



Career Access: Higher Education's New Core Differentiator

How Colleges and Universities Can Compete
in Today's Learning and Certification Market

Consider this business case study...

There is a store whose main competitive advantage is that it's been the only place where a consumer can go to get what they want. This particular product is one of the few things in the world that is *almost* guaranteed to improve the customer's life. If the customer buys it, they will make more money, live longer, and generally be happier. As such, the store has seen a huge amount of growth, with customers coming from all over the world to pay for this one particular product.

Because they're the only store in the market, they essentially have a monopoly. With no competition, there is nothing stopping them from raising their prices. And so they do...by a lot!

Soon, the store has raised its prices almost 3 times faster than their customers' ability to pay. Suddenly, another store opens up, and then another, and another. They promise the same product that the original store does, just at a far cheaper price. But even for these new stores, there are fewer customers around buying anyone's product.

Our original store's only hope is to look to those who considered the store the only place to get the product and hope that they still think the store's product is the best one. Unfortunately, they don't. In fact, they publicly announce (to much applause) that they'll take products from the other stores. Some even say the other products are better than the ones from the original store.

The store is in trouble. They need something to differentiate themselves.



A Case Study on Higher Education

Just for a moment, let's evaluate higher education the same way a business is evaluated.

If you read that first sentence and felt your stomach turn, it's understandable. Higher education's ultimate goal is about human progress, knowledge creation, and the advancement of society. It's not about selling soda or shipping boxes from point A to B.

But consider how much higher ed does in fact operate like a business. Institutions spend money to build a pipeline of consumers (students) from which they can predict a certain number of customers (enrollment). Those customers are onboarded (orientation) and satisfaction is tracked (retention). Based on their effectiveness, an



institution can predict revenue and project for future years. Satisfied customers (graduates) go on to be strong brand ambassadors who drive more customers and continue to support the business (philanthropy).

However, the trouble the store in our first case study is in sounds a lot like where higher ed is today. The differentiator that the industry has traditionally relied on — the fact that a degree was the launching pad for a career — no longer exists.

An Existential Threat to the Model of Higher Education

Higher education has had a “monopoly on learning and certification”¹ for centuries. Generation after generation pursued college degrees as a means of not only bettering themselves, but also of proving their worth to society. Of course, bettering themselves included seeking and obtaining a livelihood. A good job.



+169%

College tuition has risen
169% since 1980

At some point in the evolution of work over the last 50 years, the college degree became required for that good job. Consider that in 1970, only 26% of middle class workers had any education beyond high school. Yet in 2010, more than 60% of jobs in the American economy required some level of higher education.²

Regardless of how it happened, a college degree has practically become a ticket to the middle class — or at least that’s the promise.

Once higher education established this monopoly, their prices skyrocketed. Since 1980, college tuition has risen at an astonishing 169%. As for young workers, those most likely to seek the benefits of a degree...their earnings have only risen 19% over the same time period.³ Consumers are losing their ability to pay.

Enter new players in the market. Credentialing programs, apprenticeships, and other technical training programs promise careers in health care, financial services, and law without the burden of debt.⁴ Want to work in tech? Join a coding boot camp at a fraction of the price of even a *semester* of college. And these boot camps come with career services and relationships with employers.

Even large corporations, the ones who set degree requirements in the first place, are challenging the status quo. Major corporations like Delta Airlines have dropped the degree requirement for many jobs, including pilot applications.⁵ Google has created their own certifications for “in-demand” jobs...no experience necessary.⁶

Respondents to a recent Forbes study were asked to rank “what types of additional education and training opportunities after high school are the best value?” Higher Ed finished sixth. As the title of the article declares: the college degree no longer reigns supreme.⁷

Along with this new competition, add a shrinking number of consumers. Thanks to low birth rates around the Great Recession, it is expected that there will be 15% fewer traditional-age college students by 2026.⁸

More companies, competing for fewer consumers; never a good formula for any industry.



-15%

There will be 10% fewer
traditional-age college
students by 2026.

