



LEVERAGING INDUSTRY EXPERTISE TO PREPARE ALUMNI FOR TOMORROW'S WORKFORCE

Welcome to the inaugural white paper from the Alumni Career Services Network. As industry professionals in the field of career services, we understand the importance of staying up to date with the latest trends and practices to best serve our alumni communities. That's why we are excited to present this paper, which focuses on new and relevant topics that are currently shaping the landscape of our industry and the uncertain job market into which our clients are entering.

Over the last few years, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the job market, leading to changes in the way we approach career services. As a result, we have seen a shift towards virtual career coaching and a greater emphasis on helping alumni navigate the challenges of the evolving workforce. In this paper, we will explore these topics in greater depth, offering insights and best practices for supporting alumni in the current job market.

In addition, we will also be examining the role of technology in career services. As technology continues to evolve, it presents new opportunities for engaging with alumni and providing them with the resources they need to succeed in their careers. From career assessment tools to alumni mentoring platforms, we will discuss the latest innovations and how they can be used to enhance alumni career services.

Overall, this white paper aims to provide industry professionals with valuable insights and practical advice on the most pressing issues facing alumni career services today. We hope that you will find this paper informative and useful in your work, and we look forward to continuing the conversation around these important topics.

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TOPIC 1: HOW CAN WE BEST PREPARE ALUMNI TO PIVOT TO MEET THE NEEDS OF TOMORROW'S WORKFORCE?

As the job market continues to evolve rapidly, it's becoming increasingly important for alumni to be prepared to pivot and adapt their skill sets to meet the demands of the future. As such, alumni career services professionals have a critical role to play in helping alumni develop the necessary skills and strategies to navigate these changes successfully. In this section, we'll explore some of the ways that alumni career services professionals can best prepare alumni to pivot and meet the jobs and skills of the future.

FOCUS ON LIFELONG LEARNING

One of the most important skills for any professional to develop is the ability to learn and adapt continuously. Alumni career services professionals can help alumni build this skill by promoting the importance of lifelong learning and offering resources to support it. This might include workshops, online courses, and networking opportunities with experts in emerging fields.

ENCOURAGE SKILL BUILDING

Another important way that alumni career services professionals can help prepare alumni for the jobs of the future is by encouraging them to develop new skills. This might include skills related to emerging technologies, such as coding or data analysis, or skills related to interpersonal communication and leadership.

PROVIDE MENTORSHIP AND NETWORKING OPPORTUNITIES

Mentorship and networking can be invaluable resources for alumni looking to pivot into new fields or advance their careers. Alumni career services professionals can help facilitate these connections by offering mentorship programs, networking events, and online communities where alumni can connect with each other and with industry experts.

EMPHASIZE TRANSFERABLE SKILLS

In addition to encouraging alumni to develop new skills, it's also important to emphasize the value of transferable skills. Many of the skills that alumni have developed in their previous roles, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and project management, can be applied to a wide range of new fields and industries.

OFFER CAREER COACHING AND SUPPORT

Finally, alumni career services professionals can provide valuable career coaching and support to alumni as they navigate the process of pivoting and adapting to new career paths. This might include offering one-on-one coaching sessions, resume and cover letter reviews, and career planning workshops.

By focusing on these key strategies, alumni career services professionals can help prepare alumni to pivot and meet the jobs and skills of the future. Through ongoing learning and skill building, mentorship and networking, and career coaching and support, alumni can develop the resilience and adaptability they need to thrive in a rapidly changing job market.



TOPIC 2: WHAT ARE YOUR BEST PRACTICES FOR MAXIMIZING THE IMPACT OF ALUMNI MENTORING PLATFORMS?

Our second topic asked us to think about the best practices for maximizing the impact of alumni mentoring platforms. Key themes that emerged in this discussion included the rise of flash mentoring, increasing platform engagement by encouraging institution-wide adoption, and the need for sufficient staffing resources.

