

Quality and Impact at Scale

Measuring Career Effectiveness Beyond Participation

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Abstract: Due to scalability and resource constraints, career development efforts at a large higher education institution (10,000 students or more) can be intimidating to implement and assess. However, there are metrics beyond quantitative figures that can measure the impact and effectiveness of services and ways to engage in cross-campus partnerships to reach students across disciplines and backgrounds. This article focuses on assessment questions and methods that can be practically implemented in strategic efforts to collect and use critical data related to career development, experiential learning, and post-graduation outcomes.

Keywords: assessment, evaluation, strategic planning, student services, partnership, collaboration, career readiness

The effectiveness and value of career services work at higher education institutions across the country can be measured in several ways. However, assessment looks different based on the size and scope of colleges and universities and their career development teams. In particular, special considerations need to be made for career services units at larger institutions, where the scalability of services can often conflict with traditional success metrics, thus painting an incomplete picture for stakeholders of all kinds and limiting creativity. This case study highlights the approach one career services department at a large state institution has taken regarding assessment and reporting, identifying proactive solutions, determining program and service effectiveness, collecting and adapting to feedback throughout the year, and considering what may be missing from the complete data-informed picture when recording attendance numbers alone.

Assessment Challenges and Opportunities at a Large Institution

The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education defines a “large institution” at the four-year college level as one with an “enrollment of at least 10,000 degree-seeking students” pursuing bachelor’s degrees or higher (American Council on Education, 2024, Large section). At Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), a large, primarily residential campus, our central Career Services team serves nearly 30,000 students across multiple physical campuses and online mediums as part of a diverse and decentralized R1 (Doctoral - Very High Research) institution. VCU was also designated by the U.S. Department of Education as a Minority Serving Institution in 2022 (Porter, 2022). “55% of [VCU] undergraduate students and nearly half of all students are from minority backgrounds, 37%

of incoming freshmen at VCU are first-generation college students, [and] nearly one-third of all undergraduate students are Pell-Grant eligible” (VCU, 2024, VCU is a Diversity Champion section).

