

# A Structured Course for Personal and Professional Development

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## THE CHALLENGE

Students arrive on a college campus full of excitement for their futures; most of them wholeheartedly and enthusiastically embrace the culture of learning, the newfound independence, and the pursuit of nonacademic interests that typify the college experience. Unfortunately, a student's subsequent daily life can be dominated by such questions as how to do well in classes, how to keep scholarships, how to balance a part-time job, and how to find time for extracurricular activities. Many of the skills necessary to thrive at college—such as managing time, dealing with roommates and stress, developing rapport with faculty, mastering the educational material, and planning for a career—can be overwhelming to young college students. A survey of first-year college students in 2012 reported that 47% struggled with effective time management, 47% had difficulty getting along with their roommate, 41% were dissatisfied with the relevance of coursework, 42% frequently felt

overwhelmed by all they had to do, 35% switched majors, 33% had difficulty adjusting to the demands of the coursework, 33% had a hard time developing effective study skills, and 25% left college before their sophomore year (Higher Education Research Institute). Meanwhile, as educators we strive to encourage intellectual curiosity, to inspire a love of learning, to foster the application of knowledge, to embrace self-reflection, and to develop the whole person. We aim to assist them in developing the character of a critical thinker, in maturing as an individual, and in progressing toward becoming a success within their chosen field, i.e., we aim to assist them in their personal and professional development. To accomplish this aim, we need to meet students where they are.

Since 2009 almost 90% of the surveyed college freshmen have identified “getting a better job” as a major reason for attending college (Pryor et al). College educators can help students work towards this goal by producing mature, critical-thinking graduates who are well-prepared not only for life but also for a career. Many students, unfortunately, do not participate in the frequent, developmental interaction that provides encouragement and guidance in examining and developing their future career goals. They can best choose a career by identifying a confluence of aptitudes, experiences, and passions. Students’ post-graduate plans and a pathway for making these plans a reality merit deep inquiry. While most students periodically interact with an academic advisor within their major, these meetings frequently focus on scheduling and class selection issues. While these discussions are important to ensure degree completion and on-time graduation, they do not provide the guided introspection that aids in the development of a career plan. Academic advisors are sometimes not trained or equipped to provide significant career exploration. Career advising, on the other hand, is not necessarily as structured or proactive as many students need. All too often, gathering information on careers and career choice is a student-driven activity that occurs only late in a student’s college experience, left to offhand and belated trips to career services. A benefit to both the student and the college would be to intertwine career exploration and academic advising within a defined curriculum no later than the first semester of the student’s sophomore year at college.

## **BEST PRACTICES**

Our challenge is not only to encourage the overall growth and learning of each student but also to make the learning strategic so that the student

is positioned for acceptance in, and success at, post-graduate school and employment. Strategic learning requires keeping students' focus on both the impending hurdles of college academic requirements and the need for longer-term career goals, and it requires that students recognize and appreciate their skills and interests. A variety of international organizations have assembled methods for assisting students in achieving success in college and beyond, and their recommendations can advance our aim to help students create a personal and professional development plan, applying skills and knowledge for both individual growth and career advancement.

## **Career Readiness**

The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) has defined career readiness as “the attainment and demonstration of requisite competencies that broadly prepare college graduates for a successful transition into the workplace” (“Career Readiness Defined”). Additionally, NACE has identified key career readiness competencies of critical thinking, communication, teamwork, information technology application, leadership, professionalism, career management, and intercultural fluency (“Career Readiness Defined”). Most students gain the key readiness competencies through academically challenging coursework and the life skills obtained during college. Although students may then possess the skills needed for a successful transition to a career, without additional guidance they may not be certain what that career should be and how to get there. From the moment students first arrive on campus, the goal is to motivate them to determine, investigate, and plan for their future career. Students need the guidance of a mentor who acts as part academic advisor, part career counselor, part professor, part devil’s advocate, and part cheerleader. The resources provided by NACE, including individual skill assessments, sample course descriptions, and articles on career readiness planning, support a mentor’s efforts (“Career Readiness Resources”).

