

## **The Power of Partnerships: Exploring the Relationship between Campus Career Centers and Political Science Departments**

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*Given the growing emphasis on career preparation in higher education, career centers play important roles on today's college campuses. The literature has focused on the reasons students use career services, but it has not addressed the vital linkage between career centers and academic departments. Using a survey of 279 political science department chairs, this study explores the factors that best explain the strength of the relationship between political science departments and campus career centers. After investigating a host of characteristics, we show that close ties between career centers and departments are more likely at smaller colleges, in departments where professors advise students (as opposed to departments with only professional advisors), and in departments that incorporate career preparation into the curriculum. We conclude with recommendations for establishing a more collaborative partnership between career centers and political science departments.*

**Keywords** advising, career preparation, collaboration

Higher education is facing increasing pressure to be “relevant” and career focused (Zernike 2010). This shift is driven by many factors including the weak economy and the meteoric rise in the cost of a college education. In response, colleges and universities have created new and more applied majors, particularly in business and health areas (Wilson 2009), and many academic programs have been eliminated or have undergone considerable budget cuts (Glenn and Schmidt 2010; Wilson 2009). The shifting landscape is particularly prevalent in the liberal arts and sciences. Not surprisingly, these disciplines, including political science, face increasing calls to address the career implications of these degrees from both on and off campus (Knotts 2002).

With this new focus on undergraduate career preparation, career centers can play increasingly important roles on college campuses, and effective collaboration with academic departments is essential. In particular, liberal arts students “must be ready

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to articulate their abilities and transferable skills and relate them to the duties and tasks they would assume in the organization” (Nell 2003, 190). Collaboration between faculty and career centers can help overcome this “marketing deficit,” since faculty alone often lack the ability to articulate employer values and to teach students how to package their skills and abilities to employers (Nell 2003, 190). Cooperation between faculty, advisors, and others can even create a “multiplier effect” to maximize career development (Rayman 1999, 179). Despite the importance of this partnership, we know surprisingly little about the conditions that underlie collaboration between academic departments and career centers.

### **The Importance of Career Centers**

Sampson (1999, 245) notes that career centers “deliver resources and services to individuals seeking assistance with career, educational, training, and employment decision making.” In fact, career centers coordinate a range of activities including personality inventories, resume and job interview preparation, internships, and career fairs (Student Affairs Leadership Council 2012).

What do we know about career centers? A number of studies have focused on the students’ awareness of and reasons for using campus career services. Fouad et al. (2006), for example, discovered a considerable gap between the percentage of students who were aware of career services versus the percentage of students who used career services. In this study, 69% of respondents were aware of the career fair, but only 15% of respondents actually took advantage of this service (Fouad et al. 2006). Studies have also addressed how individuals evaluate campus services overall—discovering that female and white students provided more favorable ratings (Junn et al. 1996).

### **The Critical Role of Faculty**

Missing from this work is an examination of the relationship between academic departments and career centers, even though widely accepted best-practice standards for career services, according to the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, are prefaced with a declaration that productive and collaborative relationships with faculty “have never been more important” (Council for Advancement of Standards in Higher Education 2010, 4). Moreover, a Student Affairs Leadership Council report describes career services as a “critical nexus” that is “uniquely positioned to connect alumni, faculty, employers, and students” (Student Affairs Leadership Council 2012, 17). In addition to the advising function, some studies support an increasing trend toward deeper and more diverse partnerships between academic departments and career centers that feature e-Portfolios, involvement in teaching, integrating academic, co-curricular, and career goals, assessing learning outcomes, and even program evaluation and accreditation (Johnson and Rayman 2007).

Noting the important role of faculty in student development, Jaye Roseborough, a career services professional at Middlebury College, created a program entitled Career Directions to improve the relationship between her office and Middlebury faculty (National Association of Colleges and Employers 2009). In creating this program, Roseborough acknowledged that corporate recruiters have recognized the important role professors play in helping identify the very best students (Cunningham 2010). Indeed, Career Directions was created “based on her observation that students give a great deal more credence to information/programs endorsed by faculty, and that the

school's liberal arts faculty are, for the most part, disinterested in jobs and careers" (National Association of Colleges and Employers 2009 , Paragraph 2). In the strongest programs, faculty and student affairs staff work together in a team approach, and both participate in advisor development and training activities (McCalla-Wriggins 2003).

