The Career Readiness Imperative in Gateway Courses:

A Student Success Perspective, Trend Report, and Emerging Playbook

everylearner everywhere

About Every Learner Everywhere

Every Learner Everywhere is a network of partner organizations with expertise in evaluating, implementing, scaling, and measuring the efficacy of education technologies, curriculum and course design strategies, teaching practices, and support services that personalize instruction for students in blended and online learning environments. Our mission is to partner with institutions to harness digital learning technology, driving innovation in higher education to improve outcomes for every learner. We build capacity in colleges and universities to improve student outcomes with digital learning through direct technical assistance, timely resources and toolkits, and ongoing analysis of institutional practices and market trends. WCET (the WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies) and WICHE (the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education) serve as the intermediary organizations for the Every Learner Everywhere Network. For more information about Every Learner Everywhere and its collaborative approach to advance student success in higher education through digital learning, visit everylearnereverywhere.org.

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We acknowledge the use of artificial intelligence tools in the drafting process of this report. The author used generative AI to assist in developing ideas, outlines, and drafts. The final published version is the result of a rigorous collaborative effort by the author and reviewers. The report was carefully edited, vetted, contextualized, and enhanced based on our expertise and understanding of our readers' needs. The text represents a synthesis of AI-generated ideas and human insight, creativity, and professional judgment. This human-led process ensures the content aligns with our educational standards, reflects current pedagogical best practices, and meets the specific needs of our learners.

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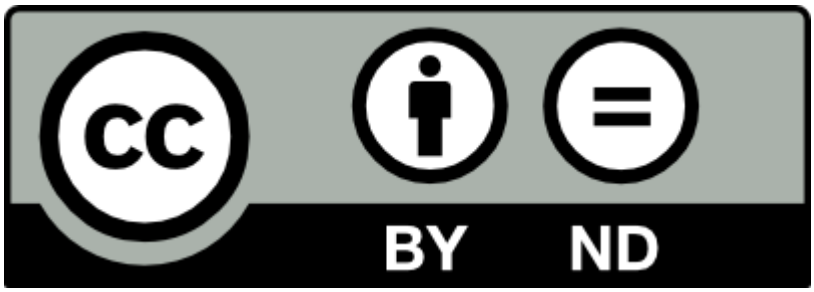

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Executive Summary

The Career Readiness Imperative in Gateway Courses: A Student Success Perspective, Trend Report, and Emerging Playbook examines how U.S. colleges and universities are integrating career readiness into academic courses, with particular attention to gateway and general education courses early in degree programs. It focuses on how students experience the relevance of what they learn in these courses, and it provides strategies institutions can use to help students experience that relevance earlier, more explicitly, and more consistently.

The primary audience includes teaching faculty, program directors, and administrators wishing to align courses with what employers and students say they need for career readiness. The report assumes readers care deeply about academic quality and student success and are seeking approaches that are intellectually serious and feasible within existing workloads.

Teaching faculty in gateway and general education courses are not solely responsible for addressing every facet of connecting career readiness to core academic courses. Among the subjects not covered in this report are how to keep up with employment trends, where to find employment data, how to form effective partnerships with employers, or how to become career counselors to students. The example programs discussed illustrate how those responsibilities continue to be met most effectively by colleagues in career services, advising, and elsewhere, and doing this work well requires an institutional commitment.

The Career Readiness Imperative in Gateway Courses is based on two major sources of information:

- A scan of academic research, published survey results, institutional planning materials, program descriptions, and white papers and frameworks from organizations leading the work to align academic learning and career readiness.

- Interviews conducted in November and December 2025 with 17 subject matter experts. They represent national organizations and individual programs from varying institution types, including community colleges, public and private research universities, and tribal colleges.

These sources point to a sector at an inflection point. Students of U.S. colleges and universities are asking sharper questions and institutions are acknowledging that early academic experiences profoundly influence engagement and persistence. The three parts of *The Career Readiness Imperative in Gateway Courses* stem from a synthesis of data, examples, and arguments from these sources.

Part I examines the landscape shaping this work. It synthesizes national data, employer expectations, student motivations, and public sentiment to illustrate why institutions face growing pressure to make the career relevance of academic learning more visible. It argues that attending to the perceived disconnect between a liberal education and career readiness is a responsibility that faculty in gateway courses in academic subjects must share with their colleagues in career services and advising. That argument is made on the grounds of institutional mission, student success, student care, and access.

Part II analyzes how institutions are responding to this inflection point. It identifies eight trends in moving career readiness to the core of academic learning in gateway and general education courses.

1. Career readiness activities are expanding from co-curricular spaces to classrooms
2. Institutions usually build on existing frameworks
3. Career readiness is maturing from percolating to planned
4. Gateway and early academic courses are high-impact spaces where access, relevance, and career readiness converge
5. Faculty are essential partners in career readiness, but they need support, context, and collaboration
6. The first intervention is translation
7. The case for career readiness has an evidence-backed theory of change, but more research is needed on measurable academic outcomes
8. Digital learning technology can help implement and extend this work

Part III distills lessons from the field into practical guidance for academic leaders, centers for teaching and learning, career services professionals, and teaching faculty seeking to make the career relevance of higher education more explicit. The emerging playbook outlined in Part III highlights instructional practices that help institutions and individual educators further this work in sustainable ways.

In addition to those major sections, *The Career Readiness Imperative in Gateway Courses* also includes short sections that spotlight individual programs, practical classroom activities, and institutional strategy documents. For the reader seeking to explore this subject in more depth, a selected bibliography details the most comprehensive sources on aligning academic learning and career readiness.

Part I - Why Career Readiness, and Why Now?

U.S. colleges and universities face a growing mismatch between what students learn in academic courses and what students, employers, and other constituencies say they need from those courses. Students are asking a question—"How will this help me get a job?"—that academic culture is not providing a persuasive answer to. That mismatch is influencing enrollment trends, the choice of majors, persistence, graduation, and public confidence in higher education.

It wouldn't be an overstatement to say that career readiness is the number one motivation for enrolling in college for the large majority of students. In the Lumina Foundation's 2025 "State of Higher Education" report, 60 percent of currently enrolled students said expected future job opportunities are a "very important" factor in their decision to enroll, reconfirming what previous annual reports have shown.[1] Other national surveys have shown that getting a better job was the top reason for attending college for as many as 83.5 percent of students.[2]

This is even more true for the students most underserved by higher education. An analysis of the annual Cooperative Institutional Research Program Freshman Survey in 2023 looked at first-generation and minoritized students and students from low-income households and found that all these groups considered employment, financial gain, and career training to be very important factors in their college choice. They also indicated so at higher rates than their continuing generation, white, and higher-income peers.[3]

Another way of approaching "why career readiness" is to sort students by those who do and do not feel that their programs do a good job of preparing them for the workforce, which the Tyton Partners *Listening to Learners 2025* survey does.[4] In short, valuing the college experience correlates with perceived relevance. The surveyed students who felt a program was relevant to their careers said the cost of college was worth it, and the students who didn't perceive the relevance say the cost was not worth it.

Unfortunately, students often say the colleges and universities they attend do not deliver on their career readiness expectations. A Strada Education Foundation report on community college student experiences found that "career motivations are most

[1] https://www.luminafoundation.org/resource/the-state-of-higher-education-2025/
[2] https://heri.ucla.edu/monographs/TheAmericanFreshman2019.pdf
[3] https://www.acenet.edu/News-Room/Pages/HERI-Brief-Student-College-Decisions.aspx
[4] https://tytonpartners.com/listening-to-learners-2025/

common, but least likely to be fulfilled, with just less than half of recent students reporting that their education helped them achieve their desired career outcomes."[5] A 2017 poll by The Strada Education Foundation and Gallup asked 32,000 students at four-year institutions if they believed they would graduate with the knowledge and skills they need to be successful in the workplace, and only 36 percent strongly agreed.[6] More recently, a survey of 2024 graduates found that over half felt unprepared to apply for entry-level positions, citing a lack of job-specific skills as the main reason.[7] More than a third (35 percent) said they wished their programs had done more to build career-relevant courses.

What this report means by "career readiness"

Outside of academia, career readiness is often discussed in relation to workforce development, which refers to the alignment of academic programs with labor market demand and economic development goals. This report, however, frames career readiness as helping students develop their capacity to understand, practice, and articulate the value of their learning as they move through a curriculum. The programs featured demonstrate how attending to career readiness in gateway and general education courses supports academic development. Any workforce development benefits are downstream effects, not the organizing purpose of this work.

Career readiness skills can sometimes have specific meanings in domains like nursing, education, or career and technical education programs. However, as this report is focused on introductory general education courses, career readiness here refers to broadly applicable durable or transferable skills not limited to a single profession or trade.

The sentiment in these self-reported surveys have some validity: The Strada Education Foundation's 2024 Talent Disrupted analysis showed that "only about half of bachelor's degree graduates secure employment in a college-level job within a year of graduation."[8] It is important to note that surveys of graduates don't include the approximately 40 percent

[5] https://www.strada.org/reports/the-value-of-community-colleges-recent-students-motivations-and-outcomes
[6] https://news.gallup.com/poll/225446/half-college-students-say-major-leads-good-job.aspx
[7] https://www.cengagegroup.com/news/press-releases/2025/cengage-group-2025-employability-report/
[8] https://www.strada.org/reports/talent-disrupted

of enrolled undergraduate students who never finish, who would presumably be even less positive about how the experience prepared them for the workforce.[9]

Likewise, surveys of the larger public underscore how confidence in the value of a four-year college degree has fallen sharply and that the question "How will this help me get a job?" demands attention. A Pew Research Center survey showed that only 25 percent of U.S. adults said it is extremely or very important to have a four-year college degree to get a well-paying job, and 29 percent said college is not worth the cost even when loans are not part of the equation.[10] According to a 2025 poll by NBC News, 63 percent of respondents said a bachelor's degree is "not worth the cost because people often graduate without specific job skills and with a large amount of debt," while only 33 percent said a degree remains "worth the cost because people have a better chance to get a good job and earn more money over their lifetime."[11]

Community colleges, in contrast, maintain a more positive reputation among students and the broader public. According to an Inside *Higher Ed* poll, community college students were about half as likely as their peers at four-year institutions to say their college charges too much tuition and are about 50 percent more likely to say it offers good value.[12] Similarly, a 2024 Gallup-Lumina survey found that Americans express much more confidence in two-year colleges than four-year colleges and universities.[13]

Less gap between higher ed and employers

The good news is that employers prize graduates with an education grounded in the liberal arts and need far less convincing than students and their families about the value of what colleges and universities are promising. Multiple employer surveys show that broad, transferable abilities consistently outrank narrow technical training in hiring priorities, and employers are hungry for knowledge workers with the strong communication, teamwork, and critical thinking skills university educators intend to nurture when they design academic programs.