MAKING MENTORING MORE ACCESSIBLE

The trend at many institutions seems to be moving more towards a flash mentoring model, where the relationship happens in a smaller time frame (maybe even just as a one-time conversation) in a much more focused environment. When we hear the word mentoring, it's a safe bet that many of us picture a long, formal program that unfolds over many months where someone is assigned a mentor that's meant to answer all their career-related questions. But as this key point illustrates, these programs are often hard to deliver on. What our audience wants (both mentors and mentees, be they students or young alumni) seems to be a more focused conversation and an ease in identifying who those mentors – emphasis on the plural – might be. Platforms that allow for this kind of lower barrier, less logistically complex mentoring are ones that our industry appear to be gravitating toward. They can also help us keep track of who is being asked to mentor, and who isn't, helping to ensure that we don't burn out our best volunteers and also identify gaps where engagement opportunities exist for untapped alumni segments.

WIDE ADOPTION IS KEY

Our ACSN members see platforms work best when they are widely adopted across the institution. Secondary to this point is the idea of platform fatigue and making difficult decisions around the right mix of technology platforms, and how our users access them. In some settings, institutions are using their signature mentoring platform as the one-stop-shop for constituents to find all their career resources, including other, more narrowly focused technology partners. Returning to the larger point, those institutions seeing the best use of their mentorship platforms have found ways to make them more widely relevant and useful to their institutions. They are not merely the focus of just one or two offices (often career services and alumni relations), but they're finding collaboration points with partners like admissions, faculty, athletics, and others.

MENTORSHIP PLATFORMS STILL NEED STAFF ATTENTION

While mentorship platforms hold great promise, their potential is maximized only through dedicated staff attention. Yes, these systems can be force multipliers for our efforts, but they are not set-it-and-forget-it solutions. They are gardens that need our consistent attention. Whether this means one or two staffers are fully dedicated to these resources, or the equivalent dedication is found across several individuals, the fact remains that staff resources are critical. Staff are often the ones driving the engagement and use of these platforms by whichever constituents are the target audience.

It is imperative that we remember these platforms are a means to an end. While we are excited as industry experts by how these platforms can allow us to do our work better, it's the connections they help to promote which are the real end goal for our users.



TOPIC 3: WHAT ARE THE BEST STRATEGIES FOR RAISING AWARENESS AND ENGAGING OUR CONSTITUENTS WITH OUR PROGRAMMING?

The third topic discussed asked us to wrestle with communication channels, thinking through the best strategies for raising awareness and engaging our constituents with our programming. Three key themes emerged in this discussion as well: frequency of communication is key but prioritizing alumni career messaging remains difficult; reliability of contact information can be a challenge, but LinkedIn can help make a difference; and communications need to strategically be on multiple channels.

FREQUENCY IS KEY, BUT PRIORITIZATION REMAINS A CHALLENGE

A common refrain that we've likely all heard from our alumni, after they discover one of our programs or resources, is "I had no idea my alma mater offered alumni career services!" This speaks to the first theme that emerged in our conversations: frequency of communicating about alumni career services is key for all of us, but prioritization of our messaging remains a challenge. Who among us feels like enough attention is given to our valuable alumni career services? We all see the impact – quantitatively and qualitatively – of how helpful our services are to our alumni, and the relevant ways we ask them to be involved with their alma mater. Unfortunately, despite what seems so self-evident to those of us in the industry, many still struggle to prioritize our messaging in a crowded communications environment.

DATA ACCURACY

While many schools have made great strides increasing the accuracy of their contact information for their alumni, up-to-date employment information remains elusive. To combat this, alumni career services teams are leaning further into LinkedIn as a source of this information. Whether that's services that offer one-time mass data appends or ad hoc updates as we encounter the info, LinkedIn seems to be the first (and then last) place our alumni update their new employment info. However, leaning into LinkedIn also presents opportunities to better leverage it as a communications vehicle, through institutional pages, alumni groups, or even those staffers who have curated strong networks with their institution's alumni.