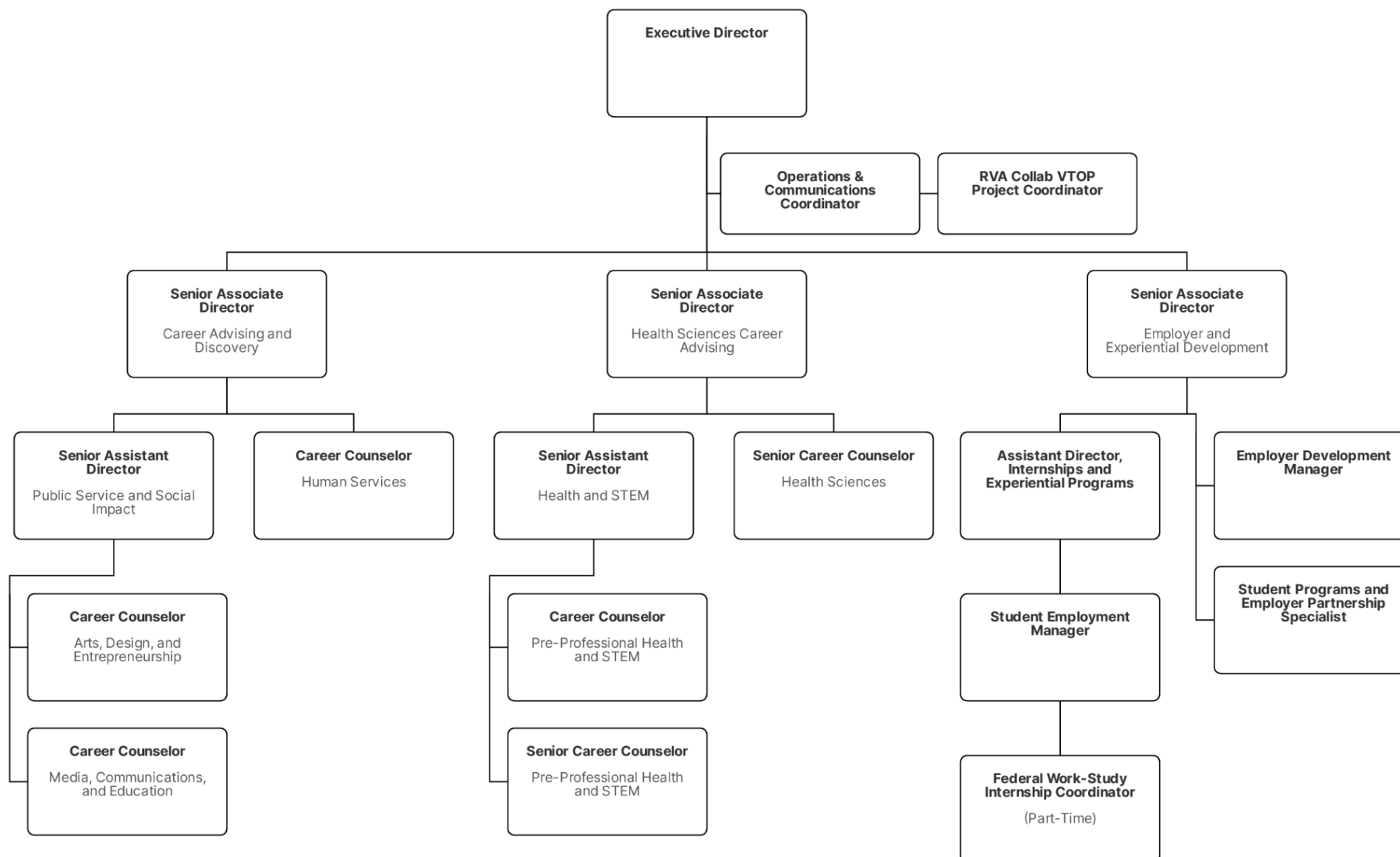
Assessment and reporting play essential roles at higher education institutions of all sizes. Effective collection and utilization of data influences in-demand resource allocation, justification for programs and services, and assists with storytelling that impacts everything from student, faculty, and staff recruitment to garnering internal and external funding and support to grow into the future. However, a significant challenge regarding assessment efforts at a large institution is the sheer scale needed to determine impact and effectiveness, especially when compared with smaller institutions. For example, in career services units nationwide, baseline data collection and reporting efforts typically center around student and alumni utilization of career advising/counseling services (e.g., appointments, drop-ins), attendance at events and programs (e.g., workshops, career fairs, employer information sessions), internship participation data, and post-graduate outcomes (“first destination”) information (National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE], n.d.a). Engaging students at scale can be a tremendous challenge in each of these areas. For example, even if our career advising team of 10 individuals meets with 10,000 unique students over a year—more than many institutions have enrolled as part of their campus community—that means serving just one-third of the VCU student population. A large, in-person career fair may draw over 800 students and feel very robust for the employers and students involved; however, that is less than 3% of the VCU student population directly benefiting from that positive experience. Teaching multiple sections of our 30-seat career development courses still engages a very small subset of students. Administering a campus-wide internship survey and getting 1,000 responses only represents a sliver of what VCU students are doing regarding experiential learning.

Does this mean that assessment and reporting do not have the same positive impact at a large institution, where career services staff-to-student ratios are typically high and it may not be feasible to hire more staff or acquire technology solutions to meet the needs of every enrolled student? Of course not. However, it does mean institutions need to consider success metrics other than percentages of the total population engaged. We will highlight some approaches and best practices later in this article. However, it is still important that we be transparent about the specific challenges that larger institutions face in this area of our work as career development professionals.

Utilizing Strategic Plans to Guide and Prioritize Assessment Efforts

As of 2025, VCU has a hybrid-decentralized model of career services with the central career services office, VCU Career Services (VCS), providing resources to the entire campus community and two other offices funded by and reporting to the School of Business and College of Engineering, respectively. In addition, as seen in Figure 1, a few other staff members across campus report to various units whose roles focus on career coaching, employer/alumni development, internship coordination, and other relevant functions.