1. Bass, Randall, “Formation by Design,” TEDxGeorgetown, 2014
2. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, “Help Wanted,” 2010
3. CNBC, “College costs have increased by 169% since 1980 — but pay for young workers is up by just 19%: Georgetown report,” 2021
4. New York Times, “Want a White-Collar Career Without College Debt? Become an Apprentice,” 2019
5. AOPA, “Delta Drops Degree Requirement for Pilot Applications,” 2022
6. <https://www.grow.google>
7. Forbes, “In a Shifting Education Marketplace, The College Degree No Longer Reigns Supreme,” 2022
8. The Chronicle of Higher Education, “The Shrinking of Higher Education,” 2022

Is Higher Ed Delivering for Students and Employers?

Cost and competition are not the only challenges to higher education. Quality has also been questioned by the very consumers paying for the product themselves. And a lack of career outcomes for students are the source of the questions.

As we wrote about in our [Learner First Approach eBook](#), survey⁹ after survey¹⁰ tell us learners pursue a degree

for a good or better job. It's the reason higher education established their monopoly in the first place.

But with this monopoly the quality of the product has dropped, according to national surveys.

Measuring the Quality of an Education

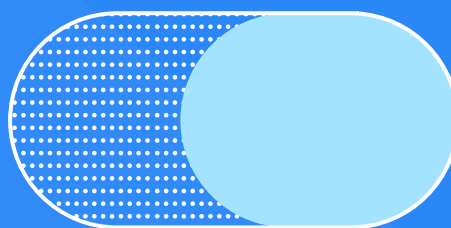
A recent Strada study identified three outcomes as the most important ways to measure how learners are evaluating a college investment: (1) did their income improve (above \$50k), (2) do they agree their education helped them meet their goals, and (3) do they agree their degree is worth the cost. Only 52% of surveyed alumni checked all three boxes.¹¹

For traditionally underserved students (i.e. BIPOC, first gen, female students), outcomes are significantly worse. Black alumni are 27% less likely than their white peers to say college improved their income, helped them meet their goals, and that their degree was worth the cost.¹² First generation students are 18% less likely to agree with all three. And females are 25% less likely than males to agree.

Learners Evaluate Their College Investment

Strada survey asked:

1. Did your income improve?
2. Did it help you meet your goals?
3. Was your degree worth the cost?



52%

of all all alumni
agreed

-27%

of Black alumni
less likley to agree

-18%

of First gen alumni
less likley to agree

-25%

of Female alumni
less likley to agree

9. UCLA Higher Education Research Institute, "The American Freshman," 2019

10. Strada, "Student Outcomes Beyond Completion: National Findings From the 2021 Strada Alumni Survey, 2021

11. Ibid

12. Ibid



Grads Are Not Workforce Ready

Employers are also raising concerns. Even as they drop the degree requirements for applicants, students still don't feel confident in their abilities. A recent study from Cengage showed that 49% of recent graduates did not apply for an entry-level job in their field because they felt unqualified. Many of those students feel they lack the skills listed in those job descriptions.¹³

At the same time, hiring managers are questioning an applicants' overall preparedness, indicating that many lack the skills necessary to be successful. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) shows "preparedness gaps" of anywhere between 3% and 21% on certain skills employers deem critical. These gaps are identified by asking employers to categorize skills as "very important" and asking them to report if graduates are "very well prepared" in that skill.¹⁴ The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) has also recently demonstrated that graduates and employers don't see eye to eye on how graduates are prepared for the workforce.¹⁵

How to Change the Narrative and Restore Faith in Higher Ed

The pressure on higher education has never been greater – to win the perception battle and to stand out from the new market entrants they're competing with.

Luckily for higher education, they're already equipped to deliver something no one can. It's what students, alumni, and employers are looking for, and it puts control back in higher ed's hands.

The answer: Career Access.

13. Cengage Group, "Regret, Confusion, and Lack of Confidence: Cengage Group's 2022 Graduate Employability Report Exposes the Reality of Entering Today's Workforce," 2021
14. Inside Higher Ed, "What Employers Want," 2021
15. NACE, "New College Graduates and Employers Agree on Key Competencies, but at Odds About New Grad Proficiency," 2022

What is Career Access?

