



The Learner First Approach

The New Way to Define,
Measure, and Achieve
Student & Alumni Success



Introduction

The Learner First Approach



As the national conversation questioning the value of higher education grows louder and louder, universities are facing increased pressure to redefine what success for their students & alumni looks like. By tapping into the power of social capital, institutions can defend their position in the ecosystem while refocusing on what matters most in education — the growth and success of learners.



It's incumbent upon university leaders to shift their priorities, time, resources, and incentives toward scaling the experiences that matter most. This is what will fundamentally differentiate a successful college from a failing one and also what will differentiate the value proposition of college from a growing list of alternatives.¹

- Brandon Busteed



1. Forbes, "The True 'Magic' Of College Happens For Just 2 Out Of 100 Students," 2020

The Old World vs. The New World



In the Before Times

Brandon Busted has spent most of his career thinking about how to make the higher education experience better. As an entrepreneur, Busted founded a company that created online courses to help incoming college students better understand the impact of alcohol use. He later joined Gallup, where he led their Education & Workforce Development research looking at what makes college “worth it” for students.² Today, Busted is the Chief Partnership Officer for Universities and Employers and the Global Head of Learn-Work Innovation at Kaplan.

In July of 2019, PeopleGrove hosted Busted as the keynote speaker at the annual Innovators Conference. As conference attendees filed into the room from breakfast, they saw a few numbers written on the board:

88%
92%
85%
94%

Busted began his talk by asking the audience if they knew what those numbers represented. After a few guesses, he revealed that each of the numbers were the percentage of students who had a first-destination, a landing spot after graduation, as reported by four of the schools represented

in that very room. These numbers were proudly displayed on university websites and prospectuses. He then took a marker and added a second column.

88% > 12%
92% > 8%
85% > 15%
94% > 6%

The number on the right was the corresponding percentage of students that didn’t have a first-destination. Busted called it the schools’ “unemployment rate.”

Busted then wrote “3.7%” next to all these figures. “That,” he said, “is the June national unemployment rate as reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics.³”

His point? Higher education was underperforming the national unemployment average – and somehow proud of it!

He concluded his talk by anticipating a new wave of consumer awareness in higher education. Students and their families would start to look at more than just services and amenities when evaluating college. They would increasingly consider why they were pursuing higher education in the first place.

2. Gallup, “Is College Worth It?” 2015

3. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Official unemployment rate little changed at 3.7 percent; U-6 at 7.2 percent,” 2019

And Then 2020 Happened.

Like many other aspects of our society, the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated a number of changes in higher education, including the arrival of the wave of consumer awareness Busted predicted.



65%

of students agreed with the statement “Higher education is not worth the cost to students anymore”⁴



+84%

Those with a bachelor’s degree earn 84% more than those with just a high school diploma.¹⁰

As the Class of 2020 graduated into the worst recession in a dozen years, career preparation and success took center stage. The national media became hyper-focused on the question of value in higher education, and the two concepts essentially became synonymous.

Think tanks like [Third Way](#) published studies reporting that 65% of students agreed with the statement “Higher education is not worth the cost to students anymore.”⁴ [The New York Times](#) wrote extensively on the topic, particularly around the value of specific degree programs,⁵ in their “Your Money Adviser” section. Even the [Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis](#) hosted a webinar discussing their findings of a shrinking wealth gap among Bachelor degree holders.⁶

Couple all this with declining student confidence in their ability to be successful in their chosen field⁷, reports of tuition rising almost 9x as fast as wages⁸, and a confusing two years when it comes to college budgets?...it’s been a rough pandemic for higher education’s image.

Closing the Growing Perception Gap

However, it remains factual to say that higher education is still the best way towards increased earnings and economic mobility. Those with a bachelor’s degree earn 84% more than those with just a high school diploma.¹⁰

So how do we fight this perception battle? How do we tangibly demonstrate that a college degree is still valuable and flip this script? How do we play a new game...and win?!

It starts with understanding learners, measuring the things that matter to them (instead of what matters to institutions), and leveraging all our resources to provide them with opportunity (not just guidance or advice).

