INSTITUTIONALIZING CAREER-CONNECTED PATHWAYS

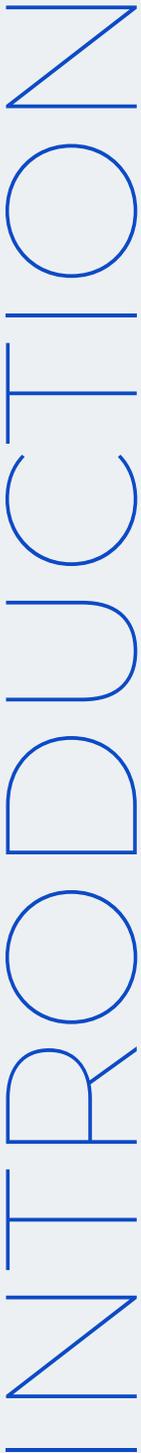## A FRAMEWORK FOR SUSTAINABLE, SCALABLE CAREER INTEGRATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Colleges and universities are increasingly operating in a context of heightened expectations around student outcomes, workforce alignment, and return on investment. Students (both prospective and enrolled) are seeking clear connections between academic programs and meaningful careers, while employers continue to emphasize the need for graduates who possess both technical expertise and transferable professional competencies.

Survey data from a study commissioned by the Gates Foundation demonstrates that students' primary driver for enrollment in postsecondary programs is improving career outcomes (Edge Research and HCM Strategists, 2024). While sustaining the pursuit of knowledge and education as a core value, institutions can and should also recognize that they can address student motivations for improved career outcomes through their educational programming by purposefully embedding career exploration throughout the student journey.

In addition to strengthening career outcomes, concerns about value and completion drive the imperative for improvement. National completion and persistence data underscore the importance and urgency of systemic reform. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2017) regularly reports significant stop-out patterns and uneven completion rates across student populations, particularly first-generation and low-income learners, but research from the Community College Research Center (CCRC) (2017) demonstrates that structured career-connected pathways—characterized by clear program maps, proactive advising, and integrated supports beginning at enrollment—improve credit accumulation and completion, especially among the most at-risk student populations. One study by Jenkins and Cho (2014) found that students who earned at least nine semester credits in their program of study during this first year had significantly higher completion rates (40%) than those who did not (16%).

Career-Connected Pathways (CCPs) respond directly to this body of evidence by providing a coordinated, institution-wide framework that embeds career exploration, advising, curriculum alignment, experiential learning, employer engagement, and holistic student supports across the entire student journey.

Rather than positioning career development as a single office or late-stage intervention, CCPs integrate academic and career planning from admissions through graduation and transition to employment or transfer. By aligning institutional structures with workforce trends and student development research, CCPs promote clarity, equity, persistence, and strong post-graduation outcomes.

Realizing this vision requires institutions to adopt a shared, holistic framing of career-connected learning. This vision should treat career connection not as an add-on service, but as a core institutional responsibility. Without this integrated lens, career initiatives often remain siloed within career services, work-based learning, or individual programs, rather than being embedded across the entire student experience. When leadership, faculty, student affairs, and employer partners share a common conceptual foundation, institutions can more effectively redesign curricula to include career milestones, embed experiential learning across programs, sustain key employer partnerships, and collect college-relevant student-level data. While making improvements in individual units can strengthen career outcomes for graduates, developing a comprehensive approach to embedding career outcomes can strengthen the impact for learners. This alignment is particularly critical for equity, ensuring that all students, not just those who seek out optional opportunities, benefit from intentional, structured pathways that connect academic progress to meaningful employment and economic mobility.

This kind of integrated approach also supports clearer program maps, stronger labor market alignment, and more coherent student journeys, ultimately improving completion, relevance, and return on investment. Thus, a shared institutional vision for career-connected pathways functions as the strategic foundation that ensures the core elements described in this resource are not fragmented initiatives but a coordinated, institution-wide system that advances both student success and regional workforce needs.

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Core elements of Career-Connected Pathways include:
- Exploration & Counseling
- Alignment & Evaluation
- Academic & Technical Sequencing
- Experiential Learning
- Partnerships & Engagement
- Comprehensive Student Supports

The sections that follow outline the six core elements of a Career-Connected Pathway and provide space for institutions to reflect on their current practices, strengths, and opportunities for growth.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR FRAMING OF CAREER-CONNECTED PATHWAYS:

- College On Purpose 2.0. Complete College America.

