IN SEARCH OF VOCATION: APPLYING MARKETING PRINCIPLES IN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

The paper details a self-marketing and personal branding project implemented in a four-year professional development program for business students at a northwestern university. The program applies marketing principles to emphasize the importance of developing a personal brand for all business students, regardless of their specific area of study. The paper presents and examines the personal branding project in terms of its learning objectives, project design, effective activities, and inherent challenges.

The process of developing and writing a personal marketing plan teaches students valuable professional skills such as goal setting, self-assessment, career research, networking, interviewing, professional behavior, effective communication, and the importance of community and service. The building of these skills produces additional benefits such as greater self-confidence, clarity of purpose, and sense of direction.
The personal marketing plan is designed to accomplish more than the short-term goals of finding a job or an internship after graduation. The ultimate goal of the personal marketing plan is to seek and obtain a professional career path that allows people to use their interests and talents every day. As such the plan is a living document that constantly changes and adapts to its author's new realities while allowing him or her to maintain focus and mental clarity.

Students set short-term, intermediate, and long-term goals for various areas of one's life such as career, family, lifestyle, etc. This process often reveals situations in which goals may be incompatible with one another, therefore requiring a deeper reflection and evaluation of one's values and priorities. The Appendix to the paper includes a copy of the specific goal setting exercise used in this program. Students are taught to evaluate a potential budget required for their professional development. This is an important activity because it requires students to consider the total costs of their professional development and plan accordingly.

Students research and evaluate potential careers by identifying and interviewing professionals in desired fields. In addition, they complete job shadows and write personal reflections of the experience. This process often results in a re-evaluation of one's ideal careers. Once desired careers are better identified, students seek and obtain an internship experience where one's skills and compatibility are further tested and evaluated.

Students conduct a personal SWOT analysis in which they must think strategically about their vocational development by reflecting on their capabilities and limitations to determine which of the selected career paths is the best fit. In addition, students reflect upon their personal and professional weaknesses and develop a specific action plan to handle them. The SWOT analysis also prepares students for interviews by revealing a clear sense of one's values and skills, which can then be translated into specific benefits for potential employers. Through this in-depth self-reflection, students are able to develop a strong brand statement that clearly communicates their value and differentiates them from their peers. Students use this brand strategy when participating in the various networking activities affiliated with this project, one of which includes developing a LinkedIn profile to connect with personal and professional contacts and to identify prospective contacts within desired career fields. In addition, students create a variety of effective promotional materials such as resumes, sample cover and thank you letters, business cards, and responses to common interview questions.
The paper addresses the challenges encountered in a program such as this one based on the various maturity levels and desires of students, as well as the school-wide culture change required for implementation. Further activity ideas and resource recommendations accompany the paper in order to support successful implementation of this program.