Boise State University Alumni Workforce Participation

Summary of Findings

Sample Characteristics: This sample of Boise State University alumni was drawn from members of the graduating classes from 1993 through 2007 who had an active email address on file with the Alumni Foundation. The alumni who responded tended to be high academic achievers with 43% reporting a final grade point average above 3.5. Based on how the sample was drawn and the profile characteristics of the respondents, this information may not be reflective of the general population of Boise State University graduates during this period.

Transition: 60% of these graduates immediately enter the workforce upon graduation and 17% continued their education. Approximately 15% were still seeking employment which many of them procured within six months of graduation. The remaining graduates were involved in personal responsibilities that kept them out of the workforce, were traveling, or engaged in volunteer activities.

Career History: All these graduates reported being actively engaged in a career since they completed their bachelor’s degree though 30% indicated that they had endured short periods of unemployment. They have held between 3 and 4 jobs (average) since graduating and were employed by three (average) organizations.

- The average length of tenure in their first position dropped from 4 years in the mid 1990’s to 16 to 18 months by the mid 2000’s.
- They changed organizations approximately every three years.
- Graduates from the colleges of SSPA and A&S tended to change positions (jobs) more frequently than graduates from other colleges.
- SSPA and A&S graduates reported finding it more difficult to establish their career than graduates from other colleges.

First Position: For 80% of these graduates their first work assignment was located in Idaho, primarily within the Treasure Valley economic region.

- 81% began their assignment within six months of graduation.
- 50% were employed by for-profit companies.
- 63% were classified as working in service sector organizations.
- 32% held this position for 12 months or less.

Current Position: Approximately 80% of the respondents were working in a different position than the one reported as their first position. Today, 65% are working in Idaho with Washington, California, and Texas being the most frequently mentioned locations outside Idaho.

- 50% were employed by for-profit companies.
- 59% were classified as working in service sector organizations.
- 44% worked for organizations with more than 1000 employees (28% for organizations with less than 100).
- Tenure in this position averaged 4 years but the variation was wide from just started to more than 10 years.

Additional Education: Slightly more than one-quarter (26%) have earned a master level degree MSW, MS, MA, or MBA) since receiving their bachelor’s degrees. Another three percent have completed a PHD (including medical degree). Some of these alumni have returned to school to earn an associate’s degree (13%) or an additional bachelor’s degree (maybe has high as one-third).
Skills and Competencies Important in Achieving Success in First Position: Managing one’s time and priorities and being able to perform their assignments with integrity were two critical competencies in achieving success in their first position. However, these new young professionals had to draw upon a number of variables in order to achieve success that included:

- Able to effectively communicate orally
- Able to solve problems
- Able to think critically
- Able to acquire knowledge
- Able to take the initiative
- Able to analyze, evaluate and interpret information
- Able to build and sustain working professional relationships
- Able to contribute to a team

Overall, 15 of the 24 skill and competency sets presented to them were scored higher than 4.0 (very important) to achieving success.

- Differences between colleges found on 20 of the 24 skill sets. Engineering alumni rated able to work in a diverse environment and communicating orally much lower in importance than graduates from other colleges. Education alumni reported higher scores for performing with integrity, oral communications, developing additional professional skills, and engaging in continuous learning than other colleges.
- Graduation year produced few differences except for utilizing technology. Graduates from the mid 1990’s did not place a high importance in knowing software and computer technologies but by 2007 the level of importance had increased sharply.
- Men and women rated most of the skills similarly, except for several that produced significant differences. Women indicated that working in a diverse environment, contributing to a team, navigating boundaries, balancing work and life, embracing change, developing professional relationships, and demonstrating mastery of their academic major were more important in their early success than men did.
- Alumni who worked in their first position for for-profit companies and government agencies rated oral communication, balancing work and life, building professional relationships, and navigating boundaries lower in importance than those alumni employed in other types of organizations.

Comparison to Employers’ Ranking of Important Skills and Competencies: Because the employer analysis of the important skills and competencies used a different metric to score the skills and competencies, a comparison of the actual rating scores could not be made. The order that the skills and competencies ranked were compared. The two ranking matched very closely. While the order was not exactly the same, the top ten were consistent with one exception. New young professionals attributed their early success to being able to acquire knowledge quickly to complete assignments. Employers placed this competency just below their top ten.