- Online By Design: Improving Career Connection for Today's Learners. The Center for Higher Education Policy and Practice.

- Holistic Student Supports Redesign (to support establishing a holistic vision). Achieving the Dream.

- Integrating Career Readiness Campus-Wide: First Steps. National Association of College & Employers (NACE).

EXPLORATION & COUNSELING

Exploration & Counseling begins early, often at the point of initial orientation, and continues through the entire academic journey.

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Exploration enables students to receive and interact with important information about careers, majors, job outlook, and the required skills to make informed decisions, instead of making selections on a whim. Done well, exploration helps students successfully navigate their major selection process.

Effective counseling aims to embed career services with advising processes, allowing learners to ensure their program and course selections support their career goal(s). This element emphasizes structured opportunities for students to clarify their interests, values, strengths, and potential career pathways. Tools such as career assessments, structured advising conversations, alumni engagement, and exposure to labor market data support informed decision-making. As such, embedding these sorts of approaches often requires redesigning advising and career services.

Evidence suggests that early and proactive advising improves persistence and clarity. Research from the Community College Research Center (CCRC) (2017) on guided pathways reforms shows that structured onboarding and career exploration increase students' likelihood of selecting and staying on a program path. When students see a clear connection between their interests and academic options, they are more likely to persist and complete credentials.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR EXPLORATION & COUNSELING:

- Integrating Career Advising for Equitable Student Success: A Higher Education Landscape Analysis. American Association of State Colleges and Universities.
- Career Advising for College Students: Getting Started. National College Attainment Network.
- Research Round-up: A Closer Look at Career Advising. AdvanceCTE.

Example: Valencia College (Orlando, FL)

Valencia College, a nationally recognized two-year institution and inaugural winner of the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence, has built career exploration and counseling into the foundational experience of every entering student through its required New Student Experience (NSE) course. Rather than treating exploration as an optional add-on, Valencia has institutionalized it as a credit-bearing, mandatory part of enrollment to ensure that all students, including first-generation and historically underserved learners, engage in structured career and academic planning from the moment they arrive on campus.

The NSE course is built around six interconnected outcomes, known as the "Six P's": Purpose, Pathway, Plan, Preparation, Personal Connection, and Persistence (Valencia College, n.d.-c). Through this framework, students: 1) create a personal purpose statement that articulates their values, goals, interests, and strengths in relation to their educational and career aspirations, 2) select an academic program aligned with those aspirations, and 3) develop a full education plan, including a financial plan, before completing their first term. This early, intentional alignment between students' self-awareness and program selection is designed to reduce stop-out rates and excess credits by ensuring students enter a pathway with clarity and confidence.

To support students throughout their journey, Valencia's Career Centers, located on multiple campuses, offer a range of integrated services including career assessments, career exploration research, interview practice, resume review, and labor market tools (Valencia College, n.d.-b). The college's online Career Coach platform provides students with real-time regional labor market data, including wage estimates and job projections customized for Orange and Osceola counties, and directly connects career searches to Valencia's programs (Valencia College, n.d.-a). This tool enables both students and advisors to ground academic decisions in current workforce realities.

Valencia's model demonstrates how a two-year institution can foreground career exploration by embedding it in the first weeks of enrollment rather than treating it as a service students must seek out on their own. By combining a required first-year course with accessible, data-informed career tools and ongoing career advising, Valencia ensures that exploration and counseling are continuous, equitable, and integrated throughout the student experience.

Example: University of Florida (Gainesville, FL)

The University of Florida (UF) is known for its use of both data and targeted advising to support students in developing a career vision.

UF's Career Hub offers students access to labor market data tools, showing job trends, salary information, in-demand skills, and employment outlooks (University of Florida Career Connections Center, 2023). This partnership helps students make informed decisions about which fields and roles align with their interests and the realities of the job market. In addition to labor market data, UF integrates platforms that provide career and alumni outcome data, showing where university graduates end up working and how their majors can translate to careers. This information helps students visualize possible career trajectories based on their intended or declared major(s) and set realistic goals. The university also provides students with numerous self-assessment activities, career exploration how-tos, and support guides to enhance the application of knowledge gained from raw labor market and outcome data.

