Episode 1 - Selling Yourself Resumes and Cover Letters

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**SPEAKERS**

Amanda Wroblewski, Meredith Benjamin, Nicholas Lampietti

**Meredith Benjamin** 00:10

From the Center for Careers, Life and Service at Grinnell College, you're listening to Going Forth. I'm Meredith Benjamin,

**Nicholas Lampietti** 00:16

And I'm Nicholas Lampietti.

**Meredith Benjamin** 00:18

And today we're talking resumes,

**Nicholas Lampietti** 00:20

and cover letters

**Meredith Benjamin** 00:21

and asking the CLS everything you've ever wondered about these tricky pieces of personal marketing,

**Nicholas Lampietti** 00:26

so that all you have to do is sit back and listen. Our guest today is Amanda Wroblewski.

**Meredith Benjamin** 00:32

Amanda is an exploratory advisor at the CLS who has been known to say the words that no one else ever has, "I love resumes!"

**Nicholas Lampietti** 00:39

So let's chat with Amanda, and give resumes some love. Stay with us. So, let's just kick this off. Can you start by telling us a little bit about yourself and your role at the CLS?

**Amanda Wroblewski** 00:58

Yeah, so my name is Amanda Wroblewski. I use she/her pronouns. I am one of the exploratory advisors here in CLS. So basically, what that means is I meet primarily with first and second year students, and kind of anybody else that's also kind of questioning what their path is, and wanting to know more about different career types out there of resume working and cover letters, internship searching, and kind of anything in between there.

**Meredith Benjamin** 01:22

That's a good segue, because it sounds like you're pretty well prepared to talk about what we're hoping to talk to you about, which is resumes and cover letters!

**Nicholas Lampietti** 01:27

Yeah!

**Meredith Benjamin** 01:27

Yeah. So could you start by telling us what is a resume? Like, what are employers looking to learn about me in my resume?

**Amanda Wroblewski** 01:42

Oh, so resumes are pretty much a record of everything that you've done professionally and sometimes personally. Employers typically are looking for things that will line up with what they need in their organization. So for example, if you're applying for somebody, or for a position that is looking for someone with leadership skills, they're gonna be looking for leadership skills on your resume and experiences that relate to that. It's really just kind of a record and a way to show off yourself and what you're capable of.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 02:11

The natural follow up question would be, "How long should my resume be?" And I think Meredith has a funny anecdote for this.

**Meredith Benjamin** 02:18

Yeah! I, my first resume that I ever submitted to a job was when I was 15. And it was six pages long. And it was six pages worth of experiences of a middle schooler, you can imagine kind of how exciting that must have been for my employer to be reading. So how long should a resume be?

**Amanda Wroblewski** 02:41

First of all, props to you for having six pages, period, as a middle schooler. I can tell you as a professional, I don't even have that long resume. And so I would say, for the average undergraduate student, a resume really shouldn't exceed one page. So there's a little, there's a caveat to that. So one page is what you're actually using to apply to a job. That said, I usually recommend students to have like a master copy of a resume or like an all encompassing copy of a resume. And that can extend as long as you need to. So at this point, Meredith, yours will probably be like 12 pages long from things you've been involved in secondary school. But a master copy is just a way that you can then again, keep track of everything that you've done, and you don't have to like worry about how long it's going to be. But if you end up needing to pull from an experience you had, you know, beginning of high school or going to college 10 years from now, you can still go back and find that experience.

**Meredith Benjamin** 03:34

I guess you kind of answered what our next question was going to be? Should I send the same resume to all jobs?

**Amanda Wroblewski** 03:41

Yeah, great question. I usually tell students, you shouldn't submit the exact same resume for everything. Of course, your experience aren't probably going to change too much, it's still gonna be the same exact experiences. But just the way you talk about them, or the way that you organize them is probably going to be different. So for example, if you're applying to three jobs that are related to working in a museum, and you're applying to four jobs related to working, I don't know what, a summer camp. Those are probably gonna be very different resumes, or at least highlighting very different skills, because it's meeting different skill sets to work in a museum versus working at a summer camp.

**Meredith Benjamin** 04:14

You lead us right into a question that we plan to ask, which is that, "Should I include experiences, even if they don't relate to the job I'm applying for?" "What if I've never had an experience in the field that I'm trying to break into with this, this job application?"

**Amanda Wroblewski** 04:33

That's a really common question I get from a lot of students, especially some of our younger students that are only in their first or second year. And also the fact that we've been in a pandemic for how long that you know, it's hard to get experiences in certain fields if you just don't have the time or if things aren't open. So I would say it's definitely still possible to have a solid resume even if you don't have the exact experience they're looking for. Case in point a lot of students are wanting to apply for things where they need lab experience, but maybe the only experience they've had working in a lab is one class I took during one semester, it's still possible to talk about the skills you've had in that one experience. But then also getting creative and thinking outside the box about what other experiences that organization or that position might be looking for. So this is where your transferable skills is going to come into play. So are you needing a leadership component to the job that you're doing? Are you needing good communication skills? Do you need to be able to work on a team? So thinking through some of those solid skills and thinking, how else have I done those in the past? Whether or not it's related directly to working in a lab? Because chances are, you've worked with teammates and worked with other people in other situations. Being able to highlight those transferable skills more so than the hands on like, "I know how to use a pipette." "I know how to use a Bunsen burner" type of things.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 05:45

You mentioned something briefly that I would love to come back to, which is the pandemic. And so what would be your advice for working with a resume gap?

