IAN: Hello and welcome again to CollegeFluency for Parents, where we demystify the college search and college financing process for parents and give insight into the realities of college admissions and financial aid. My name is Ian Mortimer, and in addition to being the vice president of enrollment here at RIT, I am the host of CollegeFluency for Parents. Our guest today is Maria Richart, director of the Office of Cooperative Education and Career Services here at RIT. Maria holds a master’s degree in student personnel administration and has more than 20 years of experience in the field of career services. In her current role as director of the office here at RIT, she creates partnerships with companies and organizations that hire RIT students for both co-op as well as full-time opportunities. RIT’s co-op program is one of the oldest and largest in the nation, and it is a pleasure to have Maria here with us today.

MARIA: Thank you.

IAN: Our conversation today is going to focus on how parents and other evaluators of colleges and universities should incorporate career services into their college search process. As we all know, many families view the job outcome of a college degree as an important driver of the investment in college. Today’s session is designed to ensure that you the listener are well-informed on questions to ask related to career development and career services. From my experience in working with families, the conversation around career and outcomes is one of the most important, but often times comes from a perspective of lack of grounding and information. And today’s podcast should help parents understand how I become a more informed consumer as it relates to the investment in career services and ensuring that investment leads to a successful career and job. Maria, thanks again for joining us, but let’s start off by describing what an office of career services does in today’s higher education landscape. What kinds of services do they provide? And, at a minimum, what should they provide?

MARIA: So, today's career services offices on college campuses, in my estimation, hold a really good value to the college search experience. I think it’s one of those offices that many parents don’t think about because it’s four years from now, so let’s not really worry about that. But I truly believe that that should be added to the college tour. Just like you’re visiting the dorms or visiting the departments, you should visit the career services office. At least the minimum things that every career services office should offer is resume review. That is the most important thing. Whether that student is a third-year or a second-year, taking a look at their resume and really understanding what it is that they need to do in order to start their internship or co-op search. Really understanding what is that process. What is the process for a student to get an internship? Is that process embedded into the curriculum? Or is it something that is just a “nice to have” during the college experience? Ask those tough questions. If my son or daughter wanted to do an internship, what would that support system be? Would they be required to take an internship prep course where they would be able to get resume reviews, cover letters, mock interviews? And third, what support system is there? Does the career services office offer any type of employer on-campus interviews? Do they offer career fairs? What is that support system? So, really asking those tough questions about what kind of support system is there for the student, I believe, is really important.
IAN: I want to take a little bit of a deeper dive into something you said because I do think it’s important for parents to think about. And that is the cultural integration of career services and in our case co-op into the landscape of the institution. It feels like at some organizations or some institutions careers services is one of those things that you go to as a secondary consideration of your educational experience. Other institutions seem to integrate it really tightly, and there’s a real strong cultural bond between faculty and the office of career services that, just from the student’s perspective, adds a lot of value. Is that fair?

MARIA: Yes, that is absolutely fair. I think at universities that value internships or co-ops you will see that synergy with faculty really intertwines with the staff at the career services office and the departments. And they really align themselves well. When you look at universities that have a teaching program or a nursing program or any types of program that has an internship embedded, you will see that those relationships are really solid.

IAN: So, part of it is that for the majors that may not have a formal clinical requirement or a formal internship requirement, how does that major integrate smoothly into an office like yours, so that any major or any program has an opportunity to have an equal experience?

MARIA: Sometimes it takes one. It takes the buy-in of one faculty member. I remember years ago looking at a university and really it took one accounting faculty to say, “I really think this is important,” and really going to career services and saying, “How can I partner?” You start very slowly. And making that connection, making that relationship, and really as a faculty member becoming involved. If you see that the career services office is hosting an employer that is in your field, get out of your office, walk over to the career services office and say, “How can I be involved? How can I let my students know about this? How can I tell this potential employer more about the field and the classes and what we’re teaching?” So, start really small and you will see it really grow from there.

IAN: Is it fair to say that one of the questions that parents should ask as they’re looking at colleges is, “How is a career services organization organized?” Meaning, does the team have points of contact in the academic areas that they work closely with? And, if so, would that be an indication that that’s an institution that culturally integrates academics with career services? And, if not, maybe that raises the question of: How closely is this culture aligned with career development? Is that fair?

