Strategic Networking Events Designed to Serve Diverse Students
National Career Development Association Global Conference 2017
The Joy of Working: Positive Approaches to Work, Career & Life

Amanda Cox, Daniel Almanza, Jessamyn Perlus, & Brian Neighbors
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Rationale
The Career Center at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign strives to provide engaging networking opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds. Initially, two events were established to provide students a safe space to develop their networking skills and to ask taboo questions about diversity and inclusion in the workplace. These two events, D.I.N.E. (Diversity & Inclusion Networking Exchange) and Conexiones, were each designed to improve students’ career readiness. To assess changes in perceptions of career readiness, a pre and post survey measured four learning outcomes including feeling comfortable initiating networking relationships, understanding the value of networking, understanding the qualities that employers seek, and feeling comfortable asking employer questions regarding their organization’s diversity and inclusion practices. In the second year of these programs statistically significant findings were revealed in three of the four learning outcomes. Additional networking events that take place for other special populations are Military to College to Career along with Professional Connections for Students with Disabilities that was held as a part of the campus celebration of the 25th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

All four of these networking opportunities provided a safe space for students to ask questions and connect with professionals in their respective fields. Students gain advice from seasoned professionals that can influence their career trajectory. Infusing perspectives from the world of work into programs for specific populations is a great addition to our Career Center repertoire.

Program Descriptions

D.I.N.E. (Diversity & Inclusion Networking Exchange)
DINE is a co-sponsored event with Office of Minority Student Affairs, the Office of Inclusion and Intercultural Relations, Native American House, Asian American Cultural Center, University Housing, Career Services Council and the Bruce D. Nesbitt African American Cultural Center. This event includes a keynote speaker and round table discussion with employers (who are attending the career fairs). During each rotation, a question is given for each table to discuss. The event concludes with open networking for students to approach any employers. This past fall 48 students and 19 unique employers participated.

Conexiones
Conexiones is developed to specifically target our Latino(a) student population. This event is co-sponsored with La Casa Cultural Latina (cultural house) and a registered student organization (each year, we have a different organization). Conexiones has a keynote speaker, elevator pitch mini workshop, two panel breakout sessions discussing various topics, and concludes with open networking. This spring 47 students and 7 alumni/professionals participated.

Military to College to Career
This workshop series is co-sponsored by Veteran Student Support Services and Center for Wounded Veterans in Higher Education. Four sessions were held focusing on specific aspects of professional development and job attainment. The four sessions had 50 student participants which focused on resume writing: translating your military experience, career fair preparation and interview skills, evaluating job offers and an employer panel that focused on how to articulate your military experience to recruiters. Three of the four sessions had employer participation. Due to an addition of a career services professional at the Center for Wounded Veterans this workshop series is no longer offered by The Career Center.

Professional Connections for Students with Disabilities
This networking event is co-sponsored with Disability Resources and Educational Services and provides an opportunity for students to engage over a meal with representatives of employers recognized as top places to work for people with
disabilities. Students are seated with their preferred participating employers and are provided prompts to initiate conversations. After dinner, students rotate to the other tables to dialogue with different employers. Prior to the event, students participate in an optional workshop focused on networking and discussion related to disclosing a disability and seeking accommodations in the workplace. This past year, 15 students participated in this event.

**Design and Implementation of Assessments**

The Career Center’s research team obtained IRB approval and implemented assessments of the D.I.N.E and Conexiones programs. A pre-post survey design was used to measure students’ level of engagement, changes in self-efficacy for networking activities, and overall learning outcomes. For example, on post-event surveys at DINE, attendees reported increased comfort levels with all domains measured including: initiating networking relationships and confidence in their ability to create meaningful connections with professionals. There were also opportunities for qualitative responses and reflections on the events. Through Conexiones many students identified specific skills that they learned more about or had an opportunity to practice, such as elevator speeches, networking, and connecting with people. Other students discussed the importance of persistence, “Never quitting and to learn as much as possible from professionals.” because taking action can open unexpected doors. Another theme in students’ comments related to the importance and ubiquity of networking (“I learned that all it takes is a simple conversation to make connections”) as a powerful tool for career development. Finally, students reflected on the empowering nature of this event that was targeted toward students of their cultural group and being inspired by the professionals’ “stories and experiences.”

Overall, results of the assessments were exceedingly positive with gains in self-efficacy and heart-felt reflections about the meaningfulness of connecting with professionals from similar cultural backgrounds. Student learning outcomes outlined in the goals and objectives were met. (See full reports.)

Quotes:

“A better understanding of how companies utilize diversity to foster growth and the importance of it. Possible job opportunities related to diversity.” – D.I.N.E. participant 2017

“What does it look like to work with employers who value diversity and how can diversity make a difference.” – D.I.N.E. participant 2017

“That there are tons of resources especially from Latino/Latina professionals to help with whatever someone is looking for.” – Conexiones participant 2017

“Be confident with yourself. You can never know when the next opportunity will arise.”

– Conexiones participant 2017

**Implications and Next Steps**

The results from the assessments were used to inform program development throughout the office. They help us gain campus partners such as LaCasa, Office of Inclusion and Intercultural Relations and Office of Minority Student Affairs. We’ve also implemented new programs such as a Chicago Networking Event for international students.

**Visit The Career Center’s Scholarship & Innovation Website**


**Reference:** The Career Center, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. (2017). *Strategic Networking Events Designed to Serve Diverse Students* handout. Champaign, IL.