**Meredith Benjamin** 05:55

For me, I know something that I've come to the CLS with before is that the summer before that happened, I broke my leg really badly. And I was laid up in bed for a whole summer that I had planned to spend doing various things. So I have this like two year resume gap. And I wasn't sure kind of how to explain that.

**Amanda Wroblewski** 06:17

That is a great question. And obviously very timely, generally speaking, as a student, I think most employers will recognize the fact that you are a student first. So if that means sometimes you have to prioritize a semester of classes, because they're particularly difficult. Or if you, you know, have a part time job, but then decide it's not a good fit for you and end up having to leave that job. Most employers are going to understand that for students because it's just, it's challenging to be a student and do a job. So there's not really a need to explain a resume gap, per se, if you're kind of unsure about it, this is a chance where you can talk about it in a cover letter rather than in a resume. So really, that resume gap piece is probably going to come more into play in an interview setting or cover letter setting when you have more time to explain your circumstances.

**Meredith Benjamin** 07:04

Let's talk about cover letters. What is a cover letter? And what are the differences? Or what should be the differences between them?

**Amanda Wroblewski** 07:10

Yeah, so a cover letter is basically just kind of your introduction to what you're planning on applying to, and why you want to work at a location. So it's basically a chance to kind of storytell your experience rather than having them in bullet points. When you're writing your cover letter, you shouldn't just be copy and pasting over your bullet points, it's a chance to say, oh, yeah, I worked at an ice cream shack and this is the experience I had working with a difficult customer, and that's how I'm going to bring this situation into your job is by knowing how to do conflict management. Most of the time, when you're writing a cover letter, you'll have a job description in front of you. So you can see again, what types of things are they looking for out of a candidate? And how can I talk about those skills that I have in my past on this cover letter to make myself sound like a very ideal candidate, I think the utility of being able to send both a cover letter and a resume is it kind of gives a more full picture of a person.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 07:58

So when I'm approaching writing a cover letter, what kind of tone should I use?

**Amanda Wroblewski** 08:03

Cover letters are a professional document. This is not the chance to break out the lingo. And the slang of Gen Z. Cover letter should be on the more professional side in the sense of like, "Hello, I'm here I'm applying for this job. This is why I'm interested in it. These are the skills and experiences I've had in the past. This is why I feel like I'm qualified in your job. Super appreciate the time you've taken to read this letter looking forward to hearing from you soon."

**Meredith Benjamin** 08:28

So on that note, I want to, we're going to read you a cover letter example, and we would just love your feedback on it as an expert. Sound good?

**Amanda Wroblewski** 08:39

Yeah.

**Meredith Benjamin** 08:40

Hey, Amanda, you're probably reading a lot of applications, and you're probably not enjoying yourself. I'm writing this cover letter, and I'm not enjoying myself either. So let me cut to the chase. I won't pretend that your company's mission is my passion. But I do think that sales are interesting. And you seem to have a strong background per your LinkedIn page. If you hire me, I'll show up for the hours you expect me to and do what's asked, and you'll like me. Let's face it, that puts me ahead of 99% of the applicants already. You'll notice that I haven't talked about what skills I have yet, do I honestly need to I went to an elite institution. And we all know that I've figured out how to use whatever programs you'd like me to toil away with. Working at your company doesn't take a rocket scientist and I think we both know that. But the type of person that you hire will matter, especially for your size team. Get back to me if you're looking for someone who you'll actually enjoy working with. Sincerely, Meredith.

**Amanda Wroblewski** 09:35

That's pretty bold narrative, I will give you that. Yeah, I think that there were a lot of things in that cover letter that I would probably recommend a student like yourself to do a little bit differently. I think a cover letter and a resume, both are a chance to be, you know, confident in your skills and abilities. Like you should definitely come into this situation being like yeah, I am qualified for this job. I really hope you will hire me, but you should be including skills and experiences, you should be elaborating more on what you're bringing to the table. It's not so much about, you know, I promise I'm really good at this, like I've done this in the past, it's more so like bringing the receipts I guess, like, for lack of a better term for so, why you're good at this thing? So if you're gonna say, Yeah, I'm great at leadership, don't just leave it at that, like, give an example of what you're good at.

**Meredith Benjamin** 10:20

That is an example from an article titled, "The Worst Cover Letter Ever Written (Literally)." I think that that was a very kind way to give some feedback on that. I thankfully have never submitted a cover letter that says that.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 10:36

But I think it brings up something really interesting, which is the idea that the cover letter is a chance to be creative. And we're wondering what your thoughts and opinions are on that? How much of a chance is the cover letter to tell your story? And to be a little bit creative?

