currently leading their own entrepreneurial firms. Thanks to the panel’s generosity, the winners of the competition were awarded several thousand dollars in start-up funding. The student wrote:

It was so exciting to be chosen because I honestly am never chosen for anything, but it was my idea our team was using so that felt great. I did not mind that we did not win but two of the judges said what a good job we did and maybe someday, I might even try out this idea after I’m done with school.

Such types of activities as these allowed students to actively engage in their learning not only mastering the core subject material they needed to learn, but simultaneously utilizing and eventually mastering fundamental skills of communication, critical thinking, creativity and collaboration. Such abilities are essential for their future success in the workplace but also in the many other areas of their lives.

### **MENTORING BY EXECUTIVES IN RESIDENCE**

One of the most salient aspects of the career development program has been the contributions of the Executives-in-Residence (EIRs) who have proven to be superbly successful in their mentoring and coaching roles. The benefits of mentorship have been extensively studied for the last thirty years although there is still no commonly accepted understanding of what mentoring exactly means (Dawson, 2014). Categories of mentoring have been identified, including youth mentoring (matching young people and adolescents with supportive adults), academic mentoring (matching students with faculty), and work mentoring (matching new hires with more senior employees) (Hamilton, et al., 2019). Yet, the idea of matching college students with senior business executives who are either employed, working part-time or recently retired is relatively novel and has been the subject of little empirical research.

The use of EIRs has gained popularity in the past decade, but such executives frequently join academic life as part-time faculty members rather than as student career mentors and coaches. Although some of the EIRs had previously served successfully at this business school as adjunct faculty members, others were recruited by the Director of Career Development Program through personal referrals and careful selection. During the past five years, several of the executives hired for these part time positions (averaging 10 hours per week) had an earlier connection with the business school, some as members of the school’s Business Advisory Board or because of their business achievements, within the community. The process of assigning students and Executives-in-Residence was at best, a “random” match (Dawson, 2014), but each EIR had an avowed interest in working with students, and most particularly with our students, who were often the first-generation attending college, and frequently from disadvantaged backgrounds but academically able, highly-motivated and determined to succeed. The hallmark of the career program was having EIRs available to coach students one-on-one, for “just in time” advising but an additional benefit was that EIRs sometimes connected students and the business school with their own professional networks, leading to additional student employment opportunities.

The EIRs embraced their roles of engaging in conversations with students to discuss their career interests and goals, to help with job search strategies, to assist them in recognizing and articulating their skills, to develop strong resumes and cover letters, and to enhance their interview and networking skills. The EIRs offered informed perspectives on the school-to-work transition, frequently describing their own experiences. They often found themselves cautioning students against such feelings as the “imposter syndrome” by sharing the lessons they learned along their own career journeys. According to Heslin and Turban (2016) traditional mentoring relationships have two primary goals: offering instrumental educational or career support through explicit guidance and coaching, and offering psychosocial support, by enhancing the mentee’s understanding of their identity, sense of competence, and effectiveness, as well as by offering friendship, role modeling, acceptance and confirmation (p.161). Although the career

development courses taught students how to format and describe their knowledge, skills and abilities on a resume and during an interview, the EIRs also provided individualized, personal support to students, usually during the job search, application and interview processes when their coaching and timely guidance were most helpful and needed. One student wrote:

I am glad that I did this (EIR) interview because lately I have been dealing with concerns over internships and building up my professional experience. (The EIR) explained that it is not easy trying for new positions or job offers because we get too comfortable where we are but staying stagnant does not allow us to grow. He said he was very glad that I have my part time job but I need to look for internships that are suited for my future career and to give it a shot because I could learn something from that.

