

An Academic Mission for the 21st Century — Academica Forum

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Last October, we argued that various changes in the post-secondary landscape have converged to create a compelling need—and opportunity—for PSE to shift toward a new paradigm of [Education & Career Development](#) (ECD). That paper generated considerable interest, and also some great discussions flowing from several keynotes and presentations (See Notes 1-3).



These discussions have reinforced several of the fundamental premises that support the shift to a new educational paradigm in PSE, including:

- There is widespread recognition within the sector and across a variety of stakeholder groups that career development is increasingly important to incoming cohorts of PSE students.
- There have been substantial increases in both the quantity and quality of career services on campuses across PSE.
- There has also been a growing interest in and development of experiential learning and work-integrated learning (WIL) across the sector.

Our discussions with various academic and student affairs leaders (See Note 4) have also helped to identify important challenges and points where further discussion and development are critical.

Going forward, it is essential that we see career development as an integral part of the academic mission of PSE

The most important challenge now is to develop the theoretical and pedagogical framework to guide institutional strategy and program development within this new paradigm. This needs to happen not only from the student development perspective, but also from the academic perspective (in terms of pedagogy and curriculum development). And to do that convincingly, we need theory-driven and evidenced-based decision-making to demonstrate how education and career development contributes to student learning, engagement, persistence, and career success.

The Academic Mission

For PSE institutions, the academic mission *is the institutional mission*. That mission provides direction for everything the institution does, as well as the goals toward which it strives and by which its success is measured. While there are several universal principles informing this mission—such as the creation of knowledge through research, knowledge sharing, and the intellectual development of students through publication and teaching—each institution defines its own unique academic mission. For this reason, we believe that meaningful change requires a discussion and reframing of the academic mission at the institutional level.

With the above guiding principles in mind, we have structured this discussion to: 1) present data about the perspectives of incoming students concerning career development; 2) examine the manner in which existing institutional structures are unwittingly limiting student development and learning; 3) provide a description of the ideal PSE environment to support student education and career development; and 4) discuss implications and priorities

going forward. We then close with a call to action.

Student Expectations for PSE

Our research (see Note 5) has shown that incoming cohorts of students come to PSE with a sophisticated set of expectations. When university applicants are asked to select among 20 possible reasons for going to PSE, the four most commonly cited reasons are:

- 1) ...as preparation to enter my chosen career (77%);
- 2) ...for personal and intellectual growth (75%);
- 3) ...increased knowledge of an academic field (73%); and
- 4) ...to explore options for my future (70%).

In the college sector, the applicants' top motivations are the same, but the order of priority is different:

- 1) ...as preparation to enter my chosen career (78%);
- 2) ...to explore options for my future (61%);
- 3) ...for personal and intellectual growth (60%);
- 4) ...to increase my knowledge and understanding of an academic field (59%).

Historically, the university sector has focused on priority #3 and, to varying degrees, #1 (in the first list). Colleges have traditionally focused on priority #1 and, to some extent, #4 (in the second list). We could write a dissertation on the history behind why universities and colleges focus on the goals they do, but our main objective here is to argue that the student motivations listed above are best viewed as a holistic set of interrelated concerns, rather than as distinct elements of a student's PSE experience. However, we have built a PSE system that treats academic and career development separately. We argue that the institutional siloing of these expectations has unwittingly limited the full potential of PSE for many students (See Notes 1-3).

Limitations of Existing Structural Approach

The limitations we discuss here are systemic, flowing directly from the fragmented approach we take to the multiple motivations students bring to PSE. The problem is not that we have set up separate service silos, as this is a necessary and practical structure. Rather, the problem is that this model enables, even forces, the participants (faculty, students, academic and career counselors) to take a fragmented approach to education and career development. Let us consider these limitations further.

Arguably, the status quo worked well enough when the main outcome provided by institutions, and sought by students and employers alike, was a degree or diploma.

But this is no longer the reality faced by students when they enter the working world. Some will argue that employers expect too much, but this evolution becomes inevitable as we close in on the reality of near-universal higher education participation. Now, employers are looking beyond a credential for graduates who have completed significantly more leg-work to refine their interests, develop sector knowledge, and articulate how their PSE learning outcomes will benefit the employer. Below, we describe the ideal state that we as a sector can work toward, but first it will be helpful to consider further the implications of education and career development.