## **Academic Advising**

The National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) has compiled core values and recommendations for best practices. NACADA recognizes that academic advising is “an integral part of the educational process” that cultivates a student’s potential. Students develop an accurate self-perception and “sound academic and career goals” through regular communication with an academic advisor. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural

Organization (UNESCO) recommends that academic advising activities include assisting with “decision-making and career direction,” interpreting “interest/ability inventories,” and selecting other “educational experiences” such as internships and study abroad; these advising activities should be performed in addition to the standard advising role of aiding in the selection of courses and evaluating progress towards goals (“The Role of Student Affairs”).

The NACADA and UNESCO standards suggest that successful academic advising uses contact with an advisor to develop students’ potential and career direction by effectively gauging their interests and abilities. Numerous academic advising advocates have added to these standards in their studies of the key attributes of effective advising. Their work suggests that successful advising is integrative, helping “students make meaning out of their education as a whole,” and that students “should expect their advising relationship to be an intellectually challenging one that will require substantial effort on their parts but will offer extraordinary rewards as well” (Lowenstein, “Toward a Theory”). Given both the effort and time needed for a student to be fully involved and also the importance of the learning that occurs, advising should take place in a structured, credit-bearing class: “this reflective learning is so important in institutions of higher learning that the student should earn credit toward graduation” (Lowenstein, “Academic Advising”).

Despite various theories and approaches to academic advising, developmental advising has become the most common advising approach used in honors programs (Klein et al). Developmental academic advising is a “systematic process based on a close student-advisor relationship intended to aid students in achieving education, career, and personal goals through the utilization of the full range of institutional and community resources” (Winston, Grites, et al.). Developmental advising leads students to “realize their maximum educational potential through communication and information exchanges with an advisor” (Winston, Ender, et al.). By continually interacting with an advisor, students develop a plan on how to achieve personal and professional goals: “The relationship goes beyond typical advising issues such as registration and class scheduling, tapping into academic competence, personal involvement, and developing life goals” (Klein et al).

Drake and King of NACADA recommend approaching advising as a teaching and learning process, with the student exploring the questions “Who am I?” and “What do I want to do with my life?” Students can explore the former through personality inventories and self-reflection and the latter through short- and long-term goal setting, career exploration, and a clarification of

the fit between strengths and goals. Students can then examine the question “What do I need to do to achieve my goals?” by using campus resources and interacting with faculty.

The inclusion of these developmental advising attributes with other academic advising recommendations creates a succinct summary of best practices: students should be involved in an intellectually challenging, credit-bearing class in which an advisor guides them to investigate their interests and abilities and take responsibility for their education with the goal of developing their potential and career direction.

## **Career Counseling Services**

NACE professional standards for career services emphasize helping students understand their competencies and interests so they may explore the fit between their competencies and job requirements. With this understanding, a student can choose relevant experience opportunities, i.e., “student activities, community service, student employment, research projects, cooperative education, [and] internships” to increase future educational and job prospects (“The Professional Standards”). NACE provides career readiness resources that can be used to help students assess their skills, understand the value of internships and job mapping, and market the value of their study abroad time; it also advises that career services provide occupation information, job-search training, and connections to alumni and prospective employers (“Career Readiness Resources”). UNESCO also recommends that career counseling assist students in becoming “active managers of their career paths (including managing career transitions and balancing various life roles) as well as becoming lifelong learners in the sense of professional development over the lifespan” (*Handbook*). In summary, the standards for effective career counseling lead a student to explore and prepare for future career possibilities by understanding personal competencies, pursuing the correct academic program, and participating in experiential opportunities.

## **COMBINING ACADEMIC ADVISING AND CAREER COUNSELING**

Comparing the summary definitions and goals of academic advising and career counseling reveals the similarities in their purpose and approach, and a strong link between the two helps students synthesize their academic and nonacademic interests in the context of their longer-term passions, talents, and values. Career and academic advising interact to “help students

understand how their personal interests, abilities, and values might predict success in the academic and career fields they are considering and how to form their academic and career goals accordingly” (Gordon).

## **GENERATIONAL INFLUENCES**

Generational theory suggests certain overriding traits of different generations and preferred methods for interacting with them. The college students we are working with now are generally the tail-end of the Millennial generation. Tamara Montag et al. studied Millennials and summarized effective methods for advising them. She reported that this generation feels a “specialness trait,” and consequently the most effective method for advising them is to provide “constant feedback, individualized classes, and a personal relationship with an advisor/mentor” (29). Montag et al. recommends that Millennials be assigned both a staff advisor and a faculty mentor; the staff advisor provides “straightforward advice about majors, course offerings, and requirements” while the mentor engages “in developmental advising practices, giving individualized attention to students, guiding them through career options, and connecting them to resources relevant for their major” (32).

