



Closing Opportunity & Outcome Gaps with Career-Forward Student Support

The 2018 Student Success Symposium, presented by Strada Education Network and InsideTrack, brought nearly 70 higher education leaders to Portland, Oregon to network, share ideas, analyze data and take meaningful action to advance college and career outcomes for underrepresented students. The symposium program featured two working sessions that offered participants the opportunity to discuss the day's topics in a small-group format. With college and university decision-makers, policymakers, student support professionals and nonprofit executives comprising the participant group, conversations merged diverse perspectives and positions to develop new solutions for closing achievement gaps.

Participants were asked to discuss the following questions:

- What role should career exploration and planning play in the enrollment process?
- What career-related knowledge/tools do enrollment staff need in order to effectively support students in making informed enrollment decisions?
- What are the key institutional challenges/obstacles to integrating career-focused support into the enrollment process?
- What are the unique challenges underrepresented students face in making enrollment decisions based on likely career outcomes?
- How can institutions, government, business, philanthropy and other stakeholders better support underrepresented students in making career-informed enrollment decisions?
- What are some examples of successful collaborations (e.g., public/private partnerships) you've seen to enhance the career literacy of prospective students from underrepresented backgrounds?
- What does it mean for students to graduate "career ready" or with appropriate "workplace skills"?
- What does it mean for students to graduate "financially literate"?
- What is the responsibility of the institution in ensuring that students graduate with critical career and financial planning skills?
- What are the unique challenges underrepresented students face in developing workplace skills and financial literacy?
- How can institutions, government, business, philanthropy and other stakeholders better support underrepresented students in developing these skills?
- What are some examples of successful collaborations (e.g., public/private partnerships) you've seen to enhance the workplace readiness and career literacy of underrepresented students?

Working group one: Integrate

The first working group session focused on integrating career discussions into the enrollment process. The following core themes emerged during the discussion:

- The expectation that students will choose a major and choose a career soon upon starting college may not be in line with the evolving nature of today's marketplace, in which many individuals will have several careers over a lifetime.
- Faculty, alumni, and community networks can be leveraged to enhance students' career opportunities.
- It can be challenging for institutions to build a career exploration process into the student journey while still supporting students in making timely progress toward their degree.
- Financial pressures and other obligations may limit underrepresented students' access to unpaid internships and other extracurricular career development opportunities.
- Institutional resources and programs are often the primary source of career mentorship and guidance for underrepresented students.

Participants offered the following responses to specific questions:

What role should career exploration and planning play in the enrollment process?

Career exploration and planning should begin before students start the enrollment process and continue after students leave the university.

Students should be exposed to information about the labor market or academic pathways before they enroll, so they have a deeper understanding of the choices available to them.

How can we take that conversation downstream to the high school level? The opportunity to explore career options can increase students' engagement in their high school experience. Partnerships between high schools and higher ed institutions are key to college students' career readiness.

Does the educational pathway of going to college right out of high school hinder the career preparation process? Some of the most prepared undergraduates have had real-life work experience before going to college.

Students often change their paths or decisions after gaining some working experience. Could frameworks, processes or technology be used to help students simulate this experience?

An institution's career development services should be an important part of the recruitment message, because those services can enhance the value of the university to prospective students.

InsideTrack works closely with students during the enrollment process to help them understand their goals and interests and help institutions meet pipeline conversion goals. The institution gets value from understanding students' career interests, which can better inform how that school can market or position themselves.

Some institutions have a mandatory "choosing a major" workshop once the student is enrolled. The goal of these workshops is not to pull students into a specific major, but to put them on one of several paths. Students are then better prepared to understand the requirements they will need to pass to graduate.

How do we make room for career discovery and exploring interests during the enrollment and matriculation phase, when students are so focused on logistics like finding their classrooms and getting a parking pass?

Does it still make sense for institutions to ask students which career they are interested in? Given that the current generation of traditional-aged students will have so many different jobs in their lifetime, is it better to ask students to think about their skills, interests, and aptitudes, and what problem they would like to solve?

Community colleges are moving toward the idea of meta-majors and guided pathways, which is beneficial for the student and the institution, because the institution can then better advise students on potential career opportunities.

It is important to teach students adaptability. How can higher ed help students flex, change and grow?

Students increasingly want to design their own career path.

Technology used alongside traditional advising strategies can help provide an analytical framework to help the student better understand their interests as well as corresponding career opportunities.