4. Third Way, “One Year Later: COVID-19s Impact on Current and Future College Students,” 2021

5. The New York Times, “Will That College Degree Pay Off?,” 2021

6. Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, “Do College Degrees Mean More Wealth?,” 2021

7. HBR, “The U.S. Education System Isn’t Giving Students What Employers Need,” 2021

8. CNBC, “College costs have increased by 169% since 1980—but pay for young workers is up by just 19%: Georgetown report,” 2021
New America, “Varying Degrees,” 2017

9. The New York Times, “Colleges Slash Budgets in the Pandemic, With ‘Nothing Off-Limits,’ 2020

10. Georgetown University Center for Education and the Workforce, “The College Payoff,” 2021

Why Do People Pursue Higher Education?

Retention & Graduation: Supply Side Metrics

For decades, Retention and Graduation rates have been the measuring stick by which higher education institutions measure themselves. Billions of dollars have been poured into “big data” programs focusing on removing barriers that students may face that might cause them to drop out or fail to graduate.¹¹

And rightfully so! After all, a student who does not complete their degree is not going to reap the benefits of the economic mobility that statistics tell us come with that degree.

However, these metrics stop short of considering why a learner pursues higher education in the first place. As Michael Horn, Co-Founder and Distinguished Fellow at the Clayton Christensen Institute said in a recent episode of his “Future U” podcast:

“...our metrics around college outcomes are really what I would call supply side metrics. They look at things from the perspective of institutions, and what’s easy to measure. In my view, that’s in opposition to what I’d call demand side metrics, the outcomes... desired by each individual learner.”¹²

Retention and Graduation rates are focused primarily on success from the institution’s point of view. Just how well did a college support a student during their time on campus? Were they able to get students across the finish line? These are the questions universities are thinking about. Not what happens to learners after that.

The Consumer-Focused University

The challenge is that learners pursue higher education for all kinds of reasons. And, as Michael Horn’s “Future U” co-host Jeff Selingo outlines in his best-selling book *Who Gets In and Why*, those reasons can be incredibly nuanced and complex.

While we can acknowledge that nuance for the individual learner, it should not stop us from having a bias for action. Available research makes it very clear what the majority of learners’ goals are. Let’s look at the data:

- Gallup reported that the main reason people pursue higher education is work outcome. 58% of respondents said that career outcomes were their primary motivation.¹³



58%

of respondents said that career outcomes were their primary motivation.¹³

11. Politico, “The Moneyball Solution for Higher Education,” 2019

12. Future U Podcast, “How to Define and Measure Higher Ed’s Value,” 2022

13. Gallup, “Why Higher Ed?,” 2018

83%

of students said
“to be able to get a
better job” was “very
important” in deciding
to go to college.¹⁴

“EXTREMELY IMPORTANT” REASONS FOR HIGHER ED, PER ALUMNI¹⁵

Qualify for Good Jobs // 87%

Gain Skills to be Successful // 86%

Advance their Careers // 84%

TOP REASONS GEN Z PURSUES HIGHER ED¹⁶



Good
Job



Good
Pay



Career
Foundation

- 83% of students responding to the The American Freshman survey, a study from the UCLA Higher Education Research Institute, said “to be able to get a better job” was “very important” in deciding to go to college. 73% said “to be able to make more money.”¹⁴
- Strada research shows that alumni rated the following as very or extremely important reasons for pursuing higher education: to be able to qualify for good jobs (87%), to gain skills to be successful in work (86%), and to advance their careers (84%). Income related reasons were only slightly less prevalent.¹⁵
- Even Fidelity Investments released a survey showing that a good job (55%), good pay (53%), and building a foundation for a solid career (51%) are the top reasons Gen Z pursues higher education.¹⁶

When we ask students what they want out of a higher education experience, they paint a very clear picture – they want a good job. Thus, any conversation about providing individuals with value out of the hefty investment that students and their families make in college HAS to start with concepts of career.

A Look at New “Student & Alumni Success” Metrics

Like the conversation around value, focusing on career metrics opens the door for an incredible amount of nuance. But rather than follow higher ed’s snail paced path of researching a topic to the point of stagnation, there are ways to look at the problem that will create a newfound bias for action and serve all learners.

It’d be easy to think about “career” as only a finishing metric. After all, the tangible outcome for students is a good job, which they are likely not getting until they at least get close to completing their degree.

But recently, measuring student confidence in their ability to be successful in the job market while they are in school has taken center stage. And the results? Not great.