## **SYNTHESIZING BEST PRACTICES**

An excellent way to keep post-graduate planning in the forefront of students’ minds is to make it a requirement. All college students are well-served by a mandatory, credit-bearing, four-year course of study that synthesizes key aspects of academic and career counseling into one setting. Such a course provides a one-on-one opportunity for each student to investigate personal aptitudes and interests and to engage in the interactive development of individual personal and professional goals. Each freshman enrolls in a first-year experience class, ideally led by the student’s mentor, to acquire the academic and life skills needed for a successful transition from high school to college. The curriculum for this freshman class includes not only proven techniques for studying, managing time, and communicating with professors but also tasks each student with developing a plan for using each semester and each summer for career-valuable endeavors, employing self-assessment tools, and exploring experiential learning opportunities. After this freshman experience course, each student enrolls in a three-course series on “Personal and Professional Development.” This course, again led by the mentor, provides the opportunity for research, writing, and discussion on the topic of the

student's future. The faculty mentor, as suggested by Montag et al., coordinates personal developmental advising and career planning services. Through this four-year approach, students develop a personal relationship that guides them in discussing and assessing their interests and abilities, that encourages them to engage in additional experiential opportunities (such as study away programs, research, and internships), and that coordinates their academic and career goals.

## **DETAILS ON A PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT COURSE SERIES**

The goal of a Personal and Professional Development class is multi-faceted:

1. To hone a student's knowledge of his/her chosen profession
2. To verify that the profession is a good choice given the student's aptitudes and interests
3. To assess the best methods for achieving professional success
4. To develop faculty contacts
5. To improve each student's research, writing, and discussion skills

During the first semester of the freshman year, as part of a first-year experience class, the student assesses personal aptitudes and interests, describes career goals, and investigates experiential learning opportunities. In a one-on-one tutorial setting during the sophomore through senior years, the student receives individualized attention from the mentor on the student's chosen profession and how to be a competitive candidate for that profession. The student and mentor meet every two weeks during the fall semester of each year to engage in a program of research, writing, discussion, and strategizing about the student's post-graduate goals. At the beginning of the sophomore, junior, and senior years, the student self-reflects and reports on the previous year's preparations for post-graduate goals. Then, the student develops a plan for the coming year to become more competitive for post-graduate endeavors. Typical areas of research, discussion, and pursuit include internships, research projects, study abroad opportunities, summer work experience, graduate schools, and prospective employers.

During these meetings, the student reviews past discussions of the future career and new questions that have come to mind. Research topics often

include characteristics of the chosen career, specific companies for future employment, study abroad options, undergraduate research projects and conferences, and post-graduate scholarships. The student gathers information by reading relevant materials and conducting interviews of those who work in the field and then writes a report summarizing what has been learned. A student who is uncertain of what to research regarding the chosen profession is assigned readings on topical material or interactions with a campus expert to gain insight. The findings and corresponding report are the starting point for subsequent meetings. The goal is no less than five meetings and ten written pages during the semester.

The goals and focus of the one-on-one conversations vary slightly depending on the student's class year. The outline below presents a beneficial conversational framework.

- Freshman year: The student is tasked with getting to know at least one faculty member in his or her major. The student is informed of available experiential learning opportunities, such as study abroad, a Washington semester, and undergraduate research. The student discusses his or her intended major, personal aptitudes, and general career goals. A portion of students have a lifetime dream career in mind but have never fully examined if this career is a realistic, desirable career goal. Because a variety of pitfalls may prevent this dream career from coming to fruition, the student should consider a Plan B.
- Sophomore year: The discussion starts with "What are your career plans?" and transitions to "What do you know about that profession?" and "Whom do you know who works in this field?" From there, the student reads relevant material and/or interviews someone about this profession. The student conducts this research, writes a summary report, and returns to discuss the findings. The student then develops an experiential summer plan, i.e., an internship, volunteer work, study abroad, or undergraduate research project, which will give both experience and a knowledge base to assess if the planned career path is a good fit.
- Junior year: The conversation starts with "What did you do this summer?" and "What are your career plans now?" To deepen the student's professional knowledge, experience, and connections, he or she is asked to reach out to relevant faculty, to read a faculty publication and discuss it with the author, to continue research in his or her major,

and to begin planning for the next summer opportunity. The student is encouraged to consider various post-graduate scholarship opportunities, to narrow down the graduate school possibilities, and/or to research employers of interest.

