

1 Data-Driven Career Engagement: Brief One of Four

Overview of the Briefs

This is one in a series of briefs to provide institutions with practical information on building a data-driven approach to career engagement and outcomes. These briefs may be used separately or together. The briefs are (current brief is in bold):

- **[Foundations](#) builds common understanding and shared definitions.**
- [Building a Data Driven Approach](#) identifies considerations for building the data infrastructure.
- [Using Career Data](#) covers implementation strategies for different student populations.
- [Dashboards, Reporting, and Benchmarking](#) discusses approaches to reporting, benchmarking, and continuous improvement.

This brief establishes the shared language and conceptual foundation for data-driven career engagement. Before metrics are collected, before dashboards are built, and before any survey goes out, the institution's career services, institutional research, and academic affairs teams must agree on what they are measuring.



FOUNDATIONS

DATA-DRIVEN CAREER ENGAGEMENT

Why Data-Driven Career Engagement Matters

Public colleges and universities face mounting pressure to demonstrate that students leave with viable career outcomes. State funding formulas increasingly tie appropriations to post-graduation employment and earnings; accreditors ask for outcome evidence; and students, families, and legislatures want proof that tuition dollars translate into jobs. Higher education institutions, however, are often ill-equipped to respond to that pressure: career-related engagement often takes place in different units across campus, career services offices are typically understaffed relative to the number of students they serve, and few institutions have established systems to track career-related efforts to better inform programming. The result is that most institutions can't yet say where engagement is happening and where it isn't, or which activities move the needle on outcomes. Complicating things further, campus opinion is not unified on what role career preparation should play in higher education.

This series of briefs is written for career services directors, institutional researchers, provosts' staff, and cross-functional teams at public institutions who want to move from anecdote-driven reporting ("we hosted a career fair") to a defensible, evidence-based model of career engagement that connects activity to outcome.

Career Engagement vs. Career Outcomes: Why the Distinction is Important

Career engagement and career outcomes are related, but they are not interchangeable and treating them as one undifferentiated pile of "career data" is a common challenge that results in some reports and dashboards being unpersuasive to provosts, boards, and accreditors.

Career engagement: what students do

Engagement is a leading indicator in that the metrics are collected in advance of any outcomes. It measures activity that happens while a student is still enrolled, is within the institution's control to influence, and can be measured continuously, term by term, from the moment a student arrives on campus. An advising appointment, a career fair visit, or a completed mock interview is recorded the day it happens. Engagement data answers the question: are students using the resources we provide?

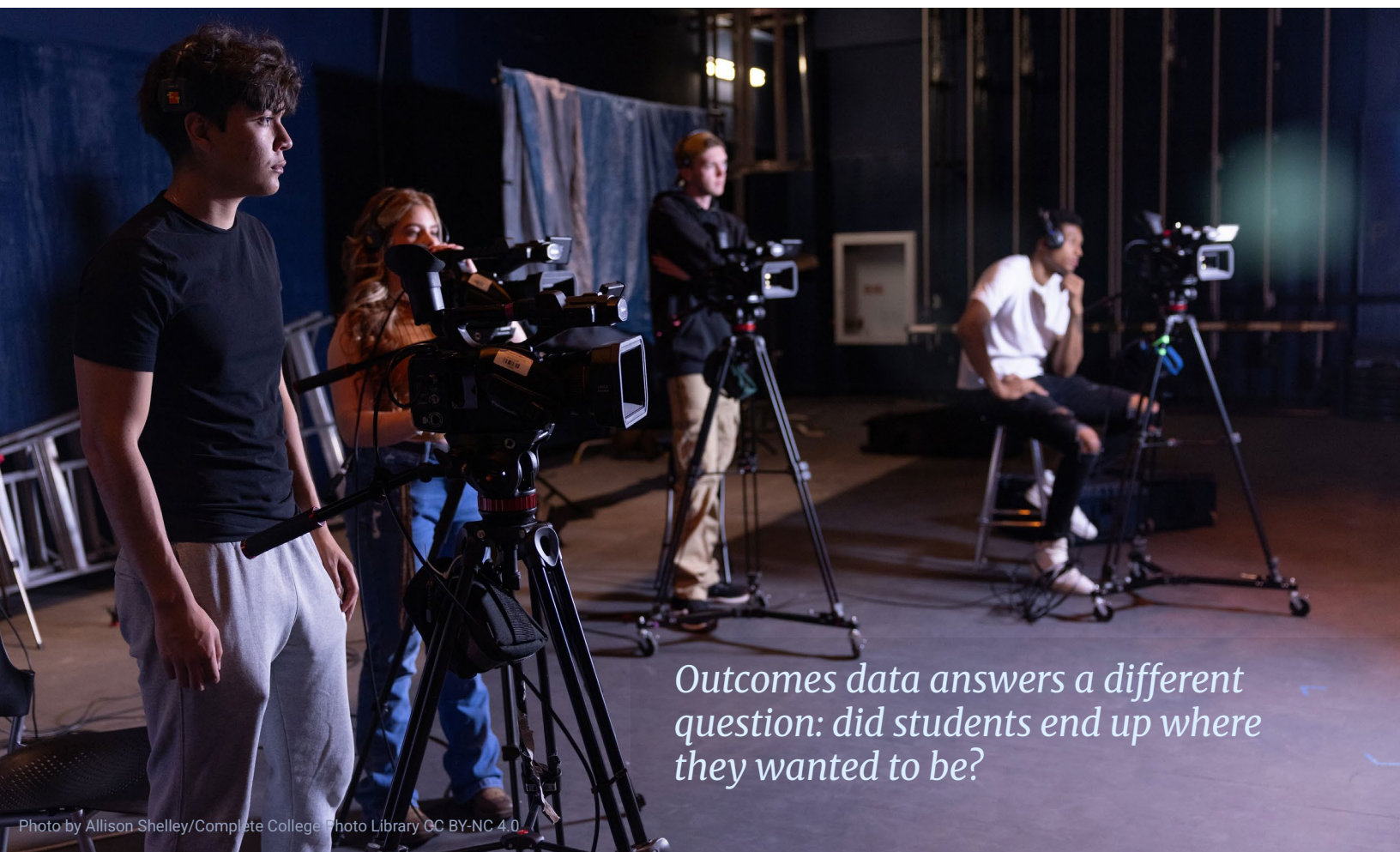
Career outcomes: what happens to students

