Redefining Measures of Career Success
A Holistic View of Post-Graduation Success

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Abstract: Traditional measures of career success—primarily salary and job titles—offer a limited and often misleading view of post-graduation outcomes. These narrow metrics fail to capture the complexity of career trajectories and provide little actionable insight for institutions seeking to improve student preparedness. This paper advocates for a holistic approach to measuring career success by incorporating objective indicators, such as cost of living and industry trends, and subjective measures, such as alumni perceptions of job satisfaction and career fulfillment. Examples and strategies for measuring career success beyond salary and first-destination outcomes are provided. Lessons learned from collecting these measures are shared, including leadership commitment, community building, stakeholder engagement, and the use of technology and analytics. Additionally, it is important to integrate data collection into curricula, foster industry collaboration, and establish feedback loops to align academic programs with workforce needs. By redefining career success beyond traditional metrics, this study offers a framework for institutions to assess and enhance graduate outcomes more effectively in an evolving job market.

Keywords: career outcomes, career success measures, objective career measures, subjective career measures, non-pecuniary measures, alumni surveys, industry trends, cost-of-living

Even though the economic value of a higher education degree has been well established (Daly & Bengali, 2014; Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011), the debate continues about its value. The discourse on value has linked traditional measures of student success (e.g., retention and graduation) with career success post-graduation. The connection between college access, retention, graduation, and career is becoming more pronounced.

We are now witnessing the beginnings of a movement that goes beyond completion and focuses on post-graduation outcomes as the priority. Just as access without

completion is insufficient, completion without the fulfillment of expectations for personal growth and improved opportunities leaves students, educators, taxpayers, policymakers, and employers alike less certain about the value of a degree or postsecondary credential. (Strada Center for Education Consumer Rights, 2022, p. 1)

Measuring career success is a challenging endeavor. Traditional success metrics, such as employment rates and starting salaries, are often critiqued for their narrow scope and inability to capture the full range of graduate outcomes (Dumford & Miller, 2017; Spurk et al., 2019). Graduates are now as likely to switch industries, pursue entrepreneurial ventures, or engage in project-based or freelance work as they are to seek traditional full-time employment in their field of study. This shift reflects broader societal trends toward valuing diverse skills, adaptability, and lifelong learning (Deloitte, 2024; Dumford & Miller, 2017). In an increasingly measured market, students and policymakers demand clear evidence of higher education's value beyond initial employment statistics (Tomlinson, 2018). To address this gap, it is imperative to consider a more holistic approach to evaluating career success. Campbell et al. (2019) suggest that "there is evidence of emerging practice across higher education of a more mature integration of employability and career development learning across a whole of curriculum design" (p. 503). Therefore, examining true career success involves a multifaceted approach.

This study presents alternative measures of career success beyond the first job and salary. It first provides a foundation in the literature for measuring student success. Then, it proposes objective and subjective measures of career success that practitioners can use to move beyond the first job and salary. Finally, it concludes with lessons learned from the authors' experiences measuring career success.

Measuring Career Success

In decades past, Americans were more likely to remain with one employer for their professional career (Pew Research, 2016), making it reasonable to assume that one's employer post-college graduation would remain highly relevant throughout their lives. As market conditions, educational opportunities, and industries shift, data shows that the average person changes jobs 12-13 times within their lifetime (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). Closely connecting a college degree to a specific job, company, or industry may limit the public's perception of the long-term career impact associated with higher education. As colleges and universities look to showcase their value far beyond the short term, holistically examining career outcomes may help present them more meaningfully. High-quality academic programs look beyond an alum's first job or company association at graduation and offer up-to-date curricula aligned with industry standards, meaningful oversight and governance, positive accreditation, clear learning outcomes, and more (Kayyali, 2023). While salary and employer information should not be ignored, further exploration of additional frameworks for examining the collegiate experience is needed.

Heslin (2005) noted that "even though most people who have careers are not White, male, well-educated managers or professionals working in large, hierarchical organizations, the vast majority of careers research has been focused on this very narrow subset of all the

people who are engaged in a career" (p. 127). A diverse array of alumni are excluded from the success narrative by defining career success only through salary and job title. By broadening how career success is measured, institutions create a more inclusive narrative of success for their students and utilize measures that lead to actionable results. Miller et al. (2017a) added that one way to look beyond job placement and salary is through alumni's perceptions of careers.