UF also offers one-on-one career planning appointments with a career coach to help students define their professional goals, guide them towards independent decision making, and provide thoughtful questions, targeted assignments, and constructive feedback to support self-reflection (University of Florida Career Connections Center, 2024). Career coaching services are available from enrollment through one year post-graduation.

By embedding data and analytics into its career planning ecosystem, UF empowers students to build their career vision grounded in real workforce insights, making it easier for students to choose majors, internships, and experiences that lead to meaningful outcomes.

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ALIGNMENT & EVALUATION

Alignment & Evaluation supports getting students onto their chosen path and implementing processes that help them stay on that path.

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Alignment requires embedding career thinking across all academic and student services and striving to help students "connect the dots" of their career aspirations and college experiences, both inside and outside of the classroom. These functions bridge the elements of Exploration & Counseling and Academic & Technical Sequencing of this Career-Connected Pathways framework. Activities in this element focus on helping students connect their developing career vision to specific majors, programs, and co-curricular experiences. Notable examples include learning communities and first-year experiences that include facilitated reflection both in the classroom and with advisors to help students evaluate whether their academic trajectory aligns with their short- and long-term career goals.

Evaluation entails the use of student management systems and data analytics to ensure students are engaging in the scaffolded processes that support their academic and career development. In this stage, student-level data is used effectively to inform and drive feedback loops. Such tools include progress dashboards, advising check-ins, and data analytics. If students appear to be moving off-track for their stated goal(s), this information can help advisors and counselors engage learners to understand the divergence and to develop solutions. Additionally, these data can help flag when there may be a mismatch between goals and academic outcomes and help advisors provide support for students to adjust their plans accordingly.

Incorporating career thinking and the use of data analytics across the full breadth of academic and student services has numerous benefits. Embedding career content improves career decision-making skills, enhances career confidence and vocational identity, and boosts career satisfaction and self-efficacy, particularly amongst historically marginalized students (Deming et al., 2023). In addition, research from Lawrence and colleagues (2021) found that using analytics data is especially useful for detecting students who are at risk of poor engagement or non-completion, enabling the institution to enact early intervention strategies and improve learning outcomes.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR ALIGNMENT & EVALUATION:

- <u>Choice of and Return to Major/Program Choice.</u> Live Handbook.
- <u>First Year Experience.</u> Complete College America.
- <u>Career Readiness Can't Wait Until Junior Year.</u> Education Advisory Board (EAB).
- <u>Connect Students to Their Career Path From Day One.</u> InsideTrack.
- <u>Approaching Student Success with Predictive Analytics.</u> Georgia State University.
- <u>Quality Coaching: Helping Students Navigate the Journey from Education to Career.</u> Strada Education Foundation.

"Example: San Jacinto College (Pasadena, TX)

San Jacinto College (San Jac) is a nationally recognized model for how a community college can use structural redesign, career-aligned meta-majors, and data-driven advising to ensure that all students, and not just those who proactively seek help, are connected to meaningful pathways. A finalist with Distinction for the 2025 Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence, San Jac's approach to alignment and evaluation illustrates what whole-college commitment to career connection can look like at scale.

At the core of San Jac's approach is the reorganization of its 144 degree and certificate programs into eight meta-majors, which are broad academic career communities that allow students to begin coursework aligned with their interests without being locked into a specific program too early (San Jacinto College, n.d.-a). This structure reduces the risk of excess credits and major-switching by providing students with a coherent and career-connected starting point. Mandatory orientation for all incoming students ensures that alignment work begins before students even register for classes, and includes career exploration through the Focus 2 Career assessment tool, educational planning, and student success skill-building (San Jacinto College, n.d.-b).

San Jac has also redesigned its use of DegreeWorks and advising technology to support individualized educational planning and continuous monitoring of student progress toward both academic and career goals (Jenkins & Pellegrino, 2019). Implementation of its "Smart Start" program integrates career exploration and educational planning into students' first semester through gateway coursework, ensuring that alignment is not a one-time activity but an ongoing conversation between students, advisors, and faculty. Proactive advising practices, supported by data alerts, allow advisors to intervene early when students deviate from their chosen pathway or show signs of disengagement.

