

**ESTABLISHING the FIRST CAREER CENTER at the UNIVERSITY MENTOURI CONSTANTINE, ALGERIA**

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Algeria, located in North Africa, has a population of 36.5 million, with 70 per cent under the age of 30. Approximately 1.5 million undergraduate students are enrolled in Algerian universities and according to the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MHESR) this number is expected to reach 2 million by 2015 (Mammeri, 2008). Thousands of graduates are entering the labor market each year, only to find themselves unemployed. The number has reached such proportions that it has become a critical concern for higher education institutions and the Algerian government. At the same time, despite the large number of university graduates seeking employment, employers report they have difficulty finding graduates to meet their workforce needs.

**Lack of Effective Mechanism to Connect Graduates with Employers**

The employment market in Algeria is diverse, with the main industries in Constantine being pharmaceutical, mechanical engineering, food, telecommunication and construction. Although there has been an increase in hiring from the private sector, the public sector continues to be the major employer of college graduates. Despite the number of multi-national and foreign companies that now exist in Constantine, their hiring is still minimal and the majority of private businesses are still family-owned. Historically, graduates have learned about employment opportunities through advertisements in local newspapers, friends, family and the National Employment Agency (ANEM), which requires each candidate to register with the agency in order to apply for a position. Unfortunately, none of these methods provide an effective or efficient mechanism for connecting graduates with hiring employers.

Algerian universities have not been involved in providing experiential learning opportunities for students, assisting students with post-graduation employment, nor establishing relationships with public and private employers for the purpose of connecting them with graduates. Once they received a degree, graduates were left on their own to navigate the labor

market.

#### **Addressing the High Unemployment of Graduates**

To address the high unemployment of graduates and stimulate economic development, Higher Education for Development (HED), a non-profit organization in Washington D.C., awarded, in 2009, a three-year grant to the William Davidson Institute (WDI) at the University of Michigan for a partnership with University Mentouri Constantine (UMC) in Algeria. This grant was supported by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the U.S. Embassy in Algiers.

The grant project, entitled *Recruiting Employable Students at the University with Management Education (RESUME)* was designed to enhance UMC's English language studies and Business Management curricula to align them with the needs of the Algerian labor market as it moved from a state-administered to a free-market economy, and to establish a career center. The career center would provide job search coaching and employment assistance services to help students be better prepared to enter the labor market. The career center would also establish partnerships with local employers willing to provide internships and participate in campus recruitment venues that would connect them with graduating students.

#### **Overview of University Mentouri Constantine**

The University Mentouri Constantine (UMC), founded in 1962, is one of 66 university centers and higher education schools in Algeria. It evolved from a small university center to become one of the largest and top-ranked public universities in Algeria. In the 2009-2010 academic year, the University of Mentouri Constantine had an enrollment of 78,782 students with 67,869 undergraduates and 4,988 graduates, with a typical graduation rate of 95%. The university employs approximately 2,500 faculty members and 2,200 staff.

The university is spread across 13 campuses in and around the city of Constantine, which is the third largest city in the country. The addition of another campus, projected to enroll 44,000 students, is under construction a short distance from the main campus. The new campus will bring the total student population of the University Mentouri Constantine to 120,000 by 2012.

Nine colleges and one institute comprise the university-academic programs. The colleges, called faculties in Algeria, include Exact Sciences, Natural Sciences, Engineering, Medicine, Law, Economic Sciences, Humanities and Social Sciences, Languages and Arts, and Earth Sciences and Geography, and the Institute of Nutrition and Food Studies. The largest faculties are Languages and Arts, with an enrollment of 12,000 students, Law with 10,000, and Humanities and Social Studies with

11,000 students. The highest number of undergraduates is in the Faculty of Languages and Arts and the highest number of graduate students is in the Faculty of Medicine.

#### **The Career Center: A New Concept**

The concept of a Career Center was new for Algerian faculty, students and employers. While having a campus department responsible for providing services that included individual job search coaching sessions, resume critiques, practice interviews, resume and interview workshops, career fairs, job postings and employer information sessions was met with enthusiasm from university leadership, it brought skepticism from many others across the campus.

However, this skepticism soon disappeared as the UMC Career Center staff's work with students and employers demonstrated the impact it could have on helping students find internships and obtain post-graduation employment. As success stories of students finding jobs and being better prepared to present themselves to employers began to spread across the campus, more students came to the Center for assistance. As employers shared their successes in finding qualified graduates through the Career Center, the number of employers participating in recruitment programs increased.

The Career Center provided the bridge necessary to connect graduates and employers and filled a critical need expressed by Algeria's growing economic community to have a systematic mechanism that could efficiently and effectively connect hiring employers and college graduates.

