



**FACE OFF: Companies Step up the Competition  
to get in Front of College Students**

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## FACE-OFF: COMPANIES STEP UP THE COMPETITION TO GET IN FRONT OF COLLEGE STUDENTS

**Amid flashy websites** and tantalizing YouTube videos, recent recruiting trends at Pace University -- a private metropolitan institution with nearly 13,500 students -- indicate that employers value face time with students more than ever. Goldman Sachs alone visited the University's downtown New York City campus 11 times during the 2007-2008 academic year.

It seems savvy employers know that recruiting the best and brightest takes more than just mass marketing. As a result, companies have stepped up their efforts to get in front of today's students. Whether it is attending careers fairs, sponsoring events, presenting information sessions, collaborating with university clubs or hosting students off-campus, employers are pulling out all the stops.

### CAREER FAIRS

A 2007 **IDEA Employer Survey** of 44,064 undergraduate students conducted by Unversum found that 46% of students chose university career fairs as the most preferred way to gather information about potential employers. This makes it no surprise that Pace University's fall 2007 career fair had the most number of attendees in over five years. In fact, space became a challenge after more than 100 employers registered for the event.

It seems Pace is not alone. The Director of Morgan State University's Center for Career Development, Bill Carson, commented on this issue in a recent *Baltimore Sun* article by Jamie Smith Hopkins, Tanika White and Megan Hartley. Regarding the number of organizations interested in their April 2008 job fair, he said "We expected to have 60 or so employers registered, which is what we had last year, [but] we have 83 registered and another 20 on a waiting list that we can't accommodate."

The trend appears to be the same at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte. In his May 2007 *Econoplay* column, *Campus Career Centers: Great Job Prospects Await '07 Class, Wages Tip Higher*, Gary Rosenberger reported that UNC-Charlotte has seen record employer attendance at campus job fairs and career expos.

### SPONSORSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

**In addition to the overall increase** in attendance at career fairs, Pace has also seen a dramatic rise in attendees electing to be sponsors, with numbers more than doubling from 2007 to 2008 at the University's NYC Internship Fair. The extra \$150 for sponsorship status seemed well worth having a full-page ad in the fair directory, a logo advertised on the career center web page, and a prime table location in the sponsor section.

Employers are so eager to stand out among the competition that they have also welcomed other sponsorship opportunities, lending financial support and/or promotional items to career related events on-campus.

In November 2007, Pace University celebrated Career Development Month with the help of donations from several leading employers. The organizations not only provided company items as prizes but also sponsored refreshments and contributed to a gift certificate used to promote participation in the event. In return, the firms' names were listed prominently in the NYC career office.

Another successfully sponsored event was a *Dining Etiquette* workshop hosted at Pace last spring. The career center, along with a business fraternity, organized a presentation where 50 students learned how to appropriately conduct themselves while sharing a formal meal. Employers eagerly paid to sponsor a table bearing their company name and also sent recruiters to dine with the students.

### INFORMATION SESSIONS

**Business professionals may assume students** are well-informed about the leading firms hiring applicants with their majors; however, more than once candidates have been overheard saying they are meeting with someone from *Ernest & Young*, instead of Ernst & Young. To address this misconception and many others, employers have proactively hosted on-campus corporate information sessions or approached professors to serve as guest lecturers in the classroom.

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Typically, employers host a session to attract underclassmen or provide information for candidates the night before on-campus interviews. Corporate representatives also participate in panels with multiple employers who discuss careers in a particular industry (i.e., fashion, media, finance). All of these venues provide excellent platforms for companies to directly or indirectly market their organizations. In addition, employers often maximize their approachability by sending at least one representative who is an alumnus of the university they are visiting.

To be most effective during an information session, recruiters use a multi-faceted approach. They educate students on their industries and firm structures; describe available internship or entry-level opportunities; highlight desired skills and abilities; stress aspects of their organizations, especially the culture, that make it desirable or unique; and initiate individual relationships with attendees.