San Jacinto's model demonstrates that alignment is most effective when it is systemic and embedded in orientation, first-year programming, advising infrastructure, and course design, rather than dependent on individual students seeking out career services. By combining structural changes with data-enabled feedback loops, San Jac has created an environment where career alignment is a shared institutional responsibility rather than an optional service.

" Example: Georgia State University (Atlanta, GA)

Georgia State University (GSU) aligns career thinking early through its first-year learning communities, meta-major structures, and coordinated academic advising model. Students are initially guided into broad academic "meta-majors" aligned with career fields (e.g., health, business, STEM), which allows them to explore interests while maintaining momentum in sequenced coursework tied to related occupations (Georgia State University, n.d.-b). Advisors and faculty facilitate structured conversations and reflective assignments that ask students to connect their academic interests, co-curricular experiences, and emerging career aspirations. This intentional scaffolding helps students "connect the dots" between classroom learning, skill development, and long-term employment goals, reducing the likelihood of late major switching or excess credits that can derail timely progression.

GSU's nationally recognized GPS Advising platform uses predictive analytics and student management data to monitor whether students are engaging in key academic and career-aligned milestones and staying on their chosen pathway. The system tracks course performance, registration patterns, and progression through recommended program sequences, generating alerts when students deviate from their academic map or show signs of misalignment with their intended goals (Georgia State University, n.d.-a; Georgia State University, n.d.-c). Advisors then proactively reach out to discuss the underlying causes (such as shifting interests, academic difficulty, or uncertainty about career direction) and help students intentionally recalibrate their academic plans, explore alternative majors within the same career cluster, or add experiential learning opportunities that strengthen alignment with career aspirations. These feedback loops ensure that pathway decisions remain dynamic rather than static, enabling students to continuously evaluate whether their academic trajectory supports their short- and long-term career vision while maintaining forward momentum toward completion and workforce readiness.

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ACADEMIC & TECHNICAL SEQUENCING

Academic & Technical Sequencing ensures that students have clear information about term-by-term coursework that builds progressively towards disciplinary mastery and employer-valued competencies.

Students gain clarity about the knowledge, technical skills, and transferable competencies required for success in their intended field. Advisors, faculty, and industry partners play a critical role in identifying skill gaps and mapping relevant steps to close them.

Effective sequencing must include the development and use of term-by-term program maps that include academic and career-related milestones. Low graduation rates, increased time to completion, and higher student loan debt can all be linked to a lack of clarity in which courses are required for graduation and in what order they need to be taken. Research on structured pathways indicates that clarity and momentum matter and that institutions who implement structured pathways models see clear improvements in their credit accumulation and completion rates (American Association of Colleges and Universities, 2018). When course selection and extracurricular activities reflect informed, goal-aligned choices, students reduce excess credits and increase time-to-degree efficiency. Term-by-term program maps improve outcomes by providing all students with a clear roadmap of all the courses, term by term, that are required for them to obtain the credential (degree or certificate).

Building these maps also leads to other benefits, including the designation of milestone courses and the determination of "hidden prerequisites". With Career-Connected Pathways, these term-by-term program maps also include career-related milestones to ensure learners are also maintaining momentum towards employment after graduation.

Transparency about learning outcomes strengthens student confidence and persistence. Research from Winkelmes and colleagues (2016) found that clearly articulating the purpose and relevance of assignments in course outcomes and program goals significantly improved students' academic confidence and sense of belonging. In addition, surveys of employers conducted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) (2023) and the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) (2023) find strong employer endorsement of programs that incorporate applied learning and highly desired transferable skills (including communication, teamwork, critical thinking, and professionalism) across the curriculum.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR ACADEMIC & TECHNICAL SEQUENCING:

- Academic Maps & Milestones. Complete College America.
- Transparency in Learning and Teaching Resources. Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TILT).
- Career Readiness Competencies and Student Competency Assessment Tool. National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE).
- Career-Infused Degree Mapping Guide. City University of New York (CUNY).

" Example: Miami Dade College (Miami, FL)

Miami Dade College (MDC), one of the largest institutions of higher education in the United States, has developed a system-wide approach to academic and technical sequencing that makes its pathways clear, career-connected, and equitable for its highly diverse student population. Through its My Academic Plan (MAP) initiative and guided pathways redesign, MDC has built term-by-term program maps across all of its 200+ degree and certificate programs that integrate both academic milestones and career-related touchpoints, helping students understand not only which courses they need to take, but why and what each step means for their career trajectory (Miami Dade College, n.d.).