MARIA: Absolutely. That is a fair assessment. However, at many universities, depending on how big the career services department is, they may not be able to have the support needed to have an alignment with every department. So, you could look at that and you could look at the relationship. But I wouldn’t necessarily use it as the defining factor.
IAN: Sure. But it is fair to say that the size of the office would also be an indicator as well, in relation to the student enrollment?

MARIA: Absolutely. And knowledge of what’s happening in the classroom. We cannot work in a silo. We have to make sure, as career services professionals, that if we are talking about a specific program, we really need to know what’s going on in those classrooms. We need to understand if there is a new experiment going on, what kind of research that faculty is involved with, so really it’s a two-way street. Us working with the department, and the department working with us as well.

IAN: And if you view the student as the customer, you don’t want to have disjointed communications coming from both.

MARIA: Absolutely.

IAN: Yeah. That's great. Awesome. Thank you. Another thing I'd like to drill down on. That is this idea of the change that’s happened since 2008. I've been working in higher education for nearly 30 years. It seems that one of the big changes that occurred in terms of how people look at college in terms of an investment happened right after the recession. People started asking the questions like, “What kind of outcomes and what kind of employability do students have from your institution?” And one of the things that I notice is that it seems that every college and university now is claiming to be great at career development. They tout 95 percent placement or 97 percent placement or 92 percent placement. And when you look at all of these statistics, it makes you wonder, is everybody really great at getting students employment opportunities? And, if that’s not the case, what are some of the truths behind some of these numbers?

MARIA: I think it’s really important for parents to take a really deeper dive into what those numbers mean.

IAN: Yeah.

MARIA: So, the national average for undergraduate student placement outcome is 64.5 percent. Now, when a university says, “We have a 95 percent placement rate,” look really closely underneath that number and see what percentage of their graduating class actually responded to that survey. So, 95 percent of, say, let’s do a small number, 100 students that responded to that survey could look amazing, of course. But if only 20 percent of students really responded to that survey and told the career services department where they’re going, it doesn’t really talk about the overall class. So, I think it’s really important that parents look at what percentage of those students in that graduating class responded to that survey. And where are they truly going? Are they all going off to graduate school? And that tells you something. There are some universities that, yes, the progression is that you will graduate from undergrad and you will go into graduate school. But if you are looking at getting out of college with that four-year degree and going into the workforce, you really need to take a look at that number and see what percentage of that 95 percent is actually going into the workforce.
IAN: Is there a term that career services professionals use to describe what that number is?

MARIA: Knowledge rate.

IAN: Knowledge rate?

MARIA: Knowledge rate.

IAN: So, if I’m a parent and I ask the question to the director of career services at X school, the way that I would pose that question is, “What is the knowledge rate of those individuals from which you are touting X statistic?” Is that fair?

MARIA: Absolutely.

IAN: And the national average – how would you encourage parents to assess the quality of a knowledge rate? Is there a national average for the knowledge rate? And, if so, what’s a good knowledge rate versus one that’s inadequate?

MARIA: Depending on the university it’s really hard. There is a national average, but it depends on the university and what their requirements are. The national average for this is 57.3 percent.

IAN: One out of two, almost?

MARIA: Right. So really taking a look at that.

IAN: And what would be a good knowledge rate? You being a professional in this field, and you run your own shop here. What would be a knowledge rate that you would feel proud about?

MARIA: Eighty-five percent. Anything over 85 percent. And I’m just going to throw in that right now at RIT, we can boast, overall, for our undergraduate student and our graduate student 91.2 percent.

IAN: So, nine out of ten students that graduate, you know what they’re doing six months out of graduation.

MARIA: Absolutely. And this comes from building a relationship.

IAN: Right.

MARIA: This is not something that happens overnight. It’s the fact that we’re in those classrooms second year teaching co-op prep courses, and keeping on top of them, and getting to really know our students and who they are, so at the end of the four years, or
five years, they're really happy to tell us where they're going and what they're going to be doing.

IAN: That’s wonderful. So, you dropped a word there that I want to follow up on. And that is “co-op.” So, as you know, I am a huge fan of co-op and I feel it adds a tremendous amount of value to, not only, the learning process, but also what students can do after they graduate. Could you spend a few minutes and inform our listeners about the difference between an internship and a co-op? And, if you can, the things that are in common between those two experiences and the things that are different.