The EIRs quickly came to understand that while their roles as coach and mentor were important, perhaps the more crucial one was providing psychosocial support to students quickly and within days or hours of their participating in work interviews. These bright, ambitious students could read about formatting resumes and writing cover letters, but they clearly needed support and encouragement as they struggled over figuring out what sort of positions to pursue or questioned their judgement about what information about themselves was most important to share in an interview. One student's report on her interview with an EIR explained that she had been reluctant to apply for an internship with a federal banking regulatory agency, explaining:

When I told [the EIR] "that 'they will never hire me; I am only a waitress,' [the EIR] got upset and said to me 'Of course they will; Look at this GPA with A's in all your finance classes. You earned those while working more than 30 hours a week, every week, to pay your tuition. They will know you can do this job even if you don't.'

Repeatedly, student comments documented the importance of the EIRs' psychosocial function of providing personalized support and affirmation. This consequently helped increase students' self-confidence, eased their anxiety when they faced employer rejection and reduced their stress about how the transition to a professional job might unfold for them (Lent & Brown, 2013).

The EIRs were frequently a source of solace and further motivation when students feared that their career plans might not be successful. Akkermans, et al., (2015) described this as "inoculation against setbacks," citing earlier work by Meichenbaum, which explained how the mentor could increase the mentee's ability to anticipate setbacks and marshal the resources needed to cope with them. By supporting students when they encountered the inevitable real-life obstacles of rejection from internship and/or job applications, EIRs enabled students to develop coping mechanisms, which inevitably led to greater resilience and job search perseverance. Persistence throughout the career search can be an especially challenging task for first generation students who at the same time, were managing increasingly demanding academic course work, part time or even fulltime employment responsibilities and family commitments at home. (McKeown & Lindorff, 2011) One student's comment captured this perfectly:

It's been amazing to have one-on-one time with a professional who's always available and gives me specific advice. The most important thing was when I got turned down from every one of my internship applications; he made me keep going. [He] helped me grow professionally and taught me how to bring the best out of me in front of employers.

The conversations that students had with the EIRs were as varied and as different as the EIRs and the students themselves but patterns and themes were immediately observable. The methods by which students were making the connection between themselves and specific career opportunities has been described in earlier research. Patton and McMahon (2006) refer to this process as "meaning making" or creating a connection between oneself in relation to certain professions. As students were asked to make their initial



career goals more explicit, the EIRs encouraged them to reflect on their personal experiences which helped them to better understand their own values, ambitions, strengths and weaknesses in a professional context and relative to an identified career aspiration. Students consequently increased their self-knowledge and the EIRs helped them relate this knowledge to their future professional roles, as they considered their preferred work tasks, organizational culture preferences, and other characteristics of different types of employment.

Another aspect of guidance offered by the EIRs was encouraging student “self-directedness” as these business majors came to better understand the essential activities they must pursue to gain precise knowledge of labor markets and then present themselves as potential candidates (Mittendorff, et al., 2010). The EIRs were there to challenge students to take the next steps, direct them to sources of additional information, and enable them to feel better informed and more prepared. This ultimately made them more confident in their ability to progress toward their goals. EIRs were also able to help some students realize the need to make constructive changes in themselves, broaden their understanding and most especially, raise their aspirations. One student described his experience of completing an assigned EIR interview for his required Management class:

