

LinkedIn: A Tool for Career Counseling with College Students

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Over the last few years, LinkedIn.com has added wonderful features for students to use to better understand potential careers and help them develop a professional online presence, but very few students actually know how to fully put LinkedIn to use. What we have discovered, through working with students on building a LinkedIn profile and putting it into action, is that LinkedIn is not just a tool for networking; it's a tool for career counseling.

Connecting Academics to Career

Administrators, the media, parents, and students alike are concerned about how a college education, and its corresponding financial burden, will eventually lead to a career. LinkedIn has an app for that.

Because students have the ability to post their projects on their LinkedIn profile (through box.net, slideshare and other apps) and describe them, we use LinkedIn as a tool to start a discussion about skills learned in college that can be applicable to the real world. The project section could include research papers, business analyses, technical presentations, or even animated movies. Talking about projects and their connection to the world of work also helps us teach students a professional vocabulary for their academic skills. Through searching profiles of professionals, students can see how to translate their "reading" skills into language (evaluating, analyzing, investigating) that an employer will find valuable.

Another way to connect academics and career is to have students view profiles of people in their field and recognize what projects and skills those professionals have under their belt. From this, students get a sense of what skills they still need to develop and can use this knowledge when selecting courses or topics for future projects or research papers. In this way, students can begin to see that they can build skills an employer will value while still in school.

Career Exploration

LinkedIn has become one of the first places we will direct students to begin exploring a career path. Students can do a "people" search using a keyword such as "accounting" in the main search box and view profiles of people in that field. They can view an individual's career path and see the various job titles and responsibilities in the field.

If students are completely lost and unsure of what to do, the LinkedIn Skills tool is a great jumping off point. Students can enter one skill that they enjoy, "writing" for example. This tool provides students with a list of related skills (proofreading, editing, fact-checking, blogging), a sample of professionals with "writing" in their profile, a description of the skill, and the relative

popularity of the skill. Students who are interested in particular companies can also view the most common skills of employees in that organization. Through this tool students can discover potential careers and a career path related to their passion or interest.

LinkedIn Builds Self-esteem

Many students have a hard time envisioning their future professional selves and often underestimate what they can offer a potential employer. As career counselors, we know that a well-written resume can boost a job seeker's self-esteem and confidence; a good LinkedIn profile can do this even more so. When our students conduct career research on LinkedIn, we encourage them to study the profiles of professionals very carefully. We recommend that they study profiles of entry-level, mid-level, and senior-level professionals so that they can see what career progression looks like. By looking at these real world examples, they can easily see that everyone starts out at the same place they are now – the beginning. We then assist our students to build their profiles from the ground up, in the same way that we help them build their resumes, making sure students utilize the profile sections especially geared for students (courses, projects, volunteer work, and activities). When done well, with the help of a career counselor, students can have LinkedIn profiles that look as good as experienced professionals. Furthermore, this process of building a LinkedIn profile can be truly transformational – when a student starts with nothing and creates a complete, professional looking profile with work samples and a list of skills, the student can actually feel better connected to the future professional he or she wants to become.

Gaining Access to Professionals and the Professional World Like Never Before

With over 150 million members, including executives from every Fortune 500 company, students can now interact in the same space as CEOs! Students can join groups and engage in online discussions, participating in LinkedIn Answers by either asking questions or providing answers. We have even seen students ask questions to get information and data for research papers and academic projects, and there is always a professional willing to respond, once again solidifying that connection between academics and career. LinkedIn's News feature helps students stay informed about what professionals in their fields are reading, even showing what articles are read most by employees at specific companies. Together, these features simulate a "virtual" informational interview, and could also enhance job interview preparation. Most students today are already comfortable living and communicating in this online world. It is easier for a student to pose a question to an online professional group, than to pick up the phone and try to schedule an informational interview.

Insight into the Future

LinkedIn.com has become much more than just an online networking tool. When used in career counseling with college students, LinkedIn connects academics to careers, provides new methods of career exploration, helps to build self-esteem, and provides valuable insight into their future professions.