STRATEGIC, MULTI-CHANNEL APPROACH

This point moves us naturally into the most robust theme that emerged from this conversation: the need for a strategic approach to multi-channel communications. We can all attest to the overflow of our inboxes, the busy-ness of our social media feeds, and the many demands on our attention. Because of this, our communication strategies need to be an all-of-the-above approach, and we can't put all our eggs in one communication basket: Emails, both targeted/individual outreach and blast emails, social media (on all the social media channels: Instagram, LinkedIn and yes, even Facebook and Twitter), and the communication features of our platforms like Handshake or mentoring systems.

Many members noted how successful mail and print pieces can be, as they stand out as different from all the many ways we ask for attention digitally. Other key channels were finding ways to

include alumni career services content in other people's messaging, whether that's school/college/program-specific newsletters, faculty communications, or any other niche communication list we can find. Another key strategy was finding ways to take advantage of signature programming or events. Can we find ways to show up where we already know there will be a crowd of constituents? Homecomings, reunions, convocations, or post-commencement festivities were a few common examples shared.



TOPIC 4: WHAT DO ALUMNI WANT? WHAT ARE SOME OF THE MOST (OR LEAST) SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMS HAPPENING IN OUR INDUSTRY?

The fourth topic we broached asked our collaborators to think about our most successful, effective programs and those programs which are ready to be sunset. Many great examples were shared by all our participants, with key themes centering on workshops, in-person vs. virtual programming, and real-time (synchronous) programs vs. on-demand (asynchronous) programs.

WHAT'S HAPPENING WITH WORKSHOPS?

Offering workshops to our alumni remains a key element of many ACSN teams' strategies, as no one has (yet) pivoted to a solely on-demand service model. Financial-themed programming stood out as particularly successful at a few institutions, including events dedicated to salary negotiation and managing your finances. Networking receptions seemed to work best when they focused on student-to-alumni networking and were designed to encourage interaction, such as through speed networking.

Identity-based programming also stood out as particularly effective, especially when combined with larger calendar themes, such as Women's History Month or Black History Month, along with workshops targeted towards these populations.

Many providers found workshops to be most successful when they were alumni-led, lifting up the expertise of our alumni and making the content feel truly unique to our own institutions. Others found that offering workshops as a series, like the many examples of job-search clubs where a workshop is not a once-and-done experience, but part of a cohort experience proved more effective.

IN-PERSON VS. VIRTUAL PROGRAM DESIGN

How then, should these workshops be offered? In-person, or virtual? It's the question that will dominate our post-COVID programming strategies. While the pandemic showed how easy it is to turn an in-person event into a virtual one, there aren't many who are looking for more reasons to be on a Zoom. Many participants felt a conflicting push-and-pull on whether things should be offered in-person or virtually. So, while many participants have returned to some in-person programming, virtual still remains a viable option. Although attendance at programs continues to be unpredictable, this is especially true for virtual events which can see very high melt rates.

To combat this uncertainty, many participants discussed shortening their virtual programs in an effort to minimize Zoom fatigue. Participants also noted that events around lunchtime (even accounting for alumni in multiple time zones) seem to do better than evening virtual programs.

REAL-TIME VS. AT YOUR OWN PACE

The points raised above all beg an important question about the value of synchronous events. What resources or programming can we create and deliver in a way that our audience can consume at their own pace? And how can we still track and count those engagement points if we aren't simply looking at a sign-in sheet or Zoom participant list?

Some ACSN members have tried experimenting with live social media streams. Instagram has proven to be a favorite, as it allows for easy cross-sharing, and seems to be less glitchy or complicated than Facebook or LinkedIn lives.

Others raised the good point that this does not have to be an either/or question, but can be approached as a both/and. Perhaps some programs or events can live on in a content library, or be edited apart as shorter, digestible video content.

A final important point on this idea of successful programming is to not be afraid to repeat what's working well. There are evergreen topics under the umbrella of alumni career services that we know our constituents need. There are always alumni emerging who suddenly need our support. Offering repeating programs builds consistency and trust, providing an outlet for the alum who suddenly finds themselves in need of career support.



TOPIC 5: HOW CAN WE CONTINUE TO GROW OURSELVES PROFESSIONALLY AS WE HELP OTHERS CLIMB?