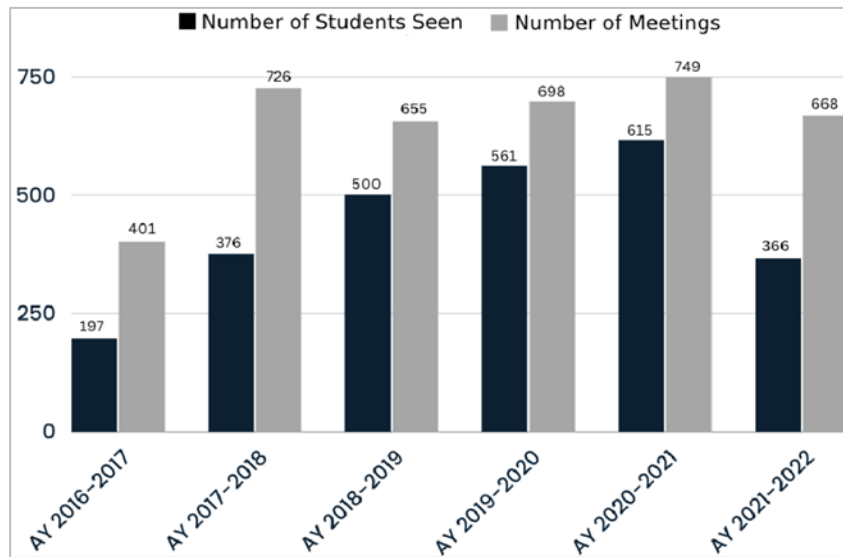
I’ve never had an interview before so my interviewing the EIR was as scary as if it were the other way around. To start off, I had to tell [the EIR] about myself, which I really didn’t expect since I was the one conducting the interview. ... (T)hen I asked about internships because I heard it is hard getting one but then he told me all the things I need to do.... He even told me that he was rejected twice by IBM before he was finally hired, so I have to get going quick, set my sights high ... and just keep trying because he said internships sometimes lead to full time jobs....

The importance of operating within a clearly defined mentoring structure in which the mentor and mentee set goals and objectives together, meet regularly to assess progress or discuss issues and exchange feedback is well documented in the literature as essential in making the connection worthwhile. This requires a true commitment on the part of the mentor if the connection is to be fruitful (Jyoti & Sharma, 2015). According to Mittendorff et al (2010), the nature of the relationship that the mentor established with a student during career conversations can certainly influence what the student learns. By showing interest, establishing common ground and offering long-term help and support, the EIRs presented themselves as companions and guides on each individual student’s career journey as they built what Mittendorff referenced as a “working alliance” (Mittendorff, et al., 2011). Over and over, students expressed how important this personal support was and how the EIRs made them feel optimistic about their chances of succeeding not just because the student had greater knowledge of available positions, better written cover letters, or more practiced interviewing skills, but because they knew that someone whom they personally valued, believed in them. Thus, they began to believe in themselves, and their self-efficacy grew, in terms of navigating their careers.

This new confidence certainly came from recognizing their improved career search skills and abilities but it also stemmed from having a partner in their efforts who was “always available,” offered “endless support” or “devoted attention,” to quote three students’ comments. One student described that the EIRs “made us set long- and short-term goals and when you meet next time, you do what you said you would do because you do not want to disappoint [her].” This points to the ability of the EIRs in their mentoring capacity to reduce students’ self-defeating behaviors such as procrastination, job search impulsiveness, or failure to network effectively (Renn, et al., 2014). These behaviors are all self-regulated but the expectations, as well as the encouragement, of the EIRs likely helped students to avoid such career search pitfalls. While a very small number of students complained about the school’s emphasis on “jobs and careers while [they were] still students,” most students commented on how fortunate they were to have help and encouragement as they pursued the sometimes-daunting task of figuring out their future. Table 1 shows the increasing number of individual student appointments the EIRs have held in the years since the career program began and the number of follow up appointments with the same students. Even during the pandemic, the number of individual and repeat meetings declined very little, though smaller figures from

2021-2022 reflect the decreased student enrollments during the pandemic, which reduced the number of entering freshmen and transfer students.

**TABLE 1**  
**EXECUTIVE IN RESIDENCE MEETINGS WITH STUDENTS**



## INTERNSHIPS

Perhaps some of the most important experiential learning was gained during the required student internships, typically completed during the junior year but before the fall of their senior year. Frequently students managed to complete more than one internship, but only one was required and students usually registered for the Internship Practicum credit course during their third year. Internships required students to work a minimum of 120 hours work in a business or non-profit organization, under the direction of an employment supervisor and a faculty member, who awarded a grade at the end of the internship period. Abundant research has documented the importance of internship experiences (Clark, 2003; Cunningham, et al., 2005; Gault, et al., 2010) and its correlation to post-graduation success in the job market (Dommeyer, et al., 2021; Drewery Nevison, & Pretti, 2016; Gault, et al., 2000). Not only was it important for students to complete an internship, but it was equally important that these internships were first carefully screened before they were approved.