For example, employer surveys by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) found "a strong correlation between the outcomes of a liberal education and the knowledge and skills employers view as essential for success in entry-level jobs and

[9] https://www.insidehighered.com/news/students/academics/2024/04/10/study-half-students-started-never-finished-college
[10] https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2024/05/23/is-college-worth-it-2/
[11] https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/poll-dramatic-shift-americans-no-longer-see-four-year-college-degrees-rcna243672
[12] https://www.insidehighered.com/news/student-success/college-experience/2024/05/24/survey-most-college-students-see-value-their
[13] https://news.gallup.com/poll/646841/americans-confident-two-year-schools.aspx

for advancement in their companies."[14] Similarly, The World Economic Forum's annual "Future of Jobs" report found that many of the trends impacting employers—climate change, the rising use of AI, changing industrial policies, etc.—will require workers with combinations of technical literacy, complex cognitive skills, and social and interpersonal capabilities.[15] LinkedIn's annual Global Talent Trends survey routinely finds very high demand for so-called "soft skills," by which they mean "transferable skills that allow candidates to move nimbly across roles," including problem solving, collaboration, and time management.[16]

Nor is the employer-side demand for college graduates a recent fashion. Both a large-scale analysis of 70 million job transitions going back to 2005[17] and a literature review of 30 years of research on "employability skills"[18] demonstrated the same long-standing phenomenon: Employers see the broad, human-centered competencies that academic degrees promise to deliver as a long-term strategic asset, not a luxury.

However, surveys also reveal an important qualification to this point about employer enthusiasm for college graduates. While employers seek what higher education promises, they are less convinced that higher education delivers it. For example, a recent poll from Gallup and the Lumina Foundation showed that even when a college degree is not identified as a requirement in a job description, three-quarters of U.S. employers still preferred candidates with degrees, but only 54 percent said colleges are graduating students with the skills the organization needs.[19]

The visibility problem

So if employers prioritize communication, critical thinking, writing, teamwork, leadership, and other broadly transferable, lifelong skills in their hiring, and if students are motivated by what will get them hired, and if colleges and universities have some version of those skills in mind when they design academic programs, why is there a disconnect? Where does the perception that college does not deliver on its promise come from?

One explanation emerging from both national research and original interviews for this report is that students' earliest academic experiences seldom make the relevance of

[14] https://www.aacu.org/research/the-career-ready-graduate-what-employers-say-about-the-difference-college-makes
[15] https://www.weforum.org/publications/the-future-of-jobs-report-2025/in-full/3-skills-outlook/
[16] https://business.linkedin.com/talent-solutions/global-talent-trends
[17] https://hbr.org/2025/08/soft-skills-matter-now-more-than-ever-according-to-new-research
[18] https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10637906/
[19] https://www.luminafoundation.org/resource/aligning-education-and-work/

their learning visible. Gateway courses that students must pass through in order to complete general education requirements or pursue a specific major are often the source of high DFW rates that disproportionately impact poverty-affected, minoritized, and first-generation students.[20] Yet these courses are not typically designed to highlight connections to professional contexts. Though instructors value students' long-term success beyond their general education courses, they often lack shared language, examples, and tools for articulating how disciplinary learning connects to the broad, transferable skills employers emphasize.

Andrea Stanton, Professor of Religious Studies and Senior Associate Dean of the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences at University of Denver, initiated a faculty learning community (FLC) on embedding career competencies into academic courses and says she came to this work out of a frustration with predominant narratives about the relevance of so-called "useless" degrees. "If we look at what employers say, we're offering exactly what they want, but we usually don't have the language to help students say that," she says.

"Imagine you're 19 years old and trying to figure out what critical thinking means. They can't just say 'I can do critical thinking' over and over on their résumé. They need language that actually is concrete and coherent. The other thing we say is, 'You can do anything with this major.' Students don't know what to do with that."

The absence of a consistent framework connecting academic subjects to career readiness makes it difficult for students to envision how their coursework will help them become capable, adaptable professionals in rewarding careers. The challenge, then, is not that the skills taught in gateway and other general education courses lack value outside of academia, but that institutions seldom make those connections explicit to students at the moments when it matters most.

Amanda Olmstead, Director of Workforce Alignment at Achieving the Dream, which works with community colleges on institutional transformation for student success, says, "There is often a silo between traditional academic subjects and what you might do in your future day-to-day work." But those courses are an opportunity for "meaning making" for students. "We know from adult learning theory that people learn better when they're connected to the material," she explains. "Doing that in gateway courses could also drive more student engagement."

[20] https://www.everylearnereverywhere.org/blog/what-are-gateway-courses-and-why-do-they-matter-to-equity-in-higher-ed/

The faculty role

Another factor is a historical tendency to treat career readiness as a co-curricular issue separate from curricular design, particularly in four-year degree programs, which have a history of housing career services offices in student affairs rather than academic affairs.[21] Colleges and universities invest significant resources in career programming, including career fairs, résumé workshops, internship matching, career-planning toolkits, and individual career counseling. But, with the notable exception of career and technical programs in community colleges, an institution's relationships with employers are often siloed from faculty. Career services offices own those relationships, track alumni outcomes, and keep up to date on employment trends.

In those circumstances, instructors of introductory college courses in math, sciences, humanities, arts, and social sciences may not feel qualified to speak to employer expectations. As the experts interviewed for this report make clear, that curricular/co-curricular division of participation in career readiness efforts limits the impact of an institution's most valuable resource—the hours of direct contact students have with faculty each term. While it is not exclusively the responsibility of faculty to close gaps in professional preparation, they must be more active partners than in the past.

Olmstead says faculty in introductory courses play a critical role in helping students understand their career options. "I don't know if faculty often think that's what their role is," she explains. "But, because students spend so much time in a classroom, faculty are often who they trust, who they feel they have connections with, who they go to with questions, and who can help students understand what comes next."

The Trends and Emerging Playbook sections of this report will further discuss questions of disciplinary integrity, appropriate expertise, and workload. Representatives from exemplar programs featured in this report make the case that it is possible for faculty to collaborate with colleagues in career services and centers for teaching and learning to use authentic, practical ways to help students connect the dots between academic subjects and career readiness. Everyone interviewed emphasized that career readiness should not crowd out scholarly objectives in the disciplines or broader educational purpose.

[21] https://www.naceweb.org/career-development/organizational-structure/career-centers-continue-to-shift-away-from-student-affairs/

The scale and consistency recommended in Parts II and III of this report cannot be met through individual faculty effort alone. Career readiness initiatives can benefit from digital learning tools that can make the throughline between academic subjects and career readiness visible across courses and curricula. At the level of individual courses, many of the practices discussed in this report align very well with the kinds of digitally enabled, evidence-based teaching practices such as active learning, instructional transparency, and metacognition many instructors seek to incorporate. Technology as an enabler—but not a magic solution—is one of the major findings discussed in Part II, and examples of creatively deploying technology to aid in connecting academic work and career readiness are woven throughout Part III.

Meeting students where they are

Many experts interviewed for this project frame the work of connecting academic courses to career readiness as inseparable from institutional mission and commitments to student success, student care, and access. For example, Stanton argues that it can build inclusion in majors in the arts and humanities that don't have an obvious vocational outcome.

“It should not be that only students who come from college-educated families feel like they can do a studio arts major while our students of color and first-gen students feel pressure to find a major that will have an immediate job,” she says. Giving students language to connect any major to a career empowers them to “major in the programs that really speak to them.”

At Navajo Technical University, Career Services Coordinator Shawna Begay says it is common for students at that institution to limit their career planning to what their own parents did, so career exploration early is important for showing them more options. “When students take that path their parents did, sometimes they hate it,” she says.

“I have had graduating students come to my office crying, saying, ‘I don't want a job in this.’ So we try to get them on the right path from the jump. If your passion is tied to what you're doing, it's not necessarily going to be effortless, but it's going to make it more rewarding.”

Clif Stratton, Associate Professor of History at Washington State University, who led the Core to Career faculty fellowship program there, says his colleagues are developing vocabulary and frameworks to help students understand the value of academic work. "When it's not understood early enough in a college career, that's when we start to lose students," he says. "They drift to other things and are missing out on the ideal version of the four-year baccalaureate degree."

Tim Harding is past board chair of The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) and Assistant Vice President for Career Development and Engagement at University of Tampa, where he manages the Spartan Ready initiative. In a 2024 interview with *Evolllution*,[22] he discussed the academic benefits of infusing competency-related learning outcomes into general education courses:

> "Our instructors really want to see students succeed. In the tutoring center, I want to make sure the path first-year students are choosing is something they want and not what anybody else wants. If you see their drive and their willingness, then pull it out of them."
>
> ***- Dee Anna James, First-Year Career-Ready Academic Advisor, Navajo Technical University***

"If students feel more connected to learning, then they will engage with it much more, which can easily translate into higher retention rates. An initiative like this one requires an institution-wide culture shift to reach the greatest number of students. Each student has a unique collegiate journey with multiple and different touchpoints along the way. If each of these touchpoints maps some of their learning outcomes to competency development, the institution is more likely to achieve core competency development that transcends academic majors while maintaining the integrity of each academic discipline."

The voices quoted above are among 17 people interviewed for this report. Together, they make a persuasive case that student care requires accounting for students' concerns

[22] https://evolllution.com/building-student-competencies-facultys-role-in-holistic-education

about career readiness and, in doing so, to “meet them where they are,” which is literally in the classroom. Moreover, embedding career considerations in academic courses, need not dilute the contributions those courses make to the institutional mission. It is in fact a powerful mechanism to ensure that every learner has the opportunity to develop a vision of how they will contribute to society and find the motivation to build skills for lifelong success.

Featured Programs

Dallas College — Faculty Integrator Program
This program supports instructors embedding the community college's Marketable Skills framework directly into courses. It trains faculty to map assignments and learning outcomes to clearly defined, employer-validated skills and to make those connections explicit to students through course design and reflective activities. The work advances the institution-wide Career Connected strategy and its measurable graduation and post-graduation targets by helping students build a portfolio of artifacts and microcredentials demonstrating their competencies to employers.

Georgia Southern University — Ready Day 1 Connect (RD1C)
RD1C equips faculty to embed NACE-aligned modules throughout the curriculum, from FYE to capstone courses, laddering up from career exploration to practical interviewing tactics. Delivered through the institution's LMS, the modules prompt students to connect what they are learning to career competencies and then practice articulating those skills through structured assignments and pre/post confidence assessments. The Office of Career and Professional Development provides related lecture notes, recordings, rubrics, and surveys, and faculty only need to devote a single class period for each module. The design emphasizes scalability, consistent student experience across modalities, and early exposure to career language that students can build on across the curriculum.

Georgia Institute of Technology — Career Readiness Framework (in development)
Georgia Tech is developing a campuswide career readiness framework designed to integrate NACE-aligned competencies into academic programs. The effort brings together career services, faculty, and the Center for Teaching and Learning to create a shared model, combining behavioral skills, career competencies, and discipline-specific technical expertise. The team is building online modules, sample lesson plans, and a faculty toolkit to support embedding career-connected learning into existing courses.

