

TRANSFORMATIONAL CAREER ENGAGEMENT

A GUIDE FOR INTEGRATING CAREER ENGAGEMENT
THROUGHOUT THE STUDENT JOURNEY



TABLE OF CONTENTS

02.	Introduction
03.	Moving to a Transformational View of Career Engagement
05.	Transformational Milestone Opportunities
15.	Developing Milestones Template
16.	Conclusion
17.	Appendix A: Career Exploration Asset Mapping Template
19.	Appendix B: Developing Milestones Template
21.	References

Suggested citation: CCRPL@Pitt Education. (2026). *Transformational career engagement: A guide for integrating career engagement throughout the student journey*. University of Pittsburgh School of Education.

INTRODUCTION

Student career exploration is most effective when it is embedded throughout the student experience rather than treated as a single program, isolated event, or the responsibility of one office. This work should begin before students enroll and continue through graduation and beyond. Institutions that embrace this vision move beyond transactional, ad hoc career exploration opportunities toward a transformational approach that understands career development as a continuous, developmental process across the student journey—not merely a final-semester service.

This guide helps institutions identify practical ways to integrate career exploration and engagement across the student experience. Doing so requires treating career engagement as a shared institutional responsibility. A crucial first step is developing a common purpose and shared language for transformational career engagement—one that links career development to student success, retention, completion, and equity goals.

Institutions can advance transformational career engagement by building on existing assets, setting shared expectations for students, staff, and faculty, and creating transparent systems to support the work. Multiple surveys, including those from Gallup and Purdue University and Strada and Gallup, show that improved career outcomes are a primary reason students pursue postsecondary education. Yet many students who seek career success lack a clear roadmap. A transformational approach addresses this gap by helping students connect their academic experiences to long-term career goals in more intentional and holistic ways.

“Transformational career services acknowledges the following priorities: 1) Student identity and cultural background; 2) student interests and aspirations; 3) student voice; 4) connections and relationships; 5) generational shifts; 6) optimization of time; and 7) co-created intended outcomes.

— Purposeful Career Planning: Transactional vs. Transformational, NACE, 2024

ABOUT THIS GUIDEBOOK

This guidebook is designed to help colleges and universities begin the process towards embracing transformational approaches to career development by identifying and establishing career-related milestones throughout the student journey. Ideally, institutions will identify the milestones that best fit their context and then begin the work to implement the systems and structures to help students achieve them. This guidebook identifies opportunities to consider when establishing milestones and provides an overview of those opportunities with some examples and links to resources. Institutions are encouraged to explore the research and promising practices behind their chosen milestones in greater depth. In addition to the informational content, templates are included to help frame and focus thinking about potential milestones.

The Appendix includes two templates. Appendix A, the Career Exploration Asset Mapping Template, should be completed at the beginning of the review process to help institutions identify existing strengths and determine how future efforts can build on them. Appendix B, the Developing Milestones Template, should be completed after reviewing the guide. It helps institutions identify which career engagement milestones to embed in the student journey and when those milestones should occur.

MOVING TO A TRANSFORMATIONAL VIEW OF CAREER ENGAGEMENT

Importance of a Shared Definition of Career Exploration

Because transformational career development requires multiple interventions across the student journey, it demands a shared understanding of philosophy, goals, and approaches. **Foundational to this effort is establishing a common sense of purpose for career exploration and engagement that crosses traditional institutional boundaries.** A shared sense of purpose engages academic affairs, faculty, student services, advising, career services, residential life (where applicable), and employer engagement.

When these areas operate in silos, career exploration becomes dependent on chance encounters or individual student initiative. A shared, institution-wide vision ensures every student benefits from a coherent career-focused developmental experience regardless of major, background, or when they engage with career services.

A Holistic Vision for Career Engagement

Career exploration is ideally centered around a developmental framework in which students are purposefully put in positions to answer progressively scaffolded questions about themselves, their futures, and their place in the world of work (NACE, 2024).

Early experiences focus on self-discovery and awareness. As students progress, exploration becomes more focused and connected to academic decision-making. Later experiences emphasize skill development, professional identity formation, experiential learning, networking, and career transition.

A developmental approach recognizes that students are not expected to have all the answers upon entering college. Instead, institutions create intentional opportunities for students to learn, reflect, explore, and test possibilities over time, ensuring that career success is built intentionally throughout the academic journey (NACE, AAC&U, & SEE, 2024).

