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# Using LinkedIn for Advising and Development

*Steven L. Cobb, Jiyoung Kwon, Michael A. McPherson*
*(Department of Economics, University of North Texas, USA)*

**Abstract:** LinkedIn, a business-related social networking site, provides a unique set of tools for Economics Departments to use for the benefit of current and future students. An individual with a LinkedIn account typically lists the jobs he or she has held, along with the dates of employment. Usually, contact information in the form of an email address is also provided. The University of North Texas Economics Department started with basic information about all undergraduate and graduate alumni provided by our Office of Institutional Research. We then made an effort to connect with each through LinkedIn. Of the 970 individuals who graduated between 1995 and 2013 with an undergraduate degree in Economics, we have information through LinkedIn on 50.1%. That figure rises to 63.8% for alumni of our graduate program. Using the U.S. Government's Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) System, this paper presents a distribution of specific jobs our alumni hold 5, 10, 15, and 20 years after graduation. This enables us to give specific information to current students. The paper discusses the use of LinkedIn to connect current students looking for employment with alumni in companies with openings. In addition, using LinkedIn in this manner makes it easy to find experts from our alumni rolls who might be invited to visit campus as speakers. The paper goes on to offer suggestions about the use of LinkedIn for purposes of advancement and development.

**Key words:** LinkedIn, advising, development, occupations

## 1. Introduction

The advent and rapid expansion of online social media presents challenges for academic departments that still are largely staffed by individuals who were educated in a much earlier era. However, these new tools offer exciting possibilities for departments. This paper details our department's efforts to leverage LinkedIn to help us better advise our students and to facilitate our efforts to develop and maintain long-term relationships with alumni. On the former, we can give current and potential majors precise guidance as to the sorts of jobs alumni from our program tend to land. We also can help current students find internships and post-graduation employment by connecting them to alumni, and our alumni database gives us quick and easy access to a diverse array of interesting speakers for our classrooms and other alumni visits from which current students may benefit. LinkedIn also facilitates our efforts in the areas of development and advancement.

Before proceeding, a brief discussion of our institutional context may be useful. Ours is a comprehensive

Steven L. Cobb, Associate Dean for Administrative Affairs, Associate Professor, Department of Economics, University of North Texas; research areas/interests: economic education, international trade.
Jiyoung Kwon, Senior Lecturer, Department of Economics, University of North Texas; research areas/interests: applied econometrics, applied microeconomics, industrial organization.
Michael A. McPherson, Professor, Department of Economics, University of North Texas; research areas/interests: economic education, applied microeconomics. E-mail: Michael.McPherson@unt.edu.

public university of approximately 36,000 students. Regarding ethnic diversity, broadly speaking our university's student body reflects the U.S. population as a whole, although at nearly 20% of our student body, we have a slightly higher percentage of Hispanics than the U.S. overall. As is typical of universities in America, women comprise slightly more than half of our student body. The Economics Department is part of the College of Arts and Sciences, and at any point in time we have approximately 250 majors. Our faculty includes 10 tenured or tenure-track faculty and six full-time lecturers. We offer a terminal Master's program and we typically have between 30 and 35 graduate students at any point in time.

## 2. LinkedIn

LinkedIn is the principal business-oriented social media site. According to company information (https://press.linkedin.com/about-linkedin), LinkedIn has nearly 350 million members, and more than two new members are added each second. At present, some 39 million students and recent college graduates are members, and this group comprises LinkedIn's fastest-growing demographic. LinkedIn profiles generally provide information about a member's current position, his or her work history, education, experience, contact information, and more. Much of this information is of interest to academic departments seeking to keep track of alumni.

Departments wishing to use LinkedIn in this fashion must first have an alumni database. These sorts of institutional records may come from a university's registrar, from the office in charge of development or advancement, from departmental records, or from some other source. Our university was able to provide information on undergraduates and graduate students receiving degrees in Economics back to the late 1980s — presumably records prior to this time have not been put into digital form. Our initial information request included name, degree, semester that the degree was awarded, and physical and email addresses, etc. Once this basic database is in place, the time-consuming process of finding and contacting each person on LinkedIn begins. The department will need access to a LinkedIn account. We opened an account using a new email address, economics.alumni@unt.edu. LinkedIn allows one to search for members using a wide variety of search parameters. If an alumnus or alumna is a LinkedIn member he or she will typically list his or her alma mater, and often the degree that was earned. LinkedIn allows one to contact a member to request that he or she connect with you, but in many cases member profiles are visible even for members with whom one is not connected. Connecting is valuable for a number of reasons, including that whenever a member changes jobs LinkedIn notifies all of his or her connections.

