

Beyond Placement Rates

Realizing New Opportunities for Using First-Destination Data

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Abstract: This article offers a roadmap for readers to utilize their first-destination data in interactive and meaningful ways. Institutions often employ their first-destination data to assess the frequency or percentage with which students achieve various outcomes. The University of Arizona uses these data to inform continuous improvement of the overall student experience. It encourages faculty and staff to partner in fostering a culture of career development throughout the curriculum. This article highlights new opportunities to combine career outcomes data with existing institutional data to understand the student experience better and enhance career development capacity.

Keywords: career development; first-destination survey, first-destination outcomes

The evolution of career services in higher education from the post-World War II “placement” to today’s paradigm, focused on meaningful connections to internships and other experiential learning embedded throughout the student experience, has been well-documented (Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014). Yet many colleges and universities still primarily use their first-destination survey data to produce descriptions of student self-reports of job placement and initial salary as proof points to demonstrate the value of a particular college or university’s programming to prospective students and parents.

The helpfulness of these data to decision-making for students and their families is questionable. While the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) offers standards and protocols for broad post-graduation outcomes reporting, data collection processes often vary by institution. This can cause confusion and misinformation when families compare post-graduation outcomes. The U.S. Department of Education has tried to provide more consistent and contextualized program-related salary outcome comparisons in College Scorecard (<https://collegescorecard.ed.gov/>). Still, it is limited to including data on students receiving federal aid. Furthermore, the tool does not make transparent what percentage of graduates’ earnings are included in the calculation or how other background characteristics (such as family income) are, or are not, included, making it impossible to isolate the effect an institution may have on those earnings (Rothwell, 2015).

With the advent of services like the College Scorecard, the Georgetown Return on Investment (ROI) index (<https://cew.georgetown.edu/>), and the Census Bureau beta of its post-secondary employment outcomes dashboard (https://lehd.ces.census.gov/data/pseo_experimental.html), prospective students and their families have a wealth of independent, longitudinal, interactive sources for comparing salary and career outcomes across the higher education institutions they are considering. Thus, another use case for the data colleges and universities collect emerges: to identify, integrate, and expand those career-related experiences that make the biggest difference in post-graduation outcomes for students, especially for those historically marginalized in both higher education and employment contexts.

To accomplish this use case, colleges and universities can combine first-destination data with other institutional data, allowing insights to emerge that can shape future investments in student success, including the campus career development office's role in that success. In particular, triangulating data such as experiential learning course enrollments and completion rates with first-destination data illuminates where opportunities coincide. This data triangulation approach can become even more useful when the data are disaggregated to explore the effectiveness of particular interventions and high-impact practices for student populations who may experience inequitable employment or continuing education outcomes. These insights can help bridge the "either academic learning or job readiness" mentality that often takes hold in campus conversations about the value of investing in students' career development and its place within academic programming.

The University of Arizona has tested this triangulation approach, which has demonstrated that engaging in certain career seeking behaviors, such as internships, research, conversations with faculty, and applying to jobs early, contributes not only to post-graduation outcomes but also to academic success factors that matter greatly to the academic enterprise: degree progress and timely completion. The following case study spans four years of data analysis. It provides an overview of our approach to more deeply exploring first-destination survey data beyond placement rates and bridging those data with other campus-wide data sources, including course enrollments and time to degree. These analyses led to meaningful insights that inspired continuous improvement and built career support capacity across the University while supporting two key student success measures: completion and post-graduation outcomes.

The Setting

The University of Arizona

The University of Arizona is a Research I, land-grant, Hispanic Serving Institution that resides on the ancestral homelands of the Tohono O'odham and Pascua Yaqui peoples. In the Fall 2024, the University of Arizona welcomed an incoming class of more than 9,300 first-year students with an average high school GPA of 3.49, more than 50% of whom self-identified with an ethnicity other than White, and almost a third of whom are the first in their family to attend college (Burtch-Buss, 2024). The University of Arizona's one-year

retention rate is 82.8%, while the six-year graduation rate is 67.5% (University Analytics & Institutional Research, 2024).