**Amanda Wroblewski** 10:50

Yeah, that's a good question. I would say, you know, again, this is a professional document, like, I think it's really going to depend on what type of industry you're trying to break into and work in. So for example, working in more of a creative industry, they might really appreciate something that's kind of out of the box, similar, but not exact, to that worst cover letter ever written. However, if you're applying to things in like a very strict business field, or something along those lines, they're probably going to want something that is just easy to read through and really predictable. That isn't to say, you can't talk about yourself in a creative way, or bring experiences to your letter that, you know, really showcase you as an individual person. I think the best way to do that is kind of thinking through the experiences that you've had and what does make you stand out like yes, every student that's going to be an economics major has taken economics, but like, what about the projects that you've picked for classes, or the papers that you've written, and the research that you've done makes you stand out and makes you interesting?

**Meredith Benjamin** 11:47

What are examples of the types of experiences that students don't always think to include on their resume? But that actually could be really helpful?

**Amanda Wroblewski** 12:00

Yeah, I think there's also I mean, I keep leaning on classwork and things that you've done academically, but I think that's something that a lot of students will overlook, as they're thinking about their professional goals. It's that like, yeah, I was just in this one class. And yeah, we did some stuff. And I went to lectures, and we had group discussions. But really, that is a good chance, where you do a lot of the learning that you need for a specific industry. So again, thinking about group projects that you've done, that's lending itself to teamwork skills, communication, it's maybe even technology if you're doing stuff on Zoom or if you're trying to put together a PowerPoint presentation. Looking deeper into what you've done, can kind of be exciting to think about things in new contexts.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 12:35

That's a really, really interesting perspective. It certainly wasn't something I was thinking about beforehand. But now I'll be able to put into practice.

**Meredith Benjamin** 12:42

I have one last question. And you have to answer honestly.

**Amanda Wroblewski** 12:47

Okay.

**Meredith Benjamin** 12:48

Is it okay to stretch the truth a little bit?

**Nicholas Lampietti** 12:53

We all contemplate doing it.

**Meredith Benjamin** 12:54

You know, like, what is the best practice when it comes to making ourselves look as good as possible?

**Amanda Wroblewski** 13:04

Yeah, that's a good question. And I always go back to something that I heard from a career advisor when I was in college. Really, this is your chance to shine, like this is your chance to pull out all the stops, don't be humble, like, really brag about yourself, and about the great things you've done. I'm not saying that you should put down that you were the mayor of your hometown, when you in fact, only volunteered in some sort of community setting. But I think that your resume really is a chance to highlight the things that you've done and make yourself sound really, really great. I will caution you and say don't make it again, don't make it sound like you've done something that you haven't because chances are someone's gonna remember something from your resume, and after you've been hired, they're gonna be like, "Oh, yeah, you have experience with this. Can you actually come and do that for me here?" So if you're stretching the truth a little bit too much, and you get caught in a lie there, not ideal.

**Meredith Benjamin** 13:51

Amanda, are you saying that you weren't the mayor of your hometown? I can't relate to that at all. I was 100%, the mayor of my hometown.

**Amanda Wroblewski** 13:59

Well based on that 6-page middle school resume, I would think so!

**Meredith Benjamin** 14:01

Yeah, exactly!

**Nicholas Lampietti** 14:02

Before we end, do you have any other general advice or tips or tricks or things you think we've missed that you want to make sure people hear about?

**Amanda Wroblewski** 14:12

Yeah, I was absolutely gonna go with shameless plug for CLS resources. We as advisors, we've got seven career communities in our office, as well as assortment of other advisors as well. We are so happy to read as many different versions of your resume as you need to. And I always recommend students to get a couple different opinions from different advisors just to see because I know my perfect ideal resume looks a lot different than another advisors perfect ideal resume just because we prefer different things and we have different industry backgrounds, I guess. So have as many people even mentors outside of CLS: professors, your best friend's mom, like have everybody look at it, look it over and kind of give you some feedback and then take what works and leave what doesn't. That said, CLS does offer lots of resources. We have some handouts on our CLS GrinnellShare page that you can take a look at to see what sample resumes and sample cover letters look like. So we obviously offer appointments for students, but additionally, we'll also offer drop in hours. So if you just have a quick question about your resume cover letter or anything else, you can pop into our drop in hours on Monday through Wednesdays from one to four in the CLS. So take advantage of what we have. Unbiasedly, this is a really great career center for this college, so we should definitely see you and at least one time while you're here.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 15:23

Yeah. Thanks so much for chatting with us today and sharing all of those pieces of information.

**Meredith Benjamin** 15:28

Very useful! I'm gonna go tweak my resume now. I'll cut it down to like maybe four pages. Yeah. Thank you, Amanda. It was great to talk with you.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 15:36

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