Central to MDC's sequencing model is the use of meta-majors as an organizing structure. Incoming students who are undecided are guided into broad academic communities aligned with career fields such as health sciences, business, STEM, and the arts. These meta-major groupings allow students to begin taking relevant, credit-bearing coursework without being locked into a specific degree program, ensuring that early course selections still count toward their eventual credential. As students gain clarity about their goals, advisors and faculty help them transition from meta-major coursework into fully sequenced degree plans that align with both transfer and employment outcomes (Waugh, 2016).

MDC makes its program maps and career pathways information widely accessible, including on its student portal, in advising materials, and in orientation programming. Advisors work proactively with students, particularly in the first year and at key decision points, to ensure that course selections remain aligned with stated career goals and that students are aware of the industry certifications, internships, and other career milestones embedded in their programs. Faculty across disciplines have adopted transparent assignment design principles that help learners connect specific course activities to workforce skills valued by employers, making the career relevance of coursework explicit to students.

By building career milestones directly into program maps and training advisors and faculty to communicate career relevance at every stage, Miami Dade College ensures that academic sequencing is not merely a graduation roadmap but a career readiness roadmap that helps every student understand and pursue a clear path from enrollment to employment or transfer.

" Example: University of Central Florida (Orlando, FL)

The University of Central Florida (UCF) has developed several tools to ensure that all students have clear pathways to their degrees. For students entering directly out of high school, Pegasus Path is a tool that creates structured degree pathways that provide students with term-by-term academic plans aligned with meta-majors and career clusters (University of Central Florida, n.d.-b). Students are encouraged to begin exploration themselves, then finalize their plan with the support of advisors and academic success coaches. These pathways outline the exact sequence of courses required for graduation, identify milestone classes, and recommend engagement in career-related co-curricular activities throughout their degree plan. For transfer students, UCF Connect provides Success Pathways Catalogs, which allow students to seamlessly identify their pathways and course milestones (University of Central Florida, n.d.-c). By making sequencing explicit for all students, UCF helps students understand how foundational coursework connects to advanced technical competencies and ultimately to career opportunities in their chosen field.

UCF further strengthens academic and technical sequencing by introducing the Four-Year Career Action Plan to all students during their first year (University of Central Florida, n.d.-a). The plan serves as a year-by-year guide for students to engage in career planning and activities to bolster their post-graduation career success. The plan emphasizes connection to and engagement with career services in the first year of study, while subsequent years identify other key career-related milestones such as internships, research experiences, and professional skill-building opportunities. When used in conjunction with term-by-term degree maps and effective advising, these tools ensure that students maintain both academic momentum and progressive development of employer-valued skills, illustrating how structured sequencing can simultaneously support timely completion and career readiness.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Experiential Learning is the process of learning through direct experience, reflection, and active engagement, where knowledge is developed by transforming experiences into understanding.

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In Career-Connected Pathways, experiential learning builds on aligned academic plans by engaging students in applied, hands-on learning. Experiential learning encompasses internships, apprenticeships, co-ops, undergraduate research, service learning, simulations, industry projects, and more. These experiences allow students to practice technical and professional skills while clarifying career interests and expanding professional networks.

The value of experiential learning is well documented. Data from the Strada Education Foundation (2022) and Gallup (2023) show that graduates who experience strong mentorship and applied learning during college are significantly more likely to report strong career outcomes and high engagement and well-being in their careers. Additionally, NACE reported that students with internship experience receive more job offers after graduation and are rated more favorably by employers based on their job performance (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2023). Embedding experiential learning across all disciplines, and not just in select majors, expands equitable access to career-connected skill development.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING:

- Principles of Good Practice for Experiential Learning Activities. Society for Experiential Education.
- Mindset in Motion Podcast. Symplicity.
- Experiential Learning and Teaching in Higher Education Journal. Cal State.
- Work Integrated Learning Open Modules. Niagara College Canada.

