Recognize Need

Based on conversations with stakeholders, The Career Center at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign acknowledged an unmet need regarding outreach to diverse populations on our campus. These students have limited interactions with professionals and alumni, particularly those from similar backgrounds, who could support their career exploration and networking. Networking events have the potential to foster career self-efficacy specifically via vicarious learning (i.e. seeing someone from their own ethnic background being successful), verbal persuasion, and positive emotional experiences. Additionally, targeted networking events like Conexiones are well-aligned with The Career Center’s dedication to actively serving and advocating for underrepresented student populations.

“Being able to see successful Latinos/as alumni taking their time to come down and give us useful advice; it was empowering.”

– Conexiones Participant, 2014

Collaborate with Stakeholders and Build Partnerships

The Career Center partnered with campus offices and student organizations, specifically: the Latino/a cultural program house, the Latino/a alumni association, and a Latino/a student organization. We discussed bringing programming into familiar spaces on campus with familiar people. We continue to build on these partnerships to provide unique programs, extended to other diverse student populations.

“... I am very proud that I am Latina and at the University of Illinois, but with this event I truly have been touched and have seen that as a Latina in the workforce I can succeed! I even teared up! Cannot wait until next year’s event and in the future coming back and helping with this event!”

– Conexiones Participant, 2014

Create Program: Conexiones

Conexiones was first developed in Spring 2014 as a half-day event where Latino/a alumni engaged with students through interactive networking sessions. In Spring 2016, the event was expanded to include Latino/a alumni and other professionals, providing students with a broader array of networking opportunities. The event includes a variety of educational components, structured networking practice, and informal networking opportunities to help students develop their networking skills. The schedule of the event has evolved over the past three years based on experience, program assessments, and reflection.

Capacity for the event is 10-15 alumni/professionals and 100 undergraduate/graduate students. Recruitment efforts relied heavily on campus partners who are often in contact with the Latino/a student population. In 2016, incentives were added for student organizations to attend the event, such as offering a pizza party for the organization bringing the most attendees.

“Just getting advice from people who have actually gone through these various career experiences was extremely insightful.”

– Conexiones Participant, 2015

“Go the extra mile, it is never crowded” – Junior, Fine and Applied Arts, 2016
Design and Implement Assessments
In cooperation with the Conexiones program team, The Career Center’s research team obtained IRB approval and implemented an assessment of the Conexiones program. A pre-post-survey design was used to measure students’ level of engagement, changes in self-efficacy for networking activities, and overall learning outcomes. Results of the assessment were exceedingly positive with gains in self-efficacy and heart-felt reflections about the meaningfulness of connecting with alumni from similar cultural backgrounds. Student learning outcomes outlined in the goals and objectives were met. (See full report.)

Student attendees came from a variety of colleges, majors, class standings. On post-event surveys, attendees reported increased comfort levels with all domains measured including: initiating networking relationships and confidence in their ability to create meaningful connections with University of Illinois alumni and other Latino/a professionals.

Open-ended questions allowed for qualitative comments as students reflected on the empowering nature of this event that was targeted toward their cultural group and being inspired by the professionals’ stories.

“I learned how having connections with others can help you with obtaining a job also being straight forward with what you want and not be afraid to speak up.”
– Sophomore, College of Education, 2016

“... the most important thing I learned was to take action and look for opportunities because you need to put in work in order to get what you want.”
– Conexiones Participant, 2014

Reflect and Plan for Future Years
The Conexiones networking event continues to evolve each year. For example, in 2016 we invited a keynote speaker who discussed her career path and different obstacles she overcame. Here are some example reflections from our 2016 program report:

- Strengths: Strong partnerships on campus, variety of professionals attending the event, organization and flow of event including keynote speaker and panel discussions
- Challenges: Attendance/no-shows, attracting professionals from a variety of fields / geographic locations that will interest students, motivating partner contributions beyond the day of the event
- Future Directions: Conexiones has spurred other networking events for underrepresented student populations, such as our new international student networking event in Chicago. We may combine with other events such as the Diversity and Inclusion Networking Event (DINE) which brings employers to campus for networking specifically around the topic of diversity.

“It is okay to not find your perfect career right away- time and patience is key.”
– Junior, Liberal Arts and Sciences, 2016

“Networking is about creating bonds, and it is about being yourself, not selling yourself”
– Sophomore, Liberal Arts and Sciences, 2016

References and Favorite Resources