Figure 1. VCU Career Services Organizational Chart, Spring 2025



Over the past six years, the VCS team has undergone significant changes, including moving into a newly formed Division of Strategic Enrollment and Student Success in Summer 2020. VCS is currently implementing our second departmental strategic plan under the current leadership, slated to run through Spring 2026. Drafting and executing strategic plans has consistently been a meaningful experience for our team. We often find that while doing the work of our strategic plan, our subgoals (“action steps”) shift over time based on scope and staffing. We are willing to let the larger goals take on a life of their own and remain open to changing the work outlined as needed. The purpose of the strategic plan is not to simply say one exists for the department but rather to let the work play out to accomplish our vision to better serve students, alumni, employers, faculty, campus partners, and other stakeholders. Having a strategic plan enables us to easily agree to or thoughtfully decline solicitations and suggestions for collaboration or project work that do not align specifically with our strategic goals. While we may want to participate in everything brought to us by internal and external colleagues, we have to stay focused on the key tasks at hand, and having a strategic plan that guides our work aids us in doing so with intentionality.

In our 2019-2022 strategic plan, our team prioritized assessment efforts by utilizing Ruffalo Noel Levitz’ College Student Inventory (Ruffalo, n.d.), Federal Work Study, and Handshake system data to create a target list of students to receive tailored campaign emails. The emails had an open rate between 37% and 68%, far exceeding the standard 23% for the education and training industry, as reported by MailChimp (n.d.). We also used data to track specific promotion efforts to employers and alumni through meetings, emails, and events as we marketed the VCULink networking platform and encouraged them to engage in flash mentoring, which is mentoring students through brief interactions within the site. These strategic items allowed us to target specific populations and share our services when they otherwise may not be aware of them.

Before making measurable changes, we needed to track what we were already doing. Many of our strategic action steps included capturing baseline data for specific success metrics. Once we knew what “typical” looked like for our office, we actively employed strategies to improve outcomes. “Goal One” of our 2022-2026 strategic plan aimed to “honor the intersections between identity and career through engaging, data-driven programs and services.” Data-driven was in the name, and assessment has undoubtedly been essential to achieving this goal. The first subgoal aimed to “regularly collect and utilize direct student feedback through multiple mediums to determine impact and effectiveness” through surveys, focus groups, a newly appointed Student Advisory Board, which began in September 2022, and post-event evaluations. In a subgoal centered on developing and designing a career readiness initiative, we added questions related to the NACE Career Readiness Competencies (NACE, n.d.b) to already existing means of assessment, including the first-year and transfer intake survey, the first-destination survey for new graduates, and both the Transforming Federal Work-Study Internship and Work+ on-campus employment efforts. We were able to see tangible impact when we measured our work and added assessment into existing methods.

Additionally, we continued including questions within the VCU Internship Funding Program participants' pre- and post-surveys. We also designed an assessment to survey faculty to learn which NACE Career Readiness Competencies they already actively discussed in the classroom and connected to assignments. By learning what students already knew and which competencies faculty were already teaching, we gained a better understanding of where to start building a career readiness initiative that will educate students.

Multifaceted assessment data provides us with valuable insights we can use to continue to move our work and our strategic plan forward. In truth, assessment is foundational to our team's routine practices. It helps us tell our story to students and key stakeholders throughout the year. We continue to leverage our strategic plan to keep assessment at the forefront of our work.

Best Practices and Lessons Learned

With a staff that is relatively small for the size of our institution (approximately 2,500:1 student-to-career counselor ratio), the VCS team has to be creative and intentional in the ways we provide services to our students and recent graduates, as well as how to collect, analyze, share, and utilize critical data internally and externally to make improvements and a positive impact. Our assessment, reporting, and program enhancement efforts have focused on key areas: advising, programming/events, career readiness, and first-destination and career success beyond salary and foundational questions.