Organizing the database in the initial stage can be time-consuming. We spent much of a summer searching LinkedIn for alumni in our database. Unsurprisingly, the age of the alumnus affects the likelihood of being a member of LinkedIn, with more recent graduates more likely to have a profile (see Table 1). Each summer we request an update of all students who graduated during the previous academic year. This takes much less time, as we graduate between 75 and 90 undergraduates each academic year.

**Table 1 UNT Economics Alumni and LinkedIn**

| Decade | UNT Economics Alumni with a Profile on LinkedIn | % of Economics Alumni With a Profile on LinkedIn |
|---|---|---|
| 1980s | 31 | 25.2% |
| 1990s | 84 | 44.7% |
| 2000s | 277 | 50.5% |
| 2010s | 202 | 62.0% |
| Total, 1980-2013 | 594 | 50.1% |

## 3. Using LinkedIn for Advising

Our database in general and LinkedIn in particular make the job of advising students easier. It allows our advisors to speak with some authority on the inevitable question: "what kind of job can I get if I major in Economics?" It also allows the department to more effectively play matchmaker — connecting potential employers at which our alumni work with our current crop of students. Our database allows us to serve our students in another way as well: it's generally a simple matter to find experts to come speak to classes or informal gatherings of students or faculty.

### 3.1 What Sorts of Jobs Can Students Expect?

While building up our alumni database, one area of attention has been what our students and faculty members in Economics have been interested in — the jobs our alumni hold. One of the things that is constantly asked by current or potential Economics majors is what types of jobs our graduates get. Historically we have given them a rather generic response with a few examples of jobs some recent graduates got. Most of our examples are entry-level positions without information on career trajectory. They want more details with real data.

Using LinkedIn, we have job information for about 900 of our alumni out of about 2,200 total alumni. We are interested in coming up with some way to organize this database and of painting a picture of what a person with an Econ degree winds up doing in terms of a career. One drawback is that our sample is not a random one. Still, this approach is interesting and potentially of use to any institution similar to ours.

The big picture is that we want to come up with a profile of occupations of our alumni at 5-year intervals from graduation. The Bureau of Labor Statistics has developed a job classification system (Watson, 2013) called the Standard Occupational Codes. We used this to code the jobs of our alumni. The key is in our being consistent — unfortunately, two people with the same type of job may call their jobs slightly different things. As a start, two research assistants each coded many of the job titles in our alumni database independently using the SOCs. Inevitably, the lists were different — some of those jobs don't fit neatly into one of the categories, and on occasion it is a judgment call as to how to code some of them. Then we compared them to see whether two of them have come up with different codes in some of the cases. We let them try to resolve any differences. If there were some they could not agree on, we made the final call to have a common list.

When students graduate with a bachelor's degree in economics they may go on to get a job under a wide variety of job titles. Table 2 presents some of the job titles UNT graduates have under broader occupation categories, 2-digit level:

**Table 2 Broad Occupation Classifications for Current Job Titles**

| Broader Job Classification | Current Job |
|---|---|
| Management Occupations | 280 |
| Business and Financial Operations Occupations | 260 |
| Education, Training, and Library Occupations | 96 |
| Computer and Mathematical Occupations | 57 |
| Sales and Related Occupations | 42 |
| Legal Occupations | 40 |
| Life, Physical, and Social Science Occupations | 23 |
| Office and Administrative Support Occupations | 22 |
| Others | 58 |
| Total Number of Responses | 878 |

The summary at the 2-digit level can be useful to display the distribution for the alumni database as a whole. However, students and advisors can draw more useful information from the summary at the 6-digit level. Table 3 details some of the job titles under detailed occupation categories, the 6-digit level.

