

IN PRACTICE ARTICLE

Virtual Graduate Fairs for PSM Programs

Kristin Kuter

IN OCTOBER 2019, BEFORE WE KNEW WHAT 2020 WOULD BRING, WE HELD THE FIRST PROFESSIONAL SCIENCE MASTER'S VIRTUAL

Fair. Following up on the marginal success of the first fair, we planned another one for April 2020, which ended up being quite timely given current events and resulted in a very successful event. In this article, we will provide an overview of virtual graduate fairs, including the platform we have used, what the benefits are, and the price of participation. We will also go over the results of the events already hosted and tips for promoting and marketing the event as we prepare for the next PSM virtual fair, scheduled for April 16, 2021.

So, first of all, what is a “virtual graduate fair?” It is just like an on-campus open house that prospective students would attend to learn more about a specific program, only now the visit is virtual – done entirely in an online space – and the participants can learn about multiple PSM programs at once. The event is free to prospective students and they get the chance to interact with admissions personnel, faculty, and possibly even current PSM students or alums depending on which of its representatives an institution chooses to participate in the virtual fair.

While individual institutions might consider organizing their own virtual recruitment events via Zoom, or other web conferencing programs, that could require more resources than some PSM programs have available to them. To address that limitation, we partnered with CareerEco to help design, promote, and host our events, which are open to all PSM-affiliated programs. This way, CareerEco handled all the technical aspects of the virtual meeting and the cost for individual institutions is held to a manageable level. For our events, the cost has been

\$295 for each institution, regardless of how many PSM programs that institution has or will be recruiting for during the event. At that price, participating in the event is worthwhile even if it yields just one enrolled student at your institution. That was the case for Grand Valley State University (GVSU) following the October 2019 fair, and as Tim Born, Past President of NPSMA, put it, “For an investment of about \$300 and a few hours of time, we may have just pulled in about \$15,000 worth of tuition.”

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The general set-up of a virtual fair on the CareerEco platform consists of a main page listing every institution participating in the event. The main page then links to individual landing pages for each institution. The landing page for an institution, which prospective students can visit leading up to the event, contains information about the degree programs that are offered at the institution so that

prospective students can do research ahead of time. Then during the event the landing page has links to chat rooms where prospective students can talk with personnel from the institution. If an institution has multiple degree programs, separate chat rooms can be created for each program. Each institution has complete control over the content on their landing page, which can include photo and video content.

The CareerEco website lists a number of reasons for institutions to participate in one of their virtual fairs, which includes lowering admissions costs, saving time and money on travel, and the ability to more easily involve faculty and current students in the recruitment process. But perhaps the most valuable benefit is that every participating institution receives access to the list of all prospective students registered for the event, not just the ones that indicated interest in their program or that may have visited with them during the event. This allows institutions to do additional follow-up recruiting efforts

beyond the event to all individuals who attended the virtual fair, even if an individual did not specifically seek out their institution during the event.

As mentioned in the introduction, the first event held in October 2019 could be considered moderately successful. A total of 20 institutions participated and 79 prospective students registered for the event. The second event held in April 2020 saw slight growth in the number of participating institutions to 22, but overwhelming growth in the number of prospective students, which nearly doubled to 153. This growth did not continue in the third event held this past October, with the number of participating institutions dropping to 18 and the number of prospective students dropping to 81. It is not entirely clear why the October fair did not draw as large of an audience as the April fair did in 2020. Perhaps it is an indication of a growing fatigue with virtual events as the pandemic continues on, the opposite of which was true in April. However, we do note that the level of participation in the two fall events was about the same. Thus, it may be that the differences are primarily driven by timing. As such, we are planning another fair this spring on April 16, 2021, to see if the trend continues.

We are also working with a new platform, Showfloor (<https://showfloor.co/>), to host the upcoming event in order to hopefully draw in more PSM institutions. In moving the event to Showfloor, we will be able to reduce the cost to NPSMA members while also improving the benefit as this new platform is more modern and offers additional features. On the Showfloor platform, participating PSM institutions will create “booths” that prospective students visit during the event and interact via live video chat with the institutions’ representatives. The “booths” are analogous to the landing pages on the CareerEco platform and can contain the same content, including photos, videos, links to websites, and PDF or other documents. Showfloor tailors the order in which the “booths” are presented to attendees starting with the PSM programs that are most relevant to the interests of the prospective student. Showfloor also offers a “main stage” from which presentations can be made

to all attendees. Participating PSM institutions will have the option to schedule time on the main stage to promote their programs during the event.