As alumni career services professionals, it is crucial that we stay up to date with the latest trends, best practices, and technologies in our industry. However, the field of alumni career services can often feel isolated and lacking in clear paths for professional development. In this section, we will explore strategies and resources for pursuing our own professional development in a field that may not have many obvious paths forward.

NETWORK WITH OTHER PROFESSIONALS

One of the best ways to stay informed about the latest trends and best practices in alumni career services is by networking with other professionals in the field. Attend conferences, workshops, and webinars to connect with other alumni career services professionals, share ideas, and learn about the latest industry developments.

JOIN PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

Professional associations can provide valuable resources for career development and networking opportunities. Consider joining associations like the Alumni Career Services Network (ACSN), National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), or the Career Development Network. These associations often offer professional development opportunities, training, and certification programs.

SEEK OUT MENTORS AND COACHES

Mentors and coaches can provide valuable guidance and support as we navigate our careers in this industry. Consider seeking out a mentor or coach who has experience in alumni career services or a related field to provide guidance and feedback on career development.

ATTEND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

Many colleges and universities offer professional development programs specifically designed for career services and alumni relations professionals. These programs may include workshops, seminars, and online courses to help us stay up to date with the latest industry developments and best practices.

STAY INFORMED ABOUT INDUSTRY DEVELOPMENTS

Stay informed about the latest industry developments by reading industry publications, attending webinars and conferences, and following thought leaders on social media. Some of the most influential industry publications include NACE Journal, Career Development Quarterly, and the Journal of Career Development.

PURSUE ADVANCED DEGREES OR CERTIFICATIONS

Consider pursuing an advanced degree or certification in a related field to gain a deeper understanding of the principles and practices of alumni career services. Many universities offer graduate programs in higher education administration or career counseling, and there are several professional certifications available through professional organizations.

As professionals in this field, it is important to stay informed about the latest trends, best practices, and technologies in our industry. While there may not be many obvious paths for professional development, by networking with other professionals, joining professional associations, seeking out mentors and coaches, attending professional development programs, staying informed about industry developments, and pursuing advanced degrees or certifications, we can continue to develop our skills and knowledge and stay at the forefront of our field.

CONCLUSION:

As we conclude this white paper, we are filled with a sense of excitement and optimism for the future of alumni career services. The ever-changing nature of the job market and the increasing demands of our alumni necessitate our continuous adaptation and evolution. We believe that by embracing new and relevant topics, we can stay at the forefront of industry trends and better serve our alumni communities.

Through our exploration of virtual career coaching, remote work challenges, and the role of technology, we have witnessed the transformative power these areas hold. By leveraging virtual platforms, we can reach alumni regardless of their physical location, providing personalized guidance and support. We have also witnessed how technology can revolutionize the way we deliver career services, enabling us to offer innovative tools and resources to facilitate alumni success.

Looking ahead, we anticipate even more exciting developments on the horizon. As the world continues to evolve, so too will the needs of our alumni. We must be prepared to embrace emerging

trends and address the challenges that lie ahead. This requires ongoing collaboration, knowledge sharing, and a commitment to continuous improvement within our profession.

springboard for further exploration and growth within your own alumni career services programs. By staying connected, learning from one another, and embracing the opportunities that lie ahead, we can collectively shape the future of alumni career services in meaningful and impactful ways.

We are grateful for your commitment to the field and your dedication to supporting alumni in their professional journeys. Together, we can continue to empower our alumni, unlock their full potential, and make a lasting impact on their lives and careers.

Here's to the exciting future that awaits us in alumni career services!



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ABOUT ACSN

The Alumni Career Services Network (ACSN) is a collaborative community of professionals dedicated to providing valuable resources, support, and guidance to alumni as they navigate their career journeys. Comprised of individuals from diverse backgrounds, including career counselors, alumni relations professionals, and industry experts, the network fosters a collective exchange of knowledge, best practices, and innovative approaches to alumni career services. Through networking opportunities, professional development events, and knowledge sharing platforms, ACSN aims to empower professionals in this field to better serve their alumni communities and contribute to the advancement of career services in higher education and beyond.

For more information about how you can get involved with ACSN, please visit us online at <http://www.myACSN.org>.