A Gallup study found that only 34% of students were confident they would graduate with what they needed to be successful in the job market.¹⁷ An article from HBR also cited data that 53% of students don’t even apply to an entry-level job in their chosen field because they felt unqualified.¹⁸ A Strada survey found that only 52% of alumni reported that they achieved all their major higher education goals.¹⁹ And finally, only 9% of alumni find their network to be “helpful” or “very helpful” in the job market.²⁰

14. UCLA Higher Education Research Institute, “The American Freshman,” 2019

15. Strada, “Student Outcomes Beyond Completion: National Findings From the 2021 Strada Alumni Survey, 2021

16. Fidelity Investments, “2021 College Savings & Student Debt Survey, 2021

17. Inside Higher Ed, “Unprepared and Confused,” 2018

18. HBR, “The U.S. Education System Isn’t Giving Students What Employers Need,” 2021

19. Strada, “Student Outcomes Beyond Completion: National Findings From the 2021 Strada Alumni Survey, 2021

20. Gallup, “Alumni Networks Less Helpful Than Advertised,” 2019

The Three Steps of the Learner First Approach

Relationship-Rich & Work-Integrated



These same studies that outline the challenge also provide a framework for changing the trajectory.

Gallup's well publicized "Big Six" study focuses on specific experiences that can improve a student's confidence in their ability to be successful in the job market. The more of these experiences students have; the higher their confidence.²¹

Brandon Busteed, who led this study while at Gallup, notes that those experiences fall into two categories: relationship-rich and work-integrated.²²

Taken individually, these discrete experiences certainly provide value. But what if we could move the focus beyond just those six and focus on the categories instead? Could we begin to weave these principles into the learner journey and make them foundational?

Here are ways that we can begin that process while focusing on a good or better job as the ultimate outcome for students and alumni.

21. Gallup, "Six College Experiences Linked to Student Confidence on Jobs," 2019

22. Forbes, "The True 'Magic' Of College Happens For Just 2 Out Of 100 Students," 2020

01 Using Valuable Experience to Connect Major & Career



70%

of first-year students say they plan to network with alumni or professionals



but
27%

of seniors say they actually completed their goal²³

The earlier these relationship-rich and work-integrated experiences can start, the better.

In their journey, the first is picking a course of study. For that they rely on Academic Affairs and the Deans who provide guidance on picking a major. In a typical setting, those Deans will start with the career aspirations of the student and then ensure that their course of study will set them up for success in that career. For undecided students, Deans will try to guide them towards a particular major and suggest courses they can try to see if it's right for them.

But careers are anything but linear. Most take dramatic twists and turns that result in one working in a field that, on the surface, might be completely mismatched from their major.

But that's OK! And students need to understand that and embrace it. Academic Affairs must provide students with a dynamic way to consume as many career paths as possible. The connection drawn by Deans and other counselors should not be what someone could do with a major, but rather how the skills built by studying in a certain field can influence a career path.

Who better to tell this story than those from your institution who already have degrees in that field (i.e. ALUMNI)?

This is where a huge opportunity lies. By weaving alumni stories into the academic advising experience, students will get a complete picture of life after graduation earlier than they currently do.

The best place to start is bite-sized learning, snackable content that alumni could provide that gives a more well-rounded perspective on their careers. Imagine a student having access to dozens of 1-minute videos where alumni share how their major influenced their career paths. The value to first and second year students would be enormous.

The next step is to hear from these alumni themselves. What if institutions required each student to complete 3 conversations with alumni in their chosen field of study by the end of their second year? Not only would students have a clearer picture of how their major could impact their career path, but they start to build the social capital that 70% of them already intend to build and only 27% actually complete.²³

These simple changes weave work-integrated and relationship-rich directly into the academic advising experience and improve student confidence as early as their first meeting with an advisor.

23. Strada, "Understanding Undergraduates' Career Preparation Experiences," 2021

02 A Hard Refresh on What Mentorship Really Means

The intentions of first-year students don't always match what they end up following through on by the time they are ready to graduate. Research shows that social capital is an area where we see one of the widest gaps between plans students make and what they end up accomplishing.

This represents a disparity of 43%.²⁴ And, a failure of the system. Why? We believe the answer lies in how social capital is framed on campus, specifically, the use of the word "mentorship."

We've all heard how important it is to find mentors to support you. Perhaps you've even given that advice to a learner. But is what we're suggesting really what learners want and need?

The word mentorship itself has a heavy connotation. Merriam-Webster defines a mentor as "someone who teaches or gives help and advice to a less experienced and often younger person." Learners expect a Yoda-like figure who imparts wise sayings and offers guidance while riding in a backpack as we train in the swamps.