> While institutional administrators certainly want to see their graduates employed, this external pressure to use income as the "end-all-be-all" measure of career success may not be capturing a complete vision of successful outcomes. Other aspects of one's career can provide just as much, if not more, of a rewarding experience as can the traditional measures of income and prestige. (p. 4)

Heslin (2005) suggested using both subjective and objective measures to define career success. Objective measures are verifiable sources such as salary, promotions, livable wages, and occupational status. Subjective measures are "an individual's reactions to his or her unfolding career experiences" (Heslin, 2005, p. 114). These reactions can include career readiness, career satisfaction, finding meaning in a career, work-life balance, challenge and support at work, financial security, and social support. Taking this concept one step further, Heslin (2005) proposed a framework for various career types and how they match with objective or subjective success measures. The first career type consists of people working in winner-take-all job markets who are more likely to define career success using objective measures such as promotions, salary, and status symbols such as job titles. The second type is clan cultures, which measure career success using more subjective measures of connection with community, team, and meaning in their work. The third type is careers for those who feel they have a calling and use subjective measures of career success, including finding meaning in their work, having freedom in their choices, and feeling they are making an impact. The fourth career type is performance goal-oriented and uses subjective and objective measures such as meeting targets (objective) and feeling they are successful (subjective). The final career type is those with a non-linear career path; again, subjective measures provide insight into success for these paths. This framework can serve institutions in understanding how to measure career success more broadly and pushes researchers to start measuring success more subjectively.

The Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP) is an excellent example of how campuses can partner with researchers to find reliable measures of subjective career outcomes (Dumford & Miller, 2017; Miller et al., 2017a; Novak-Leonard, 2024). Through a focus on alumni of arts programs (music, visual arts, performing arts), this survey couples objective and subjective measures of career success with alumni's perceptions of skills and competencies they learned while obtaining their degree. Given that most alumni from arts programs fall into Heslin's (2005) career types of clan culture, a calling, goal-oriented, or non-linear career paths, it goes without saying that "if making money is not the only thing that matters for workers and employers, it only follows that it should not be the only thing that matters for institutional measures of alumni success" (Dumford & Miller, 2017, p. 196). Findings from alumni surveys demonstrate that career success can be measured by alumni perceptions of work that reflects values, opportunities to be creative, work that

contributes to a greater good, career relating to their degree, job security, level of responsibility, overall satisfaction at work and with life, and finding flexibility in their workplace (Dumford & Miller, 2017; Modern Language Association, 2024; Novak-Leonard, 2024).

Subjective measures such as career satisfaction capture valuable perspectives on career success as well as reflect current values related to work and career. The Deloitte Global 2024 Gen Z and Millennial survey highlights that most Gen Zers (86%) and Millennials (89%) say having a sense of purpose is important to their overall job satisfaction and well-being. These generations are increasingly willing to reject assignments or employers that do not align with their values (Deloitte, 2024). Interestingly, among Gen Zers, their purpose is important for job satisfaction and well-being regardless of job seniority (Deloitte, 2024). By examining job satisfaction, institutions can understand what is important to graduates in the workforce and incorporate the data into their larger career preparation strategy. For example, the curriculum can be adjusted, career preparation offerings can be adapted, and career centers can learn about organizations that attract and retain early talent that may appeal to their students (Modern Languages Association, 2024).

Moreover, recent studies indicate that students entering higher education today prioritize different aspects of their future careers than previous generations. Surveys conducted by organizations such as the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) and Mowreader suggest that students place significant emphasis on job satisfaction, work-life balance, and the ability to make a meaningful impact in their communities (HEPI, 2023; Mowreader, 2023). This is partly due to the changing social context, where environmental concerns, mental health awareness, and social justice movements have influenced how success is perceived. These values-driven motivations for career choices have altered the landscape of professional aspirations, suggesting that higher education institutions need to broaden their success metrics to capture these evolving definitions.