Student Engagement & Career Development (SECD)

The University of Arizona SECD office provides a variety of offerings that help students develop in-demand career skills, find support along their career journey, and engage in experiences that expand students' capacity to solve authentic challenges facing our world. Its mission is to inspire and prepare all graduates to create lives of opportunity aligned with their purpose and values. This office also oversees the administration of the Graduating Senior Survey (also known as the First-Destination Survey). This work generates data-informed insights about student career outcomes, with attention to surfacing gaps between our aspirations for equitable outcomes and the realities of our graduates.

The Graduating Senior Survey (GSS)

The University of Arizona GSS has historically collected information from graduating seniors about their undergraduate student experiences and post-graduation outcomes. The survey includes self-reported data collected mostly prior to graduation through Qualtrics and provides a snapshot of post-graduation outcomes for undergraduate students. For the spring administration, the survey is coordinated in partnership with the University's Commencement RSVP process. Prior to academic year (AY) 2024, the University of Arizona had not participated in coordinated follow-up or third-party data scraping to contribute to overall knowledge rates. The response rate to our survey is generally between 60%–70% of a survey-eligible graduating class, typically around 7,500. Data are reported to the NACE and used in university rankings and accreditation processes. In addition, findings from the survey are intended to inform the University's strategies for supporting students in attaining their post-graduation goals.

Our Timeline and Analyses

Like many other universities, the University of Arizona has regularly participated in a first-destination data collection process for several years. Beyond sharing the percentage of our students who secured an outcome (i.e., employment, continuing education) with campus departments, reporting to NACE, and contributing to university rankings, the data were not previously utilized to their fullest extent—namely to understand predictors that lead students to these and other student success outcomes. A better understanding of these predictors allows university faculty and staff to design new interventions and iterate on existing ones, resulting in meaningful experiences and successful outcomes for our students. In 2020, SECD started considering how we might employ these data to better understand predictors of post-graduation outcomes.

Beginning in 2020–2021, SECD has asked different questions of the first-destination data. It should be noted that this means that each year, different students with different independent variables were included in the analyses. While some variables were consistent across analyses, such as background characteristics including race, sex, and GPA, other independent variables varied by year (through stepwise regression) in an effort

to improve the model fit. The paragraphs below outline each year's inquiry and the analyses conducted.

In 2020, our analysis started by first exploring the question, “How do career-related experiences (e.g., internships, research, student teaching) impact post-graduation outcomes such as securing full-time employment or acceptance into a continuing education program?” To respond to this question, we built two logistic regression models. For our full-time employment model, our predictor variables included common career-related experiences (internship, part-time employment, research, class project, student leadership, student teaching, volunteer, study abroad, preceptorship, and other experience) and whether the student “discussed career plans” with others. The “discussed career plans” variable asked students their agreement with the following statement: “While I was an undergraduate, at least one person talked to me about my career goals.” Response options included strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree. Our control variables included background characteristics such as honors college student (at any time during college), veteran, sex, transfer student, race, age, first-generation college status, cumulative GPA, field of study, and campus location. During this year, we also included a variable representing whether students experienced a disruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Our predictor and control variables for our continuing education model were similar, including the common career-related experiences, sex, transfer student, race, first-generation college status, cumulative GPA, field of study, and the COVID-19 disruption variable. The model also included Federal Pell Grant recipient, high school GPA, and having received a merit award.

In 2021, we kept the same question and ran similar logistic regression models to the prior year to further corroborate our AY 2020 results and continue improving our models. Similar to AY 2020, our full-time employment model included common career-related experiences, discussing career plans, COVID-19 disruption, honors college student (at any time during college), veteran, sex, transfer student, race, first-generation college status, age, and cumulative GPA. In addition, we added Arizona state residency and Federal Pell Grant recipient as control variables, added a new predictor variable (“months spent applying”), and reshaped our field of study variable. The “months spent applying” variable asked students, “About how long prior to your graduation did you begin applying to jobs?” Response options included: Less than one month, 1 month, 2 months, 3 months, 4 months, 5 months, 6 months, and more than 6 months. Our field of study variable was reshaped for two reasons: first, it prevented us from having to combine several diverse fields to create large enough groups for analysis, and second, it helped us control for fields that have generally better outcomes. Instead of broad fields of study categories, we created a variable (coined “professional field”) to represent fields where a specific bachelor's degree is in high demand for paid internships and recruitment for entry-level positions. We used Classification of Instruction Program (CIP) codes and created one category that included Business, Computer Science, and Engineering CIP codes versus all other fields. Similar to AY 2020, our continuing education model included common career-related experiences, sex, transfer student, race, first-generation college status, cumulative GPA, Federal Pell Grant recipient, and COVID-19 disruption. In AY 2021, the continuing education model also