What career-related knowledge/tools do enrollment staff need in order to effectively support students in making informed enrollment decisions?

Enrollment staff need to be able to personalize the career conversation with prospective students. Leading those conversations with prospects could be a differentiator for enrollment targets, and can improve students' qualitative experience of the enrollment process.

Career development should be the first point of contact between an institution and prospective student, and this engagement should continue all the way through graduation. What are the different career development pieces required at different points in the student journey?

Admissions staff are expanding their focus from sales and recruitment to thinking more about retention. One consequence of this is that if admissions staff are focusing on the best fit for the students, they may discourage students from enrolling. But that's not necessarily a bad thing if these students would not have been likely to persist. Enrollment has to play a part in the health of the institution and the success of prospective students.

Registration systems can be built to ask students about their major, and flag any changes or concerns to prompt an intervention from staff. The college application can be redesigned in the same way. If students are not sure about potential majors or careers, they can connect with career staff.

Advisors need more training about which careers are available and how they match up with various pathways and degrees. They need more knowledge about the salary and specifics of those careers, and how the job might evolve over the next few years.

Faculty, alumni, and professionals from the community can be leveraged to expose students to different career fields and build connections with students and advisors. Underserved students may not have such connections/relationships/exposure in their personal lives, so it is particularly important that the institution cultivate these.

Examples offered by participants of institutional programs integrating enrollment/admissions and career exploration:

- College Promise programs help nudge students into career paths that are part of state priorities. College Promise could be a good vehicle for delivering more career support. For instance, if students want to be eligible, they may have to go on a career shadow.
- UC Irvine created the Anteater Leadership Academy program to give some students leadership training in lieu of the typical first-year curriculum.
- At SUNY Empire State College, students design their own learning experience. Part of that process requires students to speak with people in their desired field. Tenured faculty work with students to set up their degree program and then enroll them. Faculty create unique programs that students can't do anywhere else. This forces students to explore career options earlier and make decisions.
- Medgar Evers College offers an experiential career exploration course in the first term.

What are the key institutional challenges/obstacles to integrating career-focused support into the enrollment process?

Career Services is often organizationally adrift within the institutional setting. It is often thought of as a place where you go to work on your résumé before you graduate. Career Services could be more effective as a resource combined with advising, designed to be utilized continually throughout the college journey.

There is a tension between the practice of selecting a degree or major with a career in mind, and the reality that most career paths are circuitous and not directly related to the degree. How can we help students understand that?

We need to create a culture of normalization for students on campus that uncertainty about career is expected. It can be detrimental to have an intake process that rewards/drives people to false certitude. Instead, we should normalize the process of exploration.

The downside of that approach is that not having an immediate direction could delay students' progress and time to graduation, with adverse consequences for financial aid.

We don't fully know what jobs are going to be needed in four years because the economy is evolving so quickly. How can high school students know what they want to do?

Life Design (such as discussed by Farouk Dey of Stanford University during the Symposium Fireside Chat) is a great framework, but institutions and requirements aren't always designed to accommodate that exploratory process. How do you embrace the Life Design concept and learn from it, but not have it be a tangible cost in terms of money and time?

With the escalating pressure on institutions to enroll more students, staff have limited time to develop a career exploration program or requirement for students. Career exploration needs to be integrated into the existing admissions process.

Advisors are spending a lot of time setting up schedules with students but not always having meaningful conversations about long-term, larger decisions.

There is an untapped opportunity to integrate career exploration into academic coursework.

For many students, the enrollment process is complex and confusing — a lot of information has to be conveyed in a limited amount of time.

Are career competencies taught and considered evidence of learning in college courses? Institutions want students to develop soft skills, but are not always educating students for that. Courses educate students in discrete subject areas, while career outcomes often depend upon adaptive, soft skills.

Institutions need to have a wider definition of "career exploration," which could include job shadows or hands-on experiences.

What are the unique challenges underrepresented students face in making enrollment decisions based on likely career outcomes?

"Underrepresented" is a huge category that can include professional students, undergraduates, residential students, graduate students, transfer students, veterans, first-generation, F1 visa students and military-connected students. These different student populations often have different needs.

Some underrepresented students may not be aware of support available within their institutions, and may not be accustomed to accessing it.

Many underrepresented students do not have family members who have attended college, and do not have another influencer or mentor who can prepare them to succeed in college.

Their peer networks may not always support their higher education aspirations. These students may have to support their family, and feel selfish for taking the time to go to school.

