Maryland Career Development Association

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In this issue

Member Spotlight ~ President-Elect Tessa McKenzie

Interview conducted by Rachel Loock

MCDA recently caught up with new President-Elect, Tessa McKenzie. Tessa Is the Assistant Director, Life Design Lab at Homewood, JHU where she develops coaching strategies that integrate life design, alumni connections employer engagement, experiential learning and mentoring into the learning experience for social science students. She earned her M.A. in International Communication and Entrepreneurship from American University and her B.A. in Communications (with a Public Relations concentration) and Spanish from Saint Vincent College. She also holds the Designing Your Life Coaching Certification. In her spare time, she is also the Chief Resilience Officer of the International Autoimmune Encephalitis Society (a volunteer staff position) and a foster parent.

You began your career as Public Education Officer at the Catholic Immigration Network, prior to your Asst. Director of Student Career Development at Hopkins. What led you to the career development field and what attracted you to that position?

I had been fortunate to work in refugee resettlement with AmeriCorps amidst the "Great Recession" of '08 and quickly identified my "why:" supporting change-makers serving marginalized communities. As Johns Hopkins University embarked on a new model of career development in 2015, I was eager to translate my experience in training and nonprofit capacity building to launch the Nonprofit and Government Career Academy.

What do you like most about your present position at JHU?

Often, we're the first destination for students and that is an incredible opportunity to help ground them in what matters most. With so many societal expectations for success, our life design and career development work helps students identify their unique purpose, vision, mission and values. We encourage students to think about solutions, and prototype ideas to figure out what's possible. We offer the support system so students can better recognize what is working, what isn't and how to exercise more of their motivated strengths. So many of us have a tendency to paint over our ugly areas; as career development professionals, we can provide the space to flip that narrative and turn our perceived deficits into superpowers.

The past 15 months or so we've seen titanic shifts in how people view work, life balance and all sorts of related issues. What changes have you witnessed in your role (if any), in terms of student expectations around career development?

One of the things I've started is a Find Your Future Friday lunch series. Students are invited to join me for intentionally intimate, authentic life-design conversations with employers and alumni. Students need us to be "encouragers in chief," which includes encouraging them to come as they are, get out of their comfort zones in expanding their networks, ask real questions, and lean into their interpersonal skills. . Sometimes there's the belief that to be professional, you have to play pretend. Imposter syndrome is rampant. And while employers do sort for the "success skills" students bring to the table, I work with students to embrace and articulate their wholistic, interdisciplinary interests and intersectional identities

Part of your role includes engaging with employers. Can you describe any changes you've seen with regard to how they interact in the recruiting process?

In this virtual environment, as university career service practitioners, we have to find ways to remain relevant to both our students and employers. Employers, now more than ever, have the ability to host recruitment events without the involvement of campus partners via Zoom. Understanding the motivations and gifts our students and employers bring to the table is increasingly critical. Universities are on the front lines in fostering direct access to diverse opportunities and talent. Not to mention, those of us working in employer relations have the platform and responsibility to advocate for more equitable and inclusive hiring practices.

How has the pandemic changed you, if it has?

In 2019, prior to the pandemic, I contracted autoimmune encephalitis – inflammation of the brain due to an overactive immune system. I still exhibit some symptoms of an acquired brain injury such as fatigue, double vision and I have some difficulty with short-term memory (names, for example). As part of my staff position as Chief Resilience Officer at the International Autoimmune Encephalitis Society, host weekly social media conversations and monthly support group meet-ups on the topic of "resilience." I was also blessed to offer a course called "The Course You Need Right Now: Stories, Service, and Resilient Roots" for Johns Hopkins University over the winter break. In my own life, I have made time to practice reflection, gratitude, and prayer during this unique time of re-evaluation. I'm also asking myself, like many of us are, "what lessons are we learning from this bounce-back?" I am a strong believer in turning "messes into messages" and tests into profound testimonials of strength.

You are the new President-Elect for MCDA. What are you most looking forward to as you step into this role?