Skill and Competency Preparation: How well prepared, through their academic and co-curricular experiences, were these alumni in each of the 24 competency sets. Overall, these alumni felt they were “moderately” to “very well” prepared in each of these areas. Given the high level of academic achievement among this group, their reported level of preparation may be higher than a broader sample of Boise State University alumni. A gap analysis
comparing the rating for importance to the rating for preparation found that a number of significant differences. In some cases graduates felt over-prepared (engage in lifelong learning, written communication, understanding impact of organization’s practice in a social, cultural and economic context, and mastery of major). However, graduates felt under-prepared in the competencies that made up the list of top ten skills and competencies in importance to achieving success. The gap was widest for:

- Building and sustaining professional relationships
- Managing time and priorities
- Effective oral communication
- Taking the initiative

**Comparison of Preparation between Employer and Alumni:** Employers and alumni employed the same scale to rate the level of preparedness for each skill and competency set. Employers were asked to rate all new college graduates from Idaho and not focus on a particular institution. This instruction was an attempt to remove any institutional bias that an individual employer representative might have. The alumni do represent only Boise State University with close attachment to their alma mater that could bias the rating to the high side.

- Overall, employers consistently reported a lower level of preparation (usually in the moderately prepared range) than alumni. In some cases the ratings were very close: building and sustaining professional relationships, embracing change, balancing work and life, and understanding organization’s practice in a global setting.
- Red flags emerged in ratings on the skills and competencies at the top of the importance list. Six of the top ten competencies showed a wide separation in preparation ratings.

While their importance in contributing to early success is consistent, employers felt that that new graduates were less prepared in these areas compared to how Boise State alumni felt:

- Thinking critically (26% difference in scores)
- Managing time and priorities
- Solving problems
- Analyzing, evaluating and interpreting information
- Oral communication

Employers also rated new graduates preparation in writing much lower than the alumni did.

**Skills and Competencies for Success in Current Position:** Alumni were asked to repeat the exercise, indicating the importance of the 24 skills and competencies to their success in their current positions. Several interesting observations emerged:

- While some shifting in the order occurred, the top ten remained fairly consistent. Managing time and priorities remained the number one competency. Integrity slides down the list while initiative moved strongly upward.
- The largest change in scores, or those that grew faster in importance, occurred for skills that appeared at the bottom of the list with increases ranging from 11% to 21%. Skills and competency scores that increased the most included: understanding impact of organization’s practices, persuading and justifying, planning and managing a project, demonstrating mastery of major, and navigating boundaries.
- Scores tended to converge toward all 24 sets being very to extremely important. In their
current positions, alumni had to call up a broader range of skills to remain successful.

- Differences also disappeared between colleges (only five) and gender (none). Graduation cohort reported several differences with 2005-2007 graduates rating writing and managing information lower while older graduates were relying on their ability to navigate boundaries and embrace change.

- Type of organization produced numerous differences (12) with alumni working for For-profit companies and Government agencies reporting lower importance for balance of work and life and continuous learning; alumni working for government also reported lowest for innovation, understanding impact in a global context, and building professional relationships.

**Lag Effects for Academic Learning**: While the evidence is still preliminary, there appears to be a lag effect that involves the use of one’s academic content in their early career. Having mastered to some degree the theories, principles, methods and practices of one’s academic discipline, a graduate has the credentials to gain access to the workplace – a most important first step. However, mastery of disciplinary knowledge does not lend itself to any great degree in assuring success in the first position. It appears that when thrust into the workplace, a new young professional has to excel in other skills that permit one to handle the complexity and ambiguity of the workplace. Certainly several competencies directly drawn from the academic discipline, analyzing and interpreting information and problem solving in particular, are critical to early success. But it is the skills (often referred to as the soft skills), including communication, teamwork, integrity and personal relationships that are called upon to achieve success. It appears that once a new hire strengthens the foundation upon which his career rests, the academic discipline can be leveraged to advantage in one’s career path.