A program like Career Directions can help overcome the low status that faculty members often assign advising duties. Many faculty members do not believe that advising carries a great deal of weight in tenure decisions; thus, they are not as invested in the advising process as they are in teaching, research, and other forms of service (Dillon and Fisher 2000). While this perception may prove a reality at many larger research-oriented institutions, the advising process plays a much more significant role in tenure decisions at universities that do not award doctoral degrees. At these types of schools, faculty who demonstrate "an interest in advising" actually enhance their chances of being awarded tenure (Marshall and Rothgeb 2011). Even at schools in which advising duties do not factor into tenure decision making, faculty still maintain investment in the advising process, and they recognize the importance of advising to the student experience. Accordingly, they prioritize providing different types of advice within their assigned duties. The literature suggests, for instance, that faculty members prioritize both providing accurate information and helping students integrate their career goals with the courses offered within the major. In contrast, however, faculty advisors feel less of a responsibility to help students integrate their career goals with general education class options and/or co-curricular activities (Allen and Smith 2008).

The literature further posits that, in general, there are three models of academic advising within university communities. First, the "decentralized" advising model has faculty and staff provide advising to students from within their academic departments with little to no involvement of outside offices, such as career centers. In contrast, the "centralized" model has all academic advising taking place within one administrative office, such as an advising center, and faculty are removed from the equation. Finally, the shared model focuses on advising collaboration between an administrative office and departmental faculty advisors. Increasingly, career advisors are broadening their roles to become "flexible generalists" (Kretovics, Honaker, and Kraning 1999, 83) who are able to perform more than one function, making them more useful to departments by providing diverse assistance through classroom presentations, helping faculty and students access and utilize current career assistance technology, helping students research careers, aiding in the creation of resumes and application materials, and serving as a resource for internships and in the advising process. Evidence suggests that the most successful advising programs utilize this "shared" model because it "is almost impossible for one advisor to be all things to all students" (King 2003, 140).

Given the type and range of services provided by career centers and the critical role of faculty in career development, effective collaboration between faculty and career centers is crucial. As a result, this study is guided by a basic research question:

RQ: What factors best explain the strength of a relationship between political science departments and campus career centers?

Using a survey of political science department chairs, we examine this question in more detail below and provide suggestions for both professional staff in career centers and faculty in departments about ways that this critical relationship can be improved.

**Table 1.** Description of variables

Variable	<i>n</i>	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Relationship with Career Center	263	1.96	0.855	1	4
Urban/Suburban	280	0.539	0.499	0	1
Small College	280	0.282	0.451	0	1
Public College	280	0.489	0.501	0	1
SAT Score	279	1121	125	815	1495
Faculty Do Academic Advising	264	0.837	0.370	0	1
Internship Required in Major	267	0.105	0.307	0	1
Resume Required in Major	266	0.124	0.330	0	1
Partial Career Class in Major	248	0.137	0.345	0	1

## Data and Methods

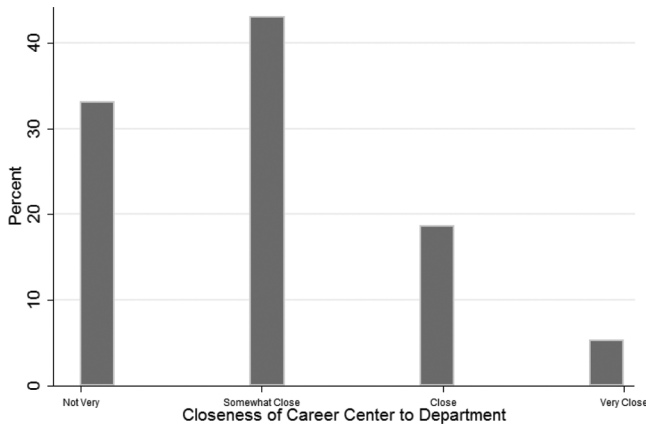
To explore these issues, we rely on a December 2010 Web-based survey of political science department chairs. The survey included 24 questions focused predominantly on the department's career preparation activities: 20 questions were closed ended and four were open ended. Our dataset also included college characteristics obtained from College Results Online (The Education Trust 2011).