Identifying Assets for Transformational Career Engagement

Institutions do not begin this work from scratch. Most already have meaningful assets and resources that support career engagement and development. As they build systems and structures for transformational career engagement, institutions should first assess the strengths and tools already in place. The Career Exploration Asset Mapping Template in Appendix A is designed to support this process by helping institutions identify existing assets, points of pride, and foundational efforts they can build upon.

Creating Transformational Career Engagement Milestones

Supporting purposeful career exploration requires developing intentional milestones throughout the student journey. While each institution would establish milestones that work for their institutional culture and students, they would ideally be considered from the outset of the student experience. Ideally, career engagement milestones are transparent, occur at each stage of the student journey, and build upon the previous one. Suggested moments for career engagement milestones include:

- **Recruitment** introduces the importance of career outcomes.
- **Onboarding** establishes expectations and awareness.
- **First-year experiences** support exploration and purpose development.
- **Academic and career planning** provides direction.
- **Experiential learning** allows students to test possibilities.
- **Career transition activities** prepare students for life after graduation.

When these experiences are intentionally connected, students are more likely to persist, make informed academic decisions, participate in high-impact learning experiences, develop professional confidence, and achieve successful post-completion outcomes (Sallie Mae & Ipsos, 2024).

Ultimately, transformational career engagement is not simply about helping students find jobs. It is about helping students develop purpose, agency, and a clear understanding of how their education can support meaningful lives and careers. Institutions that embrace this vision create environments in which career exploration is woven into the fabric of the student experience, ensuring that every student has the opportunity to explore possibilities, build skills, and prepare for a successful future. The following section, Transformational Milestone Opportunities, takes a deeper look at potential transformational milestone opportunities that can be established along the entire academic journey.



EXAMPLE: GEORGIA COLLEGE & STATE UNIVERSITY

Georgia College & State University, a public four-year institution in Georgia, offers a strong example of undergraduate career planning milestones embedded from the start of the student experience. Through its GC Career Planning Milestones, students begin in the First-Year Seminar by completing the Focus 2 Career Assessment and connecting with the Career Center. The milestones then build progressively across all four years. The Career Center tracks completion through its programs and services, faculty incorporate milestone activities into course assignments, and staff follow up with students who have not completed benchmarks aligned with their year.



RESOURCES ON MOVING TO A TRANSFORMATIONAL VIEW OF CAREER ENGAGEMENT:

[College, On Purpose 2.0](#). Complete College America

[Bridging the Gap from Education to Employment](#). University Innovation Alliance

[Integrating Career Advising for Equitable Student Success: A Higher Education Landscape Analysis](#). American Association of State Colleges and Universities

[Purposeful Career Planning: Transactional vs. Transformational Career Readiness](#). National Association of Colleges and Employers.

TRANSFORMATIONAL MILESTONE OPPORTUNITIES

Recruitment

Effective recruitment messaging goes beyond program descriptions and credential offerings; it actively frames career outcomes as central to the institutional mission. When prospective students see employment data, alumni career pathways, and examples of graduate outcomes, they gain a clearer sense of purpose and a stronger understanding of the value of their academic investment. This early framing can be particularly valuable for first-generation students and others who may not have well-developed professional networks.

Recruitment touchpoints that introduce career outcomes can include:

- Admissions materials and institutional websites that highlight graduate employment data, wage outcomes, and labor market alignment for specific programs.
- Alumni career success stories shared via print, digital, and social media channels.
- Campus visit experiences that include dedicated time with career services or current students who can speak to career exploration opportunities.
- Outreach events, college fairs, and high school partnerships where career pathway information is presented along with academic program information.

The goal at this stage is to clearly and consistently signal to prospective students that career exploration is valued, supported, and is an ongoing part of the student experience.



INSTITUTIONAL EXAMPLE: AUSTIN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Austin Community College (ACC), a public institution serving Central Texas, emphasizes career-focused pathways across its programs. [Each program of study listed on its website](#)—from certificate to associate degree—is linked to a list of potential careers. For each of these careers, ACC displays granular, current information on prospective earnings, local job openings, projected outlook, and top skills required to be successful in that career. The interface is user-friendly, and prospective students can glean useful information on how their program interests align with careers.

