

Does Your Image Match Your Ambition?

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We've all heard the phrase: "Image is everything" but how many of us in the Career Services Department of our various universities ever stop to include 'everything' in our list of things when we talk to our students?

For purposes of this discussion let's define "Image" as the way other people see our students and their influences on whether they will agree to their requests, hire them, and pay them the salary they want.

In helping our students to understand the importance of image, many times our focus is on our Juniors and Seniors as they prepare for the Career Fairs, career oriented workshops, seminars, and other programs. While emphasis is usually on that group of students, we inadvertently neglect those who could best benefit from the services – our Freshmen and Sophomores.

We believe that Career Services professionals should get in the path of the students at the early stage and begin to influence their total image in respect to dress, speech, relations and career preparation. We should provide an 'extreme' makeover for our students from head to toe.

While it's not all about the clothing and physical appearance, which plays a greater part, there are other aspects of the students' life that influence image.

A recent Yahoo! HotJobs poll on workplace fashion issues revealed that a majority of the general workforce (68%) and HR professionals (82%) believe that how employees dress at work affects their chances for hiring or a promotion. How you dress definitely shapes how you are perceived by others. Wardrobe selection is very important and should be taken very seriously.

Our goal is to help the students achieve what they want early in their career development - whether it is to get a job or internship, to make a good impression, or simply to feel good about themselves. Providing programs to address verbal communications (voice, grammar, and vocabulary); non-verbal communications (handshakes, posture, and eye contact), dressing for success (business attire vs. business casual, formal, etc.), Business Etiquette (social graces, dining and relations), Career Prep (resume', interviewing, salary negotiations, etc.)

All of these services can be provided, in most instances for free, through a network of strategic corporate partners and career peers who are skilled in the areas you wish to address.

When developing the total image of the students there are three areas that have little to do with clothing but nonetheless enhance their chances of getting what they want. These areas of interests include: being confident (not arrogant), groomed nicely, and avoid perfumes or colognes or oversized jewelry.

I'm certain there are various programs available that could be tailored by Career Services around the country to address the career imagery we should strive for in the students. Several years ago, a "Back to Basics" program was implemented at Prairie View A&M University geared primarily to our Freshman students. The program is designed to assist the students in their overall development – academic, personal, social, economic, physical and career. Dressing for Success is a major component of the program.

The students are exposed to various types of wardrobes through fashion shows, special events requiring special attire, networking socials and other career enhancement events. Additionally, the students are encouraged to dress business like every Tuesday throughout the school year. The teachers and staff have an opportunity to take note of the students and then nominate them for the Best Dress Awards which is presented during a special Student Life Awards program.

The program has been very successful to date. One measure of success is that we now have students challenging each other on wearing appropriate clothing for the event. Incidentally, we are still working to achieve a serious decline in the sagging fashion market. That's a task within itself. However, we believe that if we continue to target the freshmen and work with them from day one, we can change the culture and our campuses will be better for it.

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