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Example: LaGuardia Community College (Long Island City, NY)

LaGuardia Community College (LAGCC), part of the City University of New York (CUNY) system, has a distinctive and longstanding model of institutionalized experiential learning. Since its founding in 1971, LaGuardia has made cooperative education, the cornerstone of its educational philosophy, mandatory for all full-time students. The college's foundational principle is that "learning takes place in many different settings both in and outside the classroom," and every full-time student's academic program reflects this commitment (Grubb & Badway, 1998, p. 8). All full-time students at LAGCC complete three internships or work placements integrated with academic coursework, accompanied by a structured sequence of cooperative education seminars. The first seminar prepares students for their initial placement; the second helps all students use workplace experiences to identify skills and requirements for upward mobility; and the third allows students to reflect on and synthesize their learning in relation to their chosen field.

These seminars ensure that work-based learning is not merely resume-building, but a reflective, academically integrated process that deepens students' understanding of themselves and their career goals.

LaGuardia's Career & Technical Education Assistance (CTEA) Center further supports experiential learning by providing career advising, building and maintaining employer partnerships, and providing work readiness training and real-time labor market information to help students connect placements to high-demand sectors (LaGuardia Community College, n.d.). The college has also developed a suite of credit-bearing micro-pathway programs that embed work-based learning and credentials into accelerated, stackable programs, co-designed with employers and spanning fields like data analytics, cybersecurity, and community health (Lundquist, 2023). All programs include at least one 21st-century skill competency, assessed in ways that help students demonstrate readiness to employers.

LaGuardia's model illustrates how experiential learning can be made universal and equitable at a community college serving a highly diverse, working adult student population. By requiring co-op participation for all full-time students and pairing it with structured academic reflection, LAGCC ensures that every student has access to the applied learning experiences that employers value and that research shows improve both completion and employment outcomes.

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Example: Johnson & Wales University (Providence, RI)

Johnson & Wales University (JWU) has developed a distinctive model for experiential learning that integrates applied, real-world engagement into virtually every aspect of the academic experience. Central to this model is the university's Reimagining Experiential & Applied Learning (REAL) framework, which embeds active, hands-on learning into every course rather than treating it as a separate component or capstone (Isles, 2025-b). REAL centers on experiential learning theory and emphasizes iterative learning processes that require students to actively apply concepts, reflect on outcomes, and transfer knowledge to new contexts.

This approach ensures that experiential education is not episodic but continuous, and transforms traditional lectures into interactive environments featuring simulations, fieldwork, research, service learning, and industry-engaged projects.

JWU's strategy emphasizes "learning by doing" through sustained partnerships with employers and community organizations (Isles, 2025-b). Students routinely work with real companies and community stakeholders to apply classroom knowledge in authentic settings, reinforcing both technical skills and professional competencies. These applied opportunities are complemented by required internships or directed experiential education courses in many programs, enabling students to earn academic credit while continuing to integrate theory with practice in career-relevant contexts. Such experiences are designed not only to build practical skills, but also to help students clarify career goals and strengthen readiness for employment.

Collectively, JWU's approach reflects a holistic philosophy that blends academic study with continuous real-world application across majors and levels of study. Experiential learning is embedded in coursework from the first year onward and supported by dedicated career services and industry-experienced faculty, creating an ecosystem in which applied learning, reflection, and career preparation are tightly interconnected (Isles, 2025-a). The result is a comprehensive, institution-wide model that positions experiential education as the core pedagogical strategy for developing career-ready graduates capable of translating knowledge into professional practice.

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PARTNERSHIP & ENGAGEMENT

Developing effective Partnership & Engagement to elevate student career success centers on sustained relationships with employers, industry leaders, alumni, and community stakeholders. Institutions maintain ongoing dialogue about labor market trends, evolving skill demands, and hiring practices.

These partnerships inform curriculum development and updates, experiential learning placement, mentorship programs, career advising, and recruiting strategies. True partnership and engagement requires developing authentic and ongoing relationships that foster dialogue and regular interaction.

Employer engagement during the student experience also improves post-graduation outcomes. The Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (2023) reports that alignment between academic programs and regional workforce demand significantly influences graduate earnings and employment stability. Strategic partnerships also help institutions remain responsive to market shifts while providing students with direct pipelines to employment or transfer opportunities.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR PARTNERSHIP & ENGAGEMENT:

- How to Build Strong Employer Partnerships to Support Student Success. The Online and Professional Education Association.
- The Employer Perspectives Study. U.S. Department of Labor.
- A Resource Guide for Engaging Employers. Jobs for the Future.