- Senior year: The conversations are much like those with the juniors, focusing on pursuing prospective employers, graduate schools, or professional schools. The student learns to write scholarship and graduate school applications, if applicable, and fine-tunes résumés, personal statements, and admissions or scholarship essays in addition to preparing for interviews.

Although time-intensive, this approach keeps students' future career goals in focus and encourages students to examine and alter their career goals as they grow and mature in their college studies. It also guarantees that the students have contact with their mentor throughout the semester, not just when it is time to register for classes or get recommendation letters.

This structured plan, which is a mix of both academic advising and career counseling, is foundational to career readiness. The program does not replace the services offered by both the departmental academic advisors and the career center but instead brings them together into a structured, recurrent, one-on-one conversation with a faculty mentor. This approach is not only in line with the recommended developmental advising approach but also provides the personal, one-on-one relationship that Millennials desire.

## **IMPLEMENTATION OF A PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN**

This credit-bearing, four-year plan has been implemented in The Citadel Honors Program for over two decades. The course was originally phased in for sophomores and juniors in 1995 and then expanded to include all honors program students the following year. For the first few years, the class was optional for honors students, but student feedback indicated that the process was so beneficial that the course became mandatory for honors program graduation.

This personal and professional development plan has two components: the freshman introduction course, taught in a group setting, and the three-year individualized course series, taught entirely in one-on-one tutorials. The honors director serves as a faculty mentor for all the honors students, teaches

the first-year experience course section for all honors freshmen, and leads the Personal and Professional Development class series for all honors sophomores, juniors, and seniors. All honors students still have academic advisors within their majors to maintain consistency with the process for non-honors students.

The first-year experience class incorporates assessments of learning styles and core values, presentations on experiential learning opportunities, and interactions with career services personnel. The honors section of this class, taught by the honors director, provides an initial opportunity to encourage participation in experiential learning opportunities and to create a written statement of career goals and professional plans.

#### LEADERSHIP 101: FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR (One Credit Hour)

LDRS 101 provides the academic and life skills to help students make a successful transition to college as well as to the unique environment of The Citadel. Students develop their academic skills—i.e., reading, listening, note-taking, test-taking, time management, and research—and are introduced to campus facilities, resources, and support services. (*The Citadel Course Catalog* 104)

The goals for students are outlined in The Citadel's *Leadership 101: The Freshman Experience*:

- Learn how to and make a successful transition from high school to college
- Examine and understand the purposes of higher education and the practice of intellectual engagement
- Learn about and develop critical thinking skills and effective time-management strategies
- Learn about and plan a course of study that is consistent with and supportive of the student's interests, abilities, and career goals
- Learn about the Study Abroad Program and internship opportunities that may enhance the educational experience

The three-year class series for honors sophomores, juniors, and seniors is a structured, individualized approach to assessing a student's talents and

strategizing to achieve professional goals. Meeting with each student one-on-one, the honors director creates a mentorship, learning, and accountability process for developing a professional plan. The focus of the research, writings, and discussions is individualized by student and class year.

HONR 211, 311, and 411: Honors Personal and Professional Development I, II, and III

Taught entirely in tutorial, this sequence directs students in a three-year period of research, writing, and discussion on the subject of their professional goals, encouraging them to envision their leadership in their future profession and guiding them in exploring through research and writing the ideals as well as the facts of that profession. Three credit hours (PASS/FAIL) are granted upon completion of HONR 411. (*The Citadel Course Catalog* 103)

This class series motivates students to research and plan for their careers and to focus on what they will do after graduation. The structure of the series, as a continually iterative process of exploration, discussion, and decision-making, uncovers and allows for alterations in goals and aspirations. Career paths and interests change as students get further into their coursework, interact with faculty, undertake research or internships, and investigate what it means to be a member of their chosen profession. Moreover, students' semester abroad experiences, their interactions with faculty, and their research raise their curiosity, their aspirations, and their confidence.