included discussing career plans, first-term GPA, Arizona state residency, and our new “professional field” variable.

In 2022, we pivoted our inquiry slightly for two reasons. First, the pandemic had interrupted student participation in some key experiences, namely internships and research, which, based on our prior models, we knew to be significant predictors of the outcomes we were interested in studying. Since participation in these experiences was somewhat abnormal during this time, we decided to explore other questions that were still relevant to our campus community. Second, our campus conversation during this time included questions about participation in not-for-credit internships, access to internships, and compensation for internships. For these reasons, we took this opportunity to further explore predictors of post-completion earnings and paid internship participation. Our questions were then: (1) “How do career-seeking behaviors, career-related experiences, and background characteristics impact post-graduation earnings?” (2) “How does internship compensation (paid versus unpaid) impact post-graduation earnings?” (3) “How do career-related experiences and background characteristics impact participation in paid internships?” The first and second questions were explored using two separate linear regression models, while the third used a logistic regression model. The predictor and control variables across the three models included common career-related experiences, race, sex, professional field, first-generation college status, Arizona state residency, and Federal Pell Grant recipient. Additionally, the first two models also included employment job function, position aligned to career interests, location of employment (in Arizona versus out of state), employment referral (via networking versus cold contacts), whether they consider their job to be a good job, and discussing career plans. The third model also included cumulative GPA and honors college student (at any time) in addition to the demographic and career-related experiences described above.

In 2023, after three years of analyzing different predictors of post-graduation outcomes, we expanded our questions to ask, “How might these experiences impact completion?” We focused on the two most common and previously significant experiences: internships and research. While our senior survey data provided us with a foundation to ask and answer this question, we needed to look beyond those data to course enrollment data to respond appropriately. We then created two comparable and representative groups (students who participated in the experience versus those who did not) in each model. We built six propensity score matching models to assess the trend of participating in a for-credit internship or a for-credit research experience and graduating in four years. We allowed bias as close to or less than 5% for all variables and did not allow any significant differences between the two groups. Our models included first-time, full-time students in Fall cohorts in 2017, 2018, and 2019. Our internship models included the following predictor and control variables: participation in a for-credit internship, race, primary college at entry, STEM primary major status at entry, Federal Pell Grant recipient, first-generation college status, honors college student (at entry), sex, Arizona state residency at entry, and high school GPA. For our student research models, the predictor and controls included participation in for-credit research, race, STEM primary major status at entry, first-generation college status, sex, and cumulative GPA. In addition to the models, we also

explored general participation in these two key experiences, including approximately how many students participate in each by using a combination of senior survey and course enrollment data, total enrollments by year, total enrollment by year in school, and total enrollments by term.

The next section outlines high-level insights generated from the prior four years of analyses. These insights are used as baselines for programmatic improvements, garnering buy-in of career development practices across campus and supporting marketing efforts regarding impactful experiences at the University of Arizona among incoming and current students and families.

GSS Insights

Using the analyses outlined above, we uncovered several insights from the data that helped us scope our priorities and leverage the experiences and connections with the largest impact.

Insight #1

The earlier students apply to jobs, the more likely they are to report full-time employment. Students who reported applying to jobs at least four months or more before graduation increased their odds of reporting full-time employment by up to six times at graduation (Forecki, 2021).