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Example: West Los Angeles College (Los Angeles, CA)

West Los Angeles College (WLAC) boasts a robust system for building ongoing partnerships with employers, directly benefiting its students' access to high-quality career-connected pathway programs, while simultaneously addressing local labor market shortages.

WLAC's Career Center works directly with employers on a number of initiatives, including hosting and promoting career fairs and recruitment events, speaking opportunities and panels, and experiential learning collaborations (West Los Angeles College, n.d.).

Through its Symplicity platform, employers can post jobs and internships specifically tailored to West LA College students and alumni, building a direct talent pipeline from the institution into industry. In addition, WLAC supports experiential, employer-linked opportunities that include internships, apprenticeships, and work-based learning placements with local companies. Relatedly, WLAC also provides regular opportunities for employers to partner on pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs in high-demand occupations, developing workforce development strategies aligned with classroom learning and industry standards.

Another way WLAC engages employers is through its CTE industry advisory boards, where businesses, local leaders, nonprofit staff, and government officials collaborate with faculty across applied disciplines to shape curriculum, identify high-demand skills, incorporate experiential learning, and address labor market needs (West Los Angeles College).

West LA College demonstrates strong employer engagement by prioritizing a wide variety of structured avenues for collaboration. These partnerships help ensure students are developing skills that match industry needs, while employers gain access to emerging talent.

Example: City University of New York (systemwide; New York, NY)

The City University of New York (CUNY) has created a comprehensive framework for career-connected pathways through CUNY Beyond, driven by its system-level Office of Careers and Industry Partnerships (OCIP) (The City University of New York, n.d.-a). OCIP has several innovative resources and programs within CUNY to more effectively create career-connected pathways. For example, OCIP's Industry Support Hub functions as a centralized intermediary that develops and cultivates sustained relationships with employers, industry associations, and community stakeholders across New York City's key sectors to support aligning academic programs with workforce needs (The City University of New York, n.d.-d). Through this structure, CUNY collaborates with external partners to co-design curricula, expand access to internships and apprenticeships, and embed applied learning projects within degree pathways. By organizing employer engagement at the system level rather than leaving it to individual campuses or departments, the hub ensures that partnerships are strategic, scalable, and aligned with regional labor market demand, strengthening students' transitions from education to employment.

OCIP has also developed the CUNY Inclusive Economy Initiative (CIE), which aims to enhance student career success by strengthening campus capabilities in fostering employer relationships and better aligning academic and co-curricular experiences with career goals (The City University of New York, n.d.-c). This privately funded initiative started in May 2024 to fund department-level investments at individual CUNY institutions to leverage faculty expertise to foster employer partnerships. At the heart of many of these efforts is building effective engagement and partnership with employers to better align curriculum to desired skills and competencies in selected high-demand sectors in the New York City region. Industry partners work with faculty to identify employer-valued competencies, shape program maps, and sponsor experiential learning opportunities tied to specific occupational pathways in high-demand sectors, including technology, healthcare, finance, and advanced manufacturing. To ensure such partnerships work well, OCIP has also developed the Faculty Career-Connected Learning Resource Hub to help build faculty capacity to advance career-connected programming, partnerships, and supports (The City University of New York, n.d.-b).

Taken together, these coordinated efforts demonstrate the priority of developing career-connected resources for students, but also in creating mechanisms for authentic partnerships with employers and build the capacity of faculty to support such efforts. By embracing a systemic approach, CUNY is expanding equitable access to professional networks and work-based experiences, particularly for first-generation and historically underserved students.

COMPREHENSIVE STUDENT SUPPORTS

Comprehensive Student Supports advances career success by integrating academic, career, and personal supports across departments.

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Rather than siloed services, institutions coordinate advising, tutoring, financial aid counseling, mental health resources, career coaching, and belonging initiatives to address the full student experience. This holistic approach recognizes that academic success and career readiness are influenced by financial stability, well-being, and social integration.

