



# Three Steps to Drive Student Retention through Career Development Services

Research Provided by

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# Introduction

## Is Student Retention a Career Services Problem?

The perfect storm of COVID-19, years of global economic uncertainty, and declining numbers of students choosing to go to college have created the steepest decline in college enrollments on record. Enrollment declines have persisted post-pandemic and threaten both the vitality of the future workforce and, closer to home, college budgets.<sup>1</sup> To tackle these challenges, schools are adopting an “all-hands-on-deck” strategy, rallying not just administrators and faculty but also involving provosts, presidents, and admissions teams.

Successful colleges and universities understand there are two ways to improve enrollments: stronger recruitment and better retention. Admissions offices often get the attention for enrolling larger incoming classes, but career center staff play a crucial role in keeping students engaged and progressing towards desirable professional goals. Retention is a tracking metric for schools; persistence is a student mindset. We know that students are more likely to persist semester-to-semester and year-to-year

### Case Study

Western Kentucky University (WKU) recognized student retention issues, particularly among those who entered without declaring a major or began pursuing a major that didn't suit them. In response, WKU sought an advising tool that could cater to four distinct student populations:

- Traditional first-time, full-time freshmen
- Students transitioning from the community college system
- Regional non-traditional students studying part-time
- International students

WKU employed an online career guidance tool for freshman experience courses to address this. This additional resource aimed to assist students, as early as possible, in choosing a major that aligned with their purposes and passions. Furthermore, WKU ensured that potential transfer students could access this platform before their admission. They also encouraged both non-traditional and international students to use the online career guidance tool when selecting their courses. The student affairs team at WKU believes that advising centered on career goals is crucial for student retention and success.

when engaged, succeeding, and seeing the path to a meaningful future.

The collaboration among career center professionals, student affairs, and faculty is crucial. Together, they play a pivotal role in guiding students to be more intentional, make informed career choices, and successfully navigate important milestones on the path to graduation and a successful career.

1. <https://fortune.com/2023/03/09/american-skipping-college-huge-numbers-pandemic-turned-them-off-education/>

## Education and Career Alignment: The Problem

There's never been a more challenging time for Career Services – unless it was last year or maybe next year. What's so challenging? It's students who are less likely to come to campus seeking support. It's the expectation that a college degree guarantees sustainable employment. It's local employers demanding college graduates steeped in "employability skills" in addition to a degree. And it's strained budgets requiring staff to do more with less. Underlying all of this is an ongoing problem of students investing in a college education without making informed, intentional choices about their future careers.



## The Solution

Instead of trying to solve myriad of problems from multiple stakeholders, Career Service leaders can start by solving just one – guiding students to meaningful careers that fit. Anyone who has ever taught a college class knows that attendance is better, performance is higher, and persistence is stronger when students are interested in the topic and see the direct connection to a personally relevant outcome (such as a meaningful career). By helping students make intentional choices toward careers that fit, they will perform better in classes, return semester to semester (building retention), prepare more effectively for the workforce, and bring the employable skills companies seek. Best of all, helping students find their fit is easy and frees up career center staff for other student success initiatives. Let us explain:

Vocational psychology provides two theories that describe a) how to help students find their purpose and b) why doing so leads to positive outcomes. Holland's Theory of Career Choice<sup>2</sup> explains how pursuing a major or career path that fits our interests leads to persistence and academic or career success. Studying content matching their interests gives students a stronger drive, making them more likely to overcome obstacles and more likely to succeed. We know from research that "time on task" is one of the best predictors of learning.

Students work harder and longer when the content is interesting. Intuitively, it makes sense that students high on Artistic interests will thrive on school tasks requiring creativity, while those high on Investigative interests will devote themselves to school tasks requiring problem-solving.

The Theory of Work Adjustment<sup>3</sup> explains how we derive personal meaning in environments that address our strongest values. Students high in Relationships will develop a passion for careers that allow them to serve others, while those high in Achievement will want to pursue careers that are results-oriented or evoke a feeling of accomplishment.