In addition to career satisfaction, career preparation is an important subjective measure to consider. The National Alumni Career Mobility Survey found a strong relationship between career satisfaction and alumni's perception of whether their institution prepared them for their careers and invested in their careers (Yousey-Elsener, 2024). Preparing students for their careers is critical to higher education, providing students with the resources, guidance, and support they need to transition from academia to the workforce. However, traditional assessments of career preparation often focus on short-term outcomes, such as job placement rates, rather than their lasting impact on graduates' career trajectories. A more comprehensive evaluation of career preparation should consider how these programs influence long-term career success, satisfaction, and adaptability (Sherif et al., 2020). Career readiness builds upon career preparation by specifying the essential skills required for success.

Subjective measures can also measure career readiness. Career readiness reflects the knowledge, skills, and learning strategies required to begin a career, including common workplace conduct expectations (National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE], 2022). Career readiness is a foundation to demonstrate requisite core competencies that

broadly prepare the college-educated for success in the workplace and lifelong career management (NACE, 2022). The competencies include career and self-development, communication, critical thinking, equity and inclusion, leadership, professionalism, teamwork, and technology (NACE, 2024). Career preparation efforts should intentionally develop these skills and competencies. Career outcomes assessments should ensure they are measuring career success in part based on how well students develop these skills and how well these skills link with long-term career success.

In addition to career competencies, subjective measures can also focus on understanding the institution's impact on networking. Researchers have found that networking is critical for building social capital and achieving career success (Sherif et al., 2020; Yousey-Elsener, 2024). Social capital refers to the value of social connections and support systems that individuals develop throughout their professional lives (Sou et al., 2022). Unlike other forms of capital, social capital is rooted in individual relationships and group memberships. What makes social capital so important is its connection to helping students achieve their career goals. Research by Seibert et al. (2001) and Zhang et al. (2010) suggests that social capital is essential for attaining career success by providing access to information, resources, and sponsorship. These connections enable individuals to navigate career challenges more effectively, open pathways to advancement, and enhance their overall career development. Building and maintaining professional relationships is key to achieving long-term career success.

Feedback loops providing insights into four subjective areas - job satisfaction, career preparation, career readiness, and networking - help practitioners understand how to support student success while assisting institutions in defining their value proposition (Dumford & Miller, 2017; Strada, 2022; Yousey-Elsener, 2024). The impact of career preparation extends beyond individual alumni achieving career success; it also contributes to the broader goals of higher education. A multi-source approach to assessing career outcomes enables institutions to identify trends such as plateauing growth in specific industries, the effectiveness of career and professional development efforts, and evolving job market demands. With a deeper understanding of career success, institutions can refine their career services, enhance curriculum relevance, and develop tailored support mechanisms that align more effectively with graduates' long-term success in an evolving workforce.

Building on this broader perspective, examining career success requires looking beyond initial job placement and salary to incorporate objective and subjective measures. While early career outcomes provide useful indicators, long-term success is shaped by a range of factors, including professional growth, job satisfaction, and career preparation. By considering these diverse measures, institutions can better understand how well they prepare students for sustained career achievement and fulfillment. The next section provides tangible examples of objective and subjective measures that campuses can use to expand their definition of career success.

Objective Measures of Career Success

Objective measures of career success need to go beyond salary to provide additional depth and perspective on graduate outcomes. The measures described below are more effective when triangulated with other data sources, allowing for more nuanced views of career success. Each measure includes a section on triangulating data with other subjective or objective measures to provide additional context.

Cost of Living

The focus on starting salaries as a primary indicator of success is problematic for several reasons. First, starting salaries do not account for regional cost-of-living variations, meaning a seemingly high salary in one location might not provide a comfortable standard of living in another. Second, they fail to capture long-term earning potential or career growth prospects. A graduate may accept a lower initial salary for a position in a location that has a lower cost of living, offering valuable experience, skill development, and advancement opportunities that could lead to significantly higher earnings and job satisfaction later on (Gray & Koncz, 2024).

Third, salary alone does not reflect the broader aspects of job quality, such as benefits, job security, work environment, and opportunities for professional development (Vandenbroucke, 2023). Fourth, focusing solely on salary data provides little actionable data for higher education institutions other than funneling students into majors that lead to high-paying positions (Yousey-Elsener, 2024). Salary-focused metrics can thus provide an incomplete picture that fails to acknowledge the multi-dimensional nature of career success.

