FUTURE SHOCK

THE CRISIS IN CAREER NAVIGATION

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Foreword

The education and workforce sectors—federal, state, and local policymakers; government agencies; foundations; employer organizations; and a host of nonprofits—have expended immense energy in recent years creating new job-focused pathways through the nation's 27,000 high schools to college and careers. No education priority has had more bipartisan backing.

FutureEd in 2025 published Skill Building: The Emerging Micro-Credential Movement in K-12 Education, a comprehensive analysis by FutureEd Senior Fellow Anne Kim of a key aspect of this movement to rethink vocational education in the nation's schools: the development of thousands of "micro-credentials" to record the wide range of employable skills students are able to acquire through the new secondary-school pathways. One of the key takeaways from that work is that many young people are unaware of the variety of careers they could pursue, the availability of jobs in their area, and the skills they need to pursue opportunities or interests. The nation, in other words, is confronting a crisis in the quality of career navigation available to high school students.

Future Shock: The Crisis in Career Navigation, also written by Anne Kim, explores the problem in depth. Drawing on surveys, research studies, and interviews with some two dozen experts, the report explores the causes and consequences of the crisis, the imperative to address it, and the most promising solutions, including cutting-edge career navigation platforms. The stakes are high. The vast resources pouring into new high school pathways won't pay significant dividends if students can't navigate the new opportunities.

We're grateful to the many national, regional, and local experts on career navigation and school counseling who contributed their insights to the project through extensive interviews. And we're grateful to the Walton Family Foundation for supporting the work.

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Thomas Toch
Director, FutureEd

In a July 2025 survey by Morning Consult, nearly half of Gen Z respondents said their ideal career is to be a "professional content creator."[1] One in five aspired to be full-time influencers, while another 25 percent said they'd like to work in content creation part-time. Only a third said they wanted a "traditional job." In a similar *Morning Consult* survey from 2023, 33 percent of Gen Z respondents chose "media and entertainment" as their top career choice.[2] Many young people in that survey also said they believed it was "easy" to make money this way.[3]

The reality is far bleaker. Of the more than 127 million people who say they work as "creators," 70 percent report earn less than $49,000 a year, and more than half earn less than $15,000.[4] A vanishing few reach the heights of someone like Mr. Beast, the YouTuber who currently boasts more than 463 million subscribers and reportedly earns $700 million a year.[5,6]

Yet it should come as no surprise that so many young people aspire to be influencers. "It's what they see out in the world," says Diane Tavenner, co-founder and CEO of the career navigation startup Futre.me. "But there's no realism behind it." At the K-12 schools her company works with, Tavenner says, the most popular occupations students initially research are professional athletes, lawyers, actors, singers, hairdressers, cosmetologists, fashion designers, and pilots—jobs they tend to see in their daily lives or represented glamorously. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), hairdressers, cosmetologists, and hairstylists earned, on average, $41,780 in 2023.[7] Lawyers earned an average of $176,470, but they make up less than one percent of the U.S. labor force.[8]

Meanwhile, the fastest growing jobs in the United States include wind turbine service technicians, solar panel installers, nurse practitioners, and actuaries, according to BLS, while health care and social assistance are projected to employ the largest number of people over the next decade.[9,10]

These enormous disconnects between aspirations and opportunities point to a crisis in the quality of career navigation available to American students. Too many young people are unaware of the variety of careers they could pursue, the availability of jobs in their area, and the skills they need to pursue opportunities or interests. Opinion polls show that many students don't feel their high schools are preparing them for careers.[11] More than 60 percent of high school students said they wished their schools provided more information about the variety of postsecondary options available, according to a 2022 foundation report.[12] It's a sentiment shared by many parents.

This absence of guidance can have serious downstream impacts on young people's prospects. The lack of early and adequate career navigation can mean less engagement from students who

don't consider their education "relevant." Students without a clear plan after high school often end up dropping out of college—if they attend at all.[13] Others flit from major to major, spending time and money on college courses that could delay their graduation or that won't deliver a return on their investment.

But many K-12 educators and administrators resist the notion of early career navigation that could help address the problem. Over at least the last 40 years, middle and elementary schools have prioritized academic achievement and college preparation. Perhaps with good reason: United States schools have a long legacy of racialized tracking practices that shunted minority students into frequently inferior vocational education that often permanently sabotaged their life chances.

> **Too many young people are unaware of the variety of careers they could pursue, the availability of jobs in their area, and the skills they need to pursue opportunities or interests.**

In response, many high schools embraced a "college for all" philosophy—sound in principle but often undertaken without a thorough consideration of what college is actually for. And colleges themselves don't do a great job of addressing that question, with few institutions prioritizing career counseling for their students. As a result, nearly a third of college students have never used their college career center, according to a 2023 survey by Inside Higher Ed and College Pulse, while one in five have visited only once.[14] This lack of guidance could be one reason many students do not go on to find jobs that match their qualifications, undermining their earning potential. Nearly 42 percent of recent college graduates were "underemployed" as of March 2026, according to the Federal Reserve Bank of New York.[15]

Fortunately, this crisis has also inspired change. Recent years have seen a burst of innovation in career navigation. Pioneering educators who early on recognized the need for quality career guidance have re-engineered schools and classrooms to integrate career exploration in creative ways, in some cases introducing students to possible pathways as early as kindergarten. State policymakers have begun to demand the prioritization of postsecondary planning. And education entrepreneurs, anticipating a growing market, have launched new tools and platforms, often incorporating AI, to help manage the complex tasks of career exploration and credentialing.

Proponents of career navigation argue that stronger guidance is more essential than ever. AI poses a unique and unpredictable threat to the labor market, and social mobility increasingly depends on students acquiring strong critical thinking and communication skills in addition to job-specific skills. Faced with a tumultuous economy, students need to maximize their educational opportunities and efficiently chart a path aligned with their interests and aptitudes. But most students cannot chart those paths alone. They need help from experienced counselors. All the resources pouring into new career pathways through high schools and beyond won't yield significant dividends if students can't navigate the new opportunities.

