

## **Assessing Graduate Outcomes Amid a COVID-19 Environment**

**Julia Panke Makela, Jon C. Neidy, and Barbara Richardson**

### **Setting the Stage**

In the past decade, pressure has mounted on colleges and universities to gather evidence of students' post-graduation success. Internally, campus departments use outcomes data to demonstrate the efficacy of pedagogical approaches (Mattingly, Rice, and Berge 2012). Externally, pressures stem from accreditors, federal and state governments, and students and families making decisions on which college to attend. Knowing where graduates work, what they earn, where they live, and what additional degrees they pursue are all valuable information to demonstrate a return on investment in higher education (For more information see, for example, Makela and Hoff 2019; NACE, 2019a). This information is often referred to as students' "first destination" after graduation.

An entire industry emerged around the professionalization of first destination survey work. The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) published the first set of national guidelines to support this work in 2014 (now in a second edition released in 2019b). Coming from an association dedicated to the employment of college-educated individuals, these guidelines helped secure a central place for college career services professionals in guiding the collection of graduate outcomes data on their campuses. However, they do not work alone. Partnerships are common with institutional research offices, provost and academic offices, and technology and survey centers, as well as an external industry of resources, services, and vendor products. This is done to achieve the goal of confirming the graduate outcomes of at least 65% of all graduates, as identified by the NACE (2019b) standards, or a greater percentage as required by other accreditation or reporting requirements.

Institutions employ many strategies to gather data on first destinations, ranging from surveying graduates, to consulting faculty and trusted advisors who stay in touch with graduates, to referencing secondary sources (e.g., LinkedIn, National Student Clearinghouse). However, direct surveys of graduates are acknowledged as a key source of data and a best practice because they are first-hand sources that come directly from graduates (NACE 2019b). As such, surveys are a topic of much conversation among first-destination assessment professionals.

While developing first-destination procedures and processes, one factor outside of assessment professionals' control – that likely played in their favor – was a long period of a reasonably healthy economy and environment for college graduates. Each year, as graduate outcomes data were collected, graduates generally continued to gain employment and enroll in additional education programs at similar (or higher) rates. Additionally, strategies for gathering data improved with time. This meant that, as graduates were doing well, more was known

about their successes. It made for a good assessment story, keeping stakeholders excited about the work and engaged in the process, as strong foundations were built.

But what happens when the environment shifts?

### **A New Challenge Arises**

Spring 2020 brought rapid shifts to the academic, economic, and personal environments of soon-to-be college graduates. By mid-semester – typically when first-destination survey initiatives begin in earnest – campuses were rapidly moving students, faculty, and staff to remote locations, cancelling commencement events, and losing the opportunity to engage in face-to-face conversations with graduating students. Campus recruiting slowed dramatically, hiring decisions were delayed, and offer start dates were postponed (e.g., NACE 2020). A variety of industries were impacted by layoffs and furloughs (e.g., Center on Education and the Workforce 2020), as uncertainty and anxiety became the new normal.

This created a new challenge for assessment professionals tasked with tracking first-destination outcomes. They could no longer excitedly celebrate graduation with their students, enthusiastically asking: “where are you going next?!” They could not physically meet with graduates at commencement events for high-touch interactions to invite participation – which is where many receive the majority of their survey responses. Yet, the pressure to gather this information remained. In fact, communicating graduate outcomes in a COVID-19 environment may be particularly important, as 2020 graduates are beginning their careers at a time like no other in recent history.

A challenging question arose: How do we genuinely meet and care for our graduates where they are in our role as career services professionals, while telling an accurate and meaningful story of graduation outcomes in our role as assessment professionals?

### **Strategic Responses**

Strategizing appropriate responses to this dilemma required collective reflection and action. Cross-institutional benchmarking groups of career services practitioners came together to share ideas and support each other. One such group, the *ARCS Network* (Assessment and Research in Career Services), considered three key areas of survey adaptations: messaging, timing, and survey questions.

**Messaging.** A fairly consistent approach to carrying out graduate outcomes assessment in a COVID-19 environment was to integrate a “softer ask.” Assessment professionals in career services broke from traditional strategies of streamlined emails with a singular focus on the survey ask, in favor of dual-purpose messaging. They advocated for a “high-touch” approach, which included survey links, but also focused heavily on sharing information about career services support, resources, and programming for those whose plans were disrupted or delayed due to COVID-19. Some institutions planned to go beyond standard email messages, including

personalized emails, phone calls, and text messages with immediate career services outreach and advice.

*Campus Example.* The Smith Career Center at Bradley University, a private university in Peoria, Illinois with 5,400 undergraduate and graduate students, engaged in an email, text, and phone call campaign for all spring 2020 graduates which employed language such as:

- “I am here to help you be successful.”
- “I encourage you to continue to prepare for the future – review as many job announcements as possible, use that knowledge to ‘tailor’ your application materials, prepare/practice for interviews, and research/learn about salary/benefits.”
- “Patience, perseverance, and persistence are words for these times.”