#### **Establishing the Infrastructure and Gaining Campus Support**

In order to launch the Career Center, several things had to be accomplished in a short period of time. Office space on the main campus had to be secured, potential staff candidates had to be identified, and office furniture, equipment and supplies had to be acquired. While these tasks were demanding and challenging, they were made much easier by the support provided by UMC's President and the Vice President for International Cooperation. It was their support and direct involvement as well as the collaboration with the WDI Senior Country Coordinator, which made the process go smoothly and allowed the project to have everything in place within a three-week period.

To foster university involvement a RESUME Project Steering Committee was established to facilitate communication within the university and obtain input from key stakeholders involved in the project. The Committee, chaired by the Vice President of International Cooperation, included the Chair of the English Department, the Dean of the Faculty of Economics and Management Sciences, the Director of International Cooperation, the

Manager of External Relations, and the WDI Senior Country Coordinator. A ten-member Employer Advisory Council, composed of representatives from the public and private sectors, was formed and tasked to provide guidance on creating and sustaining relationships with local and regional employers. A Student Advisory Council, composed of twelve students representing various campuses, was also created and tasked to provide input regarding services for students as well as help market the new Career Center to students on the various campuses.

#### **Finding the Right Staff**

To ensure success, it was critical to find the right staff. Recognizing that none of the candidates were likely to have a background in career development or have career center experience, it was imperative to identify candidates receptive to learning new concepts, willing to be change agents, and whose skills and previous experiences could be easily transferred to the project tasks. Due to increasing globalization of the Algerian economic engagement with English speaking companies, the charge of the RESUME project to improve English language skills of students and the need for the staff to have communication with colleagues in U.S. Career Centers, it was also deemed important that the staff be fluent in English. All candidates were required to have a minimum of a bachelor degree, with the director required to have a good understanding of the academic, public, and private sector environments, supervisory skills and experience working in both a university and the private sector.

After informal networking and obtaining a list of candidates from the National Employment Agency, a total of 22 qualified candidates were identified, resulting in the hiring of a director, an employer relations manager, two career counselors and an administrative assistant. An additional seven student peer counselors were hired to work on a part-time basis at the Career Center and student volunteers were also solicited to work at the Center and help market services across the UMC campuses.

#### **UMC Career Center Staff Experience Prior to Coming to the United States**

The University Mentouri Constantine Career Center opened its doors in November 2009. The UMC career center staff was charged with introducing and embedding the concept of career services into its campus community, helping students develop employability skills through internships, and teaching students effective job search skills to help them transition successfully from the university to the workplace. The Career Center staff was also charged with developing partnerships between the university, the career center and local employers.

Under the guidance of the RESUME project's Senior Country Coordinator and a team of WDI experts, coupled with the Career Center staff's

self-directed learning of career and job search strategies found online, the UMC staff successfully marketed career services to students. They developed its first resume and interview workshops, provided individual resume critiques, conducted outreach to local employers, began posting job announcements, created new internship opportunities and offered its first career fair. A total of 31 public and private employers and 2,000 students participated in the first career fair, which was held June, 2010. The second career fair held in May 2011 saw the participation of 31 employers and was attended by more than 5000 students.

Although the UMC Career Center staff had been delivering services based on a U.S. model, they had never seen a career center in operation. A visit to a U.S. career center would provide an opportunity to observe how a centralized, comprehensive career center at a large university developed and delivered career planning and employment assistance to students, created and maintained partnerships with employers, used technology in the delivery of services, and handled the overall administration, management, and operations of a full service career center.

#### **University of South Florida Career Center Selected to Conduct the Training Program**

The University of South Florida system, founded in 1956, is one of the nation's top 63 public research universities. It is the eighth largest public university in the nation serving more than 47,000 students and offering 232 degree programs at the undergraduate, graduate, specialists, and doctoral levels, including the doctor of medicine, through its 11 colleges. The University of South Florida system consists of the main research campus in Tampa, which includes USF Health, its USF-St. Petersburg campus, and two regional campuses, USF Sarasota-Manatee and USF Polytechnic in Lakeland.

The University of South Florida Career Center, Tampa, is a centralized, comprehensive career planning and job search assistance service for student and alumni. Services include career counseling and job search coaching sessions, career assessments, graduate school advising, an onsite and virtual career library, workshops/seminars, resume critiques, interview training, candidate resume database, online portfolio service, career planning courses, job postings, employer information sessions, employer interviews (on campus and virtual), career fairs (on campus and virtual), coordination of employer on site visits, professional dining etiquette programs, and special career events.

After considering a number of universities, the WDI Senior Country Coordinator invited the University of South Florida Career Center to develop and conduct a two-week training program for the UMC Career

Center staff. The USF Career Center was selected due to its comprehensive programs, seasoned professional staff, the size of its student body and reputation for the delivery of a quality service to students and employers.

