Organizing a Successful Career Fair

A resource developed by the AAG's EDGE Project (www.aag.org/edge)

What is a career fair?

A career fair is a venue in which students and employers can exchange ideas and information about employment opportunities. Some employers actively recruit at career fairs, while others participate in order to learn what skills and perspectives geography students can offer their organizations, to stay connected with and "give back" to the departments and institutions from which they graduated, and to demonstrate their interest in hiring geography graduates. Participating students can explore a range of career paths, network with prospective employers, and practice essential professional skills.

Why host a career fair in your department?

- To introduce students to careers related to their coursework and to help them identify the key skills needed in order to become a successful professional;
- To provide students with opportunities to develop skills in communication, self-presentation, and networking, which will prepare them for job interviews and other professional interactions;
- To develop relationships with area employers, which could lead to student internships, class visits, service-learning projects, and other work-based learning partnerships;
- To bring campus-wide visibility to your department;
- To foster connections with alumni and engage them in departmental activities; and
- To raise employers' awareness of the diverse and valuable skills that students gain as geography majors.

Strategies for success

- Student buy-in is crucial! If students do not believe in the value of the event, they will not attend. Ask students which employers would pique their interest through in-class surveys or discussions, posting the question on social media groups, or conducting a student focus group.
- Focus on quality versus quantity. A "successful" career fair depends less on the number of employers and students who attend than how well it meets the needs and expectations of those students and employers who do participate.
- Plan ahead to avoid last-minute issues. Consider the following as early as possible in the planning process:
  o Where will the event take place? How far in advance does the venue need to be reserved?
  o How much space will you need to accommodate the projected number of exhibitors and attendees?
  o Is adequate parking available for the number of employers anticipated?
  o What dates, days, and times would work best for students and employers?
  o Will refreshments be provided?
  o Will employers be required to pay a fee in order to participate? If not, how will the event be funded?
  o What materials will the department provide (e.g., tables, chairs, basic signage, power connections) and what will the employers need to bring with them or make special arrangements to have?
  o How will you track participating students and employers for record-keeping, future contact, or follow-up?
- Learn from your experiences. Develop a brief evaluation form to distribute to employers and students alike. Their feedback and suggestions can make your career fairs even better in the future.
Assembling your first list of employer contacts

- The easiest organizations to attract are those that currently employ your alumni. Reach out to your alumni and invite them to attend or ask them to refer you to another appropriate contact within their organization.

- If your department does not maintain its own alumni contact list, now is a great time to start! Work with alumni offices and organizations on your campus to obtain information for your department's graduates. Use social media such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter to identify and contact alumni. Ask your school's career services office for a list of area employers who have hired geography students.

- Seek a diverse mix of employers who represent the business, government, nonprofit, and education sectors to encompass a range of student interests and potential career paths.

- Consider involving graduate assistants, student workers, geography club members, or departmental interns in assembling contact lists and reaching out to prospective participants, both to provide opportunities for professional development as well as to increase student investment in the career fair.

Preparing students for the event

- Help students make a great first impression! Direct them to resources or workshops on how to prepare for a career fair. Employers are more likely to become repeat participants if they are impressed with how your students present themselves.

- Ask the career services office on your campus to put on a presentation, workshop, or Q&A session for the students in your department. The careers staff can offer advice on suitable attire, materials to bring, how to research employers, appropriate questions to ask, developing a 30-second "elevator pitch," and many more topics.

- Advertise the list of employers who will participate in the fair. Encourage students to check the list often for new registrations and to research organizations of interest in advance of the event.

You don’t have to go it alone! Securing support for your career fair

- Have a geography class or student club "sponsor" the career fair as a project, or offer extra credit to students who assist with logistics or set-up.

- Choose a flexible classroom space that the department “owns” so that technical and administrative support will be readily available during set-up and throughout the event.

- Partner with a related major to diversify the skill set of participating students. In addition to attracting more employers, you can share the responsibilities of organizing and hosting the career fair with another department.

- Ask your school's career services office what assistance they can offer. They may be able to provide support such as funds; database assistance for managing invitations, reminders, and registrations; a physical space in which to hold the event; advertising and marketing assistance; and/or employers’ contact information.

A successful career fair will require a modest investment of time, energy, and resources, especially when it’s your first. However, the potential dividends to your students and your department are well worth it. Organizing fairs will become easier over time as you gain experience, establish procedures, amass employer contacts, and implement suggested improvements. If a full-scale career fair is not feasible, or if you’re interested in additional careers-oriented events to complement your fair, please see our tip sheet on "Careers Education Beyond the Classroom," available online at www.aag.org/careertips.

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