A singular emphasis on financial outcomes can misrepresent the true value of an education by neglecting other essential aspects of long-term career success (Vandenbroucke, 2023). The average salary for either an institution's or a program's graduates does not give a graduate a realistic salary expectation. Graduates may turn down positions based on institutional averages. Prospective students with their families may choose a major based on salary that could be inflated or deflated and not a realistic picture of what is happening years in the future. Moreover, salary-focused measures often fail to account for higher education's broader return on investment (ROI), including personal fulfillment, skill acquisition, and career adaptability (Levy & Graff, 2023).

To address these limitations, institutions can employ several strategies to measure living wages effectively. First, they should utilize regional cost-of-living data to adjust salary benchmarks, recognizing that the cost of living varies widely depending on location. Publicly available resources, such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's (MIT) Living Wage Calculator, estimates living wages based on family size and location, offering a valuable tool for benchmarking graduates' earnings (MIT, n.d.). Institutions can request data from the MIT database or the Council for Community and Economic Research Cost of Living Index (n.d.) to contextualize salary information so that current and prospective students can compare alumni salaries with the living wage standards of the regions in which they reside. This method provides a more realistic assessment of financial success and informs programmatic support for graduates facing economic challenges.

Self-reported data from alumni is another crucial component of this measure. Surveys that ask graduates about their monthly expenses, savings, debt levels, and financial stress can provide a more comprehensive picture of their economic well-being. For example, questions such as "Are you able to save a portion of your income for future goals?" or "Do you feel financially stable given your current expenses?" can offer insights into the adequacy of graduates' earnings relative to their cost of living. Contextualizing salary in light of the cost of living provides valuable data for those seeking to better understand higher education outcomes. However, focusing solely on financial outcomes limits decision-making by emphasizing career paths that lead to high salaries and locations with low living costs. Exploring alternative measures helps to broaden the perspective of career success.

Industry Trends

Graduates' success is also influenced by the industries they enter (Deloitte, 2024). Traditional metrics often focus on whether a graduate finds employment within their field of study, reinforcing an "in-field/out-of-field" binary that fails to capture the complexity of modern career trajectories. This rigid framework overlooks the reality that graduates often apply their skills across multiple sectors, leveraging transferable competencies instead of following a direct academic-to-career pipeline.

Institutions should analyze how well academic programs prepare students for career adaptability within evolving market landscapes. A thriving industry with a high demand for skilled workers may provide job security, career advancement, and job satisfaction. Conversely, industries facing decline may require graduates to pivot more frequently, acquire new skills, or redefine their professional paths. Recognizing this dynamic interplay between education and workforce trends allows institutions to assess how well they equip students to thrive in a fluid and interdisciplinary job market (Aspen Institute, 2014, Watermark, n.d.).

To incorporate industry trends into career success metrics, institutions should utilize labor market information systems (LMIS) and actively partner with employers and industry associations. LMIS tools provide data on job openings, the demand for specific skill sets, average wages, and projected growth or decline in various sectors (International Labour Organization, n.d.). These systems are available through various organizations based on regional or global locations. Readers are encouraged to explore the dataset most relevant to their context. By analyzing these data, institutions can identify which industries are expanding, where skill gaps exist, and how their academic programs align with market needs. This information is critical for curriculum development and career advising, enabling institutions to prepare students for emerging career opportunities (Aspen Institute, 2014; Watermark, n.d.).

Additionally, combining industry trends with alumni employment trends can reveal important patterns. This transparency benefits both institutions and students. For institutions, tracking and sharing data on employment trends allows them to identify potential gaps in program relevance, advocate for curriculum adjustments, and develop strategies to support graduates facing unexpected job market disruptions. For students,

this level of transparency ensures they understand real-world employment conditions in their field and can make informed decisions about their career paths, skill development, and any potential need for further education or retraining.

In addition to LMIS datasets, employer partnerships, such as the Employer Advisory Board at Suffolk University, provide another valuable source of information (Suffolk University, n.d.). Institutions can establish industry advisory boards comprising professionals from key sectors who offer insights into current workforce trends, emerging technologies, and the most in-demand skills. Regular dialogue with employers informs curriculum development and ensures that students receive up-to-date career advice reflecting the realities of the job market.

