



Career Services

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Let the Kids Outside to Play: The Case for Interdepartmental and Industry Collaborations for Graduate Students at CU Boulder

Introduction

The top three reasons students pursue a college education are tied directly to employment. CU Boulder graduate students are no exception and while they are some of the most talented, intelligent students seen in Career Services, something concerning stands out in advising appointments with this population. They are under-equipped to enter the nonacademic workforce in a key area--their professional network. The majority of graduate students will not be employed in academic positions and, as a powerful and well-connected university that prides itself on innovation, CU Boulder is uniquely positioned to address this deficit in its graduate student experience. This paper proposes 5 ideas for CU to consider to help its graduate students build their professional network and apply the skills gained through graduate work. Potential auxiliary benefits to both graduate students and the University are also listed.

Background

While students are expecting their college education to provide an advantage to obtaining gainful employment (Carlson, 2017), the place graduate students' traditional duties are preparing them to apply—academia--is most likely not the sector they will eventually need to mine for employment. Conservative estimates indicate that roughly half of PhDs work outside of academia upon graduation and 61% of employed STEM PhDs are working outside the university (Allum, 2014). The vast majority of masters-level students in fields where a master's is not the terminal degree will be seeking employment in areas outside academe as well.

Assistantship duties keep grad students closely tied to their departmental research and teaching (an obvious priority). However, too little room is made for collaborating with others across campus and with partners in the Boulder/Denver area. CU's graduate students are left needing a sense of belonging at the university and with a desire to connect with peers outside of their departments (Office of Planning, Budget & Analysis, 2014). There is no doubt CU grad students excel in the #2 job-readiness competency employers are seeking in today's job market: critical thinking and problem-solving (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2017). However, many may not be getting the opportunity to develop the #1 job-readiness competency: teamwork and collaboration (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2017). With employers demanding soft skills and evidence of experience, creating chances for graduate

students to engage outside their departments in applying their knowledge and honing their abilities will only benefit their professional development and increase their marketability for positions outside the academy. Such competencies would have application in academic careers as well.

Not only will collaboration lead to expanded experiences and application of knowledge, working with those outside one's department will build graduate students' professional networks. Employee referrals are the number one way people get jobs (SilkRoad Technologies, 2017). In addition to possibly fast-tracking application materials to hiring managers, one's professional network is a place a graduate student can learn about employment opportunities not widely advertised to the public (Galenianos, 2012). CU's graduate students are working hard for the university; there are tangible and effective ways in which they can be shown support that will take seriously their primary goals for being here.

Solutions for Consideration

Build collaboration with employers or graduate students from other departments into all grad students' academic process

Any student support department knows well that if opportunities are not considered a core element of a student's program, the majority do not take advantage of the opportunity. The chance to collaborate with other departments or organizations must be built into their CU experience.

Option 1) Include a course employing a capstone or experiential learning model that partners with sectors outside academia. CU already has several programs making use of such models. Individual departments or a centralized office administering such projects can learn from programs already established and tailor to the needs of various fields/departments.

Option 2) Include collaboration activities/employer partnership projects as a mandatory graduation requirement outside of coursework. If these projects are not included as coursework, the key is to make sure time is allocated within the program to complete this project. Students cannot be required to pursue ventures they are not given time for. Perhaps departments can build space into graduate student academic programs and assistantship duties to allow for project completion and the Graduate School (or another centralized department) can be given resources and staffing to provide administration and mentoring for projects.

Provide ways to connect students with employers to help with time-limited, concrete projects

CU graduate students need a well-marketed, centralized place to learn about ways they can get involved in applying their skills outside the classroom and labs.

Option 1) Create an online hub for posting opportunities for gig-like projects needing graduate student skillsets (#CUGradGigs)

An option like this would need a large-scale marketing push to the metro area to solicit projects plus training for employers/organizations on how to use the system. A particular season in which projects were accepted and a limited time for completion of the projects could be identified. Resources would need to be provided to the department housing the software for administration and training as well as staffing to oversee the program.

Option 2) Host an event for companies and organizations to pitch current problems they have to a large, interdisciplinary group of graduate students.

Students would gather with employers at roundtables after presentations (students choose where they could be of service) to discuss processes and ideas for finding solutions. Follow-up meetings would then be arranged by participants. Guidelines for partnerships would need to be written by university administration and provided to employers upon application to the event.

Option 3) Broker one-year large-scale partnerships with cities in the metro area to solve an issue they are facing or design a new process

The project would be arranged at the university level and administration would task classes in every school as well as student groups and, perhaps, grad student workers/grad interns in Student Affairs departments to address various elements of the project. A plan would then be provided to the city partner late in spring semester. The University of Oregon has such a program called Sustainable Cities Initiative and they hold a conference each spring to teach universities how to set up these programs (Carlson, 2017).

Potential Additional Benefits to Graduate Students and CU Boulder

For Students:

- Expanded portfolio of work for resume or CV
- Increased sense of belonging at CU Boulder through connections with other students in various programs
- Opportunity for multiple mentors offering diverse feedback and interaction
- Exposure to varying mindsets around career, which may foster creativity in career path

For CU Boulder:

- Short-term projects can provide crucial insight into developing long-term collaborations with industry partners (Kogut, 2000)
- Breaking down of departmental silos (Carlson, 2017)
- Strengthened alumni engagement

Conclusion

The graduate students of CU Boulder are, indeed, inspiring and talented individuals. Their skill sets are vast and useful in all sectors. However, they need exposure to creative application and larger networks to build confidence in the opportunities they will find after, and perhaps through, their graduate work. With 37-53% of job openings filled by employee referrals (Galenianos, 2012), graduate students need to be

interacting outside of their departments. CU Boulder has an opportunity to provide needed connection for their graduate students while at the same time strengthening the University's ties with the Boulder/Denver community.

Respectfully submitted by Alaina Nickerson, Assistant Director for Graduate Students, Career Services

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