Because so many students needed to work while going to school, taking on an unpaid internship was not an option for most. It was therefore crucial that employer partnerships were established which could offer students the opportunity to gain experience in their chosen field while being paid for that experience. Most undergraduates were already working at part time jobs, or in some cases, full time, to help support their educational expenses, and occasionally, some students managed to expand their current work responsibilities to include more professional assignments, thereby converting their job to an internship. More frequently, students worked to find internships in the field for which their major was preparing them. Accounting majors, for example, typically found internships that lasted an entire semester and required a minimum commitment of forty or more hours a week, necessitating that they completed their other classes in the evening or using an online format.

Finding a suitable internship was a process that students began preparing for during their sophomore year as they integrated and applied the skills they had developed in their Career Development classes. Because of hiring timelines, it was crucial for students to understand that many interns are recruited and selected during the fall semester for internships that would not occur until the following summer. The career

program began offering a job and internship fair in the fall semester to accommodate these timelines and students were required to attend this fair and write up an evaluation of their experience as a graded assignment in their career development course. For many students, conducting a systematic internship search was a daunting task and the EIRs were vitally important in supporting students' efforts, offering guidance and encouragement along the way. For a few students, however, the process seemed almost easy and one commented:

I was thinking it would be so hard to find an internship but even without sending out my resumes all around, I was offered an internship at a Fortune 500 company. I didn't really like what I was doing there so I am going to try to get another internship next summer that is closer to my job goals.

All learning acquired during their internship turned out to have value, however. Another student explained that:

This internship was just enough of a push to boost my self-confidence to apply for jobs more of my liking. I was scared to apply for an internship but now that I have had one, I have the confidence to apply for other jobs and feel like I can find one that is a better fit."

All students were required to enroll in an Internship Practicum course on campus which ran for the entire semester as they were completing their internship. In this class, they completed such assignments as a Project Paper which included their job description, a list of their short- and long-term work goals as well as descriptions of the technical and "soft" skills they hoped to develop or refine. The learning goals and objectives of the practicum included helping students increase knowledge of their industries, network with their colleagues at the worksites, and with their classmates, to better understand how to navigate workplace challenges. Students met as a class to discuss inevitable work issues and together devise possible solutions to challenging situations at their job. They also were encouraged to exchange ideas on polishing their professional image while at work. Besides the regular weekly assignments, at the end of the course, students prepared a Reflection Paper as they considered the work that they had done, evaluated what had been especially valuable, or challenging, and assessed how the experience had shaped their future career aspirations. They also participated in a performance evaluation with their work supervisor at the end of their internship and a final grade was submitted by the Internship professor in consultation with the work supervisor.

The tremendous benefits of completing an internship range from the obvious benefit of gaining professional work experience, learning to deal with pressure and time constraints, and developing specialized technology skills, to working independently or with colleagues in teams (Klein & Scott, 2021, Dixon, et al., 2005; Dommeyer et al., 2016). For some students, it was their first experience of working in the "real world" of business, despite their prior years of part time employment, when they were working at jobs they viewed as merely a way to help with tuition. Working in a professional role can hold many challenges and surprises as one student explained:

I'd say my internship has been a preview of the real world. There has been lots of collaboration between each of the different departments to complete projects and it has been an amazing way to experience real, professional, and personal relationships. Just last Friday there were a few layoffs, which took me by surprise. I was not expecting to see such a serious yet necessary part of business to occur during my seven-week experience, but it further opened my eyes to how real everything is; real in terms of the economy affecting the company, real in terms of those individuals' lives changing in a day, and real in terms of the impact their layoffs had on other employees and the business.