Indiana University Indianapolis — Amplifying Career Competencies Faculty Learning Community
IU Indianapolis launched this campuswide FLC to help instructors make career-relevant learning more explicit in their existing courses. Led in the original cohort by Sydney Kadinger and Patricia Turley as an outcome of their participation in a faculty fellows program, the FLC is grounded in the university's 2030 strategic plan. Faculty from across disciplines meet to share assignment designs and technology-supported practices such as ePortfolios and interactive presentations that help students articulate how course learning connects to NACE-aligned competencies. Kadinger and Turley emphasize intentionality, explicit framing, and building a supportive cross-disciplinary community, enabling faculty to adapt career competencies to their own teaching contexts.

University of Connecticut — Career Readiness Faculty Fellow Institute
UConn's Center for Career Readiness and Life Skills supports faculty integrating NACE-aligned competencies into existing courses through a structured fellow model. Faculty receive a stipend and commit to a short series of workshops, peer consultations, and redesign work, completing a project that embeds at least one career competency into a course assignment. The institute provides sample activities, reflection prompts, and syllabus language that help students articulate skills emerging from disciplinary learning. Projects from past fellows have included redesigned writing assignments, competency-mapped lab activities, and reflection exercises that strengthen students' confidence and clarity about their developing professional identities.

University of Denver — Career Competencies Faculty Learning Community
This FLC during the 2024-25 AY supported faculty integrating NACE-aligned competencies into assignments, discussions, and syllabi across disciplines. The program, sponsored by the Office of Teaching and Learning, provided nine structured workshops over two semesters, with sample activities and reflection tools to help faculty make career relevance visible without overhauling their courses. Andrea Stanton, who initiated the FLC, emphasized that the intention was "a tiny lift that can have a big impact," often taking minutes of class time while giving students language to describe capabilities developed in their academic work. Faculty were drawn by a shared ethical commitment to student support and

the desire to counter the perception that liberal arts learning lacks clear career value.

University of South Florida — Bellini Center for Talent Development
USF's Muma College of Business embeds career readiness into the student experience through the Bellini Certification Program, a multiyear curriculum that helps students develop professional skills employers seek. Students progress through four stages covering competencies such as communication, teamwork, and career management. The modules are built into specific required courses, ensuring every student encounters them. For faculty in these courses, the system functions as a plug-and-play curriculum component: Assignments are deployed directly in the LMS, where they are graded automatically. A linked student engagement platform tracks this progress, awarding digital badges students can showcase to employers.

University of Tampa — Spartan Ready
Spartan Ready is an institution-wide competency initiative that positions every course and co-curricular touchpoint as part of a developmental pathway. Drawing on NACE competencies, the program helps faculty make explicit the career skills students are already practicing and aligns them with a vocabulary used across campus. Early high-enrollment courses are essential to the program. Faculty are not asked to add content but to raise awareness of these skills through small shifts in assignment framing, helping students build confidence, engagement, and academic momentum.

Washington State University — Core to Career
This initiative, supported by a philanthropic gift through spring 2025, supported faculty in redesigning high-enrollment general education courses to make career relevance explicit. Faculty fellows mapped the university's UCORE general education learning objectives to NACE competencies, revised assignments, and syllabus language, and added reflective activities that help students understand how skills like communication, teamwork, and professionalism emerge in their academic work. Fellows used concrete practices such as self-assessment checks and cover letter assignments, visibly linking a liberal arts curriculum and employability. Although the original program has sunsetted on the Pullman

campus, a related effort continues at WSU Vancouver. The College of Arts & Sciences at WSU recently announced the launch of Career Ready, World Ready, which blends career readiness goals with the "world ready" framing of the Boyer 2030 Commission report.[23]

[23] https://www.ueru.org/boyer-2030-report/about-the-commission

Part II - How Higher Ed Is Responding: Trends in Incorporating Career Readiness

Part I of this report makes clear that the evidence on student motivations, public confidence, and employer expectations all argue for institutions of higher education giving more attention to helping students connect their academic learning to the career trajectories they anticipate after college. Students seldom encounter the relevance of their learning early enough, explicitly enough, or consistently enough to understand how their academic experience helps them become capable professionals. Institutions are increasingly aware that incorporating career readiness requires action inside the classroom, not only around it.

Fortunately, as Part II will detail, higher education already has many of the ingredients needed to respond—growing faculty interest, models that make career competencies more visible, and growing strategic alignment. The eight findings in Part II outline how that recognition is taking shape. It traces how colleges and universities are moving career readiness from optional programming to integrated academic practice. It synthesizes frameworks, initiatives, and practices for integrating career readiness into the curriculum, especially in the gateway courses that reach the greatest number of students. It describes how translation—not reinvention—has been the core of effective implementation. Lastly, two of the findings discuss the state of outcomes measurement in this work and identify a range of ways that digital learning technologies support it.

1. Career readiness activities are expanding from co-curricular spaces to classrooms

Traditionally, colleges positioned career readiness as something that happened outside the classroom through optional workshops, career-center programming, individual career counseling, career fairs, and internship matching. Students who proactively seek out these opportunities and participate in them express more satisfaction with their institutions,[24] and they get a better launch to their careers.[25]

The problem is that few students do participate. According to an *Inside Higher Ed* student survey, 31 percent never engage with career services at all, and so-called "frequent" users—six contacts during a degree program—amount to only 8 percent of students.[26] As Tyton's *Listening to Learners 2025* showed, this phenomenon is not exclusive to career offices but applies to most student support services.[27] A sense of belonging and retention are highly correlated with awareness of and use of supports, but awareness of them is very low for most students. And even when they are aware of supports, students' belief that the supports are not relevant to them limits their participation.

Career services professionals work diligently to increase engagement, but systemic barriers may only allow for marginal improvement. Consider for example internships, which the higher education sector increasingly recognizes as a high-impact practice. A NACE survey found that as many as 61 percent of graduating seniors have had internship experience, about half of which are unpaid.[28] Other surveys put that more conservatively at 41 percent.[29] Continuing to improve that number is difficult for two reasons: The supply of opportunities offered by employers is constrained, and the ability to engage with an internship disproportionately advantages students with greater financial and social capital. Solving these challenges requires institutional level attention and effort.

Glenn Gibney, Associate Vice President for Career Readiness at Georgia Southern University, launched a program there called Ready Day 1 Connect after considering these challenges. He says the career services office on campus had very high satisfaction scores from students who visited but only about two-thirds of students engaged in any

[24] https://www.insidehighered.com/news/quick-takes/2023/10/25/career-support-boosts-alumni-perception-college-value
[25] https://www.naceweb.org/career-development/organizational-structure/the-value-of-career-services/
[26] https://www.insidehighered.com/news/student-success/life-after-college/2023/11/30/survey-what-college-students-want-career
[27] https://tytonpartners.com/listening-to-learners-2025/
[28] https://www.naceweb.org/job-market/internships/students-recognize-the-importance-of-gaining-internship-experience
[29] https://www.gallup.com/education/509468/four-college-students-internship-experience.aspx

way and only 35 percent met with a career and internship advisor. That left about 20,000 students not benefiting from one-to-one career advising.

In conversations with his university president about how to do better, Gibney recounts, "I told him he could add a million dollars to my budget, and I can raise that from 35 percent to 40 percent. But that's not the answer. The answer is 100 percent, right? I don't really care how many people come to our office. I care that students begin to think about their career readiness early. The solution is to embed career readiness into the curriculum."

Jeremy Podany, whose consultancy The Career Leadership Collective works with campuses to transform their career readiness efforts, argues it is ineffective to rely on students to access optional co-curricular resources: "It used to be you could say, we have a career center and families would say, 'Awesome. We're all set.' That was the value proposition. But imagine if you said to new students in any degree—say psychology—'Welcome to psychology. You don't have to go to classes, but we have a psychology center over there we hope you'll go to. We'll do some workshops.' The psychology degree would be in disrepair with accreditation, right?"

> "Unless you can hire three to five times the number of career services professionals, which usually is not a possibility, the only place to really grab students is in the classroom."
> ***- Niesha Taylor, Director for Career Readiness, NACE***

In short, many institutions have recognized that they cannot scale up the co-curricular machinery to do much more than it already is or to draw more students in. The lever not fully engaged is in the place where every student is already participating—the classroom.

NACE surveys show that as many as 83 percent of institutions are embedding career competencies at some level.[30] Many of the examples in this report of embedding career

[30] https://www.naceweb.org/career-readiness/competencies/nace-quick-poll-more-than-83-percent-of-respondents-implementing-career-readiness-competencies

readiness into the curriculum are in first-year experience courses, gateway courses, other general education requirements, and foundational courses in the majors. Further evidence of this growing trend emerged as this report was being finalized when the Lumina Foundation announced a new From Campus to Career initiative supporting programs connecting the high-impact practices long promoted by the American Association of Colleges and Universities with "career-connected learning across disciplines."[31]

[31] https://www.luminafoundation.org/news-and-views/from-campus-to-career-a-new-era-of-high-impact-practices/

2. Institutions usually build on existing frameworks

Faculty and academic leaders need not start from scratch when integrating career readiness into courses. The programs featured in this report use widely recognized frameworks that provide language shared across academic and co-curricular units, reducing the load for faculty and helping institutions communicate purpose to students coherently.

The most commonly used framework is the eight career readiness competencies developed by NACE.[32] The eight competencies are: Career + Self-Development, Communication, Critical Thinking, Equity + Inclusion, Leadership, Professionalism, Teamwork, and Technology. NACE offers an assessment tool for each competency to its member institutions. Interviewees repeatedly emphasized its value as a "common language" that helps faculty translate existing disciplinary practices in both general education and coursework for majors into skills employers value without reducing academic learning to narrow job training.

Another framework is the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) VALUE rubrics, which situate career readiness within a liberal arts mission.[33] The 16 rubrics enable academic programs to assess cross-cutting "skills, abilities, and dispositions that students need and that policymakers and employers demand."

A new book from the Community College Research Center, *More Essential Than Ever: Community College Pathways to Educational and Career Success*, includes examples of colleges using the Ask-Connect-Inspire-Plan (ACIP) framework, which encourages institutions to help students explore interests early, connect with mentors, and take inspiring coursework immediately. [34] Crucially, it prioritizes helping every student develop an educational plan, ensuring they have a clear, customized path to their career goals.

Many institutions adapt these frameworks to align with their mission, strategic plan, and context. For example, at the Muma College for Business at the University of South Florida, says Doug Meyn, Program Director of the Bellini Center for Talent Development, "One trend we're hearing is local employers looking for 'coachability' in students. That's not necessarily a NACE competency." With that insight, the Bellini Center can consider how to incorporate that language into the student engagement platform it uses.

[32] https://www.naceweb.org/career-readiness/competencies/career-readiness-defined
[33] https://www.aacu.org/value
[34] https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/easyblog/reimagining-program-recruitment-onboarding.html

A local constraint at Dallas College has been the ongoing consolidation of several independent community colleges into one institution, and they also have to align with a state-level strategic plan for all community colleges that emphasizes career readiness.[35] Sharon Manna, Dean of Marketable Skills and Digital Badging at Dallas College, says that with so much in flux, a competencies layer couldn't be too complicated.