### CAREER SEMINARS

**Along with company information sessions**, employers have also been eager to participate in developmental events hosted by the career center. The spring 2008 Mock Interview Day at Pace University included an impressive list of 11 employers who conducted practice interviews with over 75 students. This was a mutually beneficial event where company representatives provided essential feedback for students while also identifying potential talent for their organization.

Career services professionals know that students often pay the most attention when guidance and advice is provided directly by employers. With firms' growing interest in gaining exposure on campus, it works well for company representatives to serve as guest speakers at workshops typically presented by career center representatives. The same holds true in the classroom. During 2007, a Small Business Management professor at Pace successfully worked with the career center to secure a series of four employers to speak to his undergraduate and graduate students about successful management skills. Recruiters have also enthusiastically given their time to deliver seminars on topics including interviewing skills, salary negotiation, making the most of an internship, and many more.

### UNIVERSITY CLUBS

**While companies have historically collaborated** with university clubs for traditional events such as Beta Alpha Phi's Meet the Firms, Pace University saw unprecedented interest in employers working directly with many student organizations during the 2007-2008 academic year. Some clubs actually had a waiting list for firms interested in getting on their schedules.

In the spring semester alone, the Association of Latin Professional in Finance & Accounting (ALPFA) hosted over 25 companies, with two major events featuring representatives from several firms. The Vice President of ALPFA's Pace University chapter, Adriana De La Cruz, believes employers are particularly interested in working with ALPFA because, "it is a nationwide organization that encourages professional growth, relationship building, service, integrity, and culture, exactly the type of traits companies look for when hiring employees."

Denisha Patrick, President of the National Association of Black Accountants, Inc. (NABA) at Pace, has also been approached by many companies. She believes teaming up with NABA provides employers with the opportunity to reach a wider audience because club presentations focus on topics that aid the entire college community rather than information sessions that exclusively promote a particular firm. Working with campus organizations also exposes recruiters to high-quality candidates. "Our members demonstrate that they want to excel academically and socially as well as professionally. In addition, they have the skill sets needed to succeed in a corporate environment such as team orientation, analytical skills, strong interpersonal and communication skills as well as the ability to adhere to deadlines," Patrick says.

To maximize the value of collaborating with student organizations, recruiters have communicated extensively with the career center. Instead of circumventing the office, university professionals were often able to work with clubs and employers to lend resources, ideas or moderators for events. Informing the career center of all company visits also provided the office with a global view of recruiting efforts on

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campus, enhancing employer relations and ensuring efforts were not duplicated.

### ON-CAMPUS INTERVIEWING

Despite the economic downturn, Pace University also saw a rise in the number of employers coming on-campus to interview for summer 2008 internships. Almost 30% more firms held interviews on the NYC campus during 2007-2008 than during 2006-2007.

According to *Job Outlook 2008*, an annual survey of college recruiters conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), “employers rated on-campus recruiting and internship programs as the most-effective recruiting methods—no surprise given the competitive nature of the job market. When competition heats up, employers rely on ‘high touch’ recruiting to build relationships with candidates.”

### EMPLOYER HOSTED EVENTS

**In addition to the spike in employer activity** at Pace University, firms have also increased their efforts to gain face time with students off-campus.

Leadership conferences are one of the most popular programs employers have developed to meet highly qualified candidates. Throughout the summer, firms will be hosting two or three day programs designed specifically to attract outstanding sophomores. Students are selected to attend a weekend of events where they learn about the organization and network with professionals while developing their skills.

Other trends include hosting students for a morning or afternoon onsite to discuss the organization’s culture and opportunities as well as general trends in the industry. These special presentations often include a tour of the facility and meal as well. Over the last year, Pace University has been able to successfully collaborate with leaders in the publishing, media, and finance industries that are eager to host these types of events.

In a more unique program, Deloitte & Touche invited individuals to join their alternative spring break program

where students worked with employee volunteers to help United Way rebuild the Gulf Coast.

### WHY ARE EMPLOYERS INCREASINGLY INTERESTED IN MEETING DIRECTLY WITH STUDENTS?

**Even with economic concerns** and tightening staffing budgets, employers have clearly stepped up their efforts to come face-to-face with university candidates both on and off campus.