While part of the success of the April 2020 fair is arguably due to the move online for most academic and business operations, the success and level of participation in a virtual fair has depended on both the marketing that is done by CareerEco and also the marketing that is done by the individual participating institutions. If more institutions participate in an event, then more efforts toward promotion are taking place. Let’s first look at what CareerEco has done to promote the event, and then discuss marketing strategies that individual institutions can adopt.

CareerEco marketed the PSM virtual grad fairs by sending promotional materials to a large list of individuals interested in STEM or somehow related to STEM. Almost 100,000 names are on this list, which includes past participants in any STEM-related virtual fairs hosted by CareerEco and contacts on purchased name lists such as GRE takers. While many institutions already purchase lists or other name buys, what CareerEco also adds to their list are contacts in career services or advising offices at colleges and universities across the country. PSM institutions can bolster these efforts by utilizing their own career center

offices and marketing to other academic institutions and employment agencies in their region. With the switch to Showfloor, we will lose this aspect of marketing offered by CareerEco and so we will encourage participating PSM institutions to adopt the strategy into their own marketing efforts.

For institutions participating in a PSM virtual grad fair, marketing materials are provided that can be placed on program websites and social media accounts. In an “Ask NPSMA” session last March, Anirudh Chowdhary, Director of PSM programs at GVSU, suggested the following for getting the most out of social media:

- Post an announcement about virtual fairs on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc., and include a

For more success at a Virtual Graduate Fair, “post an announcement about virtual fairs on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc. and include a ‘10 second teaser’ video to help promote the event.”

“10 second teaser” video to help promote the event. This post should send prospective students to the event page.

- Format the announcement as an “event” on Facebook or Instagram rather than just posting a flyer. This creates more hype around the virtual fair and prospective students can RSVP to the event through the social media accounts.
- Consider using the free version of Eventbrite to advertise the event, which will create another mechanism for prospective students to register for the event. The benefit of using a tool like Eventbrite is the additional notifications about the event sent through email automatically generated by the program. This also serves to increase the hype of the event and provides another avenue for advertising through the Eventbrite database.

Individual institutions should also work with any admissions or marketing personnel at their institution to reach out to prospective students who have already expressed interest in their PSM programs. Individuals in these offices should have email lists of prospective students that they contact for recruitment purposes. These lists may be obtained through name buys, like the CareerEco list, but may also consist of prospects that have visited a program’s website. In short, any prospective student that an institution has contact information for should be informed either through email or social media about the virtual fair ahead of time.

Finally, get faculty involved in the promotion of the virtual fair. Faculty can help spread the word about the event to their own undergraduate students and also their colleagues at other institutions. Additionally, get faculty to participate during the fair, either to be available in the chat rooms to talk with prospective students or to give a scheduled presentation during the event, something akin to a webinar, which is an optional feature available on the CareerEco platform. Including these opportunities as part of your institution’s virtual fair can help to draw more prospective students to the event, as students are often looking for opportunities to directly interact with faculty in order to discuss more technical aspects of a PSM program than is typically possible with an admissions representative.

For more information about virtual fairs and to see examples of landing pages from the most recent PSM Virtual Fair hosted on CareerEco, visit:

<https://www.CareerEco.com/Events/PSM>

For more tips on marketing, you can read the following blog post by Showfloor:

<https://showfloor.co/2020/12/02/how-to-host-an-virtual-career-fair-in-6-easy-steps-step-4/>

More details about the April 2021 fair will be in in future *PSM News* emails and “Ask NPSMA” sessions. The registration deadline is April 7.

Author Information

Kristin Kuter, PhD, is an Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Mathematics and Computer Science at Saint Mary’s College in South Bend, IN. She is also the NPSMA President Elect. She may be contacted at: kjehring@saintmarys.edu

Next PSM Virtual Career Fair

April 16, 2021



Interested? Contact: kjehring@saintmarys.edu
 Registration deadline: April 7, 2021