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# Promoting Successful College-to-Workplace Transitions: Examples from Bethel University

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**ABSTRACT:** Life is filled with transitions. One of the toughest is from college to the workplace. Many graduates experience culture shock as they move from the comfort of a Christian college to the reality of the business world. This paper will look at the context and the challenges for workplace transition. It will then review the practices used at one Christian university that have shown effective in preparing students for employment along with theories currently in development to improve workplace transition.

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## INTRODUCTION

Something happens when a graduate walks across a stage to receive a diploma. There is excitement, pride in achieving a major accomplishment, a sense of satisfaction, and gratitude. Then fear and discomfort set in. Commencement catapults the graduate from a reasonably comfortable environment to a new unknown. Most graduates went through a similar transition from high school to college, but this time the “real world” looms ahead. Paul Kaponya (1990) has coined the phrase “student shock syndrome” to describe the stress that occurs during the transition from graduation into the workplace. The syndrome is widely accepted among psychological circles as a stress disorder suffered by students

struggling through the transition (Kaponya, 1990).

College students grow in confidence, academic ability, and interpersonal communication skills during the college years. This is the time in life where adolescents transform into young adults and launch into the work world. According to Alexandra Levit (2009), the nationally known author specializing in young adult work issues, the transition into the workplace can feel like being whisked away in a space ship and landing on another planet. Many graduates are caught off guard by the reality of the workplace demands and struggle with many things they should have been better prepared to experience (Murphy, Blustein, Bohlig, and Platt, 2010). Many have a hard time adjusting to the structure and rules of a professional job, learning how to handle money and finances, figuring out

what the boss and company expectations are, and building new interpersonal relationships (Smith, 2006).

As business professors, we have an opportunity and responsibility to ensure our graduates are ready for the work world. This paper will review the context and challenges of workplace transition, provide examples of what one university is currently doing to aid student transition, and offer a sneak peek into our future by highlighting three programs currently in the planning stage to build graduates' competence in workplace transition.

### LITERATURE REVIEW: TRANSITIONS

Berry's theory of acculturation is useful for understanding transitions between cultures (1997, 2002, 2005). Although originally developed to help understand perspectives through immigration, it can provide insight into any cultural transition. Berry argues that people react one of four ways when confronted with joining a new culture, such as leaving a Christian-college environment and entering a secular workplace. First, some respond by separation. They place a strong value on their original culture and maintain it exclusively throughout transition. They would remain separated from the work culture by finding other Christians and socializing and interacting exclusively with them. The second response is assimilation. Here the graduate turns completely to the new work culture, shedding their original cultural distinctiveness to look like those around them. The third response is integration. In this case, the graduates would seek to blend their original culture and their new work culture, valuing each one of them independently. The final response is marginalization. In this case the graduates become overwhelmed with the transition or are excluded or discriminated against in the new workplace. They then dislike both their original culture and their new culture, and often find themselves isolated and disenfranchised. Marginalization does not make for successful workplace transition. The challenge is to enable students to assimilate into their new organizational culture, maintaining their own sense of values and beliefs and yet adjusting to the expectations of the workplace.

As the workplace moves toward a global environment, it is critical that students have a well-grounded understanding of the multicultural world in which they will be working. A variety of studies across time and disciplines have revealed that intentional classroom intervention could be effective in developing moral reasoning and ethical decision making (Welton, 2009). Studies reveal that multicultural competence can also be improved

through focused and well-developed curriculum and experiential learning opportunities (Cannon, 2008). Too often, Christian colleges and universities fail to reflect the realities of the diverse population students will face in the workplace (Yancey, 2010). Developmental theories recognize the influence of other people in the growth and development of a young person. Early psychosocial theories such as Chickering's (1978) seven vectors of development presuppose interactions with formative influences. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) state that students' interpersonal interactions with faculty manifest themselves in changes in intellectual outcomes, attitudes, values, and psychosocial characteristics.

### LITERATURE REVIEW: TRANSITION SUPPORT TOOLS

Internships have long been recognized as important contributions to the development of business professionals and their transition to the workplace (Rothman, 2007). In a longitudinal study of intern perceptions, Cook, Parker, and Pettijohn (2004) found students rate internships as valuable in helping them in their careers including relating classroom theories to the workplace, gaining confidence in finding a job after graduation, helping them mature as individuals, and getting along better with others in work situations. A study by Caroline D'Abate (2010) suggests that making multiple developmental interactions, including internships, mentoring, and team-based projects part of a business curriculum better prepare students for the working world. The findings by Callanan and Benzing (2004) indicate significant improvement in the ability to secure a job for students who had completed an internship. Their study indicated students were 4.4 times more likely to secure a job than non-internship counterparts. Other studies (Coco, 2000; Knouse, Tanner, Harris, 1998) have shown similar results including more job offers and higher salaries.

