Composing Your Career

David Schachter
295 Lafayette Street, Room 2112 / 212-998-7475 / david.schachter@nyu.edu
Office Hours: Mondays 4:00-6:00 p.m.

Workshop Description and Objectives
The Wagner School prepares students for the real – sometimes messy, always complex – world of public service. To achieve this mission, we are dedicated to creating opportunities for students to discover the interrelationships of conceptual theory, practical realities, and individual career goals. This workshop will enhance students’ abilities to:

- Develop career planning skills and strategies through concentrated research, written assignments, and large group discussions
- Map an intended career field and develop a broad understanding of the various roles and organizations that influence that field
- Understand the interconnections among diverse public service issues and between Wagner’s various programs

Throughout this workshop, students will use their experiences and education as the context for a series of analyses based on the following four lenses:

- **Issue(s)** that guide(s) the student’s commitment to public service,
- Broader **Systems** in which this work takes place,
- **Organizations** where the student could potentially work, and
- **Roles** that students may want to play within an organization.

Discussions and written assignments will use these lenses to teach students how to process and reflect on past, current, and future work experiences. Students will be encouraged to shift back and forth between lenses, between personal experience and generalized learning, and between strategic thinking and action items. All of this will lead to an action plan to maximize their time at Wagner in the pursuit of a successful public service career.

All discussions will be brought back to Composing Your Career (CYC). CYC is a framework for maximizing one’s time at Wagner and includes strategies that employ:

- **Being Smart** by choosing appropriate classes, using assignments strategically, and getting in the habit of reading professionally-related materials
- Gaining practical and relevant **Experience** in your field of interest and/or role
- **Engaging** with others who have similar interests through student groups, faculty, professional associations, and attending events on and off campus
- **Reflecting** on your choices in a thoughtful and mindful way
- **Crafting your message** so that others will “get you”
Although it’s not required, students are highly encouraged to be working in an internship or job while taking this workshop.

**Required Readings**
A reading packet will be distributed during the first session. It is expected that students will have read and be ready to discuss all assigned readings.

**Course Format**
This four-session workshop will meet for 100 minutes each week. Throughout the course, we will use large and small group discussions, exercises, and writing assignments, to explore and illustrate the four lenses and their implications for future career paths. The final session of the course will integrate the four lenses into the CYC framework to help students maximize their career search.

**Assignments**
Students will submit a Tracks (synthesis) paper due the last session (week 4). This written assignment will articulate potential career directions/tracks and action steps the student will take while at Wagner to move them toward their goals.

**Journal Writing**
Students have the option to consider and reflect on the readings, class discussions, and their experiences through journal writing. Guiding questions are listed in the class agenda for weeks 2-3. It is recommended that students maintain a journal to help guide their thoughts for the synthesis paper.

**Grading**
This course is graded as Pass/Fail, and students must attend each of the four sessions in order to receive a Pass. While there is no letter grade for this course, the student will benefit based on the time and effort s/he puts into the readings, assignments, and discussions.

**Workshop Expectations**
The following norms for behavior and performance are expected:
- Attend every workshop on time and be fully prepared to discuss reading and case assignments
- Participate in discussions
- Accord the same professional respect to classmates’ contributions as to instructors’ comments

**Workshop Content and Schedule of Assignments**

**Week 1:**
**WORKSHOP INTRODUCTION**

Class Agenda:
• General overview of the workshop, including goals and objectives as well as expectations for learning and exploration
• Introduction to the Tracks (synthesis) assignment and optional journal writing
• Exploration of current work experiences and making connections to the experiences and interests of peers, diverse public service issues, and between Wagner’s various programs
• Introduction to the four lenses (issue, system, organization, and role) used to structure the workshop
• Introduction to how employers make hiring decisions
• How this course connects to and incorporates “Composing Your Career”

Review of Assignment Due 4th Session:
TRACKS EXERCISE

I. Brainstorm
Download, photocopy, or cut out of the newspaper any job posting that appeals to you on one of two levels:
A. You’re drawn to this kind of an organization. You like its mission. You’d like your work to have an impact on this issue, population or area. You like the agency’s approach to the work. And you could see yourself, someday, working for an organization like this. Don’t worry about where it’s located or whether you like the job description that’s attached to the organization. Just focus on the agency’s overall purpose. Circle the part you like and put it in a folder.

B. You’re drawn to this kind of job description. You like the way the responsibilities are bundled. You like the skills needed to perform the function of the position, and you could see yourself, someday, doing something like this in your day-to-day. Don’t worry about the agency the description is associated with or whether you have the skills to perform the job. Just focus on the actual job description. Circle the part you like and put it in your folder.

Do this until you have a bare minimum of 50 selected items. The more you collect, the better. Remember, when brainstorming, we don’t evaluate along the way, we just collect ideas. Once you have at least 50, continue to the next phase.