The two theories work well in tandem. Pursuing career paths that match students' work interests keeps them motivated and driven in the short run. When those career paths also match their work values, they remain motivated because they can see the pot of goodness at the end of the rainbow.

2. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holland\\_Codes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holland_Codes)

3. <https://vpr.psych.umn.edu/theory-work-adjustment>

## Why Interests Matter

In 1943, Stanford psychology professor E.K. Strong, Jr.,<sup>4</sup> used a boat metaphor to describe how interests impact people differently than do their abilities and achievements:

“The relationship among abilities, interests, and achievements may be likened to a motor boat with a motor and a rudder. The motor (abilities) determines how fast the boat can go, the rudder (interests) determines which way the boat goes.”

Student abilities and achievement, measured by metrics like high school GPA and test scores, influence academic performance in college. But what matters first is aligning a student's path with their interests. Doing so creates the conditions in which students are motivated to optimize the potential established by their abilities.

The niece of one of the authors attended a small Midwest liberal arts college, forgoing any career assessments and intending to pursue her parents' dream of becoming a doctor. After three semesters of high tuition bills and average grades, her mother asked if she could take a comprehensive career assessment. The assessments showed that she was a great fit to be an elementary school teacher (which she had secretly always wanted to be). The results prompted her to enroll in a university closer to home and major in K-12 education. She maintained a high GPA for the remainder of her undergraduate career and graduated with a great job as a third-grade teacher.

4. Strong, E.K. Jr. (1943). Vocational interests of men and women. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press (p. 17).

# Overview

## Improving Retention by Guiding Students to Find Their Career Fit

The influential vocational psychologist David Campbell once published a book with a very long title: If You Don't Know Where You're Going, You'll Probably End Up Somewhere Else. Truer words were never spoken for students struggling to forge their path in an uncertain world of work. Without a clear end goal, figuring out what learning experiences to pursue and who to lean on for mentorship and support can feel overwhelming. But framing this same adage positively: With the support of Career Services, students will likely find that "if you do know where you're going, you'll probably get there."

As you'll see, supporting students getting there is deceptively simple.



## Steps for Career Service Leaders

Here is an overview of the steps we'll outline next:

First, help students imagine a preferred future. It is hard to project what life will be like down the road. The good news is, with your help, students don't have to blindly guess what they'll enjoy when they join the workforce. Offer students science-based assessments with predictive algorithms to help them identify satisfying career paths that fit them well.

Second, help students prepare for a preferred future. Once students know a career path that will bring them joy and

meaning, you can connect them to experiences designed to validate that pathway, spur growth, and develop connections along the way.

Third, help students seize their preferred future. As they enter the workforce, with your support and by leveraging science-based tools, they will have what it takes to embark on a purpose-driven job search that will set them up for a successful and satisfying career.

# 01 Step One

## Help Students Imagine a Preferred Future

How do students decide which career path to pursue?

Most are bombarded with cultural messages about what industries are hot, which jobs are lucrative, and where the most job security lies. Many feel pressure from parents and compare themselves constantly to the most laser-focused of their peers. It's all a bit head-spinning. Successful career

decision-making starts with a clear understanding of the self, proceeds with exploring available options, and lands on a path forward based on fit. How can you best support students in this process?

### **Promote intentional decision-making, informed by data.**

Students first need to understand, appreciate, and own the fact that they are in the driver's seat when it comes to shaping their career trajectories. Building from that starting point, some students need greater insight into what brings them meaning; some need a clearer sense of their options, and some need support with pulling the pieces together, making a choice, and committing to it.

The key is helping students make wise decisions wisely. Put another way, the objective is not just the outcome itself but the process students go through to reach it. The most successful

approach is a planful, intentional one in which students learn a process for systematically evaluating their options and finding their fit.

Invest in a science-backed online career guidance platform that (1) uses reliable and valid assessments to help students better understand themselves, (2) highlights career paths that align with their unique profiles of interests and values, and (3) encourages reflection on interests and values leading to career exploration and program choice.