Those on campus who have tried to launch a mentoring program know the challenges the term can bring to their efforts. Alumni hear the word and believe that they don't have time to be the resource a student needs, while students don't want a forced friendship for 6-months. That leaves the staff member to plan and execute a program that requires a lot of strategy, execution, and results measurement.

These types of mentoring programs create what sociologists call "strong ties." And yes, all the literature points to just how important those ties are to all sorts of development for learners. However, they are also what Julia Freeland Fisher, Director of Education at the Clayton Christensen Institute, calls "high dosage" relationships. They take up a considerable amount of bandwidth in our lives. An intense focus on strong ties may lead us to discount the web of other relationships that a learner may have access to — the "weak ties."



There's a **43%** social capital disparity between students wanting to build it but don't.²⁴

"Weak tie networks actually contain new information and new opportunities that our strong networks tend not to," Fisher said in an Innovators Talk, presented by PeopleGrove. "A lot of conventional wisdom and this term mentor has counseled people to think that only strong relationships are valuable...the stronger the better. And that just doesn't bear out in the research in terms of accessing opportunity. You're actually more likely to find a job through your weak tie network."²⁵

Author and professor Eric Koester agrees. In his soon to be published book *Super Mentors*, Koester studied 142 high-profile mentor relationships (think Steve Jobs or Mark Zuckerberg) and formulated a new definition of mentorship:

Mentorship is a free transfer of assets from one person to another.

In Koester's model, the most successful mentoring relationships happen when the mentor is able to open doors for the mentee that were previously closed. To do this effectively, Koester suggests that the relationship initially focus around a project.

And herein lies the opportunity. As Career Services and Provost's offices begin to strategize around closing this social capital gap, applied learning projects that bring the instruction in the classroom to life in a real world setting presents a unique opportunity to weave BOTH work-integrated and relationship-rich together. If a learner participates in one of these projects that requires them to build connections along the way, they are more likely to have those doors opened by a "Super Mentor" who has seen their work in action.

24. Strada, "Understanding Undergraduates' Career Preparation Experiences," 2021

25. Julia Freeland Fisher, "Innovators Talk: Networked Networks," 2020



Career support is the **#1** thing that alumni want out of their alma mater.²⁶



Most workers switch jobs **4x** in the first decade after graduating college.²⁶

03 Scaling to Alumni is No Longer Optional

Alumni Relations has always been a job of attrition.

As students graduate and start their careers, it's inevitable that some will drift away from their university as they join other organizations or associations. The goal of alumni relations is to slow that attrition down.

In the old world, alumni relations focused on the social experience of college. Happy hours, reunions, gamewatches, homecoming, and other such events were planned specifically to provide social outlets to graduates. Come join us back on campus and watch the team, just like in the old days. This was the value that alumni then were seeking.

Over the last decade, that value demanded by alumni has changed. As students graduated into the Great Recession, alumni were looking back at their institution for more support as they navigated uncertain job markets. Alumni surveys from across the country showed that career support is the #1 thing that alumni want out of their alma mater. Makes sense given that most workers switch jobs four times in the first decade after they graduate college.²⁶ And that was pre-pandemic before the "Great Resignation."

In the new world, alumni are looking for support in designing the next step in their career. And they will look towards the institution that helped them with their first job: their alma mater.

What happens next is crucial. If an institution can provide them with the resources to help them on that journey, they build affinity, engagement, and trust with their stakeholders. The value of their degree continues to climb the more they feel that the university supports them beyond seeing them as a number in the numerator in a "graduation rate" equation.

The good news is that the work-integrated, relationship-rich approach that works for students also works for alumni. In the 142 mentorship relationships that Eric Koester studied, most of them began after the mentee had left college. In fact, the projects and connections that alumni engage with become even more powerful as the mentee brings their own work experience and knowledge to the relationship.

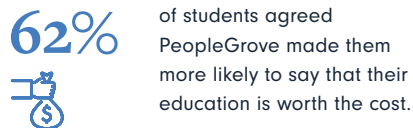
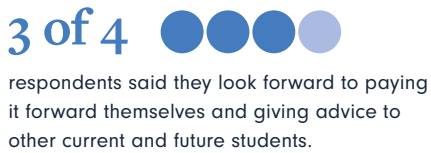
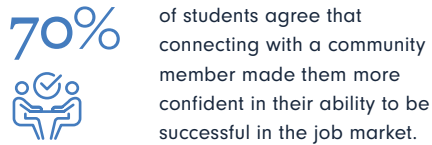
By scaling access to these opportunities, alumni relations can reduce the attrition of the community by providing real value.