Onboarding

The transition to college is one of the most consequential moments in the student journey. It is also one of the most underutilized opportunities for career engagement. Onboarding, which encompasses orientation, welcome, and initial enrollment activities, offers a structured, high-engagement opportunity for institutions to introduce career exploration as a foundational element and expectation of the student experience, rather than as an optional resource.

Transformational onboarding signals from the beginning that career exploration should start immediately, not after students choose a major or approach graduation. It also reinforces that the institution actively supports career development throughout the student journey. When career awareness is embedded in onboarding, students are introduced to available tools and resources and begin to see how their academic decisions connect to future opportunities.

Effective onboarding experiences for career engagement can include common elements such as introduction to career exploration resources like early interest and career and/or strengths-based assessments, career connected pathway mapping resources, labor market data, alumni panels and career conversations, and exposure to career competencies (e.g., [NACE's eight career readiness competencies](#)).

Ultimately, onboarding programming can take many forms depending on institutional context; career engagement can be embedded within a required orientation course or welcome week programming, introduced in initial advising appointments, or delivered using a combination of these approaches. What matters most is that the message is clear and consistent that career exploration is something the institution takes seriously from the moment students arrive on campus.



INSTITUTIONAL EXAMPLE: ST. PETERSBURG COLLEGE

St. Petersburg College, a public two-year college in Florida, embeds career exploration directly into the new student onboarding experience. Through its First-Time Titans program, incoming students attend an in-person orientation session that includes career exploration as an explicit component.

Career Engagement Coursework in the First Year

The first year represents one of the most important opportunities for career exploration. Students often enter college with limited knowledge of their goals, potential career options, and the connections between academic programs and employment. Within the first year, and ideally by the end of the first semester, all students should begin exploring their goals and understanding how they connect to their academic choices (National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2023). There are several ways institutions support opportunities to explore purpose, understand possibilities, examine academic and career opportunities, and establish direction including:

- First Year Experience courses or first-year seminars that encourage students to examine their interests, strengths, values, and long-term aspirations.
- Life design and purpose courses focused on purpose development and life design; and
- Career exploration modules embedded within general education requirements.

These experiences offer structured opportunities for career exploration and reflection and can help students develop a stronger sense of purpose, increase engagement with their studies, and make more informed academic decisions.

“Within the first year, and ideally by the end of the first semester, all students should begin exploring their goals and understanding how they connect to their academic choices.”

National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition

Common elements of effective career engagement during the first year include:

- Clarifying goals
- Exploring strengths and values
- Researching occupations
- Conducting informational interviews
- Connecting academic choices to future opportunities
- Reflecting on possible futures NACE (2024)

When career exploration, goal-setting, and professional identity development are introduced in the first semester, students who can connect their academic experience to future goals are more likely to remain engaged and persist to completion (Sallie Mae & Ipsos, 2024).

Faculty play a critical role in helping students understand how academic disciplines connect to careers. Students often trust faculty as guides to both academic and professional opportunities (The Career Leadership Collective, 2019). As a result, faculty engagement is essential to creating a culture in which career exploration is everyone's responsibility. Engaging faculty in developing career engaged coursework requires thoughtful and ongoing engagement that includes professional development, shared governance, promotion and tenure considerations, and more (NCDA, 2020).



RESOURCES ON CAREER ENGAGEMENT IN COURSEWORK:

[Exploring the Influence of Course-Based Career Experience and Faculty on Students' Career Preparation](#)

National Association of Colleges and Employers (2022)

[Engaging Faculty: Strategies for College Career Services](#) NCDA (2020)

[How Career Services Can Get Faculty Buy-In](#) Paré, R. uConnect (2025)

[Faculty Engagement Strategies for Career Services](#) The Career Leadership Collective (2019)

[LifeMap](#) at Valencia College

Career Engagement in the First Year Experience / First Year Seminar

First Year Experience (FYE) courses support students' first-semester transition by building essential college navigation skills, such as understanding syllabi, using proper citation practices, and developing a sense of belonging. Meanwhile, First Year Seminar courses are taught contextually within any discipline and often in a small, inquiry-based setting. A growing number of colleges are embedding career development directly into the first-year experience rather than waiting until later in a student's academic journey. Career exploration at this stage should focus on self-discovery, purpose development, and understanding opportunities (Skipper, 2017; Ithaka S+R, 2018).



