

Implementing Virtual Career Counseling and Advising at a Major University

Shane Haberstroh, University of Texas at San Antonio, USA

Shirley Rowe, University of Texas at San Antonio, USA

Stefanie Cisneros, University of Texas at San Antonio, USA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With college students using the Internet to meet a variety of professional and personal needs, college campuses are seeking ways to enhance their student services by using emerging technologies. In this case study, the authors discuss the implementation of online career advising and planning services via synchronous chat sessions. Given the constraints concerning vendor selection, procurement issues, software implementation, and limited budgets, it was critical for the career counseling team to find a robust, secure, and affordable software platform to meet their needs. It was important that this software and service appeal to students as they sought personal career development. The team considered existing practice standards to guide the implementation of this innovative student service. With these elements in place, the authors discuss the process of launching an online career planning and advising program and the resulting challenges that emerged. [Article copies are available for purchase from InfoSci-on-Demand.com]

Keywords: Online Behavior, Online Relationships, Social Support, Virtual Organization

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

Anonymous South University (ASU) is a major metropolitan research university serving over 28,000 students. As one of the fastest growing universities in the State, and the second largest component in the University System, ASU has experienced tremendous expansions in student enrollment, research funding, and faculty recruitment over the past decade. Accordingly, the university plays a major role in the regional economy, producing over US\$800 million in annual business activity (ASU Public Affairs Office, 2008). Moreover, ASU employs more than 6,500 individuals and invests over US\$200 million annually in employee salaries. The university is designated as an Hispanic Serving Institution and is a national leader in utilizing historically

underrepresented businesses (HUBs), investing over \$17 million in HUBs annually. With a focus on research, teaching, and community involvement and transformation, the university strives to provide opportunities to individuals and communities from underrepresented backgrounds while becoming a first choice for all students across the state and nation.

Student Services

To oversee this sizeable workforce composed of a mix of academic professionals, trade workers, and student support staff, the university is led by a president and six vice-presidents who direct specific components of the university. Student services focusing on personal development, career, and lifestyle planning are under the auspices of the Vice President for Student Affairs. As such, several departments and programs fall within the purview of this office, including financial aid, student health and counseling, judicial affairs, and career services.

Office of Career Services

Given that choosing a major, preparing for a career, and entering the workforce are significant life tasks, the Office of Career Services offers a menu of programs and services for students as they navigate these professional and educational milestones. The mission of the Office of Career Services is to assist students and alumni in identifying and developing the skills necessary to pursue their lifelong career goals. To meet this mission, Career Services employs a cadre of career counseling professionals (see Figure 1) who meet with students on an individual basis, in small groups, during designated classroom presentations, and at university-sponsored events. The focus of these interactions is to provide tailored career guidance for students as they embark on self-discovery, goal setting, and skill acquisition during their time at the university and after graduation. Specifically, career counselors teach students the basics of job searching, résumé writing, and interviewing. Career counselors also work with students as they assess their personality type, their interests, and their personal reasons for choosing particular majors and career paths. Finally, career counselors assist students who struggle with ambivalence about making career and educational decisions by meeting with them in individual sessions focused on in-depth counseling work.

The Office of Career Services is headed by a director who oversees two associate directors focusing on areas related to student services and employer services. The Student Services Team comprises 11 career counselors, front desk personnel, a professional development program manager, and a marketing specialist. Outreach to the university community is a strong component of Career Services, as they regularly organize job fairs, present lectures in many courses, and host special events to connect students, alumni, and employers. As such, the Career Services Office has made extensive use of technology, offering online career assessments, an online job bank, podcasts, instructional modules, and an online career library (see Figures 2 and 3). Prior to implementing these interactive online services, all of the personal career counseling and advising activities had been provided in face-to-face settings. While the office provided a wealth of online information, no interactive career planning with students had ever been provided via the Internet.

