

The Emerging Paradigm in College Career Services

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<https://www.careerleadershipcollective.com/post/the-emerging-paradigm-in-college-career-services>

We have been in the middle of a shifting paradigm in college career services for the last 10-15 years. We arrived at this paradigm shift over the last forty years due to several variables, insights, and pressures. Price outrage for higher education is now common. Alternatives to higher education have received much attention. Liberal Arts departments without a clear focus on career development are under fire. Families now decide which college to attend based on their perception of a college's overall career preparation effectiveness. And, there is a rising belief that every college student deserves to learn career development and be career-ready before graduation; optional is no longer an option.

Students have a desire we should not miss. They deeply desire to find purpose and meaning in their lives and careers. This goes well beyond just getting a first job after college. Students and their families fundamentally believe they are paying their college to help them meet this desire. But colleges are not universally keeping up.

Welsh novelist Raymond Williams believed that three paradigms exist inside any culture or industry: 1. Residual (old but lasting), 2. Dominant (the most common), and 3. Emerging (where everything is going). A paradigm is a pattern of operating. An era is a long, distinct period. And a version is an attempt to upgrade. With appreciation for those who have codified historical timelines before me, I believe organizing and understanding three eras of career services is helpful at this point in our history. I will use the terms eras, paradigms, and versions alongside each other to signify periods, modes of operation, and the evolving attempts our field has taken to get better.

I will be writing much more on this in the coming months and years. I have been studying the systems of higher education for more than 25 years, and I believe that creating strategic, systemic change can, in turn, change the careers and lives of many people for the better. Since 2016, in my time as CEO of the Career Leadership Collective, I've had the opportunity to visit hundreds of higher education institutions and to witness a surge of enthusiasm around building effective career ecosystems at every type of college and university.

My hope is that understanding the Career Services Eras, namely the emerging Career Ecosystem Era, will illuminate the undeniable benefits to higher education of progressing into this emerging paradigm and call institutions to action for both their own good and the future of their students.

The Career Counselor Era, The Residual Paradigm, Version 1.0.

This is where it all started in the early 1900's. It was the era of individual assessment and is the residual paradigm because there are still remnants of it around today. Career choice theories from Donald Super and John Holland dominated this era, and instruments like the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator abounded, helping any student who was interested in self-assessment related to their career. A few career counselors were scattered around campus, often inside mental health counseling offices and academic exploration offices. Internally, colleges felt successful if students had high satisfaction rates with career counseling appointments.

The benefit of this version was students could choose to get a true depth of understanding about their career aspirations by meeting with a counselor for one or more sessions and going through the battery of assessments offered. This era led a lot of colleges to mirror the academic advising approach to serving students, which is a one-on-one ratio model to meet all needs. With most campuses having between one and ten career counselors in this era, the capacity to serve students was very limited. A counselor could only make so many appointments. Professional development for the field was launched by national associations and built around the counselor's toolbox. The counselor toolbox, however, did not include having the employer connections needed for students, planning job fairs, working with faculty members, or creating marketing materials to promote their services.

The Career Center Era, The Dominant Paradigm, Version 2.0

Seeing the gaps in the Career Counselor Era led creative visionaries to consider how they could more holistically serve students. The Career Center Era was launched and is currently how most higher education institutions set up their system for student career readiness today. It is the era where we saw career services offices get created for a multi-dimensional purpose, from career exploration to landing a job, employer relationships, internships, academic unit-specific offices for niche needs, and much more.

Nearly all activities in this era happen at the career center or through the career services staff, and the core marketing message invites students to visit the career center. Because of this approach, year-over-year attendance at events, appointments, and services, and the number of completed workshops or classroom presentations became one of the markers of success in the eyes of colleges. The Great Recession brought about added success markers in first destination outcome rates (which were previously called placement rates in this era) and average salaries, which quickly became the two most common data points showcased to prospective students and parents.

The staff teams at career centers mostly became larger than the previous groups of career counselors. Career Centers learned how to build great partnerships across campus to refer more students to their services. There were also more robust job descriptions within a career

center, ushering in career generalists who did much more than 1:1 appointments. The capacity to serve students rose but was still largely limited by the career center team's size.

The Career Ecosystem Era, The Emerging Paradigm, Version 3.0

Emerging paradigms don't get solidified overnight; they take time—innovation and experimentation are regular. This era is approximately 10-15 years old. The other two are likely 50-90 years old each, depending on your perspective and institution. Some of the key themes of The Career Ecosystem Era involve creating career learning outcomes, mandatory career development milestones, integrating career development into the classroom, and empowering hundreds of career champions across the campus with a basic level of competence to engage students in career development.

Staff capacity to serve students is not an issue in the Career Ecosystem Era. Career development is embedded and, therefore, multiplied and scaled, and it is no longer an avoidable part of the college student experience.

The benefits of The Career Ecosystem Era should not be underestimated by senior leaders in higher education. The Career Ecosystem Era has become known for developing a set of institution-wide values, goals, and threshold experiences that integrate into the student experience in unavoidable ways, producing equitable career learning outcomes for every student. That is precisely its success marker: every student should receive career development at the institution. In turn, this will increase overall student satisfaction with their institution; retention rates will rise, alumni affinity will rise, career readiness for a first job will skyrocket, career mobility throughout their career will have a high satisfaction rate, and overall institutional brand optimism will increase.