Student portfolios demonstrate fulfillment of curriculum learning objectives. Dating back to the 1960's (Michaelson & Mandell, 2004) portfolio use has increased with the advent of electronic and Web 2.0 tools. E-tools have increased the ease of creating and accessing portfolios. While only 16 percent of employer's currently use e-portfolios in the recruiting and selecting process, 56 percent indicate they plan to utilize them more in the future (Ward & Moser, 2008).

## CONTEXT OF WORKPLACE TRANSITION

Understanding the operational context and the developmental stages of our students aids us in preparing them for transition. The view of adolescence has changed drastically in the past 150 years. In the 1800s, children progressed from childhood to adulthood with minimal transition between the two. When girls and boys reached maturity, they were expected to work, marry, and start a family. In the early 1900s, that started to change when school and labor reform laws were passed (for example, the Keating-Owen Law of 1916, the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1934, and the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938). At that point children were expected to stay in school through high school, which extended childhood. Although the 16-18 year olds were physically mature, they were typically not expected to take on adult responsibilities while still in high school. This is when the term “teenager” came into vogue, which Harris & Harris define as “a young person with most of the desires and abilities of an adult but few of the expectations or responsibilities” (2002, pp. 34-35).

As the demand for continued education soared, the expectations of adulthood were prolonged yet again. However, the word teenager did not fit with the 20 something group, so another new word was created: adolescence (Harris & Harris, 2002). Adolescence now describes the years from older teenager through the young 20s in which people are still growing up and slowly adding adult responsibilities. Our culture has now turned growing up into a longer and gradual process. This time of gradual maturing continues through college and into the workplace and provides the context for studying transition between the two.

Many graduates are slightly disillusioned to find that the workplace is not as welcoming to friendships as expected. Many new graduates report that the workplace can be a lonely environment compared to college (Wright and Lopes, 2009; Murphy, Blustein, Bohlig, and Platt, 2010). According to a MonsterTRAK survey done in 2006, 48 percent of students move back home after graduation. That number tends to go up in a poor economy (Pollack, 2007). This can accentuate emotional turmoil for the graduate who just spent four years working on transitioning to adulthood and now feels less independent. The problem surfaces when students are not ready to deal with these transitional issues. Therefore, awareness is a key factor to dealing effectively with the transition. Students need to be better prepared, to make adult choices for the changes and challenges that will arise as they enter the workplace.

## CHALLENGES OF WORKPLACE TRANSITION

We now turn to two significant challenges to workplace transition. First, for successful transition, graduates must learn how to adapt to a new organizational culture which might be significantly different from the culture of their college. Second, new graduates must understand how the expectations of the workplace are different from typical expectations at college.

The first challenge for workplace transition grows out of organizational cultural differences. Every organization has its own unique culture (Fullan, 2007). Most students pick a university based on the culture they experience during a campus visit. Students look for programs and activities that interest them and observe the overall demeanor of the people in the environment. Often unconsciously, they observe the four traits of any organizational culture: involvement, consistency, adaptability, and mission (Denison & Mishra, 1995). Students typically pick a college, especially a Christian-college, because its culture is similar to their own history. After enrollment, students begin to get involved with campus activities, enjoy the consistency of the social norms, learn to adapt through college systems, and feel university pride at being part of something larger than self. The transition from college to work can be more difficult than the transition from high school to college. Colleges typically have a stronger support system for the transition, including residence assistants, academic advisors, campus ministries, and counseling centers.

The second challenge is understanding workplace expectations and how they differ from college. College can be a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week experience. There is always a paper to write, research to conduct, or a textbook to read, but there is security in understanding expectations and required outcomes and flexibility in planning and scheduling projects and personal time. Students learn to ask professors questions and submit work that will earn the grade they aspire to reach. Once a student is acclimated to the college environment, it becomes much easier to succeed; they know how to read a syllabus, work with various personalities of professors, and complete assignments by due dates. While those are all transferable skills to the workplace, the work environment is different from the college environment and many students are not ready for the transition.

Students often get their first exposure to the professional work environment through an internship. Most students comment about the different culture and work flow of the workplace. Students discover that many managers expect the work to get done, period. During college if a student has an issue with a deadline, they try to

negotiate with the professor or simply take a lower grade. In the workplace, not completing the job has far-reaching consequences. The stakes are much higher in the workplace. Missing a deadline could result in shutting down a production line, losing a large client, or losing a job. In college the student works for a grade; in the workplace the employee is working to keep a job (Pollak, 2007).