Underrepresented students may not understand college and career options, or the financial cost associated with college. Underrepresented students may not even know the language of college — such as "bursar" or "matriculate."

Some students feel a lot of pressure at age 18 to make a big decision about career. But taking a gap year can give students an opportunity to reflect and make better decisions — and not just go along with what seems like the "right" thing to do. However, different student populations may have a different experience of a gap year. For example, if underrepresented students take a break, they may be less likely to return.

How can institutions, government, business, philanthropy and other stakeholders better support underrepresented students in making career-informed enrollment decisions?

Financial pressures and food insecurity are persistent challenges for many underrepresented students. Students need a "career closet" where they can find clothes to borrow for job interviews.

Stackable credentials, and options to step in and step out as needed, can support underrepresented students' career preparation and college success.

Underrepresented students, particularly those who are struggling to finance their education and under pressure to complete their degree quickly, may not have the opportunity or time to develop workplace skills through internships and extracurricular activities. Employer-funded internships and other career development opportunities could be hugely beneficial to underrepresented students.

How could we integrate corporate partners and the private sector into preparing underrepresented students for college and career? Employers can be a valuable partner in talent development.

For example, paid internships during the summer and weekends would be good for both high school and college students.

What are some examples of successful collaborations (e.g., public/private partnerships) you've seen to enhance the career literacy of prospective students from underrepresented backgrounds?

The Avid program is introducing career development to students through guest speakers that come into the classroom. Avid students are typically low-income and highly motivated.

Idaho PTECH and Indiana's 21st Century Scholars are good examples of programs that address college and career inequities among underrepresented students.

Brandman University is working with local organizations to introduce the college experience to students. Participation in this program is often the first time students have stepped on a college campus.

In South Carolina, high school students can get a registered apprenticeship to transition from high school to college.

Working group two: Develop

The second working group session focused on workplace skill development and financial literacy. The following core themes emerged during the discussion:

- The definition of “career readiness” may differ among various student populations or institution types.
- Likewise, methods of assessing career readiness vary greatly among institution types and student populations.
- At most institutions, no single department or program is responsible for teaching career readiness or financial literacy skills.
- Normalizing financial literacy training and the utilization of support resources can help underrepresented students succeed.
- Industry partnerships can be leveraged to broaden access to internships and other career preparation activities.

Participants offered the following responses to specific questions:

What does it mean for students to graduate “career ready” or with appropriate “workplace skills”?

Should there be differences in the way we define workplace readiness and career readiness for different types of students? Should a 40-year-old college student have the same counseling/advising experience as traditional students? What about graduate students?

Workplace readiness is an issue of breadth and depth — knowing specific skills and also having content mastery.

Students need success skills and fundamental core skills along with curricular content, because success skills will support their career readiness.

Career skills are rapidly shifting. The marketplace no longer requires people to have content mastery. Now the important competencies are in access and utilization.

Intangible “career readiness” qualities are also critical, like:

- Accountability
- Time management
- Communication skills
- Leadership
- Collaboration
- Professionalism
- Teamwork
- Critical thinking
- Self-regulation
- Growth mindset

Knowing how to learn, understanding that learning is an ongoing process, and knowing how to articulate what you know how to do are important career readiness skills.

Knowing how to fail and then try something else is a requirement for innovating and learning. Students need to be coached through failure.

The ability to adapt is a key skill, as is the ability to “translate” the skills one has learned previously to the task one is currently doing.

What are some ways to judge career readiness? One way is if students can articulate what they know and what they can do — essentially, to give their own “elevator pitch.” They need both the “bricks and the mortar” (to echo a concept Cathy Reynolds of Legacy Health shared during the Symposium Fireside Chat), which means that they need both the skills and a way to recognize and articulate that they have the skills.

Helping students explore careers is about engaging their interests.

In the first InsideTrack Career Coaching engagements, students wanted to get started right away on editing résumés or sending out job letters, and completely bypass the narrative/self-reflection component. Coaches had to ensure that students didn't skip over that part.

What does it mean for students to graduate “financially literate”?

Important financial literacy skills include:

- Financial decision-making
- Understanding the complexity of financial payment
- Understanding taxes
- Understanding financial aid
- Knowledge of the stock market
- Budgeting
- Math skills

Students should have financial literacy before they attend school, but financial literacy workshops typically have low attendance. The workshops need to be fun and relatable to boost participation and outcomes.