I like that MCDA represents the strengths and best practices of many different groups – counselors, coaches, HR professionals, etc. This makes our industry stronger. I love that MCDA is inclusive—no matter who you are, you are at home here. I also recognize the contributions of so many prior to the transition of the new Board. We have a unique opportunity to represent the entire State of Maryland (including Western Maryland where I live). Other career development organizations don't have that benefit. I want to bring a humility to recognize and listen to what's come before. Ultimately, I envision doing an inventory to learn what people love about MCDA and encourage them to come back. Incoming President Natasha Ortiz-Fortier and I have had some very preliminary discussions about potentially hosting social events to get people talking and foster that closeness. Everyone has been so welcoming thus far. I also want to give a huge shout out to Julie Neill for the work she has done, especially with regard to the MD Cares Event. The timing for the event was perfect and it highlighted so many career ambassadors doing great work in the community.

What would you recommend to members and nonmembers who want to get involved with MCDA? What's the best way to start?

Please reach out to any of us on the Board for a conversation. Connect with us on LinkedIn or other social media platforms. I see all of us on the Board as a network of ambassadors. We look forward to hearing from you!

Building Resiliency at Work

By Karol Taylor

During the pandemic, we proved our resilience as we adapted to new ways of doing our jobs and tested our ability to "get 'er done" (as Larry-the-Cable-Guy might say). Nonetheless, the positive response to a workplace workshop I gave on resiliency indicated a strong interest and need for ongoing support in this area. This article is designed to align itself with that thinking.

Well-known author Jodi Picoult says, "The human capacity for burden is like bamboo – far more flexible than you would ever believe at first glance." As most of us know, once bamboo gains a foothold it is nearly impossible to restrain. While flexibility and resiliency have slightly different connotations, we could easily substitute the word resilient in Picoult's quote and the concept would be the same. We are resilient people. The dictionary definition of resilience includes concepts like flexibility, suppleness, durability, strength, speed of recovery, and buoyancy. In short, resiliency affects our ability to "bounce back."

When we refer to resiliency at work, we think of it as a defining characteristic of employees who deal effectively with the stresses and strains of the pandemic. Resilience is a person's capacity to respond to the demands of daily work life in a way that reflects their professionalism and commitment to the workplace.

Resiliency may not necessarily come naturally to many of us, but like most soft skills, it's teachable. Here are some ideas for enhancing your resilience at work:

1. Cherish social support and interaction. Good relationships with family and friends and others are vital. Being active in the wider community also helps. Zoom can help with that.
2. Treat problems as a learning process. Develop the habit of using challenges as opportunities to acquire or master skills and build achievement.
3. Avoid making a drama out of a crisis. Stress and change are part of life. How we interpret and respond to events has a big impact of how stressful we find them.
4. Celebrate your successes. Take time at the end of each day to review what went well and congratulate yourself. This trains your mind to look for success rather than dwelling on negativity and "failure."
5. Develop realistic life goals for guidance and a sense of purpose. Do something each day to move towards them. Again, small is beautiful; one small step amid the chaos of a busy day will help.

6. Take positive action. Doing something in the face of adversity brings a sense of control, even if it doesn't remove the difficulty.
7. Nurture a positive view of yourself. Developing confidence in your ability to solve problems and trust your instincts helps to build resiliency.
8. Keep a realistic perspective. Place challenging or painful events in the broader context of lifelong personal development.
9. Practice optimism. Nothing is either wholly good or bad, there is a lot of gray in between. If we allow our thinking to dictate how we view something it will take over. Make your thinking work for your benefit, rather than letting it stymie you with doubt or by seeing only the bad side.

I once saw on a FaceBook post where someone said "I dream of never being called resilient again in my life. I'm exhausted by strength. I want support. I want softness. I want ease. I want to be amongst kin. Not patted on the back for how well I take a hit. Or for how many." While we may feel that way, we are still facing change. Until the desire of this quote is met, we offer another resource for ways to think about, and give ourselves credit for, our profound workplace resiliency.

Resources:
Resilience at work, why it is important and how to develop it (barrywinbolt.com)
The resilience imperative: Succeeding in uncertain times | McKinsey

Karol Taylor has been a member of MACD/MCA and MCDA for more than 17 years, 13 as an MCDA Board member and executive leader, and 8 on the MACD/MCA Board. Karol is an award-winning expert in the federal job search, but she also has expertise in leadership and organizational development. The emergence of COVID-19 motivated Karol to consider how people might respond in the new telework-place.

Back to top

The Power of Peer Connections and Learning

through Cohort-Based Career and Professional Development Groups

By Satomi Yaji Chudasama

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In recent years, more students failed to demonstrate accountability, including no-shows for programs, campus interviews, and pre-boarding sessions for internships or full-time positions. Career development professionals are well positioned to help students realize the importance of commitment and accountability. Moreover, some students perceived their classmates as competitors during internship or job searches. Perhaps if students supported each other instead, they would feel less isolated in their search and may even refer each other for job opportunities or professional networking.