The growth in importance, especially for graduates from Business, SSPA, Health Sciences, Arts & Sciences, and Engineering, increased by more than 10% between their first position and their current position. Business graduates posted a 25% increase in the importance of mastery of the discipline. Disciplinary mastery grew the fastest in For-profit, Government and Health organizations. Further evidence on the long-term value of the bachelor’s degree was found when respondents were asked to what extent they drew upon this degree for their current professional skills. 86% indicated that they still relied on the BA/BS degree in their professional activities (only on-the-job training and self-learning were rated slightly higher). The connection between academic preparation and career success may not be as immediate as some observers contend. If academic training really kicks in after a young person has gained and demonstrated expertise in the skills and competencies associated with the context of the workplace, the implications would have a profound impact on how higher education institutions measure the return on investment in obtaining a degree and demonstrate their accountability to key stakeholders. The corollary may hold that students who fail to gain the broader skills demanded in the workplace and have trouble gaining expertise in them after they graduate, may not be able to maximize the potential in their degrees.

**Career Success**: These Boise State University alumni report being very successful in their careers compared to other people in their same occupation or position. A preliminary regression captured the
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factors that positively relate to success from among all the possible factors that can influence their success. These factors enhanced an individual’s feeling of success:

- Rated Importance of Planning and Managing a Project higher
- Rated Importance of Oral Communication higher
- Rated Importance of Embracing Change higher
- Better Prepared to Balance Work and Life
- Better Prepared to Develop Professional Skills
- Better Preparation in Persuading and Justifying
- Alignment between academic program and their career

Some factors actually hinder the feeling of career success, including:

- Gender (women reported less successful than men)
- College of Business and Economics (reported not as successful as others)
- Better Prepared in Contributing to a Team
- Better Prepared in Understanding Impact of Organization’s Practices
- Rated Importance of Acquiring Knowledge higher

Career Progress: Respondents were posed a variation on the career success question by asking them how they felt their career was progressing against their peers. The first question was much broader in scope than this question. The intent of this question was how they were doing against those who graduated from college at about the same time they did. A preliminary regression model identified both positive and negative influencers. 46% said they were making slightly better progress than their peers while 22% felt they were doing much better. 32% indicated that they were lagging behind their peers.

Positive influencers:

- Having a Mentor
- Rated Importance of Planning and Managing a Project higher
- Rated Importance of Contributing to a Team higher
- Rated Importance of Oral Communication higher
- Rated Importance of Acquiring Knowledge higher
- Better Prepared in Balancing Work and Life
- Better Prepared in Persuading and Justifying
- Better Prepared in Engaged (continuous) Learning

Negative Influencers

- Gender (women not making as much progress)
- Better Prepared in Understanding the Organization’s Impact
- Better Prepared in Contributing to a Team
Recommendations

Utilization of skills and competencies: New professionals have to draw upon an array of skills, some drawn directly from their field of study, in order to gain success in their first position that provides the momentum for their career. While the skills did not group in sets, like for the employers, the alumni did report basically the same combinations of skills and employers. Current and future students need to be appraised from their freshman orientation the high expectations that will be placed on them at the moment of transition into the workplace.

- Boise State University must be committed to promoting the development of comprehensive professional competencies, attitudes, and behaviors in each student.
- Boise State University must be committed to enhancing integration of liberal learning (Foundational Studies Program), disciplinary, interdisciplinary & co-curricular/experiential concepts and experiences into a professional foundation.

Skill definition and language: Some of the contrary findings, such as the higher one feels they are prepared in teamwork in college negatively influences success while higher importance one places on teamwork positively influences success, can stem from imprecise definitions used by academics and people outside the academy. Within the college experience, teamwork (sticking with this example) can be operationalized through team projects and team coordinated co-curricular activities, employing procedures or dynamics that do not accurately mimic how teamwork is structured and initiated in the workplace. A language problem also exists in that students often do not know how to express their skills and competencies in a way that allows employers to understand how competency was developed.

- Boise State University along with its employer stakeholders need to align the definitions and practices for professional competencies being integrated into the educational experience both in and out of the classroom.
- Students need proactive and embedded assistance in translating their competencies and accomplishments into language that employers understand. Students must learn how to effectively tell their story.