II. Analysis
Take the selected items out of your folder and see if you can find any patterns or common themes. Some things to look for might include: issue, population to be served, approach to the work, geography, kind of organization, unit or department within an agency, and role.
III. Synthesis

Using the data gathered from your brainstorming and analysis phases, create at least one and no more than five potential job tracks for yourself. A job track is a way to put parameters around and frame your potential career interests, and can include any of the following that have meaning for you: issue or field of interest; subcomponents of the issue that are of interest; approach to the work; kinds of organizations that do this work; where these organizations are located; size of the organizations; potential departments within organizations; roles that you aspire to play; and the requirement of skills, education, experience, and knowledge to fulfill those roles.

Take stock of your qualifications and experiences as they relate to your potential tracks. Your tracks should connect to Composing Your Career and lead to a plan of action to maximize your time at Wagner. Your track should inform which courses you should take, the professors you should get to know, how you use your assignments, the events you go to, the groups you join, the people you seek out, the internship/job experiences you look for, and how you present yourself in a resume, cover letter, and an interview. Remember to reflect along the way to determine if this track feels like a good fit for you. If it does, continue on this path. If not, seek out additional tracks.

Week 2:
ISSUE and SYSTEM Lenses

Readings:
- Alliance for Nonprofit Management map of “Our Universe”: http://www.allianceonline.org/about/our_universe

Class Agenda:
- Focus will be on issue and system, the broadest lenses. We will examine the systems in which issues exist and the group of interacting, interrelated, or interdependent elements that comprise a system.
Discussion will emphasize the various ways to explore and analyze issues, understanding the roles of various stakeholders, the levels of influence stakeholders in an arena have on each other, and the various approaches to having impact on an issue.

Journal writing (optional):

- **Issue**: Explore the history of the issue area in which you are interested. Include why this issue is a matter of public concern; the roots and evolution of the movement surrounding this issue; the language, jargon, key terms and symbols that are evident when discussing this issue; and various policies and current debates connected with this issue. Include why you are drawn to this issue.

- **System**: Who are the various stakeholders within your issue? Note that groups of stakeholders may approach each issue from different perspectives. Identify the various approaches to operating within your system (can include direct service, advocacy/community organizing, policy/legislation, oversight/regulation, and technical assistance/funding). Describe the power, influence and relationship dynamics that are created in the system (as a result of these various stakeholders) and their approaches.

**Week 3:**
**ORGANIZATION and ROLE Lenses**

Readings:

- John Isaacson, “Hunger, Speed, and Weight,” 2004
- **Leading from the “Middle,”** Center for Applied Research, (July, 2003): slides 1-35.

Class Agenda:

- Focus will be on an organization’s mission, structure, and lifecycle stage, and how these elements influence an agency’s impact on the issue. We will also explore both formal and informal roles individuals can play within organizations.

- Class discussion will emphasize the importance of looking at organizations through both formal (mission statement, organization chart, etc.) and informal (lifecycles, influence within systems, etc.) frameworks, and how one’s role can impact one’s sense of an organization, including the various ways individuals can gain influence without formal authority.
Journal writing (optional):

- **Organization**: Identify agencies within your issue area as they relate to mission, structure, and lifecycle stage. Start creating a series of desired organizational profiles that include an organization’s approach to the work, recipient of the services, sector(s), size, location, and anything else you find relevant. If possible, list specific organizations. Explain why you are drawn to these kinds of agencies, being mindful of the relationship between organizational mission statement and issue.

- **Role**: Conduct informational interviews inside and possibly outside your organization to get a better understanding of role. Pick two possible roles you might want to play within an organization. Interview at least one person who holds each of these roles. Describe the scope of their responsibilities, tasks they perform, requirements to fulfill the positions, skills that are required and useful, educational needs, years of experience required to fulfill these roles successfully, and anything else that may be enlightening.

**Week 4:**

**SYNTHESIS and CRAFTING YOUR MESSAGE**

**Class Agenda:**

- Focus will integrate the four lenses with Composing Your Career, exploring various ways to craft your message to potential employers.
- Discussion will focus on helping students articulate what they have learned from this workshop, their own experiences and those of their peers.
- Students will be asked to develop their 90-second “pitch” and share their reflections on how they plan to implement learning from this class to composing their career.

**Written Assignment:**

- Now that you are clearer about issue, system, organization, and role, create an action plan that clarifies a potential career path(s) and maximizes your time at Wagner and beyond. This written “tracks” assignment should include: specific field of interest/issue area; subcomponents of the issue area that are of interest and why; approach to the work that resonates with you; kinds of organizations that do this work and why they appeal to you; where these organizations are located; size of the organizations; potential departments within organizations; roles you aspire to play and why; requirement of skills, education, experience, and knowledge to fulfill those roles; an assessment of current fit for those roles; and a plan of action to maximize time at Wagner and beyond to meet your goals.