#### **Developing a Two-Week Intensive Career Development Training and Professional Experience for UMC Staff**

While the USF Career Center staff was excited about hosting their Algerian colleagues and fully committed to providing a rich educational experience, there was also apprehension. The short time span, potential language barriers, cultural differences, UMC staff's lack of formal training in the field of career development, and limited experience operating and delivering career services made designing the content and framework of the training challenging. These issues, coupled with USF Career Center staff's limited knowledge of Algeria's higher education system, job search process, and social protocol, added to the initial misgivings about whether it would be possible to design and deliver a training program within a two-week period that would meet the UMC Career Center staff's expectations. These misgivings quickly dissipated as the USF Career Center staff learned about Algerian higher education and protocol via personal research and a briefing from the WDI Senior Country Coordinator, the UMC Career Center's accomplishments, and the primary purpose of the visit, which was to observe and understand the daily operations and services of a U.S. Career Center.

#### **Format and Structure**

While new to the field, the members of the UMC Career Center staff were not really novices in delivering employment assistance to students or developing partnerships with employers, as they had been delivering these services on their campus for more than eight months. Thus, if the USF Career Center's two-week program was to help enhance, refine, and maximize the services UMC Career Center was already providing, the design of the program needed to be more of a collegial exchange than a didactic approach. The program topics and experiences needed to be practical and pertinent to UMC's charge to deliver employment assistance to students and develop employer partnerships. The program needed to include experiential opportunities, observations of Career Center daily operations, time for self-reflection, and a setting that would encourage open dialog regarding what would transfer across cultures and what would not. See Table 1 for the complete training schedule.

#### **Program Content**

Special topic sessions included the career development process; anatomy of a career counseling session; self-directed job search methodology; career assessment tools and interpretation; effective job search strategies;

résumé and cover letter writing and critiques; interview skills training; career information resources; experiential learning options; identifying, building and sustaining employer partnerships; campus recruitment venues and online recruitment systems; use of social media and marketing strategies to connect with students; and general overview of a campus career center and self-assessment of services. Sessions were designed to introduce a concept, service and/or operation and then provide an opportunity for the UMC staff to observe how the concept, service and operation were implemented. This was followed with dialog as to whether the service, activity and/or operation could transfer across cultures and be used by the UMC Career Center.

In addition, to facilitate special topic sessions, the UMC staff was given the opportunity to observe workgroups, office-wide staff activities, and team and university-wide committee meetings in which the Career Center staff was involved. They also had the opportunity to observe individual student job search coaching sessions; meet with members of selected academic programs to discuss how faculty work with the Career Center; experience completing career assessment instruments; and review career library and online resource materials and recruitment software. During the latter part of the second week, time for self-reflection, self-paced use of resources, and one-on-one visits with counterparts was built into the schedule. Flexibility was embedded throughout each day so a particular session topic or hands-on experience could be abbreviated or expanded, depending on the interest and need of the UMC staff. At the end of each day the USF Career Center Director met with all of the UMC staff to summarize the day's content, respond to any questions, and review the following day's agenda.

To serve as a daily guide and provide reference materials the UMC staff could use after their two-week experience, a notebook was compiled that included the agenda; all session topic PowerPoints; examples of handouts for students; employer collateral; job search workshop presentation outlines; resume rubric; examples of career assessment instruments; on-campus interview policies; NCDA, CAS, and NACE professional and ethical standards documents; and journal articles related to the session topics being discussed.

#### **Implementing Experiences and Knowledge Gained**

Over a period of two weeks, the UMC staff was introduced to major concepts in the career development field; occupational resources and educational materials; professional standards and ethics of career professionals and career center operations; strategies for recruitment programs; the role and partnerships with campus and the local business communities; and to workgroups and committees addressing new initiatives and/or enhancing

current services and operations. It was an extremely busy two weeks for the UMC and the USF Career Center staff, who had to continue to operate and deliver services during this period of time.

According to the UMC Career Center staff, the two-week program content and experiences not only met, but exceeded their expectations. This was also the case with the interaction they had with the USF Career Center staff. The members of the UMC staff were surprised at the warm welcome extended to them and the level of commitment each of the USF staff made to ensure the visit was productive, fun and engaging. The following are a few highlights of how the knowledge and experience gained from the program will be used to enhance their service delivery and operations.

While the UMC staff had been successful in delivering services, they were doing so without having a theoretical framework to guide their efforts. Providing an introduction to career development theory and the developmental steps needed to be taken by students to successfully implement their career goal presented the UMC staff with a model they could use as a theoretical underpinning to further enhance and develop their services and programs.

