

BMA Team 5

Narrative



Abstract

Collectively, institutions of higher education have always had missions that included preparing students for the demands of their lives after graduation. However, the nature of these demands has changed. The economic reality of current graduates is that they must be prepared for multiple jobs and changes in required skills - prepared for work yet imagined. Yet, many jobs are unfilled with employers indicating students are unprepared. Universities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have not been able to fully equip students with 21st century workplace competencies.

U.Belong is a student-centered initiative that enables and supports students collaboratively working within peer groups; learning through crowd-sourced competency-based modules; creating culminating portfolios; and, through their co-agency in each others' success, developing resiliency and efficacy necessary for workplace success. U.Belong connects students with each other, community resources, and educational institutions to improve student's ability to successfully navigate the transition from college to career.

Narration

Problem / Opportunity

Collectively, institutions of higher education have always had missions that included preparing students for the demands of their lives after graduation. However, the nature of these demands have changed over time (Smith, 2012). The economic reality of current graduates is that they must not simply be prepared for a job or even a single career. Although some students may work in one career field, many others will need to adapt their knowledge and skills to fit multiple jobs and multiple careers (Bureau of Labor Statistics). In fact, today's students will have 10-14 jobs by the time they are 38 and many will experience jobs that don't exist today (Bureau of Labor Statistics). Therefore, students gain an advantage when they have skills that allow them to thrive in different work settings.

Meanwhile, employers find many students unprepared for the workforce and as a result many positions remain unfilled (Hart Research Associates for AAC&U, 2013; Koba, 2013). The Manpower Group's Talent Shortage Survey shows that employers in the U.S. are negatively impacted by the continued lack of available skilled talent (2012). Employers want entry workers with competency on specific skills (Hart Research Associates for AAC&U, 2013; Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2006). These skills include professionalism/work ethic, teamwork/collaboration, oral and written communication, critical thinking/problem solving, and leadership (Hart Research Associates for AAC&U, 2013; Holtzman & Kraft, 2011; National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2012; Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2006).

Many institutions of higher education and NGOs recognize this gap in student preparedness and make efforts to address it. These efforts include career counseling, senior experience, and internships. These efforts are important but do not adequately address the problem. The Strive networks across the U.S. have intentionally sought to improve the resources and opportunities provided to students from cradle to career. However, the career transition in most Strive regional networks has not yet received adequate attention (see Strive Network).

U.Belong is a model that will leverage students as co-agents in the development of their 21st century workplace skills, as co-agents in each other's success, and connects these students with the community and employers. U.Belong builds upon research regarding high impact educational

practices such as learning communities, collaborative assignments and projects, diversity learning, and capstone projects (Kuh, 2008); employer supported learning practices like collaborative research (Hart Research for ACC&U, 2013), the efficacy of peer groups for learning and career transitions (Chua and Chub, 2010; Jukka, Toppinen-Tanner, Mutanen, 2012), and practices supporting student success including hands-on, effortful learning, and belonging/mentoring (O'Banion, 2013). Mentoring and peer groups are effective tools for career development (Hezlett and Gibson, 2007). U.Belong shifts the focus to the student as co-agent of theirs and their team's success to cultivate resilient students who have improved levels of efficacy for workplace success and the resiliency necessary for workplace transitions.

Program Purpose and Goals

The purpose of U.Belong is to create a student-centered platform that enables the formation, collaboration and support for student groups where students act as peer-mentors; learn through crowd-sourced competency-based modules; achieve competency and create a culminating portfolio; and, through their co-agency in each other's success, develop resiliency and efficacy necessary for workplace success.

The goal of U.Belong is to develop a platform that connects students, universities, communities and employers so that students can together develop the necessary competencies to navigate career transitions and achieve workplace success.

The program model of U.Belong utilizes available technology to connect people, curate content, deliver online learning, and track competency.

Program Description

The U.Belong program supports the cultivation of resources by and for students and connects students with their own peer/mentor group, mentors external to their group, employers, local employment agencies, and institutions of higher education.