INSTITUTIONAL EXAMPLE: FULLERTON COLLEGE

Fullerton College, a public two-year college in California, offers an [FYE course](#) organized around four areas: Community and Cultural Connections, Career and Educational Exploration, Support Services, and Mindful Growth. By making career and educational exploration one of the course's central pillars, the college helps students explore careers and majors early, focus their studies, and reduce excess coursework on the path to graduation.



INSTITUTIONAL EXAMPLE: THE UNIVERSITY OF REDLANDS

The University of Redlands, a private, four-year university in California, created a [Professionalism and Career Exploration Module](#) that FYS faculty can embed within any seminar topic. Rather than separating career content from the seminar subject, faculty integrate it contextually. The module includes four components adaptable to each instructor's goals: introduction to career resources, self-reflection assignments, and activities connecting academic content to professional paths.



RESOURCES ON CAREER ENGAGEMENT IN THE FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE/FIRST YEAR SEMINAR:

[The First-Year Experience in Two Year Public Postsecondary Programs: Results of a National Survey](#) Ithaka S+R (2018)

[Bay College - FYE 103 - Career Exploration](#) OER Commons (2024)

[What Makes the First-Year Seminar High Impact? An Exploration of Effective Educational Practices](#) Skipper, T. L., National Resource Center, Research Reports on College Transitions No. 7 (2017)

Purpose and Life Design Approaches

Pioneered by Stanford's [Life Design Lab](#), some institutions have expanded career exploration beyond traditional career planning by helping students explore identity, meaning, and purpose. Life design uses a design thinking approach to help students envision the life and career they want to pursue. This approach was first implemented through [ENGR 104B: Designing Your Life](#) and has since been replicated at several other institutions.



INSTITUTIONAL EXAMPLE: VALENCIA COLLEGE

Valencia College, a public two-year college in Florida, has developed LifeMap, an integrated framework that connects educational, career, and life planning across the student experience. Through structured reflection, students identify goals, recognize their strengths, and link educational choices to future aspirations. Rather than positioning career planning as a separate activity, LifeMap embeds purpose development throughout the student journey.



RESOURCES ON PURPOSE AND LIFE DESIGN APPROACHES:

[Stanford Design Lab Resources](#)

[Bowling Green State University Life Design](#)

Academic Advising: From Transactional to Transformational

Academic advising is among the most powerful mechanisms for career exploration. Traditional advising focuses on course registration and degree requirements; while important, only considering those elements constitutes a missed opportunity. Transformational advising expands these conversations to include interests, strengths, goals, and future aspirations.

There are a number of meaningful ways in which transformational advising can occur. Advisors, faculty, and career professionals play a critical role in helping students understand how academic choices relate to career pathways. Students should have opportunities to explore career options associated with their programs of study, identify skill development opportunities, and understand potential educational and employment pathways (NACADA, 2019; Gordon, 2006).

Career-informed advising includes questions such as:

- What interests you most about your major?
- What careers have you considered?
- What experiences would help you learn more about those careers?
- How do your strengths align with your goals?

In addition to engaging in transformational advising conversations, the advising function should also ensure students have clear information about post-graduation outcomes (Strada, 2024). Advisors should also help students understand labor market information, employment trends, and career outcomes associated with academic programs (Georgetown CEW, 2025). Providing these sorts of particulars can support more informed decision-making from learners about their direction.

What is most important about these steps is ensuring that the systems are in place to support transformational advising. There are many thoughtful resources available on advising redesign and institutions are encouraged to do deeper research on paths forward. To be clear, the elements that follow are considerations for transformational, career-engaged advising. Effective approaches and potential milestones include:

- Career-connected program maps with career-related milestones
- Effective labor market and alumni outcomes information
- Integrated academic and career advising
- Support for undecided students

Career Connected Program Maps

Many institutions have developed sequenced academic maps with term-by-term direction for course-taking. Academic maps include specific course sequences, academic milestones, and program learning outcomes (Complete College America, 2025). Embedding career milestones into these maps addresses a structural problem: without them, career development depends entirely on whether individual students know how to seek it out, when to seek it out, and how to connect it to their academic decisions (Complete College America, 2025). These maps include course sequences and identify career milestones, helping students explore academic and career options from the start of their academic careers. Rather than treating career engagement as something students pursue independently alongside their coursework, career milestones are communicated as expected activities in each year, making career development a clear part of the academic experience rather than an optional add-on.