Figure 1. Office of Career Services organizational chart

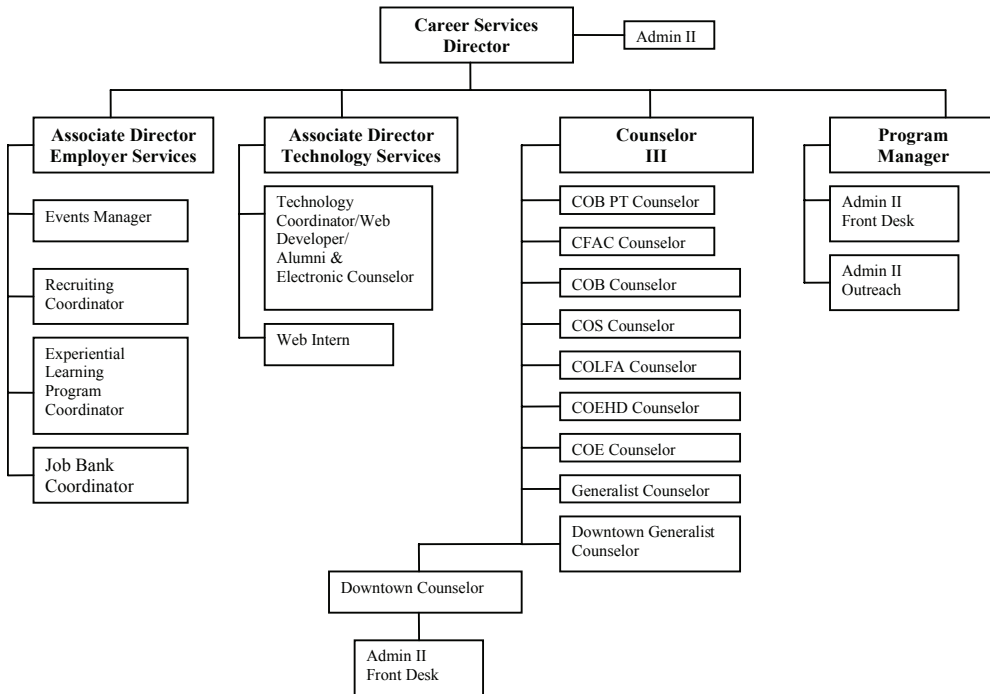


Figure 2. Screen shot of the Virtual Career Center



Figure 3. Examples of Virtual Career Center modules

The screenshot displays a website interface for a 'Virtual Career Center'. At the top, the title 'Virtual Center' is written in a large, bold, orange font. Below this, the section 'Instructional Modules' is highlighted in a similar orange font. A link 'Click to view Module' is positioned above two thumbnail images. The first thumbnail, titled 'Write a Resume', shows a woman smiling. The second thumbnail, titled 'Succeed in Interview', shows two people in a meeting. To the right of the thumbnails, there are two text blocks. The first block, 'What is an Instructional Module?', explains that these are online tutorials for students and alumni, with a focus on writing a resume. The second block, 'How can these modules help me?', states that the modules are provided for those who cannot attend on-campus workshops. A silhouette of a man in a suit stands on the right side of the page. Navigation arrows are visible: a downward arrow between the thumbnails and a rightward arrow next to the second text block.

SETTING THE STAGE

At colleges and universities across the United States, students use the Internet and distance technologies at high rates to communicate, find entertainment, and enhance their educational work (Jones, Johnson-Yale, Perez, & Shuler, 2007; Maples & Han, 2008). Recognizing that online communication was a powerful force in students' lives (Jones et al., 2007), the Office of Career Services sought to harness this resource to enhance their program offerings. As this team conceptualized how to develop online career planning and advising programs, they considered questions about whether online counseling was legal, ethical, and clinically appropriate. In addition, the team would need to research what kinds of guidelines and technical procedures had been previously developed in similar programs. Realizing that this method of providing career counseling was new and probably untested, the counselors needed to address these issues before: (a) developing a convincing rationale to present to the administration; (b) seeking robust, secure, and user-friendly technologies; and finally, (c) implementing these services.

Online Counseling Ethics and National Standards

Beginning in 1998, national counseling organizations began to address the ethical, procedural, and clinical implications for counselors who used the Internet to provide counseling services (American Counseling Association, 2005; Center for Credentialing and Education, 2008; National Board for Certified Counselors, 2001). In the most recent ethical codes of the American Counseling Association (ACA), an entire section was dedicated to the use of technology in counseling practice. These standards delineated informed consent procedures, technology considerations,

and basic practice guidelines for counselors to follow. For example, the ACA Ethical Code directed counselors to inform clients about: (a) confidentiality risks related to online counseling, (b) security and access to records, (c) limitations and issues with intrastate service delivery, (d) emergency procedures and technology failures, (e) potential time zone and cultural differences, and (f) insurance coverage of online counseling if applicable.