Our database allows us not only to have their current job titles but also to track down their career changes. Out of alumni's responses, we tabulate alumni's jobs every 5 year after their graduation in Table 4. Table 4 with frequency and Chart 1 with relative frequency are constructed to display UNT alumni's career changes for every 5-year interval.

**Table 3 Detailed Occupation Classifications for Current Job Titles**

| Detailed Job Classification (out of 150 classification) | Current Job |
|---|---|
| Chief Executives | 67 |
| Management Analysts | 53 |
| Market Research Analysts and Marketing Specialists | 43 |
| Sales Managers | 40 |
| Financial Analysts | 39 |
| Lawyers | 37 |
| General and Operations Managers | 33 |
| Financial Managers | 25 |
| Graduate Teaching Assistants | 24 |
| Accountants and Auditors | 23 |
| Postsecondary Teachers, All other | 21 |
| Credit Analysts | 13 |
| Retail Salespersons | 8 |
| Students | 6 |
| The Other 136 Classifications | 444 |
| Total Number of Responses | 876 |

**Table 4 Detailed Occupation Classifications for Career Changes for 5-year Intervals**

| Detailed Job Classification | Job in graduation year | 5 years later | 10 years later | 15 years later |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Chief Executives | 1 | 4 | 4 | 2 |
| Management Analysts | 9 | 20 | 8 | 0 |
| Market Research Analysts and Marketing Specialists | 13 | 15 | 6 | 1 |
| Sales Managers | 0 | 13 | 7 | 2 |
| Financial Analysts | 14 | 9 | 8 | 2 |
| Lawyers | 0 | 12 | 12 | 3 |
| General and Operations Managers | 5 | 8 | 8 | 1 |
| Financial Managers | 2 | 5 | 3 | 0 |
| Accountants and Auditors | 10 | 9 | 5 | 0 |
| Postsecondary Teachers, All other | 2 | 1 | 3 | 1 |
| Credit Analysts | 4 | 6 | 2 | 1 |
| Retail Salespersons | 6 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| Students | 42 | 12 | 1 | 0 |
| The Other 136 Classifications | 85 | 86 | 37 | 5 |
| Total Number of Responses | 193 | 202 | 104 | 18 |