By providing similar information to all students, career expectations aren't left to chance or luck; ensuring all students receive a career-connected program map promotes a more equitable approach to considering career engagement. Moreover, making this level of information available to all students enables advisors to engage in more transformational conversations rather than focusing on providing scheduling information (NACE, 2024).



INSTITUTIONAL EXAMPLE: CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

The City University of New York (CUNY), a public higher education system in New York City, has developed comprehensive program maps with embedded career milestones. Through its Career-Infused Degree Maps initiative, CUNY integrates academic and career planning into a single term-by-term document. These maps place coursework and career milestones side by side, helping students understand the sequence of key academic and career steps. Examples include maps from LaGuardia Community College, College of Staten Island, and Lehman College.



RESOURCES ON CAREER CONNECTED PROGRAM MAPS:

[Academic Maps & Milestones](#) Complete College America

[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)

Effective Labor Market and Outcomes Information

Helping students understand labor market realities and graduate outcomes is foundational to informed career exploration, yet it is among the most consistently underprovided elements of the student experience. According to research conducted by the Strada Education Foundation, only 1 in 5 students at four-year institutions and fewer than 1 in 4 students at two-year institutions currently receive high quality guidance on successfully linking education to career goals, leaving the majority to make less-informed decisions about majors and career directions. Providing students with labor market and outcomes data gives them the ability to make informed choices rather than decisions based on assumptions, anecdotes, information from friends and family, or media representations. These data would include, but are not limited to wage information, employment rates by field, regional demand, and identifying careers that graduates of programs enter after leaving. When institutions make labor market and outcomes data visible, timely, and relevant, they provide students with agency and shift career decision-making from a matter of chance to a shared responsibility (Strada, 2024).



INSTITUTIONAL EXAMPLE: NORTHERN VIRGINIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA), a public two-year college in Virginia, uses its Labor Market Intelligence team to track regional economic and workforce trends. The team produces dashboards, reports, and publications on in-demand occupations, industry sectors, hiring patterns, and economic indicators. NOVA's [Career Exploration and Navigation](#) page translates these data into career ladders show students potential pathways within broad fields, including typical job titles, education requirements, recent job postings, and salary ranges for the Northern Virginia and Washington, D.C., metro area. This gives students localized information to guide academic and career decisions.



INSTITUTIONAL EXAMPLE: MARICOPA COLLEGE

Maricopa College, a public two-year college in Arizona, embeds occupational information directly into its [program descriptions](#). This allows students to review labor market information, career outcomes, and course sequencing as they explore programs.

Integrated Academic and Career Advising

At approximately 76% of institutions, academic advising and career counseling operate as separate functions (EAB, 2018). While most institutions require students to receive academic advising throughout their college career, far fewer institutions have parallel policies ensuring students receive career counseling during their time on campus. The result is “fragmented educational and vocational planning” (AASCU, 2021) that produces redundancies, delays, and gaps in student support.

Integrating academic and career advising functions helps students make more informed and purposeful decisions about their education by connecting academic planning directly to future career opportunities. When academic and career advising are integrated, students are better able to see the relevance of their coursework, understand how academic choices influence future opportunities, and develop a clearer sense of direction. Integrated advising also supports retention and completion by increasing student motivation, confidence, and goal clarity. By helping students connect who they are, what they are studying, and where they hope to go, institutions can create a more coherent and student-centered experience that improves both educational and career outcomes.



INSTITUTIONAL EXAMPLE: TARRANT COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Tarrant County Community College, a public, two-year college in Texas, redesigned its entire advising philosophy, practices, and positions to prioritize career development in student conversations. The institution shifted from a transactional advising model toward one that intentionally incorporates career exploration, goal setting, and long-term planning into advising conversations. To achieve this, TCCC reconfigured staffing, created dedicated caseloads, and provided robust professional development.



