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Leveraging LinkedIn: How Can Educators Help College Students Market Themselves?

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Abstract

To successfully transition from college to career, community college students must be prepared to sell their skills to potential employers. LinkedIn, the world's leading professional networking website, provides college students and graduates with an affordable platform to promote their knowledge, skills, and abilities. Unfortunately, students often do not know how to communicate a unique value proposition in their LinkedIn profiles. In response, the National Convergence Technology Center (CTC), based in Collin College, developed a 30-minute webinar to train community college educators about how to avoid common mistakes in LinkedIn. High interest in the webinar as well as responses to a survey about the session indicate community college educators want to learn how to leverage LinkedIn to help their students find jobs after graduation.

Leveraging LinkedIn: How Can Educators Help College Students Market Themselves?

Importance of LinkedIn to Students' Career Success

Growing interest in the employability of students after graduation (Chadha & Toner, 2017; Knight & Yorke, 2003; Sum & Jessop, 2013) has led to increased use of LinkedIn at colleges and universities (Komljenovic, 2019). Approximately 40 million students and recent college-graduates use the professional social media platform (Shield Intelligence, 2019).

LinkedIn offers numerous benefits to students, including helping them to find jobs, establish an online presence, and network with colleagues and recruiters (Yavorski, 2021). While they may recognize the importance of having a professional networking presence, college students often do not know what content to include in a LinkedIn profile (Daniels, Pemble, Allen, Lane, & Miller, in press).

To help students develop a professional profile, some business faculty members have developed and tested LinkedIn interventions in their classrooms (Cooper & Naatus, 2014; McCorkle & McCorkle, 2012; Sloan & Gaffney, 2016). Other researchers tested LinkedIn interventions to help students make professional connections, seek internships, and secure jobs (Peterson & Dover, 2014). While such educators recognize the importance of LinkedIn to help students transition from college to career, teachers tend to be one of the least represented professions on LinkedIn (Turner, 2018). Additionally, non-business instructors may lack the background to help students market themselves effectively. Finding time to teach LinkedIn concepts within the constraints of preexisting curriculum may also present educators with significant time management issues. To overcome these challenges, the National Convergence Technology Center (CTC), funded by the National Science Foundation and based in Collin

College north of Dallas, developed a collaborative LinkedIn webinar for community college educators in the United States.

National LinkedIn Intervention to Train Educators

The CTC is funded by a \$4 million grant from the National Science Foundation's Advanced Technological Education program (Collin College, 2017; National Science Foundation, 2017). The CTC's overall goal is to better prepare students for workforce success. CTC manages the Convergence College Network (CCN) community of practice that currently consists of 80 community colleges and universities across 30 states. All the work of the CTC is guided by the recommendations and feedback of an actively engaged group of information technology (IT) employers and subject matter experts known collectively as the "BILT" – the Business and Industry Leadership Team. BILT's interest in better preparing graduates for the workforce led CTC to explore the benefits and best practices of using LinkedIn.

To help facilitate students' transition from college to career, the CTC offered a webinar in December 2020 (Convergence Tech Center Collin College, 2020). The virtual event was designed to help community college educators nationwide (1) better inform students about the value of LinkedIn and (2) communicate how students can maximize the effectiveness of their profiles. Of the 816 educators invited to attend the webinar, 98 individuals registered with 45 attending the live event.

The goal of the webinar was to share LinkedIn best practices based on a national study of community college students' profiles (Daniels et al., in press). After providing general information about marketing, the webinar reviewed common mistakes in LinkedIn profiles. Attendees then received a 1-page handout with best practices as well as a list of reflective

questions to help students prepare distinctive information for their LinkedIn profiles. The webinar also provided attendees with an opportunity to ask questions in real time.