Given these observations, the staff at the Center for Career Development at Princeton University decided to adopt the high-impact educational practices (Kuh, 2008) that were associated with increases to student learning and engagement. In addition, the group format is also believed to enhance career awareness and self-confidence while reducing anxiety (Pyle & Hayden, 2015). Career development professionals can learn from Princeton's implementation process to replicate this program on their own campuses.

Goals of the Cohort Group Model

The principal goals of Princeton's model included the following:

1. foster a support system that empowered students to own their career development process
2. provide a forum and opportunity for like-minded students to learn from each other
3. help students practice accountability.

Cohort groups were created based on criteria such as skill-development, self-exploration, industry/career-interest, demographic/affinity (e.g., class level, majors, personal identities), and professional development. Some of these criteria deliberately overlapped across groups, including interviewing skills for first-generation/low-income students, self-exploration for nontraditional students, and job search for seniors. Other cohorts were open to any students interested in the topic, such as the introduction to networking and women's empowerment groups. The optimal size of each group was six to ten students, which was large enough to foster a support system while small enough for students to feel comfortable with sharing their experiences and vulnerabilities.

Roles of Group Facilitators

Typically, two cohort group leaders facilitated each group. These individuals provided structure and guidance to the group while encouraging and respecting organic development of student interactions during meetings. They developed learning objectives, rough outlines for meetings, ice-breakers, and some questions to guide group conversations. Those questions included exploration of students' feelings, thoughts, and experiences. To create a safe environment, each group discussed rules they wanted to adopt besides standard ground rules. Many students reported in post-meeting surveys that they realized they were not alone and felt comfortable in the group. Some of the groups matched students and alumni volunteers so that students could practice interviewing and networking skills. Some practice interviewing and networking skills. Some alumni volunteers offered additional help and continued their dialogues with students on an ongoing basis. Ensuring student learning and development was an important part of facilitators' roles. Cohort group facilitators participated in routine training and meetings to discuss best practices and new ideas.

Duration of Sessions

As for the length of each group, the duration was designed to accomplish goals in three to four weeks. This itinerary accommodated students' busy schedules while setting realistic expectations for their attendance accountability. Group facilitators also encouraged students to stay in touch with each other to continue their conversation beyond the initial time-frame if they wished.

Assessment of Learning

To assess learning, participants were required to complete pre- and post-meeting surveys. Pre-meeting surveys focused on skill and knowledge levels based on learning objectives. Group facilitators also asked about students' feelings and comfort for group topics. Pre/post surveys measured students' experiences and explored additional feedback. As needed, career specialists offered additional feedback, opportunities, and individualized assistance.

The power of this cohort group model was evident through students' verbal feedback and reflection in the closing meetings, as well as surveys. For instance, pre- and post-meeting surveys for two "Introduction to Networking" cohort groups this past fall revealed all participants increased the levels of knowledge and comfort

in networking. As an example, the mean for the knowledge of various ways of networking on a five-point Likert scale increased from 1.9 pre-meeting to 4.0 post-meeting. Similarly, the comfort level of going through informational interviews increased to a 4.1 average from a 2.1 on a five-point Likert scale. Nearly 100% of respondents indicated on a post-survey that they would recommend these groups to other students.

Impact to Students and Beyond

Both qualitative survey data and verbal feedback reflected the change in participants' mindset and behavioral habits, as well as their positive perception of the office. When Princeton University shifted to fully virtual instruction in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, cohort group activities also transitioned to online. A few students indicated that their decision to join cohort groups was driven by their desire to feel part of a community. Three cohort groups this past fall semester also provided a way for first-year students to have a sense of belonging and connection to the career office as they virtually went through the first semester at Princeton. They were grateful for the opportunity to meet new people through cohort groups while developing career development knowledge and skills. In short, these groups proved to be impactful not only in person, but also in a virtual environment. Most importantly, the model positively impacted student learning, accountability, engagement levels, and community building.

References

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Newsletter Article Submissions

MCDA welcomes article submissions on topics of interest to the career practitioner community. We are seeking articles that address emerging trends, and best practices. The newsletter is published monthly. For article submission deadlines or questions, please email: MCDA.Newsletter@MDCareers.org