Rather than select a sample of chairs, the survey was sent to all department chairs listed in the 2010 version of the American Political Science Association's *Directory of Political Science Faculty and Programs*. In total, our final list included 791 total department chairs that resulted in 781 valid e-mail addresses. Our population of department chairs included 493 BA departments (62%), 159 MA departments (20%), and 139 PhD departments (18%). After the initial waive and two follow-up e-mails requesting that the chair complete the survey, we received 279 completed surveys resulting in an overall response rate of 36%. Our sample consisted of a mix of department types that was quite comparable to the population with 63% BA departments, 21% MA departments, and 16% PhD departments.

Obviously, there are some advantages and disadvantages to a research approach based on selecting just one discipline to survey. By just focusing on political science departments, we hold constant many of the disciplinary differences that exist across the range of departments on a college campus. However, by examining just one discipline, our findings may not be generalizable to all academic departments. Nevertheless, we would expect to find comparable results in similar academic disciplines, particularly within the liberal arts and sciences. To give a sense of our data, simple descriptive statistics can be found in Table 1 and more details on question wording and coding appear in the Appendix.

## Results

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the dependent variable, how chairs rated their department's relationship with the campus career center. One third of chairs described the ties with the campus career center as "not very close." The modal category was "somewhat close" with nearly 43%. Just over 18% of chairs said they had "close ties" with the career center and a paltry 5% had "very close" ties.



**Figure 1.** Closeness of career center to department. (Figure appears in color online).

Notably, there is considerable variation across the four response categories. What explains these differences? Since the relationship between career centers and academic departments has not been previously examined, our eight independent variables and the anticipated effects of these variables on the dependent variable are drawn from logical expectations, rather than from existing literature. First, we included a variable if the department was located on a campus in a suburban or urban area. We anticipated that the internship and employment opportunities in suburban and urban areas will lead to a great collaboration between career centers and political science departments. Second, we created a variable to indicate whether the department was located on a campus with a student population below 2,500. In this case, we expected smaller campuses would foster an environment for greater collaboration. We believe that it is just more likely that faculty and career center professionals know one another on a smaller campus. Third, we included a variable if the college was a public institution to determine if the strength of the relationship varies between public and private colleges and universities. Fourth, to determine the impact of a school’s competitiveness, we created a variable with the average SAT score for first-year students. Fifth, we included a variable to indicate whether faculty did the academic advising in the department (as opposed to professional advisors). We expected departments with faculty advisors to have stronger overall ties to career centers because they more frequently engage in career-related discussions with students. Our final three variables measure department policies related to career development. Though we do not measure specific student outcomes, these measures provide some indication of policies designed to benefit students, testing whether departments with career-specific curriculum have closer ties with the career center. First, we created a variable to indicate whether the department required students to have an internship. Our expectation here was that departments with required internships would foster closer relationships with career centers. Next, we included a variable indicating if the department required students to complete a resume. Again, we expected departments with this requirement to report closer ties with career centers. And finally, the model includes a variable indicating whether the department has a course that focuses some on “career preparation” with the expectation that departments with some career preparation will report stronger ties with the career center.

Table 2 shows results predicting how closely political science department chairs rate their relationship with the campus career center. Since the dependent variable is ordinal and measured on a 4-point scale, we use an ordinal logistic regression.

The results show that small colleges were significantly more likely to have close ties with the campus career center. Likewise, departments where faculty advise students (as opposed to professional advisors) also had closer ties to the campus career center. Two of our variables measuring a department's commitment to career development were also statistically significant. As we expected, departments that require majors to complete a resume had closer ties to the career center. Similarly, departments with a class with at least some portion that focuses on career preparation had closer ties to the campus career center.

We did not find any significant differences if the department was located in an urban/suburban area or a public institution. We also discovered that SAT score was not significantly related to our dependent variable. Also to our surprise, departments that required majors to conduct internships did not have closer ties to campus career centers.

Because ordinal logistic regression coefficients are difficult to interpret, we also computed predicted probabilities for our significant variables. Although they do not show large differences, they do provide a sense of the impact of the independent variables on the dependent variable. For departments located in small colleges, there was a 0.07 probability of having very close ties with the career center compared to a 0.03 probability of having very close ties at larger colleges. In departments where faculty do academic advising there was a 0.05 probably of having very close ties while departments where faculty do not do academic advising had only a 0.02 probability of very close ties. Likewise, in departments with a required resume, the probability of very close ties was 0.08 compared to a 0.04 probability for departments without a required resume. Finally, there was a higher probability of very close ties in departments with

