<u>**Overview**</u>

The Workforce Readiness Workgroup was charged with providing innovative strategies that support workforce readiness. Knowing the focus of Prepared4PA, PASSHE's workforce development initiative, the group decided to focus solely on workforce readiness so as not to duplicate upskilling and reskilling efforts already underway. After reviewing several existing frameworks, we came to the conclusion that trying to work within an existing framework was limiting our ability to think creatively and see the entire landscape of opportunity.

Over the last decade, workforce readiness has been a critical conversation on college campuses and in industry. Much of the conversation around workforce readiness primarily focuses on how high schools, colleges and other training programs prepare students for the world of work, and that is how this group's conversation started. While student preparedness is certainly relevant to the conversation, it is not the entire conversation.

The workforce is an ecosystem, in which many individuals and entities are interdependent. Therefore, workforce readiness is not solely about students being ready to work for employers. It's also about employers being ready to receive talent from our campuses and move that talent through their hiring process in a fair and equitable way. Both students and employers must be adequately supported and prepared for true partnership and success to be realized.

Traditionally, workforce readiness partnerships between employers and colleges include colleges receiving feedback from employers on their students' readiness. Some colleges rely on industry partners to drive their discipline-specific curriculum. However, there is an opportunity to shift the narrative and expand our collective impact. When viewing workforce readiness through the lens of equity, it is clear that a student's level of readiness won't be realized when they enter the job market if they are encountering bias throughout the employer's hiring process, and/or if the employer doesn't have a clearly defined strategy for inclusion and retention.

This is probably best summarized in a recent article from the Brookings Institution. "Instead of focusing on the skills gap, we argue that it's time to focus on closing the *opportunity* gap—not only for the benefit of individuals who have been shut out of the labor market, but for society as a whole. Cultivating and investing in diverse talent can unleash regional innovation, economic growth, and community well-being" (Goger & Jackson, 2020).

In the interest of expanding the conversation around workforce readiness and championing equitable practices that support all of our students and employer partners, the Workforce Readiness Workgroup would like to put forward the following three recommendations.

<u>**Recommendations**</u>

Recommendation #1: Maintenance. Gather a baseline of competencies and proficiency across the state system. Use that data for marketing strengths and identifying and addressing curricular and co-curricular gaps.

We already have data from the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) that shows student proficiency in the designated NACE competencies nationwide, comparing student and employer perceptions. Replicate that study for PASSHE, and collect perceptions for each competency from students, employers who interviewed and/or hired PASSHE students, and from faculty/staff who are integrating competencies into curricular and co-curricular programming. It's important to get multiple perspectives on proficiency, as a study conducted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) suggests that "students consistently rank themselves as prepared in areas where employers do not agree" (Jaschik 2015).

While this data can be useful in the aggregate to see overall similarities and differences between student, employer, and faculty/staff perceptions, it can also be broken down to provide PASSHE a better picture of where opportunities exist, and where commonalities are across the system in terms of students' readiness in particular competency areas. The competencies must be deeply embedded and completely integrated into the curriculum and co-curricular experiences to ensure success. Having this data on a localized level helps with system-wide marketing to employers, prospective students, and their families.

Skill Survey, who has partnered with NACE, is a platform that enables the assessment of competencies between students and their on-campus or internship employers, and could be used to collect some data related to this recommendation.

Recommendation #2: Problem Solving. Invest in positions that focus on building, maintaining, and scaling employer recruiting relationships.

Invest in positions and partnerships that focus on building meaningful recruiting and branding relationships with employers on every PASSHE campus. Out of the current 14 state schools, only 4 career centers have dedicated employer engagement staff. Unsurprisingly, those without dedicated employer engagement staff have expressed limitations in engaging employers proactively, or at all. Collaboration exists amongst schools in terms of sharing career fairs on Handshake (career management system used by career centers), but with more consistent staff across schools, there is the potential for further collaboration that opens the entire PASSHE system to an employer partner.

Career development has moved away from a transactional and reactive model of providing services to employers and is instead focusing on a much more effective relational model of proactively approaching and helping employers as unique entities navigate the campus environment. A multinational corporation is going to approach the campus much differently than a startup or nonprofit, and both of their needs are important. Taking into account their budget, ability to deploy people on campus for events, recruiting timelines, hiring goals and other partnership interests, the most effective employer engagement models are built on partnership. They provide individualized recruiting and branding strategies that help an employer meet their campus recruiting goals. In order to build a robust and rewarding partnership, someone needs to manage that relationship. Some colleges are in markets with a dense population of private schools, many of which have robust teams who manage employer relationships.

Employers are able to find talent on any college campus. The differentiator here is the recruiting experience they have on each PASSHE campus and how they are connected to talent in ways that meet their hiring needs. The reality is, most of our career centers don't have the appropriate positions to provide that necessary experience for employers.

Employer demand for Career Center support is especially high with small to mid-sized businesses, our job creators, who are often new to campus recruiting, or seeking advice and guidance in creating internship programs. As a result, PASSHE campuses need employer engagement staff to both manage employer relationships and consult with them on their experiential and early talent programs.

With potentially limited resources for adding positions, PASSHE could leverage organizations and state agencies who are already doing some of this work. One example is CareerLink, where representatives are already going out and assessing employers' needs. With an account manager on each campus, someone to help execute the employers' recruiting plans, CareerLink representatives could be in the field, making referrals to each campus.

Recommendation #3: Innovation. Create a space that produces research and develops employers to ensure their readiness for receiving this generation of talent.

Open a Center for Equitable Recruiting Practices that produces forward-thinking, equity-minded research on talent attraction and acquisition and provides similar professional development to employers on best practices for recruiting and hiring students within the PASSHE system. Leverage talent that already exists within PASSHE (ie – faculty who teach in Human Resources disciplines, diversity and inclusion leaders and practitioners, students, small business development centers, continuing and professional education) to produce research and deliver training.

Providing data and professional development centered on equitable recruiting and hiring practices adds value to an employer as a PASSHE partner. With access to best practices, current trends and benchmarks, employers can advocate within their organizations for what they need, upskill their recruiters and hiring managers and further strengthen their commitment to racial and social justice.

In providing this type of value to employers, PASSHE provides further value to its students by building more robust partnerships with employers who are more likely to hire PASSHE students and ensuring those students will be treated equitably in the hiring process. In addition, it adds a revenue generating center to PASSHE's portfolio.

References

Goger, A., & Jackson, L. *The labor market doesn't have a 'skills gap'—it has an opportunity gap*. September 9, 2020. https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2020/09/09/the-labor-market-doesnt-have-a-skills-gap-it-has-an-opportunity-gap/?utm_content=140471181&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook&hss_channel=fbp-429763960401319

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