Instructions in the workplace tend to be more vague than in the classroom. Although many employers offer new employee orientation, it still takes time to acclimate to the new environment. Most employers require a new employee to get up and running very quickly. In college classes, the professor normally spends a great deal of time explaining the course and project requirements. If students are confused, they have their fellow students, teaching assistants, and the instructor to clarify requirements. Most employers do not go into the same type of detailed requirements for a work project. The new employee must determine how to complete the project without knowing all of the detailed steps (Coplin, 2007).

Students need to learn how to successfully transition from the university to work, understand the dynamics of making adult decisions, and be prepared to deal with the reality of workplace demands. The job of academia is to help students through the transition by giving the students experiences that will develop character, spiritual growth, and critical thinking capabilities.

### **CURRENT PROGRAMS FOR TRANSITION**

We now turn from the theoretical to the practical. The following sections will highlight programs at one particular school, the Department of Business and Economics at Bethel University in suburban St. Paul, Minn. At Bethel, the Department of Business and Economics is part of the College of Arts and Sciences and services the traditional residence college. Most students are between 18 and 22 years of age and have not yet held a full-time job. There are approximately 450 students in the department, 13 full-time faculty members, and two staff positions. The first section will focus on current programs that have proven valuable in aiding graduate workplace transition; the second will highlight transition-focused programs in consideration for future implementation.

The department's current efforts toward facilitating transition are both formal and informal. Informally, the department places value on building faculty-student relationships. The majority of faculty members have workplace experience prior to joining academia and frequently

relay their own experiences to students. These experiences are often brought into the classroom but at other times the classroom is brought into industry. One example is a faculty member who teaches proper business attire. After teaching the principles, the professor takes the entire class out to shop for appropriate business attire. In a business writing course, faculty members move beyond writing to communications. In this class, they spend time learning about business meals and practice what they have learned by actually sharing a meal together.

Additionally, curriculum goals emphasize authentic learning experiences. For example, classes such as strategic management, auditing, compensation, and managerial finance include case studies or simulations to increase the transfer of learning from the classroom to the workplace. Other classes combine curricular goals with more direct hands-on experience. For example, a marketing seminar requires a group project where students consult with an external business to satisfy their marketing needs. An entrepreneurship strategies and tools course includes a group project where students bring an actual product to market and produce a profit. A federal income tax class provides opportunities for students to volunteer through a local non-profit to prepare tax returns for low-income wage earners. These experiences contribute greatly to successful workplace transition. While many faculty and courses do provide intentional learning to aid student transition to the workplace, these activities are not currently integrated as curriculum level objectives. The opportunities that are available department wide, regardless of a particular student's curriculum choices or career goals, are internships, alumni interactions, and a senior banquet.

Although the business major at Bethel has had an internship option almost from its inception, the department was disappointed by how few students were choosing to complete an internship for credit. The department now requires internships for all students. The department based its decision on anecdotal evidence relating to the success rates of students completing internships and their success in finding jobs. They anticipated internships would provide students with experience necessary to be marketable and successful in their chosen field. It is not, however, standard for the field. Weible's (2010) survey of 180 Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) accredited programs showed that although 94 percent of schools offered internships, only 16.8 percent actually required them.

We believed that our internship model would need to change to be able to successfully monitor and mentor the increase in internships. In school year 1999-2000, 36 students did voluntary internships for credit. In school

year 2009-10, 129 students did internships for credit, an increase of more than 250 percent from a decade before. In 2004 the course was moved to an online model using the Blackboard platform. Students now submit a number of assignments and participate in discussions boards in order to fulfill the course requirements. These assignments are structured to help students transition to their first jobs by being reflective and analytical about their internship experiences (Clark, 2003). There are four core assignments that are similar in structure. Each assignment requires the student to answer four questions with reflective analysis on their experiences. At the beginning of the semester, the questions are general in focus (describe your job, describe your organization, how did you get the job, what skills do you want to develop). Assignments two through four become increasingly analytical and increasingly behavioral. The behavioral aspects of the questions are designed to mimic behavior-description questions that are frequently asked in interviews, thereby preparing students for the job search as well as the transition.

Another key part of the online course is discussion-board postings. While the assignments are student-to-teacher in emphasis, the discussion boards are a peer-to-peer environment. During these postings, students engage with issues that arise at their worksites, sharing best practices, looking for advice, and learning from each others' good and bad experiences.