Outcomes are a lagging indicator in that the metrics are collected after the interventions have occurred. They measure results that typically cannot be observed until after a student has graduated (or left), depend heavily on factors outside the institution's control (regional labor markets, employer hiring cycles, a student's personal circumstances), and are harder and slower to collect, often relying on survey response or external data matching months or years after the fact. Outcomes data answers a different question: did students end up where they wanted to be?

This series of briefs recognizes that engagement and outcomes are two parallel tracks: every metrics table, dashboard, and template that follows is organized to keep the two clearly separated, with a section that specifically addresses how to connect them once both are being tracked well on their own.

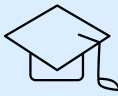
As a terminology note, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) has moved away from the term “placement rate,” since it implies the institution placed a graduate into a role, in favor of “career outcome rate,” which more accurately describes a result that depends on many factors beyond institutional engagement efforts.¹

¹National Association of Colleges and Employers. (n.d.). *First-destination standards and protocols: Key questions and answers*. NACE. <https://www.nacweb.org/job-market/graduate-outcomes/first-destination/first-destination-standards-and-protocols-key-questions-and-answers/>



Outcomes data answers a different question: did students end up where they wanted to be?

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	DIMENSION	CAREER ENGAGEMENT	CAREER OUTCOMES
	Timing	During matriculation	At or after graduation/ departure
	Type of indicator	Leading	Lagging
	Institutional control	High – institution designs and delivers the activity	Low – shaped by labor market, employer decisions, student choice
	Typical data source	CRM, event check-in, platform logs	Surveys, National Student Clearinghouse, wage records
	Collection difficulty	Easy to capture automatically and continuously	Harder to capture; depends on response rates and external matching
	What it asks you	Are students using available resources?	Did students achieve a successful result?
	Risk if mismeasured	Overcounting activity with no real value	Drawing conclusions from low-response, biased samples

Creating Data Definitions

Before any data can be collected meaningfully, an institution needs a shared definition of what “career engagement” includes. A shared definition ensures that data collection will be consistent across multiple offices and departments in tracking students. A workable definition typically separates engagement activities (things a student does) from outcomes (what happens as a result).

Engagement activities typically include:

- One-on-one career advising appointments (in person or virtual)
- Career fair and employer information session attendance
- Resume reviews, mock interviews, and skills workshops
- Use of self-service career platforms (job boards, assessment tools, alumni networks)
- Participation in experiential learning: internships, co-ops, externships, research, or practicum placements
- Engagement with faculty-embedded career content (career modules inside courses)
- Employer site visits, job shadowing, and industry mentoring programs

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Outcome measures typically include:

- Career outcome rate at set intervals (e.g., six months, one year post-graduation)
- Field-relevance of employment to the student's program of study
- Starting salary or wage data
- Graduate or professional school admission rates
- Time-to-employment after graduation
- Retention in the workforce at one and three years

A clear written definition, agreed upon by career services, institutional research, and academic affairs, should be the first artifact your team produces. The worksheet on the next page provides a starting point for this conversation.



The core mistake to avoid

High engagement does not guarantee good outcomes, and good outcomes do not always require visible engagement. A student who never visits the career center may still land a strong job through a personal network; a student who attends every workshop may still struggle in a weak local labor market.

Engagement is a measure of institutional effort and student participation. Outcomes are a measure of results. Both matter, but they must be tracked, reported, and interpreted as two distinct categories — never collapsed into a single “career success” number.



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Career-Related Data Definition Worksheet

Use this worksheet in a cross-functional meeting to build a shared definition of engagement and outcomes before collecting any data. Fill out the engagement questions and outcome questions in separate conversations if possible — conflating the two at the definition stage is the most common root cause of confused reporting and dashboards.

QUESTION	NOTES / DECISION
Engagement	
What counts as a tracked engagement activity?	
What is the minimum threshold for a student to be considered "engaged" in a term? Are there differences in definition based on enrollment? (Full-time or part-time, degree seeking or certificate seeking, credit or non-credit)	
How will we distinguish a student with zero engagement from a student whose engagement isn't captured by the institution's systems?	
What other considerations need to be made for engagement activities?	
Outcomes	
What counts as a successful outcome (placement, field-relevant, salary threshold, etc.)?	
What is our outcome measurement window (e.g., six months post-graduation)?	
Which office owns the system of record for each data type?	
Which office is responsible for compiling outcomes data from external sources?	
How will we handle students who do not respond to outcome surveys?	
What other considerations need to be made for outcomes?	