This report provides a comprehensive analysis of the career navigation crisis in American education and the emerging strategies to address it. Drawing on surveys, research studies, and interviews with some two dozen experts, the report explores the causes and consequences of the crisis, the imperative to address it, and what the nation's most promising guidance programs, including cutting-edge online platforms, are doing to ensure that K-12 students exploit the many new opportunities available to them.

The Counseling Landscape

Research shows that high-quality career navigation can confer significant benefits, boosting both student engagement and achievement. A 2016 literature review by ACT researchers concluded that helping students define a clear direction for themselves can give them purpose and motivation.[16] "Those who have career goals are more likely to engage in meaningful planning related to those goals," the researchers found, and "those who have an interest in specific occupations tend to have higher expectations for themselves and more positive work-related attitudes." Students who develop career navigation skills, the researchers further found, are more likely to "have expanded education and career opportunities," "make education and career decisions that better fit them," and "experience more positive outcomes in both school and work settings."

But delivering high quality career services isn't easy.

A Persistent Counselor Shortage

One problem is that there aren't enough school counselors to do the work of providing career navigation assistance. While the ratio of students to counselors has improved enormously over the past 30 years, school counselors already wear many hats in their daily work, and this ongoing shortage makes it difficult for them to provide the one-on-one guidance that quality career navigation demands.

In 2025, according to the American School Counselors Association (ASCA), the average student to counselor ratio nationwide was 372 to one, compared to 512 to one in 1995.[17] But many states have significantly higher student-to-counselor ratios. In Arizona, the student to counselor ratio is as high as 570 to one.[18] Only four states—Hawaii, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Colorado—met ASCA's recommended ratio of 250 to one in 2025. Troublingly, low-income students and students of color, who arguably need the most support, are least likely to have access to school counselors. A 2019 EdTrust study found that counselors who work predominantly with students of color serve 34 students more per year than their peers.[19]

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Given these enormous caseloads, career navigation often ranks low among counselors' priorities. In a 2025 survey of school counselors, the edtech career navigation platform YouScience found that overload "forces counselors to prioritize immediate crises over proactive planning and career exploration and reduces the impact they can have with students."[20] The survey also found that many counselors are grappling with post-pandemic challenges such as learning loss and deteriorating mental health. Nearly three in four counselors reported mental health support "as a top demand on their time."

The dearth of counseling resources is compounded by the fact that many K-12 students do have not have a full sense of what their skills, interests, and aptitudes might be, let alone the specific careers that align with those traits. Students who do have specific interests, meanwhile, may not know what credentials to pursue, whether the jobs they want are available in their communities, or if they'll earn a living wage. These challenges are especially acute for low-income students. "There is a huge gap in awareness of different career pathways," said Eric Scroggins, CEO of Opportunity Trust, a philanthropy that works with high-poverty schools in St. Louis. "[Students] who want to be lawyers did not know that you had to go to both undergraduate and law school. People who want to

be veterinarians did not know that you had to go to undergraduate and veterinary school."

The Tyranny of "College for All"

At the same time, many schools have prioritized college preparation over career navigation in deploying their limited counseling resources. They focus on getting students through the college admissions process or encouraging college attendance by students who otherwise wouldn't consider it—often at the expense of helping students explore other postsecondary paths. "For many years, we've had a 'college for all' mantra, and we've been trying to push as many young people as we can through two- and four-year institutions," says Judy Goldstein, senior vice president and managing director of the Career Navigation Impact Hub at Britebound (formerly American Student Assistance) found. "That's still very important, but young people today are telling us they don't want that. They don't want the student debt, and they don't want to spend four years in college." Indeed, a recent study of college-advising initiatives in Tennessee found that while the programs boost higher-education enrollment, they do not lead to greater persistence in college or degree completion.[21]

Schools are not wrong to encourage college, especially for students belonging to groups historically deprived of opportunities for educational and economic advancement. While the gap in earnings between college- and non-college educated workers has stagnated over the past 20 years, according to the Minneapolis Federal Reserve, the so-called "college wage premium" remains high.[22] On average, the median worker with a bachelor's degree earns about 70 percent more than the median worker with a high school diploma, according to Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce (CEW).[23] CEW also finds that two-thirds of tomorrow's "good jobs"—those that pay a living wage—will demand a bachelor's degree.[24]

But there's a growing consensus within the education sector that attaining a four-year degree is neither realistic nor desirable for all students. Diane Tavenner, who was the founder and chief executive of the Summit charter school network before co-founding Futre.me, said she became increasingly "uncomfortable" with the push for college at her schools. "We were getting all of our kids into college when we knew it wasn't the best pathway for them," she said. Alumni outcomes confirmed her discomfort. "Forty-plus percent of our kids were not graduating from four-year college," she said. "Many of them were saddled with debt, without a degree or certification, and some percentage were underemployed." This emphasis on college often crowds out other career pathways that counselors might have explored with students, Tavenner and others say.

In response, industry-affiliated training organizations, universities, community colleges, labor unions, non-profits, coding bootcamps, and others have launched a host of new training programs to provide students new routes to quality jobs. These include apprenticeships, pre-apprenticeships, certificates, certifications, "badges," and other short-term credentials, as well as two-year degrees.

But the profusion of new pathways has led to a confusing and chaotic marketplace of programs and credentials.[25] The nonprofit credential registry Credential Engine says that there are more than 1.8 million credentials available from more than 134,000 providers in the U.S. today.[26] Determining which of these are what the Lumina Foundation calls "credentials of value" is among the most significant challenges facing the education and employment sectors.[27] While numerous efforts are underway to rationalize the credentialing marketplace and improve transparency, there's still very little definitive data on which specific credentials confer valuable skills, are trusted by employers, and lead to well-paying jobs. This presents a massive problem

for school counselors, who struggle to advise students on the credentials they should pursue.

