College Career-Center Directors Say Students Are Unprepared for a Job Search

By: Caitlin Peterkin

With unemployment rates still high, many recent college graduates are jobless, and according to a new national survey of college career centers, they are commonly unprepared to find work.

More than three-quarters of career-center directors believe the biggest obstacle in effectively counseling students is that they underestimate the amount of time and effort required for a job search, says the report, "Effectively Counseling Graduating Students," released on Wednesday by the National Association of Colleges and Employers, or NACE. It is based on a survey this summer of career-center directors at nearly 600 campuses, conducted by NACE and DeVry University's Career Advisory Board, a panel of education and business leaders.

About half of the respondents agreed that the majority of their students were well-prepared to succeed in their first full-time jobs after graduation, but just under a quarter said that students had the tools and skills necessary to find a job.

Career centers are not seeing enough students take advantage of their services to prepare for that search, Ed Koc, director of strategic and foundation research for NACE, said in an interview. "A great number of students go out into the employment market after college being unprepared."

Preparation might include going to the career center for résumé review or one-on-one coaching. The service most used by students, according to the survey, was résumé writing. Still, more than half of directors said the majority of students didn't have résumés ready to present to potential employers. And although nearly all career-center directors said practice interviewing is effective, that was among the services students used least.
At Barnard College, where students rate career services highly in popular surveys, counselors have hit upon an effective strategy to attract participation. "Everything we do in career development is really a program," said Robert Earl, director of career development at Barnard. "Students flourish when you can present what you're doing in a program," he said. "It's more fun to be in a program than just meet with a counselor."

The college runs such programs as Matching Alumnae to Partner With Students, which pairs Barnard students with alumnae working in their field of interest, and the Senior Initiative program, a twice-a-year series of workshops and events for seniors.

The University of Florida's Career Resource Center has been using technology and social media to reach students, said Heather B. White, director of the center. "We've started Twitter 'power hours,' where we basically have a conversation through Twitter."

And at Bentley University, career counselors have built strong relationships with university administrators and faculty. According to NACE's survey, one-third of career-center directors viewed lack of support from faculty as a problem in getting students to use their services.

Susan Brennan, executive director of career services at Bentley, has sought to overcome that obstacle by participating in faculty committees. "I play a visible role in faculty advising, helping to think through curriculum policy issues," Ms. Brennan said. "As we think about adding new courses, we think about what is the relevance of this course in the market, and how employers would react."

For a career center to be truly successful, said Mr. Koc, of NACE, a university's administration and faculty must recognize the importance of what it provides to students.

Top administrators control resources, and the survey showed that career centers could use more. About 42 percent of career-center directors said staffing limitations were the biggest burden on their success. On average, NACE has found, career centers employ about one professional staff member per 859 students.

Of course many university departments are straining under tight budgets, said Mr. Koc. But, he added, centers need money and space "to do the kind of in-depth counseling that's most effective for students."