The Center for Credentialing and Education (CCE), a certification branch of the National Board of Certified Counselors (NBCC), offers training and certification in distance counseling (CCE, 2008). Once a licensed counselor completes this training program, submitting a case study and self-statement, he or she is eligible for certification as a Distance Credentialed Counselor (DCC). The two-day training program for DCCs covers: (a) ethical and legal issues related to online counseling, (b) technology skills, (c) online counseling practice, (d) online counseling research, and (e) clinical skills needed for establishing online relationships (CCE, 2008). While this certification does not license an individual to provide online counseling services, it does attest to their knowledge of best practices for distance counseling. With these national organizations outlining standards and practice guidelines for distance and online counseling, the framework was established for counselors to use the Internet to work with clients.

Online Counseling Background

There has been a rise in research focused on the application of online counseling for a range of issues and concerns. Related to day-to-day concerns and stresses, researchers have reported on wellness and prevention-focused online counseling for students (Haberstroh, Duffey, Evans, Gee, & Trepal, 2007; Maples & Han, 2008) and the efficacy of online counseling for coping with test-related anxiety (Rassau & Arco, 2003). Another body of research has investigated online counseling for more serious concerns, including depressive, anxiety, and eating disorders (Christensen, Griffiths, & Jorm, 2004; Kenardy, McCafferty, & Rosa, 2003; Lange, Van De Ven, & Schrieken, 2003; Rassau & Arco, 2003; Richards, Klein, & Carlbring, 2003). In another recent study, one campus used online counseling to screen and intervene with suicidal students (Hass et al., 2008). This research team found online counseling reached individuals who were suicidal, and potentially provided a link between these distressed students and campus resources. In sum, research shows that counseling interventions delivered online tend to be helpful and may be an avenue for student service programs to provide greater outreach on campus.

Although online counseling has demonstrated some promising results, some authors have found that individuals prefer face-to-face interactions (Leibert, Archer, Munson, & York, 2006) and report on the limitations of online counseling for certain issues and populations. For example, the absence of body language online can limit a counselor's ability to assess a client's emotional and mental states (Haberstroh, Parr, Bradley, Morgan-Fleming, & Gee, 2008; Leibert et al., 2006; Rochlen, Zack, & Spyer, 2004). Moreover, issues remain as to the legalities of providing services across state lines when a counselor is not licensed in the client's state. Thus, counselors are urged to ensure that their clients have the technological, emotional, and mental capacities to engage in online counseling and develop clear procedures in cases of emergencies and technological failures (ACA, 2005). To determine client appropriateness for online work, counselors are required to assess their client's emotional, intellectual, and physical capabilities prior to beginning counseling. For example, it would be important that clients are able to type, read, and are comfortable with communicating via text (ACA, 2005). Given the slower pace and narrowed focus of online counseling (Haberstroh et al., 2008), clients who need quick response times or desire to share in-depth information might be better served by face-to-face counseling. With these opportunities and considerations in mind, the staff and administrative team at the

Career Services Office sought to implement an enhanced virtual presence to include interactive online career planning and advising.

The Virtual Career Center

At ASU, a growing number of students took advantage of the interactive features through the Distance Learning & Academic Technology Office and other offices throughout the campus, expecting delivery of online classes as well as other innovative products and services. Based upon ASU students' high use of technology, Career Services considered how to develop enhanced interactive approaches and online resources. Many of the students at the university were only on campus in the evening, or because of scheduling difficulties, found traveling to face-to-face appointments cumbersome. Likewise, Career Services provided programs to many alumni who lived a considerable distance from the university. Thus, it became apparent to this team that it was necessary to seek new ways to engage their changing population. They developed a plan to provide a blend of face-to-face and technology-facilitated services. It seemed clear that interactive chat would complement the static online information currently available to students and alumni.

CASE DESCRIPTION

In early 2006, the Career Services Office began exploring the feasibility of creating a Virtual Career Center (VCC) to provide all the services found on campus to the online student and alumni community. The office had already implemented electronic information resources such as podcasts and instructional modules, and the office staff used e-mail to schedule appointments and provide basic information to students, employers, and alumni. As the team discussed and considered enhancements to their online presence, they believed that offering synchronous chat sessions would add value to their program, allowing them to communicate with students in a manner that was familiar and convenient. Because they worked at a state-funded public university, the team had several constraints regarding: (a) appropriate software selection, (b) vendor approval by the university, (c) network security, (d) software customization and branding, (e) staff training, (f) installation issues, (g) internal technical support required to maintain the system, (h) marketing approaches, and (i) evaluation measures that would need to be addressed before this project moved forward.

