UNIVERSITY INNOVATION ALLIANCE

Putting College to Work for All Students:

Bridging the Gap from Education to Employment Playbook Action Guide

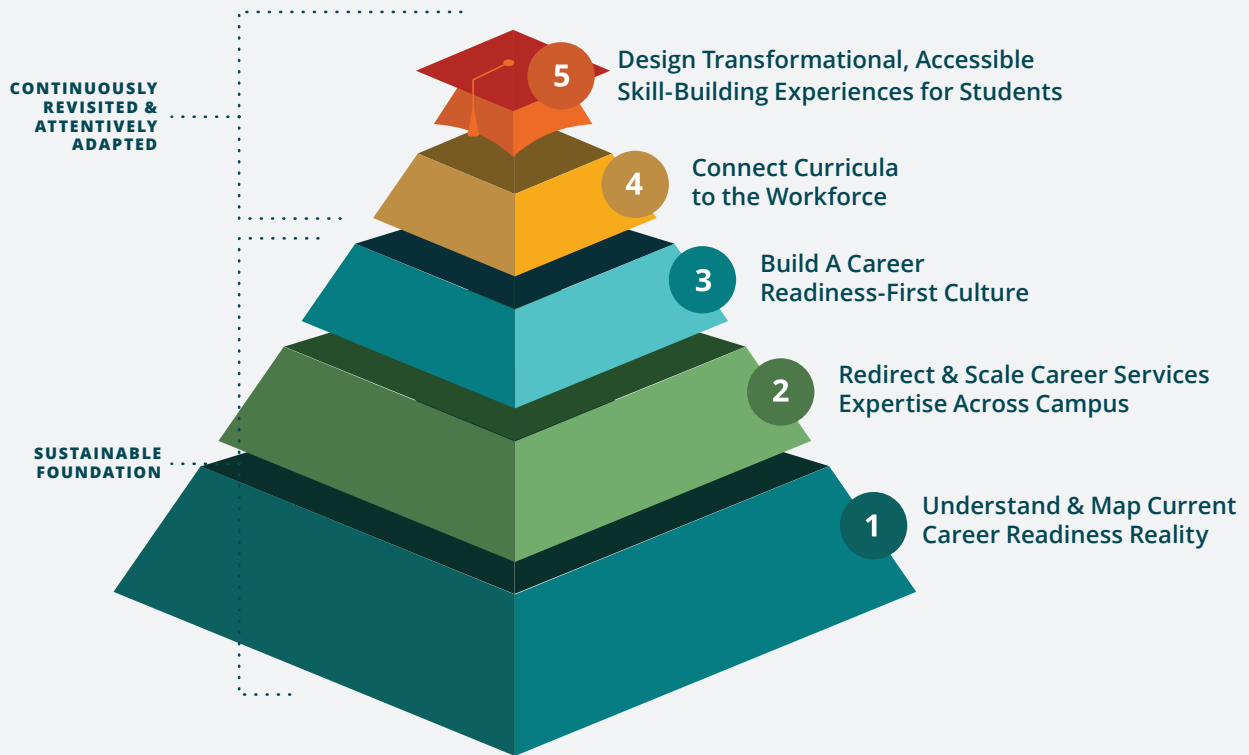# HOW TO USE THIS ACTION GUIDE

As an education professional, you open this action guide knowing a few things already:

- A growing number of institutions of higher education struggle to help their graduates translate educational experiences into economic opportunities.

- First-generation college students, those from low-income backgrounds, and students of color are especially vulnerable.

- Prospective students are increasingly paying attention to job placement rates upon graduation before choosing which college to attend.

- Increased student confidence in career readiness could lead to improved retention and graduation rates.

- The burden of career readiness is too often on students, not where it should be, on colleges.

- Employers' recruitment pool is composed only of students who elect to seek career information, choose majors for career outcomes, or have advantages that ease their access to career resources.

- Employers are bypassing what they consider lackluster or incomplete career services connections by using tools that connect them directly to students.