Education and Career Development: Toward the Ideal

In an ideal world, a student takes a very deliberate and mindful approach towards their holistic development as a student, a citizen, and a worker. With regards to their postsecondary education, the deliberate aspect means that they actively consider their choices with respect to the institutions, programs, course options, work-study positions, and co-curricular opportunities available to them. The mindful aspect means that they consider these options in relation to their a) unique motivations and interests, b) talents, and c) life and career goals. When properly integrated, these experiences become education and career development.

So how does PSE help a student achieve this ideal?

The specifics in implementation will likely look different from institution to institution, so we believe that it is essential to consider the implications of this new paradigm at the broader cultural, systemic, and institutional levels. Our first job is to understand and demonstrate how education and career development fits within and advances the academic mission of PSE.

In terms of learning pedagogy, the student is exposed to knowledge that they must master, which piques their interest (or not) in a subject area. They can then explore and learn more about careers in related areas, which provides deeper understanding of the learning outcomes the student will need to achieve in order to excel in this field. At the same time, they see more direct connections between their classroom learning outcomes, the skills they are developing, and success in that career area (and ideally, a broader spectrum of possible career areas). This learning inspires broader or narrower interests and an awareness of learning outcomes that will be useful as they journey through PSE.

Metaphorically, this journey would resemble a double helix, in which the student's career development and academic learning occur and progress in tandem rather than in separate silos.

Faculty will perhaps recognize this ideal in the vital, often transformative mentor-mentee relationship that can exist between faculty supervisors and senior/graduate students with respect to research and academic career development. These relationships, at their best, embody many of the critical elements alluded to here. Yet this scenario is limited to a marginal selection of research-oriented students in the later years of their education who are typically interested in a future academic career.

An example of a school looking to break down the silos created by different service areas can be found in Queen's University, whose school of graduate studies partnered with Queen's career services in the fall of 2016 to help graduate students create "[Career Maps](#)." Graduate students are able to consult and update these career maps throughout their education journey as they explore how their learning relates to specific career paths. Yet examples like this are still limited in number.

When we look at PSE through this particular lens, the problem may appear overwhelming, since it's a tall order to ask the average 17 to 18-year-old incoming student to fulfill the ideals listed above. But regardless of such limitations and the variability associated with age, maturity, and experience, it's safe to say that all students looking to achieve our PSE ideal would need to build fluency in at least two broad categories of understanding:

1. An understanding of their personal motivations and interests, talents, and life and career goals.
2. An understanding of the PSE learning outcomes that will help them fulfill these factors.

Before we turn to a discussion about strategic priorities for the sector, it may be helpful to consider specifically what education and career development means for career-focused programs (e.g. engineering, nursing, or business) and

career-oriented institutions such as colleges or polytechnics.

When the incoming student has declared a career focus, which may be broad (as in the case of business) or more job-specific (such as nursing), the ECD model may shift away from exploring broad interests toward exploring sector interests and matching opportunities. Consider that many students enter their programs with little deliberation on the fields they are interested in, little understanding of the nature of the work their program will lead to, and a poor understanding of the variety of opportunities within their chosen and related fields. Compounding this, they may also have little understanding of their own skill areas, interests, and motivations; negligible experience with various types of employers; and little knowledge of the preparation they will need to pursue multiple, potentially non-linear careers in their working lifetime. As one can find in the case of engineering—where only one in three Ontario engineering graduates, for example, go on to work as engineers—the case of the unprepared, under-informed student is a very real one today (See Note 6). In fact, a recent [Canada-wide study](#) found that over half of recent PSE graduates would not complete the same education again if given the opportunity.

Going Forward

In our view, new and existing programs looking to fulfill the ECD approach will need to be evaluated based on their ability to fulfill the following objectives:

1) The first priority should be to work with the academic community to develop integrated programming that reflects the premise of ECD. Recent interest around [work-integrated learning](#) demonstrates a growing effort to integrate work experience and career planning directly into the academic mission. Teaching and learning thought-leader Thomas Carey has built on this trend by arguing that schools should take this integration further [by treating the PSE classroom itself as an innovative workplace](#). Further, the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario has recently pursued new research on how to [assess PSE learning outcomes](#) and their connection to workplace competencies. All of these efforts mark a growing attempt to intertwine critical reflection and career development in the academic mission, with neither one precluding the other.