Industry trends and cost-of-living information are powerful tools for understanding career success, career trends, and how institutions can impact long-term student success. These tools are part of a broader understanding of measuring career success. Subjective measures collect additional information, often from the perspective of students or alumni. The next section explores ways in which institutions can gather this vital information.

Subjective Measures of Career Success
Oreopoulos and Salvanes (2011) contend that the financial returns of higher education have been well-established, so it is time to look beyond those returns and find ways to measure what "schooling actually does" (Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011, p. 159). The examples they provide include the impact of having a degree on how someone enjoys work, finds work, progresses in their career, and makes major life decisions about things like marriage, health care, and parenting. These nonpecuniary (or subjective) benefits allow for reshaping the conversation around obtaining a college degree and call for new ways to measure career success. These subjective measures use many different data collection tools such as focus groups, advisory boards, interviews, and, most often, alumni surveys.

Surveys that gather perceptions of the value of a degree can play a crucial role in defining career success beyond just salary. These subjective ratings can provide insights into nonpecuniary benefits such as job satisfaction, opportunities for career progression, and a sense of meaning in life. Moreover, when combined with career pathways, industry trends, and cost-of-living data, they offer a more nuanced understanding of career success. The Strada Foundation (2022) has stated that "by examining economic success and personal fulfillment together, as well as identifying the most successful elements of their educational experience, we can help improve the return on all the investments that individuals, families, communities, employers, and governments make in postsecondary education and training" (p. 3).

Higher education institutions have been using alumni surveys for many decades. Cabrera et al. (2005) outlined the various stages of alumni surveys beginning in 1930-1970. At that time, surveys focused on gathering data from alumni on career pathways, transitions to the workforce, and the relationship between their careers and majors. Surveys of this type seek to answer questions such as, "How satisfied are graduates with their employment? How satisfied are graduates with the degree-granting institution? To what extent are

graduates fully participating in civic activities?" (Cabrera et al., 2005, p. 6). From the 1980s to the early 2000s, alumni surveys broadened to include information about competencies gained and engagement while pursuing a degree. Surveys focusing on competencies and engagement aim to answer questions like, "What are the competencies (outcomes, abilities, and values) that college education should foster most? To what extent were alumni engaged with faculty, staff, and peers while attending college? To what extent do graduates apply those competencies on the job or in graduate school?" (Cabrera et al., 2005, p. 9). In the early 2000s, a third type of alumni survey focused on alumni's capacity to give back to the institution. The central question for alumni giving surveys is, "What is the inclination and capacity of alumni to support higher education through service, advocacy, and philanthropy?" (Cabrera et al., 2005, p. 12).

Institutions today are known to use all three types of surveys when gathering information from alumni. Volkwein (2010) underscored the importance of alumni surveys for internal and external stakeholders and suggested that these surveys should collect information on career pathways, competencies, and engagement categories. He summarized the value of alumni surveys: "Under ideal conditions, the results of alumni studies equip faculty and administrators with information for making constructive alterations to programs and curricula, as well as for demonstrating institutional effectiveness" (Volkwein, 2010, p. 127). Stoloff et al. (2016) concurred that alumni surveys should focus on collecting data beyond career pathways and satisfaction by incorporating questions about alumni experiences while obtaining their degrees. Alumni surveys play a crucial role in understanding the impact of a college degree on career success, the ROI of that degree, and how to better enhance programs and services. Parkyn (1991) emphasized that "while assessment endeavors which measure currently enrolled students focus on short-term outcomes, alumni-based research provides an appropriate context within which to measure long-term objectives" (pp. 7-8).

One of the largest criticisms of alumni surveys is their lower response rates, which may limit the sample's representativeness. Stoloff et al. (2016) reviewed a survey conducted by a large psychology department to determine if the responses to their alumni survey were representative. They concluded that although the responses were not representative, the results were still valuable and should be used to understand general information about student experiences and alumni career pathways. "Results from alumni surveys that are carefully constructed and appropriately analyzed can provide insights that can guide curriculum development and advising, thus increasing the likelihood that more students will mimic the activities of highly successful alumni" (Stoloff et al., 2016, p. 15). The key to effectively using alumni data is careful construction, appropriate analysis, and interpretation, as lower response rates could indicate nonresponse error for some topics but not others (Fosnacht et al., 2017; Standish & Umbach, 2019). Increasing response rates is discussed further in the lessons learned section of this article.