The research previously cited indicates internship experiences help students get jobs. However, for the experience to truly prepare students to transition into those jobs, faculty feedback is key. The faculty member provides insight and assistance to the student, helping them navigate the internship successfully. In turn, students are better prepared to take on their first year post graduation.

Secondly, one-on-one or small-group interaction with alumni is a successful way to facilitate transition to the workplace. There are two predominant ways we have made that happen.

Our department sponsors a networking tent at our school's homecoming football game. We encourage departmental alums to visit with us at the tent by offering free snacks and door prizes. Although alums from all years stop by, we find it to be especially popular with new alumni who have just entered the workforce. A second way we facilitate interaction with alumni is through events or workshops that we or our student association host, including workshops on resume and interview skills, opportunities to speed network, guest speakers, and visits to local employers. Each of these activities gives the students exposure to different perspectives of the workplace and clarifies

workplace expectations and norms through descriptions of culture, job requirements, struggles, and accomplishments. By interacting with alumni either on campus or at their companies, students begin to envision their professional lives in advance, reducing the threat level once they graduate. One of our student groups focuses on bringing in alumni to talk specifically about how they integrate faith into the workplace and the impact of faith on their decision-making and leadership styles.

The third initiative designed to facilitate successful workplace transition is our senior banquet, held just a few days before graduation. The purpose of the banquet is three-fold: to bring closure to the college experience and allow the department to celebrate the students' successes, encourage students to look ahead to their careers, and provide a time to offer a blessing upon the students, in essence anointing them for a vocation in service to God's kingdom and for God's purposes.

### PROPOSED PROGRAMS FOR TRANSITION

Although the department has been pleased with the results of our internships, alumni interactions, and senior banquets, we are always looking for additional opportunities to help our students grow and develop, enabling a smoother transition to the workplace. Three new initiatives are currently being developed. These include the use of an electronic portfolio, strategic connections with external partnerships, and the implementation of an integrated curriculum stressing moral development and reasoning.

Traditional academic assessment standards often focus on grading metrics and rubrics targeting narrow, specific outcomes. While those metrics are a critical component of assessing student performance, their design fails to assess development of a student's competencies beyond the classroom.

There is a significant and growing body of academic and organizational research about electronic portfolios. We have used many sources to help form our portfolio initiative, including Heinrich, Bhattacharya, and Rayudu's (2007) study of ePortfolios' (their terminology) value for building lifelong learning; Bollinger and Shepherd's (2010) discussion of their integration of portfolios into an online course; Wang's (2009) study of using electronic portfolios to increase student collaboration; Fitch, Peet, Reed, and Tolman's (2008) discussion of how the University of Michigan integrated portfolios into assessment of curriculum and student learning; and examples of portfolio implementation written by Woelfel, Murray,



and Page (2010) from The Citadel School of Education; and Wilhelm, Puckett, Beisser, Wishart, Merideth, and Sivakumaran's (2006) review from three different schools including Arizona State University, Drake University, and the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. These articles, along with conference presentations on the topic, are informing our program development and increasing our confidence in successful deployment. A likely future extension of this project will be to use portfolios in institutional assessment and departmental accreditation, as portfolios are gaining attention from accreditation bodies such as the Higher Learning Commission (Basken, 2008).

Employers typically have a list of expectations of college graduates entering the workforce. The list includes the ability to communicate verbally and in writing, possession of an established work ethic, knowledge of quantitative tools, and the ability to work effectively with others, influence people, ask and answer the right questions, and solve problems (Coplin, 2007). Most academic programs have required projects involving writing and oral presentations, team work, and critical-thinking skills. However, these skills should also be developed outside of the classroom.

When entering the workforce, graduates must demonstrate life-wide competencies. In order to assist students in presenting those competencies, we propose the implementation of an electronic portfolio approach. An electronic portfolio is a collection of a student's accomplishments in a web-based multimedia format. Within an academic structure, students create an online profile for displaying their achievements and artifacts including their résumé and examples of work projects, work records, course activities, and any relevant credentialing. We are not alone in exploring an electronic portfolio. Our education department has used electronic portfolios for years as a way for students to produce exceptional credentialing packets for assessment and employment, and their advice has been invaluable.

Portfolios are not a new concept for business professionals either. They have long been a way to represent yourself and your abilities to work-related audiences. What is new with an electronic portfolio is not the objective, but rather the avenue. When published electronically, the portfolio can include multi-media and full color pieces that can be replicated and distributed very inexpensively. Implementing an electronic portfolio would enable students to begin their professional development while still a student, facilitating a more gradual transition and smoother first year of work.