Serving as an intern also enabled students in their individual pursuit of their “provisional selves” as they benefitted from the opportunity to learn more about themselves as they “stepped into” different professional identities and roles in a relatively low stakes situation. They discovered that even an unsatisfactory internship could be a good learning experience (Nicholas & Handley, 2020.) As described by Ibarra, “provisional selves are temporary solutions people use to bridge the gap between their current capacities and self-conceptions and the representations they hold about what attitudes and behaviors are expected in the new role” (Ibarra, 1999, p.765). Provisional selves are thus clarified, tested, discarded and revised by their current experiences, differing from the idea of their “possible selves,” or who they might eventually become. This tentativeness was captured by a student’s assessment of her internship as she considered all the possibilities before her:

In just the first 2 weeks of my internship, I have learned so much and have found it to be extremely valuable to me in a myriad of ways. As a marketing and finance double major, I wondered how much a sales internship would benefit me. I quickly realized that no matter what major one decides on, this is a great internship to introduce you to valuable individuals, teach you great skills, and introduce you to the insurance industry which is something that could benefit anyone. A great aspect ... is that the company is multifaceted. It specializes in so many different things so if one sector doesn’t seem to suit me, I can easily pursue learning about a different sector and continue until I discover what really interests me. This has been a great help to me because every day I’m also learning about myself and figuring out what I’m good at and what I’m passionate about. While my college courses have taught me so much valuable information, working in the field has let me apply that knowledge and get real life experience.

Internships also frequently helped to develop students’ maturity, and improve such interpersonal traits as communication and organization skills, self-motivation, problem solving and critical thinking (Delcours, et al., 2018; Oberman, et al., 2021; McHugh, 2017). One student assessed the value of his internship:

If I had to name one thing that I got from my internship experience, funny enough, it would be experience. By this I mean learning the intricacies of corporate and business life, career growth, skill development and refinement, personal growth, connections, and simply understanding what it looks like to go through a day in the life of a marketer, accountant, business owner, web developer etc. all within the course of several months There is an abundance of different things you can get out of an experience, and I believe that this internship has checked pretty much every box, especially since it was my first ever corporate and non-manual-labor experience.

As this student explained, interactions in an authentic work environment allowed students to observe professionals’ daily routines, strategies, motivations, and behaviors, as they became fully acquainted with the dynamics and culture of their workplace. As a result, they learned better how to conduct themselves in the work place, based on their own experiences and observations of “how things are done.”

Different from their case studies in a classroom, internships can require students to deal with genuine business problems where solutions make a difference between failure and success as they manage risk and uncertainty (Perusso et al., 2020). Rather than presenting devised solutions for a simulation to a professor, or even to a panel of external evaluators, interns are putting their decisions and solutions into action and then dealing with the outcomes, which can sometimes seem daunting. One student commented:

Doing so many new things that I have never done before was very challenging because a first-time experience is often a stressful one, and that was the case for me. I thankfully work well under pressure, but that didn’t change the fact that there was a mountain of new information and responsibilities I had to learn and take on. This includes anything from

grant writing, accounting/bookkeeping, social media management, creating posts, creating advertisements, creating guidelines, preparing various forms, documents and templates, event planning, website development, data analysis, overall research and presentations, meetings, and so much more.

Numerous research studies have shown that internships help students better understand how their university education translates to employment, offering evidence that the internship experience smooths the transition between school and work (D'Abate, et al., 2009; Delcours et al., 2018; Di Meglio, et al., 2019; Knouse & Fontenot, 2008). This happens for many different reasons. Students frequently reported that their internships made them more comfortable in a professional business setting and helped them to consider how what they were learning in their academic courses connected to the skills they would need after they graduated. Students frequently mentioned their new eagerness to learn to “write better” because of their internship. Completing internships may have even helped to support retention and persistence since students could see for themselves that the material they were studying was of great practical value. For some students, the internship reconfirmed their choice of major field, and career aspirations. One student explained:

