Measuring Developmental Career Readiness

A Cross-Campus Imperative

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Abstract: There is growing research that career success is a key motivator for students pursuing higher education, yet career development often exists in a silo on campus, and there are increasing calls for a more integrated approach. In this case study from Smith College, career development professionals have collaborated with institutional research to work toward systematic measurement of career learning prior to graduation and first-destination outcomes. This allows for real-time data on competency gaps over a student's developmental journey and the opportunity for more targeted use of programmatic interventions.

Keywords: career development, institutional research, career competencies, career learning, data-driven

Growing research shows that career success is a key motivator for students pursuing higher education (The Career Leadership Collective, 2022; Gallup & Strada, 2018). In response to new institutional imperatives to demonstrate return on investment, many career centers are moving to implement career readiness competencies. Yet, assessing these career competencies is less common (NACE, 2025). Across many institutions, the focus of assessment is still on job outcomes rather than competency building. This sentiment is noted in an American Association of State Colleges & Universities (AASC&U) 2021 report entitled, *Integrating Career Advising for Equitable Student Success: A Higher Education Landscape Analysis*. The report emphasizes the importance of progressive career competency development versus post-graduation outcomes alone: “Career outcomes are a part of equitable student success and must not be reduced to only the first job, or salary measurement” (AASC&U, 2021). This paper explores an attempt to deliver cross-campus assessments of students’ perceived career readiness to support targeted real-time interventions for students before graduation and first-destination outcomes.

Broadly speaking, we define career readiness as demonstrated preparedness to successfully enter the workforce and advance in one’s career. The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) describes it as “a foundation from which to demonstrate requisite core competencies that broadly prepare the college educated for success in the

workplace and lifelong career management" (NACE, 2024). NACE further describes a set of eight core competencies supporting career readiness: career and self-development, communication, critical thinking, equity and inclusion, leadership, professionalism, teamwork, and technology. Further research has established relationships between career readiness and learning processes such as connecting to resources for career navigation, identifying and following through on career planning steps, and networking with mentors (The Career Leadership Collective, 2022).

Measuring the development of career readiness competencies throughout a student's academic journey is essential to recognizing equity gaps, identifying needed interventions, and ensuring that the institution effectively meets the goals of a student's career planning while they are still on campus. If we know, for example, that a certain subpopulation has historical barriers to job entry, it is important to consider a set of related questions early and often, such as: To what degree do students in this population have access to career resources? Are there structural barriers to their development of career readiness competencies? What levels of engagement do they have with various career support resources, and how does this change over time? When we know more about how students perceive their career readiness over time, we are better equipped to provide research-supported, targeted interventions while they are still at the institution.

This learning-oriented approach to career readiness assessment is important amidst institutional imperatives to demonstrate the return on investment of a college education (The Career Leadership Collective, 2022; Gallup & Strada, 2018). To effectively demonstrate degree value, colleges need to adopt data-driven tools to intervene with targeted skill-building well before graduation, rather than waiting for post-graduation surveys.

Challenges of the Current Approach: Data Gaps and Information Silos

While campuses may perceive that they are adequately tracking career development, most are not. In their Career Advising Integration Survey, AASC&U found that nearly 42% of campuses believed that they are tracking students in their career development over time (AASC&U, 2021). However, when asked about the underlying data, respondents mostly referenced event attendance and career advising appointments, with very few integrating indicators such as career networks, career decidedness, or career confidence, and only 15% of campuses reported correlating career engagement data with retention rates, graduation rates, or career mobility over time (AASC&U, 2021). This represents a gap in our understanding of the qualitative experience of student career learning, which is only magnified when taking an equity focus. If our goal is to understand the full impacts of identity on learning outcomes and career mobility, gap analysis needs to go beyond simply cross-tabbing engagement with demographic information.