Career Counseling/Advising

More than a decade ago, our career counseling team moved from a "major model" to an "industry model" regarding the way we serve students, engage with faculty and academic departments, and hone subject matter expertise in different fields. We wanted our approach to career advising to reflect the growing trend in career services to designate career pathways by related areas of interest that could cross the boundaries of academic disciplines (Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014). With this in mind, we developed the following industry areas: Arts, Design & Entrepreneurship, Education, Human Service, Healthcare, Media & Communications, Public Service, and Science, Technology, & Math. Each of our career counselors has an industry specialty area and also serves as a career counseling generalist, supporting any student who reaches out to connect and ask questions. This approach has helped us better serve students and recent alumni by allowing them to prioritize industry specialty or schedule availability when booking advising appointments.

When considering scale at a large institution, VCS career counselors have diligently provided industry-specific resources for our department website so students can access what they need at any hour. Our goal is to empower students to access information in a 24/7 manner rather than requiring them to book an appointment to feel supported. Similarly, our office hosts drop-in hours throughout the academic year where students and recent alumni can stop by our suite without an appointment for a quick 15-minute coaching session with one of our Peer Career Advisors (PCAs). Regardless of whether students or recent alumni meet with us in an appointment or a drop-in session, we disseminate a post-meeting survey to assess their experience and ask for their feedback, as shown in

Appendix A. An advising satisfaction survey is automatically deployed via Handshake after career counselors mark individual appointments or drop-ins as complete.

We have adapted our approach to better serve our campus community based on student and alumni feedback. Examples include shifting our appointment hours to prioritize offering more options in the late morning and afternoon, adding a new appointment type for interview skills, and playing music in our lobby to create a welcoming environment. Students utilize the interview skills appointment type, and our front desk manager reports that students engage by asking us what music we are playing in the waiting area. Some have even asked if there is a shared playlist that they can add music to themselves. These small, student-led changes cost us nothing to provide and enhance their interactions with our office.

As many institutions looked to retail to begin offering a net promoter score, VCS incorporated a version of that question into our advising satisfaction survey (Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014). By asking for specific insights, we can share student and recent alumni feedback quickly with career counselors so they can make necessary adjustments. This immediate feedback allows us to remain agile and responsive and more effectively tell the story of our impact to leaders within our division. Our team submits an annual technology fee proposal that includes testimonials of students' positive experiences using the VCU Handshake system. We utilized assessment to stop scrambling to email interested students for feedback each year and instead added a question about Handshake to the advising satisfaction survey. Using the data we collect from this survey, we can quickly and easily find student stories to feature in our proposal.

Career Programming/Events

With a campus of our size, we are constantly thinking about scale, so our collective goal is to serve more students through programming and events than through individual advising. We can effectively reach more students via classroom presentations, workshops, and career fairs than via 1:1 advising appointments. For example, in April 2023, we met with 542 students in advising and nearly double (1,021) in programming. Keeping this approach in mind, we measure many different aspects of student engagement, including tracking monthly program counts and attendance. We then report our numbers to one another, and anyone can share what factors they see contributing to whether our numbers were up or down. For example, in the past 5 months, we stopped reporting on pre-professional health online learning modules as part of our programming data because our institution launched pre-health minors. Creating pre-health minors was an innovation grant project that was actualized because one of our team members saw a need for it and made it happen. The creation of pre-health minors will help students to chart out which classes they need to take. Conversely, our pre-health Canvas modules are no longer relevant since the minors have replaced them. As a team, we anticipated that our program numbers would drop, but for a very good reason.

Additionally, we assess every event we implement. It is not enough to feel like we did a good job; we want proof and to learn where we can improve. After every class presentation and workshop, we share a slide with a QR code that takes participants to an

evaluation. This evaluation has continued to evolve as we learn from students, alumni, and the broader career development field. In this survey, shared in Appendix B, we ask, “Tell me the most important thing you learned during this workshop,” to gather data that lends itself to storytelling. Students’ answers to this question also help us refine content. Sometimes, something we may say in a session becomes a student’s main takeaway, so we find ways to incorporate that content into other programs. In James Clear’s *Atomic Habits* (2018), he shares that people are more likely to follow through on a goal if they write it down. Therefore, we ask, “What is the one action you will take as a result of attending this workshop?” We hope that by reflecting on this one action in the moment, students and recent alumni will follow through on completing an action they picked for themselves. We were also curious whether learning was taking place in our programming, so we added the following question with a Likert scale choice of responses: “I feel more informed on this topic than I did beforehand.” We wanted to know whether students already knew the content or truly learned something new. Lastly, student feedback is imperative, so our last prompt is “Feedback for presenter (positive and/or constructive).” Presenters often receive overwhelmingly positive feedback, and sometimes, they can spot input specific to their style (i.e., speaking too softly or too loudly), which helps them polish their presentations. Moreover, because the survey is anonymous, we hope students are more likely to be honest with us.