It would be very easy to provide a simple definition for this idea. Even as you have read the term, you may have thought that by just giving students and alumni a list of job postings from prospective employers that you have provided career access. If your community can see available jobs they can — in theory — get those jobs.

However, the college to career gap, as evidenced above, demonstrates that such a simple solution is not sufficient. Technology solutions for this have been available for more than a decade now and the problem is worse.¹⁶

Career Access is the principle that every individual, regardless of their background or status, has the ability to fully understand how their passions, interests, and studies can become a meaningful

career. Then, with newfound confidence and vital resources, they can build the competencies necessary to achieve and succeed in that career.

This definition puts the responsibility of Career Access squarely on the shoulders of colleges and universities who strive to serve lifelong learners. It requires that institutions become more proactive in enabling their communities so that individuals can meet their goals.

It also asks that institutions take full control over equity issues inherent in the career outcomes of learners. A simple job board allows those issues to persist as only those well-versed in “how to get a job” tactics (or may have know-how and help from involved families and mentors) will leverage opportunities posted.

How to Implement a Career Access Approach

The good news for colleges and universities is the elements that make up Career Access are already present on campus and in the work of Career Education, Alumni Relations, Academic Affairs, and more. Frankly, it's inherent in the work of every office on campus.

A Career Access approach consists of three main elements: Lifelong Career Learning, High-Impact Experiences, and Social Capital. These elements are not, by any means, discrete categories which have no overlap. In fact, there is considerable overlap here.

16. Craig, Ryan, “Abolish Career Services,” 2022

01 Part One of Career Access: Lifelong Career Learning

Career Education has always been about two major types of learning: (1) offering students exposure to industries and professions and (2) teaching necessary “job search” skills so students could get the job. Each has undergone an evolution over the last few decades. And a new way of thinking about how each is delivered better fulfills a Career Access promise.

Exposing Students to Industries & Professions: Old vs New

When a student visits the Career Center, invariably they’re instructed to review a list of possible professions based on their major. A good place to start: a declared major may indicate a student’s interests. But the alignment between interests and majors is never a straight line. In fact, in today’s market, it’s more likely that students are picking programs in which they have little interest just so that they are more likely to get a return on their investment.

For today’s job seekers, majors and programs are not the most important variables. Rather, a learner’s passions and motivations provide a better gauge as to what careers would be best suited for that individual. Do they like solving problems or leading teams? How do they spend their free time? Answers to these types of questions provide a better foundation to subsequently expose the learner to industries and functions where a job seeker can find their purpose. After all, and especially for Gen Z, finding that purpose is the #1 thing one seeks in a good job.¹⁷



Gen Z reports that the #1 thing they seek in a “good job” is Purpose.

17. Gallup, “Purpose and Pay Define a ‘Good Job’ for College Grads,” 2020

Teaching “Job Search” Skills: Old vs New

Certain tactics and strategies that get people jobs can be taught. In the old model, this was primarily resume and cover letter tips. But in today’s world, being able to network and show career competencies is vital to getting in the door.

This means career education has to rely on those working in today’s market — professionals who can provide learners with best practices and guidance. When you teach learners how to ask the right questions and engage with those in the working world, higher education ensures that these job seekers enter the market armed with the strategies and tactics needed to achieve their career goals.

Finally, with the increased focus on outcomes beyond degree completion, higher education institutions now have a mandate to support learners long after they leave campus. That means this education must be available at scale to every graduate.

In navigating the twists and turns of a career journey, alumni will inevitably seek help from the institution where they first encountered career education. If their alma mater can not provide them with the resources they are looking for, that institution has lost a supporter, advocate, and even a donor.

When you provide tools for Lifelong Career Learning, you are arming your students and alumni with the knowledge and skills to pursue their career. You’ve also unlocked the next level – one where they can put their knowledge and assumptions to the test...

02 Part Two of Career Access: High-Impact Experiences

To be prepared for today's workforce, NACE has identified eight Career Readiness Competencies that learners should focus on developing.