"We didn't want to ask faculty to learn one more new system," she explains. "So we decided to create a skills inventory housed inside the core objectives we are required to assess. And then we updated that skills inventory to reflect what students should expect to see in job applications in Dallas-Fort Worth."

That customized inventory (critical thinking, communication, teamwork, personal responsibility, social responsibility, and empirical and quantitative) was informed by a committee of faculty that considered the NACE competencies, existing frameworks at several other institutions, and local labor market data. "The idea was, you don't have to reinvent the wheel," Manna says.

"It also acknowledges the great work faculty are already doing to assess critical thinking and communication. The skills inventory gives life to that core objective, and it gives students a toolkit to articulate what they know and can do."

[35] https://tacc.org/tsc/talent-strong-texas-pathways

3. Career readiness is maturing from percolating to planned

In many institutions, early activity around career readiness begins with individual faculty members experimenting with small course adaptations or direct collaborations with career services staff. Many of the institutions that informed this report are going further than that to coordinate efforts to embed career readiness in academic courses as an institution-wide strategy. The work is becoming less *ad hoc* and more intentional to ensure consistency and impact across the student experience.

This shift is visible in cross-unit planning structures, systematic course redesign efforts, and quality initiatives in response to requirements from institutional accreditors. A review for this report of 11 Quality Enhancement Plans (QEPs) from institutions accredited by The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges shows how those institutions use QEPs to bring together academic affairs, career services, institutional research, advising, and instructional designers. These strategic plans move career readiness from an isolated activity of individual faculty into a campuswide priority.

Gibney at Georgia Southern University says when he was first hired and began to advocate for incorporating career readiness more into the curriculum, he met with seven deans. “And they all said, ‘Great idea. Let’s keep talking about this.’ The eighth dean said, ‘Let’s do it.’”

The resulting pilot program—Ready Day 1 Connect—was in place when it was time for the university to develop its QEP, and the provost urged the campus to use it to expand on that pilot. “The QEP is a great launching point,” says Gibney, “because by definition, it is across the university. Schools can say, ‘This is really important, and it's hard to get it done one unit at a time, so let's get it done across the spectrum.’”

At the University of Tampa, the Spartan Ready initiative began in 2013 as a co-curricular competency framework and has gradually matured into a central component of institutional identity. The person initiating that, Tim Harding, collaborated in 2020 with colleagues at Clemson University to develop a four-pillar strategy for institution-wide career competency implementation eventually adopted by NACE.[36] One of the pillars is multiple possible points of contact with career readiness conversations, since individual students may have affinity with their major, a sorority, an athletic team, or another activity.

[36] https://career.sites.clemson.edu/symposium/archive_2020/Competency_Symposium_Webinar_2020-Workbook.pdf

"There's no one on campus who touches every single student, so it's critical that there be an institution-wide approach," Harding says. "Not everyone's going to be at the same level as another person in what they can do with competency development. And that's okay. But everyone can be at the plate in some way."

Career readiness in the age of AI

While it was not in the scope of this project to explore how the emergence of AI is changing the career competencies that students will need, how they will develop them, or how programs will change their approach to teaching them, these questions are inevitably front of mind for many educators. The transformational impact of AI on many aspects of learning and professional work is adding even more pressure to prioritize career relevance in college courses. Students report feeling unprepared to use AI and are concerned it will limit, rather than expand, their career options.[37]

Frameworks from NACE and elsewhere are intended to be flexible and useful for a lifetime, much as a comprehensive general education curriculum is intended to be. As Part I of this report showed, results from surveys of employers about what they seek in early-career professionals emphasize particular technical skills far less often than skills that endure shifts in technology and the economy. This would align with a thesis that automation increases the demand for uniquely human stills that software cannot replicate.

The following resources are designed to help faculty consider the role of AI in their pedagogy:

Faculty Development and Gen AI Playbook: Evidence-Based Best Practices
This guide from Every Learner Everywhere and the Online Learning Consortium offers a "four-stage model" (Awareness, Engagement, Integration, Iteration) that

[37] https://www.american.edu/sine-institute/education-poll.cfm

helps faculty move from basic understanding to deep curricular integration using digitally enabled, evidence-based teaching practices.

Creating the AI-Enabled Community College: A Road Map for Using Generative AI To Accelerate Student Success
This report from Achieving the Dream's AI Task Force urges community colleges to adopt AI strategically, emphasizing digital literacy and workforce alignment. The report recommends faculty development, transparent governance, curriculum integration focused on human skills, and expanded employer partnerships so institutions can help students navigate and participate fully in an evolving economy.

AI Literacy: A Framework to Understand, Evaluate, and Use Emerging Technology
Digital Promise outlines how institutions can integrate AI into teaching and learning in ways that strengthen digital literacy and protect students. The report emphasizes faculty support, transparent governance, and human-centered design so colleges can use AI to expand opportunity and prepare learners for an evolving workforce.

AI Literacy in Teaching and Learning: A Durable Framework for Higher Education
This EDUCAUSE report defines what AI literacy looks like for faculty and establishes seven competencies, including the ability to "evaluate the application of AI tools critically" and "address ethical concerns proactively."

AI Education Policy, Guideline, & Practice Ecosystem Framework 2025
The policy-focused framework from WCET-WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies helps institutional leaders and faculty understand the guardrails needed in classrooms and provides specific guidance on creating syllabus statements, defining acceptable use for students, and addressing algorithmic bias in assessment.

4. Gateway courses are high-impact spaces where access, relevance, and career readiness converge

While first-year seminars, one-credit career exploration courses, and co-curricular workshops make important contributions to a comprehensive program, they cannot carry the full burden of helping students understand the relevance of their academic work.

Gateway courses, meanwhile, reach students who will never walk into a career center, who may not yet know how to navigate college, and whose academic momentum is fragile. In some cases, students in gateway courses are weeks away from a decision to drop out of college. National research on course success and retention has long shown that early academic performance in required quantitative, writing, or introductory disciplinary courses strongly predicts whether students persist.[38] Embedding career relevance in these spaces serves a double purpose: It strengthens students' sense of meaning and purpose, and it does so where the stakes are highest.

> "Gateway courses are imperative to helping students begin to connect meaning to learning—to see they're not just learning content and checking off requirements, especially for traditional-age students. You miss the boat if you don't do it in a gateway course."
> ***- Tim Harding***

The people interviewed for this project underscore that waiting until the junior year or relying on students to find co-curricular resources privileges those who already "know the ropes." By contrast, introducing career-relevant vocabulary and practices in the first year makes career readiness a standard part of the academic experience rather than a luxury enjoyed by those with high levels of confidence, self-efficacy, or social capital.

[38] https://www.everylearnereverywhere.org/blog/what-are-gateway-courses-and-why-do-they-matter-to-equity-in-higher-ed/

Olmstead at Achieving the Dream points out that students in gateway courses often still don't know what they want to do for a career. "Faculty, because of their expertise in particular subject areas, have the ability to make academic connections to the workplace in a different way than advisors and career center staff can," she says.

For example, in early courses, faculty can encourage career exploration or how what interests a student in the curriculum relates to a broad sector of work: "The conversations will then look much more targeted once students have selected a major."

Short career readiness lessons delivered via the LMS

One common way of enabling faculty to introduce career competencies in gateway courses is for career services offices to develop lessons that faculty can select from and weave into their course plans, typically via the learning management system. This modular approach can help establish consistency across sections and normalize connecting academic success and career readiness early in the college curriculum. Readers may benefit from exploring the examples below.

Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo

- Five ready-to-use modules covering career exploration, résumés, interviewing, and professionalism
- Designed for 100–200 level courses

University of North Florida—OspreyPro

- Four-stage program aligned to career development milestones
- Students "read, view, and do" content and assignments; digital badges included

Indiana University System—Career EDGE Modules

- Eleven modules used in FYE, gateway, and major courses
- Faculty can embed modules as is or download and modify them
- Designed for use by instructors, advisors, or career staff

Virginia Tech—Career Readiness Toolkit

- Six modules aligned to NACE competencies
- Includes assignable activities and reflection prompts for early courses

Kent State University—Career Academy Canvas Course

- Twenty-one modules available for faculty to embed or recommend
- Designed so students can enroll directly or for faculty to use as assignments or extra credit

Georgia Southern University—Ready Day 1 Connect

- Part of a more comprehensive career readiness program
- Four progressive modules beginning with first-year courses
- Two modules are university-wide for all students and two are college specific
- Includes pre/post assessments

Texas State University—Career Success Toolkit

- Assignments on writing résumés and cover letters
- Available for faculty and staff to use with students or for students and alumni to access directly
- Career services staff provide assessment and feedback

San José State University—Canvas Career Modules

- Career readiness modules for faculty to integrate into any course
- Covers career exploration, résumés, interviewing, and professional skills

5. Faculty are essential partners in career readiness, but they need support, context, and collaboration

Students spend more time with faculty than with any other group of professionals on campus, and survey data shows they look to professors as their primary academic and professional mentors. In a 2024 *Inside Higher Ed* survey, 40 percent of students said they want their professors to help them better connect what they're learning in class to real-world issues or career plans, and 46 percent believed faculty are responsible for preparing them for careers.[39]

Several people interviewed for this report emphasized that a growing number of faculty are willing and capable allies when institutions provide context and don't expect faculty to develop career readiness initiatives from scratch. Depending on their discipline, faculty may lack exposure to professional experiences outside academia and so are not comfortable attempting to communicate how the course material is relevant to specific professional roles. But career readiness, especially in introductory courses in academic subjects, does not need to address narrow technical competencies in a profession. The frameworks in Section 2 above encourage fluency in well-defined but broad competencies.

Faculty are most impactful when supported by institutional scaffolding: clear competency frameworks, adaptable assignment templates, guidance on language, and adjustments to workload. Collaborative relationships with advising, career services, and centers for teaching and learning are also essential. Numerous interview subjects described cross-unit models in which teaching faculty introduce or reinforce competencies, while career staff provide targeted coaching, résumé review, and employer connections.

In his consulting work with individual institutions, Podany emphasizes that the goal is not 100 percent participation by every faculty member: "I believe the strategists—department chairs, deans, associate deans, and certain faculty—need to come together and say, 'How do we ensure all our students have walked through a set of career learning outcomes? And that's a different question from 'How do we get all faculty to do something?'"

[39] https://www.insidehighered.com/news/student-success/life-after-college/2024/10/28/survey-student-confidence-career-prep-future

In other writings and interviews, Podany describes the career center as a resource "for not just students but also professional development for student-facing faculty, staff, and administrators, giving them the tools they need to guide their students toward lifelong career success and purpose. This should not be construed as adding more to faculty or staff job descriptions, but on the contrary, should have the express purpose of making their jobs easier and more accomplished."[40]

In effective collaborations, faculty don't take on the role of career counselor and labor market expert. In fact, several participants observed that when faculty embed competencies in academic courses, perennially low student engagement with career services reverses. For example, Gibney at Georgia Southern University says students in the pilot of their Ready Day 1 Connect program had 31 percent more contact with the career center.