Students elect to participate in a peer group and then are accountable for their success and are responsible for the success of their peers. This program can be illustrated through the student experience (see Appendix I).

Program Structure and Components

The program can be illustrated by its structure and components

- Campuses and local community organizations market the program to upper division students;
- Students are formed into groups by matching students with complementary strengths and common values in order to leverage group fit;
- A group has approximately 4-6 members sharing a commitment to grow in their ability to effectively navigate career transitions and achieve workplace success;
- The groups work through problem-based exercises to develop key competencies and build a portfolio appropriate to achieve career transitions;
- Students gain badges when (a) they successfully complete a project, (b) they receive an average score of 80% or higher on the competency (e.g., leadership, work ethic, communication) as evaluated by their peers, and (c) mentors assess the work in e-portfolios to ensure quality. These badges will help students show potential employers that they can bring the 21st century skills to the workplace and provide the student with an opportunity to develop greater self-efficacy.
- The model has a technology platform that supports enrollment, group matching, content management for crowd-sourced curriculum, feedback, badges, and ways of keeping students connected with U.Belong and each other. The technology will also include support for mobile devices and social media using HTML5. It will use a permissive engagement system to keep team members engaged with each other and U.Belong.
- The model provides basic guidelines for group beginnings, endings, and restarts.
- The model trusts students as co-agents to continually participate in the improvement of the technology, the curriculum, and the exercises.
- The technology platform allows co-branding with local institutions (e.g., U.Belong at Fresno State) and the platform allows for co-advertising with local employers in order to generate revenue to cover costs.
- The model assumes students are capable of choosing the right mix of face-to-face and online presence and the most appropriate social tools to help them achieve their work.
- There will be a pool of mentor resources available to the teams (e.g., graduates of the program and local employers).

Stakeholders and Engagement Plan

- The primary stakeholder is students. Other stakeholders include institutions of higher education, regional education and workforce initiatives like STRIVE, community-based workforce NGOs, and employers.
- Partners of U.Belong will include institutions of higher education, regional education and workforce initiatives like STRIVE, and employers.

- The Engagement Plan will begin by targeting regions with mature workforce initiatives where there is collaboration between institutions of higher education and employers. The Engagement Plan will leverage its marketing effort by promoting U.Belong to national and regional workforce NGOs, regional initiatives like STRIVE that have a national network, and institutions of higher education.
- Most significantly U.Belong will rely on students who have completed the program to promote the program within their own social network.

Program Plan: Timeline

Development (3-6 months)

- Build the platform with a scalable backend with a light-weight mobile interface and then secure the appropriate cloud I.T. services.

Pilot (Fall 2014)

- Begin with a pilot program at a single university which has strong collaborative ties with local force NGOs and employers. Working with campus career services form up to ten groups. Tune the program and prepare for expansion of the pilot.
- Expand pilot program to two separate locations where there is a strong collaboration between an institution of higher education, local workforce NGOs, and employers.
- Develop the template and rollout toolkit for launch in subsequent markets.
- Conduct program evaluation of pilot and incorporate lessons learned into rollout.

Rollout (Spring 2015)

- Roll the program out to markets that have local, mature collaborative social infrastructure such as Strive that focus on success from cradle to career – so employers are familiar with these challenges and are willing to be engaged in the U.Belong initiative.
- Complete the tuning of the program, update template and toolkit, and prepare for subsequent scale out.

Scale-out (Fall 2015)

- Using the template and toolkit, engage additional markets based on the program's capacity for additional student participants and the potential to increase workplace success.

Program Plan: Design

Following are design components of the U.Belong program:

- Universities' contributions include career services such as trained counselors who could match the group members.
- For mentor resources, seed with university alumni in the workforce and later with program alumni. External mentors do not drive the program. The key point is that the students perform their tasks, build their portfolios, and solve problems by relying on each other. Only when the students request support would they receive it.
- This model flips both the standard teaching model and the standard development model. The development model is unique in that the launch team works with participants to shape the model.
- This model borrows from open source software and crowd-based content. For example, some of the advanced modules involve improving the program itself. U.Belong leverages participants, graduates, and stakeholders to tune and augment the model.