MARIA: Co-op is really, if you think about it, co-op is full-time work in the student’s field of study. And it can be anywhere from four months to eight months. And that long period of time really gives the student and in-depth understanding of what that field is. It is also paid, so that student is a valued part of that company’s culture and work. They are assigned projects. Many of the companies that we work with truly cannot run their operations without co-op students. And the other biggest factor is: you are away from the university but you are still a student. You are still enrolled. Your status is still a full-time student. But you’re gone from the university for that period of time to really integrate yourself into that company and into their culture. An internship defined by most other universities could relate to your field of studies. It doesn’t necessarily have to related to your field of study. You might be taking classes at the same time. You might get paid, you might not get paid. So those are the biggest pieces. Co-op is required. It is part of your curriculum. It’s paid, and you are away from the university and 100 percent concentrating on what that company wants you to do.

IAN: When your students go away on co-op, how do you keep connected with them? How does that come alive? If I’m a student, say, out in the Bay Area working for a company, how do you keep connected with them so that they feel supported?

MARIA: Each student at RIT has a co-op coordinator, which they meet in the second year. That person is responsible for working with them throughout the process. In our co-op prep course, we really drill it into our student that while you’re not here at RIT, you still have a person here. There are quarterly emails that go out to students while they’re on co-op. We have a dashboard that tells us who is where and when. We reach out to our employers when our students are there. We visit our students while they’re there. But really we try to ingrain in our students that it is A) your responsibility to reach out to us if something is not going right. But they do hear from us or their employer hears from us. There are five different touch points for both students and employers while they are out on co-op. We have a welcome to co-op email that goes out to both the employer and the student. And then there are two additional emails that go out to students that just really say to them, “Your co-op evaluation is coming. Your co-op evaluation is ready. And your co-op evaluation is past due.” So, they are constantly hearing from our office. And the same type of messages go out to our employers. We have many employers that are familiar with us and familiar with RIT. But then we have a very large number of employers that are not familiar with the program. So a different kind of welcome email goes out to that employer to say, “Welcome to the RIT family.” So, each
party is hearing from us throughout the period where they’re on co-op. If they have an issue, if there is a problem, they know where to reach us.

IAN: One of the things I’ve observed – and let know if this is a fair statement – is that when a student goes away on a co-op experience, they have a transformation that is somewhat similar to when they have a study abroad experience. I think one of the things that I like a lot about a co-op experience such as RIT and other institutions is that you really test, at the student level, your perceptions about the world. And you also learn a lot about yourself. I hear that a lot when students go on study abroad programs where they didn’t realize that they kind of had this grit and resolve, and that kind of came alive via their study abroad program. And it feels like with the students that I’ve engaged with that come back from co-op, they come back different.

MARIA: Yes.

IAN: They come back more mature and they come back a little more informed in terms of who they are, but also what the opportunities of the world are. Is that a fair statement when you talk to your students?

MARIA: Yes. I see that transformation all the time. I had five students this summer on a panel. And each one of them talked about being able to now understand A) why they took that course and getting so excited about coming back. One student talk in particular about a communications course. He was like, “Why do I have to take communications?” And now he was out on a co-op and he comes back and he’s like, “That’s why! Now I need to really pay attention to grammar. It’s important. It’s not text language.” So whether it’s a technical skill within a student’s field or it’s one of the soft skills like, “Really writing is absolutely important, so I really need to pay attention.” I’ve even heard students say things like, “Now I’m all psyched up for the next rounds of courses that I have to take because I’m going to be taking this course and I’ve already done that on my co-op.” So, now they’re all jazzed up and they’re looking forward to having that conversation with their faculty member about, “This is how I really applied these skills while I was out on co-op.” So, we see that transformation all the time. And also, we see the other end of it as well. We see if a student is not so jazzed up about a particular field. Or maybe they’re in engineering because their parents told them this is a good field and you’re going to make a lot of money. And then that student comes back and says this is really not for me. Our office plays a huge role in that as well. We have career counselors that can meet with those students to help them figure out where they can take their skills.

IAN: That’s a really interesting thought. I just want to expand upon that a little bit. And that is the idea that an internship or a co-op experience – we’ll group them together for this example – is it ends. Where the way that you describe it, and it makes more sense to me, is that the co-op experience or the internship experience is the middle to the beginning and the end. And the end is really graduation because the conversation about what you did, how you did it, what you learned connects all the way through to the end
of the student’s experience. Having those reflections and those opportunities to engage
with a professional like yourself feels really, really important.