> "I came to this from a love of students but also from the sense that everybody I knew was exhausted. The pitch was that this doesn't have to be everything all the time. I heard from colleagues the concern 'If I focus on career information, then what field-specific skills am I giving up?' This is a big impact with a tiny effort. It can be five minutes once a week. And it doesn't have to be everyone. If a student gets information about career readiness in seven of their courses, that's critical mass."
>
> ***- Andrea Stanton***

[40] https://www.careerleadershipcollective.com/post/the-4-foundations-of-the-career-ecosystem-era

6. The first intervention is translation

Across nearly every interview for this report, faculty and program directors emphasized that the opportunity to make significant progress embedding career readiness in academic courses is aligning the language inside and outside of academia. Faculty often have high conviction they are helping students develop competencies employers value, but students do not recognize that. The role of faculty in that case is helping students name and explain the durable and transferable skills they already are developing. A few metaphors came up repeatedly on this point, including "translation," "making the implicit explicit," and "making the invisible visible."

The initiatives referenced in this report do not ask faculty to teach specific technical career skills instead of disciplinary content. Instead, they map employer-facing language to language that already exists in syllabi, course and department objectives, strategic plans, and accreditor requirements. Then they are positioned to help students articulate their learning in terms that matter both inside and outside the academy. Part III of this report gives more detail on these "crosswalk" activities.

Kaitlyn Anderson, Career Readiness Curriculum Designer at University of Connecticut says she encourages faculty to build a common language into the syllabus. "There's some pedagogy in that—transparency in learning and teaching," she explains.

"Then in your lectures, in your activities, or on assignments, you can say not only what the learning objective is for that assignment, but you can also state what NACE career competencies are going to be enhanced as a result. It becomes an embedded feature in anything you give to students."

In the University of Connecticut's Career Readiness Faculty Fellow Institute, fellows receive a stipend to redesign one assignment to help students begin building a professional identity alongside their academic identity. For example, STEM faculty have modified lab protocols to assess teamwork and professionalism, encouraging students to attend not only to research methods but also to the collaborative and procedural skills they will need in the workplace.

At Washington State University, faculty fellows in the Core to Career program learning to incorporate NACE competencies did not displace the objectives of the general education curriculum. Instead, the connection reinforced them. Stratton gave the example of a history professor assigning the same traditional research paper they had before but

adding a “cover letter” element in which students explained their research process to a non-academic audience. This allowed students to practice disciplinary argument while imagining ahead to the communication, inquiry, and professionalism competencies their careers will require.

> “If you can’t change the learning objectives [of your course], it's about what in-class activities you do. What conversations do you have with students about these competencies? Those are the things any person can do at any level.”
>
> ***- Patricia Turley***

7. The case for career readiness has an evidence-backed theory of change, but more research is needed on measurable academic outcomes

The underlying theory of change for incorporating conversations about durable and transferable career skills into academic courses is supported by several well-documented educational mechanisms. The literature scan and interviews for this project did not surface empirical research showing career-readiness initiatives improving academic outcomes, but the logic chain is coherent and grounded in established learning science findings.

Two links in the chain were established earlier in this report: The number one motivation for attending college for the majority of students is career success, and when students do participate in co-curricular career services programming, they have better post-graduation outcomes and a more positive sentiment about their alma mater.

A third link is the large body of evidence that relevance supports motivation. For example, a controlled experiment published in *Frontiers in Psychology* found that STEM students who practiced statistical analysis using data tied to climate change—a meaningful real-world context—reported higher motivation and interest than students completing the same exercise using abstract dart-throwing data.[41] A broader review of "utility value" interventions reached the same conclusion: When students understand why a task matters for their future selves, engagement and persistence rise.[42] Another study on first-year students showed that coursework aligned with career aspirations predicts significantly stronger motivation and engagement, whereas perceived irrelevance predicts disengagement.[43]

Fourth, applied learning activities such as internships, projects, case studies, and simulations have long been associated with improved mastery. This is consistent with learning-science literature showing that applied practice supports retention. Research also shows that guided reflection improves knowledge transfer, helping students recognize what they know and apply it to new contexts.

A related argument is that employer-aligned outcomes enhance engagement because they give students a sense of purpose. Early career conversations may help students avoid the costly churn associated with changing majors, which is a major contributor to

[41] https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10569612/
[42] https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5839644/
[43] https://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/12/12/885

excess credits and extended time-to-degree. If early courses help students clarify interests and pathways, they may navigate programs more efficiently.

Kyoungjin Jang-Tucci is a Project Assistant at The Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions (CCWT) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and a Ph.D. candidate at that university in Educational Policy Studies. She notes that in multiple current surveys of students for CCWT and for her dissertation, "what we are hearing is that faculty who make clear how assignments are necessary for the job market have been most helpful. When they have specific projects that have clear skill goals, clear context, an explanation of how this project can be listed on the résumé or described during the job search, then making sure a project is recorded and documented or even recognized by awards on campus, these kinds of experiences have been extremely helpful for students."

> "One principle of adult learning theory is that we crave context so we can understand how to use this. That's how you reach a community college student or a first-gen student. You make the teaching culturally responsive and you make it contextually appropriate. Even a gateway course can touch their context."
> ***- K.C. Williams***

Further research is needed to directly test the influence of career-readiness activities in academic courses on indicators of academic success like GPA, DFW rates, and graduation rates. Some of the programs featured in this report have early data suggesting positive outcomes for program objectives, often from surveys of student awareness, confidence, and sentiment. But, while the theory is built on a strong, evidence-backed mechanism, the empirical case is still emerging.

8. Digital learning technology can help implement and extend this work

Digital learning technologies have the potential to support institutions seeking to embed career readiness across early academic experiences without adding substantial workload for faculty. While the previous findings describe the pedagogical and curricular foundations of this work, technology provides practical mechanisms that help institutions carry it out consistently. However, it is important to resist a techno-solutionist posture that overpromises "scale" with every deployment of a digital technology. The most effective tools depend on thoughtful teaching and empower faculty to extend or amplify what they are doing by helping students understand the personal relevance of academic subjects.

The most common example of using digital learning technology that was encountered in research and interviews for this project was deploying career-content modules into the institution's LMS for faculty to implement, sometimes after lightly adapting them. (See sidebar on pg. 31.) The topics of individual modules range from career exploration to interviewing tactics. They are easy to insert into any first-year or gateway course and can be automatically assessed. These reduce the need for faculty to generate their own career-focused materials. Instructors typically devote a small amount of class time to connecting a module's concepts to their own disciplinary context.

Digital portfolios are another technology seen in many of the programs featured in this report. Faculty design project-based assignments that result in artifacts appropriate to include in the ePortfolio platforms their institutions have invested in. This helps students document their work and articulate the career competencies embedded in academic subjects. Because ePortfolios encourage reflection and iteration, they support one of the central mechanisms identified in learning science: Students are more likely to transfer knowledge when they practice saying explicitly what they know (metacognition) and how they have applied it (active learning).

A growing category of digital tools provides structured exposure to professional practices. Virtual job simulations let students explore career paths by completing realistic tasks designed by employers. AI-enabled coaching platforms and interview-preparation tools offer practice and feedback on communication and professionalism. Again, faculty find creative ways to use these tools to bridge between traditional academic assignments such as research papers, lab reports, and problem sets, and students' understanding of career competencies.

At the program level, curriculum-alignment tools such as Lightcast's Skillabi help academic units surface where career competencies already exist in syllabi and program objectives. Across these examples, technology does not replace the relational work of teaching or advising. Instead, it gives faculty and staff tools that make career readiness easier to implement, more visible to students, and coordinated across courses.

What are digitally enabled, evidence-based teaching practices?

Many of the principles and specific activities recommended by practitioners for this report align well with digitally enabled, evidence-based teaching practices (DE-EBTs). These are instructional approaches that integrate technology tools and platforms to enhance and support teaching methods grounded in empirical research and data-driven insights.

The eight DE-EBTs are

1. Active learning, such as simulations and hands-on projects
2. Assessing and activating prior knowledge, such as designing activities around students' interests and current levels of understanding
3. Data-informed instruction, such as using data dashboards
4. Formative practice and assessment, such as timely, targeted, and ungraded feedback
5. Fostering a sense of belonging through an inclusive learning environment, such as connecting course objectives to what is important or relevant to students
6. Instructional transparency, such as mapping content to course objectives
7. Metacognition and self-regulation, such as student self-assessment
8. Peer collaboration, such as small group and revision activities that give students the opportunity to support one another's learning

Transform Learning, a resource from Every Learner Everywhere, fully defines the eight DE-EBTs, details the research supporting them, and offers a library of example activities submitted by faculty.

Part III - The Emerging Playbook for Leadership and Faculty

The final section of this report synthesizes what practitioners from across diverse institutional contexts are actually doing to make core academic courses more relevant for learners. The first half of Part III is intended for director-level leaders of centers for teaching and learning and career centers, associate provosts with portfolios related to student success, vice presidents of academic affairs, and college and university presidents. The second half is intended for individual faculty and academic departments considering changes to their own courses.

Across contexts, several themes stand out. Institutions that make progress tend to start with people and culture, recognize and strengthen the work already underway, and lower the lift for faculty by providing clarity, tools, and shared language. Over time, efforts move upstream, using structures, strategy, and policy to reinforce and sustain the work.

The lessons in this emerging playbook are drawn from faculty innovators, career services leaders, and academic administrators at institutions at different stages of implementation. They document patterns that appeared repeatedly across interviews, authoritative reports, and the strategy and working materials of existing programs. The lessons here are offered not as a prescription but as an emerging set of approaches that are gaining traction.

Leadership

1. Start with the people: Cultivate curiosity and culture

A. Work with faculty as allies

Many faculty are already doing much of what career readiness requires, and they present an opportunity to activate their colleagues.

- Start with the willing. Every campus has “career-readiness-curious” faculty who want better tools to help students connect learning to future opportunities.
- Begin with affirmation. Frame the work as: “You’re already teaching these skills. We will help you make them visible to students.”
- Protect disciplinary identity. Position competencies as an overlay onto existing expertise in teaching academic subjects, not a rewrite.

B. Normalize gradual culture change

Culture change in academic departments is slow and nonlinear; the goal is steady movement, not universal buy-in.

- Give permission to start small. Emphasize that five minutes of reflection, one clarified outcome, or a single revised prompt are valid beginnings.
- Set direction, offer support, and let faculty opt in. Voluntary efforts generate more momentum and are more sustainable.
- Use visible wins to build confidence. Showcase pilot efforts, early adopters, and small successes to signal that change is already underway.
- Plan for phased, multi-year adoption. Reinforce career relevance through repetition, shared language, and peer examples.
- Communicate that incorporating career readiness is an iterative process that evolves with economic and technological changes.