RESOURCES ON ADVISING REDESIGN:

[Principles for Quality Education-to-Career Guidance](#) Strada Education Foundation (2024)

[Centering the Role of Advising Redesign for Effective Guided Pathways Implementation](#) Advising Success Network (2025)

[Integrating Career Advising for Equitable Student Success: A Higher Education Landscape Analysis](#). American Association of State Colleges and Universities (2021)

[Your students' career journey should start in their advisor's office](#) Education Advisory Board (2018)

[Integrating Career Development in Academic Advising](#) Parrent, C. Career Convergence Web Magazine (2023)

Targeted Supports for Undecided Students

Undecided students often require focused support with career and academic planning. Uncertainty about future goals can make it difficult to select a major and make informed educational decisions. There are a variety of reasons why students may be undecided; they may have limited knowledge of career options, connections between academic programs and occupations, or their own interests, strengths, and values. Without intentional guidance, undecided students may accumulate excess credits, change majors multiple times, delay completion, or be at greater risk of stopping out. Integrating career exploration with academic planning helps these students understand the relationship between educational choices and future opportunities while providing a structured process for self-discovery and decision-making. Through assessments, career conversations, labor market exploration, and exposure to different fields, students can develop a clearer sense of purpose and choose a career direction.



INSTITUTIONAL EXAMPLE: THE UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI

The University of Cincinnati, a public, four-year university in Ohio, has a [Center for Exploratory Studies](#) for students who are truly undecided on their major. The Center provides purposeful exploration through focused advising, seminars, and tools. By providing supports directed to helping undecided learners find their major, undecided students have better opportunities to build academic momentum, be retained, and graduate on time.

End of First Year: Developing an Academic and Career Plan

The first year of college is among the most consequential — and most vulnerable — periods in a student's academic journey. According to data from the National Student Clearinghouse, of students who started college in fall 2022, nearly one in four did not return to any college for a second year. The reasons for not returning are complex, but 40% of students who stopped out cited a change in focus, motivation, or life direction as the reason for leaving, outpacing financial concerns and mental health challenges as the most commonly cited reasons for leaving (Sallie Mae & Ipsos, 2024). A clear academic and career plan by the end of the first year should not be considered a luxury; it is a crucial factor that gives students a reason to stay, a framework for making decisions, and the confidence that their time and money are leading somewhere meaningful.

A clear academic and career plan is particularly important during the first year because this period represents a critical transition point in which students establish patterns of engagement, develop a sense of belonging, and begin making decisions that shape their future opportunities. When students can see how their coursework, major selection, and co-curricular experiences contribute to future careers, they are more likely to find meaning in their studies and remain committed to completing their credentials. Institutions that intentionally support career exploration and academic planning during the first year often see improvements in retention, student confidence, and academic success (Complete College America, n.d.).



Institutions that intentionally support career exploration and academic planning during the first year often see improvements in retention, student confidence, and academic success.

Complete College America

Importantly, a clear plan does not mean students must have every detail of their future mapped out or commit permanently to a specific occupation. Rather, students should develop a working roadmap that identifies potential academic and career directions while remaining flexible enough to evolve as they gain new experiences and insights. Early planning provides a foundation for purposeful exploration, experiential learning, networking, and skill development throughout college. It also helps ensure that students, particularly first-generation students and those with limited access to professional networks, receive the guidance and support needed to navigate both educational and career decisions successfully. Academic advising and career development professionals play complementary roles in helping students build this clarity, transforming the first year from a period of uncertainty into the beginning of a purposeful educational journey (NACE, 2022).

Experiential Learning

Institutions that implement transformational approaches to career would be well served to strive to embed at least one meaningful experiential learning opportunity into every academic pathway. The timing and sequencing would ideally be identified within degree maps and academic plans and require close partnership with faculty. Experiential learning allows students to connect classroom learning with professional environments while developing confidence, skills, and professional networks (Society for Experiential Education). These experiences help students evaluate career interests through direct engagement rather than assumptions. There are multiple modalities for experiential learning that can connect classroom learning with professional environments. These examples include:

- Internships
- Undergraduate research
- Clinical experiences
- Service learning
- Cooperative education
- Apprenticeships
- Industry-sponsored projects
- Work-based learning
- Work simulations in the classroom (using digital twins or virtual reality to simulate real-life scenarios)

Experiential learning supports both career clarity and career readiness. Students gain a deeper understanding of professional expectations while developing transferable skills that employers value. Good experiential learning not only relies upon the experience itself, but structures guided reflection.



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, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (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 (NACE, 2023).

Embedding experiential learning across all disciplines, and not just in select majors, expands equitable access to career-connected skill development.



INSTITUTIONAL EXAMPLE: LAGUARDIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

LaGuardia Community College (LAGCC) — a public, two-year college in New York — has a distinctive and longstanding model of institutionalized experiential learning. 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.