**Table 2.** Exploring the relationship between campus career centers and academic departments

	Coefficient (robust standard errors)	Predicted probabilities
Urban/Suburban	0.16 (0.27)	
Small College	0.81** (0.33)	0.03–0.07
Public College	0.11 (0.29)	
SAT Score	–0.00 (0.00)	
Faculty Do Academic Advising	0.68* (0.41)	0.02–0.05
Internship Required in Major	0.23 (0.51)	
Resume Required in Major	0.71** (0.36)	0.04–0.08
Partial Career Class in Major	0.76* (0.41)	0.04–0.08
<i>N</i>	244	
Chi Square	25.38***	

*Note:* Entries are ordinal logistic regression coefficients. Numbers in parentheses are robust standard errors. Predicted probabilities refer to the change in probability of expressing strong ties with the Career Center (a 4 on the scale) when that entry is held at its low and high points (for dichotomous or ordinal variables) or from one standard deviation below the mean to one standard deviation above the mean (for continuous variables), while holding all other variables at their sample means.

\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ ; two-tailed test.

a partial career-focused class than there was in departments without a career-focused class (0.08 compared to 0.04).

Although we were not able to collect student outcome data for each department, our open-ended questions do provide some additional clues about the importance and nature of this relationship. Our survey asked political science departments about the types of career activities in which they are engaged, and many of the responses indicate that political science departments follow one of two models in terms of their relationships with their respective university career centers. Both of these models suggest that career centers play an important synergistic role with political science departments, either by allowing the department to “outsource” advising to the career center or by supplementing/enhancing existing departmental advising for students.

For instance, several of the surveyed departments indicated that they send their students to the career center for career-preparation advising, rather than advising students themselves regarding potential career opportunities. In this respect, departmental comments on the survey ranged from “we generally let the career advising office work on employment preparation” to “we encourage students to visit the Career Development Center beginning in their second year” to “we have an Office of Career Services that provides assistance with most of the issues raised in this survey...the department does not provide this structured level of mentoring for the students because they are getting it elsewhere” and finally to “our students who don’t go to grad/professional schools get advice and counseling from the career planning staff and their faculty advisors.” The responses suggest, then, that one way university career centers are important to political science departments is because they help alleviate the workload of departments by relieving them of the need to provide career-counseling services.

In contrast, other departments surveyed seemed to have a more synergistic or integrated relationship with their university career center, and many of these political science departments work closely with career services to provide enhanced advising opportunities for students. Comments in this regard ranged from “we have a very active career services division at the college ... we work with them and they do resume/internship/job fair workshops, etc.” to “we are just launching a career and professional development plan (template designed by career center and then customized by department faculty)” to “[we] have begun conversations with our Career Services Office to learn about the resources and opportunities they have to share with us and our students.” Additionally, one political science department commented that they often incorporate visits to the career center within the requirements of their senior seminar class, while another department mentioned that it had established formal “networking” with Career Services to provide opportunities for students to intern with various organizations. These types of comments signify that departments following the more integrated model are engaging with their respective career centers in order to offer students a more holistic approach to career advising. Indeed, the fact that some departments are taking the time to forge these types of formal links with career centers suggests that these departments are prioritizing that relationship and recognizing the importance of close ties between the two entities.

## **Conclusions**

To recap, we show that closeness between political science departments and the career center is more likely at smaller colleges, in departments where professors advise students (as opposed to departments with professional advisors), and in departments that

incorporate career preparation into the curriculum. These results suggest that there are specific steps that political science departments can implement in order to further strengthen their relationships with career centers, and such steps include integrating career preparation into regular class curriculum and requiring students to create discipline-specific resumes. While all of these actions help to elevate the level of career advising provided to students, our survey results also indicate that the relationships between political science departments and career centers lack clarification or a clear articulation of the responsibilities and goals of both entities. A need for such a clarification is supported by the literature and would allow departments and career centers to work toward fostering stronger ties with each other in order to reinforce the quality of mentorship provided to both students in the classroom and advisees.

One potential paradigm for this type of clarification hinges on a specific type of a “shared,” or “dual,” advising model. Traditionally, such a dual advising model centers on the early college experience and calls for freshmen and sophomores to have two separate advisors, one from an academic department who will provide advice on curriculum and one advisor from student affairs tasked with answering nonacademic questions for students. A student affairs advisor, for instance, might help students navigate the university’s organizational structure or answer questions regarding residential life or extracurricular activities (Habley 2004).