In addition to the response rate, Volkwein (2010) examined various challenges specific to alumni surveys and proposed possible solutions. The first challenge is selecting which alumni classes to survey. The author suggests that younger alumni (5-10 years post-graduation) are ideal for assessing outcomes, competencies, and engagement as

they have had enough time to reflect on their experiences while still remembering the details. The second challenge pertains to sample size, recommending that it should not be too big or too small, considering the need to ensure adequate responses for each group required for analysis. The third challenge Volkwein (2010) noted is the frequency of survey distribution. The suggested solution is to wait at least 5 years between surveys to avoid survey fatigue among alumni and to give the institution enough time to utilize the data properly. Volkwein made no recommendations regarding how frequently any group of alumni should receive surveys.

The final two challenges are related to survey design and include advice on what scales to use and the survey length. One recommendation is to use an alumni survey offered nationally, as it provides some consistency with the design elements and also offers benchmarking opportunities. Alumni surveys offered nationally include the HEDS Alumni Survey (Higher Education Data Sharing Consortium [HEDS], n.d.), Gallup Alumni Survey (Gallup, n.d.), National Alumni Career Mobility Survey (Lightcast, n.d.), Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (Strategic National Arts Alumni Project [SNAAP], n.d.), and the Alumni Outcomes and Loyalty Survey (Ruffalo Noel Levitz [RNL], n.d.). Each survey focuses on aspects of alumni data and provides different deliverables as part of its process. Whether for internal use or external stakeholders such as accrediting bodies, institutions should clearly understand what data they need before conducting national surveys or designing one in-house (Volkwein, 2010). In-house, custom-made surveys allow campuses to collect data specific to their needs. Surveys intended for other stakeholders, such as current students or employers, can utilize questions from the alumni survey. The Appendix includes a sampling of survey questions for alumni surveys.

Understanding career success through subjective and objective measures provides a comprehensive view of how students and alumni evaluate their professional achievements. While objective metrics–such as salary, employment status, cost of living, industry trends, promotions, and job title–offer tangible benchmarks, subjective measures–including job satisfaction, personal fulfillment, and work-life balance–capture the nuances necessary for institutions to understand and gather actionable insights on career success. Examining these dual perspectives highlights the complexity of defining and assessing career outcomes. However, measuring career success effectively requires more than defining key indicators; it also demands a strong infrastructure to support data collection and use. Without sustainable processes for gathering, analyzing, and using this information, even the best-defined metrics may fall short of their potential impact. The next section explores building a sustainable framework that ensures data is consistently collected, accurately interpreted, and meaningfully used to inform decision-making.

Building a Sustainable Data Infrastructure

Broadening the measures of career outcomes is just one aspect of a larger effort to assess student success and enhance the narrative surrounding the value of higher education. Establishing scalable and sustainable frameworks to support collecting, analyzing, and utilizing career outcomes data ensures campuses fully optimize these efforts. Wells and Eckert (2024) explain that "the degree to which assessment practice is successful depends

on its capacity to provide relevant and credible data on goals of interest over time" (p. 86). Strategies for building this infrastructure specifically for career outcomes data align with best practices for effective assessment frameworks. The professionals responsible for collecting and using career outcomes data often reside outside the assessment organizational structure, typically in career services offices. This section links the elements used to construct assessment infrastructures to the specific strategies for creating a sustainable infrastructure for data for career outcomes.

Leadership Commitment

Institutional leaders are pivotal in driving data collection and analysis initiatives (Wells & Eckert, 2024). Their endorsement signals the importance of this work and sets the tone for a data-driven culture within the institution. Highlighting the potential impact on career readiness, curricular improvements, and student success outcomes illustrates the value of adopting a holistic career outcomes approach (Rosenbaum et al., 2017). Leaders can support data collection efforts by allocating resources, endorsing initiatives, and communicating the significance of career success metrics.