Research consistently shows that wraparound supports improve student persistence, completion, and post-graduation outcomes. Studies from the American Institutes for Research (AIR) (2018) and the Community College Research Center (2017) demonstrate that integrating advising and wraparound student support increases retention rates, particularly for first-generation and historically underserved students. By embedding holistic supports within career-connected pathways, institutions strengthen both access and outcomes.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR COMPREHENSIVE STUDENT SUPPORTS:

- <u>Active Academic Support.</u> Complete College America.
- <u>Holistic Student Supports Redesign Toolkit.</u> Achieving the Dream.
- <u>Comprehensive Approaches to Student Success Programs.</u> The Institute for College Access & Success.

" Example: Amarillo College (Amarillo, TX)

In 2023, Amarillo College was named as a co-winner of the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence for its achievements in addressing poverty as the primary barrier to college completion (Aspen Institute, n.d.).

The college's <u>Advocacy & Resource Center</u> is home to four centralized, integrated programs: social services, the adult students program, the Amarillo College food pantry, and the Storybridge Library location. Together, these programs address caregiving and childcare, affordable housing, utilities and clothing, employment, food resources, legal aid, transportation, tuition, wellness, and more (Amarillo College, n.d.). In addition, Amarillo College restructured the majority of its classes from 16-week semesters to 8-week terms. This change allows students to focus on fewer subjects at a time, facilitating faster credit accumulation and flexibility for working adults, while increasing participation and decreasing drop-out rates (Amarillo College, 2015).

To respond to student needs before crises arise, the college uses a combination of online student surveys and predictive analytics to identify which students are most at risk of dropping out due to non-academic factors. Using these tools to inform how they distribute emergency aid, the college was able to double its graduation and transfer rate in just five years (Swaak, 2022).

Example: University of California, Riverside (Riverside, CA)

UC Riverside (UCR) intentionally embeds student well-being into its holistic student success infrastructure. The division of <u>Health, Well-being & Safety (HWS)</u> situates mental health counseling, basic needs assistance, case management, and wellness promotion within a Health, Well-being & Safety framework so that well-being is treated as foundational to academic persistence and career readiness, rather than as a separate service (University of California, Riverside, n.d.-c). Services include <u>Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)</u>, the <u>Student Health Services clinic</u>, <u>The Well health promotion department</u>, rapid-response counseling, the <u>Student Disability Resource Center (SDRC)</u>, and <u>CARE advocacy programs</u>. Most importantly, within HWS, all services can be coordinated through a system of case managers to address stress, trauma, and mental health challenges that can disrupt students' ability to remain on their academic pathway (University of California, Riverside, n.d.-b). Complementing these efforts, UCR promotes social integration and belonging through living-learning communities, peer wellness coaching, cultural resource centers, and recreation and mindfulness programming, all designed to strengthen students' sense of connection to campus and professional identity formation. Advisors and faculty are trained to refer students proactively when early alerts or progress dashboards suggest academic disengagement linked to well-being concerns, enabling timely, coordinated interventions.

UCR also addresses well-being through a robust <u>Basic Needs Department</u> that recognizes that addressing essential needs supports student success (University of California, Riverside, n.d.-a). The Basic Needs Department fosters student success by addressing the connection between financial stability and student persistence. Initiatives such as the <u>Cal Fresh, R'Pantry</u>, and <u>Meal Support</u> food security programs, <u>emergency financial assistance</u>, and <u>housing assistance</u> services provide wraparound supports for students facing financial insecurity. Advisors and career development staff are knowledgeable about existing Basic Need Services and make referrals so that students can stabilize immediate needs while continuing to progress toward long-term educational and career goals. Together, these integrated mental health, basic needs, and belonging initiatives reinforce the university's holistic model: student well-being is not treated as ancillary, but as an essential condition for sustained academic engagement, completion, and successful transition into post-graduation careers.

CONCLUSION

Career-Connected Pathways represent more than a collection of programs to support career success. They reflect an institutional commitment to redesigning structures around clarity, coherence, and equitable outcomes. National reform efforts have demonstrated that institutions that intentionally integrate academic mapping, proactive advising, and embedded career learning see measurable gains in student progress and completion (Community College Research Center, 2017). At the same time, workforce analyses from the World Economic Forum (2023) highlight accelerating shifts in skill demands, underscoring the urgency of aligning higher education with evolving labor market needs.

Together, this body of evidence reinforces that a systemic, integrated, and partnership-driven approach like Career-Connected Pathways is essential to strengthening student success, workforce readiness, and long-term institutional impact and transformation.

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