Insight #2

Students who reported participating in internships were almost twice as likely to report full-time employment compared to students who participated in other career-related experiences (e.g., volunteering, preceptorship, research with faculty, full/part-time employment, student leadership, study abroad, student teaching), but not internships (Forecki, 2020). For first-generation students, the odds were greater. First-generation students who participated in internships were three times more likely to report full-time employment than first-generation students who participated in other career-related experiences but not internships (Forecki, 2020a).

Insight #3

Paid internships predicted higher first-destination reported starting salary by \$4,800 compared to unpaid internships (Forecki, 2022). While internship participation overall was not a significant factor in earnings, students who reported having at least one paid internship experienced higher predicted salaries, a finding consistent with prior research from the Strada Education Network (Torpey-Saboe et al., 2022).

Insight #4

Students who participated in research were 1.8 times more likely to report acceptance to a continuing education program than students who participated in other career-related experiences but not research (Forecki, 2020).

Insight #5

Based on the representativeness of first-destination survey respondents to all graduates, and using the student self-reports of participation on the survey combined with course-based internship enrollments, we estimate that 58%-60% of University of Arizona bachelor's degree recipients completed an internship experience (including student teaching) during their undergraduate career (Forecki, 2024).

Insight #6

Students who strongly agree that "Someone at the UA spoke to me about my career goals" were more likely to report full-time employment or acceptance into a continuing education program than those who did not strongly agree. Faculty and academic advisors are reported as the most common sources of information (Forecki, 2021).

Insight #7

Among students who graduated in four years, students who participated in a course-based internship experienced a four-year graduation rate of about 30 percentage points higher than those without a course-based internship (Forecki, 2024). It is important to note that there are a myriad of factors affecting persistence and completion (Tinto, 2022), including some factors that cannot be measured in statistical models. Beyond the unmeasurable or unobservable factors, this analysis demonstrated that the impacts of internship, or potentially other career-related experiences, should not be discounted as key experiences that help move students toward graduation. These results are consistent with emerging literature exploring the relationship between engagement in high-impact practices and degree completion (Kuh, 2008; McDaniel & Van Jura, 2022).

The following sections explain how we arrived at these insights in greater detail and how we are using the insights to inform future pathways toward student success, including post-graduation outcomes.

How We Got Here: Finding Additional Sources of Information

Arriving at these insights required adding questions to our GSS beyond the NACE baseline questions and a thorough understanding of existing data sources. As discussed previously, the questions added to the GSS probed at career-seeking behaviors (months spent applying, employment referral), participation in common career-related experiences, internship compensation, discussing career goals with others, perceptions of employment (position aligned to career interests, considering position a good job), employment job function, and location of employment which we hypothesized impacted post-graduation outcomes.

Several of these additions were sourced or contextualized from prior studies. For instance, in 2017, we partnered with Gallup to administer a survey to University of Arizona alumni. The alumni survey found that students who strongly agreed that someone at the University spoke to them about their career goals were more likely to believe they had the ideal job (Gallup, 2017). This insight inspired us to add a similar question to our senior survey. Similarly, our results (see Insight #6) from the GSS also indicated that students who

strongly agreed that someone spoke to them about their career goals were more likely to report a post-graduation outcome at the time of graduation compared to students who did not strongly agree (Forecki, 2021).

In 2022, the Strada Education Network published a report that shared that paid internships were associated with a \$3,096 predicted increase in annual wages one year after graduation (Torpey-Saboe et al., 2022). We attempted a similar study for University of Arizona graduates and found that paid internships predicted higher reported starting wages by approximately \$4,800 (Forecki, 2022; see Insight #3).

More recently, we have been investigating the relationship between time to degree and internship engagement and found that students who participated in a course-based internship experienced a four-year graduation rate that was about 30 percentage points higher compared to those without a course-based internship (Forecki, 2024; see Insight #7). When searching the extant literature to understand our results further, we identified prior research (McDaniel & Van Jura, 2022) that also found that students who participated in an internship or other career experience were 2.7 times more likely (or 170% more likely) to complete their degree compared to students who were not involved in these types of experiences.