Building a Community of Practice

Establishing forums, working groups, or committees dedicated to data collection and utilization practices fosters collaboration and the sharing of best practices (Cebulski, 2024). Cross-departmental committees that include representatives from academic programs, career services, institutional research, and alumni relations can facilitate discussions on data collection strategies, analysis, and application. Regular meetings provide opportunities to share findings, address challenges, and explore potential improvements in data practices. By building a community of practice, institutions enhance their collective capacity to understand and support graduates' long-term success (Thompson-Dyck & Schalweski, 2024).

Building a Team

Thomson-Dyck and Schalewski (2024) stated that "effective...involvement...is essential for producing timely, useful results that demonstrate impact and are used to make improvements. The challenge...is to identify who, how, and when to involve... while juggling competing priorities and information demands" (p. 52). Engaging faculty, staff, students, and alumni in data collection efforts fosters a shared commitment to understanding and enhancing career outcomes. Regular communication with collaborators about the progress of data collection, insights gained, and resulting improvements reinforces the value of a data-driven approach. Involving partners in interpreting data and developing strategies for programmatic changes ensures that the institution's efforts align with the diverse needs of its community. Celebrating success stories and recognizing faculty, staff, and alumni contributions can inspire ongoing engagement (Yousey-Elsener & Bayless, 2025).

Leveraging Technology and Analytics

Modern data analytics tools provide powerful capabilities for managing and interpreting career success data. Predictive modeling and trend analysis can identify factors contributing to successful career outcomes, assisting institutions in refining their programs and support services. For example, data analytics can reveal correlations between specific

academic experiences, such as internships, research projects, or participation in professional organizations, and long-term career success (Miller et al., 2017b). Centralized data management systems, interactive dashboards, and user-friendly data entry platforms enhance the efficient tracking of key metrics and support data-driven decision-making (Henning & Roberts, 2024). Visualizing data through dashboards allows partners to explore trends and metrics, improving the accessibility and usability of data for faculty, staff, students, and policymakers.

Training and Professional Development

Creating a truly data-driven culture requires more than just collecting information—it demands a fundamental shift in how institutions train, equip, and empower their faculty and staff to use data meaningfully. The new framework for career success tracking depends on strategic data planning, integration across multiple sources, advanced analytics, and effective visualization to translate raw information into actionable insights. To meet these demands, institutions must invest in professional development that ensures faculty, career services staff, and institutional researchers have the skills to collect, interpret, and apply data effectively (Kruchen-Spaulding & Cyr, 2024).

Incentivizing Participation in Alumni Surveys

Encouraging student and alumni participation in data collection efforts is essential for obtaining comprehensive and accurate information. As mentioned above, a strong community of practice is key to creating cross-functional teams that promote alumni engagement. Offering incentives, such as access to exclusive career resources, prize draws, or recognition for contributions, can increase response rates and data quality (StageClip, n.d.). Moreover, regularly updating participants on how their input improves programs reinforces the value of their engagement. Recognizing alumni success stories in institutional publications, on social media, and at events fosters a sense of pride and community, motivating graduates to contribute to data collection initiatives.

Feedback Loops

Establishing feedback loops to inform institutional policies and practices is crucial for continuous improvement. A feedback loop is a systematic process where data is collected, analyzed, and used to make informed decisions, with the outcomes of those decisions being reintroduced into the system for ongoing refinement (Volitaki, 2023). Data insights can drive program reviews, curriculum updates, improvements in career readiness, and advising practices, aligning institutional efforts with the evolving definitions of career success. Sharing success stories, lessons learned, and enhancements that result from data-informed decisions emphasizes the importance of data collection efforts (Henning & Roberts, 2024). Regularly communicating how data improves programs and services builds trust, support for the initiative, and a shared purpose within the institution.

Integrating Data Collection into Curricula

Integrating data collection and analysis practices into the curriculum enhances the institution's overall data pool while educating students on the importance of data-informed decision-making in their careers. Capstone projects, internships, and career development courses allow students to gather data, explore industry trends, and analyze employment

patterns. By embedding these practices into academic programs, institutions prepare students for the data-centric nature of modern careers (Modern Language Association, 2024).

