

Outfit Students for Opportunity: Applied Learning in Campus Career Closet Development and Outreach

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Abstract

In the pursuit of academic and professional success, students often encounter barriers that extend beyond the classroom. One significant challenge is access to professional attire, a critical component for job interviews, presentations, networking events, and internships. Career closets—designated areas on campus where students can go to receive new and gently used professional clothing at little to no cost—can alleviate the challenge, but only if students know the resource is available. Promoting a campus career closet is a great way for students to practice their media and journalism, strategic communication, and business and marketing skills, as there is much to be shared with audiences using traditional and new media methods. Students can play a pivotal role in raising awareness, promoting engagement, and fostering a positive perception of the campus career closet among their peers and the broader community while simultaneously gaining valuable experience and building their professional portfolio.

Introduction

Clothing is one of the most salient artifacts of culture. When people feel good about the way they look, they naturally convey confidence and a positive attitude. These nonverbal messages can be as important in a presentation or interview as the verbal skills used in presenting one's research or in demonstrating career aptitude (Maran et al., 2021).

For some college students, procuring professional clothing can present a significant challenge. Beyond tuition, college students face a multitude of financial hurdles such as rent, food, textbooks, and transportation. To help students overcome the financial challenge of obtaining professional clothing, many colleges and universities are offering a valuable resource that not only alleviates financial challenges, but also empowers students in their career journeys: the campus career closet.

Campus career closets offer access to professional clothing at little to no cost. Some closets operate using a rental system, while others allow students to keep the clothes. No matter how the resource is structured, looking professional can significantly boost students' confidence during an interview, presentation, or career event. Knowing their attire is appropriate allows them to focus on their skills and qualifications, making a stronger first impression.

Similarly, not all students come from families who can afford to help them purchase a professional wardrobe or even offer advice. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2018; Nam, 2023), in 2016 37% of undergraduate college students were first-generation. A first-generation college student is an individual enrolled in a college or university whose parents did not obtain a post-secondary 4-year degree (NCES, 2018; Nam, 2023).

Because many first-generation college students come from lower-income households and will likely incur more college debt, career closets are a vital resource, ensuring students have access to appropriate attire regardless of their financial background.

Sustainable Option

The financial benefit of a campus career closet to students is evident, but there are other reasons students shop second-hand. Generation Z—people born in 1997 and onward—is one of the environment's greatest champions (Dimock, 2019). This generation acknowledges the large amount of textile waste that gets incinerated, dumped in landfills, or exported to developing countries (Niinimäki et al., 2020). In fact, 14 million tons of clothing are thrown away in the United States every year (EPA, 2022). Embracing practices like thrifting, upcycling, and repurposing, Gen Z appreciates sustainable practices when it comes to procuring clothing (Jacobs, 2020). Organized clothing swaps, shopping at second-hand stores, and renting clothing are just a few of the ways that many college students attempt to reduce waste and save money. Because career closets often rely on donated clothing, many college students appreciate having a sustainable option on campus.

Career Services

Many campus career closets are managed by Career Services, a department or resource center within a college or university dedicated to assisting students in exploring career options, gaining relevant experience, and achieving their career goals. Career Services offer a variety of resources and services aimed at supporting students in their career development, such as resume assistance, job search and interview preparation workshops, and career counseling.

Career advisors provide valuable guidance to students utilizing the career closet. They can help students identify appropriate professional attire for events where professional dress is expected, ensuring that students make informed decisions about their wardrobe choices.

Further, career advisors facilitate partnerships with other groups on and off campus, such as student clubs, philanthropic organizations, or alumni networks. These partnerships can help enhance the resources available in the career closet and expand its reach to a broader audience of students.

Applied Learning

While Career Services plays a vital role in supporting students throughout their academic journey, the personnel in these centers are busy and may not have time to promote the resource. It is also possible they may lack specific training in persuasive communication and media engagement. Indeed, a campus career closet is only going to be successful if students and faculty know it exists. Promoting a campus career closet is a great way for students in business and communication-related disciplines to practice their strategic communication, journalism, and marketing skills, as there is much to be shared with audiences and stakeholders using a variety of traditional and new media methods. Students can play a pivotal role in raising awareness, promoting engagement, and fostering a positive perception of the campus career closet among their peers and the broader community while simultaneously gaining valuable experience and building their professional portfolio. By way of course activities and assignments, students develop the ability to think critically and creatively. They also build professional acumen, leadership and collaboration skills, and tangible work to put in a professional portfolio that sets them up for success after graduation.

There are many activities faculty can design that will give students practical, hands-on experience working for a non-profit client. When students are presented with the opportunity to do what they need to learn, every action provides a personalized learning experience, which builds motivation, especially when the work they are doing benefits students just like them.

That motivation connects to what is learned and can be felt deeply by the learner, making what is learned more relevant and meaningful (Dewey, 1938).

Communication, Integration, and Promotion

Promoting a campus career closet presents the opportunity to use a diverse set of communication. Our methods involved in-class assignments and projects in an introductory public relations course; practicums and workshops; work-study programs; independent study courses; and collaboration with student media. These methods were chosen to capture a wide range of competencies and experiences, reflecting real-world applications and interdisciplinary learning outcomes.

