# Improving Outcomes Series – Part III

# Re*Thinking* Graduate Placement

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 In this, the third article in the series to help school owners and administrators improve outcomes for their students and graduates, the author offers a more detailed action

plan specifically designed for poor placement rates. And, while the plan outlined

below may not address and/or resolve every scenario that may occur affecting

graduate placement rates, it may very well stimulate ideas of thinking outside the box\ box when it comes to connecting graduates with employers.

There are many factors that, either alone or in combination, can affect a school’s placement numbers. Previous articles touched on the most common factors, such as: economic hard times, large numbers of graduates saturating the local market, poor quality candidates for employers to choose from, and failure to connect grads with employers. The following article examines each in more depth and explores positive possibilities.

**Difficult Economic Times**

Job markets are always in a state of flux. Generally speaking, larger markets tend to be more stable because the base is broad. In metropolitan areas, there will be more job opportunities than in rural areas. The reason for more stable markets is because of a broader base of employers and employment fields, which is why people move to larger cities for better employment opportunities. Smaller communities tend to have fewer employers and employment fields to enter, and when a down economy forces an employer to close its doors, that can have a devastating affect on entire communities, counties or states. Therefore, schools need to inform prospective and current students of the possibilities: possibilities of being hired (*the school’s track record of past and current placement rates, which are published in consumer disclosure statements required by the U.S. Department of Education*); possible employers and the demographics they serve; possible wage variances depending on different areas of the country and different employer types; and, the possibility of relocating to obtain a job.

Using massage therapy as an example and depending on the school’s curriculum offering, ***possible employment opportunities*** include, but are not limited to: massage clinics, chiropractic offices, day spas, resort/destination spas, fitness centers/health clubs, sports rehab facilities, cruise ships, and outcalls to homes and hotels. ***Wages vary*** depending on the type of employer and area of employment.

On the lower end of the income scale are generally medical massage offices where LMTs work on people in pain from accident or injury. Insurance companies cap what practitioners (chiropractors, physical therapists, and LMTs) can charge as well as how many treatment sessions can be given. As a result, less money is available for pay. Further, insurance companies may delay payment on claims from weeks to months. Cruise ship employment sounds adventurous, but the hours can be grueling, the pay is minimal compared to what the cruise line charges; and, LMTs are typically not allowed to leave the boat for extended periods because they might jump ship (so to speak) after discovering resort spas pay so much more. Even though spas are among the highest paying employers with clientele who are trying to distress rather than rehabilitate, day spas in the city generally pay therapists less than at a resort or destination spa for which a graduate may have to relocate. Working at a massage clinic as an employee will net less income than doing massage as a self-employed therapist out of a home or hotel. ***Relocation to find a job*** can be a definite possibility. In rural areas a LMT may be trading massages for farm fresh eggs or a side of beef instead of receiving money all the time; or when hard economic times hit, the LMT may have to move to a metropolitan area to find suitable employment. The downside to relocating is higher living expenses.

**Saturated Local Markets**

Sometimes it isn’t so much of a down economy as it is too many schools competing in the same area graduating more students than a local market can bear. Frequently schools rely on national forecasts from the U.S. Bureau of Labor & Statistics as their justification for adding a new program or campus, but fail to research local markets thoroughly. Even if they survey local employers with questions like, “*Have you hired someone in this profession in the past year?*’ or ‘*Do you plan on hiring someone in this profession in the next year?*”they rarely ask themselves “*Are my competitors offering the same program?*’ or

‘*How many graduates are my competitors sending out in the field each year?*’ or ‘*Can the local market absorb my graduates in addition to theirs?*”