- Most universities don't have reliable, up-to-date, collective baseline data, gathered from all departments, on student engagement and needs and how to reach students, especially those from disadvantaged populations.

What is less understood is how to address those concerns and make real change in our universities. This action guide helps you start to see the action steps your institution can take, starting immediately and ending with transformational, accessible skill-building experiences for all students, especially those who are first-generation students, students of color, and students from low-income backgrounds.

UIA'S NEW MODEL FOR EQUITABLE CAREER READINESS

CONTINUOUSLY
REVISITED &
ATTENTIVELY
ADAPTED

5 Design Transformational, Accessible
Skill-Building Experiences for Students

4 Connect Curricula
to the Workforce

3 Build A Career
Readiness-First Culture

2 Redirect & Scale Career Services
Expertise Across Campus

SUSTAINABLE
FOUNDATION

1 Understand & Map Current
Career Readiness Reality

Here, we summarize a New Model for Equitable Career Readiness. You can adapt this for any student success effort, but it was designed especially for positioning your institution as a place that prepares students for the job market. While career readiness is exactly what most students seek from their college experience and what most employers need, our current lackluster college-to-career path isn't meeting either group's needs.

The model synthesizes the learnings from the University Innovation Alliance's Bridging the Gap from Education to Employment project, funded by Strada Education Network. Practitioners and leaders from seven University Innovation Alliance (UIA) member universities, their students, and employers from a range of fields and disciplines collaborated on this initiative. For more guidance, see the Bridging the Gap from Education to Employment Project Playbook or contact UIA.

> "This project has made me aware of my blind spots. It's helped me be more empathetic. It made me aware of where students are coming from. I was probably operating under the assumption that students were more like me, but that's obviously not the case."
>
> **– Participating campus staff member**

Your institution is a place of possibilities and exploration. But for students, the heart of their education includes something much more directed and focused on the reality that awaits them after graduation: jobs.

Most students are in school to prepare for a career. At the same time, employers are looking to universities for graduates who are prepared to hit the ground running. But universities are not serving either groups' needs adequately. Only 27 percent of college students report securing a good job before graduation; four in ten are underemployed in their first job. An incredibly small number of business leaders, 11 percent, believe schools effectively prepare students for the workforce.

27%
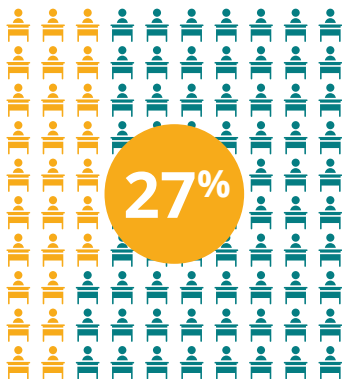
Percent of college students who secure a good job before graduation

40%

Percent of graduates who are underemployed in their first job

10%

Percent of business leaders who believe schools effectively prepare students for the workforce

The students most vulnerable to this disconnect are those from low-income backgrounds. They are students of color. They are first-generation college students. Challenges, judgments, and inequities specific to these students are rooted in our society. Quality, goal-focused education is especially crucial to them expanding their career options and increasing their lifelong earning potential.

To identify and deconstruct barriers to successful career readiness, the 2018–2020 Bridging the Gap from Education to Employment (BGEE) initiative brought together a diversity of University Innovation Alliance (UIA) institutions, students, college professionals, and employers for three years of fact-finding using human-centered design principles followed by the building and piloting of innovative solutions.

The New Model for Equitable Career Readiness came out of the UIA's work on college-to-career redesign. This action guide summarizes the model.

Every university has a unique mission and student body, but we've found that a clear path toward career readiness should be broad enough for any student to follow. The evolution of career readiness in each university is a long process. This guide, along with the larger Project Playbook, provides significant steps to take along that journey.

> "I am scared for my future because I have not yet felt that I have gained professionalism or mentorship by others. I hate my job, but I somehow have to pay the rent. Most internships are non-profits or don't get paid minimum wage."
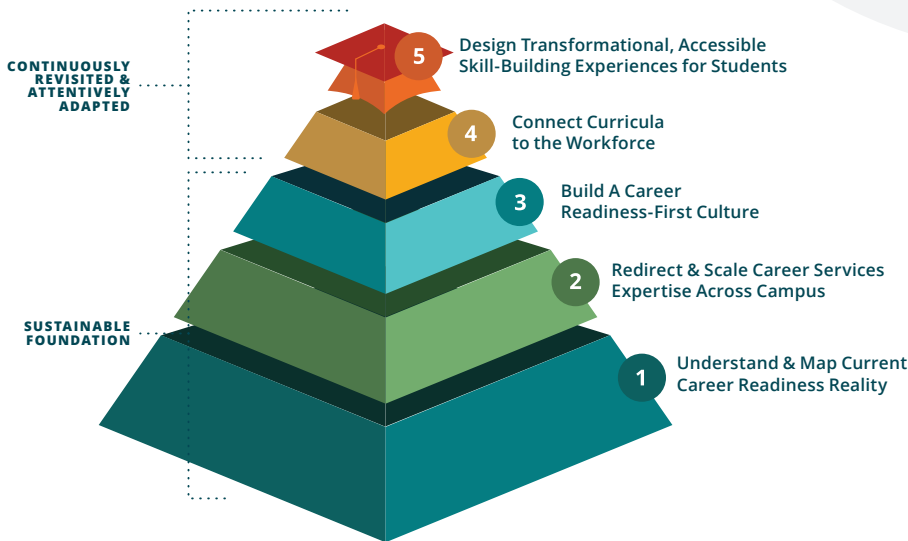>
> **– Undergraduate student**

For more information, see *Project Playbook* part IV, "Introduction to Bridging the Gap from Education to Employment"

The New Model for Equitable Career Readiness synthesizes our recommendations for effective implementation and scaling of your institution's own career-readiness program for first-generation students, students of color, and those from low-income backgrounds. UIA's campus teams identified this approach as being critical to the success of their piloted interventions.

Because we put this model through its paces across seven different campuses, we envision all institutions of higher learning as being able to adapt the model's five levels to their needs.

While it may be tempting for an institution to selectively choose which levels of the model to implement, the outcomes and learnings of this UIA project have shown the most promising results come from the strategic, gradual application of change management and capacity-building practices beginning at level one and intentionally working through each step to achieve the best possible results in step five. Doing so will allow institutions to create a career readiness–first culture, organically secure faculty and employer buy-in, and exponentially scale the positive impact of student engagement with career services expertise. Our experience indicates that the thoughtful and effective implementation of this model will likely result in better career outcomes for students, more robust campus-employer partnerships, and an increased ROI for the institution.

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

Oregon State University

OHIO STATE

PURDUE UNIVERSITY

Georgia State University

UC RIVERSIDE

Arizona State University

CONTINUOUSLY REVISITED & ATTENTIVELY ADAPTED

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2 Redirect & Scale Career Services Expertise Across Campus

SUSTAINABLE FOUNDATION

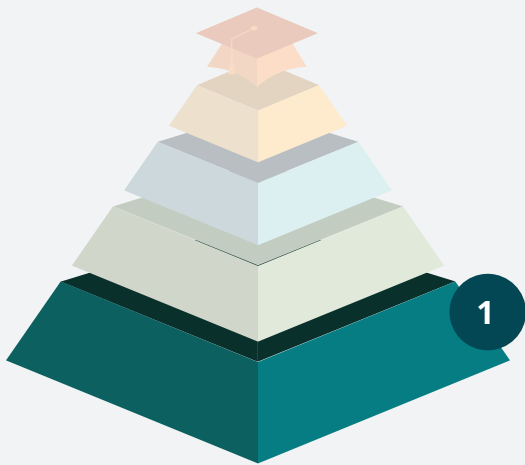**1** Understand & Map Current Career Readiness Reality

As Maria Flynn, president and CEO of Jobs for the Future, notes, "The solution to our career services woes is not to find a quick fix to a broken system, but to develop a new and better one." Flynn reminds us that students and employers already see power in us; we just need to use it to their advantage better: "Modernizing the career development function of higher education requires us to stop and appreciate the vital role that colleges play—not just as places of learning, but also as brokers of the sort of connections, social capital and networks that are still preconditions for economic mobility."

> "There is no one to lead me through this journey. My parents were in the military so they didn't have to look for a job. I don't know where to look or the whole timeline. Not only can I not ask my parents for advice on college, I can't ask them for advice on a job either."
>
> **– Undergraduate student**

For more information, see the *Bridging the Gap from Education to Employment Project Playbook* or contact UIA.

Understand and Map the Current Career Readiness Reality.

Successful career-readiness programs begin with this level of the model. You need to know where you are so you can move forward.

The concern

Institutions do not know how students experience career readiness on their campus because they don't have access to, or may not even track, student career outcomes or career-related activities data. It's likely that even if your university thinks it knows the problems on campus, you'll find that you don't really—not until you talk with all the stakeholders. Your institution might be overlooking some important ones.

Pro tips

Data and knowledge are often siloed on campuses. Look to a variety of departments—e.g., not just career services but also student affairs and academic affairs—for the unique information they hold. The health of current campus-employer relationships must be part of this analysis.

The solution

Institutions looking to improve career readiness support on their campus need to understand what career readiness resources exist for students, how hard it is for students to access those resources, and the impact of using those resources.

- Ask first-generation students, students of color, and low-income students about their experiences along their college-to-career path.

- Understand the reality of college-to-career experiences for your students.

- Discover duplicative services as well as gaps.

- Invest in—and begin to use—a strategic suite of tools and platforms to track long-term career outcomes.

- Assess formal and inherent reward structures for faculty and staff to encourage their participation in the college-to-career path.

- Build and maintain robust collaboration and partnerships internally (with faculty and staff) and externally (with employers).

- Redesign inclusively by prioritizing regular engagement with stakeholders and students.

> Only by understanding where they are starting can campuses move forward to improve upon their current state.

> "An engineering student at this institution has a much more enriching career readiness experience compared to a student in our college of education—only due to the major they selected. We have to figure out how to make career readiness more equitable across our campus."
>
> **– Career services staff member**

For more information, see *Project Playbook* section VIII, "The New Model for Equitable Career Readiness."
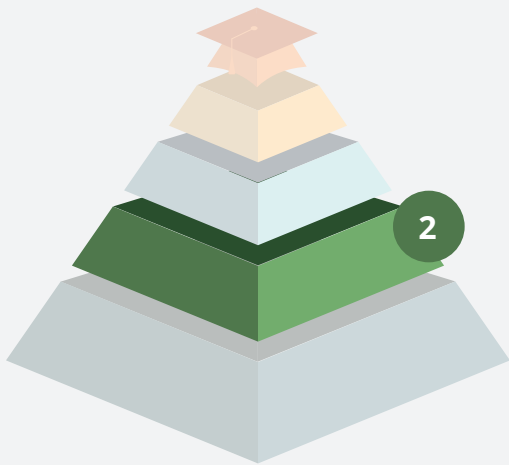
Redirect and infuse career services expertise across campus.

2

Career services professionals want more than transactional interactions with students. They want to provide support in a meaningful way, especially to the students who need it most. This level of the model moves your campus toward multi-point engagements with students to build their career skills and awareness.

The concern

Career services units are charged with the important responsibility of equipping students for near-future employment, but they are often siloed. Students who don't themselves choose to visit—or who don't have the time or bandwidth to do so—are left out of available opportunities.

The solution

Institutions need to embed career readiness in all academic units and, importantly, to integrate career readiness in each and every classroom. This allows schools to reach even those students with the most limited amounts of time to spend on campus or participate in extracurricular offerings. We recommended institutions looking to enhance career services do the following:

Recommendations	
Prioritize	• Position central career services professionals as the source for generalized career readiness expertise, in partnership with experts in academic units and disciplinary-specific faculty • Create career readiness efforts that increase student confidence • Provide resources for first- and second-year students
Scale	• Grow resources, effectiveness, and impact by building a cross-campus career readiness coalition • Expect equitable access to and direct engagement between students and employers
Additionally	• Infuse career readiness with diversity, equity, and inclusion best practices • Retire career-related activities not clearly leading to quality career outcomes • Create plug-and-play resources for faculty training or an exploratory course for students, complete with a cohort model for faculty and student engagement

See *"Redirect & Infuse Career Services Expertise Across Campus"* in Project Playbook, section VIII.

On many campuses, career services' critical expertise has been siloed due to continuous underfunding and understaffing. Instead, it must be recognized, leveraged, and scaled across the institution. Moving career services out of the corner cultivates shared responsibility for career readiness that enhances everyone's efforts with students.

Idea for concrete action

Go virtual. With Covid-19, the necessary pivot to virtual solutions demonstrated that not only could institutions offer this kind of service but virtual often led to higher engagement numbers and increased access for students. One UIA campus saw higher semester-to-semester student engagement with career services events hosted on Zoom and live-streamed to social media platforms, even during the pandemic.

"

Nathan Hatch, president of Wake Forest, once told the *New York Times* that career services offices rank "somewhere just below parking" as an administrative priority. Other higher education leaders have described career services as "literally and figuratively buried on campus" or as "an island."

For more information, see *Project Playbook* section VIII, "The New Model for Equitable Career Readiness."
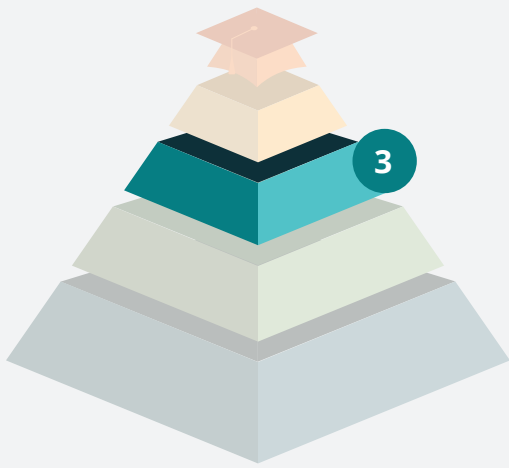
Build a career-readiness-first culture.

Integrating career services more fully on campus leads us into this third level of the model. Building a complete career-related culture at your institution reframes the way we think of student success. No longer should we focus on getting students to graduation only; we must consider what they feel equipped to do after graduation—in fact, we would be wise to start with the end, students' careers, in mind.

The concern

If career readiness feels like "something extra" to a student, it will feel like something "no one has time for" to faculty and staff. The expectation to serve students in this career-focused way doesn't yet exist at most institutions.

The solution

By demonstrating the importance good career outcomes have for institutional ROI and by recognizing that ensuring career readiness is an expectation students bring, career readiness becomes, clearly and unshakably, "how we do things around here."

- Engage meaningfully with faculty by providing information and resources that scale career services expertise and meet faculty needs.
- Develop career readiness-focused professional development for leadership, faculty, and staff.
- Update incentive structures to expect and reward faculty for participating in career-readiness professional development.
- Provide professional development for faculty and staff to understand the unique strengths and needs of first-generation students, low-income students, and/or students of color.

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Ideas for concrete action

Infuse explicit career readiness training into all work study jobs. University staff can learn to view student workers as people to mentor.

"Our role helping students prepare for careers is to be as helpful as possible, but there is not strong clarity on how to do that except helping navigate college years while talking about goals."

– Faculty member

For more information, see *Project Playbook* section VIII, "The New Model for Equitable Career Readiness."
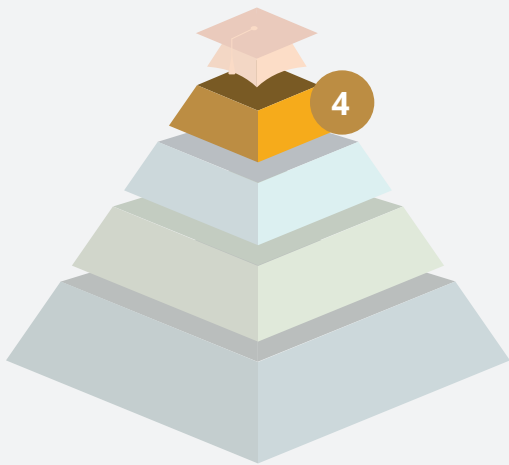
Connect curricula to the workforce.

The most efficient and effective way to scale career readiness across campus is through the classroom, be it virtual or in person. It is the one place on campus students are required to go. We can't expect every student to, by chance, find their way to a career center. We must bring it to them, where they are, and partner with faculty and employers to do so. The first three levels of the model build the necessary foundation to earn faculty buy-in and support for this level's activities.

The concern

The UIA has found that, in general, if career readiness does not live in the classroom, it doesn't really live anywhere on campus. Career services may exist as a department, but it can't maximize impact on student life and success without integration into curricula.

The solution

Career services need to lay the groundwork for breaking down barriers for students to access career information across disciplines and clear the pathway for employers. Determining ways to help programs and faculty understand how their program contributes to both internal learning outcomes and career development outcomes is crucial, as often students may not know how their skills relate to employability until it is too late.

If you get this level of the model right, your campus can change the story and create a career readiness culture, designed to support students. Your institution can overcome almost anything. The key is that students see how their work in the classroom connects to their future careers.

Ideas for concrete action

Establish a faculty cohort so a group of faculty members can experience these changes and co-create together.

Reward expertise and forward-thinking. For example, Georgia State University awards grants for faculty who incorporate career readiness in their curricula.

Create a toolkit of activities that faculty could bolt on to their syllabuses no matter the class to make it career friendly. For example, the University of Central Florida created a toolkit available through their center for teaching and learning. Remind faculty that adding career readiness to their curriculum can occur at a variety of levels.

> If career readiness does not live in the classroom, it doesn't really live anywhere on campus.

For more information, see *Project Playbook* section VIII, "The New Model for Equitable Career Readiness."
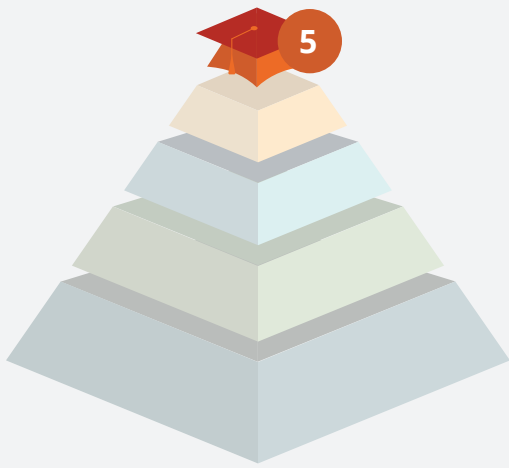
Design transformational, accessible skill-building experiences for students.

Just as career readiness must be delivered to students in the classroom, skill-building experiences for students must be provided more intentionally, and at a larger scale. This level of the model is the pinnacle of successful career readiness at an institution and should be measured as the goal for setting students up for post-graduation employment.

The concern

Traditional approaches to directly connecting students to employers leave out far too many people. Consider job fairs. They are high-pressure, one-time, transactional affairs that cater to only the most privileged students and employers. UIA found that if revenue for the university was not a consideration (since these fairs often involve employment partner sponsorships), even career services would say these old ways are not ideal.

The solution

Gather your stakeholders, take the knowledge you've collected about your current system, and generate new ways of bringing students and employers together.

This level of the model moves your institution beyond everything you've already done to codify career readiness on campus—and if you have successfully completed the model's earlier levels, this one's new ideas will just start appearing to you. This is the place for robust relationships across university departments, with students, and with employers—not transactional but substantive.

Ideas for concrete action

Investigate whether small businesses have equitable access to students. Current revenue models crowd out small businesses.

Educate employers. Most are not well-versed in institutional politics. One of the more interesting conversations we had during our research was about resistance that some faculty and programs have to career information. Employers gained a new understanding of faculty independence.

Use data tools to remove barriers to more deeply understanding job markets, in-demand skills, and alumni career outcomes (*Project Playbook*, Appendix).

Make your internship program count, for first-generation students, low-income students, and students of color specifically. This means professionally scoped projects that empower (including financially), provide agency, and are built around real-world challenges currently being tackled in the field. They include cohorts and connections to build students' confidence. UC-Riverside, for example, partnered with the US Environmental Protection Agency to create internships that paid students and provided them with EPA staff mentors, while allowing them to help address a real-world issue.

> "[My fear is] not having a successful career because of my lack of communication and social skills. I'm afraid that I am always going to be afraid and hold myself back from opportunities just because I am scared of communicating and asking questions."
>
> **– Undergraduate student**

For more information, see *Project Playbook* section VIII, "The New Model for Equitable Career Readiness."

UIA's college to career project was packed with learning. We spent three years working with more than 600 students across seven campuses, a nationally representative Employer Working Group, and cross-campus collaborative teams. Here, again, are some of the most critical findings, with a corresponding section from the *Bridging the Gap from Education to Employment Project Playbook* for further reading.

- Career prep must be a priority made early and regularly recommitted to, accessible to all students, and integrated into both university culture and all class curricula (section VI, "Barriers to Equitable Career Readiness").

- Before beginning any transformative work, universities must first understand and map their current career-readiness reality (section VIII, "The New Model for Equitable Career Readiness," part d).

- All university support services, particularly those that maintain student data, need to work together (section IX, "Summary & First Steps").

- Universities need to create the truly robust partnerships with employers that are crucial for their students' future success, including connections with common priorities; clear and steady points of contact; regular, meaningful check-ins with two-way critical feedback and co-led initiatives, not transactional recruitments; and equitable access between employers and students, regardless of employers' ability to pay to interact and students' major or academic department (section VII, "Robust Campus-Employer Partnerships").

- Student employment and "old chestnuts" like internships and mentorships can be used intentionally to great success (section VIII, "The New Model for Equitable Career Readiness," part b; Appendix).

- Exposure to diverse jobs, networks, and professionals expands students' horizons (section IV, "Introduction to Bridging the Gap from Education to Employment," part d).

- Designing for transformative change is complicated and needs to be approached with that in mind (Executive Summary).

> "Being a Political Science major, it wasn't until I registered for the exit course that I saw a list of possible jobs outside of law. If this [pilot idea emerging from UIA project] happens, it needs to be focused on people who are outside of what we normally think of when it comes to careers."
>
> **– Undergraduate student**

For more information, see the *Bridging the Gap from Education to Employment Project Playbook* or contact UIA.

ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY INNOVATION ALLIANCE

The University Innovation Alliance is the leading national coalition of public research universities committed to increasing the number and diversity of college graduates in the United States.

We share a sense of urgency about this work because we are public universities with a public mission. Higher education needs to do a better job of graduating students across the socioeconomic spectrum, particularly low-income students, first-generation students, and students of color.

Raising graduation rates is imperative for individual social mobility and U.S. global competitiveness.

For too long, colleges and universities wasted time and resources trying to solve this graduation challenge by themselves. It was inefficient and ineffective, and students paid the price. In 2014, we flipped the script. We decided to innovate together. We set ambitious goals, opened up our data, and agreed to share everything we learn.

ABOUT THE STRADA EDUCATION NETWORK

Strada is a national social impact organization devoted to research, philanthropy, and solutions that align education and careers.

Their vision is to see all individuals empowered to pursue learning pathways that are valuable, purposeful, and provide support to overcome systemic barriers to success.

theuia.org