Once students see a connection between what they are learning and their “real world” experience or goals, they have better learning outcomes. For instance, if financial literacy is going to be taught, it has to be made logical in the student’s mind, such as by teaching resource management as part of a curriculum.

When students get financial literacy training earlier, they make better choices. But most people don’t take advantage of financial literacy training until they are at a crisis point.

One suggestion to increase financial literacy is to make such courses a requirement for getting a loan.

What is the responsibility of the institution in ensuring that students graduate with critical career and financial planning skills?

Where does the soft skill training take place in higher education? Is it a certain kind of pedagogy? A focus on competency-based learning? A separate curriculum? A component built into existing coursework?

Do those things actually have to be directly taught in a curriculum? Or can we trust that students learn these skills over the course of a college experience?

Part of going to college is learning to be self-sufficient, manage your time, live independently, and feed and clothe yourself. These are skills that can be developed simply by living in a residential college experience — “going away” to school. Yet these residential experiences are not the norm.

Some schools have a first-year experience course that teaches these skills.

Career Services can be responsible for teaching career and financial planning skills.

Faculty may need to become more responsible for career preparation, such as by linking competencies to courses, with certain courses being responsible for imparting select competencies.

Experiential learning/community service/hands-on learning can be highly valuable for career preparation.

From the community college perspective, there’s a push/pull between letting people explore and find their way, and making sure students can secure employment or transfer opportunities after graduation. Not all students can simply try different things, take classes and explore.

Portland Community College has a program that supports underrepresented students and provides financial literacy training as students transition from high school to college. All students have a coach. These students also have to take a college survival and leadership class, and many do internships. This program has great outcomes but is labor intensive — how do you scale it? How do you make it available to everyone?

Schools can put resources out there. The responsibility of the institution is to make sure that quality career development resources are in place. Some students will heavily utilize these resources, but others will not.

Partnerships between employers and institutions are becoming more common, and can be beneficial to the institution. But they can also be complicated, with a feeling of tracking students to enter a particular workplace.

Responsibilities for career readiness should be shared among different stakeholders, including employers. Employee onboarding and orientation should provide training and set expectations.

What are the unique challenges underrepresented students face in developing workplace skills and financial literacy?

For many underrepresented students, financial literacy is not modeled by the family, often because the family has very limited resources. Many families are reluctant or uncomfortable discussing financial issues with anyone outside the family.

Underrepresented students can often benefit from accessing institutional resources, such as advising associated with financial aid or career services. But some students may feel shame using resources. Many students don't ask questions out of embarrassment or fear, assuming everyone else already knows these things.

Recommended resources for teaching financial literacy skills include "Pay Sallie Mae Back," a rap video, and the book *Debt Sucks: A College Student's Guide To Winning With Money So They Can Live Their Dreams!* by Ja'Net Adams.

There is a perception that focusing on soft skills or noncognitive skills may not be as valuable for underrepresented students. Low-income students, for example, may wish to be more focused on developing specific job skills.

How can institutions, government, business, philanthropy and other stakeholders better support underrepresented students in developing these skills?

Financial literacy courses can be part of freshman orientation.

Completing financial literacy courses can be a requirement that must be fulfilled before releasing financial aid.

For students who do not have the resources to participate in unpaid internships, employers need to fund internship opportunities. These should be structured around and related to competencies. Work study should also be extended to include opportunities outside the school.

Some schools want to offer financial literacy training in the time between admission and the term start.

Could financial literacy be an admissions requirement? How would admissions and enrollment marketers respond to financial literacy as an admissions requirement? Would there be an entrance exam?

Offering financial literacy training would challenge higher ed institutions to demonstrate their return on investment and compellingly explain it to students.

Do Financial Aid departments view teaching financial literacy as their job? If not, where does it fit?

Currently, it is no one's job to provide financial literacy training — not high schools, not colleges, not employers.

Policies need to change at the federal level to provide financial education, including education about retirement.

What are some examples of successful collaborations (e.g., public/private partnerships) you've seen to enhance the workplace readiness and career literacy of underrepresented students?

Some schools require career exploration courses.

In the state of Hawaii, students do career exploration and labor market exploration every year. Participating in this program is a requirement for high school graduation. Many of these students go into the University of Hawaii system.

A program in New York between community colleges and the construction trades enables students to apprentice with the trades while they are getting a degree. This particular labor group sees the value of higher education and what it can teach, such as team-building and problem-solving.

Other programs:

- Alamo Advise
- ASAP at CUNY