How does an Asheville entrepreneur starting a high-tech Internet company quickly find new employees who meet his requirements?

And how does a UNC Asheville undergraduate about to enter the workforce with a freshly minted diploma find that perfect job that will launch a meaningful and successful career?

The answer for both can be found at the UNC Asheville Career Center, which serves the role of facilitator to ensure students and companies are a good fit for each other. The center offers career development services, guidance and career planning strategies including networking opportunities and internships. The Career Center is there to help alumni as well, no matter how long it’s been since they have thrown a Frisbee on the Quad.

BY ARNOLD WENGROW
PHOTOS BY TIM BURLESON
Local entrepreneur Bill Ward, founder of BUILDERadius, has found that his company has benefited from a close partnership with the Career Center, and as a result about a quarter of the company’s workforce of 48 employees are UNC Asheville graduates.

Why? Kristie Price, who is in charge of hiring at BUILDERadius’ newest division BuildFax, says it’s the liberal arts background that UNC Asheville is known for. “We need people who are curious about the world and know how to develop relationships …”

Price said the partnership with UNC Asheville grew organically. “Some of the first people we hired were from the university, and they worked out so well, we decided to go to the Career Center.”

Here’s how the process worked: A BUILDERadius team sat down with Career Center Director Eileen Buecher to go over job descriptions and the skill sets needed. Price was impressed by the extra steps Buecher took. She posted the positions as a first step but then talked to professors in specific departments to see if they had students they would recommend. Soon after, the Career Center sent the company a folder filled with resumes of well-qualified potential hires.

NETWORKING WITH EMPLOYERS

Working with employers like BUILDERadius is one of the Career Center’s primary strategies for placing graduates with employers. Assistant Director Holly Waltemyer also regularly attends meetings of the Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce and the Western North Carolina Human Resource Association both to find leads for placement, and to talk about the kinds of students UNC Asheville is producing—students who are ready to hit the ground running.

On campus, Waltemyer organizes job, career and graduate school fairs each semester, which attract up to 100 non-profits, businesses and organizations.

ONE STOP FOR CAREER RESOURCES

The Career Center isn’t just about connecting students to potential employers, however. “We don’t consider ourselves a placement center,” Waltemyer said. “We’re a resource in the job search, internships search and career exploration process.”

Buecher agrees. “We are the one-stop shop for any type of career decision making for students and alumni,” she said. “And we offer lifetime access for all alumni.”

The Career Center doesn’t wait until students are ready to look for a job. “We work with them as early as the first week of their first year,” Buecher said, “making presentations about career decision making in the introductory liberal studies courses all freshman take.” She estimates that though her staff is small they reach 80 percent of freshmen and 60 percent of transfer students.
The UNC Asheville Alumni Association has stepped up its efforts to assist the Career Center, and in the past year 337 alums have helped with Career Center events and programming, while 132 alumni are registered as mentors available to help give advice to students in their chosen fields.

One such alumni effort has been particularly successful. The “World of Work” is essentially an annual field trip that connects students considering jobs in cities like Chicago, Washington or New York with local alumni to discover job opportunities and to network. Another popular program is the “How to Find a Job” series that provides seniors “speed networking” opportunities in North Carolina cities, including Asheville, Charlotte and Raleigh.

The results: According to the most recent figures available, an estimated 72 percent of the 2006–07 class secured employment or pursued additional education within one year of graduation. The top employment categories include education, fine/performing arts, marketing/sales/advertising, nonprofits and health care. Top employers include Mission Hospitals, BUILDERadius, Biltmore Estate, Clear Channel Communications, AmeriCorps, Peace Corp., Home Trust Bank, NEMAC, Grove Park Inn and the North Carolina public school system.

REACHING OUT

Gabriela Lemus, a junior from Hickory, discovered new interests and her leadership potential at UNC Asheville, although when she arrived she was not sure what she wanted to pursue. Working with Waltymeyer and the Career Center inspired her to look in many directions.

“Holly is my counselor,” she said. “We talked a lot about what I was doing, what I enjoy doing, taking some assessments. That really helped.” Waltymeyer also encouraged her to become involved with HOLA, the student Latino service and advocacy group on campus. She is now co-president.

“We tutor Latino students at Asheville High,” she said, “and raise funds for Nuestro Centro,” the Buncombe County organization that helps Latinos in the Asheville area. “That work is something that has taken precedence in my life over everything else. The Career Center has been supportive in that effort.”

That volunteer experience has inspired what likely will be a career path. There’s a good chance that Lemus will pursue non-profit service, she said, and in preparation she is taking courses in public policy, civil liberties and individual rights.

WIN-WIN-WIN

For students searching for career options, for alumni rethinking their career paths or offering mentoring service to current students, and for businesses seeking employees with workplace-ready skills, the Career Center has provided an array of opportunities. In fact, in a recent survey of graduating seniors, the Career Center was given a satisfaction rating of about 87 percent—higher than the average for the entire UNC system.

In challenging economic times, that’s good news for graduates seeking lifelong careers and for companies seeking well-rounded employees who are adaptable and ready to succeed.

2008–09 Career Center Statistics

Career Center counselors and volunteer advisers conducted 1,136 individual appointments. Some 27 percent of appointments were with UNC Asheville alumni.

More than 1,584 job, internship, fellowship and scholarship opportunities were posted online for students and alumni. These were viewed some 47,600 times.

About 87 percent of seniors report a high level of satisfaction with the Career Center.

189 employers, alumni and professionals visited campus to provide job, internship and graduate school information to students.