Career Readiness

Career readiness is at the heart of what we do. Many of our strategic plan goals have centered on career readiness. We have been working to infuse career readiness across campus using NACE’s Career Readiness Competencies as a guidepost.

“Goal One” of our 2019-2022 strategic plan aimed to “infuse career and professional development into campus culture” (VCU Career Services, 2022a). We knew students were having career development conversations with faculty and staff all over campus, and we did not want campus partners to feel compelled to funnel everyone through our office, especially with the capacity constraints previously mentioned. Instead, we wanted to equip faculty to enhance the conversations they were already having with students. With this in mind, our team developed a training program for faculty and staff to empower them to have career-related discussions with students and to expand our department’s reach across campus.

What started as a fairly academic undertaking consisting of pre-tests and post-tests for participants evolved as we gathered feedback from our certified “VCU Career Champions” to make changes continuously. We originally asked all participants to take a pre- and post-test within a Canvas module for each of the three VCU Career Champions training sessions to track whether learning was taking place. We found that pre- and post-test completion was sporadic. Furthermore, we found that sometimes participants’ knowledge decreased after the session due to the wording of the questions. Participants even wrote in their post-surveys that while their post-test scores did not show improvement, they believed they learned a lot from the session. We considered their feedback and looked at other train-the-trainer sessions across campus, such as Rams in Recovery, which focuses on supporting students recovering from substance use disorder, and Green Zone training,

which prioritizes aid for military veterans or military-affiliated students. None of them had a pre- or post-test, and we chose to begin measuring learning by asking participants directly in their post-survey. We also noted how difficult it was for participants to get to three separate sessions and that tracking their attendance for each session caused more administrative work for us. After a pause, we decided to continue the work of the training program in our 2022-2026 strategic plan, relaunching with a new format in Fall 2023 and continuing to gather data and refine the experience. Our training now includes one three-hour session rather than three separate one-and-a-half-hour sessions, which has increased participation and completion overall. As of January 2025, our team has trained 147 VCU Career Champions.

Additional career readiness-related work included creating tailored, individualized Handshake email campaigns to educate students and encourage them to be proactive in their development. These campaigns have increased drop-ins and appointments.

In our 2022–2026 strategic plan, “Goal Two’s” central message is to “champion career readiness and student success through education and outreach.” Our team conducted benchmarking on peer institutions’ best practices for incorporating career readiness into their campus culture and began to investigate what could work for our campus. Our College-to-Career (C2C) Blueprint started as a grant-funded pilot project between VCS, VCU REAL (Relevant, Experiential, and Applied Learning), and VCU’s Department of Psychology within the College of Humanities and Sciences, focused on infusing career readiness and internship experiences into the academic curriculum. As part of this project, VCS team members partnered with faculty and staff to map out how the current core curriculum within the department aligned with the NACE Career Readiness Competencies (NACE, n.d.b) and then evaluate areas for future growth and development to give students a well-rounded, relevant learning experience within the major. Since then, nine additional departments within the College have committed to similar Blueprint initiatives/projects with our team, helping to bring career readiness and internship preparation directly into the curriculum through thoughtful assessment and planning.