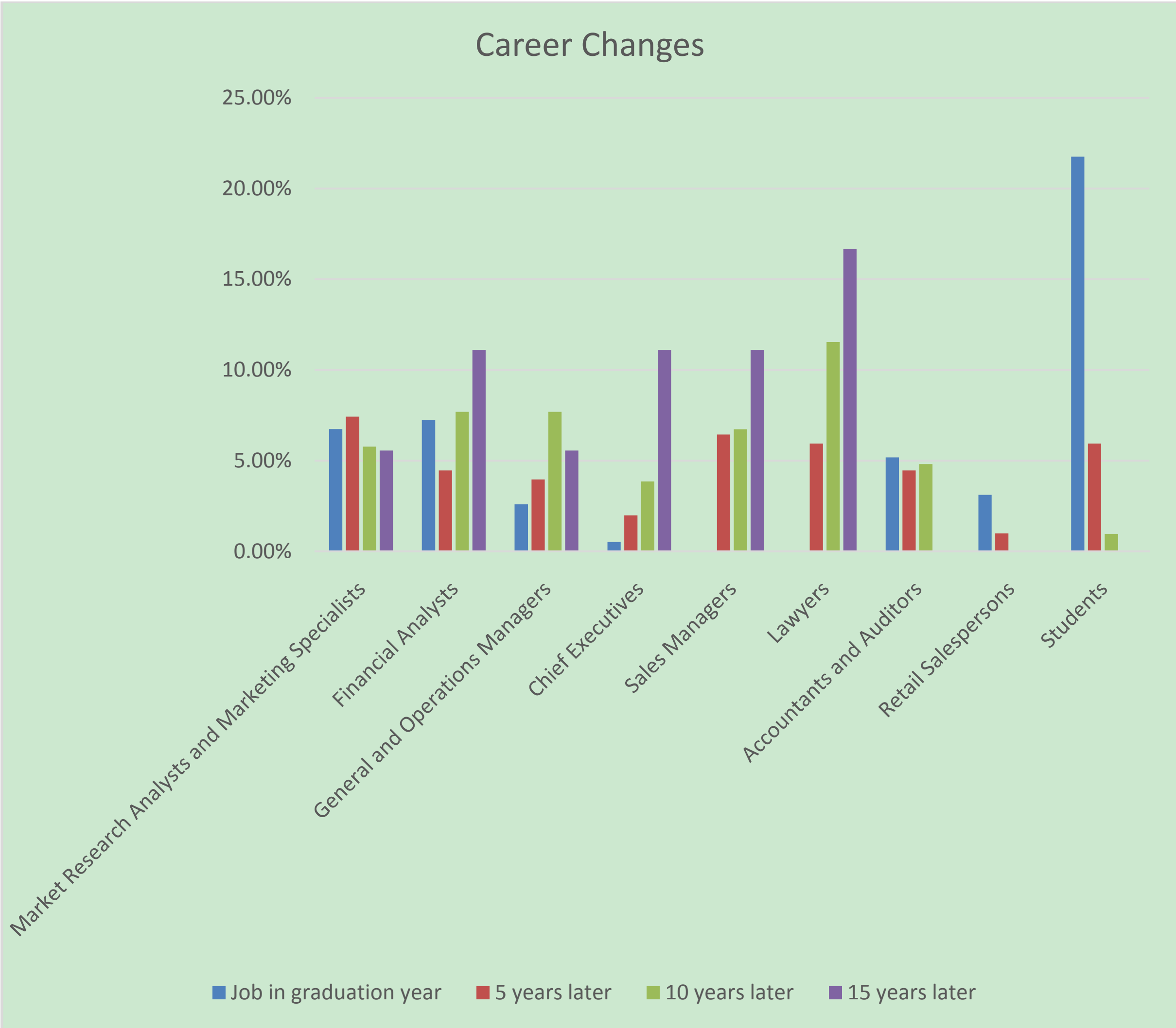


**Figure 1 Detailed Occupation Classifications for Career Changes for 5-year Intervals**

From this chart, we can quickly see that top job positions for fresh graduates are Retail Sales and Full-time Students while Chief Executives, Managers, and Laywers are most frequently observed 15 years after graduation. The bar chart illustrates that the proportions of our alumni as Financial Analysts and Market Research Analysts remain steady for 5-year intervals.

### 3.2 "Matchmaking"

An important sort of fruit that the recent intensification of our efforts to build relationships with alumni has borne involves a sort of matchmaking role. More and more often, alumni contact us when their companies have job openings. Alumni who feel close to their alma maters view this as a way to give back, and employers who have had good experiences in hiring our alumni are often quite interested in hiring similarly trained recent graduates. This is an important way for employers to decrease the risks they take when hiring a new person, and it is clearly a boon for our current students to have such opportunities.

In addition to helping with post-graduation employment, our alumni outreach has facilitated internship opportunities. Internships, paid or not, are increasingly important ways for students to gain experience and for employers to assess up-and-coming talent without making a commitment. Based on anecdotal evidence, we believe that we are doing more matchmaking in this area than ever before. A recent example involves an alumna who is finishing her first year of law school. On the hunt for a summer internship in the Dallas-Ft. Worth area, she inquired as to whether we have any alumni who practice law in the area. It was a simple matter to send her a half-dozen names, and she has accepted an offer from one of them.

### 3.3 Creating a Wide (and Deep) Pool of Experts

The evidence above clearly indicates a remarkably heterogeneous alumni base in terms of career path. It is likely that this is a common feature of economics programs at other colleges and universities as well. Assembling and maintaining a database and close relationships with the individuals in that database creates opportunities that would otherwise be scarcer and more difficult to arrange. For example, we have an active Economics Club that meets monthly. Most months the organizers wish to have speakers address topics of interest to students, including certain current events and discussion of career possibilities. Such spots are typically easy to fill with alumni, who usually are honored and delighted to be asked to share their knowledge and experiences. In our case, we have had alumni discuss careers as analysts of one form or another. We could as easily form a panel of attorneys who are alumni of our program to discuss how training in economics prepared them for law school and beyond. Since many of our students go on to become economics educators, finding speakers to address current students with similar aspirations would be simple. There are many other possibilities.