## Start at the Beginning

For most students, the beginning is Exploring Options.

Many students are not thinking much about their career development during their orientation experience, but incorporating science-based career assessments and decision-making tools as early as possible reinforces the importance of being planful and proactive. As soon as students are admitted to college, they should be introduced to career guidance tools and encouraged to explore career paths. Science-based assessments offer an efficient, data-driven way to stimulate thinking about where students are headed and how their college experience will get them there. By the summer before their freshmen year, students should be thinking deeply about their career options. Schools like Boise State University, Ashland University, and Western Kentucky incorporate career-planning sessions within new student orientation, which gives Career Services a high-impact way to introduce themselves to students even before Day 1.

Unfortunately, for many students, career planning—if it happens at all—is an intuitive, haphazard process. To foster a more intentional, systematic, and informed approach, many schools now require a “first-year experience” course into which career planning is built. For example, Grace College (IN) walks all first-year students through their career assessment results, encouraging informed decision-making and reflection on how students’ careers will fit into their broader sense of purpose and meaning in life. Their efforts were profiled by their regional PBS affiliate [here](#).

## Embed Career Assessments within Experiential Learning Opportunities

Experiential learning —learning by doing—is a powerful way to drive student engagement. Experiential learning opportunities like internships, field experiences, service-learning, and lab-based research experiences can have an even greater impact on students who tie these experiences to their career goals. Using science-based career assessments is a powerful way to make and strengthen these connections. Assessment results can inform how students evaluate and choose experiential learning opportunities. For example, Berry College in Georgia uses career assessment scores to match students to on-campus jobs, optimizing their chances of working in a role that personally resonates.

## 02 Step Two

# Help Students Prepare for a Preferred Future

As students discover their preferred future, they should move to validate their path and major and then gain experience.

Students now will be less likely to seek out direct support from Career Services, but Career Services professionals can still have a tremendous impact on student persistence and success by partnering with stakeholders on campus. During the second and third years of students' college experience, there should be two goals for facilitating student retention and progress towards their degree:

- Promote career crystallization through the college experience;
- Close knowledge and skill gaps to move students towards meaningful careers.

Career crystallization means bringing clarity to students' career goals and the path to achieving those goals. A student in their first year may learn they are a good fit for a career in medicine. Whether they should pursue specific

paths such as doctor, nurse, or healthcare administration should be shaped through ongoing career exploration and self-reflection. This self-reflection can be facilitated by reminding students of their career profiles and what can be done to fill knowledge and skill gaps.

While these activities can be self-directed by students, they can also be super-charged with input from instructors, student services, and student organization leaders. Career Services can lead these efforts by encouraging students to share their profiles and occupational choices with their educational support ecosystem.

Following are examples of activities that can be used campus-wide to help students clarify and prepare for their preferred future.



## For Instructors

Activities such as these can be embedded in a single career readiness course or in any in-major class. In general, faculty facilitate student learning by helping them understand the relevance of course content. Connecting that content to a future career is a great way of building relevance.

- Plan examples and in-class activities that will resonate with different groups of students based on the most common interest profiles of students in a class (e.g., Social/Artistic and Conventional/Investigative).
- For students who are 'trying' but not doing well on assignments, diagnose whether the course itself is a fit for the student given their career assessment profile and suggest alternative ways for them to approach the course material given their interests.
- Assign informational interviews to gather occupational information and require questions enabling students to affirm fit to purpose, e.g., "What do you enjoy most about your job? What do you find most meaningful about it?"
- Integrate experiential learning into courses through activities such as field works and project-based learning. As students report their experiences, include reflective questions that connect lessons learned to their career planning and destination occupation.
- Invite students to conduct a SWOT analysis in courses related to the major. Have students research potential careers by using integrated career assessment tools and other resources and identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to them as long-term career options.
- Connect students to alumni by engaging them as guest speakers in classes or mentors to undergraduates.

