

A Career Prospects Course that Works!

Helping students explore career possibilities early on is important for their Professional Identity Formation (PIF) journey, which is all about learning to "think, act, and feel like a professional". When students get a clearer picture of their future careers, they become much more motivated, confident, and engaged in their studies.

In my previous life as an intelligence analyst, manager, and Human Resources Development specialist, I developed a deep understanding of the importance of connecting the world of work with academia.

When I taught at Mercyhurst University's Intelligence Studies Department, I noticed that my students were uncertain about the career opportunities available to someone with their skills and knowledge. This ignorance led to a lack of focus, self-awareness and agency in their own "professional" development.

I implemented a Career Prospects module of 9-12 hours in my Crime Intelligence courses, providing students with a safe space to explore different professional roles – essentially "trying on" different "provisional selves" or "possible selves" to see what fits best.

The theoretical part of the course included ethical issues, required competencies and professional Codes of Conduct.

Lectures included career options available in traditional law enforcement, the private sector, think tanks, humanitarian organisations, NGOs, and international organisations that employ people with these skills. We also analysed job postings on LinkedIn and other job boards.

I invited past and present professionals to discuss their "day in the life of...". Of course, the technical expert who worked undercover in a drug ring and a former agent handler were the most popular! The analyst who shared how she used specific techniques to assist in countering human trafficking made a big impression.

The students asked career-related questions and personal questions about life-work balance, challenges, job satisfaction, and dealing with moral issues while fighting crime. I coordinated with the student-led intelligence clubs to maximise attendance at these sessions. For many, this was the highlight of the semester!

PIF outcomes

The module serves as an early “expedition map” for students, guiding them through initial self-assessment and career exploration, stimulating critical reflection, and providing opportunities to practice professional communication and collaborations, all while fostering a sense of their evolving professional self.

The module directly addresses the following key aspects of students’ Professional Identity Formation (PIF):

- Early career exploration & understanding;
- Mitigating “reality shock”,
- Fostering self-reflection;
- Building preference & self-efficacy;
- Developing communication & teamwork and
- Leveraging mentorship & coaching.



The assignment

The deliverable is an individual presentation in class or a talk in a group context. The students receive the assignment at the start of the module, giving them enough time to research career opportunities and reflect on the content and the interactions in class.

The latter works well if there are students who choose the same employer. The “FBI” group can then discuss the topic. I also had a few students whose assignments evolved into fully-fledged career coaching sessions in my office!

Be mindful that the reflective nature of the assignment could have some psychological consequences. Ensure that Career Guidance experts are available to assist with personality and aptitude tests as needed.





Assessment criteria



1. Depth of research & understanding of the professional landscape (30%) include:

- Comprehensive organisation and role analysis: mission, priorities, and the specific job's day-to-day realities, including a clear articulation of the skills and competencies required.
- Contextual awareness: understanding of the broader professional or industry landscape relevant to the chosen role, acknowledging different perspectives or specialisations within it.
- Realistic expectations: attractive and challenging aspects of the role.

2. Self-reflection & personal professional identity connection (30%) include:

- Meaningful self-assessment: reflecting on their own strengths, weaknesses, interests, and values, and how these align or might conflict, with the demands and culture of the chosen profession/role.
- Integration of learning: Articulates how class discussions, readings, or specific concepts from the module have informed their understanding of this career possibility or their own professional identity development.

3. Content organisation & visual aids (20%) include:

- Logical flow, clarity and conciseness, effective visuals.

4. Engaged audience & professional delivery (20%) include:

- Dynamic delivery, audience connection, responsiveness and discussion facilitation.

INSTRUCTIONS

You need to research an agency, company, or NGO conducting security or intelligence work and share with us a specific job/position that interests you at this stage.

1. Collect and analyse information:

- Choose any agency or company and go to their website. Look at its objectives, mission, priorities, mandates, and laws that give it authority to operate.
- Go to their Careers section and choose any career option that looks interesting to you and fits your technical and soft skills, values, personality, relevant experiences and personal circumstances.
- Identify the required education, certification, skills, and experience.

2. Reflect:

- What are your strengths that will help you succeed in this career?
- What are your weaknesses that you need to address? How can you leverage your strengths and mitigate your weaknesses?
- What further education or training is required to reach your career goals?
- What have you learned about yourself and your career goals through this reflection process? How has your perspective changed?