They include things such as Leadership, Critical Thinking, Communication, and Teamwork.¹⁸ Not necessarily things that a student can learn about in a classroom and immediately be experts in. These human skills (a far superior moniker than "soft skills") are what employers are seeking from new hires, and it's on the job applicant to actually prove that they have these competencies.¹⁹

Learners then have to rely on certain experiences — both in and out of the classroom — to help them develop these competencies. The more they can participate in these experiences, the greater their confidence in their ability to be successful in the job market.²⁰ And of course, participation in these experiences give learners the chance to demonstrate their proficiency in these skills.



18. NACE, "What is Career Readiness," 2022

19. Forbes, "Employers Want — And Will Pay For — Soft Skills. Are You Focusing On Them Enough?" 2022/13. Gallup, "Why Higher Ed?," 2018

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

Equitizing the Ability to Try and Fail

High-impact experiences also give learners an opportunity to prototype their assumptions about a possible career.

A learner may decide that an industry really isn't for them and rule out that job to pursue a different path. Learning what you don't want to do is often more valuable than learning what you do want to do.

Traditionally, higher education has relied primarily on students taking the initiative and obtaining internships or participating in extracurriculars to check this box. Group projects can also fall in this category, but most students aren't taking many classes where these are required. As such, high-impact experiences and their benefits are optional in today's model. For some, it's not even possible.

Data shows us that traditionally underserved student populations, such as first generation students, are less likely to have experiences like an internship than their continuing-generation peers.²¹ A first-gen student is statistically likely to also be low-income, relying on Pell Grants or work-study programs to pay for school. They don't have the luxury of taking a 12-week unpaid internship. And even if they can, what happens if they discover their assumptions about an industry are wrong just 2 weeks in? Now they're stuck and behind.

In a Career Access ecosystem, institutions do more to integrate these experiences. They also build new, dynamic ways to serve every learner.

An Easy Shift for Higher Ed

For high impact experiences, colleges and universities have an advantage over their competitors in the market. One of the biggest challenges with these experiences is helping learners understand just how they are developing competencies while they are in the midst of the experience itself. Learners need to be taught to have a wider perspective on what they are engaging in and how it impacts their career readiness. Dr. Randall Bass, current Vice President for Strategic Initiatives at Georgetown University called this the "Arc of Learning" in a 2014 TEDx Talk. It's an "understanding of education that's 'the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.'²²" Rather than the laser focus on "hard skills" that competitors like boot camps or apprenticeships may have, higher education is uniquely positioned to help learners understand how their experiences are developing the competencies that lead to success.

Participating in high-impact experiences is necessary for every learner. If universities don't make this mandatory, they are letting students down.



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

22. Bass, Randall, "Formation de Design," 2014

03 Part Three of Career Access:

Social Capital

Social capital is the heartbeat of Career Access.

Lifelong Career Learning and High-Impact Experiences are only made possible by leveraging the social capital inherent in an institution's community. And, with as many as 80% of jobs filled through networking²³, social capital is the #1 way that a learner will achieve their ultimate career goal. And yet, data shows that while 70% of first-year students say that they intend on networking with alumni and other professionals, only 27% of graduating students actually do so — **a 43% difference!**

Why this gap? Until now, higher education has not prioritized creating structures for their communities that allow members to effectively and consistently leverage the resources available. Social capital, and therefore careers, have not been accessible.

The relationships that make up one's social capital can be divided into two types based on their "dosage:" strong ties and weak ties.

Equipping Learners with Strong Ties: Helpful, But Less Scalable

Strong ties are higher dosage relationships. They take significant time and energy to maintain and persist. Both parties need to agree to invest those things into the relationship in order to make it work.

In higher education, learners may form strong ties with individuals like a guidance counselor, professor, or mentor assigned through a formal program. Ultimately, the top benefit for a learner is to be able to rely on that individual for guidance and advice on navigating specific situations that the knowledge-sharer has experience with. For example, mentoring programs designed for first-generation students often pair a student with a graduate who was themselves a first-generation student. That graduate knows

exactly what it feels like to be the first in their family to go to college and just how confusing, scary, and ultimately rewarding the experience can be. A student in that mentoring relationship has an invaluable resource in that mentor that can help them through the tough times and ensure they graduate.



70%

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



only 27%

of seniors actually do

23. CNBC, "How to get a job often comes down to one elite personal asset, and many people still don't realize it," 2019

Equipping Learners with Weak Ties: More Valuable Than You Think

On the opposite side of the spectrum, weak ties are lower dosage relationships. They do not take as much time and energy and the parties may never even meet in person. And that fact offers a knowledge-seeker an opportunity to cultivate multiple weak tie relationships, which even further expands their access to knowledge, support, and ultimately opportunities.

Research suggests that more jobs are earned through weak tie networks as opposed to strong tie networks.²⁴

In the recently published book [Super Mentors: The Ordinary Person's Guide to Asking Extraordinary People for Help](#), co-authors Eric Koester and Adam Saven identify different types of knowledge-sharers that a learner should have in their weak tie network that gives them the best opportunity to achieve their goals. They include knowledge-sharers who are peers or near peers all the way up through luminaries in their fields. The point is that opportunity seekers need to keep in mind who they are adding to their networks and how they can best build meaningful relationships with those who can assist them with different types of challenges at different times.

The Resource Higher Ed Can Lean On

Leveraging social capital is the only way that an institution can drive Career Access at scale. With an average of 2,263 students per professional career services staff member²⁵, it is a tall task for an institution to rely solely on staff and expect that every student will be adequately supported. Add on alumni who expect career support as well and the task is now impossible.

It's the members of an institution's community who are truly the engine of providing Career Access. Institutions who are not strategically harnessing this power with intention leave learners' career success to chance and fail to meaningfully differentiate themselves in the learning ecosystem.

24. Freeland Fisher, Julia, "Don't discount the power of students' acquaintances to expand supports and horizons," 2020

25. NACE, NACE 2021-2022 Career Services Benchmarks Survey, 2022



Career Access Throughout the Career Journey

Done correctly, the process of finding a career is a lot like the scientific method that we all learned in grade school. You encounter a problem and discover possible solutions. You then explore those solutions and learn more about how they might work. After making some assumptions, you test those assumptions to determine if your assumptions are correct. And finally, you make a conclusion and take action based on your findings.

Let's follow a typical career journey. Meet Jessica. Jessica graduated with a bachelor's in business from a top institution 4 years ago. Like many of her peers in her major, Jessica followed the typical recruitment process and landed a good job. But she has never really enjoyed business. She only chose the major because she wanted to guarantee that good job.

Four years into her career, Jessica is miserable. She's disillusioned and wants something that fits her passions and purpose.

But she has no idea where to start? To figure that out, she WILL turn to her alma mater for support.



Let Learners Discover Careers Outside the Career Center

Jessica is a career discoverer, and like so many learners, she has no idea what careers truly match her interests or passions. In many ways, she has the exact same needs as a first-year student, regardless of her alumni status or work experience. She just doesn't know what she doesn't know. She needs access to the Lifelong Career Learning tools.

By focusing on Jessica's passions and interests rather than her degree, this education can begin to match her with paths that may be more fulfilling than her current role. And of course, since Jessica is an alum, this education needs to be available beyond the walls of a career center or even a campus.

Jessica discovers quite a few roles that she had never considered or even heard of before. She selects three roles that sound interesting and decides to explore them further.

Academics and Alumni Can Help Learners Explore Careers

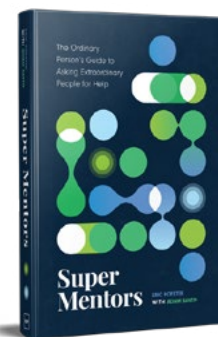
Now that Jessica has made some assumptions, it's time to start going deep. The Lifelong Career Education that Jessica is leveraging allows her to get a sense of what skills would be valuable in the role, industries where that role is valued, and even what a day in the life of someone in that role is like.

But the full picture is really going to come through social capital. Leveraging the educational tools provided by her institution, Jessica decides to begin creating Super Mentors.

As Eric Koester and Adam Saven defined in their book, Super Mentors are those who can open the door to opportunity for a learner. Importantly, Koester and Saven also challenge the notion it's the mentor that really makes the difference in a mentorship. Instead, they argue that the mentee has true control over the success or failure of the relationship. By providing frameworks and principles, Koester and Saven have created a process that any mentee can learn to effectively access that opportunity.

Since collaboration is the foundation of a successful Super Mentor relationship, Jessica decides she's going to do a side project. She decides to write a 10-part article series on a topic she's passionate about. She sets up 15-minute conversations with potential Super Mentors and prepares for those meetings using the educational tools her institution provides.

Importantly, she takes the key principle of Super Mentorship to heart: Aim High, Ask Small, and Do It Again. Soon, she's spoken with a number of prominent fellow alumni and her article series is progressing beautifully. She's even getting noticed on social media by companies and other professionals. All while getting the insider's view on what it's like to work in the roles she's targeting.



Unlike regular mentors, Super Mentors are individuals who provide more than just advice...they provide opportunity. Luckily, creating Super Mentors is a process that anyone can learn at any point in their career journey – but it all depends on the mentee, not the mentor. Learners are encouraged to identify a project that allows them to collaborate with a number of knowledge-sharers. Then they can “Aim High, Ask Small, and Do It Again.” Additionally, this collaboration helps learners establish these relationships using the 4 Laws of Super Mentors: Right Person, Right Ask, Right Start, Right Time. Through this process, a mentee can cultivate a network of relationships that open the doors to opportunity.

To learn more about Super Mentors, visit supermentorsbook.com.

Networking with Alumni Creates a Safe Space for Learners to Test Assumptions

The article series that Jessica is working on serves as a high-impact experience itself, and the Super Mentors she has surrounded herself with also give her an excellent opportunity to access additional high-impact experiences.

Following her Super Mentors frameworks, Jessica follows up with every alum she connected with. One particular alumna shared a challenge she was facing in her business, and Jessica decided to share her thoughts on the issue. They weren't even particularly complete thoughts, Jessica just followed the Super Mentors suggestion and followed up quickly.

A few days later, Jessica got a response back from the alumna. She was so impressed that Jessica took the initiative that she offered Jessica a 2-week paid, part-time opportunity to construct a full strategic plan to solve the issue. And since it's part-time, Jessica can do it in her spare time without leaving her current job.

This is how high-impact experiences can make a huge difference for a learner. Jessica now has the chance to demonstrate her competencies to both an industry professional and a company she may want to work for. At minimum, Jessica now has something to add to her portfolio for future interviews and conversations.

At the same time, Jessica is really getting an inside experience on what it's truly like to work in the role she identified, allowing her to truly test whether or not she'd be happy in that role.

In this example, Jessica leveraged social capital and Super Mentors to create her own high-impact experience. However, students and alumni alike will be expecting their institution to provide them with wider access to these types of opportunities that help them connect the classroom and career. Institutions will need to think strategically about how they can build structures where these opportunities are offered through the institution's available social capital.



The University Stays Central to Getting the Job

After everything that Jessica has experienced, she's ready to start applying for roles. It's time to get the job.

Jessica turns towards additional education resources to understand resume and interview best practices. She asks her new network of Super Mentors how they would prepare for interviews at certain companies. Her network gives her invaluable insight into the state of the industry so she can speak to her opinions on certain issues, and effectively discuss how her high-impact experiences have prepared her for the role.

But perhaps most importantly, Jessica asks her network if they happen to know anyone at companies she's applying to. One of her Super Mentors connects her with a colleague who gives Jessica even more inside information on the job. That connection even moves Jessica to the top of the pile so she is guaranteed at least one interview. From there, it's all on Jessica — and she's ready.

A Lesson for Alumni Relations: The Process is Never Linear

Jessica's story is an idealized way that a learner might go from a career discoverer to someone who is taking the next step in their career. Of course, this process plays out in hundreds of different iterations. Like a board game, learners might skip 2 spaces to subsequently go back 3 more.

What these elements of Career Access truly accomplish is helping learners deal with the uncertainty of the journey. It's a huge confidence boost to anyone when they know that they have resources to rely on when doubt creeps in and the imposter syndrome suddenly becomes very real. Armed with the opportunity to engage in Lifelong Career Learning, participate in High-Impact Experiences, and build meaningful Social Capital; any learner can enter and exit the career journey wherever and whenever they need to.



Career Access is Everybody's Business

As a whole, colleges and universities are in business to help learners achieve their goals. And learners tell us that their main goal is to find the next step in their career journey. That means the entire institution needs to support that goal.

Christian Garcia, Associate Dean and Executive Director of the Toppel Career Center at the University of Miami, asks us to think about it this way. "I am not a mental health counselor," he told us in a 2021 webinar. "But as folks who work on college campuses, if we see a student in distress, we have a responsibility to step in when it comes to mental health issues. If I see something, I'm going to check in with that student, make a referral, or walk them to the mental health center."

"The same is true of career services," Garcia continued. "Whether we teach in the classroom, whether I'm an advisor to an organization, whether I'm in athletics...we're all mentoring students in one way or another. And we have a responsibility to help those students out. It makes no sense that only one office on a college campus would be responsible for the career education of our students, the same way it would be absurd to think that only one office would be in charge of helping students with their mental health.²⁶"

That's why the Toppel Career Center titled their [10-year strategic plan](#) "Career Services is Everybody's Business."

[Here is how Career Access matters to offices across a university campus.](#)



How Career Access Matters Across Campus Offices



27. BCG, “How Higher Ed and Employers Can Partner to Power Talent Pipelines,” 2022

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

29. Stories from the Grove, “Why Career Services is Everybody’s Business,” 2021

30. Cengage, “Regret, Confusion and Lack of Confidence: Cengage Group’s 2022 Graduate Employability Report Exposes the Reality of Entering Today’s Workforce,” 2022

31. California State University System, “Alumni Attitude Survey,” 2018

32. CASE, “Alumni Engagement Metrics Findings,” 2022

The Impact of Career Access on Learners: Equity, Engagement, and ROI

The impact to the campus offices described above depends on the impact that this approach has on learners themselves. Recently, PeopleGrove published our [2021-2022 Social Capital Impact Report](#). This report surveyed over 1,600 students and over 1,200 alumni to understand their perception of the Career Access community they belonged to through their institution.



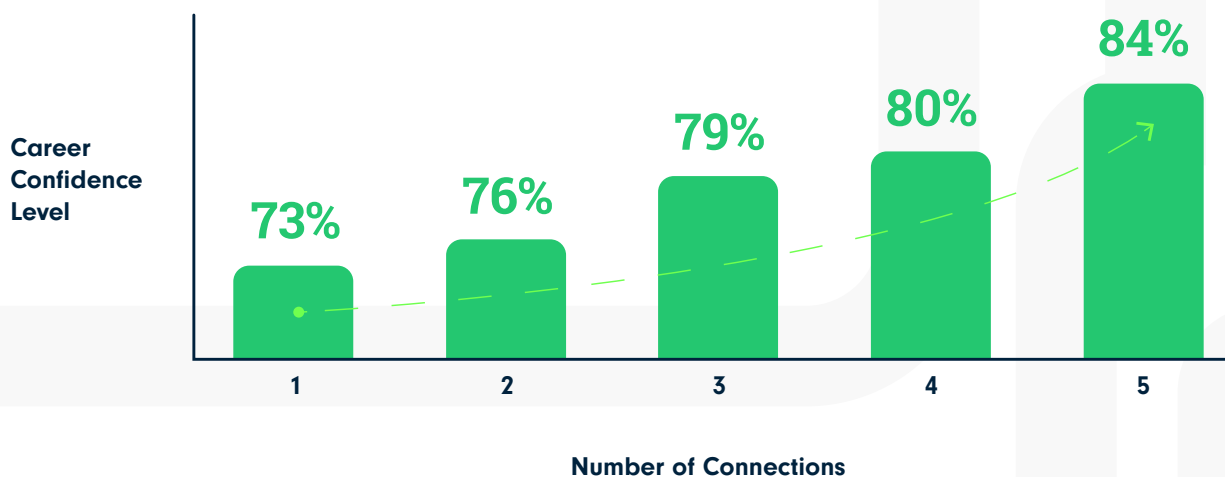
76.2%

of students agreed the support of their institution and community made them more confident in their ability to be successful in the job market

Students

Overwhelmingly, students indicated that the support of their institution and community made them more confident in their ability to be successful in the job market. 76.2% of all respondents agreed with that statement. Not only that, but the report demonstrated the more connections a student made, the more confident they became in their ability.

Connections drive career confidence and outcomes.



On top of that, we saw incredible numbers from students of traditionally underserved communities. For example, statistically, first generation students come to an institution with roughly half the inherited network of their continuing generation peers.³³ Our report demonstrated that a Career Access approach helps these students not only catch up to their peers, but surpass them in leveraging their network to obtain improved outcomes.

1st Gen students were

1.8x

more likely to agree that the community helped them discover their career path

2.4x

more likely to agree that connection in their communities got them a good job or internship

2.5x

more likely to agree that advice from the community directly helped them get a job

2.8x

more likely to agree that advice from the community directly helped them get an internship

Finally, this approach creates engaged students who are eager to give back and continue to engage. 83.5% of students said that they would continue to seek advice from the platform after graduation, while 3 out of 4 said they are looking forward to helping those coming behind them. 62% of students say that because of the community, they are more likely to say their degree is worth the cost.



83.5%

of students said that they would continue to seek advice from the platform after graduation.



62%

of students say that because of the community, they are more likely to say their degree is worth the cost.

33. Freeland Fisher, Julia, "Networked Networks," Innovators Talks presented by PeopleGrove, 2020

Alumni

Graduates express similar levels of confidence and support.

63% of alumni said that their network was “helpful” or “very helpful” — compared to just 9% nationally.³⁴ 65% of alumni said they would leverage the community should they ever want to make a career change.

A Career Access approach will also help ensure that alums stay in touch with their alma mater. 59% of respondents said that the community kept their institution relevant in their lives while 57% said they are more likely to give back in other ways because of their community. This strategy allows alumni to give of their time, talent, before an institution asks for their treasure.



63%

of alumni said that their network was “helpful” or “very helpful”



65%

of alumni said they would leverage the community should they ever want to make a career change



59%

of respondents said that the community kept their institution relevant in their lives

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

Career Access, Higher Education's Differentiator

Career Access for every learner absolutely must be a priority for colleges and universities if the industry is going to remain the go-to source for learning and certification. Scaling this approach will take strategy, intention, and investment. However, Career Access is already at the heart of most universities' strategic plans. It really is simply a matter of identifying it, making it a priority, and then working with partners across campus and beyond to explicitly implement the strategy for the entire community.

In a recent Inside Higher Ed article, Seth Bodnar, president of the University of Montana, wrote:

"Future leaders need the tangible skills to do their jobs well immediately upon graduation, but also the foundational cognitive capacities and broad-based knowledge to navigate uncertainty and cope with ambiguity throughout their careers. In the same spirit, we believe a rigorous education equips our students with a valuable combination of fundamental and targeted skills.³⁵"

This is higher education's true differentiator in today's crowded learning ecosystem. A degree is more than just training for today's in-demand roles. It is the preparation for a lifelong career journey. One that will require both relevant skills and foundational competencies proven to be vital in navigating that journey. This is something that job training programs, bootcamps, and other entities challenging higher education can not provide.

The key; however, is that students and alumni alike understand and recognize these skills and competencies while they are developing them. That they see in the moment just how that class, project, or connection has helped them grow. This is the foundation of the Career Access approach. The understanding of what you are building while you are building it.

In today's market, the question isn't how to afford implementing such an approach. The question is can colleges and universities really afford not to.

35. Bodnar, Seth, "Higher Ed Failing Students as They Navigate College and Career," Inside Higher Ed, 2022

“Talent is evenly distributed, opportunity is not. Career Access is about opening doors for learners in areas where ordinarily those doors might not be open for them. There’s a lot of privilege out there. And what we’re trying to do by increasing social capital is to open those doors for all learners so that they have the same opportunity.”

Mike Summers

Associate Vice President for the Gateway Career Center
at Lafayette College