A major project for the UMC staff was to create a comprehensive occupational information resource which would outline the key components of a specific job, to include the skills, duties, abilities, education, training and work environment. The jobs included in the resource would be those available in and around Constantine. This resource would provide a standard means for helping graduates understand the work and background needed to be qualified for a specific position. This was an overwhelming project for the UMC staff. However, when discussing how to even begin this project, the UMC staff was introduced to the Department of Labor's Occupational Information Network (O\*Net). O\*Net provided an excellent model of the type of content and format that could be used to create an occupational information resource for graduates. Since the content is online, the UMC staff counselors will be able to access the content as they develop and customize their own Occupational Information Resource guide.

While the UMC staff was teaching interview skills, they had not implemented a practice interview component. The idea of conducting a practice interview with the students and then providing a critique resonated with the career counselors and they have now incorporated this into their services. The résumé rubric was also a tool that they liked and planned to use to critique résumés.

The USF Career Center's method for building relationships with employ-

ers was very similar to those used by the UMC Career Center staff, with onsite visits being the most effective means for developing productive partnerships. While employers in the U.S. are accustomed to using e-mail and technology to promote their positions and connect with graduates, this is not the case in Algeria. Due to the limitations of the internet, using recruiting technology is problematic. However, the UMC Career Center envisions using technology more in their recruitment programs in the future.

#### **Progress Made**

The UMC Career Center continues to develop and refine their services. They have seen an increase in students and employers taking advantage of their services. They have also increased the number of campus advocates who now see the value of a Career Center and point to its success with pride.

As of May 5, 2011, more than 2,400 students attended 17 informational sessions organized by the Career Center staff on the various university campuses. Counselors have conducted 144 workshops, attended by more than 2,100 students. Since opening its doors, more than 2,800 individual student visits have occurred and more than 4,850 students are now in the Center's candidate database. The career counselors have provided one-on-one sessions regarding résumés, interview and other employability topics to more than 238 students. The Career Center's Employer Relations Manager has conducted 255 onsite visits with employers in the region. These efforts have led to 235 internships and 42 job offers from employers in and around Constantine.

While these numbers may seem modest when compared to the overall student population at UMC, it is important to remember that the RESUME project and the Career Center's effort is creating a paradigm shift in the way students approach job search and how employers go about hiring recent UMC graduates.

#### **Lessons Learned**

Establishing the first Career Center at the University Mentouri Constantine has been a challenging but exciting project. The UMC staff has been tenacious and diligent in their efforts to introduce and embed the concept of career services on a university campus. Throughout the implementation of this project, a great deal has been learned. We have learned that: (1) when introducing a new concept one needs to be patient and enlist the help of early adopters within the target population, in this case the university administration, the Deans, the faculty, and the students; (2) hiring staff with a positive attitude and a willingness to learn and be change agents are important characteristics, even if they do not have the

knowledge or technical skills required for the position; (3) old habits die hard, people who have been operating in a centralized economy for a long time have difficulty adjusting to new environments and ideas that run counter to the traditional means of finding employees for their workplace; (4) new concepts cannot just be adopted as is, they must be adjusted to meet the culture and the environment in order for them to be accepted; and (5) providing continued support and presence early on helps in the adoption of the new concepts by the populations that it seeks to serve.

#### **Next Steps**

In an effort to reach more students, the university leaderships agreed to open Career Center satellite offices on two campuses in 2011. Eventually, it will be necessary to have Career Center offices on all campuses because of the distance between campuses and the number of students to be served. To be effective, the launch of new Career Center satellite offices will require the allocation of more staff and resources. The involvement of more employers has been promoted through onsite visits and by encouraging employers to conduct specialized forums on the UMC main campus, which creates higher visibility for them and gives an opportunity for students to interact with more employers. Employers are being encouraged to sponsor Career Center activities and most have been receptive, with some employers providing notebook computers, flash drives and cell phones as door prizes during the forums. This is helping put the employers' name in front of the students and also encouraging more students to attend Career Center functions.

The long-term sustainability of the project depends on the Career Center acquiring a formal status within the university organization. To this effect, a draft status has been presented to the university leadership for discussion with the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. There is no question that the launch and operation of the UMC Career Center has been very successful. As a direct result of this success, the MHESR is considering the opening of 18 other career centers around the country. This is the highest compliment that one can receive for achievement. The UMC Career Center will serve as a model to be emulated by other universities in Algeria and elsewhere in the region. The UMC Career Center staff's experiences and the knowledge gained over the last 18 months will serve to guide and train others who will be developing career services on their own campuses. The stage has been set and the time seems to be right for the concept of a university Career Center to spread across the country of Algeria.

#### **References**

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#### **About the authors**

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