Post-Graduation Outcomes

Each May graduation cohort at VCU comprises approximately 4,000 students, including bachelor, master, and doctorate degree-level graduates. In 2018 when VCS first became strategically involved in the creation, distribution, marketing, and campus engagement for the annual VCU First-Destination Survey, in partnership with Institutional Research and Decision Support (IRDS), response rates hovered close to 30%, not providing a representative sample of graduate outcomes for the campus community. While we saw notable increases in response rates in the first year through the platform changes and intentional marketing efforts alone (from approximately 31% in 2018 to 50% in 2019), partnering directly with over a dozen different schools and colleges at VCU on branching survey questions, student response rate strategies, and regular data updates has made the most significant difference. Since collaborating and approaching the survey more intentionally, including building and sharing it through the Handshake platform, we have collectively increased the combined data rate (via direct responses and knowledge rate data sources) to 78% of the graduation cohort.

As part of our core institution-specific questions, we ask graduates about their experiential learning participation while at VCU. 77% of the 4,154 May 2023 graduates participated in at least one experiential learning opportunity, and 32% were offered full-time employment based on those experiences. We also asked about the relation of their post-graduate plans to their program/field of study (92% related) and individual career goals (93% related). We gauge their satisfaction with their employment or continuing education plans (90% satisfied). We also ask if they want to take advantage of the career advising and other resources available to recent alumni, then follow up with respondents accordingly. Beyond the typical metrics of employment versus seeking status, these questions help us understand the alignment between students' expectations and what VCU can provide related to career and professional development, as well as proactively reach out to individuals to provide support in the months after graduation. Additionally, IRDS created and now updates an internal First-Destination Survey Data Dashboard bi-annually that all VCU faculty and staff can access for recent and year-to-year comparisons on post-graduation outcomes data down to the academic major/department level.

Approaches Beyond Traditional Methods and Metrics

As part of the aforementioned strategic plan action group work over the last few years, one of our core strategies for moving our work forward has been to “refine program and service feedback and evaluation process to amplify student participation and representation, including increased support for underserved student populations” (VCU Career Services, 2022b). To achieve this strategy, the team set a specific action step to “regularly collect and utilize direct student feedback through multiple mediums to determine impact and effectiveness” (VCU Career Services, 2022b). As project work began on this action step, the team faced the critical question of how exactly we would and should determine the impact and effectiveness of our work with students beyond the traditional measures of engagement and post-graduate outcomes cited above. Through collaboration and consultation with assessment experts within the Provost's Office and Academic Affairs at VCU, the project team came up with 12 metrics that could both easily be tracked for progress over time and would directly speak to the ways we wanted to connect with and receive feedback from students, both directly and indirectly.

We decided to track engagement metrics throughout the 2022-2026 VCS strategic plan. They included those related to student engagement with our Handshake system and the employment opportunities available therein (internship, full-time, and federal work-study applications), as well as student feedback survey responses throughout the year (seeking an increase in positive responses and decrease in negative responses overall). Additionally, we have been tracking campus partner relationship development, classroom presentation requests from faculty/staff instructors across campus, website and newsletter engagement, and whether or not we are effectively closing originally-established equity gaps in service engagement with specific at-risk or underserved populations in our campus community. We now actively track relevant data points annually to see how we are on course and trending along the way, with the ability to note and address any issues that arise and celebrate wins when we meet our minimum and stretch goals in specific categories.

There are so many ways for students, alumni, employers, and campus community members to engage with a career services office and for us to make a difference to our stakeholders and their experiences. When approached strategically and consistently, assessment efforts paint a compelling picture of what is working and what needs improvement and ensure that the data we collect is utilized appropriately throughout the year as needs and resources change.

Future Considerations

Career services will continue to be evaluated in specific, meaningful ways in the years ahead related to the return on investment for earning a college degree. We can tell an impactful story about student, employer, and campus-community engagement with our resources and services, as well as how student outcomes (including career readiness and first destinations) are improving over time, addressing any barriers to success or new resource needs that arise along the way. As the VCS team has aimed to do over the last few years, we encourage similar units at other large institutions to regularly evaluate assessment practices, including working with campus experts, to ensure you measure impact and effectiveness appropriately for your specific student population and campus community. Do not be afraid to admit that your practices or measurements need updating or highlighting where you are falling short and how you can address it thoughtfully.