Software Needs

The team considered several factors in selecting an interactive chat program. They questioned whether free instant messaging services available through MSN, Yahoo, or AOL would be appropriate for engaging students and tracking their data. While these services were free, the team realized they wanted the ability to customize their chat rooms, track student data, and generate reports focused on utilization and quality control. Moreover, they needed a chat program that would integrate with university enterprise servers, with the potential to facilitate encrypted communications. Because the staff members involved with this project were not information technology specialists, they required that the software product include customer support, data integrity measures, back-up procedures, and assurances of minimal down time. After distilling these needs, key questions remained for them as to whether the product would be hosted in-house

or outsourced to a company specializing in these software suites. After careful consideration and dialogue, the team decided to choose a specialty provider (<http://www.velaro.com/>) who was able to meet these technology needs. Once this company was selected, the team developed a proposal to submit this innovative program through the university channels.

Consultation with the Office of Information Technology

Before an official vendor contract could be written and authorized, it was critical for Career Services to consult with the university's Office of Information Technology (OIT). OIT has very specific "acceptable use" policies in place to protect against the loss, misuse, and alteration of information under the control of ASU Web server administrators. For example, university employees are restricted from installing programs on their personal computers, and the licenses of all installed software products are regularly monitored. Thus, the team needed to demonstrate that the recommended software would not compromise the technology infrastructure. In the general policy statement, the OIT is committed to maintaining a secure, robust, and current IT system at the university. Given that the OIT oversees the technological infrastructure of eight colleges and a graduate school, security policies are in place to restrict student, faculty, and staff installation of software programs on the network. The OIT had reasonable concerns, as many chat programs have the potential to spread viruses, worms, and Trojan horses. After reviewing the technical specifications and assurances by the proposed vendor, the OIT authorized installation of this software on the university servers.

Contractual and Budgetary Requirements

As a state agency, the university requires specific stipulations that must be met before a contract is released for disbursement. Departments submitting proposals requesting an amount between \$5,000 and \$25,000 are required to place their contract out for bid to at least three vendors, two of which must be HUBs. Payment options were also to be specified. For the recommended vendor, pricing was based on the number of "agents" purchased. Each agent represents one staff member who can use the chat program during any particular time. Thus, purchasing two agents would allow career counselors to use the services simultaneously. After reviewing the office budget, however, the team realized they could only afford one agent at the time of the proposal.

Moving Forward and Chat Room Customization

Despite having only one chat agent available, the team decided to pilot the installation of the interactive career chat software. Even with this limited capability, they would be able to pilot a unique service and test its effectiveness and usability. In this next phase, the technology coordinator proceeded to customize the chat screens with the university colors, icons, greetings, and text. Measurements of effectiveness were incorporated via pre- and post-evaluations. When considering these elements, the team hoped to create a seamless online experience between the Career Services Web site and the chat module. They were also quite interested in allowing users to provide feedback about their services. In designing the feedback modules, the team debated whether to make the questions optional or mandatory. They also brainstormed the kinds of questions they would want to ask (see Appendix). Once these issues were resolved, the team moved to the implementation phase of this endeavor.

Installation

Because of the security policies instituted by the OIT, the team requested software installation well in advance of the chat start date. Because the office is one of many institutions, departments, and programs needing IT support, careful planning and foresight ensured that the proper authorizations and software licensing protocols were met. Thus, the chat service was installed and tested on several computers and laptops used by the Office of Career Services. Having multiple installations was critical so that counselors could switch computers in the event of technology failure and have access to computers when needed. Laptop installations assured that counselors could provide mobile services if the need arose.

Staff Training

The Career Services Office employed approximately 11 full-time staff members who would conduct chat sessions, and each of them had different exposures to and comfort levels with technology. As such, a need existed for user-friendly training materials with step-by-step instructions. Once this manual was created, the technology coordinator scheduled group training sessions. In these sessions, the training staff used two computers to demonstrate the student and counselor perspectives of the online chat system. This was critical for the staff to understand the nuances of the online chat and to gain an appreciation of the perspectives of the potential students. The staff observed the real-time analytics generated by the system which were available for the counselor to view. Once each staff member reviewed the documentation, engaged in role-plays as both a student and counselor, and flushed out questions and issues, the system was ready for implementation.

