

Invest in Career-Readiness Training for College Students

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Key Points

- Only 25 percent of our country's 1.2 million first-generation or low-income college students are predicted to earn their degree and land a strong job or attend graduate school.
- The status quo exacerbates inequality and pushes the American dream further out of reach for many Americans.
- Targeted investment in career-readiness training and social capital-building opportunities can help underrepresented college students achieve upward economic mobility.

In America, we've promised that self-discipline, hard work, and ambition will be met with equality of opportunity. That's a promise we've failed to keep far too often. Today we stand on a precipice. The question we must ask ourselves is how we will rebuild the American dream in a post-COVID-19 America.

Before COVID-19, a bachelor's degree-holder from a low-income background started his or her career earning only two-thirds as much as those from higher-income backgrounds did. While education could be the great equalizer, only 25 percent of our country's 1.2 million first-generation or low-income college enrollees are predicted to earn their degree and land a strong job or attend graduate school.¹ A high-quality first job—defined as having promotion pathways, employee benefits, and a market-competitive starting salary; being full-time; and requiring a bachelor's degree—helps individuals build long-term wealth and health.

If we are not careful, these college-to-career gaps will continue to be exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis and the impact it is having on job

prospects for young Americans entering the labor market. Graduating during a recession leads to initial earnings losses and underemployment, and students who start underemployed are five times more likely to be underemployed after five years.² These two factors can have scarring effects on a young person's lifetime earnings, especially for students from humble beginnings who worked hard in school to earn the right to compete for poverty-breaking jobs.

We're already seeing this play out for students from low-income backgrounds whose jobs and internships have been rescinded due to the COVID-19 crisis, forcing them to scramble to find a new source of stability.

Now more than ever, we must ensure that talented college students, particularly those from low-income backgrounds, are prepared to compete for strong jobs before they graduate. This can be achieved by infusing high-quality career preparation into the academic side of higher education and making it accessible to all (i.e., students who attend college while working full-time). There are five core elements of successful career-preparation efforts.

- Providing deep experiential career-learning opportunities that promote developing professional connections and provide opportunities for students to practice soft skills with employers. This might include mock interviews, networking practice, or consulting projects in which students assist an employer in solving a real-world problem.
- Developing social capital through opportunities for students and local professionals to work together in ways that mimic workplace structures and fostering mentorship by exposing local professionals to students who sit outside their typical networks. This should allow students to develop the core competencies employers are seeking such as building trust, receiving feedback, and communicating and networking.
- Preparing students to understand how to create and maximize artifacts related to the job search such as a LinkedIn profile, cover letter, and resume.
- Increasing access to career-building opportunities such as internships and research assistantships that give students the skills and at bats needed for full-time employment, using existing work-study dollars to do so.
- Ensuring students understand how to apply their major or minor to a fulfilling career.

Combining these five elements can help students who might not otherwise understand the less overt elements of career preparation catch up to their peers. For instance, Crystal Cardenas, whose parents immigrated to America years ago and passed on their hard work ethic to her, became first in her family to graduate college. When she entered college, Cardenas had no idea she needed a mentor or that she should be searching for internships—until her friends started landing them. She, like so many other first-generation college-goers, was strictly focused on receiving good grades and obtaining her bachelor’s degree until she received evidence-based career-preparation training and realized the steps she needed to take to land a strong first job.

We must build structures into the fabric of our universities to support students like Cardenas. There are numerous ways to go about this work, but here are four places to start.

First, universities can partner with outside organizations to provide career support aimed particularly at students from humble beginnings. Braven, the organization I founded, is one such organization. We are embedded in large public universities, allowing us to build innovative career learning into the undergraduate experience and become a systemic solution. We also create connective tissue between resource-constrained public colleges and employers, which helps us manufacture social capital networks for students and bring employer partnership capacity and expertise to public colleges.

Second, in-house, universities can innovate in a myriad of ways to offer high-quality career preparation to students. We are seeing some universities breaking down the silos among career services, academic advising, and academics. Other universities are ensuring students have experiential learning opportunities as part of their coursework. For instance, Xavier University in Louisiana sends more African American students to medical school than does any other college in the country by preparing them for their medical exams and assisting with medical school applications.³ Northeastern’s cooperative education model alternates semesters of academic study with periods of full-time work.⁴ The University of Chicago’s model offers 3,000 paid substantive internships for its students each year and more than 50 career treks to visit employers throughout the US and around the world.⁵

Third, federal policymakers can help find and scale what works for students by investing in research on and assessment of innovative career-readiness practices. Innovation funds such as the one proposed in the bipartisan Fund for Innovation and Success in Higher Education Act would, among other goals, aim to “identify and support the most effective interventions to increase postsecondary degree attainment and career success of high-need students.”⁶ Additionally, increased data transparency requirements for all postsecondary institutions, such as those proposed in the bipartisan College Transparency Act,⁷ would allow for better evaluation and program improvement of the various innovative practices being implemented across the country and would ensure students and families have access to more information.

Fourth, federal policymakers should create the equivalent of K–12 Title I funding for higher education, a crucial step that would provide additional targeted resources to schools based on the numbers and percentages of Pell grant recipients. This new funding stream should focus on outcomes, including career metrics, rather than eligible activities. This would mean that, alongside supporting basic needs, Title I higher education funds could be used to support flexible evidence-supported approaches to career preparation that are producing results.

Millions of students have stories that start but don't end like Cardenas' does, with a strong job

and a promising future. Policymakers and higher education leaders need to ensure that all students receive career-readiness support that launches them into the labor market ready to compete—regardless of their family's background. Investing in career-readiness supports will not only help give individuals a better shot of achieving the American dream but also help the country's economy recover from the COVID-19 pandemic by providing a workforce that's better equipped to handle the demands of a 21st-century career. The cost of providing this kind of support is far lower than many other initiatives to advance economic mobility in our country.

About the Author

Aimée Eubanks Davis is the founder and CEO of Braven. Before this, she spent 13 years at Teach for America in various leadership roles.

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Notes

1. Composite statistics are based on national sources, including the National Center for Education Statistics, National Association of Colleges and Employers, and Federal Reserve Bank of New York.
2. Burning Glass Technologies and Strada Institute for the Future of Work, "The Permanent Detour: Underemployment's Long-Term Effects on the Careers of College Grads," May 2018, https://www.burning-glass.com/wp-content/uploads/permanent_detour_underemployment_report.pdf.
3. Nikole Hannah-Jones, "A Prescription for More Black Doctors," *New York Times Magazine*, September 9, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/13/magazine/a-prescription-for-more-black-doctors.html>.
4. Northeastern, "Cooperative Education," <https://careers.northeastern.edu/cooperative-education/>.
5. University of Chicago, "Career Advancement," <https://careeradvancement.uchicago.edu/>.
6. Fund for Innovation and Success in Higher Education Act, H.R. 4083, 116th Cong., 1st sess., <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/4083/text?r=7&s=1>.
7. College Transparency Act, S. 800, 116th Cong., 1st sess., <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/800/text>.

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