The existing data sources included data housed within our University's data warehouse. Since students single-sign on to the GSS, thus collecting their StudentID, we used the information in our University's data warehouse to identify additional fields we may want to include in future analyses. It is important to note that students are provided a description of how their survey data will be used at the start of the GSS and assured that responses will only be reported in the aggregate and student-identifying information will never be published. We also include a link to our university's privacy statement to ensure students clearly understand our responsibility to protect their information.

Data sourced from our University's warehouse included demographic data such as race and ethnicity, first-generation college status, Federal Pell Grant status, sex, age at graduation, as well as academic information such as campus attended, college, academic plan CIP codes, internship and research course enrollments, first term and last term enrolled, and more. In addition to the warehouse data, we have sourced career-related engagement data from Handshake, our career management tool, including career fair attendance and appointment data. We then merged these sources with students' GSS responses for robust data analysis and disaggregation. While some of our preliminary analyses, through chi-squared tests, reflect promising trends between participation in engagement activities recorded in Handshake and post-graduation outcomes, these require further triangulation and validation before we feel confident publishing results.

How We Use the Data: Informing Next Steps

Sharing findings with campus colleagues and empowering them to utilize the data to generate their insights is a key next step in ensuring the data are used and leveraged to improve students' experiences and, ultimately, the next generations' post-graduation outcomes. The SECD office has implemented several strategies to build staff capacity to

employ the data-informed insights generated through our senior survey data and empower collaborators to explore their own questions using the data. These strategies operate in addition to external reporting requests for university rankings and/or accreditation purposes.

We have employed two methods to share these data more broadly and increase their general awareness and availability. Our first strategy was to host an inaugural Graduation and Beyond Summit. The Graduation and Beyond Summit focused on (a) sharing our University of Arizona post-graduation outcomes data by reviewing key data insights, (b) how to access the data, and (c) where historical data are available. As part of the Summit, we hosted two expert panels: one focused on integrating career development practices and skill-building into the curriculum and a second on building equitable internship experiences. Panelists included faculty members from various colleges and departments, student worker supervisors, internship managers, undergraduate students, and representatives from orientation services and academic advising. In addition, we held one concurrent breakout session focused on data and outcomes of key student populations informed by the various data sources, including Hispanic/Latinx students, first-generation students, and our Online student population.

The second strategy we used was incorporating the data meaningfully into our Career Champions program. This program provides an opportunity to put the data in front of key collaborators, such as faculty and advisors, who believe in career development work and seek opportunities to support curriculum and programmatic changes through data. In our training, we highlight the importance of discussing career plans with students as well as encouraging students to apply to jobs early. We also share our data on internships and research experiences and how those experiences often make a difference in supporting students to secure successful post-graduation outcomes, particularly for students from marginalized backgrounds. Additionally, we emphasize that our results indicate that faculty and academic advisors are often the trustworthy sources students confide in for discussing career goals. As such, holding opportunities for students to explore careers in courses or advising appointments is an important part of a student's post-graduation success.

Beyond opportunities for faculty and staff to build capacity, we have also used the data to support additional inquiry and programmatic enhancements, specifically to our internship offerings and student employment experiences. Our GSS survey results highlighted a gap in our understanding of how University of Arizona students were experiencing internships. Those results provided a foundation for us to administer a climate survey with students in November 2022 related to their internship experiences. The survey was sent to a sample of sophomores, juniors, and seniors to better understand the internship search process, the internship itself, perceptions around participation in internships, and barriers to internship participation. Our results uncovered several actionable insights.

Our first insight was to educate students on where to find paid opportunities – especially for female-identified students, who more commonly reported not receiving compensation for internships compared to male-identified students. Our second insight emphasized the importance of applying to internship postings early and often. Several students reported

applying in a short time period prior to when they expected to begin. In contrast, NACE (2022) reports that employers start recruiting interns up to eight months before the internship start date. Our third insight was to continue building capacity among faculty and staff to assist students in their internship search. Our GSS results tell us that faculty and staff are important partners for students' post-graduation success, and responses related to campus support of career goals in the Internship Survey were lower compared to other surveys. Our fourth insight was the importance of baking skill development into existing experiences, such as student employment, to meet students where they are. Another common barrier to participation included concerns around time, such as a heavy course load or having to work another paid job. Our final insight was to increase confidence in the internship search and engagement process among first-generation students. We found a lower percentage of first-generation students reported agreement with the following statements: "students like me participate in internships" and "employers are seeking students like me for internships." The insights from this survey, and by extension the prior GSS analyses, led to creating case management internship interventions specifically among our first-generation student population, sourcing additional funding for unpaid and underpaid internships, and re-designing our skill development program to operate through student employment.