MARIA: Yes, absolutely.

IAN: Maria, while we’re on the topic of co-op, can you speak a little bit to why employers
find this such a valuable program?

MARIA: So, Ian, it’s interesting that you ask that question. Just to give you a little bit of
background, we send out on a yearly average 4,200 students across the United States
and in 30 countries on co-op assignments every year. We just did a survey, and 94
percent of our employers that we work with have told us that they would hire our
students if a full-time position was available. And I think that speaks to A) the ability of
our students to perform in that particular industry and B) just the relationship and the
partnership within industry.

IAN: So, from their perspective they get an advantage in terms of finding great talent.

MARIA: Absolutely.

IAN: I’d like to close with kind of a big question that I’d like your reflections on. And that
is to parents. If you could give one piece of advice in helping to coach their child in
working with a professional like you, either before the college decision or more
importantly when they’re in college, how would you coach parents to ensure that their
sons or daughters are engaged with career services once they’re at their institution of
selection?

MARIA: That is such an amazing question. As parents – I currently have a college junior
at a college that does not have any kinds of co-ops or internships embedded, and I had
to learn the hard way this year. Really taking a step back and saying to her, “You need
to be able to do this. Go to your career services office.” So really, not pushing, I don’t
want to say I pushed, but softly encouraging that these professionals are there to help
you. If you don’t go to the office and find out how you can get a resume review, get a
mock interviews, understand if there is a career fair that fits you, is there an employer
you can work with, you’re really missing the bar. So really, helping them see that the
people, these professionals, are there to help you, and softly nudging them towards it
but not upsetting them or turning them off in a way that they are just so angry. But each
time you speak to them throughout the year, especially if they are going on a summer
coop, which is where a lot of students will look to go, not to start the search in March.
But start that co-op search if this is your son or daughter’s junior year in the fall of their
junior year. And really utilizing and getting to know their career services coordinators.
Because, again, that three degrees or six degrees of separation is really key. If you met
with your career services coordinator or counselor and you’re really psyched up about
your specific field, they’re going to remember. When that internship job comes in,
they’re going to say, “Ah. So-and-so, I just met with this student,” and keep you top of
mind.
IAN: It’s funny you say that. One of the themes of our first podcast was the importance of relationships – the relationship with the counselor, the relationship with the financial aid office, the relationship with the admissions office – and how important relationship building is to get to the goal that you want. And what I’m hearing you say is that relationships matter in this area of the experience as well, that you want to know your career services professional on a first-name basis, be friendly, be cordial, be communicative because the returns on that relationship can be very much longstanding. Is that fair?

MARIA: Absolutely.

IAN: And would you say the same thing is true also with employers? And when you go into the career fair, how would you suggest a student engage in the career fair process so that it doesn’t feel like going to the career fair is a cold call?

MARIA: Well, I always tell students be unique. Don’t try to memorize everything that a particular company does. But look at a company – why do you want to work for that company and what kinds of positions do they have? Everyone at the career fair will be saying the same thing: “Hi. My name is so-and-so.” [laughter] So if you can come up with a different type of intro. I followed a student on this process. And I saw the notes that this particular student had written down for the career fair. And one of the things that really struck me was, she looked at the company and aligned it with her own goals, but also the goals of her family. This particular company was building aerospace machinery, and she aligned to her father being in the Air Force. And really, that was her opening speech: “I see that you do this and I just want to let you know my dad had this experience.” And the recruiter was really caught off guard that A) the student did her research and B) was just so knowledgeable on their industry. So, it’s not the volume, per se, of the employers that you connect with, but really taking the time to look at the one or two or even ten companies that you really feel a passion or connection to, and you can really start having that conversation. And I’ve seen it where those types of things have worked.

IAN: Wonderful. Thank you so much. So, that’s going to wrap up our podcast around career preparation and career services and how to use that information in the college search process. And just to reiterate something that Maria said, it feels really, really important. Many of you, as parents, are looking at the outcome of an investment in a college degree as a very important consideration. The more you understand the culture, the process, the people that exist in a career services and/or a co-op office, the much better off you will be in terms of understanding how that department and that set of people can work with your son or daughter, and hopefully help them find great success. So, Maria, thank you so much for your time today.

MARIA: Thank you for having me, Ian.

IAN: Absolutely.
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