Integration with Public Relations Course: In the Introduction to Public Relations (PR) course, the career closet has been a central focus, providing students with real-world experience in [event planning](#), [fundraising](#), and [promotional campaigns](#) to raise awareness and engagement. Student input was used to create the [Request for Proposal \(RFP\)](#) submitted for the grant that ultimately funded the initiative. Through these projects, students have honed their skills in strategic communication, audience engagement, and campaign execution, culminating in tangible successes for the career closet and its outreach efforts.

Incorporation in Media & Journalism Practicums and Workshops: By positioning the career closet as a non-profit client for media and journalism [practicums and workshops](#), students have gained valuable hands-on experience in graphic design, media relations and content production. Projects have ranged from creating multimedia stories and video features to developing targeted social media campaigns. These practical experiences have not only advanced students' media skills and given them work examples for their professional portfolios, but the experiences have also amplified the career closet's visibility and impact on campus.

Work Study Student Programs: Work-study students play a pivotal role in supporting the career closet's daily operations and promotion. Their responsibilities include organizing donations, tracking inventory, [content creation for social media accounts](#), assisting with special events, and customer service. These experiences provide students with on-the-job training in business management, marketing, and communication while fostering student growth and development.

Independent Study Courses: Through independent study courses centered on business and marketing communication, students can work closely with the career closet as a client. These courses encourage students to develop comprehensive promotional strategies and execute targeted campaigns. [Projects](#) have included market research, social media marketing, content and [brand development](#), [photography](#), video production, and cross-platform advertising efforts. The outcomes demonstrate students' ability to apply theoretical knowledge in a practical context while advancing the career closet's mission.

Collaboration with Student Media: Collaborations with [student media](#) (e.g., TV news station, radio station, student newspaper/magazine) can be instrumental in elevating the career closet's profile on campus. Student-led initiatives have produced news segments, radio interviews, and articles that

showcase the closet's services and impact. These partnerships offer students hands-on experience in journalism and broadcasting while raising career closet awareness and support.

Discussions and Implications for Future Research

One of the primary challenges in increasing use of a campus career closet is a lack of student awareness. Limited promotion is a significant factor contributing to this issue. This lack of outreach means that many students remain unaware of the resource, missing out on opportunities to access professional attire for interviews and career-related events.

Faculty in communication-related disciplines can assist in promotion of the campus career closet by introducing activities where the career closet serves as a non-profit client in the classroom. In doing so, several qualitative outcomes and observations emerged. Students were enthusiastic about engaging in projects that promoted the career closet, providing them with opportunities to apply classroom knowledge in a real-world context. Anecdotal feedback from students indicated hands-on experiences deepened their understanding of business acumen, media production, and strategic communication principles. They were also excited to have tangible examples of work for their professional portfolios. Although informal observations indicated a heightened awareness and use of the career closet across campus, highlighting the effectiveness of multifaceted applied learning approaches, if the career closet is not actively promoted every semester, awareness and use may drop. Even though students have been actively engaged in promoting the career closet in certain classes and practicums, their participation may come to an end when they advance into other courses, which is why consistently using the career closet as a client across multiple semesters is essential to increasing awareness and use of the resource.

These observations contribute to the broader understanding of applied learning and community engagement by illustrating the potential for integrating practical projects into academic programs. By engaging students in hands-on experiences, they are better able to connect theories and knowledge learned in the classroom to real-world situations. When given opportunities to collaborate with diverse organizations, students will gain a broader view of the world, an appreciation of community, and insight into their own leadership skills, self-confidence, and pre-professional values.

While this study focused on the effectiveness of integrating the campus career closet as a non-profit client in journalism and strategic communication courses, it did not evaluate the impact on students' long-term career goals or outcomes. Future research could explore how applied learning projects influence students' career trajectories over time.

Similarly, this study was conducted at just one university campus. Future studies could examine the effectiveness of similar applied learning projects in a variety of academic settings in different geographical regions.

Finally, future research could shift focus from the campus setting and analyze professional dress standards related to hiring decisions and/or employer

perceptions of the clothing choices among recent college graduates during job interviews. This could expand existing scholarship regarding employers' expectations of recent graduates when hiring.

Conclusion

The campus career closet is a vital resource for students, providing access to professional attire while simultaneously offering hands-on learning opportunities in public relations, advertising, and strategic communication. With the support of more than 150 donors—many of whom have contributed multiple times—our career closet has received nearly 5,000 items of professional clothing. These donations have made it possible to serve over 300 undergraduate and graduate students, empowering them to confidently pursue and present themselves in places where professional dress is expected.

Further, a campus career closet can support and enhance the professional development of student workers, and give PR, advertising, and strategic communication students the opportunity to create quality work samples for their professional portfolios. These tangible examples of strategic communication, media engagement, and campaign execution will help set these students apart in the job market, increasing their chances of being hired in their chosen fields. Indeed, campus career closets can serve as a powerful experiential learning opportunity, engaging students in real-world projects that bridge the gap between theory and practice. This initiative reinforces the importance of applied learning, community engagement, and the impact of strategic communication efforts on campus and beyond.