### Case Study

## Using Career Assessment in the Classroom

Career assessment is a central component of a career readiness course required of all majors in the business school at the University of Memphis. At the outset, students review their assessment results and career choices they may have made as freshmen. They also complete a workbook that gives them a guided understanding of their results, supports career crystallization, and prepares them to meet with employers. Students prepare an initial resume that integrates their results. The resume not only reflects their education and work experience but also their personal interests and values. In the third week, they participate in a career and internship fair and use the event to learn more about local companies and to practice presenting themselves to recruiters. In class exercises and homework assignments in future weeks, they build on this experience to refine their career goals - both the type of work they want to do and the type of employer. By the end of the semester, students have revised their resumes and created personal development plans to guide their remaining time in school.

## For Student Services

Student services play an essential role in career crystallization and helping students prepare for their preferred future. Worthwhile activities include:

- Schedule appointments with students struggling in a major to review their academic performance in light of their career profile.
- Plan an 'employer-of-the-day' event and serve pizza to attract students. Share available jobs with students in advance and have them compare job profiles to their destination occupation. Local employers love to come to campus to meet students.
- Arrange field trips to local employers; many students have no idea of what the inside of a business looks like. Suggest to students that they review their workplace preferences to prepare questions for employers to help them understand whether that corporate culture is a fit for them.

As students gain more information about the world of work, with the help of career services, instructors, and student services, they will be able to make more informed choices about their best occupational fit and then seek out other learning opportunities to round out their preparation for a meaningful career.

# 03 Step Three

## Help Students Seize their Preferred Future

Students must continue to build their network and translate their self-knowledge into a job search strategy.

As students enter the home stretch of their undergraduate journey, they anticipate graduation and set their sights on job opportunities. Are your students implementing a purpose-driven job search that results in meaningful, satisfying employment?

Research shows that when people participate in a job search intervention like a workshop, they are three times more likely

to land a job.<sup>5</sup> This same research shows that the two most effective components of such interventions are improving students' job search skills and enhancing their motivation to engage and persist in the process.

Following are some ways to support students as they seize their preferred future.

### Boost Job Search Skills via Multiple Intervention Touchpoints

Workshops, job search support groups, classroom-based interventions, college-sponsored career fairs, and one-on-one coaching are ways to help students learn job search skills.

All of these intervention approaches should target one objective: helping students move from a default passive strategy (apply-online-and-wait) to a highly active one. A primary way to achieve this is to leverage the power of students' networks. Networking should begin as early as students' second year but should accelerate in the final year. 70% of jobs are filled through network strategies. Making direct contact with alumni, recruiters, and employers exponentially increases the chances of finding a job.

Interventions should also teach active skills that transform students' preferred future into reality.

Do your students have a handle on writing a cover letter and adapting their resume in a way that connects the job

requirements to their interests and values? There are resources online and through advanced career assessment platforms that guide students through these steps.

Interviews. Encourage students to talk about their interests and values as personal strengths, then give them the opportunity to practice in recorded mock interviews. Career services staff are well equipped to provide interview feedback, but alumni and mentors can also serve effectively in this role.

Do your students know what kind of employer is their optimal fit? As students work to understand their own preferences, they can get a feel for an organization's culture by examining the company website, speaking to prospective co-workers, and coming prepared to a job fair with questions for employers about their potential fit should they be offered a job.

23. Liu, S., Huang, J. L., & Wang, M. (2014). Effectiveness of job search interventions: A meta-analytic review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 140(4), 1009–1041.