RESOURCES ON EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING:

[The Integration of Career Readiness into Experiential Learning and High-Impact Practices](#) National Association of Colleges and Employers (2024)

[Principles of Good Practice for Experiential Learning Activities](#) Society for Experiential Education

[Experiential Learning and Teaching in Higher Education Journal](#) Cal State

[Work Integrated Learning Open Modules](#) Niagara College Canada

Preparing For Life After Graduation

As students approach graduation, career exploration evolves into career transition. Students benefit from structured support related to job searching, graduate school preparation, networking, interviewing, professional branding, and workplace readiness. However, institutions that embrace transformational career engagement recognize that career preparation at this stage is most effective when built upon years of exploration and development. When career preparation is embedded structurally rather than offered optionally, career development efforts in the senior year are incremental, not a discontinuous process.

During this period, many of the efforts fall into the purview of traditional career services offerings. Some successful transition efforts include:

- Career readiness assessments.
- Employer recruiting events.
- Alumni mentoring programs.
- Networking opportunities.
- Graduate school preparation.
- Professional portfolio development.
- Interview and job search coaching.

Students who have engaged in exploration throughout their educational journey are often better positioned to articulate their strengths, communicate their experiences, and pursue opportunities aligned with their goals. At this point, milestones should integrate with previous efforts in career engagement.

Lastly, most career services offices provide career-related supports beyond graduation with lifelong career navigation and alumni engagement. Ideally, students are informed of the possibilities and receive ongoing engagement to build awareness of these opportunities.

DEVELOPING MILESTONES TEMPLATE

The Developing Milestones template in Appendix B is designed to help your institution translate the transformational career engagement framework described in this guidebook into concrete, measurable milestones tailored to your institutional context, student population, and existing resources. Rather than prescribing a single model, it provides a structured process for identifying what career engagement should look like at each stage of your students' journey and for building the systems to make it happen.

The template is organized around six sequential stages of the student journey: Recruitment, Orientation, First Semester, End of First Year, Midpoint, and Final Year. Each stage includes opportunities for milestones, but there need not be milestones for every stage. Work through the template in order, as each stage builds on the previous one. The suggested milestones are not intended to be adopted verbatim; they are starting points. Your institution should adapt the language and expectations to reflect your mission, student population, program length, and existing infrastructure.

This template works best when completed collaboratively by a cross-functional group that includes career services, academic advising, faculty governance, student affairs, institutional research, and enrollment management. Because career engagement is a shared responsibility, completing the template together helps build the common purpose emphasized throughout this guidebook. Institutions serving significant populations of first-generation, low-income, or historically underserved students should ensure those perspectives are represented, either through staff who work closely with these students or, ideally, through direct student input.

CONCLUSION

Transformational career engagement is not simply about adding a new program. The milestones described in this guidebook, from recruitment through graduation, are not a checklist of discrete activities. They are an invitation to reimagine the student experience as one in which the connection between education and a meaningful life is not left to chance, but built intentionally, together.

The institutions featured in this guidebook have demonstrated that this reorientation is possible. Whether through career-infused degree maps, integrated advising models, life design courses, or structured first-year exploration, each approach shares a common conviction: that every student deserves the opportunity to understand who they are, what possibilities exist for them, and how their time in college can help them get there.

Supporting transformational approaches to career engagement does not require rebuilding everything at once. It requires starting with intention: mapping existing assets, identifying the moments in the student journey where career exploration is already occurring and where it is missing, and committing to a shared vision that career development is everyone's responsibility. The templates and resources in this guidebook are designed to support exactly that work.

The ultimate measure of success is not the number of programs offered, or career center visits logged. It is whether every student — regardless of major, background, or when they first engaged with career exploration — graduates with a sense of purpose, an understanding of their strengths, and the confidence to pursue a meaningful life and career. That outcome is within reach. It begins with the institutional commitment to make it possible.

APPENDIX A:

A fillable PDF version of this template can be downloaded here: [Career Exploration Asset Mapping Template](#)

Career Exploration Asset Mapping Template

INSTITUTION NAME: _____

1. Existing Touchpoints

Where do first-year students already encounter career topics (even informally)?

- Orientation / Welcome Week
- First-year seminar / FYE course
- Academic advising appointments
- Residence life / living communities
- Student affairs programming
- Others (please list) _____

2. Advising

How do advisors discuss career goals with students?