As an example of the success of this plan, a young man stated during his college interview that he planned to major in either business or political science and have a career in the Army after graduation. During his freshman year, through the first-year experience class taught by his mentor, he learned about the Washington Semester Program, undergraduate research opportunities, and study abroad options. He applied for the Washington Semester Program and was accepted for the fall semester of 2008. He spent the summer of 2008 attending the competitive Army Airborne school; then he spent the fall Washington semester as a fellow in the national office of a U.S. congressman. He returned to college for the spring semester, immediately beginning a research project in the political science department, as encouraged by his faculty mentor. Additionally, during the spring 2009 semester he pursued and received a scholarship for a summer study abroad, which he spent in Spain. When he returned to college in the fall of 2009, he was a junior who had proudly studied away in Spain and Washington, D.C., and worked on a research project

in his major. In conversations during his junior year (HONR 311), he still planned on a long career in the military followed by a government-related job. He continued to excel in the Army ROTC program and held a high-level leadership position within the student body. His leadership abilities, interest and experience in politics, and academic abilities led to the suggestion of a possible law career. By the start of his senior year, he was studying for the LSAT and acting as the Judge Advocate General (JAG) for the Citadel Army ROTC department. Upon graduation, he attended Duke University School of Law. He is now a lawyer and an officer in the U.S. Army.

The encouragement, the information on relevant educational opportunities outside of the standard curriculum for his major, and the assistance provided through the four-year Personal and Professional Development approach were beneficial to his path and his success.

## **SUPPORT FROM OUR STUDENTS**

Feedback from The Citadel Honors Program students indicates that the one-on-one meetings have an impact. The following quotations are typical of feedback from students:

The biggest benefit of the Personal and Professional Development classes was the one-on-one interactions with [the honors director]. I have always had a “wing-it” attitude about major life decisions, so sitting down with him and regularly discussing my future plans has helped me a great deal. These discussions, readings, and papers did make me realize that I needed to pursue employment that would benefit me in the future. I took an internship in the purchasing department of a local company after sophomore year partially because HONR 211 clued me in to the reality of my professional life. These classes have also helped me greatly in my postgraduate plans. I have flirted with the idea of law school for a while, but most of my productive research has come from HONR 311/411. These meetings and papers have allowed me to flesh out my ideas, identify what is important to me, and then find options that fit my values.

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The Personal and Professional Development class was very helpful in its own way, each year that I took it. In my sophomore year, I was exposed to many different paths that could be taken with my

career. [The honors director] encouraged further education, as well as scholarly programs and scholarships to apply for. After I decided I didn't want to take that route, [the director] guided me towards professional development. During my junior year I landed an internship for the following summer, so [the director] gave me many tools and tips to set myself apart from my peers. During my senior year the class helped me polish my skills and expose me to an even greater variety of accounting professions. [The director] sent me various articles and journals that taught me more about my accounting profession than any accounting class had thus far. In all, it was very helpful to have a mentor who was geared towards helping me individually. [The director] was very persistent in pushing me to develop myself over the course of my college career.

A quantitative correlation study on the specific effect of this course on graduate school attendance rates and job satisfaction has not yet been done. While honors program graduation rates, graduate school acceptance rates, and persistence in career path following graduation are high, the direct correlation solely to this course has not been established. However, qualitative surveys of The Citadel Honors Program alumni consistently produce comments that the Personal and Professional Development plan was high-impact. Alumni value the discussions of career goals over all four years and the opportunities for meaningful experiential learning experiences both to gain real-world knowledge and to differentiate them from other candidates for post-graduate opportunities.

## **OTHER POINTS**

The Citadel Honors Program is mid-sized, with approximately a hundred students. Admittedly, the program size contributes to the feasibility and successful execution of this course, but the approach, focus, and framework could be modified for larger programs. For example, the course could have sophomores and juniors meet predominately in groups based on major and career goals. Then, the students could present to the group and discuss research on careers, graduate schools, companies, and related topics. For maximum impact, there should be some one-on-one mentorship, however, to supplement the group meetings.

## CONCLUSION

This four-year, one-on-one Personal and Professional Development course model reflects the best practices in advising and career counseling. This individualized mentor/advising program encourages research, writing, and discussion on the topic of the student's future. The approach influences students' ability to recognize their talents, skills, interests, and experiences. Additionally, the program encourages students to take actions to ensure that they are well-positioned to pursue their post-graduate goals. This course of study, combined with a rigorous undergraduate curriculum, produces a mature, critical thinker who is poised for a successful career.

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