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Personalizing and Increasing Access in Career Services

A new brief from the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities highlights promising practices in career readiness for college students, including tech integration and targeted outreach.

By [Ashley Mowreader](#)



Public institutions have improved career services through data collection, personalized outreach, technological integration and employer connections.

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Colleges and universities, particularly public institutions, are facing growing pressure from lawmakers, students and their families to improve postgraduate

outcomes, demonstrating a return on investment in students' college experiences. While the long-term benefits of a college education remain clear, helping students land higher-paying jobs and see a more direct correlation between their education and careers has risen as a priority for many institutions.

A November report from the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities identifies strategies in career service support that bridge academic preparation and workforce development for student success.

“As public universities face increasing scrutiny over their ability to deliver value to students, innovating in career services is critical to maintaining public trust and fulfilling their educational mission,” according to the report.

Survey Says

One in five college students is very confident that their education and college experiences are preparing them for success after graduation, according to May 2024 Student Voice data from *Inside Higher Ed* and Generation Lab. An additional 58 percent of respondents are just “somewhat confident,” and 18 percent are not too confident.

When asked to rank their colleges' overall efforts to support students in career exploration and development, the greatest share of students said their institution's efforts were average (35 percent) and 34 percent ranked efforts as good.

What's the need: A February report from the Strada Institute for the Future of Work and the Burning Glass Institute found 52 percent of four-year college graduates are underemployed (holding a job that doesn't require a bachelor's degree) a year after

they graduate, and 45 percent of these students remain underemployed 10 years later.

Further, accountability measures for public institutions continue to point toward postgraduate outcomes, increasing pressure on colleges to assist students in achieving high-skill and high-paying jobs.

“While higher education institutions have long emphasized academic rigor and intellectual development, they have often been slower to adopt the innovative, real-world career preparation strategies that today’s job market increasingly demands,” according to the report. “This lag can result in some graduates who are theoretically knowledgeable but lacking sufficient applied skills that employers are increasingly seeking.”

Equity gaps also exist in postgraduation outcomes, with first-generation students, those from low-income backgrounds and students from rural regions less likely to engage with career services or access a professional network.

In response to these challenges, member institutions of APLU have transformed their career services offices in five thematic areas: personalization, career-aligned student success systems, data-driven approaches, experiential learning and employer collaborations.

Methodology

To compile the report, researchers at APLU analyzed the national landscape in early 2024, determining current and innovative practices in career services and student career preparation. Data was collected through 26 individual interviews, four focus groups and five site visits.

Increasing personalization: Only one in five students receives personalized coaching, support and timely information about careers during their college tenure, according to Strada research published in October.

Three programs that allow for more customized approaches to career development are individualized career coaching, adaptive learning platforms and career success apps.

Career coaches can use student data, including academics, co-curricular involvement and internship experiences, to provide tailored pathways for students, helping give guidance that aligns with their goals and skills as well as overall industry trends.

Adaptive learning platforms that use artificial intelligence can provide career preparation activities based on student performance, offering real-time feedback on résumés, interviewing skills or job searches.

Mobile applications, similarly, can put career service resources in the palm of students' hands, offering real-time job listings, application deadlines and notifications based on their career interests, major and geographic preferences.

Adding technological integration: Tech can be leveraged both to support students and career service professionals in this work, according to the report.

Virtual career platforms that offer 24-7 access to resources, such as Handshake or Big Interview, can reduce barriers to accessing career support, and recent generative artificial intelligence tools can give additional guidance.

Online skill-building modules, which often award some kind of digital badge or microcredential, can build students' workforce readiness with technical skills, including in coding, data analysis, digital marketing or project management.

For professionals, career analytics dashboards help with institutional decision-making, offering real-time data on students' career progress, internship placements, job applications and employment outcomes after graduation. Data can be leveraged for coaching in real time or predictive analytics to catch students before they leave the institution without support.

Creating career-aligned student success systems: Data systems should include graduate outcome tracking, student success metrics and predictive job market analysis to enhance the effectiveness of career service professionals.

Expanding experiential learning: “Experiential learning has become a cornerstone of career readiness, providing students with the hands-on experience needed to bridge the gap between academic theory and practical application,” according to researchers.

Work-integrated learning, combining academic coursework with work experiences, helps students connect classroom knowledge to real-world scenarios, while earning academic credit. Researchers found more APLU institutions have partnered with regional businesses to create these kinds of experiences, including co-ops, internships and project-based learning opportunities, for students.

On-campus employment can also improve student skill-building in meaningful ways, embedding career development to foster professional growth in student work.

Virtual internships can reduce equity gaps in participation, mitigating geographic barriers and allowing for flexibility and accessibility for student participation. APLU institutions that have added virtual internships have worked with global companies to create these opportunities as well.

Deepening employer collaborations: While employers have always held a role in student career development, these partnerships have shifted “to ensure students are prepared for the realities of the modern job market,” according to the report.

Employer advisory boards provide input on curricula, career services and program development, keeping academic offerings in alignment with industry standards and emerging fields.

Job shadowing and mentoring programs connect students to potential careers and introduce them to professionals in the field who can serve as supporters and members of the student's network.

Institutions are also looking to better serve employers by creating partnerships that address upskilling needs for in-demand industries, such as coding boot camps for tech companies.

Barriers to success: While each of these strategies can impact students' outcomes positively, campus leaders face barriers implementing programming, researchers wrote.

Funding limitations restrict administrators' ability to invest in tech, staff or partnerships that could drive change. Bureaucratic processes and tradition can slow progress, as well.

"Institutional inertia also hinders the adoption of innovative practices," according to the report. "Without strong leadership and a willingness to innovate, institutions may struggle to implement the necessary changes."

Campuses should prioritize collaboration, innovation and equity to best position themselves to prepare their students for success in a competitive job market, researchers wrote.

Do you have a career prep tip that might help others encourage student success? [Tell us about it.](#)

Written By

Ashley Mowreader

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