Living up to Expectations

Steven M. Richardson, *Winona State University*

The job advertisement calls for applicants with "a bachelor's degree in a social science discipline, two years' experience in community service, and fluency in Spanish." You have received 15 applications. Most candidates have a B.A. in sociology, two majored in history and one in economics. One candidate left college for financial reasons without finishing the senior year, but has worked for the city redevelopment authority for ten years. All the others did volunteer work with service agencies while they were in college. Two candidates are native Spanish speakers, one studied for a semester in Argentina, and the others had no more than two years of college-level Spanish instruction. Whom do you interview?

Unclear Expectations
Can't decide? Of course not. I haven't told you what the job is. Furthermore, the ad offers few hints about which qualifications are negotiable and which ones are absolutely not. We haven't discussed other qualifications that may be relevant either.

It's useful to compare our academic world with the work environment that many of our students will enter upon graduation. In both, people spend a lot of effort defining expectations, or trying to meet someone else's. Teachers and employers face similar uncertainties, as do students and employees.

Consider what one of our graduates would think if he or she applied for the job above. Some colleges count History among the humanities, not the social sciences. Will they accept my history major? How fluent can they expect me to be in Spanish after two

years? I hope they count the summer job I had with the YWCA as community service. Am I qualified? Would I be prepared to do the job?

Some expectations are very crisp and non-negotiable. Employers want to be sure that applicants have specific skills to meet safety or legal requirements of the job. We have similar concerns for college students. We want to ensure that a student entering Accounting 250, for example, can handle basic math and has grasped principles that are taught in Accounting 132.

Other expectations might be met in different ways, or to different degrees. The company that wrote the ad at the top of this essay might want to attract people who value community service and who share the language of social scientists. Any specialization would be O.K., but dilettantes and those without practical experience need not apply. A college that expects new first-year students to have studied a foreign language might have similar motives. The particular language doesn't matter; living abroad for a couple of years or growing up in a bilingual family might be acceptable forms of "study."

So, who gets the interview, is admitted to college, or is enrolled in Accounting 250? The answer, of course, depends on how negotiable the written criteria are and how fully they describe what we expect of candidates. Prerequisites and job descriptions are written for students and applicants in the abstract. We're rarely surprised that we have to be flexible in applying the criteria to real people. Sometimes real students and real job candidates exceed our expectations. Just as commonly, people offer strengths that substitute for what we were expecting or that compensate for gaps.

All too often, however, college entrance criteria, job ads, and course prerequisites set ambiguous expectations that lead later to frustration and disappointment. Students in Accounting 250 discover that the "basic math" prerequisite assumes familiarity with statistical methods that were not emphasized in prior courses. Potential employees decide not to apply because posted criteria appear more restrictive than intended. Morale and productivity suffer because teachers, students, employers, and employees cannot agree about what it means to be prepared for work.

The Importance of Planning
Careful planning can reduce the uncertainty caused by unclear expectations. Here are some key steps to take before soliciting candidates or potential students:

- Write a course syllabus or a job description first. Be clear about what students in the course or program will be asked to do. For a new course, think about how it will be related to parts of the curriculum that precede or follow it. Consider how a potential job relates to the broader corporate context.
- Identify the entry skills and levels of competency that are "non-negotiable."
- Determine how non-negotiable skills may be assessed (e.g., audition, standardized exam) or what guarantee of prior assessment you will accept (e.g., passing grade in a specified course, high school diploma).
- Describe the assessment as concisely as possible, making it clear that this is a requirement for everyone and that only a specified set of alternatives is acceptable ("Prerequisite: C or better in ENGL 325 or 330").
- If the pool of potential candidates is small, consider ways to help future candidates develop non-negotiable skills. A university partnership with public schools, for example, might strengthen reading skills and enlarge the pool of qualified college applicants.
- Identify "negotiable" bodies of prior knowledge or experience that will increase a student's likelihood to succeed in the college, program, or course or an applicant's effectiveness in the job.
- Describe these requirements, making it clear that although not strictly necessary, they constitute a highly desirable foundation ("The ideal candidate will have at least two years of work experience in a counseling environment" or "Prerequisite: prior or concurrent enrollment in PHYS 247 recommended").
- Decide what supplementary resources or services you will offer for students or applicants who have not met the negotiable requirements. These might include on-the-job training, tutorial sessions, a campus writing program, self-paced study materials, or extra optional class periods.

Risks and Obligations
This last step is particularly important. The existence of negotiable requirements implies a set of risks and obligations. A student who skips over a recommended sophomore class to take an upper-level English course risks being unfamiliar with some literary allusions. The student is therefore obliged to do independent reading to keep up. An employee who learned Spanish in an informal, non-school setting may be less able to write grammatical Spanish than a "fluent" employee who learned in school. A company that accepts that risk upon hiring may have to send the one employee to a night school class in Spanish composition if indeed the expectation is for grammatically correct written language usage.

Risk and obligation are clearly greatest for the most negotiable qualifications. This suggests that it is generally best to make important criteria as rigid as possible or at least to identify acceptable alternatives carefully. Risk and obligation are also greater when prerequisite skills were picked up long ago or far away. Although all first-year college students must satisfy generic entrance requirements, for example, students come from different high schools and take different courses. Some wait a year or more before applying to college. Colleges assume the obligation of offering remedial courses and intensive tutoring to reduce the risk of student failure. With time these differences diminish, faculty and students get to know each other better, and they meet each other's expectations more fully.

Meeting Expectations
So far, so good. Suppose, though, you are teaching a course that someone else designed or that you don't hire new employees yourself. You may be surprised to find that a new student in your class or a person in your office lacks important background knowledge and is now struggling to keep up. Under some circumstances (when the person came with false credentials, for example), you can force a student to drop your class or reassign an employee; but that isn't always the practical or the humane thing to do. Instead, try a two-step approach aimed at clarifying expectations and responsibilities and enabling individuals to meet expectations.

• Very soon after the new person joins you (within the first two class periods in the term, for example), have an open conversation

about what you each expect. The goal is to anticipate problem areas while you each have time to soften their impact. The student or employee will be eager to learn how to succeed. Your task is to overcome their natural inclination to hide a shortcoming and to build confidence in your role as a mentor.

- Offer a specific developmental plan tailored as closely as possible to the person's area of weakness. Broad advice to "brush up on your computer skills" or "visit the math lab" is less helpful than advice that targets specific skills that will be needed in the course or job. Instead, for example, recommend that the employee sign up for a workshop in using Excel, followed by guidance from a more experienced staff member. For a student who reveals unfamiliarity with matrix algebra, recommend a tutorial guide that stresses applications in your subject area, plus participation in a math study group with other class members.

Conclusion

Support systems should be designed with the assumption that unprepared students and employees are exceptions to the norm. Students or employees should understand that they must shoulder a large part of the responsibility for meeting unfilled prerequisites. As teacher or employer, you should not enable their future dependence on remedial help by signaling that it's O.K. to be unprepared for a major task.

At the same time, it's important to realize that what we see as a lack of preparedness often arises from a mismatch of expectations, some of which is unavoidable. Rather than act surprised, annoyed, or discouraged, it makes sense to communicate expectations early and carefully and to be ready with help for those who need it.