Schools could look to fishermen in Third World countries for proactive solutions. Fishermen in the southeast Pacific Rim were competing against each other to harvest the most fish for larger pay for their families and were well on their way to destroying populations of certain species and thereby harming an entire ecosystem. By working together, they finally came to the conclusion that by limiting the amount of their individual harvests, they could keep market prices stable and not deplete fish populations for future generations. In this analogy, schools should consider local markets of prospective students as the fish population, cities and counties as the ecosystem, and enrollments as harvests. By working together to cap enrollments in “overly fished areas,” schools can actually stabilize a portion of the economy in any given area, maintain acceptable placement rates, and help keep graduate wages from bottoming out. Taking the analogy a step further, when schools volunteer at high schools and junior highs to speak about the advantages of specific careers at job or health fairs, it is similar to restocking fish in depleted areas. Institutions may not immediately reap the benefits of their efforts, but it will pay off over time by planting thoughts of better jobs tomorrow in rising generations.

**Poor Quality Job Candidates**

Sometimes schools are so focused on teaching skills of a specific trade or career path, that they sometimes offer minimal skills in job-related math, writing, phone etiquette, communication, salesmanship, dress, and developing letters of introduction and résumés. Schools can’t always be blamed for lack of planning or insight. Given that curricula for certain professions are dictated and even mandated by professional associations, credentialing agencies, and/or local or state governmental departments, sometimes schools have no choice but to offer free workshops for graduates in the above subjects. But where changing school curricula is easier, they should evaluate and consider strengthening these subjects if the option is open to them. And, don’t forget that accrediting agencies need to be informed when making program changes.

**Failure to Connect Graduates with Employers**

Obviously it is the job of a career services department to find available jobs for qualified graduates, and schools are not allowed to make job guarantees to prospective students as an enrollment ploy. Occasionally, a school may use this disclaimer to justify not doing more than having a job board to post openings faxed in by employers. However, it is clearly the responsibility of the school to find jobs for its graduates, and keep placement outcomes within acceptable benchmarks to stay on good terms with its accrediting agency and the DOE. So, how is that accomplished?

It is sound advice to have one person in career services working on placement opportunities for every person enrolling students in admissions. That is a one-to-one ratio. At times, schools are so excited about enrollment numbers they forget the end goal is to help people get jobs to support themselves and their families. Under normal circumstances, a graduate takes the initiative to create a list of potential employers in their area, and then either cold calls them to determine if a current job opening exists or visits the employer with a letter of introduction and résumé. A third option for the graduate might be a combination of mailing out the letter and résumé followed by a phone call or visit a week later to see if the employer received their letter and to request an interview.

Imagine a midsized city, with a population of approximately 150,000-300,000 between city boundaries and surrounding suburbs, which has a handful of vocational schools all offering medical assistant programs that each graduate several hundred students every year. That is a total of about 1,800 graduates all inundating medical offices/centers annually with mail solicitations, cold calls and unannounced visits. Employers would quickly weary of the seasonal spawn from graduates flooding their field.

Conversely, when schools accept the role of creating potential employer lists, making the calls a month or two prior to graduation and then publishing the current active jobs for upcoming graduates, instead of a thousand phone calls there are only half a dozen that get made. Suddenly employers are not inundated, but aware of a valuable resource schools have created for graduates. Long-term professional relationships between employers and schools are essential for placement success. These lists can be emailed to graduates, made available on a secured section of the school website, or the career services representative can call individual graduates to help make those initial connections. Another proactive approach is to go the extra mile by creating job fairs for employers to meet students several weeks prior to graduation where letters of introduction and résumés are distributed and interviews can take place.

**Conclusion**

Inform prospective students and current students realistically about job potentials, like types of employers, average wages, and the possibility of relocating at times for better salaries. Make

sure students get sufficient business and professionalism coursework, even if it is offered through free weekend workshops prior to job fairs and graduation. Also, schools need to take a proactive approach to keep markets from becoming saturated with too many graduates. And lastly, by looking for positive solutions to placement issues rather than allowing negative speak to bog down career service personnel, schools can find a sea of possibilities for graduates; certainly more than the examples given in this article.

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