### Career Services Tool Highlight:

## Using PathwayU to Measure Workplace Preferences

PathwayU's Workplace Preferences shift focus away from the essential duties of a job and toward the culture of a particular organization. Students' understanding of their workplace preferences helps answer this crucial question: Does this employer embrace the organizational values that are most important to me? PathwayU measures seven broad workplace preferences:

- **Excellence.** People who value Excellence enjoy working for organizations that emphasize achievement, quality, being distinctive from others, and being competitive.
- **Guiding Principles.** People who value Guiding Principles enjoy working for organizations that value social responsibility, have a clear guiding philosophy, are reflective in their approach to doing business, and have a good reputation.
- **Collaboration.** People who value Collaboration enjoy working for organizations that are team/people oriented, share information freely and emphasize collaboration.
- **Innovation.** People who value Innovation enjoy working for organizations that are quick to take advantage of opportunities, emphasize innovation, are comfortable taking risks, and encourage employees to take individual responsibility.
- **Recognition.** People who value Recognition enjoy working for organizations that strongly emphasize fairness, provide praise and high pay for good performance, and offer opportunities for professional growth.
- **Performance.** People who value Performance enjoy working for organizations with high expectations for performance, are results-oriented, highly organized, and have high levels of enthusiasm for the job.
- **Stability.** People who value Stability enjoy working for organizations that are highly stable, where the level of conflict is low, where job security is high, and where people are calm.

## Enhance Motivation with Multi-Pronged Support

Even students with well-developed job search skills need proactivity and motivation to find success. “Passivity drift” is common but deeply problematic in a job search. How can you help students “keep the pedal down?”

One way is by helping students understand the power of effective goals. Clearly-stated job search goals have been shown to predict job search intensity, which in turn predicts job search success. Regular check-ins with a counselor, group, or faculty member offer opportunities to encourage progress toward job search goals.

A second way is to help students build self-efficacy, or confidence, in navigating job search tasks successfully. Self-efficacy spurs motivation; students will engage in activities in which they are confident. Students high in self-efficacy also set higher goals and interpret failure as the result of a lack of effort rather than a lack of ability. Self-efficacy increases when students learn from others, draw from their past successes, and receive helpful encouragement. For these reasons, incorporating role models (e.g., alumni and recent graduates) into job search interventions is very beneficial.

A third way students maintain motivation is by enlisting emotional support (encouragement and assurance) and tangible support (e.g., reviewing a resume or helping prepare for an interview). Support comes in many forms, but establishing a “personal board of directors” is one helpful approach. The benefits are profound when students can name and connect with specific faculty, staff, parents, alumni mentors, and other trusted supporters who “have their back” in the process.

### Tactical Highlight for Advising Students: SMARTER Goals

Job search behaviors are easy to connect with clearly stated goals that meet the conditions of SMARTER goals—that is, goals that are:

- **Specific.** “To feel better about where my career is headed” speaks to a pain point, but it’s vague. “Within the next month, interview three people who work in a career path that is exciting to me” is a specific and far more effective goal.
- **Measurable.** Is it easy to assess progress using numbers? Look at the example above. “Interview three people” is easily measurable and more effective than “feel better.”
- **Attainable.** If you expend the effort, can you achieve the goal? “Complete your career assessments by Friday” is attainable. “Climb Mount Everest next week” probably is not.
- **Relevant.** A smarter goal is relevant to your larger objective. For a student trying to choose a major, for example, a goal like “Within the next week, gather detailed information about training requirements for three promising career paths” is highly relevant.
- **Time-bound.** Open-ended goals are less likely to drive success than goals with target dates. If a student wants to find an internship by the semester’s end, treat it like a deadline and work out a timeline for each goal leading up to it.
- **Engaging.** A smarter goal is one that students are highly motivated to pursue. They will need that level of engagement when they confront the inevitable obstacles.
- **Reinforcing.** Smarter goals elicit reinforcement through support, encouragement, or feedback from others. Self-reinforcement helps, too.



## Conclusion

While the challenges facing Career Service leaders today are varied, steering students towards careers that truly resonate with them may have the single biggest impact across the board. Because when students are genuinely engaged with a subject and can perceive its direct relevance to their personal aspirations, it results in improved engagement, enhanced academic performance, and greater determination to succeed. Through assisting students in making purposeful decisions about careers that align with their interests, Career leaders are helping ensure students will excel academically, persist from one semester to the next, acquire the necessary skills for the job market, and possess the qualities that companies value when seeking employees.

## About the Authors

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