Design Your Life & 5 Steps to Build Your Network: An Integrated Approach to Utilizing Peers to Support Career Exploration

**Background**

At the University of Arizona, Student Engagement & Career Development leads and coordinates our campus-wide commitment to foster career success for each student we admit, retain, and graduate, through our mission to *inspire and prepare all graduates to create lives of opportunity aligned with their purpose and values*. Our mission supports the Enrollment Management mission to *provide integrated, student-centered services with a personal touch from first contact with prospective students and families through graduation*. In fact, the student-centric support that SECD provides stays with our Wildcats after graduation, as they launch and ultimately navigate their careers.

The Covid-19 pandemic has reminded us that our First-Generation Students, Students of Color, Pell Eligible Students, and students completing non-linear degrees struggle more than their peers to secure meaningful employment after graduation, a reality that we are actively working to change. In AY 2019-2020, SECD served the first three groups of students in proportion to, and often greater than, their representation on campus. Two key SECD programs designed to support our students as they explore careers are Design Your Life (SBS 311) and 5 Steps to Build Your Network. We propose hiring student employees to provide peer support to these two programs in an integrated manner.

**Design Your Life**

Design Your Life (DYL) is a 7-week, 1 credit course grounded in design thinking that guides students as they design a fulfilling life and career, specific to their strengths, interests, and values. Students:

- Uncover career paths that interest them and develop strategies to explore those interests
- Determine what they want in life and in their career, and how to get it
- Ask themselves: What fizzles? What rings true? What inspires my passions?

In AY 2019-2020 DYL served 80 students, with an AY 2020-2021 goal to serve a minimum of 200 students and a plan to continue to scale over time.

**5 Steps to Build Your Network**

5 Steps to Build Your Network (5 Steps) is an email-based program piloted in Fall 2020 after SECD’s popular Job Shadow program was put on indefinite hold due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The program guides students as they prepare for and complete an informational interview, making a new addition to their professional network (often an alumni or individual affiliated with an employer who recruits at the University). Informational interviews help students do two things: find answers to their employment questions and meet people in professions they are curious about or want to enter. The virtual nature of the program enables *any* student to meet with *any* professional, regardless of geography. Students:

- Develop a compelling self-introduction
- Find and interview at least one professional of interest
- Reflect on their experience and what they’ve learned

Pilot feedback from the program indicates that students would like more (virtual) “hands on” support as they identify professionals to connect with, prepare for the interview, and complete the conversation.
Integration and Peer Positions

While 5 Steps will continue to be open to all students, we are proposing its integration as a mandatory component of DYL, as a critical step in career exploration is confirming, or rejecting, career paths of interest. One of the most efficient and effective ways to do this is through informational interviews with professionals who are able to provide an authentic and honest assessment of the day-to-day realities of their jobs, as well broader feedback on their likes, dislikes, and perceptions of their field’s future needs.

We proposing adding peer positions to support this integration in the form of two student employees supporting both programs, to include supporting 5 Steps participants not enrolled in DYL. Students would work 15 hours each week, and their job responsibilities would include:

- Grading DYL assignments
- Providing feedback on participants’ career-related materials, to include their self-introductions
- Facilitating individual appointments to guide students through exploratory conversations, or provide targeted resume, cover letter, interview, and/or job/internship search feedback
- Facilitating “match-making” between students and alumni/other professionals as part of 5 Steps

Students would work during the academic year, part of winter break, and much of summer (anticipated 46 weeks). We would offer 1 section of DYL during the summer and run 5 Steps through summer’s entirety. Note: This proposal has been submitted as a New Project although it is based on the evolution of two existing programs, as the proposed integration and peer positions are both new.

Planned Impact

The proposed integration of these two programs and associated peer positions could support any Wildcat exploring careers, though we would target intensive marketing of the programs to our students most in need. This proposal meets several of the areas identified through the Student Services Fee survey, to include:

- On-campus Job Opportunities
- Career Preparation Opportunities
- Career counseling within specific academic areas
- Career-based experiential learning and internship opportunities for juniors and seniors (less of a direct connection but may help students secure these)

We would target reaching 270 undergraduate students in AY 2021-2022 through DYL with the 5 Steps component, offering 2 sections of 30 students each 7-week session during the academic year and an additional section during the summer. We would anticipate an additional 130 students solely completing 5 Steps, for a total annual reach of 400 students.

Program Assessment and Longevity

We view these student positions as key elements of both programs’ longevity, enabling us to serve more students through peer support without adding additional professional staff resources. We would plan to assess impacts annually, analyzing:

- Total number of students enrolled as well as demographic composition (First Gen, Pell, Students of Color, non-linear majors) of program participants compared to their relative population on campus.
- Program reputation, as evaluated via Net Promoter Score (i.e., would you recommend to a friend).
- Student perception of whether the program(s) helped them make progress towards their career goals.
- Student progression towards a stronger resume, evaluated through established SECD criteria.
- Comparing participants’ post-graduation outcomes (i.e., securing employment or being accepted into a graduate program) as opposed to their peers (note that this would be a lagging indicator, as most students would complete the program(s) earlier in their academic journey).