*The following reasons emerge as the main drivers of this trend:*

### BRAND RECOGNITION

**Many entry-level candidates**, especially underclassmen and first generation college students, are unaware of potential employers within the industries they are pursuing. If these individuals saw a firm’s name on a job posting they may skip right over it; however, if they walk into a career fair and actually see a friendly face with industry related paraphernalia, the chances of making a connection with that employer dramatically increase.

To ensure that the best and brightest students are attracted to their firms, employers have started marketing their brands to students even earlier in their academic careers. Although freshmen and sophomores may not even be ready for an internship, strategic recruiters know that getting in front of students early will increase the pool of interested and qualified candidates who join their firms or at least their particular industries. Jean Wyer, head of recruiting for PricewaterhouseCoopers, told the *Washington Post* that if “you don’t reach [students] by their sophomore years, you’ve kind of missed out.”

Employers also use in-person interaction to clarify misconceptions regarding their brands. For instance, several investment banks held information sessions at Pace University during the spring 2008 semester to attract liberal arts majors. Before attending these presentations, many students studying Psychology, English, or History had disregarded Wall Street

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firms believing that only finance majors were qualified for opportunities in this environment.

### CAPITALIZING ON THE VALUES OF MILLENNIAL STUDENTS

**Although brand recognition is important**, today's students are not exclusively considering job opportunities with top employers who can provide the highest salaries. Instead, the most talented undergraduates want to join organizations that also demonstrate strong ethics while providing flexibility and work-life balance. In fact, a 2007 IDEALEmployer Survey of 44,064 undergraduate students conducted by Universum found that "for the second year in a row, high ethical standards (36%) trumped financial strength (26%) as the top characteristic students look for when considering employers."

These preferences create opportunities for employers, particularly small or mid-size organizations, to aggressively market the benefits they can provide in addition to financial incentives and stability.

Lincoln Jenkins, an employee in regional CPA firm Eisner LLP's Audit practice, recently seized the opportunity to participate in a panel presentation at Rutgers University. While speaking about his own career path, including former employment with a Big Four firm, Lincoln was able to appeal to Millennials by broadening their perspectives on joining a smaller organization. "Students need to know there are options outside of the Big Four to have a successful career. At a mid-size firm, there are many opportunities for achievement with a greater sense of work-life balance. When selecting an employer, it's important to consider personal goals and values."

### SKILL IDENTIFICATION - SEEING IS BELIEVING

Jenkins also commented about the importance of face-to-face interaction in identifying qualified candidates. "To be successful in auditing, you have to know how to communicate and present yourself," he said. "At a presentation, you can actually identify students with the necessary skills by interacting with attendees and noticing individuals who stand out by dressing appropriately, sitting up front, asking

questions, introducing themselves, and holding a professional conversation. New hires can learn about debits and credits as they go, but what are most important, especially when working with clients, are social skills."

NACE's *Job Outlook 2008* survey also found that college recruiters "faulted new college graduates for their lack of communication skills—the skills that employers prize most." A number of employers specifically reported that students were short on face-to-face abilities.

In addition to evaluating important skills while interacting with students, employers have capitalized on the opportunity to develop meaningful personal relationships that cultivate a sense of connection to their firms. This kind of loyalty can be difficult to establish if recruiters rely exclusively on internet marketing and outreach.

### CONCLUSION

**To attract a diverse pool of top talent**, it's clear an online presence is not enough. Although it is effective to utilize cutting edge technology to recruit today's students, employers are also taking the lead by stepping out from behind the computer and returning to a more simple approach of getting in front of students. In this way, they can successfully compete to be recognized and pursued by the most qualified candidates.

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*In addition to her work at Pace University, Meri Mayes is actively involved in several professional and non-profit organizations. She served as Newsletter Editor and Board Member for the New York State Cooperative & Experiential Education Association. She is also on the Board of Directors for Inverse, an organization dedicated to mentoring at risk youth.*

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