We envision the use of an electronic portfolio will serve as a means to accomplish three objectives. Achieving these objectives will help students feel more confident and make for a smoother transition to the workplace:

1. Demonstrate key competencies beyond academic prowess.
2. Provide an opportunity for student self-reflection.
3. Identify deficiencies and determine an action plan to overcome them.

Students would be introduced to electronic portfolios at welcome week during fall semester. This week pulls together a wide range of career activities throughout the department. The new portfolio would complement these activities. Through orientation to the "empty canvas" of their respective portfolios, students become intentional about making strategic decisions for demonstrating their competencies and filling their portfolios.

Through the reflection process of the electronic portfolio, students contemplate their unique skills, abilities, and gifting. Many faculty and institutions finding electronic portfolios "can breathe new life into the academic-advising process and help students reflect on how their disparate activities become a well-rounded education" (Young, 2002, P3). Incorporating the use of Strengths Finders results discovered during freshmen orientation classes, students can review their personality types, skills, and areas of potential giftedness as they plot individual maps toward graduation and entry into the workplace. As such, use of the portfolio is not meant as a simple "check list" for a graduation requirement but rather as a tool to be used for strategic decision-making.

A student's portfolio will be monitored and reviewed in certain core courses, during student registration and advisor meetings, and with the internship and placement coordinator. A final analysis would be completed as a component of the degree evaluation process during the student's senior year in preparation for graduation. By using a template designed around key competencies, the students will be empowered to prepare themselves for transition to the workforce through focused, intentional actions. Ultimately, the portfolio template provides measurable outcomes driven by the curriculum review and thus a "road map" for students to complete during their college years to demonstrate expertise. Through personal reflection, students identify gaps in their individual e-folio proficiencies and undertake intentional and strategic decisions to close those gaps.

Our second major initiative is the development of strategic external partnerships. We believe partnerships with resources beyond the university would help students face the challenges of transitioning to the workplace. Samples of the partnerships we are developing, to assist in workplace transition, are highlighted below.

Intentional integration with the university's alumni network to provide:

- Advisory board to identify strengths and weaknesses in our curriculum, student experience, and general readiness for transition to the workplace.
- Mentorship program to provide one-on-one opportunities for students to develop workplace skills.
- Employer networks of alumni within strategic employers to facilitate integration of new employees upon graduation.

We are also engaged in developing a model with a national Christian organization to integrate Christian students into the secular workplace through periodic seminars, mentoring opportunities, and networking events. This strategic partnership will provide a win-win for both organizations. The university and its students will gain exposure to the workplace through small group interaction while the organization's membership will have the chance to hone their coaching skills. In addition, a regional Christian non-profit organization, known and respected for its commitment to serving under-privileged communities, has offered to partner with the university to provide service and leadership opportunities for our students. We believe these strategic partnerships will better engage students with the world outside our campus perimeter.

Our third initiative is a large-scale curriculum review with an eye toward integrating intentional opportunities to engage students in developing their ethical decision-making and moral-reasoning skills. Our goal is to ensure our entire curriculum intentionally and strategically develops graduates to not only have a solid biblical foundation for decision-making but also a framework that acknowledges the tension that exists when making difficult decisions in the secular business world.

The business field has come under significant scrutiny over the last decade for lapses of ethical behavior. The Enron fiasco, the implosion of Wall Street, and the deepest recession since the Great Depression has been laid at the feet of the business world. As a Christian university whose mission is to educate and prepare students for being salt and light in the business world, we must provide a foundation for our students to identify and manage the ethical dilemmas in the business world. The collegiate-level academic experience should transform students in a way that they are able to connect their character education with an understanding of their role in society (Glanzer, 2010). This connection should provide the foundation and confidence to support ethical decision making in the workplace. Therefore, curriculum and experiences need to be developed to provide students the framework by which to gain

confidence and interpersonal skills to allow them to be effective and productive teammates with their co-workers. We hope, through a variety of service and experiential learning opportunities, to provide students with the skills to navigate the ever-changing global economic, social, and spiritual environment.

## CONCLUSION

Life is filled with transitions and graduating from college and entering the workplace is one of the biggest. Collegiate academic departments have the ability to strategically provide programs and opportunities to help facilitate this transition. Internships, e-portfolios, strategic partnerships, and enhanced curriculum can each improve the chances for student success in that transition. Upon founding our school in 1871, Bethel's first president, John Alexis Edgren, gave the following charge: "Measure our performance by what God accomplishes through our graduates after they have been prepared by Bethel to go out into the world to serve." It is our hope as a department that we have prepared our graduates to serve faithfully in the workplace. We are honored if any measure of their success reflects back on us.

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