2) The academic mission should place a greater emphasis on the student's exploration of personal motivations, interests, talents, and life and career goals. To be sure, there are institutions that have been moving in this direction, but on balance this aspect of career services is the least well-developed overall. Programming in this area needs to be much more deliberate and proactive. The objective here is to move students into this exploratory work as early in their PSE journey as possible. Higher ed professionals will correctly lament that it will be very difficult to engage students meaningfully in such exploration in the early years of PSE. We agree, but also believe that this difficulty is as much a product of current institutional structures and priorities as it is the state of student interest and capacity.

The approach needs to be proactive, embedded within academic credit systems, and scalable. There are examples of approaches ranging from mandatory career courses to software-based career exploration platforms such as [Paddle](#). The key is to ensure that programs are meaningfully connected to academic fields of study and supported through integrated programming offered by career services and academic advising departments. An example of exploratory ECD programming can sometimes be found at the high school level, where students are offered the opportunity to “[test drive](#)” certain careers. PSE can offer a similar, programmatic approach to helping students explore career possibilities to better foster students' education and career development.

3) Promoting a culture of education and career development will require advocates to create a ‘community of practice’ devoted to developing and implementing this new paradigm. This needs to happen not only from the student development perspective, but also from the academic perspective in terms of pedagogy and curriculum development. That is, we need theory-driven and evidenced-based decision-making to demonstrate how education and career development contributes to student learning, engagement, persistence, and career success.

A Call to Action

To support the paradigm shift discussed above, Academica Group has developed a new applied study that will help PSE institutions take a data-driven approach to the discovery and development of student ECD. The study assesses students using over 50 distinct indicators across several dimensions:

- Career focus/certainty
- Education goals
- Program fit (relationship between academic program and life/career goals, talents, interests)
- Self-knowledge/Awareness
- Awareness of and engagement with institutional interventions
- Students' awareness of and ability to articulate knowledge and skill development

Taken together, these factors can help give a holistic picture to better understand students' education and career development, *and* to assess how well new programs are or are not fostering this ideal. Measuring these types of factors will give institutions the power to:

- Profile their students' level of awareness/fulfillment with respect to their education and career development
- Target resources to improve students' ECD success
- Track students' development throughout their period of study
- Measure the success of institutional interventions (i.e. intentional program/service development and delivery)

At Academica Group, our mission is to [support and inspire higher education](#). We hope that this study will mark an important step forward in understanding students' decisions to enroll and persist in PSE, which will have major implications for participating institutions interested in evolving their own understanding and approaches to student ECD and for the sector as a whole. If you are interested in learning how this research can be customized to help advance your institutional strategic objectives, just [contact us](#) at your convenience. Or if you'd prefer to chat over the phone, give us a call at 1-866-922-8636 ext. 228.

Notes:

1. *Trends in Higher Education demand: Implications for the Academy*; Key Note: Higher Education in Transformation Symposium, Oshawa, ON. November 2 - 4, 2016.
2. *Why Student Career Development is Critical to the Future of Recruitment and Engagement*; Keynote: Strategic Enrolment Management and Marketing Forum. November 16-17, 2016.
3. *From Application and Beyond: Tracking Aspirations and Motivations for Transfer of Ontario's University and College Applicants*, Presentation with Ursula McCloy, Seneca College: PCCAT Conference, Vancouver, BC. June 22, 2016.
4. These views have been informed through helpful discussion with many higher ed professionals and we wish to acknowledge in particular for their thoughtful reviews and comments toward this paper: Greg Moran, Director of Special Projects at the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario; Jan Basso, Director of Co-operative Education & Career Development at Wilfrid Laurier University; Catherine Maybrey, career expert and owner of CM Coaching Services; Thomas Carey, Executive-in-Residence at the British Columbia Association of Institutes and Universities; Matthew Thomas, Founder of Paddle; Neil Bradford, Chair of the Political Science Department at Huron University College; Graham Donald, Founder of Brainstorm; and Rachel Dengate, StudentVu Coordinator & Research Associate at Academica Group.

5. Data for top motivations of both university and college students comes from surveys of roughly 50,000 college and university applicants collapsed across 2010-2015 [University and College Applicant Surveys \(UCASTM\)](#). If your institution is a current participant in the UCAS, feel free to [contact](#) Academica Group to see where your students fall according to these motivations. Or if you'd prefer to chat over the phone, you can reach us toll-free at 1-866-922-8636 ext. 228.
6. *Ontario Society of Professional Engineers*. "Crisis in Ontario's Engineering Labour Market: Underemployment Among Ontario's Engineering-Degree Holders" (Jan 2015). Page 2. "According to the 2011 NHS1, only about 30 per cent of employed individuals in Ontario who held a bachelor's degree or higher in engineering were working as engineers or engineering managers. Fully two-thirds of engineering-degree holders were not working in engineering at all. Many had jobs that didn't necessarily require a university degree. OSPE considers this unacceptable, and an indicator of significant underemployment of those who hold engineering degrees."

