

Bridging the Gap: Career Competencies as Keys to Student Belonging

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Abstract

Career support does more than break down barriers; it enhances feelings of belonging, uncovers hidden curricula, and leads to paid internships and long-term career success. Career support helps to retain students, clarifies the value of one's education, and increases feelings of support from one's college or university. This panel presentation explores strategies for incorporating career competencies within discipline-specific curricula. With a focus on practice, panel members discuss ongoing interdisciplinary collaborative efforts and unique approaches to incorporate career competencies into their respective curricula. In doing so, barriers are broken down, and students gain opportunities for a greater sense of belonging. Given the social responsibility of educators at a large Hispanic-Serving (HSI) University, panel members are incredibly passionate about helping ensure all students thrive academically and within their chosen career field. The panel discussion will highlight immediate and tangible actions individuals, departments, and colleges can employ depending on their timeline and available resources.

Keywords: belonging, career readiness, career competencies

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A student's sense of belonging improves academic outcomes (Gopalan & Brady, 2020). Improved academic outcomes improve career prospects. However, racial-ethnic minority and first-generation students report lower belonging in institutions of higher learning than their peers (Gopalan & Brady, 2020). These reports of lower belonging are especially alarming given that most college students today are from Generation Z, born after 1996, which is more diverse than any previous generation.

The racial and ethnic makeup of Generation Z is well documented. The Pew Research Center reports that a "bare majority" (52%) are non-Hispanic white, a 9% decrease compared to Millennials (Parker & Igielnik, 2020). Not surprisingly, diversity in higher education has also increased, and while educational attainment levels continued to rise for all racial and ethnic groups, non-White, non-Asian adults were less likely to earn a college degree (Kim et al., 2024). Furthermore, Black or African American students were less likely than their peers from other racial and ethnic groups to complete a degree or certificate (Kim et al., 2024). Black or African American students were also more likely to incur large amounts of educational debt, and Black or African American and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander students were most likely to enroll in for-profit institutions (Kim et al., 2024), which often cost more.

As recently as 2020, six-year graduation rates for first-time, full-time undergraduate students who began a bachelor's degree at a four-year institution in the fall of 2014 was 64% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Within that, social positionality characteristics such as gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status further determine who completes a degree. For example, analysis by Barshay (2023) illustrated that while rates of Americans with a college degree have risen for all racial/ethnicity groups:

In 2021, there remained an enormous 40 percentage point difference between Asian American adults, among whom 66 percent have a college degree, and Native American adults, among whom only 25 percent have a college degree. Among Black adults, 34 percent have college degrees. Among Hispanic adults, it's 28 percent and among white adults, it's 50 percent.

These graduation rates are especially alarming when unemployment and underemployment trends are examined. Consistent employment trends over decades have established that the more education one completes, the less likely one is to be unemployed or underemployed.

Colleges and universities, which are less racially and ethnically diverse in their faculty and staff compared to their students (Kim et al., 2024), have and continue to struggle with practices that best serve their increasingly diverse student populations. Career support and professional development are often overlooked areas where connection and belonging can be established and enhanced. Indeed, this is an area where everyone wins: students can feel increased connection and belonging because their goals are identified and supported while also feeling greater confidence in their career readiness. Career readiness refers to one's sense of preparedness to find, acquire, maintain, and grow within a job. Career readiness translates to students who graduate into jobs more aligned with skills, interests, goals, and jobs that ultimately pay more long term (Kelderman, 2023).

Career and Professional Development Support as Key to Building Belongingness

Research on embedding career readiness into the curriculum, rather than offering it as a separate service, shows promise for enhancing students' sense of belonging. Lambert et al. (2024) demonstrated that developing STEM career identities can shift students' motivation from destination-driven to purpose-driven, thus increasing their sense of belonging. Further, data

collected by Gallup (2018) finds that students thrive when they see a clear connection between their education and future work.

Incorporating career readiness into the curriculum not only prepares students for future careers; it dismantles barriers by clarifying hidden curricula, customs, and resources, and most importantly, it contributes to enhanced feelings of belonging. It equips students with essential skills for current job searches, such as internships and future employment, fostering agency through informed decision-making and increased confidence. However, integrating career readiness into an already packed curriculum poses challenges. Below are strategies that have been adopted to varying degrees by faculty at the University of Arizona, a large public R1 Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), to enhance feelings of belonging via concerted efforts to enhance career readiness.