PERSPECTIVES FROM THE FIELD

“The real surprise to me with our faculty learning community was that people across so many programs feel this ethical concern to make sure our students have meaningful job opportunities, because they are able to articulate what they know and what skills they have.” - Andrea Stanton

“We created a community of practice in our LMS so our marketable-skills-curious faculty can learn from their peers.” - Sharon Manna

“We needed to make sure we honored the motivations of why students were coming, even though they were multifactorial. That started resonating with some faculty.” - David Gaston

2. Recognize and strengthen what's already happening

A. Celebrate existing efforts

Recognition is one of the fastest ways to accelerate culture change. Faculty respond to visibility and appreciation, especially when the message is that their work contributes to student success.

- Shine a spotlight on early adopters. Use newsletters, teaching awards, and campus events to make career-aligned teaching visible.
- Create or expand career champion programs. Institutions like University of Connecticut,[44] University of Montana,[45] and Georgia Southern University[46] show that a simple recognition framework can validate faculty making small but meaningful moves.
- Acknowledge effort with time and compensation where possible. Even symbolic stipends send a message that the work matters.

B. Build supportive peer communities

Faculty learn this work best from one another. Community—formal and informal—builds momentum, shared language, and useful models.

- Create structured groups where faculty learn together. Fellows programs and faculty learning communities give faculty space to test small ideas, share assignments, and build confidence.
- Make participation visible. Highlight fellows' projects, publish case studies, or host showcases so faculty see what their peers are doing.
- Center early adopters as peer mentors. Faculty who already teach career competencies become natural guides for colleagues.

[44] https://career.uconn.edu/channels/career-champions-resources/
[45] https://www.umt.edu/careers/faculty-staff/careerchampions.php
[46] https://ocpd.georgiasouthern.edu/ready-day-1/career-champions/

- Give groups enough structure to stay focused, but enough freedom to adapt. Let them design assignments, exercises, and assessments that can spread across the curriculum.

PERSPECTIVES FROM THE FIELD

“Use your early adopters. Help them not only to develop the program but also to become evangelists for it. Compensate them if you can. Our stipends are not a lot, but it acknowledges the work.” - Sharon Manna

“You have to start with faculty professional development. Give your faculty service for doing this work. Put letters in their file for it. Offer them some stipends. Really put the money into beginning the process, and then you're off to the races with train-the-trainer expansion over time.” - Niesha Taylor

“Our faculty fellows program started with one faculty member in 2023, and they helped us to develop materials and a process. Then it morphed into specifics for the humanities versus STEM. From there, the career center realized we had everything we needed to get faculty to deliver this information to students. Meanwhile, the program grew into a cohort with 17 fellows.” - Kaitlyn Anderson

“Our college is going with a voluntary model and we had strong responses. I think faculty are actually hungry for these ideas and the chance to share ideas across campus.” - Clif Stratton

“Understand that faculty have different levels of experience, such as adjuncts teaching for the first time or professors early in their career. They are asking, ‘What is a learning objective?’ And then you have faculty who can do course objectives in their sleep, and they're at a place of revising a syllabus. They may not need to read about Bloom’s taxonomy versus Fink’s taxonomy. Navigating those different levels of experience has been a little bit challenging.” - Sydney Kadinger

3. Lower the lift for faculty

A. Identify the shared language

Faculty adopt new practices more easily when the institution provides a common framework or vocabulary for talking about skills, relevance, and learning outcomes. Remove uncertainty and turn a diffuse idea of "career readiness" into something instructors can explain, model, and assess within their own disciplines.

- Use existing frameworks as a foundation. Review the NACE and other frameworks discussed in Finding 2 of Part II of this report and convene stakeholders to identify shared terminology. Select a limited set of competencies and apply them consistently across syllabi, advising, and career services.

- Provide model language faculty can borrow. Offer sample syllabus statements, assignment prompts, and reflection questions that translate competencies into classroom terms.

- Connect institutional language to disciplinary language. Help departments articulate how each competency appears in their field, preserving academic identity while improving transparency.

B. Provide ready-to-use assignments and modules

Faculty adoption accelerates when the starting point is a ready-to-use asset. These materials signal institutional support, model how career relevance can look in a real course, minimize preparation time, and enable faculty to experiment.

- Deploy career-themed modules to the LMS for faculty to adopt. Short modules on topics such as communication, teamwork, career management, or professionalism can help students begin exploring careers and connecting existing academic work to their professional futures. (See sidebar on pg. 31.)

- Develop a library of reflection questions, applied exercises, rubrics, ePortfolio assignment templates, and résumé and LinkedIn profile models. In some programs, career services colleagues participate in reviewing and giving feedback on those assignments.

- Offer industry-aligned job simulations that don't require faculty to design workplace scenarios from scratch.

- Curate employer-validated microcredentials (e.g., from Google, Salesforce, or CompTIA) for faculty to use as optional or embedded assignments.

PERSPECTIVES FROM THE FIELD

"Give faculty the basics and let them know that whenever they have a question, there is support in place to help. Then make it very simple. We specifically designed the program so that it could be "plug and play," since they have so much more content to teach. Fortunately, faculty have wholeheartedly embraced the program on every level." - Doug Meyn

"We can't expect gateway course faculty to know everything about every career. That's just completely unrealistic. But I do think some small tweaks could really make a difference for students." - Amanda Olmstead

"There's always a lot of institutional movement where leadership says, 'Faculty should do X, Y, and Z.' Faculty are already tasked with so many things. So include faculty and provide tons of professional development." - Sharon Manna

4. Move upstream for greater impact

A. Shift from isolated practices to institution-wide strategy

Course-level innovations gain power when institutions adopt a shared framework and embed it across programs.

- Map competencies across the student journey so learning is reinforced at multiple touchpoints.
- Learn from peer institutions' efforts in program-level commitments, assessment, and faculty development.
- Coordinate efforts across academic affairs, career services, and the teaching and learning center.
- Make gateway and early courses central to the strategy. Early academic momentum is shaped by whether students experience relevance before choosing majors.

> **Lessons from peer institution QEPs**
>
> Many institutional accreditors require or encourage targeted quality initiatives. Institutions accredited by The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges use a format called the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), which is devoted to one issue—often selected collaboratively by the campus—and outlines a comprehensive, multi-year, institution-wide strategy for making a measurable improvement on that issue.
>
> In recent years, several colleges and universities have devoted their QEPs to career readiness. Many of those QEPs are publicly available, and reading them for common themes and elements can suggest several lessons for peer institutions:
>
> - Coordinating dispersed efforts, both curricular and co-curricular

- Framing career readiness as aligned with institutional mission
- Framing career readiness as aligned with student care and student success
- Aligning the whole institution around a clearly defined framework with a limited number of career competencies
- Anchoring career readiness in first-year experience, general education, and other gateway courses
- Tiered, developmental career learning and experiences over the entire student lifecycle
- Blending career advising and academic advising
- Digital tools to support reach and coordination
- Intentional communication and culture-change campaigns
- Standardized assessment expectations
- Faculty development structures and incentives
- Resources for sustaining the work beyond a pilot

B. Align institutional and system-level levers to support and sustain the work

Career relevance becomes durable when policy and planning structures reinforce the same expectations. Institutions with more mature and comprehensive programs tend to pull levers in multiple areas rather than relying on individual faculty or isolated initiatives. The policy environment—state outcomes dashboards, statewide strategic plans, accreditation expectations—can be a powerful motivator for that alignment.

- Embed competency language and career-relevance prompts into curriculum proposal forms, program review templates, advising frameworks, and syllabi guidance.

- Use teaching-evaluation structures to acknowledge faculty who integrate applied learning and career-aligned practices.

- Use institutional levers already in place. Many existing initiatives are informed by statewide or system-level expectations around pathways, employability dashboards, or education-to-workforce plans.

    - The Talent Strong Texas Pathways is a statewide guided-pathways strategy focused on alignment to employment and transfer outcomes, implemented across all 50 Texas community college districts.[47]

    - Strada Education Foundation's State Opportunity Index is a scorecard on each U.S. state on "five research-backed keys to improve employment outcomes for learners and employers alike: Clear Outcomes, Quality Coaching, Affordability, Work-Based Learning, and Employer Alignment." It allows users to look up and compare detailed reports on individual states.[48]

    - The Education Commission of the States' Education-to-Workforce Framework shows how states build integrated data systems linking K–12, higher education, and workforce information.[49]

PERSPECTIVES FROM THE FIELD

"There's a way to do it where it's strategic without sounding like, 'Thus saith: required is career development.' There's a way to build it into the existing system where institutions can say, 'Every student who comes here designs a plan for their future.'" - Jeremy Podany

[47] https://tacc.org/tsc/talent-strong-texas-pathways
[48] https://www.strada.org/state-opportunity-index
[49] https://www.ecs.org/strengthening-state-data-systems-through-the-education-to-workforce-framework/

"I made sure I aligned our program with our faculty evaluation competencies. Faculty are innately caring about their students. They want them to succeed. They're also innately concerned with themselves, so, if you can show what's in it for [them] by aligning it with institutional service and all those other engagement competencies, it helps them articulate their own successes." - Sharon Manna

"Guided Pathways was designed to eliminate the cafeteria model, where students are just racking up credits and taking a bunch of classes that don't directly correlate with career readiness or further degree completion." - K.C. Williams

Faculty

1. Start small and use the resources your institution already has

Significant infrastructure already exists for faculty ready to connect academic work and career readiness. Faculty interviewed for this report repeatedly said they learn quickest from peers whose examples make the work feel concrete and doable.

A. Begin with ready resources

Faculty across institutions emphasized that integrating career relevance does not require a major redesign of a course. Small moves, supported by existing campus resources, can strengthen how students make meaning for themselves out of the academic curriculum.

- Use ready-made tools before creating your own. Many institutions offer short, standalone LMS modules introducing competencies such as communication, teamwork, or career management. Others offer job simulations, résumé templates, checklists for creating LinkedIn profiles, or reflection assignments that can be adopted with minimal preparation.

- Rely on campus expertise. Career services offices often partner with faculty to review assignments or support students preparing application materials for internships and jobs. Teaching and learning centers, faculty fellows programs, and faculty learning communities offer assignment banks, model rubrics, and sample syllabus language.

B. Use a “small lift” mindset

Faculty experienced in this area say that short but frequent touchpoints make relevance real for students. Modest activities add up over time to students understanding how a course objective relates to future professional opportunities.

- Make one small move to get started. Add a short reflection prompt, revise the language around the purpose of an assignment, or include a brief activity connecting course work to real-world contexts.

- Emphasize relevance in small moments. Even a few minutes explaining “why this assignment matters” can help students connect learning to future opportunities.

- Build gradually. As comfort grows, expand beyond periodic touches to incorporate reflection across modules, adding transparent assignment language or aligning a few activities with career competencies.

PERSPECTIVES FROM THE FIELD

“Education, accounting, and business are required to do competency work and connection to the workplace [for programmatic accreditation], so it's just normal for them. You can ask, ‘How do you do that? Where do you fit it in?’ They're usually champions on campus who you can grab and ask for advice.” - Niesha Taylor

“Our Office of Career and Professional Development provides all of the heavy lifting. The only commitment we ask is to provide one day of course time for students to complete module tasks.” - Glenn Gibney

2. Illuminate the career relevance already in your courses

As Finding 6 in Part II of this report described, translation between career competencies and academic course outcomes achieves a lot of this work. Faculty and program directors consistently reported that the most powerful shift was recognizing that their courses already cultivate many of the competencies students need. They are energized by finding creative ways to help students notice and articulate what they are learning, in ways that students find relevant to their career concerns.