Future Considerations

While our efforts over the past four years were intended to provide a broad understanding of predictors of post-graduation outcomes and student success indicators, we are always left with more questions to inform future work. At this time, some of those questions include:

- How might specific fields of study impact post-graduation outcomes? While fields of study were used as controls in certain models, delving deeper may uncover other gaps/barriers to address.
- What are the impacts of paid research experiences or other paid experiences on post-graduation outcomes or completion? Does compensation in these experiences make a difference in post-graduation outcomes as well?
- Does funding through the university for an underpaid or unpaid internship offer the same benefits as an employer-paid internship related to post-graduation outcomes?
- Does paid work-based learning provide skills that support students getting a traditional employer-paid internship?
- Are higher starting salaries contained to industries that are more likely to pay their interns?

Conclusion

The results from the GSS and extended analyses have allowed several teams at the University of Arizona to leverage the data to create, embed, and expand meaningful experiences that help students meet their post-graduation goals and, hopefully, through future lines of inquiry, other student success outcomes such as timely graduation. During this process, we have learned several strategies that have supported us in this work. We

hope you find it helpful as you explore what is possible within the context of your own campus and data availability.

Lesson #1: Develop Your Driving Questions

What do you want to know relative to your students' post-graduation outcomes? Focus on using your data in ways that allow you to intervene while students are still enrolled. What aspects of their current student journey can help inform an intervention now that might make a difference in their outcomes post-graduation?

Lesson #2: Develop Data Collaborations

Strong partnerships between offices that house campus data (e.g., career services, institutional research, assessment, registrar) help to access and pull data together. What data exists on your campus, or externally, that can help you tell the most complete story possible about a student's career journey?

Lesson #3: Review Your First-Destination Survey

What might be missing, no longer needed, or answered elsewhere? Are there other studies that can help inform new questions and assist you in making the most out of the survey?

Lesson #4: Identify Career Champions

Who on campus might be willing to ideate and test strategies to meaningfully integrate your findings into their work or curriculum? How can you celebrate that partnership to encourage others to join?

Lesson #5: Integrate Findings into Existing Student Experiences

What opportunities do you feel excited about as a potential partnership to integrate findings into existing student experiences (i.e., courses, student employment, leadership roles)? The key component is to meet students where they are and remove barriers to participation in career development offerings.

Lesson #6: Be Transparent with Methodology and Insights

What are you finding that is surprising? What requires addressing immediately versus longer term? When data demonstrate gaps in providing services or post-graduation outcomes for historically marginalized students, the tendency may be to hold that data close to avoid scrutiny or negative comparisons to institutions that do not conduct or share these data externally. The professional career services and assessment communities have an opportunity to create spaces for transparent sharing of survey methodology and the results of analyses like these that can lead to more collective insights and advocacy for strategies that make the most difference to students earlier and often within their college experience.

Lesson #7: Take Your Time and Refine

As mentioned, these insights were generated across four years of data analysis. Each year, we refined our assessment process based on the insights we had learned from the prior analyses or based on our campus's conversations at the time. Most important is to

recognize that these insights were not generated overnight or within a single dataset. It takes time to learn what you do not yet know while staying relevant to what your stakeholders may find useful for designing interventions or making a case for investment in particular efforts.

At a time when higher education institutions likely have more access to data than ever before, early interventions to address various challenges are at our fingertips. We must put the data into action to support positive student outcomes like retention, graduation, post-graduation outcomes, and more. Data transparency and building capacity among faculty and staff and across the career services community can help students accomplish their personal and professional goals. Together, we can chart a path beyond placement data that gives our current and future students and families the tools to make the most of their college education.

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