Typically we do not offer honoraria to alumni speakers, but we have generally had no problems finding alumni willing to come back to campus as a way of “giving back”. In many cases alumni are also motivated by an opportunity to recruit potential new employees for the companies they represent.

Alumni are also a tremendous resource for departments interested in making large or small adjustments to their curricula. In our case, we frequently discuss with alumni the usefulness of the courses they took with us and we have added new courses (especially at the graduate level) as direct responses to suggestions from alumni in the workplace.

## 4. Using LinkedIn for Development

Professionals in the advancement or development offices at American colleges and universities know that alumni are more likely to give when they feel a closeness to their alma maters. According to the advancement office at our university the general rule of thumb is that five to seven quality interactions are necessary before a potential alumni donor is primed to be approached about making a donation. While university offices have a number of ways to keep in touch, LinkedIn provides opportunities for departments to do so as well. Indeed, individuals are more likely to feel a bond with their departments and may be more likely to read and respond to contacts from that level.

### 4.1 Keeping in Contact With Alumni

We contact every alumnus or alumna for whom we have contact information at least twice each year. First, we know the birthday of all alumni graduating since the mid-1980s. We send a birthday greeting to each one by email; this greeting also includes a simple request for an update. We have received much positive feedback from alumni on this — such greetings seem to come as a pleasant surprise to many of them. In addition to serving as a quality point of contact, this effort serves several other purposes as well. It is a way to discover when an email address no longer operates. It also allows us to learn about career changes alumni may have had. It is true that we learn about such changes through LinkedIn updates, but some LinkedIn members update their profiles only sporadically.

We contact our alumni a second time each spring when we email a departmental newsletter. This newsletter has an extensive section on alumni news; this section is informed by the data we have collected on our alumni via LinkedIn (as well as information from other sources such as responses to our requests for updates in our birthday greetings emails). Although this makes for a large newsletter (our most recent edition runs to 25 pages), we believe that an alumnus or alumna is more likely to read a newsletter that mentions him or her and most of his or her classmates. Another way that we try to pique interest in the newsletter is by highlighting three or four alumni in each edition.

We often receive emails in response to our birthday greetings and newsletter release, and when this happens we do our best to reply to each in a timely fashion. These conversations serve to further cement closer relationships, and they also allow us to be a stronger bridge linking our university and our current students on the one hand, and our alumni and our community on the other. While it is always possible that a particular alumnus does not enjoy hearing from us, to date we have had only positive reactions from those we have contacted.

### 4.2 Using the Alumni Database for Fundraising

How might a department use their alumni database for fundraising? We have run a successful narrowly focused campaign designed to raise money for a scholarship named in memory of two former faculty members. For this, alumni who were students of these professors were contacted. To date we have not contacted those in our alumni database as part of a general Economics Department giving campaign, but our success with the narrowly focused campaign is certainly encouraging. It should be emphasized that any sort of fundraising campaign should only be undertaken in coordination with one’s college and/or university advancement professionals. Such individuals not only possess expertise in how to approach alumni, they may also have knowledge that those at the departmental level may lack. For example, certain alumni may have been approached in the recent past by some other group within the university, and may not welcome an “ask” so soon thereafter from another group.

Most colleges and universities have developed simple ways for alumni to donate, either online or by more traditional means. We include a page in our newsletter that encourages alumni to support our program and provides information about how to do so. On it we list each of our scholarship funds, along with a short description of each fund. There is a URL given that takes the potential donor to a webpage created by our advancement office. This allows a choice between our scholarship funds, and it provides a payment mechanism for those wishing to use a credit card and a physical address for those who would prefer to write a check. We place a high premium on making it as straightforward as possible for individuals to donate.

## 5. Conclusion

Developing an alumni database using records from one’s institution, and then augmenting it by means of the use of LinkedIn, requires an initial investment of time, but offers departments a set of tools that would have been unavailable previously. These tools include the ability to better advise current students, to help place students in valuable internship opportunities, to match soon-to-graduate students with alumni interested in filling vacancies at their companies. The longer term benefits of closer associations with alumni may also create better opportunities for fund-raising than were previously possible.

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