Lack of Reliable Data on Pathways

This dearth of information around which credentials are useful is compounded by the absence of timely, reliable data on the jobs available or expected to be available in a given community. While state agencies and workforce boards typically gather this information, the data can be difficult to translate into practical advice for students considering careers. Maryland's workforce development website, for instance, offers county-level projections of job openings by occupation, but the data are highly abstract.[28] For example, the fact that Montgomery County expects an 18 percentage point increase through 2032 in job openings for "animal caretakers"—a description covering zookeeper, lab assistant, vet tech, and dog walker, among others—is meaningless without more information about what the jobs entail, what credentials are required, and who might be major employers.[29]

> **Available career resources are also often fragmented, incomplete, and difficult to synthesize into an overall understanding of potential pathways.**

Increasingly, educators and policymakers are realizing the benefits of internships, work experience, and other work-based learning opportunities. Trying out jobs in the real world can help students decide what careers might be the best fit. Students also learn important skills for workplace survival, such as showing up on time and behaving professionally, and are exposed to potential employers.

Yet despite growing interest in these opportunities and the advantages they can confer, opportunities for work-based learning remain relatively rare. A 2022 study by Britebound found that while 79 percent of high schoolers were interested in work-based learning, only about a third were aware of opportunities for students like them, and just two percent had completed an internship in high school.[30] These figures are not surprising. Few schools have the resources to develop robust partnerships with local employers and to match students with opportunities that fit their interests. Some states are working to expand access to work-based learning through dedicated funding and other measures, but they are still in the minority.[31]

Inadequate Infrastructure

A final obstacle impeding widespread access to quality career navigation is the lack of infrastructure to help students manage and organize vast quantities of information about possible careers, credentials, and their own progress toward their goals. "You have to tie together labor data, program data, and [credentialing] data, and you have to have enough information so the young person can see the ROI of each path," said Britebound's Goldstein. "It just doesn't exist in one place."

While most school districts today rely on various "learning management systems" to track students' attendance, coursework, and progress toward graduation, these systems don't typically integrate these records with students' career exploration activities and experiences. For instance, students often can't tell by looking at their transcripts if they're on track for a specific career. Available career resources are also often fragmented, incomplete, and difficult to synthesize into an overall understanding of potential pathways. Many students also don't have access to reliable tools for assessing their skills and interests and for learning about the careers that align. As a result, students end up overwhelmed and paralyzed.

Students Adrift

Not surprisingly, students and parents say they need more college and career guidance. Many students—especially those not college-bound—say they feel unprepared for life after high school. A 2022 survey by YouScience found that 75 percent of the recent high school graduates it interviewed felt "moderately, slightly, or not at all prepared" for college and career.[32] Similarly, a 2024 survey by Jobs for the Future (JFF) and Morning Consult discovered that 66 percent of young people ages 16 to 24 said they "do not know exactly what career they want to pursue."[33] Just 13 percent of Gen Z teens said they feel "fully prepared to choose their path after high school," according to ECMC.[34]

Lack of guidance from their schools is one reason students feel so unready. Just 38 percent of high schoolers said they had taken a class or participated in a program to help them explore careers, according to ECMC's survey, while a majority of teens say they've had five or fewer conversations with teachers and counselors about potential careers, according to YouScience.[35] As one result, teens are turning to social media and other dubious sources of information, with all of the attendant risk.[36]

Students not headed toward college are the most adrift. One 2023 survey found that only 50 percent of non-college-bound seniors said they had heard "a lot" or "some" about alternatives to four-year college, while another survey by JFF and the Walton Family Foundation found that many parents also lack knowledge of alternative post-high school options such as apprenticeships, internships, certificate and certification programs, and the military.[37,38] Consequently, many teens feel "pressured" to attend a four-year college, even as surveys find that a majority of students say they are open to other options and believe they can succeed without a four-year degree.[39]

Among the potential consequences of inadequate guidance, the most severe is the "disconnection" of young adults from both school and work. As of 2022, 4.3 million young people ages 16 to 24—or more than 1 in 10—were neither working nor in school, according to the nonprofit Measure of America.[40] Disconnected young adults are significantly more likely than their peers to live in poverty, be involved with the justice system, and suffer from lower earnings throughout their adult lives.[41] The lack of guidance and support in school may also contribute to the ongoing crisis in mental health among young adults.[42] Among the 11 percent of young men and 14 percent of young women in the 2024 JFF/Morning Consult survey who said they had "no idea" about their career path, nearly half said they were "overwhelmed" and "worried," and only 18 percent were "hopeful."[43]

Inadequate career navigation also often leads to dead-end jobs with minimal opportunities for advancement. A 2024 study by the Burning Glass Institute and the nonprofit Britebound found that only about 9.2 percent of young non-degree workers are in so-called "Launchpad Jobs" with a clear trajectory for career growth.[44] "With minimal information, the choices that launch careers are often haphazard," write the report's authors.

> **A 2022 survey by YouScience found that 75 percent of the recent high school graduates it interviewed felt "moderately, slightly, or not at all prepared" for college and career.**

Even more concerning, uninformed decisions in high school can lock workers into paths they can't easily escape. Early jobs "generate a substantial amount of path dependence," according to a 2025 study by the National Bureau of Economic Research, and workers who start their careers in one field are likely to be in the same or a closely related field 20 years later.[45] Young workers who enter low-wage jobs may

never get the chance to transition to higher-wage opportunities. Low-income and minority students are at highest risk for these outcomes because they may not have the benefit of broad social and professional networks that wealthier students enjoy through their parents or communities.

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The lack of adequate guidance in K-12 schools also damages students who do enroll in college. Many colleges also lack sufficient guidance, and students are no better equipped to plan their careers than they were in high school. YouScience's survey, for instance, found that 53 percent of students said they "changed their college major at least two times," which means more time and money spent earning a degree (and a greater risk of stopping out).[46] (See sidebar on page 14.)

In a 2024 survey by the Community College Research Center (CCRC), nearly two-thirds of first-time community college students named three or more careers of interest, often in unrelated sectors.[47] The CCRC study noted that many students deemed "undecided" or "exploratory" were shunted into "general studies" programs that often lead to "weak transfer and labor market outcomes" because they do not fulfill transfer requirements at four-year institutions and "have little labor market value on their own." In fact, 59 percent of the associate degrees awarded to transferring students by community colleges in 2022-23 were in "general studies"—even though only 6 percent of students actually chose it as their first-choice major.[48]

Students at "elite" colleges, meanwhile, face a different problem—what sociologists Amy Binder and Daniel Davis call the "career funnel."[49] While elite schools "are credited as launch points for the widest variety of meaningful careers," Blinder and Davis write, the reality is that a majority of graduates are funneled to a narrow range of "prestige" options, including finance, tech, and management consulting, not because students arrive at school aspiring to join these fields but because they are "motivated but directionless," Blinder and Davis write.

It's not surprising, then, that significant numbers of students are "under-employed" in jobs that don't match their degrees or skills or funneled into careers they find unsatisfying. The lack of adequate career navigation is a universal concern.

The Search for Solutions

The plight of career counseling in the nation's schools and the potential of strong counseling to benefit both students and the nation's economy haven't been lost on state and local policymakers.

States have increasingly encouraged career exploration and navigation through a variety of policy levers, including requirements for middle school career exploration and the expansion of work-based learning opportunities. Fully 34 states require schools to create so-called individual learning plans (ILPs) for all students, and many require it for graduation.[50] States are also expanding students' access to work-based learning, a key component of quality career navigation.[51] Florida and North Dakota, for example, recently created tax incentives for employers to hire apprentices and pre-apprentices.

Mandates alone, however, do not guarantee effective guidance. According to research by V. Scott Solberg of Boston University, ILPs can be an effective tool for encouraging college and career readiness, leading to greater student engagement, lower dropout rates, and greater willingness by students to pursue rigorous coursework.[52] But

the ILP is only valuable when it has been "shaped around the youth's self-defined career and life goals, interests, values, and skills," Solberg writes. An effective ILP details the academic and out-of-school learning opportunities that help students achieve their goals—and then helps students obtain those opportunities.

Unfortunately, a significant share of schools comply with ILP requirements only superficially, according to research by the National Association of College Admission Counseling, while some schools don't use them at all.[53] When treated as a "check the box" exercise en route to granting students diplomas, ILPs have little to no value.

Arizona's State Board of Education, for example, requires students to maintain a "portfolio" showing how their coursework and extra-curricular activities align with their career aspirations.[54] A 2021 evaluation by the Institute for Education Sciences' Regional Education Laboratory West found that students who worked with parents or teachers to develop a plan and who updated their plans at least annually were more likely to complete college preparatory courses, complete financial aid forms, and enroll in college.[55] Only about a fifth of students in the study received this level of support, however. Merely creating a plan—which was the case for many students—had no measurable impact on students' postsecondary outcomes.

Kentucky's experience also suggests how difficult it is to mandate improvements in school counseling from afar. The state initially had schools use a single, generic platform for career-oriented individual learning plans, failing to account for students' differing grade levels and differences in the state's regional economies. Schools couldn't customize students' career exploration and college and career planning, according to Michelle Sircy, program coordinator for comprehensive school counseling at the Kentucky Department of Education. As a result, the ILPs became an exercise in compliance rather than student development.

In response, the Kentucky General Assembly in 2023-24 tasked school districts with implementing their own ILP models.[56] Guidance from the Kentucky Department of Education urges career exploration beginning in sixth grade; the establishment of regularly updated personal goals; help with college planning, financial aid and applications; assistance with resume creation; and infrastructure for tracking assessments, work experience, and extracurricular activities.[57] In 2025, the state unveiled Futuriti.org, a free site with Kentucky-specific data on high-demand careers, along with expected salaries, skills requirements, and the institutions offering related credentials.[58] Sircy said the state is exploring the possibility of offering students "credential wallets" on the site.

Kentucky is moreover among some 37 states that have pressed school districts to begin introducing students to careers in middle school.[59] The goal of this strategy is to build more runway into the post-secondary exploration process and promote engagement in learning at a time when students are struggling to form their identities, coping with puberty, and navigating new environments, according to the Association for Career and Technical Education.[60]

> **One hopeful development is the emergence of intermediary organizations seeking to support career exploration and navigation activities.**

But here, too, it has proven difficult to translate mandates into widespread reform. A 2024 analysis by Britebound and the Education Strategy Group, a consultancy, found that while three-fourths of states have adopted policies around middle-school career exploration, only a minority have developed robust systems integrating early career exploration

into broader strategies for student pathways.[61] Only eight percent of states have "a strong ecosystem of organizations" to support these efforts, the study found, and only about a fifth of states collect data that can help assess the quality of career navigation programs.

A Role for Intermediaries

Despite state mandates, the dearth of school counselors, information systems, and insight into labor market trends continues to impede schools' efforts to provide students with effective career counseling. One hopeful development is the emergence of intermediary organizations seeking to support career exploration and navigation activities. Organizations are expanding capacity for coaching and advising, developing career navigation curricula, and matching students with internships, work experience, and other work-based learning opportunities.

In Mississippi, a statewide career coaching program for middle and high school students launched in 2022 now involves nearly 200 coaches embedded in public schools across the state, according to a report by Strada's Quality Coaching Initiative.[62] Under a series of grants managed by AccelerateMS, the state's workforce development agency, nonprofits like the United Way are recruiting, hiring, and training coaches for placement under the program. Strada's report captured some encouraging data at the end of the 2023-24 school year: by that point, 90 percent of Mississippi's public schools had access to a coach and those coaches had logged nearly 60,000 one-on-one conversations with students. Since 2022, about 6,000 students had been offered job shadowing opportunities.

In St. Louis, The Opportunity Trust's Next Prep initiative offers a comprehensive career exploration curriculum based on Futre.me, along with career days, job shadowing, and other opportunities with local employers. Since its pilot launch in 2022 at Kairos High School, Next Prep has expanded to a second St. Louis school as well to as a third school in Indianapolis.[63] All three schools predominantly serve low-income students and students of color.

Next Prep's St. Louis Program Director Riley Foster manages a vast network of local employers involved in career exploration workshops for ninth graders, site visits for 10th- and 11th-graders, and yearlong "deep dives" into thriving regional industries such as advanced manufacturing. "Students are doing hands-on rotations through a number of specific trades or modalities … like welding and precision machining," Foster said. "They went to [biotechnology company] Thermo-Fisher; they'll go to Boeing." Foster said her goal is to step up parallel career exploration tracks in St. Louis's three biggest industries: health care, biotech, and advanced manufacturing. She believes the students involved with the program are considering educational and career opportunities they otherwise would not have considered. "We are definitely seeing more students interested in apprenticeships and short-term certifications," she said.

The Chicago public school system has embraced a different strategy by requiring an individual learning plan (ILP) for graduation that includes career navigation. Intermediaries like Chicago-based OneGoal have stepped in to make the requirement meaningful for students. (See sidebar on page 10.)

Technology Solutions

New nonprofit and commercial technology platforms are also seeking to deliver quality career navigation at scale. AI-driven platforms offer to fix the dearth of reliable data on career options, provide the infrastructure linking students, counselors and employers, and even substitute for human counselors. Innovations are in early stages and rigorous evaluations don't yet exist to measure their relative effectiveness, especially at scale. But emerging technology-driven strategies may help address career navigation's vexing challenges.

INTERMEDIARY ORGANIZATIONS CAN CLOSE COUNSELING GAPS

Now operating in 10 states, OneGoal launched in Chicago in 2007 with one goal: expanding access to high-quality postsecondary advising for low-income students.[a] It currently works with 36 high-poverty schools in Chicago to train teachers as advisers ("program directors") for cohorts of OneGoal student "Fellows."[b] Fellows enter the program as juniors and receive support for three years, including one year after graduation. Classes meet during a dedicated block of the school day (typically the advisory period), and the curriculum covers topics such as career exploration and academic and social-emotional skills development. Later in the programs, students tackle test prep, college admissions, and applying for financial aid. In the third year of the program—after students graduate from high school—the organization continues to provide counseling and material support, including emergency financial aid for tuition payments, books, or other student-related expenses.

According to the organization's 2025 annual report, the program served a total of 9,600 students in 115 high schools in 57 school districts in 2025-26 and 35,000 students since its inception. Although the organization does not disclose per-student costs, its budget in fiscal 2025 was about $31 million.[c]

An evaluation by the University of Chicago's Inclusive Economy Lab found dramatic positive impacts for OneGoal Fellows compared to nonparticipants.[d] For instance, OneGoal Fellows were 15.9 percentage points more likely to graduate, 20.4 percentage points more likely to enroll in college within six months of graduation, 15.8 percentage points more likely to persist in college after one year, and 8.2 percentage points more likely to graduate college within six years. OneGoal CEO Melissa Connelly says the key is the relationships OneGoal teachers develop with their students. While the program relies on technological platforms to deliver curriculum and information, "all of the technology we use is designed to enable high quality advising conversations between an adult and a young person, or between young people," Connelly said.

Among OneGoal's program directors is Monica Selagea, an English teacher at Chicago's Prosser Career Academy, where the student body is 76 percent Hispanic, 22 percent Black, and 58 percent economically disadvantaged.[e] Selagea says each cohort of OneGoal Fellows consists of about 30 students—a group that's small enough for her to get to know them individually. "You have to form connections with students," she said. "They have to be able to trust you."

During class, she guides her students through career exploration activities, helping them choose their coursework and find internships. In senior year, the curriculum includes college exploration, sessions on financial aid, essay writing, and other details of applying to college. Many of her students, she said, are first-generation, and cannot rely on their parents for help. "We wear so many hats," she said. "We're not just counselors or teachers or staff. We play a lot of roles for these students, and if they don't have support at home, we even play a parent role."

Selagea continues these roles in the first year after graduation, the third year of the program, helping students manage a variety of challenges, including financial aid and academic support for students in college and workplace dilemmas for students in careers. Tykwon Billups, a 19-year-old freshman pre-law student at the University of Illinois at Chicago, said he frequently reaches out to Selagea for advice about school. He also received a $500 grant from OneGoal to pay for books and supplies.

Billups credits OneGoal for the fact that he's in college at all. "I'm first generation, and the only thing I really knew about it was that it was super expensive," he said. "I didn't know about federal financial aid or scholarships, so I kind of saw it as a luxury. I just didn't think about it at all." With Selagea's help, Billups

ultimately ended up with $100,000 in scholarship offers from the colleges he applied to before he settled on UIC.

He also said that Selagea and the OneGoal curriculum helped him choose both his career goals and where he wanted to go to school. "I didn't have a career in mind," he said. "She helped me figure out what I enjoy doing and put those skills into a career path." Billups discovered his interest in criminal justice and ended up taking a dual enrollment course on the subject. His goal now is to become a public defender. He's also satisfied with his choice of UIC. "She helped me realize that for my learning style, I needed a medium-sized school, rather than a super large school like [the University of Illinois at] Urbana," he said. "She nudged me in the right direction."

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Especially noteworthy among the emerging technology-based practices and model initiatives are systems that integrate systematic tech-based career planning with personalized coaching and guidance.

The nonprofit CareerVillage, for example, provides students opportunities to ask for free career advice from a network of more than 190,000 volunteers.[64] The site functions like a career-focused Reddit community or listserv, where students can post questions for professionals to answer. CEO Jared Chung, who founded the site five years ago, said his goal is to "democratize access" to career advice, especially for disadvantaged students who don't otherwise have mentors or counselors. Chung also recently rolled out a related site, Coach, which uses an AI-powered chatbot to act as a career adviser.[65] According to its site, CareerVillage has served more than 7.6 million learners globally since its founding.

Other sites aim to supplement adviser capacity with modernized, tech-assisted approaches to career exploration and navigation. Tavenner's Futre.me, for instance, offers a database of more than 800 careers for students to explore, half of which don't require a four-year degree. Futre.me's jobs database excludes jobs that don't pay a living wage or that school leaders would find inappropriate (like bartending and gambling). Unlike older platforms, which may simply spit out a list of potential careers based on a quiz about students' interests, Futre.me also offers granular details about the day-to-day experiences of particular jobs.

This information can inject useful realism into a student's career search, according to Tavenner. For example, "When you ask kids, 'Why do you want to be a lawyer?,' inevitably they will tell you, 'I'm really good at arguing,'" she said. "But when we show them the top ten tasks of a lawyer—the things that people do every day—they look at that and say, 'I hate that.'"

The site also provides information on what skills specific jobs require and whether openings are available in the students' area. A financial literacy module helps students understand how much money they would need to earn to support the lifestyle they want, and whether their chosen career would enable that standard of living.

Tavenner argues that Futre.me can provide the data that counselors otherwise would not have at their fingertips and that the site's guided exploration model can help advisers be more productive. "If students are using the platform independently, they're coming to their advisers with more knowledge and are better prepared," she said. "It makes the quality of that meeting much higher." Futre.me also offers students a 10-year license to their account so they can continue to access its resources through college and potentially into their first jobs.

Emerging technology-driven strategies may help address career navigation's vexing challenges.

Older platforms have begun to introduce similar features to improve their products. The edtech company Edmentum, one of the nation's largest providers of learning management software, recently built an online career navigation curriculum available to students beginning in sixth grade. For sixth-to-eighth graders, the curriculum focuses primarily on career exploration, with the goal of helping students understand the nuts and bolts of various jobs. For high school students, the company's curriculum transitions to coursework planning and credential attainment, including whether students would need a degree, a certificate, a license, or other credential to get a job in their chosen field. "Our job is to give them exposure beyond being a teacher or a veterinarian, which is typically what kids that age want to be," said Chief Strategy and Operating Officer Amanda Kocun. In February 2026, Edmentum announced a partnership with Roadtrip Nation, the Emmy-winning documentary series for public television that profiles its subjects' career paths.[66]

The most ambitious of the new technology initiatives aim to provide an all-in-one platform that integrates career exploration and navigation with course planning, credentialing, work experience, and record keeping. The college and career platform SchooLinks, for example, acts as a portal for students searching for internship and work-based learning opportunities, offering students a "credential wallet" where they can track work experiences, service hours, and any related credentials they earn. The site also assists students with college searches and applications while offering counselors tools like a digital manager for college recommendation requests and digital meeting logs tied to individual students.

SchooLinks has been adopted by more than 1,000 of the nation's roughly 13,300 school districts, including in Chicago, Dallas, and Houston, according to founder and CEO Katie Fang, who launched the company 12 years ago. Fang said districts have also begun to use the platform for accountability reporting, compliance, and strategic planning. If data from students' career exploration activities show a significant interest in nursing, for instance, districts can plan their hiring and course offerings to meet that demand. "It's not just about what students want; it's about helping the infrastructure around them become more efficient so they can be supported," said Fang.

JFF's Britebound Center for Career Navigation is likewise building a comprehensive career navigation platform freely available to all young people, including those not currently in school. Among the planned resources is a library of social-media-friendly videos profiling a day in the life of specific careers. "We heard loud and clear from young people that they want short video content," says JFF Senior Vice President Jeff Bulanda. "They don't want to read paragraphs about a job; they want to see it in action." In addition, the site will offer a "marketplace" of short-term credential programs, along with data to the extent available on credential

quality and funding opportunities. The goal, said Bulanda, is to "streamline the workflow and decision architecture for a young person, given how overwhelming it is." Bulanda said the site will be piloted in four cities in 2026: Chicago, Birmingham, New Orleans, and Seattle.

Integrating Career into Curriculum

While many schools have tended to treat career navigation as an add-on activity, a few pioneering school districts have chosen to embrace career navigation as a core element of their curriculums. One such district is Cajon Valley Union School District, located about 20 miles northeast of San Diego. It serves roughly 18,000 students, nearly 85 percent of whom are economically disadvantaged.[67,68] The district's pioneering "World of Work" curriculum, developed by talent management expert Ed Hidalgo and launched in 2017, has attracted national attention for its focus on early career exploration—coursework begins in kindergarten—and its unique approach to integrating career navigation with curriculum.[69]

Superintendent David Miyashiro said research on how children form their career identities persuaded him of the need for early intervention. "Career identity starts around five or six years old," he said. "If kids don't start to see themselves in a professional space, or if they aren't exposed to others who look like them or sound like them [in particular careers], they probably won't aspire to that later on." To prevent this narrowing of perspective, Miyashiro said, "starting from kindergarten through eighth grade, kids have at least 56 career exposures."

Kindergarteners, for example, learn about six careers—police officer, doctor, artist, elementary school teacher, baker, and farmer—each of which corresponds to one of six personality traits in the "RIASEC" model developed by social psychologist John Holland.[70] Students in fact learn about RIASEC beginning in kindergarten so they can begin to think of themselves in the context of its typology—"artistic" or "enterprising," for example.

Students also receive what Miyashiro calls "deep career exposure" with hands-on activities and real-life experiences. First-graders learning about civil engineering, for instance, meet with the city manager, and then plan a virtual city. "They decide where the hospital, the school, and other places will be in their virtual city based on traffic patterns and all the different things that civil engineers have to do well," Miyashiro said. At the end of the school year, students are asked to reflect on their experiences, which helps them shape their preferences and interests. "They'll say, 'this one I didn't like so much because it was outside,' or 'I don't like using my hands,' or 'we were on the computer a lot,'" Miyashiro said. At the district's newly established charter high school, Bostonia Global, which also follows the World of Work model, universal work experience is a priority. "Our kids spend 40 percent of their time out in the community, in work-based learning," said Miyashiro. "Not some kids, but every kid." Bostonia is also one of the few high schools in the country to provide its graduates a competency-based "mastery transcript" describing the skills a student has acquired in addition to academic achievement.

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The district also relies primarily on teachers instead of counselors to deliver its career navigation curriculum. "If you have a career counselor or a career coach, there's one per school for 800 kids," Miyashiro said. "But every child has a teacher, and if

LAUNCHING COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS INTO THE WORKFORCE

By Harry J. Holzer and Amy Feygin

At a time when young Americans are increasingly questioning the value of four-year college degrees, and when advances in artificial intelligence (AI) are undermining their confidence in investing in skills that AI may soon overtake, high school graduates are increasingly turning to community colleges for faster, lower-cost routes to the workplace via associate degrees and a wide range of shorter-term certificates.[a]

Yet student outcomes at community college are not always positive. Many enrolled students fail to complete credentials, and those they do complete do not always have labor market value. This is fine for students who will transfer to four-year institutions and ultimately obtain bachelor's degrees, but the vast majority of community college students will not.

How can more community college students earn *credentials of value* that will ultimately translate into higher employment and earnings? We recently undertook a research project at the American Institutes for Research, where we ranked all public community colleges on their success in producing credentials of value for their students, and then used quantitative and qualitative methods to identify policies and practices that correlate with that success.[b, c] We chose a set of "excelling" colleges from the top third of our rankings and "aspiring" colleges from the bottom third, often within the same states or regions and with similar demographics and local industries, to find out what practices distinguish the two groups.

We found that both excelling and aspiring colleges engage with regional employers and make use of labor market information to predict future employment trends, but the excelling colleges do so more fully and with more intention. They generate a range of work-based learning options for students with regional employers and provide students more career navigation support. We also found that technical colleges outperform more comprehensive colleges in generating higher earnings for students, as they tend to concentrate more on this goal and less on helping students transfer to four-year institutions. Finally, we found differences across states, with some clearly outperforming others in generating credentials with market value.

These findings suggest recommendations for practice and policy. Community colleges should: (1) better *align their program offerings* with both regional job availability and job quality, focusing on higher-wage jobs facing strong or growing demand that employers have trouble filling; (2) *engage with employers* more often and more deeply, with employers codeveloping programs, providing inputs on equipment needs, and helping students gain good-paying jobs; (3) offer high-quality and varied *work-based learning experiences*, including apprenticeships, internships, co-ops, and service learning; (4) integrate *career readiness* into all facets of education and training, including a focus on work ethic and employability; and (5) provide robust *student supports*, including academic advising and wraparound services (such as help with child care, transportation, and case management in emergencies).

State higher education and workforce policymakers should: (1) incentivize community colleges to *teach skills needed by regional employers* by tying colleges' public funding to their graduates' salaries; (2) provide *technical assistance* to support college involvement with regional employers; and (3) fund robust *academic and career advising* plus other critical supports for students.

The federal government can help by including funding in the Higher Education Act for these institutional and state supports and for work-based learning. And it can help states prepare for the availability of Pell grants for high-quality shorter-term or non-credit programs by

helping states obtain the data they need to illustrate a program's value.

At the same time, it's necessary to evaluate programs and policies rigorously to ensure they contribute to better student employment outcomes. And it's important to recognize that AI might shake up employers' needs and worker compensation patterns in the coming years, requiring policymakers to help community colleges monitor these trends and adjust their programs accordingly.

But the first step is for community college leaders and federal and state policymakers to implement more robust academic and career advising and other policies and practices that can help improve the employment outcomes of the nation's millions of community college students.

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the teacher understands the purpose of what we're doing in the classroom for the trajectory of the kids and then provides those experiences, it's so much more powerful."

What this means in practice is introducing skills and experiences via academic content to help students think about their future careers. A core component of the strategy is the integration of career content into daily classroom activities. Elementary students, for example, might learn about what it's like to be a firefighter as part of "fire safety month" at their schools, while older students might learn about math in the context of careers like engineering or carpentry. Instead of learning about geometry in the abstract, students might be asked to apply geometric concepts to a construction project.

Kika Gutierrez, a first-grade teacher at Meridian Elementary, said this approach helps build and maintain student engagement if they see their schoolwork as relevant to their future. "Exposing them at an early age gets them interested and makes the connection that there's a reason behind all of this," she said. "There's a reason why I'm learning math and reading and why I'm learning teamwork with people. There's a reason why my teacher is asking me to share with a buddy who I might not necessarily gel with because that's real life."

One of Gutierrez's annual activities is to set up a student-run flower shop as part of an exploration of floristry—one of the six careers in the first-grade World of Work curriculum. Using flowers donated by a local flower shop, students create bouquets to sell to parents and other teachers. Through this exercise, Gutierrez said, students learn practical skills, such as how to count money and how to speak to adults. "Students are showing competency in their math standards because they have to work the cash register and give out change correctly," Gutierrez said. Once, an older student told her that she had learned how to tie her shoes as part of this

activity. "She said, 'I was responsible for the bows on the bouquets, and I had to learn how to tie a bow,'" said Gutierrez.

Gutierrez links the flower shop activity to other academic subjects as well. "We learn about producers and consumers and needs versus wants," she said. "We have a lesson on the different parts of a flower and other plants. We learn about the plant life cycle." Gutierrez's classroom library is filled with books that focus on social and emotional skills or that explore a wide variety of careers from diverse perspectives. A Zoom tour of her classroom shows a windowsill crowded with flags from the countries her students' families represent, along with her books. "One of my favorite ones to read is Fly, Girl, Fly, about Shaesta Waiz," Gutierrez said.[71] "She's the first woman to circumnavigate the globe in a plane, and she happens to be from Afghanistan, where a lot of my students are from." The goal, she said, is to show students "mirrors and windows." "We want them to be able to see themselves in these career opportunities, and we want to highlight and feature people that look like them," said Gutierrez. "But we also want to show people who don't necessarily look like them who are doing this work."

Cajon Valley's teachers continue to embed career into curriculum as students get older, which can be especially important for students at risk of disengagement. Christopher Rice-Starkey, who teaches math, economics, and advisory at Bostonia Global, said one of his students had been labeled "extremely difficult" for his problem behaviors in class, the result of trauma from his parents' divorce. "He was moving into a shoebox apartment, and he was basically pulled away from his community and all the things he loved," Rice-Starkey said. Career exploration revealed that the student had a love of sailing, which became the key for keeping him engaged.

"I bought him a book about how to tie knots and rope work for sailors, and he was like, 'You did that just for me, wow,'" Rice-Starkey said. "Since then, we had that bond." Rice-Starkey said he tailored math assignments to pique this student's interest. "We're learning about triangles, and I'm drawing a sail," he said. "We're learning about navigation, and I'm doing it in terms of sailing." This student, now a senior, ultimately landed an internship at San Diego's Maritime Museum, earned a boating license, and has a job lined up after graduation that he hopes will lead to his ultimate ambition as a ship's captain. "He knows what he wants to be," Rice-Starkey said.

The Path Forward

Our analysis of the roots of the navigation crisis and the insights emerging from innovative counseling strategies points to three key takeaways for educators and education policymakers who want to ensure quality guidance for students:

Deploy technology to complement—not replace—human connections. Some districts may be tempted to believe that the phenomenon roiling the economy—AI—can also be the solution to all of its problems, including the counseling crisis. Many promising programs rely on sophisticated platforms to assess student skills and interests, gather information about careers and labor markets, and manage records. But practitioners warn that the proper role of this technology is as a supplement to human counselors; the adviser-student relationship is central to successful career navigation. It follows that districts should first invest in hiring and professional development, as well as provide dedicated time for counselors and students to work together. "Invest in your staff before you invest in any technology," says Chicago Public Schools' Heidi Truax. "Making sure your staff feels equipped to do the high quality advising that you need them to do will pay off in dividends more than any digital platform on its own would… young people thrive though relationships."

Moreover, over-reliance on technology has significant limitations. While generative AI and simulations can be helpful, said Cajon Valley's David Miyashiro, "I don't think it will replace hands-on experience and work-based experience with mentors who can give kids feedback and guidance." Engaging with a platform is also not the same as engagement. "There's no way to really know what [a student] is thinking or how they're thinking," said the Opportunity Trust's Riley Foster. "Are they just clicking through? Did they go to this career for a reason or was it just the first one that showed and they wanted to check a box for this assignment?" Software is also unlikely to re-engage students who are already disaffected. "If you have a young person who's overwhelmed, who's maybe discouraged, it's really hard for a platform to be the motivator for them," said OneGoal's Melissa Connelly.

Expand access to work-based experience. Researchers argue that real-life experience is a powerful and necessary complement to one-on-one guidance. Hands-on experience takes discussion of potential careers out of the abstract and concretizes specific pathways, leading to greater motivation and sense of purpose. "Research in vocational psychology shows that if young people have a 'vivid' sense of their possible future self, their ability to navigate toward that possible self is greater because they feel the urgency and the agency to do it," said Cajon Valley's David Miyashiro. "And the only way we can build a 'vivid' possible self is to give kids exposure and introduce them to the people who actually do the work."

Work experience can also help students begin to build networks and credentials that could help propel their careers. "If exploration does not lead to relationships in a pathway of interest or concrete credentials that set [students] up for success, then the exploration really has had zero impact," said The Opportunity Trust's Eric Scroggins. "It's like watching an interesting TV show. If you're like, 'Great, I'm aware of all these careers, and I really want to be a lawyer, but I have no understanding how to pursue that,' what's the point?"

For most high schools, their longstanding focus on academic achievement means that expanding access to work experiences will require significant shifts in investments, expectations, and even the structure of a school day to accommodate opportunities. High schools also don't typically build networks with local employers willing to provide internships, job shadowing, or pre-apprenticeships. Partnerships with proven intermediaries, however, could bring immediate capacity and obviate the need for schools to start from scratch.

Prioritize data. Timely, accurate data form the foundation of quality career navigation. Counselors and students must have access to meaningful information on local and regional labor markets, skills requirements for specific pathways, credentials of value, and trusted providers. Schools should also track their own outcomes data to understand what strategies work.

Much of this data collection is a work in progress; practitioners acknowledge that reliable indicators of quality credentialing, for instance, are often lacking today. (See FutureEd's report on K-12 micro-credentialing for more details on this topic.)[72] Nevertheless, educator demand for quality data can accelerate the rationalization of the credentials marketplace and the emergence of best practices. Strong structures for data collection can also help schools and districts hone their strategies and avoid ineffective investments.

The AI revolution and its attendant economic tumult elevate the urgency of future-proofing tomorrow's workers. Quality career navigation can help instill the resilience and flexibility students need to navigate new postsecondary pathways and an uncertain labor market, and, ultimately, anchor themselves to careers that align with their skills and interests, rather than drift into jobs with no potential for advancement or that risk obsolescence. Of the many challenges facing the nation's K-12 schools, strengthening career navigation should be a top priority.

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