Offices may even find that those who have drifted away excitedly return to the fold when they are able to continue learning and growing in their career through their alma mater.

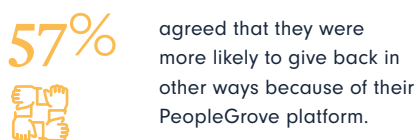
26. CNN Business, "The new normal: 4 job changes by the time you're 32," 2016

Driving Meaningful Measurable Outcomes

WHEN INSTITUTIONS USE PEOPLEGROVE:



VS



Survey Results from PeopleGrove Users, 2021

At PeopleGrove, we work with over 450 institutions who are focused on prioritizing career outcomes for their communities. By combining work-integrated and relationship-rich experiences into what Freeland Fisher has called "Edtech That Connects," we focus on how we can help learners design their next step at every point of their journey.

In 2021, we wanted to understand how we were doing. If we looked at these "demand-side" metrics, are we helping our partners drive outcomes for our learners?

Confident, Prepared Students

For students, it was clear that the more we can expand their networks and build social capital, the more confident they are in the job market. 70% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that connecting with a community member made them more confident in their ability to be successful in the job market. On top of that, 3 out of every 4 respondents said they look forward to paying it forward themselves and giving advice to other current and future students.

And most importantly, the mere existence of a supportive community increases their perception of the continued value they are currently getting, and will continue to get, out of their investment in higher education. 62% agreed or strongly agreed that the platform made them more likely to say that their education is worth the cost.

Alumni Who Want to Give Back

For alumni respondents, we looked at their perception of the helpfulness of their network to directly compare with what Gallup reported nationally. While their results²⁰ showed that only 9% of alumni find their network "helpful" or "very helpful," 63% of alumni using PeopleGrove gave their network a "helpful" or "very helpful" rating. A 7x difference!

Alumni also reported that the platform helped ensure that they remained a part of their university community. 60% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the platform kept their alma mater relevant in their lives, with 65% saying they would use the platform to make a career change. 52% also said that they are more likely to recommend their alma mater to a potential applicant because of the platform. And finally, 57% agreed or strongly agreed that they were more likely to give back in other ways because of their PeopleGrove platform.



Rewards for Action vs. Perils of Inaction

The strategies outlined here build one, cohesive experience for a learner on campus. This experience creates a culture of purpose, confidence, and trust between the individual and the institution.

Without that experience, we create a perpetual cycle where our learners will fail to realize the value of their investment in higher education.

- Students who don't see how their studies set them up for a career will look elsewhere in the now crowded learning ecosystem for other ways to get the job they want.
- Those who graduate without a job or are underemployed face an uphill climb to reach the same earnings as those who do graduate with that good job.²⁷
- Alumni who can't continue to find value from their alma mater will leave the community, fail to advocate for the brand, and ultimately withhold a possible donation.

We're already seeing this cycle play out in the enrollment challenges faced by the entire industry.²⁸

Putting #LearnersFirst

The heart of higher education has always been those who seek to advance themselves through knowledge. And those who make higher education their calling have always had the best interest of their communities at heart. Yet, we have reached a point where the public believes that institutions put themselves before their students.²⁹

In 2019, Brandon Busteed completed his keynote by offering an image of a "virtuous cycle" of higher education. One where the engaged, employed, and satisfied student pays it forward to those behind them. Where the institution grows through the growth of the individuals in their community.

In this cycle, the answer to this perception challenge lies back at the core of education – the learner. Understanding and measuring our progress towards helping students achieve what they truly want out of their experience centers efforts on those higher education is meant to serve.

And as we enter into a new era of consumer awareness, students and alumni alike will be looking at their alma mater to either praise or blame the institution for the trajectory of their career.³⁰

Let's make it praise.

27. Gallup, "Graduates With Good Job Upon Graduation Earn More, Faster," 2018

28. Axios, "College enrollment plummets - again," 2022

29. New America, "Varying Degrees," 2017

30. PeopleGrove, "Career Services For All. No, Seriously." 2021



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