



Workforce Development: How Do We Prepare Students for the Workforce?

Each time a school term ends, I wonder if I have prepared my students appropriately for the workforce in their selected field. Could I have done more? How can we best prepare our students for life after graduation? For the past ten years, I have been teaching online at Purdue Global, formerly Kaplan University, in the health sciences department. This segment of teaching has grown into an established program with many job opportunities. As the program has grown, so too have the number of students in the classroom. In an effort to provide hands-on experience to supplement required classes, we introduced a practicum component to our courses.

We first began to implement this component after the Purdue University Global Advisory Board, which consists of industry employers, indicated the importance of a practicum or job shadowing course for our billing and coding certificate program. Around that time, we realized that many of our students planned to work from home after graduation. In reality, most entry-level positions in billing and coding are in medical offices or facilities. The practicum offers students real-world job experience, an opportunity to network with future employers, and a more accurate expectation of their post-graduation work life.

Orientation Process

The faculty at Purdue Global provides guidance and support to students one or two terms before the practicum course begins as an orientation process. The orientation is in PowerPoint format, giving students easy access to the information and step-by-step guidance. The orientation makes the job shadowing expectations clear and helps students begin preparing before starting their practicum.

Practicum Requirement

First, the students arrange to job shadow in the billing and coding department of a physician's office or a medical facility for 40 hours. This hands-on experience helps them understand what occurs during the day-to-day operations of the organization. The Career Services department, along with a clinical placement team, helps provide students with the tools and guidance necessary to succeed in finding a placement. However, it is up to students to find their individual practicum site.

The practicum gives students the opportunity to introduce themselves to the potential organization and develop a professional relationship with potential employers. It has resulted in students being offered a job prior to, or after they have completed, their job shadowing.

Challenges

When we introduced the practicum to students, we did encounter push back. Since our students are adult learners and have family obligations, some felt they would not have time to complete the practicum. Some students also lived in rural areas far from possible practicum sites and did not have access to transportation. In addition, we did not anticipate the complex paperwork. Practicum sites require an affiliation agreement before the practicum can start. This became a challenge for some students who did not pursue the affiliation agreement with their instructor.

We worked to resolve these challenges by offering help from Career Services and the Clinical Placement team. However, students who were unable to complete the practicum did not earn the points. Although this does not result in a failing course grade, it does cause the grade point average to drop. Step Three: Individual

Statistical Information

Recent statistical data have indicated that 90 percent of our students have completed the practicum. The 10 percent that did not are a result of the factors indicated above.

Feedback

After students complete their practicum, the Assistant Dean sends a thank you note to the practicum employers with a link to a survey to evaluate the students and the practicum program. We have received mostly favorable responses, and several students have been hired by their practicum site. I can't say all my students have achieved success, but I hope that I have "sent them off" with the knowledge they will need for the workforce.

Occasionally we hear from former students about their job search, and these updates keep me motivated and reinforce that we are on the right path.

Conclusion

Developing a workforce program is beneficial to students because it prepares them for success. It is designed to provide real-world experience as well as networking opportunities. It is not an easy task to find a job that is a good fit for students and employers. However, with a successful workforce program, the students are better prepared for the challenges of seeking employment after graduation.

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