U.Belong provides practical learning experiences through the modules, exercises and pursuit of work. It also offers deep learning opportunities as students discover their strengths, learn from group collaboration, experience the transition from college to career with greater efficacy, and appreciate their capabilities through their personal portfolio. It personalizes supports through the group's interpersonal interactions. U.Belong motivates students to complete college as it engages and strengthens students' ability to effectively transition to the workplace. U.Belong helps develop resiliency and competencies required to successfully navigate the challenging and more frequent workplace transitions in the "new" economy.

Evaluation

The evaluation of the U.Belong model will include four components:

1. Descriptive statistics of program. This will help identify growth in program as well as ensuring that diverse student populations are served.
2. Survey of stakeholders including perceptions and outcomes. This will collect Likert-type quantitative data as well as qualitative information through interviews used to improve the program component and highlight successful outcomes.
3. Chi-square goodness of fit test to determine whether learning occurred in competency areas (method adapted from Holliday, 2012).

4. Pre/post test of participants on self-efficacy.
5. A/B Testing of web/mobile interface to ensure effective engagement with students.

The technology platform will allow the descriptive statistics to be collected as well as pre-tests as part of the sign-up and early work in the program. The rest of the data is collected at the end of the pilot, on an annual basis, or when a student leaves the program. The A/B Testing is a regular process of evaluating student suggested improvements.

Resources

Business Model

The U.Belong business model is built upon an open-source technology platform. The curriculum is maintained through facilitated curation of crowd-sourced contributions. Promotion occurs through partners including institutions of higher education and regional NGOs. Funds will be generated through advertising from employment services aligned with the U.Belong mission.

Initial funding will be obtained through grants and angel capital. Ongoing operational funding will be generated through advertising and partnership dues based upon a formula that favors access and equity.

Budget and Staffing Model

This program will require a program coordinator as well as limited technical and support staff. The ratio of personnel to student participants improves as the program expands.

Staffing requirements include help desk, I.T., and developers. It may be possible to partner with institutions of higher education to leverage personnel and infrastructure.

Recommendations

The transition from college to career is part of the mission of institutions of higher education, yet a gap exists between employer's demands for qualified candidates and student's preparedness. The nature of this demand and the requisite skills continue to change. U.Belong is crucial so students can prepare together to learn critical competencies, successfully navigate career transitions, and achieve workplace success.

Student success task forces and legislation altered the mandate and resources committed to the transition from high school to college. U.Belong begins the conversation on the transition from college to career as it engages students to be their own solution for themselves and each other.

Appendix I: Student Experience

1. Student learns about U.Belong through their campus, peers, and community career service programs. They may also learn about U.Belong through websites and social media.
2. Student joins U.Belong. After the program's initial startup, the costs are determined by the subscribing college (e.g., direct payment, part of a student fee, part of a graduation fee).
3. Student updates profiles with strengths, values, and preferences such as whether to participate in local or distributed group
4. Student is matched and placed into a group
5. Online resources are provided including:
 - a. Team-Dynamics (Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing, Re-forming)
 - b. Link to E-Portfolio
 - c. Link to get U.Belong App (permission-based participant / group check-in)
 - d. Link to Crowd-Sourced Competency Modules
 - e. Mentor Resource List
 - f. Handbook
 - g. Personal Dashboard with Badges and Next Steps for themselves and group
6. Group meets face to face or virtually depending on team's preferences and proximity
7. Group collaborates on real-world problems and completes projects
8. Group provides formative feedback to each other and earns badges based upon completion of learning objectives, projects, and "getting work" activities
9. Group members must decide on their commitment at the end of six months: Re-up, End, Refer, Mentor.
10. Closing evaluation of Group members and themselves to earn Completion Badge.

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