Preparation: Both employers and the high achieving alumni respondents agreed that further preparation across the most important professional skills is needed. Boise State University may not be able to foster all of the 24 competency sets but, for those that are selected, the university must be deliberate in setting them forth as learning outcomes throughout the curriculum and co-curricular activities.

Measures of accountability: The findings from this study suggest that a young professionals' academic learning is leverage throughout their early career. The reliance on their bachelor’s education more than a decade after receiving their diplomas may suggest that the value of the bachelor education increases over time. Unfortunately the public discussion swirling around accountability (return on investment in a degree) is limiting its reference point to the first job (a job that is vacated after 18 months) and the salary received. The actual reference point that better reflects the value of the degree may occur 5 to 10 years post-graduation. However, no institution currently captures a reference that far in the future.
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- Boise State University should hold a conversation on what faculty, staff, and administration expect a Bronco graduate to be like (citizen, professional, learner, global participant) so that appropriate measures can be developed to benchmark outcomes.

- Boise State University should take the lead in undertaking a longitudinal study to document the role of a bachelor’s education in the early professional career and personal development of its graduates.

Use of Foundation Studies Program:
The competency for understanding how an organization’s practice in a social, cultural, economic and political context has its antecedents in the core general education courses offered at the university. The alumni graduated under a different structure for general education completion than current students who are now engaged in the new Foundation courses. The alumni do provide insight into how poorly general education courses are understood and how they connect with disciplinary and inter-disciplinary courses. Alumni felt very over prepared in this competency in their first position but watched the importance explode in their current job. More attention needs to be given to explaining to students how the Foundation courses connect to their academic major courses and to other dimensions of their educational experience.

Too often students approach college with a checklist mindset where from list of courses, course assignments, activities, etc. items are checked off when completed. However, very little attention is given to connecting these experiences (see first recommendation). In structuring courses, assignments, and activities, faculty and staff should try to provide examples of the connections embedded in the learning outcomes.

- Add a Career Planning Component to each of the Foundational Studies Courses. Set aside a designated number of class periods (3-5 classes) in each section of the UF courses for a module on career planning/decision making (UF 100/200) and the internship and job search process (UF 300/400). The Career Center would design these modules, provide content, resources, and expertise and train faculty. While the exact content would need to be agreed upon and vetted with faculty and administration and tied to ULO’s, areas of focus could include:

  - FS 100: Setting the Stage: Career Assessment/Career Decision Making – Creating an Intentional College Experience, the benefits and values of intentional engagement, a high level overview of employer expectations for skills, competencies, attitudes and experiences.
  - FS 200: Reinforcing FS 100 message and Introducing the Career Planning Process: Becoming Employable, Creating an Intentional College Experience, Current Job Market, Employer Expectations for skills/competencies, behaviors/attitudes, and experiences, connecting the UF courses and content to one’s major, Internships (how and why)
  - FS 300: (transfers): Becoming Employable, Creating an Intentional College Experience, Current Job Market, Employer Expectations, the internship experience, connecting the UF courses and content to one’s major
  - FS 400: Putting it all together: Telling your story, connecting your experiences, transitioning from college to career, the Job Search Process (networking, resumes, interviews, and LinkedIn)
• Additional means of embedding Career Planning and the Job Search Process Across the University: Use On-line portfolio to help students “tell their story” translating academic language to common business language. Provide students with the opportunity to reflect on skills learned between classes. Identify co-curricular programming to embed the Career Planning and the Job Search Process in. Examples may be in Student Life and International Programs among others.

Engagement: Evidence from this study show a low level of engagement of students in co-curricular activities. Students heavily invest their time in working off-campus while in school. Participation in internships has increased but many students still opt not to pursue an internship. Employers also indicated little interest in connecting with student organizations; probably because so few students are involved. However, student professional organizations, in particular, are strongly supported by employers in other parts of the country. If Boise State University plans to expand its regional recruiting presence (in response to changing student demographics), more vibrant student organizations will be necessary to support these connections. To gain student interest in professional organizations, they have to be informed