**Timing.** As previously addressed, moving to remote operations and the cancellation of in-person graduation events due to COVID-19 presented significant data collection challenges. Campuses also expressed concerns that the economic slow-down and hiring delays would leave more graduates uncertain regarding their outcomes at graduation. Others wondered if job offers reported prior to graduation might be rescinded due to economic stresses, which could result in over-inflated outcomes if they do not reconnect with graduates at later dates. This led to many questions regarding the timing of graduate outcomes surveys. Should data collection begin later, and should campuses follow their graduates for longer than the national standard of six months post-graduation this year as set by NACE (2019b) in order to provide opportunity for economic recovery to impact new graduate hiring?

*Campus Example.* The Illini Success Initiative (<https://illinisuccess.illinois.edu/>) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, a public research institution with 51,000 undergraduate and graduate students, chose to maintain its typical survey schedule. Survey invitations began approximately one-month before the May 2020 graduation. This timing allowed for an intentional use of the well-known survey initiative as a vehicle for distributing career services resources to all graduates through modified survey messaging that prioritized students’ career needs. Additionally, Illinois plans to report on the standard six-month post-graduation schedule for this year’s data to be comparable to previous (and future) years for benchmarking.

**Survey Questions.** Much discussion also occurred around expanding the types of questions asked about graduate outcomes, with two primary topics of interest emerging. First, interest existed regarding graduates’ experiences in the job market with delayed timelines for interviews, offers, and start dates, as well as a concern with rescinded offers. Second, questions arose about changes graduates make to navigate a difficult job market. For example, might graduates accept part-time or contract work, when their goal is a full-time position? Do graduates pivot in the industry, position, or skill sets that they are applying to use? How related are these choices to their career goals and/or academic program? How satisfied are they with their choices? When considering adding survey questions, it is important to think about data use. For example, based on the results, what actions might be taken to improve career service supports for graduates?

*Campus Example.* Colorado State University, a public research institution with 34,000 undergraduate and graduate students, was interested in hearing directly from students about challenges they were experiencing related to COVID-19. A cross-campus group brainstormed potential challenges to be presented in a single, multi-select survey question (see Figure 1). An open response option was provided for students to directly express their concerns. This allowed Colorado State to gather representative information from a large student population and immediately use the results to inform supports and educational programming.

**Figure 1. Campus example of an additional survey question related to COVID-19.**

How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted your job search? *(Please select all that apply)*

- I am having/had a difficult time finding jobs or internships in my industries of interest
- I am having/had an easy time finding jobs or internships in my industries of interest
- The employers I am interested in have frozen their hiring
- My interviews with potential employers have been postponed or cancelled
- My start date for the job I accepted has been postponed
- I was offered a job or internship and the offer was later rescinded
- My internship or job I accepted was moved from in-person to virtual
- I plan to continue my education rather than search for employment at this time
- It hasn't impacted my job search
- Other (please specify)

### Concluding Reflections

COVID-19 has had a profound impact on higher education and employment, deeply impacting the lives of students and recent graduates. Looking forward, it is essential to be thoughtful and sensitive to the ways in which we prepare graduates for successful transitions to life outside of the academy. Continued dialog will be essential as we persist in this graduate outcomes assessment journey. We must continue to closely monitor the needs and experiences of our 2020 graduates, as the insights we learn will better prepare us to support future graduates as they discover their “first destinations” after college in the challenging months to come.

### References

- Center on Education and the Workforce. 2020. *Tracking COVID-19 Unemployment and Job Losses*. Georgetown University: Author. Retrieved from <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/jobtracker/>
- Makela, J. P., and K. Hoff. 2019. “Career Outcomes Data from Social Media: Examining Quality in Current Practices.” *Career Development Quarterly*, 67, 220-235. [doi:10.1002/cdq.12192](https://doi.org/10.1002/cdq.12192)
- Mattingly, K. D., M. C. Rice, and Z. L. Berge. 2012. “Learning Analytics as a Tool for Closing the Assessment Loop in Higher Education.” *Knowledge Management and E-Learning*, 4(3), 236–247. <https://doi.org/10.34105/j.kmel.2012.04.020>

National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE). 2019a. *Outreach to Target Students Who Indicate "Still Seeking" on FDS Survey*. Bethlehem, PA. Retrieved from <https://www.nacweb.org/career-development/best-practices/outreach-to-target-students-who-indicate-still-seeking-on-fds-survey/>

National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE). 2019b. *Standards and Protocols for the Collection and Dissemination of Graduating Students Initial Career Outcomes information for Undergraduates*. Bethlehem, PA. Retrieved from <https://www.nacweb.org/job-market/graduate-outcomes/first-destination/standards-and-protocols/>

National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE). 2020. *Coronavirus Quick Poll*. Bethlehem, PA. Retrieved from <https://www.nacweb.org/talent-acquisition/trends-and-predictions/coronavirus-quick-poll-preliminary-results/>

Julia Panke Makela is the associate director for assessment and research in The Career Center at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; Jon C. Neidy is the executive director of The Smith Career Center and assistant vice president for student affairs at Bradley University; and Barbara Richardson is the director of operations and assessment in the Career Center at Colorado State University. The authors express sincere thanks to members of the Assessment and Research in Career Services (ARCS) Network (<https://go.illinois.edu/arcs>) for engaging in conversations that greatly informed this article.