A. Identify where skills already appear

Many instructors found that a simple review of existing program outcomes alongside existing career competency frameworks illuminated the path forward. Some people interviewed described this "crosswalk" activity happening at the level of departmental committee.

- Familiarize yourself with NACE competencies, the AAC&U VALUE rubrics, and other frameworks described in Finding 2 in Part II of this report.
- Highlight where disciplinary habits of mind align with transferable skills employers say they value.
- Note which activities in a course or program already require students to practice professional competencies.

B. Make the implicit explicit

Once faculty identify where skill development is already happening, the next step is to help students see it through the evidence-based teaching practice of transparency. The goal is to reference competencies throughout the term so students begin to recognize them, recognize why the course assigns the material and activities it does, and to shift how they interpret their learning.

- Include career competencies language in the syllabus, to explain the "why" of the course in terms of academic learning, college success, and career success.
- Add a sentence or two in descriptions of traditional academic assignments like research papers, problem sets, lab reports, and presentations that connect the

work to a specific career competency. Share these among colleagues to lighten the workload. Suggest institutional templates that can be shared more broadly.

- Include a short explanation in class about why a reading, project, or method matters for future academic or professional contexts.

PERSPECTIVES FROM THE FIELD

“These are meaningful changes, not mechanical. And they're not inauthentic. Adding accurate information about the competencies students develop doesn’t detract from what we do.” - Andrea Stanton

“The greatest challenge, to me, is helping faculty understand that we’re not really asking them to do more. We’re asking them to approach the learning occurring in their classrooms differently and to think about the pedagogy so they’re also helping students make connections to skills development through learning.” - Tim Harding

“We see overlap between liberal arts college outcomes and the NACE competencies. Essentially you're talking about things already occurring in higher education, but there tends to be a tricky translation problem for students representing these as they're getting into internships and jobs. That's what we're helping faculty work with students on—being aware that these skills they're learning in the class can be connected to their résumé over time, so they start to be able to tell that story when they're moving into the world of work. The first point is not rethinking a whole class.” - Niesha Taylor

3. Help students articulate what they are learning

The previous section discussed faculty making the implicit explicit. Give students opportunities to practice that themselves by naming, describing, and applying their understanding of the connection between academic course content and career competencies. Many of the ideas described by the experts interviewed can be thought of as a "career timeout," where students are encouraged to practice advocating for themselves and their learning in terms of the professions they envision for themselves.

A. Integrate reflection into existing assignments

Short reflection activities to promote metacognition, often immediately after the completion of an assignment, have become a common pedagogical practice. Those same reflection activities are an effective place to help students articulate the career readiness skills they are gaining. Pausing for short reflections repeatedly across a term helps students develop a language for their learning.

- Add short, structured reflection prompts to existing assignments, asking students to identify which competencies they used in completing a task.
- Include a brief follow-up question, such as "How might this skill transfer to another class or a future opportunity?"
- Ask students to practice explaining what they have learned to different academic and professional audiences, such as a scholarship committee, graduate school admissions committee, and a specific employer.

B. Use applied learning to make material relevant

Applied learning asks students to use course concepts in context, improving mastery and their ability to describe the concepts to multiple audiences.

- Incorporate case studies, scenarios, or real-world data that allow students to use course concepts in professional situations. Use simple simulations or examples inspired by professional contexts.

- Practice course concepts with short exercises, such as partner explanations or problem-solving tasks that shift the intended audience for an explanation or argument.

C. Vary ways for students to communicate their skills

As students engage in reflection and applied learning activities, flexible opportunities to describe their thinking help them build fluency in articulating their skills to different audiences.

- Ask students to translate course concepts for different audiences, such as peers in another major, a community group, or a potential employer.
- Encourage students to add one line to a résumé, to update a career mission statement, or to add a course artifact to an ePortfolio using language drawn from discussions of career competencies.
- Connect to co-curricular or experiential opportunities by asking students to reflect on how course concepts relate to internships, volunteer work, or campus employment.
- Use multiple media. Assign audio or video reflections in which students describe the choices they made in a problem, analysis, or project.

Examples from the field

A cultural wealth activity to broaden students' sense of possibility
At Navajo Technical University, Shawna Begay created a family career tree activity in which students chart not just the names of their elders but also their occupations. The exercise highlights diversity in career paths in a student's lineage and challenges assumptions that they must follow a single inherited path. "I can say, 'Look at what all these people did,'" Begay says. "Our students

are influenced by family, so let's flip this so it's no longer a roadblock. This way they can't say, 'I can't do that.'"

Embedding occasional career prompts in academic activities
In a research skills course in paralegal studies at Indiana University Indianapolis, Sydney Kadinger expands on the traditional research log activity by embedding short questions about how an assignment helps develop problem-solving skills.

Public policy simulations connecting academic analysis to civic careers
At Dallas College, Sharon Manna's state government course includes a semester-long simulated campaign for the state legislature. Each component reinforces analytical skills through, for example, interpreting documents or negotiating with committees. The project requires students to connect the academic content to their intended careers, strengthening relevance and motivation.

4. Communicate for continuous improvement

Experts interviewed for this report cautioned against expecting a single “heroic” course or module to do all the work of career exploration and preparation. No single faculty member can be responsible for covering every competency. Therefore, meaningful and sustained career-aligned curricula depend on active conversations within departments, across departments, with student affairs colleagues, and between faculty and students.

A. Collaborate for coherence

Talking with peers helps refine approaches, build shared language, and ensure students experience career readiness as something that develops throughout their college program. Focus on giving students recurring opportunities to connect course content to authentic contexts and to see how their skills develop progressively.

- In gateway courses, select one or two competencies that align with your discipline and emphasize them throughout the term.
- Coordinate with colleagues teaching adjacent courses to identify which competencies each course naturally supports and where students may need reinforcement.
- Share assignments or reflection prompts that worked well. Even a five-minute exchange can help colleagues adapt ideas to their own contexts.
- Meet periodically with student support or career services colleagues to compare what students are reporting and identify where faculty may need additional resources.

B. Use student feedback to guide your approach

Instructors who make the most progress describe a culture of coordination with colleagues and ongoing communication with learners. Listening to students helps instructors understand where relevance is clear, where it slips out of view, and which practices make the biggest difference.

- Ask students early in the term what kinds of assignments, explanations, or examples help them understand relevance most clearly.

- Invite short mid-semester reflections about which activities helped them understand their strengths or skills.
- Use class discussions, office hours, or online forums as opportunities to clarify purpose or explain how a task relates to disciplinary or professional practices.
- Make small adjustments—such as adding a reflection prompt, clarifying assignment language, or revisiting a competency during a unit—based on what students report as being most helpful.

PERSPECTIVES FROM THE FIELD

"We know we can't teach career competencies to all students with a single class lecture. The purpose of the RD1C program is to allow students to pause in the middle of their classwork to connect what they are already learning in their studies with the career competencies that are necessary for work success." - Glenn Gibney

"Career competency shouldn't be an afterthought. It shouldn't be 'I have this one low-stakes assignment where I'm going to incorporate critical thinking, and then I'm going to say I've done it.' It has to be intentional, meaningful, explicit, and connected to the real world. Because, ideally, career competencies are life competencies." - Patricia Turley

"If we want to reach students—want them to get the skills—get their feedback. Sometimes we can lose that connection with our students, so just take some time to hear from your class. Student voice is incredibly important." - Sydney Kadinger

"I actually learned from a student group just yesterday when we were talking about their podcast project. They said, 'You know, we really like this other platform because you can incorporate music into the podcast.' So I will

probably have my next cohort of students use that. They actually teach me a lot about the tech tools they use." - Clif Stratton

"If we really think about the desired outcome and are aligned on developing a program students buy into, I would have even more focus groups with students at all levels. 'How do we reach you? What gets your attention?' It can be tempting to over-engineer a large program, so we need to focus on the desired outcomes and what really has an impact with students." - Doug Meyn

Conclusion — Career relevance as an institutional responsibility

The interviews with subject matter experts, research literature, and planning and implementation documents from multiple institutions that informed this report reveal an unmistakable throughline: Career readiness is no longer a parallel project to the academic experience but a core expression of institutional responsibility to student success. Students arrive with urgent questions about the relevance of their coursework to their future. Yet they too rarely encounter answers early, explicitly, or consistently enough.

Career readiness is also deeply tied to educational access. Faculty at diverse institution types describe how making career relevance explicit helps students who might otherwise self-select out of programs or doubt they belong in a chosen field. When gateway courses reflect students' goals—including their professional goals— they support belonging, persistence, and motivation, outcomes that institutions have long struggled to improve.

The good news is that colleges and universities already hold many of the tools to meet that need inside the classroom, including shared competency frameworks, evidence-based teaching practices, digital resources, and high levels of faculty engagement. The primary challenge is helping students recognize that the communication, critical thinking, problem solving, teamwork, and professional skills many courses already have as their objectives are durable and transferable.

The Career Readiness Imperative in Gateway Courses documents a clear shift from isolated experimentation to planned, institution-wide strategies. The most effective programs identified for this report treat this translation as a cultural practice rather than a technical fix. Strategic plans, steering committees, faculty fellowships, and growing collaboration between academic departments and career services professionals all demonstrate a maturing ecosystem. These structures lower the lift for faculty, create common vocabulary, and ensure that career relevance is reinforced across multiple touchpoints rather than left to chance. They also position digital learning technologies as enablers rather than as standalone solutions.

The examples throughout this report show that meaningful progress is achievable. The impact of light touches and short activities accumulate, especially when reinforced across programs. The emerging playbook outlined in Part III describes how institutions

can build this capacity systematically, starting with culture and people, strengthening existing practices, reducing barriers for faculty, and gradually aligning structures around a shared goal.

As the institutions profiled here demonstrate, career readiness is not an add-on. It is a way of helping students understand and articulate the purpose of their education and navigate a changing world. As higher education faces pressure to demonstrate relevance, this work offers a path that honors both disciplinary integrity and student aspirations. It holds promise not only for improving post-graduation outcomes but also for strengthening engagement, belonging, and academic success within the classroom. In that sense, connecting academic learning to students' future careers is not only a matter of workforce preparation; it is a matter of educational responsibility, support, and care for every learner.

Related resources from the Every Learner Everywhere Network

- Communities of Practice in Higher Education: A Playbook for Centering Equity, Digital Learning, and Continuous Improvement
- Communities of Practice in the Higher Education Landscape: A Literature Review
- Faculty Development and Gen AI Playbook: Evidence-Based Best Practices
- Infusing Culturally Relevant Content in Gateway Courses in Postsecondary Education: Findings and Insights from College Faculty

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Advising Success Network and The Career Leadership Collective. *Integrating Career Advising for Equitable Student Success*. Washington, DC: Advising Success Network, 2021. https://www.advisingsuccessnetwork.org/advising-tool-equity/integrating-career-advising-for-equitable-student-success/.