I have loved every second of (my internship) and it has really taught me that I do want to work in business.... That maybe is the most important detail that I learned; knowing what it is that I want to pursue once my internship is over and understanding what career path I want to go into. I have a few friends who decided to switch directions or refused to work in a certain field after their internships, so I know just how strong of an influence an internship can make in determining your future. I want to emphasize the importance of this ... further, by mentioning that I am an undocumented immigrant, so an experience like this to me is like a gold-mine and a blessing at the same time. I am overjoyed that I have been able to find so much reward, challenge, and growth all in the course of several months.

In other instances, the internships helped students to begin rethinking their earlier choices. One student discovered what he would not choose for a career while confirming what he did want, instead:

I was excited to start my internship at first because it was completely different from my line of work which is running my own wholesale produce business. I wanted to experience what corporate America is and see if I would like to join it after college or take the risk with continuing my own business. So far, I'm not a fan of the office life and sitting down for 8 hours, looking at 3 screens, and having a fixed schedule. I'm thankful for this internship for showing me that my passion is in sales and running my own business.

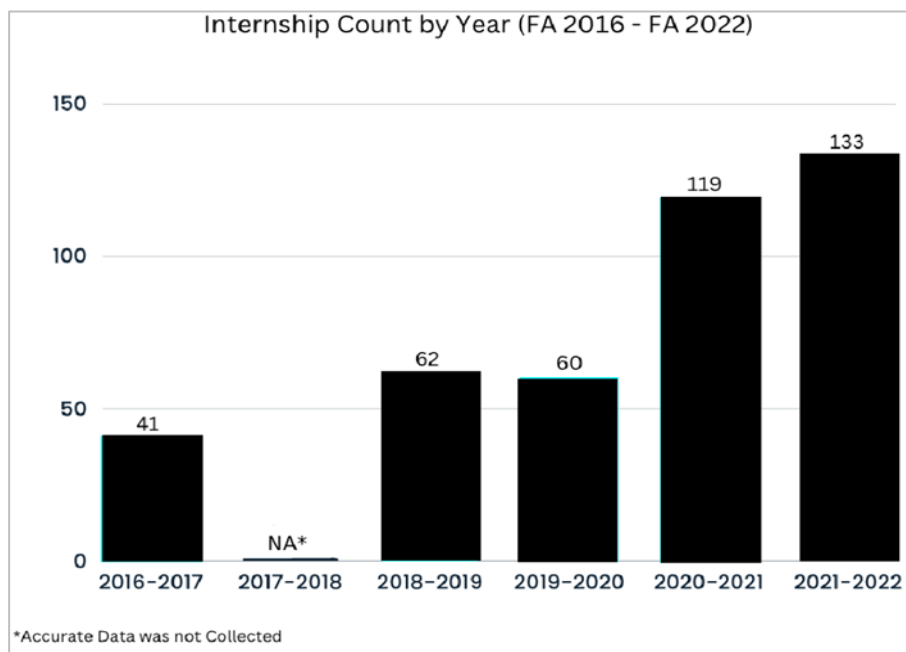
Another key aspect of the internship experience for most students was the opportunity to learn from the meaningful feedback and mentoring that was provided by their supervisors. (McHugh, 2017) Instead of the usual developmental comments from professors regarding academic performance and content mastery, now students had the opportunity to learn from the feedback of professionals who were usually paying the interns to add value to their organization, not just learn new information to succeed on an exam. One student who did not take this opportunity for granted wrote:

Working at a startup may have been one of the luckiest opportunities I have ever been given as the abundance of responsibilities has really helped me grow personally and professionally. The most rewarding part of my internship experience has been the variety of different projects my bosses have let me work on as this has expanded my abilities greatly and sharpened my already existing ones. On top of this, [I have been shaped by] all the wonderful people I have been able to meet and connect with as they are the ones who

have been kind enough to provide me such experience and opportunities and have challenged me in ways that help me refine and build my skills and grow career-wise.