The webinar was recorded and later posted online for individuals who were unable to participate in the live event. At the conclusion of the session, a link to a brief online survey was shared in the chat box of the webinar. The survey's questions assessed how attendees previously taught LinkedIn, what challenges they observed when discussing LinkedIn with students, and potential instructional changes in response to the webinar. A reminder email was also sent to webinar attendees to encourage their participation in the online survey. In addition to some Likert-scaled closed items, three open-ended questions allowed attendees to share thoughts in their own words: *Before this webinar, how (if at all) were you teaching students about LinkedIn? What are the main challenges you face when teaching students about LinkedIn? Do you believe you will be able to incorporate elements of this webinar into your classroom coursework? If so, how will you incorporate it?* Frequencies were tabulated for the closed questions and a content analysis identified themes in the open-ended responses. To assure sufficient reliability, two faculty members independently coded the frequency of themes from the open-ended questions. Comparisons of their coding detected nearly identical results.

Results and Conclusions

Twenty webinar participants completed a post-event survey. Before the training, 24% of respondents said they did not teach LinkedIn at all. Others reported teaching students about the social media platform in various ways. Some survey respondents described having informal conversations about LinkedIn with students (35%) during class. Others said they integrated LinkedIn information into their classroom modules (29%) by including assignments, such as

requiring students to build a profile. Other survey respondents said they referred students to their school's career center (12%) for 1-on-1 guidance about what to include into a LinkedIn profile.

Respondents described various challenges when teaching LinkedIn. Some community college educators (41%) observed student "reluctance to setup an online professional presence." Others indicated "getting them [students] to understand the importance of it [a LinkedIn profile]" was challenging. Another 23% of survey respondents said teaching students how to promote themselves effectively through the professional networking website was challenging because students lacked prior experience in marketing and promotion. One educator observed that students need to learn "how to sell themselves to potential employers," while another emphasized the importance of teaching students how to present a unique value proposition. Survey respondents also mentioned challenges related to a lack of classroom time (12%), low interest from other faculty members (12%), and insufficient knowledge about LinkedIn (12%).

Webinar attendees' response to the CTC's LinkedIn training was overwhelmingly positive. Eighty percent reported being *most likely to absolutely likely* to recommend their colleagues watch a recording of the webinar. Most survey respondents (80%) also indicated they are *most likely to absolutely likely* to incorporate recommendations from the webinar in their classrooms. Additionally, the vast majority (95%) *somewhat to strongly agreed* the webinar provided high quality content that could be used in the classroom. For instance, after the webinar, some respondents said they planned to:

- Emphasize the importance of developing profiles that makes students "stand out from the rest of the crowd"
- Offer students on-campus opportunities to have a professional photograph taken for their LinkedIn profile

- Encourage students to build portions of their profiles during their degree program
- Integrate a LinkedIn unit into the school's existing ePortfolio assignments
- Share a video recording from the webinar with students and faculty

High registration in the live webinar as well as the number of people watching the session online (122 views approximately one month after the webinar) suggest community college educators want to learn more about LinkedIn. This conclusion is also supported by inquiries posed during the live question-and-answer portion of the webinar, when attendees requested permission to share the presenter's information with colleagues and students (Convergence Tech Center Collin College, 2020).

Implications

The results of this study suggest many community college educators recognize the importance of LinkedIn to their students' workforce success. However, feedback from webinar attendees indicates significant challenges limit the effectiveness of their current LinkedIn initiatives. Community college faculty members who lack a background in marketing often do not know how to help students promote themselves in a LinkedIn profile. The study's results indicate it is possible to distribute such information during a short, virtual presentation. One attendee shared, "This [webinar] gave me ideas on how to speak to students to help them understand their strengths, so they can put their best foot forward."

The overwhelmingly positive response to the webinar strongly suggests community college educators are interested in LinkedIn but need more training. Students and faculty members must recognize that a LinkedIn profile is only as good as the information contained in it; setting up a profile is not enough. To "stand out from the crowd" and attract potential employers, students must learn how to communicate a unique value proposition that

differentiates them from other job applicants. To accomplish this goal, community college leaders must motivate faculty members to emphasize the importance of LinkedIn when working with students. Additionally, the provision of innovative resources (e.g., photography services in career centers, strategic guidance from marketing faculty members, in-person training and/or virtual webinars) should help students create engaging, high-quality profiles.

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