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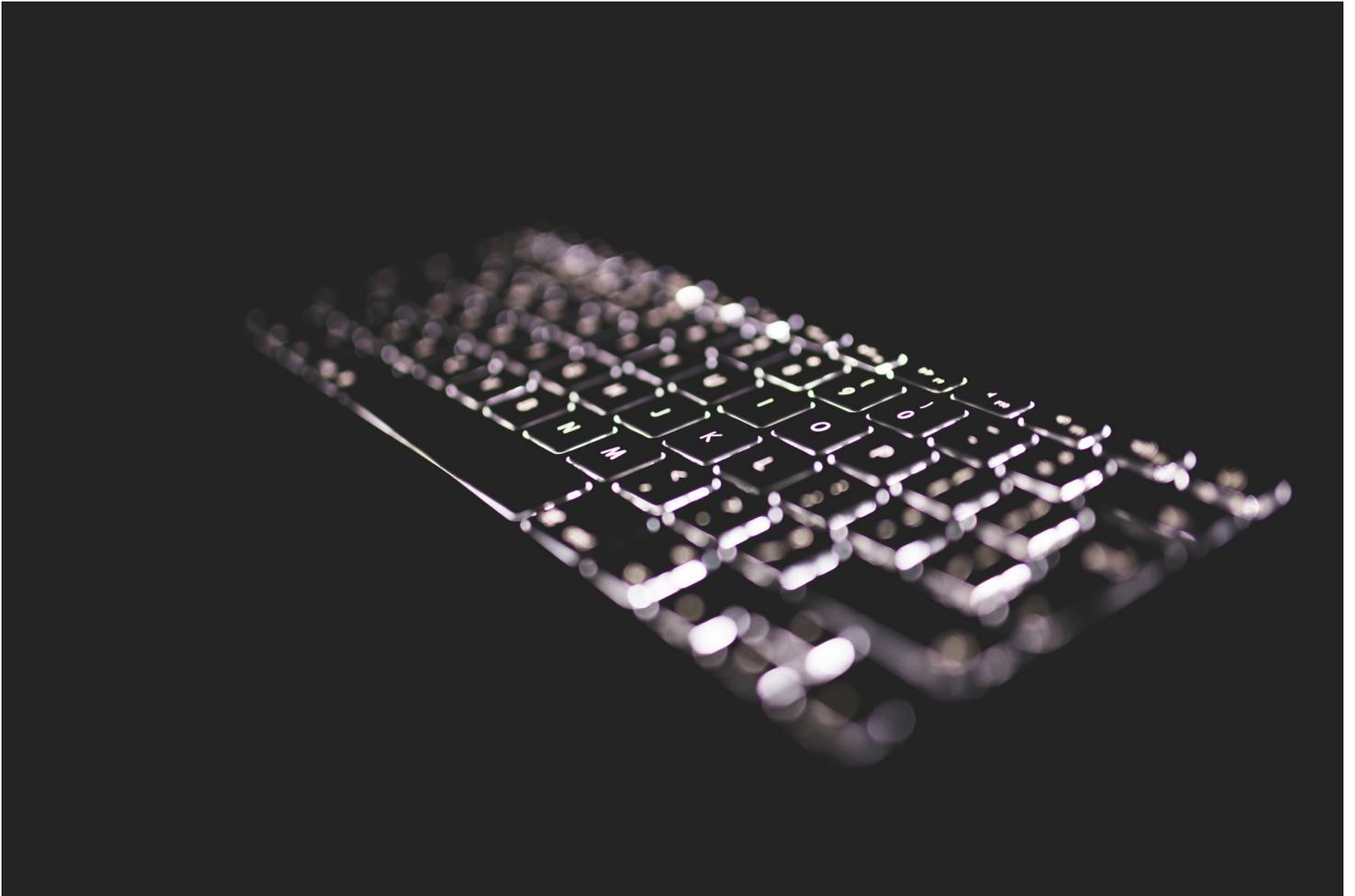
wanted to study at that school. Now, though, students face mounting pressure to make the right choice when selecting a program, and in many cases, this will lead students to choose their program first and later decide which school has the best reputation in their program area.



[Education & Career Development: An Academic Mission for the 21st Century](#)

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