Internships not only help to close the gap between the academic knowledge taught in the classroom and the practical and professional skills that employers expect, they also send a clear signal about a student's enthusiasm for work. Not surprisingly, research has shown that employers generally perceive that students who have been successful as interns have a willingness to learn, a positive attitude, and a strong motivation to succeed and are therefore more attractive as a prospective candidate (Delcoure, et al., 2018). The Table below shows the continuing increases in the number of students successfully completing academic credit-based internships since the career development program began, despite the setback experienced due to Covid-19 and a record keeping error in 2017-18, when data was not collected because of a staffing change.

**TABLE 2**  
**ACADEMIC INTERNSHIPS**



### **SOME POSITIVE RESULTS**

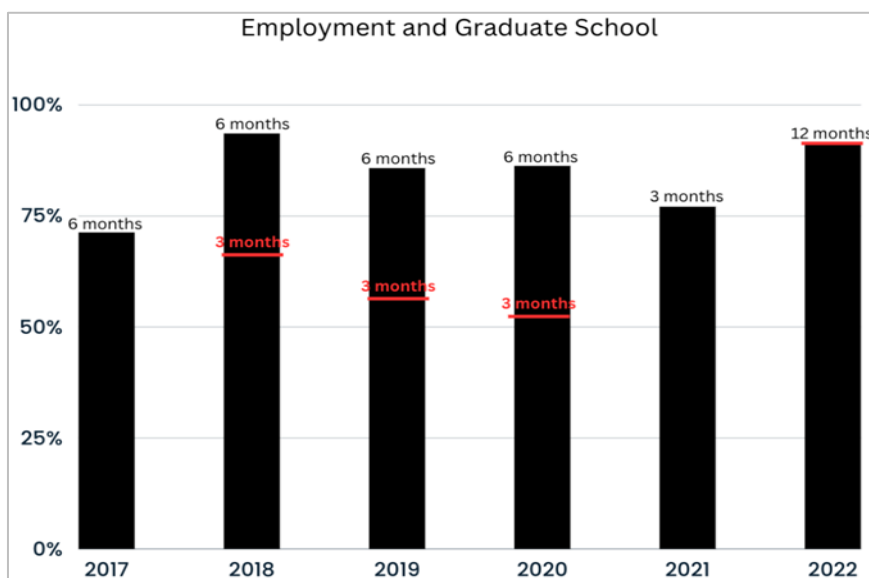
The career program has been very successful, and clearly achieved the goals for which it was designed. All business students are now effectively learning to understand their career aspirations, preferences and values and just as importantly, how to navigate the job market to ensure that they achieve those aspirations. Student were asked to assess themselves on their degree of certainty about their chosen career, their confidence in their resumes and cover letters, the quality of their Linked-In Profile and their ability to introduce themselves and respond to job interview questions before the program was launched and then after it had been in operation for several years. The students who had experienced all or even part of the new program expressed statistically significant higher levels of career certainty and confidence. In the same survey, students evaluated the most valuable aspects of the career program. The importance of the Executives in Residence ranked first, followed by the value of the Mock Interviews (Burke, et al., 2022).

Another survey conducted in by the Career Development Program in 2021, asked employers to assess their satisfaction with their student interns. The results showed that 94% of the employers said that they would offer their intern a fulltime job if they had one available and 97% said they would be happy to hire

another intern from our business school. Their qualitative comments were equally positive. One employer wrote that he was impressed with the intern’s incredible work ethic, commenting “...she worked so hard to prove that she deserved this internship spot. I also met a few other interns from (our business school) and they were equally outstanding in their performance.” A financial executive praised his intern’s abilities, describing “(The student) was outstanding; very detail oriented, with great initiative, and excellent problem-solving and customer service skills.” Students own assessments of their internships were similarly positive.