At a large institution, career services ability to work at scale means utilizing technology and communications, leaning into programming, events, and campus partner engagement to reach students beyond one-on-one appointments, and measuring impact and effectiveness in ways that go beyond attendance numbers. Suppose you measure success only by what percentage of the student population accesses your services in person, for example. In that case, you will be missing out on understanding how students want to and are actively engaging with your team and offerings in other ways, including through intentional, broader partnerships. Meeting students where they are – the classroom, their student organizations, their on-campus student employment roles, social media, and online in general – and making sure your services are accessible and not missing certain students along the way will enable you to offer career services at scale in a way you can be proud of, no matter the size of your student population or department staff.

Conclusion

As career services operations strive to meet the ever-changing needs of students, alumni, employers, and campus and community partners, assessment can be a major tool for success if approached with intention and customized to the institution itself. This shapes and refines the story that needs to be told to ensure impact and effectiveness. Strategic planning can set long-term goals and keep work throughout the year within scope for reaching those goals. While program attendance, service utilization, and post-graduate outcomes are common baseline data collection areas for many career services departments, there are ways to assess and frame each of these success metrics in ways that set up larger institutions to get a better picture of engagement and what needs to be improved to meet critical milestones. Additionally, thinking about other ways and areas of work to assess the quality and growth for career services departments ensures that

resources are cultivated and allocated in the right direction to serve the broader campus community and institutional goals. Ideally, this article provides a few new perspectives and ideas for larger institutions to consider in their assessment efforts, helping increase the support for student success at colleges and universities nationwide.

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Appendix A

Advising Effectiveness Survey with Branching Questions

Automatically collected data includes student ID, name, date and time, and email address.

Primary Questions for Branching

- Did you have an advising appointment or drop-in?
 - Drop-ins (branches to *Peer Career Advisor Questions*)
 - Appointment (branches to *What type of appointment did you have?*)
- What type of appointment did you have?
 - Suit Yourself Appointment (branches to *Suit Yourself Questions*)
 - All Appointments, other than Suit Yourself (branches to *Advising Questions*)

Peer Career Advisor Questions

- Which Peer Career Advisor did you meet with for your drop-in?
- The Peer Career Advisor was able to accurately answer my question(s) and refer me to appropriate resource(s).*
- The Peer Career Advisor encouraged me to ask questions and discuss concerns.*
- I left my drop-in session with a clear next step.*
- Any additional feedback or a shout-out for the Peer Career Advisor?
- I would recommend the Peer Career Advisor to a friend or classmate.*

Suit Yourself Questions:

- I was able to find the item(s) I was looking for.*
- What item(s) were you looking for during your visit?
- The selection of clothing and accessories was inclusive.*
- The quality of the clothing met my expectations.*
- What is one way we can improve our Suit Yourself closet?
- I would recommend the Suit Yourself closet to a friend or classmate.*

Advising Questions

- Which Career Advisor did you meet with?
- I was able to meet with the advisor at a time that was convenient for me.*
- If I had specific questions and concerns in mind during your session.*
- I left my career advising session with a clear next step.*
- Any additional feedback or a shout out for the Career Advisor?
- I would recommend the advisor to a friend or classmate.*

Front Desk Questions + Net Promoter Score (seen by all students and recent alumni)

- The front desk staff assisted me promptly.*
- The Career Services front staff was welcoming and approachable.*
- The office space was accessible for my needs/requirements.*
- I would recommend Career Services to a friend, roommate, or classmate.*
- What is one way we could improve our office/waiting area if you visited our office?
- If a front desk staff member wasn't able to assist you, did they refer you to an appropriate resource/person?
- If applicable, how has Handshake been a helpful tool in your career development or job/internship search process?
- Any additional feedback or a shout-out for the front desk/office?

* All scaling options consist of: Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree, and N/A.

Appendix B
Programming Evaluation

1. Enter the number provided by your presenter.
2. Tell me the most important thing you learned during this workshop:
3. What is the one action you will take as a result of attending this workshop?
4. I feel more informed on this topic than I did beforehand.
 - a. Strongly agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Disagree
 - e. Strongly disagree
5. Feedback for the presenter (positive and/or constructive):