Generating a Buzz and Marketing the Program

Much work had gone into conceptualizing, purchasing, implementing, and training staff on this innovative program. It was critical that students were made aware of this unique interactive career-counseling approach. The team began by advertising it on the Web site with a “Coming Soon” teaser banner. Because the new online service start date coincided with the beginning of a new semester, the team bundled advertisements about the chat feature with their other offerings. They created customized flyers and displays (see Figure 4) and e-mailed the students at the university. The team anticipated a steady but growing flow of students who would use this convenient, interactive student service.

The stage was set: The message was out to students. Staff members were trained and committed. Staff work schedules were rearranged to offer evening chat sessions for the non-traditional and working students, anticipating these students would access chat at higher rates. The program launched in the spring of 2008 after two years of planning and preparation. The counselors logged on in the evenings and waited. After several weeks, the utilization was far less than anticipated. The counselors’ enthusiasm for the program was waning, and the team faced a set of new challenges related to the low usage (see Figure 5), as well as concerns that emerged for those students who did access this service.

Figure 4. Marketing example

Career Services

Not able to make it to our regular office hours?

LIVE CHAT NOW AVAILABLE!

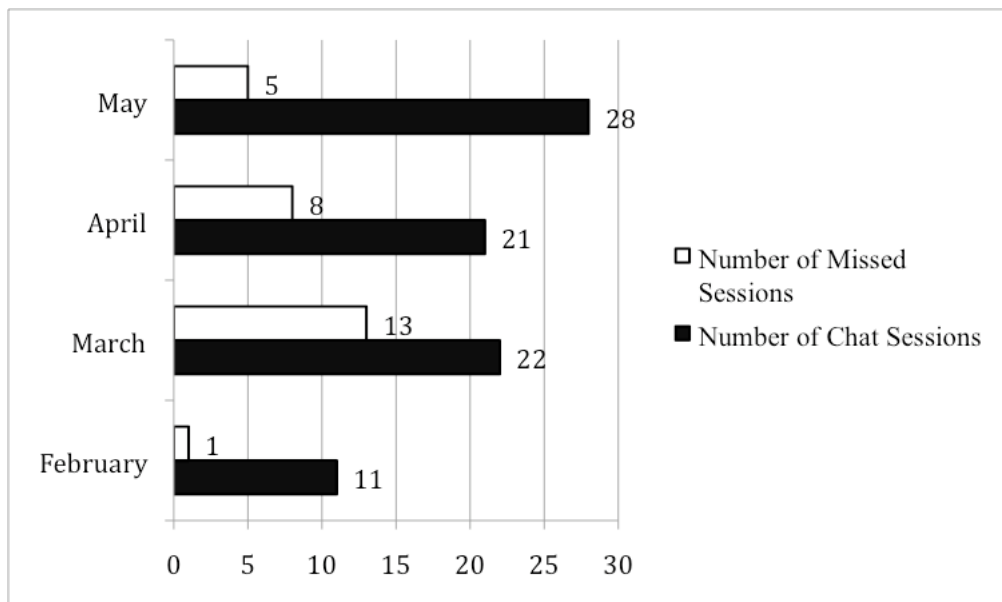
Sundays - Thursdays from 6pm-9pm

Check it out!

Go to our website and click on the Live Chat graphic to connect with one of our career representatives.

ASU
CAREER SERVICES

Figure 5. Initial usage trends for online chat—Spring 2008



Missed sessions represent students who accessed the service outside of designated hours of operation.

CURRENT CHALLENGES/PROBLEMS FACING THE ORGANIZATION

Clearly, the lack of student interest in seeking online chat was a considerable problem facing this team. With little research and previous program experiences to guide them, they needed to discover solutions to the lack of involvement by the students. They wondered if they: (a) overestimated student interest in using online chat for counseling, (b) did not use appropriate marketing strategies for their population, and/or (c) overlooked some other factor influencing the low participation rates. Expedient, but carefully considered decisions needed to be made by the team, because the online service required reallocation of staff resources from the traditional face-to-face service availability.