- Advising aligns academics and credentials with career goals
- Every student completes a skills inventory (technical and transferable) to identify skill and experience gaps
- Every student is asked about career interests
- Each program has a sequenced term-by-term program map that includes career and academic milestones
- Undecided students receive career-specific advising
- Advising primarily focuses on majors and academic coursework
- Career outcomes for majors (including placement and wages) are shared with each student
- Others (please list) _____

3. Data & Technology Assets

What data, platforms, or tools are already available to support exploration?

- Alumni outcomes / first-destination data
- Advising CRM (e.g., EAB Navigate, Starfish)
- Labor market data (e.g., Lightcast, Burning Glass)
- Career exploration tools (Forage, Riipen, etc.)
- LMS modules (Canvas, Blackboard, etc.)
- Others (please list) _____

4. People & Partnerships

Who on campus or in the community could serve as career exploration connectors?

- Career services staff / embedded advisers
- Faculty with industry connections
- Alumni willing to mentor / speak
- Peer mentors / near-peer coaches
- Employer / community partners
- Others (please list) _____

5. Gaps & Opportunities

Where are first-year students underserved or where could integration be strengthened?

- Where are first-year students underserved or where could integration be strengthened?
- No required career touchpoint in year one
- Advising & career services not connected
- Data exists but not used in advising
- Undeclared / exploratory students unserved
- Siloed efforts across departments
- Others (please list) _____

6. What could early career exploration look like at your institution?

Answer:

7. What are the challenges to embracing early career exploration at your institution?

Answer:

8. What resources would you need to implement?

Answer:

9. Who else needs to be at the table?

Answer:

10. Are there any quick wins you can advance in the short term?

Answer:

11. What additional information would be helpful?

Answer:

APPENDIX B:

A fillable PDF version of this template can be downloaded here: [Developing Milestones Template](#)

Developing Milestones Template

INSTITUTION NAME: _____

Milestones provide structure to career exploration, as they break down the process into several consecutive, actionable steps that build on one another. Aim to have your students complete a certain number of milestones at each phase of their program. The milestones suggested here align with key aspects of Social Cognitive Career Theory (1994) related to interest and choice of career — self-efficacy, observational learning, and outcome expectations.

1. Recruitment: During recruitment, prospective students should be exposed to career outcomes, employment data, and potentially, alumni success stories

Please frame recruitment milestone language for your institution:

What strategies will you employ to implement?

How will you measure when students attain that milestone?

Have you identified any equity gaps, and if so, how will you address them?

2. Orientation: By the end of orientation, students should have met an advisor to discuss career interests, completed a skills inventory to identify skill and experience gaps, and been introduced to NACE's eight career competencies.

Please frame orientation milestone language for your institution:

What strategies will you employ to implement these milestones?

How will you measure when students attain an orientation milestone?

Have you identified any equity gaps, and if so, how will you address them?

3. First Semester: By the end of their first semester, students should have been introduced to pathway mapping, have taken or scheduled one or more courses in career exploration and discussed majors and career paths.

Please frame first semester milestone language for your institution:

What strategies will you employ to implement these milestones?

How will you measure when students attain a first semester milestone?

Have you identified any equity gaps, and if so, how will you address them?

4. End of First Year: By the end of their first year, students should have taken one or more courses in career exploration, and completed an individualized academic/career mapping plan.

Please frame the end of first year milestone language for your institution:

What strategies will you employ to implement these milestones?

How will you measure when students attain a first year milestone?

Have you identified any equity gaps, and if so, how will you address them?

5. Midpoint: By the midpoint of their programs, students should have a) completed or scheduled at least one experiential learning opportunity (e.g., work-based learning, work simulation in the classroom, internship, career excursion/job shadowing), b) completed or scheduled a mock interview, and have a draft resume reviewed.

Please frame the midpoint milestone language for your institution:

What strategies will you employ to implement these milestones?

How will you measure when students attain a midpoint milestone?

Have you identified any equity gaps, and if so, how will you address them?

Final Year: By the end of their final year, graduating students should have a) participated in at least one relevant experiential learning opportunity related to their career of interest, b) attended a career fair, c) met alumni in their field of interest, d) completed a polished resume, and e) sharpened their interviewing skills.

Please frame the final year milestone language for your institution:

What strategies will you employ to implement these milestones?

Have you identified any equity gaps, and if so, how will you address them?

How will you measure when students attain a final year milestone?

How, and for how long, do you track alumni outcomes?

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