It is possible for this more traditional model to be repurposed and aimed at career counseling and advising for students in their last two years of college; indeed, such a model could serve as a formalized version of the advising collaboration that already exists between some of our surveyed departments. This formalized advising paradigm could be targeted toward juniors and seniors, and as in the traditional model, these students would be assigned two separate advisors. In the new advising paradigm, each junior and senior would be assigned a departmental academic advisor, as well as a career center counselor, and such an advising structure would enable students to have access to information spanning the spectrum of their career-preparation needs. This dual model could easily clarify advising responsibilities with academic departments focusing on career advice specific to their particular discipline while university career centers might bear the responsibility for the practical realities of the job search by critiquing student resumes, helping students practice interviewing skills, and educating students on the requirements of the general job search process. Such a dual-advising relationship would reinforce strong connections between individual departments and the career center while allowing both sides access to information that enables them to better serve students in their respective advisory roles. Ultimately, this would create a synergistic relationship between the two entities, which would better serve students in their search for a career after graduation.

The dual advising model is just one type of collaborative structure that could strengthen and enhance the relationships between political science departments and university career centers, and many other possible permutations of shared advising responsibilities exist. In the absence of sufficient staffing within career centers for career counselors to carry large caseloads of assigned advisees, their intentional presence in the classroom, especially in the major, may provide complementary exposure to career development. Also, at many larger institutions with centralized advising centers that serve undeclared majors, professional academic advisors may partner with both faculty advisors and career center counselors to provide continued career development support for students as they matriculate toward graduation.



Although beyond the scope of our study, structural factors may also lead to greater collaboration. While divisions of the university often perform as loosely coupled silos, many institutions have responded to economic pressure by shifting expectations and restructuring via the strategic planning process. For instance, about half of those surveyed in a small benchmark study (Western Carolina University Office of Career Services & Cooperative Education 2009) indicated that while many individual career centers already reported to the academic affairs division, some whole student affairs divisions have shifted over, creating new opportunities for collaboration (Bourassa and Kruger 2001). Additionally, some institutions use a liaison model within their career center, in which career counselors provide support to faculty and students within a designated college or collection of departments, who may even help fund and supervise the position (Kretovics, Honaker, and Kraning 1999). When career services directors, department chairs, and college deans all report to the same executive officer, organizational barriers to collaboration may be reduced or eliminated through more direct communication and better articulated common cause.

There are many ways in which collaboration may occur. Methods may include individual student referrals by faculty, the inclusion of career-related topics and professionals in the classroom, integrated or cooperative advising, internships and related service opportunities and may include a shared commitment between faculty and career services professionals to help students develop an ability to apply knowledge, to build workplace competencies, and to connect the dots between curricular, co-curricular, and career-focused activities. Certainly, it is important that political science departments not overlook the chance to work with university career centers to both find and cultivate networks of potential student internship opportunities. Additionally, a true civic education, a goal to which many political science departments aspire, is more likely to occur when students “directly experience ‘politics’ as part of their education” (Delli Carpini and Keeter 2000, 635).

These points of connection and opportunities for collaboration between political science departments and career centers may well be enhanced by a reporting structure that places career services within the division of academic affairs. Whichever variation on the theme one chooses, however, clearly articulating the responsibilities and goals of a university’s various teaching, counseling, and advising resources would help achieve the optimal outcome—aiding students with a successful job search and the establishment of a solid career in which to ground their postuniversity life.

### **Appendix: Question Wording and Coding**

*Relationship with career center:* To what extent is your department networked with the university career center? Not very close ties (1), somewhat close ties (2), close ties and (3), very close ties (4).

*Urban/suburban:* 1 = urban/suburban, 2 = rural

*Small college:* 1 = small college, 0 = not small college

*Public college:* 1 = public college, 0 = private college

*SAT score:* sum of median SAT verbal and median SAT math

*Faculty do academic advising:* Who does the academic advising for the majors in your department? professors (1), professional academic advisors/other (0).

*Internship required in major:* Is an internship required for undergraduate political science majors in your department? yes (1), no (0).

*Resume required in major:* Are your undergraduate political science majors required to complete a resume? yes (1), no (0).

*Partial career class in major:* Is there a required undergraduate political science class in your department that spends some portion of the class on career preparation (i.e., resumes, cover letters, job searches, etc.)? yes (1), no (0).

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