The results of student job placement in their majors or attendance in graduate school after graduation have also been collected, and have been increasingly positive, despite some challenges during the pandemic. As with internships, the positions and salaries that students are offered is consistently showing improvements.

**FIGURE 3**  
**STUDENT JOB PLACEMENT IN THEIR MAJORS, OR GRADUATE SCHOOL**



More difficult to measure however, is the quality of the corporations where students were being offered employment. Still, more and more of Chicago’s leading companies have become increasingly interested in working with our school to recruit business graduates. This may be motivated by their recognition that their work force should be representative of the city’s growing Hispanic population but it also suggests that our business majors have the qualities that they consider to be essential. In 2021 and 2022, larger numbers of fulltime placements were at EY, Aon Insurance, JP Morgan Chase, Bosch, Amazon Web Services, Accenture, US Foods, Transunion, Allstate Insurance, Morgan Stanley, Chicago Cubs, and the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago.

Not only are students achieving greater career success, there is clearly a “culture change” in the business school. Students finally have begun to realize that that value of their business education was not measured simply by top grades or by completing their degree but by the acquisition of the skills and abilities that will enable them to be successful in securing satisfactory employment in their chosen field. As they observed the successes of their classmates, many students developed higher expectations and aspirations in terms of their preferred employment opportunities. They have begun to realize the contributions they can make as young professionals and are eager to strive for opportunities that they once might have felt were out of reach.

The business school was pleased to be recognized nationally for the success of this career development program. At its annual national conference, the Cooperative Education and Internship Association (CEIA) selected the program to receive the Best Practices Award, spotlighting our innovative approaches in creating

a curricular-based model, and noted the very significant impact it was having on the school's student body. Another major success was being recognized by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) as the small college winner of the Award for Career Services Excellence. The award citation highlighted the importance of our curriculum-based model that guarantees that all students receive the benefits of career development throughout their college studies. The University was also awarded a Title V grant to support the further expansion and transformation of career development services enabling all students at the university, regardless of major, to participate in an equitable career development program. Plans are already under way to make curriculum adjustments in the University's core curriculum so that students of every major can engage in course work that helps them to assess and then achieve their career goals. This curriculum will also offer experiential learning, multiple opportunities for employer engagement, the support of Experts in Residence, and participation in internships.

## **CONCLUSION**

This school's work to transform its business curriculum and career development program has enabled students to not only develop the competencies needed in the twenty-first century work force, but also to more effectively identify and achieve their career goals. In the years since these changes were first adopted it has become increasingly clear that the sequential experiential learning courses, the coaching and mentoring by Executives in Residence and the required internships have been the cornerstones of the program's success. The limitations of this study are self-evident and the program, as designed and implemented may not fully generalize to institutions operating in different contexts. Still for our faculty, who deeply believe that our mission is not just to impart conceptual knowledge but also to prepare our students for lives after college, this career program has been transformative.

Because of the unique student population we educate, who are frequently first generation in college, it is especially important to provide these additional institutional supports to help ensure their persistence and retention. It is a well-established fact that transfer students and undergraduates whose parents did not earn college degrees are less likely to graduate on time, or at even all, according to the Gallup Purdue Index Report (2016). Despite consistent efforts by higher education to reverse this trend, little progress has been made. Enabling such students to see the end-point of their studies and to feel well prepared to assume professional roles in the labor market makes the value of their education more tangible. Helping students who may not have extensive social networks enjoyed by others enables them to unravel the complexities of professional employment, a process that can sometimes seem confusing and intimidating.

It seems likely that career and professional development will continue to grow in importance as students' expectations, and employers' demands keep increasing. Such programs need to become part of the very fabric of their education, not just a transactional service that some seek but many others ignore. A four-year, comprehensive program that provides meaningful learning experiences, caring and knowledgeable mentors and practical work experience helps ensure that students graduate with the abilities to manage their careers throughout their professional lives,



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