This report synthesizes research, surveys, and focus groups to map how institutions are blending career advising with academic advising and curriculum. It identifies common models, including structured faculty networks, classroom-based integrations, and curriculum-wide mapping of career development. It highlights models such as faculty champions groups, career influencer networks, and guided pathways. Its recommendations emphasize cross-functional planning, equity gaps, curriculum alignment, and strengthening the career advising role of faculty across disciplines.

Advising Success Network and American Association of State Colleges and Universities. *Integrating Career Advising for Equitable Student Success: A Toolkit (2022 Update)*. Washington, DC: Advising Success Network, 2022. https://www.advisingsuccessnetwork.org/advising-tool-equity/integrating-career-advising-for-equitable-student-success-toolkit/.

Designed as a practical companion to the organizations' earlier landscape analysis, this toolkit provides a roadmap for moving career advising out of the silo of a single office. It offers concrete exercises, discussion guides, and rubrics that institutional working groups can use to operationalize career readiness. The toolkit frames career advising as an equity imperative, arguing that privileged students often have access to professional networks, while first-generation and low-income students rely heavily on the classroom and academic advising to gain the social capital necessary for economic mobility.

American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). *The Career-Ready Graduate: What Employers Say About the Difference College Makes*. Washington, DC: AAC&U, 2023. https://www.aacu.org/research/the-career-ready-graduate-what-employers-say-about-the-difference-college-makes.

This report presents AAC&U's survey of employers, documenting which skills, mindsets, and learning experiences influence hiring decisions and early-career success. Employers emphasize broad, transferable abilities and report that

applied learning experiences such as internships, research, and project-based coursework make candidates more competitive. The findings reinforce the value of liberal education outcomes.

American Council on Education and Higher Education Research Institute. *Factors Affecting First-Year Students' College Choices*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education, 2024. https://www.acenet.edu/News-Room/Pages/HERI-Brief-Student-College-Decisions.aspx.

This brief analyzes data from the national Cooperative Institutional Research Program Freshman Survey to identify the strongest factors influencing decisions about college choice. It finds that career considerations dominate: The top reasons for enrolling include "to get a better job," "to train for a specific career," and "to make more money," alongside concerns about affordability and value. The report highlights shifts in student confidence about college paying off and notes widening differences by income, race, and first-generation status.

The Boyer 2030 Commission. *The Equity/Excellence Imperative: A 2030 Blueprint for Undergraduate Education at U.S. Research Universities*. Fort Collins, CO: Association for Undergraduate Education at Research Universities (UERU), 2022. https://www.ueru.org/boyer-2030-report.

Updating the seminal 1998 Boyer Commission report, this blueprint argues that equity and excellence are mutually reinforcing goals. It introduces a "World Readiness" framework integrating preparation for citizenship, life, and meaningful work as a strategic alternative to "career readiness." It identifies gateway courses as critical sites for intervention, recommending the adoption of evidence-based teaching practices to close equity gaps.

The Burning Glass Institute and Alliance for Decision Education. *Decision Skills in the Workforce*. New York: The Burning Glass Institute, November 2025. https://www.burningglassinstitute.org/research/decision-skills.

This analysis of 6.8 million job postings quantifies the value of "judgment," finding that roles requiring strong decision-making skills (e.g., risk analysis and strategic thinking) command a wage premium. It provides hard data that critical thinking and other so-called "soft skills" are directly linked to higher earnings.

Carnevale, Anthony P., Ban Cheah, and Martin Van Der Werf. *Ranking 4,600 Colleges by ROI (2025)*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2025. https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/roi2025/.

This report and an accompanying interactive tool measure the monetary return on investment for students at 4,600 U.S. colleges and universities. It shows that while degrees generally pay off, the timeline and magnitude of that payoff depend heavily on career alignment. For policymakers and educators, the report underscores the need for transparent value metrics and better alignment between program offerings and labor market opportunity.

Center for Higher Education Policy and Practice. *Online by Design: Improving Career Connection for Today's Learners*. Washington, DC: Center for Higher Education Policy and Practice, 2025. https://www.chepp.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/CHEPP_WORKFORCE-CONNECTIVITY_WHITE-PAPER.pdf.

This white paper outlines a comprehensive framework for "career connection strategies" that support adult, working, and online learners. It introduces a taxonomy across workforce-aligned curriculum, skills assessment, and career exploration, advising, and work-based learning. The report emphasizes integrating these strategies early and consistently across modalities, addressing barriers faced by new traditional learners, and designing flexible, authentic, and relevant experiences. It argues that embedding career connection into academic programs, not just extracurricular services, strengthens engagement, clarifies pathways, and improves employment outcomes for diverse learners.

Complete College America. "College, On Purpose 2.0." September 16, 2025. https://completecollege.org/resource/college-on-purpose-2-0/.

This report updates the Purpose First framework to help institutions embed career readiness for purpose and engagement across the student experience. The report outlines a six-phase model linking academic choices to personal and professional goals. It features an implementation guide by phase and function, examples of institutional practices, and policy tools for integrating purpose into advising, curriculum, and student support.

EAB. "Bridging the Early Career Readiness Gap: How Colleges Can Leverage Technology to Prepare Students for Career Success." Insight Paper. Washington, DC: EAB, 2025. https://eab.com/resources/insight-paper/bridging-the-early-career-readiness-gap/.

This white paper addresses the “readiness crisis” facing higher education, where a disconnect between academic performance and workforce demands leaves graduates feeling unprepared. It presents data showing that career exploration is most effective when introduced in the first year rather than delayed until capstones or senior year. It recommends student-facing technologies such as job simulations and tools to explore majors to scale career guidance without adding unmanageable workloads to faculty or advising staff.

Hora, Matthew T. *Teaching Transferable Skills Using a Sociocultural Perspective: A Guide for Faculty and Institutions for Creating College Courses that Highlight Disciplinary Knowledge, Professional Norms, and Habits of Mind*. Madison, WI: Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2025. https://ccwt.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/2025_Hora_Guide-to-Teaching-Transferable-Skills_UWMadison.pdf.

This comprehensive teaching guide critiques “generic” career readiness frameworks and advances a sociocultural model that treats skills as context-specific “habits of mind.” It argues that faculty should design curricula around the specific professional norms of their field (e.g., “thinking like a biologist” rather than generic problem solving). It demonstrates how to embed workforce preparation into the curriculum in a way that honors academic rigor and disciplinary expertise.

Jenkins, Davis, Hana Lahr, John Fink, Serena C. Klempin, and Maggie P. Fay. *More Essential Than Ever: Community College Pathways to Educational and Career Success*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2025. https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/more-essential-than-ever.html.

This book synthesizes a decade of research on "Guided Pathways" to argue that structural reform alone is insufficient. Instead, it pushes for a focus on "post-completion success," ensuring degrees lead to careers that provide a living wage or to seamless transfer to four-year programs. It challenges instructors to teach for "versatile learning" and provides evidence-based strategies for aligning course learning outcomes with labor market needs.

National Association of Colleges and Employers, American Association of Colleges and Universities, and Society for Experiential Education. *The Integration of Career Readiness Into Experiential Learning and High-Impact Practices: An Examination of Stakeholder Perspectives and Practices*. Bethlehem, PA: National Association of Colleges and

Employers, July 2025. https://www.naceweb.org/research/reports/the-integration-of-career-readiness-into-experiential-learning-and-high-impact-practices.

This report presents findings from a 2024 survey examining how faculty, staff, and administrators embed career preparation into experiential learning and high-impact practices. The report emphasizes aligning career outcomes, adding reflective components, bringing in professional guest speakers, and designing career-oriented assignments, and it includes discipline-specific recommendations. It also provides strategic recommendations for institutions, faculty, staff, and governments.

Sorensen, Barbara Ellen. "Preparation for Life: Career and Technical Education at Tribal Colleges and Universities." *Tribal College Journal* 35, no. 2 (November 13, 2023). https://tribalcollegejournal.org/preparation-for-life-career-and-technical-education-at-tribal-colleges-and-universities/.

This article examines how tribal institutions blend workforce development with community and cultural sustainability. The experts interviewed stress the need for clearer pathways from TCUs to employers while honoring Indigenous languages, values, and nation-building goals, preparing students to solve specific local challenges, from healthcare gaps to infrastructure needs. The article highlights programs where CTE integrates soft skills, apprenticeships with elders, and place-based learning that prepares students to serve their communities. It challenges the vocational/liberal arts binary by demonstrating how technical training can be delivered as a culturally grounded, intellectual, and civic endeavor.

Strada Education Foundation and The Burning Glass Institute. *Talent Disrupted: Underemployment, College Graduates, and the First Job*. Indianapolis, IN: Strada Education Foundation, February 2024. https://www.strada.org/reports/talent-disrupted.

This report analyzes longitudinal labor market data to show that more than half of recent college graduates start their careers underemployed and that early underemployment often persists for a decade or more. It identifies structural inequities that shape who gains access to "good first jobs" and highlights long-term wage penalties associated with misalignment between education and work.

Strohl, Jeff, Artem Gulish, and Catherine Morris. *The Future of Good Jobs: Projections Through 2031*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2024. https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/goodjobsprojections2031/.

This report projects which industries and occupations in the future will generate "good jobs" with family-sustaining wages and analyzes the uneven distribution of those opportunities across regions, education levels, and demographic groups. Drawing on national labor market data, it highlights growth in skilled-services fields such as healthcare, education, and finance, while forecasting continued decline in many blue-collar jobs. The report emphasizes persistent racial and gender disparities in access to good jobs, underscoring the need for stronger alignment between education and the workplace, and more equitable pathways to economic opportunity.

Strohl, Jeff, Zachary Mabel, and Kathryn Peltier Campbell. *The Great Misalignment: Addressing the Mismatch Between the Supply of Certificates and Associate's Degrees and the Future Demand for Workers in 565 US Labor Markets*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2024. https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/greatmisalignment/.

This report analyzes the disconnect between labor market demand for well-paying jobs and the number and types of postsecondary credentials produced for "middle skills" jobs that require and less than a baccalaureate. It finds that over one-quarter of these credentials are earned in fields with weak labor market alignment. The report recommends policies to improve credential transparency and strengthen employer partnerships, and help institutions design programs that reflect regional workforce needs. It also includes an interactive database for readers to explore data for a particular region.

World Economic Forum. *The Future of Jobs Report 2025*. Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2025. https://www.weforum.org/publications/the-future-of-jobs-report-2025/.

This biannual global report synthesizes survey responses from over 1,000 employers representing 14 million workers to assess how macro-trends such as demographic shifts and geopolitical fragmentation are reshaping jobs and skills through 2030. It provides extensive data on fast-growing and declining roles, sector-level projections, and shifting skill demands. The report highlights surging demand for analytical thinking, resilience, and AI-related skills, while clerical occupations continue to decline. It estimates that 35 percent of U.S. workers' core skills will change in the next five years.

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