Industry Collaboration: Aligning Academic Programs with Workforce Needs

Collaboration with employers and industry bodies ensures that academic programs align with workforce needs. Engaging with employers through advisory boards, industry partnerships, and regular feedback loops provides valuable insights into current and future skill demands, allowing institutions to adapt their curricula and career services accordingly (Leavitt & Leigh, 2022). Industry collaboration also facilitates data collection by providing information on employment trends, job openings, and the skills in demand. Incorporating employer feedback into academic advising and program reviews helps students make informed career decisions and enhances their readiness for the job market (Aspen Institute, 2014).

Conclusion

In redefining career success, this article highlights the limitations of traditional metrics like first-destination salary and job titles and underscores the need for a more holistic approach. Institutions can better understand post-graduation outcomes by integrating objective factors—such as cost of living and industry trends—and subjective insights from advisory boards and alumni surveys. Lessons from the field emphasize the importance of leadership commitment, community building, partnership engagement, and the strategic use of technology and analytics. Moreover, embedding data collection into curricula, fostering industry collaboration, and incentivizing participation are key to sustaining meaningful assessments. As higher education evolves to meet workforce demands, embracing a comprehensive, data-driven approach to measuring career success will better equip institutions to support graduates in achieving fulfilling and sustainable careers.

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Appendix
Example Alumni Survey Questions

Job Satisfaction

- I feel satisfied with my post-graduation plans.
- Overall, how satisfied are you with your current job?
- How well does your current job align with your career goals?
- How satisfied are you with career growth and advancement opportunities in your current role?
- Does your current job utilize the skills and knowledge you gained during your education?
- What factors beyond salary and promotions have contributed to your sense of career fulfillment?
- What is the most important factor contributing to your job satisfaction? (Select all that apply)
    - Salary and benefits
    - Work-life balance
    - Career growth opportunities
    - Company culture and work environment
    - Job security
    - Alignment with personal values
    - Other (please specify)

Career Preparation

- My institution helped me prepare for my career.
- How do you define career success at this stage in your professional journey?
- Which aspects of your academic experience were most valuable in preparing you for your career? (Select all that apply)
    - Coursework and academic curriculum
    - Internships or co-op experiences
    - Networking opportunities with faculty, alumni, or industry professionals
    - Career services (resume help, job search assistance, etc.)
    - Extracurricular activities (clubs, leadership roles, etc.)
    - Other (please specify)
- What factors do you believe have contributed most to your career success? (Select all that apply)
    - My education and degree program
    - Networking and professional connections
    - Internships or work experiences during school
    - Continuous skill development and learning
    - Mentorship and guidance
    - Hard work and perseverance
    - Other (please specify)

Career Readiness

- If you could go back, what additional resources or experiences would have better prepared you for your career? (Select all that apply)
  - More hands-on or experiential learning opportunities
  - Stronger career services and job placement support
  - More networking opportunities with alumni and industry professionals
  - More emphasis on practical skills within coursework
  - Other (please specify)
- To what extent did your institution help you develop the following skills:
  - List skills specific to the institution. Examples include professional and career skills, critical thinking, writing, etc.
  - My experience as a student at this institution included trying new things and broadening my scope.

Social Capital/Networking

- The relationships I developed as a student at this institution will last far beyond graduation.
- To what extent did your institution help you develop networking skills?
- To what extent did your institution help you build your network while obtaining your degree?
- To what extent have you maintained connections with the network you built as a student?
- What are the most valuable ways your professional network has supported your career? (Select all that apply)
  - Job referrals or recommendations
  - Mentorship or career advice
  - Business or collaboration opportunities
  - Industry insights and knowledge-sharing
  - Emotional or motivational support
  - Other (please specify)

Career Mobility

- Have you had to switch jobs, industries, or further your education to achieve career or economic mobility?
- How frequently have you changed jobs or industries since graduation?
- To what extent did your education prepare you to adapt to new roles or industries?
- What skills from your academic program have been most valuable in navigating career changes?
- What factors influenced your career transitions?
- Was your career transition driven by personal choice, employer expectations, or industry requirements?
- Did your education provide you with the skills necessary to adapt to changes in your industry?
- How prepared did you feel when facing career shifts or pursuing further education?
- To what extent do you feel financially secure in your current career?