When thinking about career-related data collection, campus partners often assume that this is an effort of the career center, perhaps with support from institutional research for an annual first-destination survey of recent graduates (NACE, 2016). However, there is already a much broader ecosystem of offices collecting independent data related to career

readiness across most campuses, ranging from alum engagement to experiential learning and more. Some key units may include:

- Academic Advising
- Alum Relations
- Campus Employment
- Experiential or Service Learning
- Faculty-driven capstone and research projects
- Financial Aid and Payroll
- Multicultural Affairs or Equity and Inclusion Offices
- Student Engagement
- Study Abroad / Study Away

Too often, these departments do not collect data in a centralized data system for unified reporting, which creates barriers to comprehensive strategic planning and would require large, expensive institutional commitments in order to redesign and organize data sources. It may take time for institutions to move in this direction, so we propose that existing cross-campus surveys be leveraged to better address questions related to career learning. Given the institutional importance of career outcomes and the existing structures for surveying and analysis within institutional research, we see a natural, largely untapped opportunity to work jointly toward systematic measurement of career learning throughout a student's time at our institution.

This article focuses on one institution's efforts to integrate and analyze career data collection across campus to support equitable student outcomes. We intend to broaden a cross-institutional dialogue about how to center developmental career learning across campus data collection, supporting strategic interventions well before the first-destination survey.

Our Context at Smith College

Smith College is a private, nonprofit liberal arts institution in Western Massachusetts, with over 2,500 undergraduates and 300 graduate students. One-third of the undergraduate student body are students of color, 13% are international students representing 68 countries, and 17% are first-generation college students, with 60% of undergraduates receiving need-based aid (Smith College Institutional Research, 2025). Under the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, Smith is profiled as a four-year, full-time, more selective, and lower transfer-in. The vast majority of students choose to live on campus for all four years in 41 self-governing house communities that accommodate between 10 and 100 students each. Smith is among the largest women's colleges in the United States, with students from 46 states and 78 countries. Smith's campus culture places a high priority on equity and inclusion, community, and leadership (Smith College, 2025).

Mutual Benefits of Collaboration

As colleagues at Smith College's Lazarus Center for Career Development and Office for Institutional Research, we have worked collaboratively to identify four core learning

outcomes to assess career readiness and developed four survey questions to measure those learning outcomes. Additionally, we leveraged existing institutional survey deployments to evaluate learning outcomes across a student's developmental journey, from prior to their first class through the spring term of their senior year. As a result, we have identified how collaboration between career development and institutional research can benefit other institutions in streamlining data to improve the measurement of career development.

Pre-existing institutional surveys at Smith College have a much higher response rate than new surveys deployed for the first time. Students are over-surveyed in higher education, which leads to lower participation over time (Porter et al., 2004). It takes time to normalize a new survey instrument and convince students that it is worth their attention. Even a highly regarded national survey, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), has response rates that vary across institutions with an average response rate of just 28% in 2019 (NSSE, n.d.). By contrast, surveys deployed by our institutional research office at Smith regularly see response rates between 40-80%, which means they can produce data that can be more generalizable across the student body. The higher response rates allow for disaggregation between minority groups without concerns of re-identification, the process of breaking confidentiality by reporting on an individual's response as opposed to multiple responses combined, due to small group sizes. It is important to identify strategies and resources for enhancing educational equity for subpopulations within the student body (Teranishi et al., 2020).

Collaboration is essential for a productive institutional research office. Fostering relationships with other offices enables institutional research to understand the nuances of information and analysis that will further contribute to strategic planning and decision-making (Howard et al., 2012). Institutional research offices are more efficient when partners across the institution can identify predictable outcomes that align with their department's goals. Using key performance indicators to assess these goals creates a framework for more consistent and meaningful results. Establishing these measurements helps track progress and enables the institutional research office to provide higher-value analyses in the future and, in this case, reduce the overall survey burden on students, ultimately contributing to more effective strategic planning and improved institutional performance.

Identifying Key Constructs and Developing Survey Items

When inserting questions into pre-existing surveys, there are constraints to be aware of, most centrally that it is not possible to collect data on every area of interest. Survey fatigue is a key risk factor that can reduce statistical power (Fass-Holmes, 2022) and potentially bias selection even when a representative sample initially chooses to participate (Le et al., 2021). Many departments across campuses are understandably interested in taking advantage of the benefits of collaboration, so space on an institutional survey is at a premium. As such, it is important to identify a few core priorities for which additional data can lead directly to actionable interventions and to make a clear case for why these data are relevant to the institution as a whole rather than just a single office. Institutional

research offices administer these surveys, so the first steps of our partnership centered on the collaborative development of survey questions to address these priorities.

We relied on a combination of our knowledge of the literature on career development and the expertise of our career advisors to determine four key constructs, measured using a 5-point Likert scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree.

Awareness of Career Resources on Campus

Our most foundational priority was understanding whether students were aware of the resources that already exist on campus to support their career learning. The prompt "I know where to get help with my career goals at Smith" also allowed us to better interpret engagement and attendance data. When students do not use the Career Center, it is helpful to understand whether that is because they do not know who we are or what we offer, which points toward a communications-type solution, or some other challenge, which could point toward content-based solutions.

Career Planning

The inclusion of this construct was informed by the work of The Career Leadership Collective and their framework developed from the National Alumni Career Mobility survey (The Career Leadership Collective, 2022). We also heard anecdotally from career advisors that the idea of career planning can be overwhelming and stressful for students, particularly first-generation college students, so we chose language that would be accessible by drawing from literature on goal setting (Locke & Lathan, 2019). The resulting survey item, "I think about the next steps I need to take to reach my career goals," was designed to reflect key elements identified in the goal-setting literature, including the importance of conscious attention, relevant knowledge, and specificity.

Ability to Leverage Professional Networks

Social capital and the ability to access informal channels of job searching are highly relevant to career outcomes (Flap & Boxman, 2001; Martin et al., 2020; Schwartz et al., 2023). In particular, there is a connection between inequitable access to social capital and differential outcomes for first-generation students, as skills like networking are often part of higher education's "unwritten" curriculum (Schwartz et al., 2018). The item "I understand how to grow my professional network" was also informed by an internal strategic priority at Smith College related to increasing engagement between current students and alums. Therefore, it lends itself to future targeted interventions.

Self-Efficacy and Confidence

Self-efficacy is a construct in the social sciences that connects expectations of success with behavioral change (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 2023; Hussain & Khan, 2022; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2021), and has been applied specifically to the career literature through the Career Decision Self-Efficacy Scale, which was developed to inversely correlate to career indecision (Betz et al., 2005; Taylor & Betz, 1983). The prompt "I am confident that I will obtain the career outcomes important to me" also responds to anecdotal feedback from career advisors who reported that they had been seeing higher levels of insecurity and imposter syndrome from students in recent years.

Implementation

As a member of The Consortium on Financing Higher Education (COFHE), Smith College participates in its suite of surveys, which provide a comprehensive examination of the undergraduate experience. COFHE is an unincorporated, voluntary, institutionally supported organization of highly selective, private liberal arts colleges and universities committed to meeting the full demonstrated financial need of admitted students (https://web.mit.edu/cofhe/). The four constructs were added as local items to three COFHE surveys.

The COFHE Survey of New Students (SNS) collects background data, including diversity and high school experiences, that are not typically available through administrative sources. It also explores students' college goals, academic interests, and preparations. The SNS is administered every other summer. The COFHE Enrolled Student Survey (ESS) assesses student engagement, satisfaction, progress toward learning goals, advising, and well-being. Smith administers ESS to all undergraduates every other spring semester. The COFHE Senior Survey gathers feedback from graduating students about their college experience, personal progress, and future plans. Smith administers this survey every spring to all graduating seniors.

These questions were also added as local items to the CIRP Freshman Survey (TFS) administered by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA (https://heri.ucla.edu/). TFS gathers data on incoming students' backgrounds, high school experiences, and expectations for college. TFS is administered every other summer to incoming first-year students at Smith College, alternating with SNS. Table 1 summarizes each survey that included our four questions, along with the time period for data collection and response rate.

Survey responses were collected via unique links, allowing for disaggregation of the data by a student's official information system record, including class standing, academic major, racial identity, first-generation status, international status, and Pell eligibility. We found that

Table 1. *Data Collection Timeline*

Survey	Target Population	Collection Period	Response Rate
COFHE Enrolled Student Survey (ESS)	All undergraduate students	Spring 2023	51%
CIRP First-Year Survey (TFS)	Incoming first-year students (alternates years with SNS)	Summer 2023	80%
COFHE Senior Survey	All graduating seniors	Spring 2024	53%
COFHE Survey of New Students (SNS)	Incoming first-year students (alternates years with TFS)	Summer 2024	86%

the samples of respondents were generally representative of the student population for all four surveys. Due to the operational nature of these surveys, the results are not intended for formal empirical research, which leads to limitations to the generalizability of our specific findings, which will be discussed later. The full analysis of our findings is out of scope for this paper, so we will now focus on how these data tangibly benefited students.

Positive Impacts from Our Findings

By measuring these four constructs at multiple developmental milestones on pre-existing surveys with strong response rates, we started to identify the moments in a student's journey where they may need additional support and where interventions could be scaled and implemented more broadly. The measurement allowed for real-time data on competency gaps and the opportunity for targeted use of resources and programmatic interventions to support career readiness across all student populations.

A key learning gap identified at Smith was students' perception of networking readiness. Less than half of respondents across class years responded favorably to the question "I know how to grow my professional network." Although data from peer schools also show lower networking confidence, these responses were concerning in light of the established importance of social capital for career mobility. As a result, the learning gaps identified using these data were a key factor in securing institutional support for three key initiatives to help grow our students' social capital and networking competencies.

First, Smith invested in Career Launch, a research-based curriculum focused on developing social capital and networking confidence. We have now facilitated this program annually since 2023 for multiple cohorts of first-generation students over the three-week winter term, helping students learn how to network and access the hidden job and internship market. After participating in this program, all students reported more confidence with networking, and a large majority reported an increased sense of belonging at Smith based on pre- and post-program assessment surveys. Although the program was successful, it was offered to a limited number of students. We realized that developing trained faculty partners who are familiar with the importance of network development and ready to serve as ambassadors to resources was essential to bringing the program to scale. Now, discussions are underway on building an asynchronous curriculum that faculty advisers across all disciplines can recommend and draw from in their advising interactions, as well as reference throughout coursework.

Second, Smith invested in technology to support scaled networking interactions. Smith had already developed a substantial repertoire of networking resources for alums, powered by Salesforce. We sought to complement this with a companion resource focused on students. PeopleGrove is a student-alum networking platform that powers Smith's new student-alum connections hub, featuring predictive mentor matches, a range of connection opportunities, and asynchronous learning engagements. Based on back-end data, over half of the Smith student body created user profiles in the first year of engaging the platform, and over 2,500 alums signed up as mentors. Currently, our focus is on engaging faculty as ambassadors for the program. We have also enlisted three academic

departments to pilot the integrated use of the tool for their targeted alum engagement, and we seek to evaluate and scale this effort soon.

Finally, Smith committed to major capital investments to support enhanced networking hub spaces for students. Smith is nearing completion of building a central career center, proximate to admissions and the campus center, and is co-located with a leadership center on campus. While fundraising was well underway for this capital project at the time of the cross-campus survey, the data on networking helped to drive targeted donor investments. For example, spaces for employer engagement were added, allowing for enhanced opportunities for students to interact with visiting employers. Private bookable rooms were also added so that students could schedule private spaces for mentoring interactions and informational interviews. The new career center space will also be the first stop on admissions tours, showing in real time a vibrant space where students develop career connections.

In addition to addressing networking gaps, we also used this survey data to focus our early intervention strategies. For example, we wanted to see improvement in self-reported first-year student knowledge of career resources. We added targeted programming during first-year orientation and implemented partnerships with both first-year academic advisers and the class dean's office, which led to substantially increased first-year engagement with career advising.

These are just two examples, but more broadly, this survey data helps us more compellingly tell the story of career development programming to campus partners, administrators, current students, prospective students, and current/potential donors. Through this initial cross-campus survey, we have seen how key data points help us focus our initiatives on resourcing students in targeted ways. We can also empirically support the anecdotes we previously relied on to tell the whole story.

Future Plans for Collaboration

As colleagues, we see this collaboration as an indicator of the efficacy of cross-unit collaboration and a marker of future work to be done. We see three key areas for collaboration moving forward. First, we seek to add another data collection point at major declaration, asking students to answer the four key questions again and log their top career industries of interest. The survey will serve several purposes: 1) to update our understanding of student career interests, which are collected on entry but change over time, 2) to target our outreach to students in more sophisticated ways, and 3) to enhance faculty and departmental collaborations based on shifting student indicators of career interest.

Second, we are moving toward viewing institutional research surveys and surveys primarily facilitated by the career development office as part of a collaborative portfolio rather than independent projects. We are planning an evaluation process to determine whether certain questions currently on the institution's senior survey could be better suited to the career center's first-destination survey due to their respective timelines and the needs of institutional partners. For example, as a liberal arts institution, many students do not have

an accurate picture of their postgraduate career plans when our senior survey is administered, just before graduation. By formally move career satisfaction and outcomes questions to the career office's first-destination survey that runs 6+ months after graduation, we can 1) help combat survey fatigue by avoiding duplicative questions, 2) collect better data by asking questions only at the most appropriate time for the audience, and 3) develop a shared methodology to maximize the usefulness of all collected data across the institution.

Finally, we seek to use students' self-reported career readiness competencies to enable more individualized targeting of relevant resources at each developmental moment. Several examples of this relate to networking, as described above. Beyond this, we are working cross-institutionally to better support students with resource navigation, including career planning resources. We have established a working group with members from the Provost's Office, the Deans' Office, and research and learning centers to look at how to provide clearer communications and navigation tools matched to class years, divisions, and special interests.

Taken together, these three next steps involve deeper collaboration, extending beyond the Career Center and Institutional Research and employing the Registrar, Provost, Academic Deans, Faculty Advisers, and others in joint efforts toward data-driven decision-making and developmental interventions.

Generalizability, Limitations, and Areas for Future Research

We hope this case study will be valuable for career and data professionals across the post-secondary space; however, the specifics of this work will not apply to all institutions. Most centrally, institutional context and culture will heavily impact the success of any potential partnership between career development and institutional research. For example, our collaboration was extremely "in the weeds" because our career office benefits from the expertise and bandwidth of a dedicated data staff person. This could look very different for career offices with less experience writing valid surveys and working with larger data sets, or on campuses with a more siloed institutional research department. Regardless of these challenges, this case study demonstrates the benefits of exploring collaborative projects between career development and institutional research.

When dealing with potentially ambiguous constructs such as "career planning," there is always some risk of students interpreting our language differently than intended, and more broadly, self-reported data has some drawbacks compared to observational data (Gonyea, 2005). We would have preferred to go through processes established in the academic literature for developing and empirically validating our survey items rather than the approach outlined earlier (Clark & Watson, 2019). However, this would have required a large survey burden on our students and long timelines involving ethics approval from the institutional review board. With our main goals being operational, we determined that it was better to avoid further survey fatigue and instead focus on integrating the theoretical and practical resources available to us to address any validity concerns given these constraints.

In addition to the operational next steps described above, there is a clear opportunity for future research to explore the impact of various programs on the career readiness constructs identified. For example, there is good large scale data on the correlation between experiential learning and career outcomes (NACE, 2019; Sattler & Peters, 2013; Strada, 2024), but it would be useful to investigate what kinds of experiential learning are most effective, and refine our understanding of the experiences we want to encourage (student employment, internship funding programs such as Praxis, study abroad, on-campus and off-campus research, etc.) These data, collected over many cycles, should also present the opportunity to assess the success of investments such as Career Launch and PeopleGrove, because it will allow us to determine changes in career readiness for students who engage with these interventions.

Final Thoughts

We look forward to continuing our analysis of these questions over the next few years. As of Spring 2027, we will have a full set of data for a graduating class of students, from their incoming student survey through their senior survey. We will also continue to monitor responses to the networking questions in the short term to assess the impact of the interventions outlined above.

This case study demonstrates how career and institutional research offices can collaborate to support data-driven interventions, while addressing the wider industry calls to better measure student career readiness prior to first-destination outcomes. We invite those reading this paper to explore how they may adapt this approach to their contexts and to prioritize collaboration that integrates the measurement of career readiness throughout their institutions.

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