Strategy 1: Assignments

Incorporating career readiness into student assignments can be creative and effective. One approach is to explicitly include career readiness tasks in courses, having students engage in discipline-specific activities that provide insights into future careers. For instance, an assignment could ask students to explore common career paths by researching current job postings for requirements and salaries or using LinkedIn to analyze profiles of professionals in desired roles. Bonus if students can find professionals who share salient identity characteristics.

Alternatively, career readiness can be integrated indirectly through assignments that develop relevant skills. After teaching concepts like statistical reliability and validity, students could complete personality assessments and critique their reliability. Similarly, instead of traditional essays, students could write cover letters or personal statements to showcase their writing abilities while enhancing their career readiness. Such assignments allow students to

reflect on their educational experiences while requiring them to articulate the value of their education.

Strategy 2: In-Class Experiences

Incorporating career readiness into both in-person and online classes through live or recorded professional interactions can significantly enhance student engagement. Inviting diverse guest speakers or panels from fields like Human Development & Family Science, Psychology, and Public Health provides practical insights into panelists' careers, daily work, and the skills required in their industries. These experiences make career options more tangible and attainable for students. Live Q&A sessions encourage direct interaction, while online students can connect with speakers via email or other platforms, fostering meaningful relationships. Importantly, it's crucial to ensure diversity among speakers, as representation helps students envision themselves in similar roles.

Additionally, faculty can dedicate class time to skill-building workshops or mock interviews to support career development. These workshops can cover various topics, including resume writing, networking, and job searches. Faculty can collaborate with their institution's career services to create a tailored approach that meets students' needs.

Strategy 3: Experiential and Service-Learning Experiences

Experiential and service learning are crucial for fostering a sense of belonging by connecting students with real-world experiences in their communities and classrooms. These hands-on activities empower students to integrate their personal and academic identities in a supportive environment (He, 2019). Kolb's experiential learning model emphasizes a cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (1984). This cycle encourages deep engagement and reflection, transforming

experiences into learning opportunities. Reflection is essential for helping students understand their role within broader societal contexts. According to MIT's Office of Experiential Learning, reflective activities like group discussions or journaling help students connect personal growth to academic content, enhancing their connections with peers and the community (MIT Office of Experiential Learning, 2023).

Service learning further strengthens belonging by immersing students in meaningful community service while meeting academic objectives. He (2019) notes that this active involvement fosters relational ties that enhance feelings of inclusion. Through service projects with local businesses, municipalities, or nonprofits, students not only contribute positively to society but also build relationships with community members, creating a sense of "place-belongingness" that extends beyond campus (He, 2019).

Strategy 4: Career Competency Curricular Integration

A fourth strategy involves integrating career readiness into the curriculum by aligning course objectives with established career competencies, such as those from the National Association of Colleges & Employers (NACE) or related accreditation bodies. Examples of these competencies include Strategic Communication, Critical Thinking, Equity and Inclusion, and Leadership (Cooke et al., 2024). "Thoughtful curricular design which maximizes student engagement and incorporates pedagogies for career and employability learning can prepare students for the realities of the workplace. Such pedagogies enhance student wellbeing and their perceived sense of belonging" (Rowe et al., 2023, as cited in Cooke et al., 2024, p.1).

Incorporating career competencies not only prepares students for the workforce but also fosters personal growth, leading to holistic development. This real-world application of course content boosts motivation and engagement by helping students see the immediate benefits of their

studies for future careers. Additionally, aligning career competencies promotes equity, enabling all students—regardless of background—to connect classroom skills with workforce demands (Kirby & Thomas, 2022). This approach supports social mobility and helps underrepresented students succeed in college and beyond.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, as higher education continues to face scrutiny over its return on investment, especially for its increasingly diverse student population, integrating career readiness provides a valuable solution to build belongingness and enhance outcomes for all students. The approaches outlined in this article will prepare students for long-term career success while fostering a sense of belonging. Connecting academics to real-world career readiness enhances student engagement and boosts confidence in achieving career goals. When aligned with institutional equity and inclusion goals, career readiness strategies can bridge gaps for marginalized students, equipping them with the tools needed for high-caliber jobs. As universities move forward, emphasizing career programming and competencies will be essential to meet the diverse needs of today's students.

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