Limited Student Involvement

For the first several months of the online chat service, very few students logged on to seek career advising. This was in contrast to the high numbers of students who sought face-to-face services at campus. Despite a prominent banner advertising counselor availability, numerous e-mails to students, and a targeted marketing campaign, students did not seem interested in online career counseling. The staff was perplexed.

In addition to students and alumni using the online chat feature, employers have also used the service to ask questions about job posting services. Utilization of this service has increased since its implementation; however, marketing of the feature continues to be a challenge.

Limitations of Chat Counseling

For those students that participated in the service, there were times that the online counselor needed to refer them to a face-to-face meeting. This occurred when their questions required in-depth analysis such as choosing a major or developing a comprehensive job search strategy; both of which can be lengthy in nature. In addition, some students were using the counselors as IT support—with questions about creating usernames, passwords, and so forth—for the online assessment tools. Interestingly, the student might have been sitting just outside the counselor's office when chatting about these problems. While assisting students with logging onto the career systems is important, other office staff could have completed this task with the student. This kind of communication may emerge as a more serious issue if there were more students needing career counseling, and the counselor was distracted with technology support requests.

Other limitations experienced by the counselors included time concerns in online chat. For example, because of the time it takes to type and respond to a student's issue, less content can be covered when compared to face-to-face sessions. The counselors were challenged to consider ways to efficiently communicate with their students online while providing comprehensive answers to student questions. Some counselors found that students wrote using text abbreviations, and the counselors were faced with how to respond. The counselors wondered if they should respond in abbreviated format, matching the student's language style. Or, should they respond in more formal ways? The counselors were challenged to communicate without seeing their client's body language. How might a counselor and student best communicate understanding of affect and emotion?

One Agent, Multiple Students

Despite significant down time related to student involvement online, there were times when several students would engage the counselor at the same time. When this happened, the counselor would have to manage several conversations simultaneously. This posed a challenge to the counselors, as they would have to shift their focus from one student to the next and potentially could respond to the wrong client if they were not attentive. Because the office could only afford one agent, it was essential that the team develop protocols to employ during these busy times, balancing responsiveness with providing individualized and customized student services.

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APPENDIX

Feedback Questionnaire for Chat Users

Pre-Chat Survey (all questions were required):

1. Your name
2. E-mail address
3. What is your connection to ASU?
4. What is your question for Career Services today?

Post-Chat Survey

1. What was the main nature of your contact with us?
2. The "live chat" hours were adequate.
3. The "live chat" was easy to use.
4. I would use this feature again.
5. The staff was courteous and helpful.
6. My question was adequately answered.
7. My overall experience was positive.
8. As a result of your experience with Career Services, what service-related improvements can you recommend?
9. Any other comments?

** Questions 1-7 are required*

Shane Haberstroh EdD is an assistant professor at the University of Texas at San Antonio. His primary research interests center on the use of technology in the counseling profession and addiction and recovery treatment models. Over the past four years he has published numerous articles in peer-reviewed journals, and presented at national conferences related to these areas of interest. He is a board member of the Texas Career Development Association, president of the Association for Creativity in Counseling, and a delegate to the American Counseling Association's Summit, 20/20 Vision for the Future of the Counseling Profession.

Shirley Rowe, MEd, GCDF, is currently the Web developer and technology coordinator in the Career Services Office at the University of Texas at San Antonio. She has presented at national conferences on topics including: Web 2.0: Harnessing its Power to Engage Students and Use of Technology in Providing Career Services and has written numerous reviews for the NACE Journal. Rowe is also actively involved with the development and beta testing of an online forum sponsored by the USDLA and IFWE. Professional affiliations include National Career Development Association (NCDA), Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT), and the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE).

Stefanie Cisneros is currently the career counselor for all student-athletes at The University of Texas at San Antonio. She graduated from UTSA in 2001 with a bachelor of science degree in kinesiology, and will complete a master of arts degree in community counseling from UTSA in December 2008. Her tenure at the Career Services Office spans over 8 years. During this time, she has had the opportunity to speak to national audiences through presentations at the American Humanics Management Institute, California Association for Counseling and Development Regional Conference and as a co-presenter at the National Careers Conference. Her current professional affiliations include membership in the National Career Development Association (NCDA), Southern Association of Colleges and Employers (SoACE), and National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE).