



Understand, Align, and Partner So That Students Succeed and Employers Excel

By Elliot Felix



Introduction

Every college student is on a unique journey. The path is rarely straight-forward. Majors shift, dream jobs change, and there's no guarantee it will lead to a rewarding career. Too often, there's a disconnect between the courses students take, the skills they build, and the jobs they want. College and university curricula may not align to employers' needs. Even when programs are tied to in-demand jobs, the career advice students receive may not be informed with real-time insights. With work and learning changing so quickly, institutions need a way to coordinate their coursework with career paths, chart progress, and provide insightful guidance to help students succeed and employers excel.

With these changes and challenges in mind, Ellucian conducted a series of interviews and convened a roundtable with leaders from colleges and universities and educational associations. These discussions brought together different roles and perspectives to better understand the student journey, identify critical disconnects between courses and careers, and spotlight success stories of institutions and technology making these connections.

This white paper, created by student success author, speaker, and consultant [Elliot Felix](#), in collaboration with [Ellucian](#), aims to assist institutions and employers in developing more connected student journeys. The content of the white paper reflects the progression of conversations around six key areas which serve as a roadmap to help students succeed and employers excel:

- 1. Understand this disruptive moment in higher education**
- 2. Identify and quantify student and employer needs**
- 3. Align curriculum and competencies to employer needs**
- 4. Develop faculty to deliver aligned curricula**
- 5. Partner with companies in your community**
- 6. Integrate work experience within learning**

Let's dive into the challenges, solutions, and success stories for each to provide a path to the future we all want to create – a future defined by inspired learning, purposeful work, meaningful relationships, fulfilling careers, and thriving economies.

1. Understand This Disruptive Moment in Higher Education



Higher education is facing a confluence of powerful forces that demand a fundamental shift in strategy. Public perceptions are rapidly changing, with increasing questions about the value proposition and return on investment of a college degree. Concurrently, major demographic shifts are reshaping three key aspects of education: the student population, enrollment numbers, and learning needs. Institutions can no longer rely on traditional models; they must redefine their role to be connectors of students and society, employees and employers. The United States has [8 million job openings](#), yet 6.8 million unemployed workers,¹ highlighting a failure in this crucial connection.

“This is a disruptive moment in higher education. The old models won’t work in the future... Institutions need to take responsibility for student success beyond graduation and into the workforce.”

- **Sukhwant Jhaj** | Vice Provost for Academic Innovation and Student Achievement and Dean of University College, Arizona State University

New workforce demands and technologies like generative AI make it even more challenging. The [World Economic Forum estimates](#) that 44 percent of the skills that employees rely on today will be disrupted within the next five

years.² The economy requires a new blend of education and work, pressuring universities to create more flexible and relevant learning pathways that keep pace with industry needs.

[The Chronicle of Higher Education report on non-degree pathways](#)³ found that students are often unaware of non-degree options, want a clear path to completion, and see financial barriers as a major deterrent – 60 percent of students who stopped out of college would return if they were given a clear path to completion.

Simultaneously, technology is transforming how people live, learn, and work, offering both a threat to traditional higher ed models and an unprecedented opportunity to innovate and reimagine the future of education.

In the face of these challenges, colleges and universities can take responsibility for post-graduation success. In a world moving toward skills, with companies and governments rapidly [removing bachelor’s degree requirements](#), institutions can’t stay focused solely on degrees.⁴ They must also provide more flexible paths to success that students can take in smaller steps like badges, certificates, and micro-degrees. The good news is that [85 percent of graduates get a job \(or continue their education\)](#) within six months of graduation.⁵ But the bad news is that [52 percent of college grads are under-employed](#).⁶ At a time when only [65 percent of college students feel a sense of belonging](#)⁷ and [58 percent of young adults lack a sense of meaning or purpose in their life](#),⁸ the right academic program and career path offer that sense of purpose and a way for students to find their people.

2. Identify and Quantify Student and Employer Needs



To navigate the changing demands of the workforce, institutions must actively listen and engage with their stakeholders. This requires traditional surveys and regular reviews of labor market data to understand and anticipate demand for specific jobs and skills. These efforts can't be one-off or ad hoc; they must be continuous conversations to create feedback loops. Listening sessions with employers provide invaluable insight into the skills and competencies they need, while similar sessions with current students can reveal their career aspirations and perceived readiness. Well-composed advisory boards with varied alumni and other industry representatives can offer a longitudinal perspective on how well the institution is preparing graduates.

“Find ways to get data that goes past graduation because this isn't the traditional way universities have looked at outcomes... What are alumni doing? What do they wish they had learned?”

– **Catherine Wehlburg** | President, Athens State University

Institutions can complement their conversations with employers and analysis of regional market data by leveraging national research and resources.

Listening in Action

George Washington University's College of Professional Studies partners with the Washington Business Journal to host roundtables with industry leaders on topics like cybersecurity. These forums go beyond traditional advisory boards, helping GW identify skill gaps, shape curriculum, and ensure graduates are equipped with in-demand competencies. Faculty also benefit from direct employer insights for real-time development.

Reports from organizations like the Strada Education Foundation, such as their work on the value of [short-term credentials](#),⁹ highlight the growing importance of skills-based learning and career-aligned pathways. Similarly, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) [Career Readiness Competencies](#)¹⁰ provide a common language and framework for the eight key skills employers seek in new hires, from critical thinking to teamwork. By using these established frameworks, administrators can audit their curriculum and co-curricular offerings to ensure they are explicitly teaching and assessing these vital competencies to make their graduates' value proposition clear and compelling to the job market.

3. Align Curriculum and Competencies to Employer Needs



Higher education institutions must align their curriculum with employer needs to remain relevant. This requires combining qualitative and quantitative insights from multiple sources noted above, using skills as the building blocks. Conducting focused industry conversations, analyzing labor market data, and gathering feedback from alumni all enable universities to pinpoint the specific skills employers' demand. These will be both durable skills—such as collaboration, communication, and critical thinking—and essential technical skills, like proficiency with specific software. Then institutions must adjust general and discipline-specific coursework as well as co-curricular experiences like leadership development. This applies to continuing and professional development programs as well. Thirty-eight percent of adult learners who would return for a master's degree are now considering [non-degree credentials](#) instead.¹¹

“Getting an education versus getting a job’ is an age-old conundrum. Traditionally, community colleges have bridged it with technical education for workforce development and universities have bridged it with research for economic development. However, it is not an either/or, it’s a both/and, because the purpose of all formal education is so that at the end of it, students have a living wage job/career. We have work to do.”

– **Jeannie Kim** | President, Santiago Canyon College



To genuinely align with employer needs, institutions cannot treat career development as an extracurricular burden on students. It's an institutional responsibility. Career preparation must be a central and continuous part of the academic experience so that students have the practical skills and network to succeed from day one. Colleges should build and maintain coordinated, continuous relationships with industry partners. They must move beyond a transactional approach or ad hoc relationships that a few faculty happen to have. Evidence-based, high-impact practices—such as collaborative assignments, capstone projects, and community-based learning—should be required, not rare. But a joint [NACE, American Association of Colleges and Universities \(AAC&U\), and Society for Experiential Education \(SEE\) study found](#) that only 59 percent of faculty report involvement in high impact practices.¹²

“Expectations might not align between academic institutions and their corporate partners, but even when program partnerships stumble, you can learn something.”

- **Deborah Keyek-Franssen** | Associate Vice Provost for UO Online and Continuing and Professional Education, University of Oregon

Alignment in Action

San Francisco Bay University has pioneered a new model for general education. The university co-designed its Agility Praxis Pathways (APP) curriculum with input from 47 leading Bay Area companies. This resulted in 10 courses that make up the general education curriculum, each framed as a “how-to” that explicitly addresses key competencies such as “How to Tell Your Story” and “How to Communicate in a Global Context.” This ensures the curriculum delivers “durable skills” employers want like critical thinking, empathy, and problem-solving. By embedding these competencies directly into the general education core, SFBU is creating a new pathway for graduates to be academically prepared and equipped with the skills to succeed in our rapidly changing economy.

4. Develop Faculty to Deliver Aligned Curricula



Even when institutions understand the needs of students and employers and curricula align to core competencies on paper, it takes work to put it into practice. Hence gaps persist instead of students. A [NACE study found that](#) only 24 percent of students take a career development course.¹³ A [Wiley study found](#) that 81 percent of students want company-led class projects but only 30 percent of faculty offer them.¹⁴ The joint research from NACE, AAC&U, and SEE noted earlier also found that while faculty are a primary source of career advice for students, they often lack formal training in this area. Faculty need professional development to help them integrate career readiness into their courses and better support student post-graduation outcomes. Professional development isn't only about the content. It's about the structure and format too. Faculty also need support to shift toward smaller, stackable credentials.

“Our research consistently highlights the critical need for faculty development and support to integrate career competencies into coursework; for example, 80 percent of faculty report integrating career readiness into the classroom generally but only 40 percent of faculty have career-focused assignments.”

- **Joshua Kahn** | Associate Director of Research and Public Policy, National Association for Colleges and Employers (NACE)

Faculty Development in Action

Metro State University's Career Readiness Project integrates career education and core competencies —like communication, critical thinking, and creativity — throughout the student journey. Faculty receive support to align course outcomes with ten career competencies, making it easier to highlight career-relevant learning. This helps students articulate their skills and strengthens the connection between classroom learning and the professional world.

To successfully embed career readiness into the curriculum, institutions must proactively support and develop faculty. This means engaging faculty in regular academic program reviews to ensure alignment with dynamic fields like cybersecurity, hospitality, or advanced manufacturing. It also means providing professional development to equip faculty with the tools and knowledge needed for this work; for example, through a Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence. To incentivize participation, institutions must recognize, reward, and showcase achievements through forums, awards, and funding. Finally, a commitment to industry alignment should be woven into accreditation quality enhancement plans, tying it to the institution's mission and making it a shared responsibility.

5. Partner With Companies in Your Community



Despite shared goals, universities and companies often struggle to collaborate effectively on experiential learning, relationship-based recruiting, and ongoing workforce development. Different schedules, processes, and cultures create friction that makes partnerships difficult to initiate and sustain. Students may understandably lack a clear career vision of who they want to be and what they want to do, particularly if they lack role models whose journeys they can follow. When colleges and universities don't meet this need, employers are compelled to develop their own talent pipelines to ensure they have the skilled workforce required for success. Instead, institutions can forge partnerships like [Quinnipiac University's with Hartford Healthcare](#)¹⁵ to align on curriculum, deliver care to university stakeholders, and recruit students.

Partnership in Action

Athens State University's Learning Partner Program strengthens workforce ties by offering employees and their families affordable access to higher education through tuition discounts and waived fees. Partner companies also engage in student capstone projects, creating a feedback loop that informs curriculum and builds a skilled talent pipeline. This collaboration keeps programs relevant, supports enrollment growth, and ensures graduates are prepared for today's economy.

“Alumni engagement must go beyond fundraising. Alumni can mentor students, offer insights about course and career alignment, and act as clients for student projects that build skills and trust.”

- **Julia Michaels** | Director of Development and Strategic Partnerships, Association for Undergraduate Education at Research Universities (UERU)

Overcoming barriers between academia and industry requires intentional, systemic shifts. Institutions must create academic programs that require close collaboration and built-in

feedback loops like co-ops and apprenticeships. The University of Minnesota Carlson School of Management's recruiting activities foster genuine interaction between students, faculty, and employers alike such as hack-a-thons, case competitions, and training sessions rather than traditional, one-way info sessions. Activating the power of the alumni network is also critical; it provides a valuable channel for gathering real-world feedback on essential skills — from technical competencies to broader proficiencies like AI knowledge for product managers. External alignment may also take internal reorganization, such as combining or consolidating career advising and academic advising like at [University of Wisconsin-Madison](#)¹⁶ or [Dickinson College](#).¹⁷

6. Integrate Work Experience Within Learning



With the right understanding, alignment, and partnerships, institutions can integrate work experience into how students learn. This is more critical now than ever. The rise of generative AI exacerbated the difficult paradox facing recent grads: you need to get a job to get experience, and you need experience to get a job. [A Burning Glass Institute study found](#) that the unemployment gap between college grads aged 22 to 27 those without a degree is the narrowest in 30 years.¹⁸ The answer is dispatch with the outdated idea of “go to college then go to work.” Instead, blend the two with class projects for companies and innovative internships that are integrated within the curriculum, like [James Madison University’s X-Labs](#) – more on this below.¹⁹ That some many students are already working presents further opportunities. Students are not just “the workforce of the tomorrow” – they are also in the workforce today. The [Lumina Foundation found](#) that 64 percent of college students have jobs and 40 percent of those are full-time.²⁰

“If institutions want better career outcomes, they must get students out of classrooms and into the workplace to supplement career preparedness.”

- **J. Noah Brown** | Formerly Senior Advisor within the US Department of Education and Past President, Association of Community College Trustees



To truly create career-ready graduates, institutions must embed work into learning. This means expanding beyond traditional internships to include a full spectrum of experiential learning, from company-led course projects to apprenticeships. The career center's role must also shift from a last-minute resume-polishing service to an active bridge between college and careers that students engage with from day one – a critical shift given that only [36 percent of students are satisfied with career services](#).²¹ Additionally, as large employers themselves, colleges can transform how they employ their own students. By redesigning these jobs to build competencies, provide stronger supervision, and offer opportunities for advancement, institutions can model best practices for career development. Other co-curricular activities like industry events complement work integrated learning to teach valuable networking skills that build social capital, like [George Washington University's Professional Access Roundtables](#).²²

“We constantly ask ourselves: ‘How can we partner with faculty?’ Could they incorporate something from an employer into an assignment? Then students see real-world application and employers get to see students in action.”

- **Maggie Tomas** | Executive Director of the Business Career Center & Graduate Coaching, University of Minnesota's Carlson School of Management

Integration in Action

James Madison University (JMU) X-Labs partnership with Ellucian redefines traditional internships by integrating work experience directly within the academic curriculum. Through this “Reimagined Internship” program, students first participate in a prep course co-developed with Ellucian, where they apply a design-thinking framework to solve a real-world company challenge. Following the course, they complete a paid, full-time internship to build on their projects, moving from conceptual design to a viable product. This model provides an intentional, skills-first approach, effectively preparing students with real-world, cross-disciplinary experience for the workforce.



Putting It All Together With Technology

Technology plays a key role in the student journey. Once institutions listen through roundtables, advisory councils, surveys, labor market data analysis and more, they need technology to gather, organize and visualize skills for career paths in demand. Then they need to identify and close gaps between the programs they supply and what employers demand. Informed by this, they can guide students with real-time insights as courses and careers evolve.

With the right platform, colleges and universities can understand needs, align courses and experiences with career paths, and forge partnerships. But the student journey is rarely a straight line, and so institutions and students alike must track their progress and adapt as they learn. When colleges and universities pull all these pieces together in one platform, they can demonstrate and deliver the value of education.

They can connect the courses students take, the skills they build, and the jobs they want so that students succeed and employers excel.

“Higher education’s value is in what students can do, not just what they’ve done... If we’re able to help students show an employer how the skills they’ve developed are aligned with the skills that employer needs, then we’re fulfilling the real promise of education — connecting learning to opportunity.”

– **Mike Wulff** | Chief Product & Technology Officer, Ellucian

Roundtable and Interview Participants

Ellucian wishes to thank the following participants for their ideas and insights on integrating career development into the student journey:

- **J. Noah Brown:** Formerly Senior Advisor within the US Department of Education and Past President, Association of Community College Trustees
- **Tom Ellett:** Chief Experience Officer, Quinnipiac University
- **Elliot Felix (Facilitator):** Higher Education Advisory Practice Lead at Buro Happold and author of *The Connected College: Leadership Strategies for Student Success*
- **Sukhwant Jhaj:** Vice Provost for Academic Innovation and Student Achievement and Dean of University College, Arizona State University
- **Joshua Kahn:** Associate Director of Research and Public Policy, National Association for Colleges and Employers (NACE)
- **Deborah Keyek-Franssen:** Associate Vice Provost for UO Online and Continuing and Professional Education, University of Oregon
- **Jeannie Kim:** President, Santiago Canyon College
- **Julia Michaels:** Director of Development and Strategic Partnerships, Association for Undergraduate Education at Research Universities (UERU)
- **Liesl Riddle:** Dean of the College of Professional Studies, George Washington University
- **Eric Skipper:** Former Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs, University of South Carolina Beaufort
- **Maggie Tomas:** Executive Director of the Business Career Center & Graduate Coaching, University of Minnesota's Carlson School of Management
- **Catherine Wehlburg:** President, Athens State University

About the Author

Elliot Felix is a student success author, speaker, and consultant to more than 100 colleges and universities who has helped more than 1,000,000 students. He leads [Buro Happold's higher education advisory practice](#) and is the author of [The Connected College: Leadership Strategies for Student Success](#), an encouraging, evidence-based playbook for busting silos so students succeed.

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