

Name: **Breona Walker**

Title: **(Then) Career Coach; (Now) Assistant Director of Career Education Institution at Virginia Commonwealth University**

Role: **I advise students and alumni of the School of Business in individual appointments, walk-in advising and small groups about exploring career and education options and in developing effective experiential learning, job search and graduate and professional school search strategies. In these settings, I identify resources for students to further learn about their careers and industries of interests and to develop necessary skills/knowledge. I also develop content and conduct programs, workshops, and courses on a variety of topics including self-assessment, career exploration, resume and cover letter writing and editing, interviewing, internship/job search strategies, networking tactics, and a variety of other career topics to educate and prepare students for the world of work. I maintain awareness through collaboration with our Employer Relations team to provide up-to-date information to students related to industry/market trends, organizations and/or employers actively recruiting, and to engage students in employer/alumni programming, such as career fairs and employer campus visits.**

Membership registration or conference attended: **Virginia Association of Colleges and Employers (VACE) 2022 Conference - April 20-22, 2022, in Harrisonburg, Virginia**

Provide a brief overview of that membership or conference opportunity and why you selected it – this should be a summary/story of need – why is this opportunity critical to your current work and career goals to advance work-based learning opportunities for students? **The VACE conference is one for career services professionals and employers, typically serving as a platform for networking, professional development, and the exchange of ideas and best practices in the field of career services. The conferences often bring together professionals from various industries, including career counselors, recruiters, HR professionals, and educators. This opportunity was critical to my work and career goals as at the time I was a new professional within the career services industry, only starting within my role five months prior to the conference. Therefore, I had limited practical knowledge and limited connections. Attending the VACE 2022 conference was critical as it provided me the opportunity to connect with hundreds of career service professionals and introduce me to newer ways of thinking, innovating strategies, and best practices to best serve my student population. I was able to learn about successful programs, resources, and initiatives that other career services professionals have implemented that further student career development, along with how it ties into student academic, social-emotional, mental, and cultural wellbeing and belonging.**

Share the story of the value that this scholarship added to your professional work. What did you learn from the professional development opportunity and how does it relate to advancing work-based learning for students? Be specific. Every type of conference or membership offers opportunities for networking and learning best practices, new resources. What sets this opportunity (conference or membership) apart? What did you learn that will help you advance work-based learning opportunities for students? **The professional development opportunity, particularly the conference attendance, offered me a wealth of insights crucial for advancing work-based learning opportunities for students. Connecting with professionals overseeing peer programs at various universities, I learned specific best practices in initiating and maintaining successful Peer Career Coaching programs. Additionally, the recognition of Virginia as one of the few states on the east coast, and nationally, with its own state-**

wide association of colleges and employers is noteworthy. This distinction facilitates collaboration and resource-sharing among the 39 public colleges in Virginia, creating a unique environment for cross-institutional learning. The conference equipped me with strategies to enhance work-based learning initiatives tailored to our students, ensuring they receive optimal support and guidance in navigating the complexities of the job market.

How do you plan on using what you learned in your day-to-day responsibilities and current role? **Attending the conference played a pivotal role in achieving one of my key goals since taking on my new job. When I initially joined, establishing a Peer Career Coaching program was a priority, as I strongly believed implementing a peer-to-peer coaching program will contribute to meaningful engagement, enhance the university culture supporting student success, provide skill development, and increase business student internship and full-time role rates due to the collaborative modeling approach. However, as a newcomer I faced the challenge of not knowing where to start as I never created something of this magnitude before. The conference proved to be a game-changer as I connected with seasoned career services professionals overseeing successful peer programs at their universities. Engaging in insightful discussions and learning from their experiences, I gained valuable knowledge on best practices for program initiation, crafting effective job descriptions to attract student candidates, training and onboarding, and identifying meaningful projects and tasks for peer career coaches. The shared insights on program maintenance were particularly instrumental. As a result, I was able to put together a proposal to my Assistant Dean for Academic Programs and Student Success, which was accepted and expanded into my current role. My Peer Career Coach program was implemented the following academic year and has been successfully running for over a year now. I was able to directly apply the conference learnings to enhance the support and guidance offered to our collegiate students.**

How will this opportunity benefit the students you work with? **My attendance this conference directly translated into substantial benefits for the collegiate students I work with. By participating in this event, I gained access to the latest industry insights, trends, and best practices in career development that I may not have otherwise had. This knowledge was applied to enhance my guidance, coaching, and counseling services, ensuring that I was equipped with up-to-date information to help students navigate the ever-evolving job market. Exposure to exhibitor booths and insights from keynote speakers further enriched my understanding of emerging career opportunities and strategies, allowing me to share relevant and informed advice with my students. Networking with other professionals in the field informed me of additional resources for students that they use at their institutions, which prompted me to advocate to bring those same resources to my institution as I recognized that they could directly benefit the students under my guidance.**

What else would you like to share about the conference/membership experience? **The conference experience exceeded my expectations in many ways. Beyond the invaluable insights gained for my day-to-day responsibilities, the welcoming atmosphere made it an enriching experience for newcomers like me. I would highly recommend attending, especially for those who may find the prospect intimidating. The collaborative and supportive environment fostered meaningful connections with seasoned professionals who generously shared their expertise. The conference not only demystified the complexities of the field but also provided a platform for networking and**

mentorship that proved invaluable in navigating the intricacies of career services. Overall, it was a transformative experience that I believe every newcomer in the field should embrace.