

Eduventures Helps the University of West Florida Improve Ties with Local Employers

Challenge:

The University of West Florida (UWF) wanted to examine the employer demand for its graduates and identify opportunities to strengthen employer recruiting activity on campus.

Solution:

To assist them with this goal, the Eduventures research team used two methodologies:

- A web survey of regional employers through the local Chamber of Commerce
- A comprehensive business scan of the business environment in the Southeast to highlight levels of economic trends and growth

Results:

The research revealed that employers have a preference to hire UWF graduates over graduates from other regional institutions. This investigation also identified opportunities to increase awareness and utilization of recruiting resources provided by the Office of Career Services. The results of this study affirmed the importance of UWF's ongoing development of its CO-OP program, provided access to a cohort of employers who wanted to learn more about the University recruiting program and generated additional job postings by employers.

About the University of West Florida

Location: Pensacola, FL

Carnegie Classification: Doctoral

Ownership: Public Institution

Size: 8,405 Undergraduate Students (2008)

About Eduventures:

Eduventures Learning Collaboratives are member-driven research programs that help more than 300 institutions of higher education achieve organizational goals and solve pressing challenges with evidence-based insight and guidance.

Improving Connections to Local Employers

In the spring of 2008, the Division of Student Affairs, under the direction of Dr. Debbie Ford, Vice President, and Dr. Tammy McGuckin, Assistant Vice President, sensed an opportunity. They believed there was a significant need to develop a more robust employer development program which connected regional employers with the University through the Office of Career Services. While existing relationships did exist, the extent to which regional employers were aware of recruiting opportunities was unclear, as was their perceptions of the quality of UWF graduates compared to graduates of other local universities.

The leadership team recognized that the Career Services program had not developed an effective strategy to benchmark its progress and efforts in developing a strong employer development program. This was troubling as employer development was viewed as strategically important and central to supporting UWF's graduating students and the regional economy in the South. In fact, a new position had been created in Career Services that had specific responsibility for employer development. They also wanted to understand better how employers in the immediate area were being impacted by the uncertain economic conditions and its effect on their recruiting practices. To help generate insights to these challenges, UWF turned to Eduventures for assistance.

Examining Regional Employer Perceptions

To help the University of West Florida better understand the perception and needs of regional employers, the Eduventures research team completed research along two separate paths to answer the key research questions. First, a web survey was custom designed and administered to regional employers through the local Chamber of Commerce. Next, data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the State Agency for Workforce Innovation and recent Eduventures research were analyzed to examine economic trends in the region, highlighting growing industries and businesses. Combined, these data provided the University of West Florida with a synthesis of employer recruiting needs and perceptions of the University by local employers in addition to a review of the sectors for potential growth in the regional economy.

“... This research has assisted us in fine tuning our employer development program. There is a confirmation of some of the things we just assumed before and the data will help us better market our students and programs to our community”.

Nathan Ford
Assistant Director
Office of Career Services
University of West Florida

Key Insights to Inform Decision-Making

The results of the research were valuable on a number of levels. First, the economic data identified industries that are likely to experience growth in the Southeast suggesting an attractive job market for graduates in several professional disciplines offered at the University of West Florida. This was helpful in affirming the alignment of university programs with the business and industry needs of the region. In addition, the results of the web survey suggested that management, finance and accounting graduates are in greatest demand by employers and skills including communication, teamwork and problem solving are more important than technical skills.

The UWF leadership team was gratified to see that, almost 70% of employers who hired graduates from the University rated them as competent in their fields of study (compared to a 50% rating of graduates from other universities). Employers were also satisfied with the University's cooperative education program and cited strong relationships with specific academic departments. However the research also highlighted areas in need of improvement. Only 32% of the employers indicated they had used the recruiting services offered by Career Services and many expressed some concern over the effectiveness of job fairs offered by the University. According to Nathan Ford, the Assistant Director of Career Services, this feedback was not surprising and would be used to improve the effectiveness of these interactions moving forward.

Building Productive Partnerships with Real Results

One of the underlying questions for the Career Services program, was how to connect their recruiting services and graduates with regional employers. In the absence of benchmark data and a rapidly declining economy, the results of this study provided both short term impacts and insights to support a long term planning commitment to employer development.

Short Term Impacts:

- Approximately 33% of employers indicated they wanted to learn more about the recruiting services provided at the University; this provided an immediate opportunity to market the University and its graduates to a group of local and interested employers.
- The University received real time data on how the economic environment had impacted employer recruiting and what they projected the impact would be over the next 3-6 months.
- Career Services followed up on the recommendation to sponsor an open house with local employers; following the first open house, three employer participants immediately posted three job opportunities for University of West Florida students.

Long Term Planning:

- Employers validated the impact of the University's co-op program and reinforces the ongoing commitment to developing this program over time.
- 'Graduate skills' definitions were based on national study benchmarks which allowed the University to compare their graduate's ratings by employers to other regional and national analysis to identify comparative strengths and areas to develop.
- Employer feedback on jobs fairs creates a 'case for action' to redefine how those interactions are delivered by the University.
- The partnership with the local Chamber of Commerce generated an opportunity to build deeper, more collaborative relationships on initiatives linked to work force development with the University.