

Educate to Enroll

5 tactics to engage today's career-focused learners

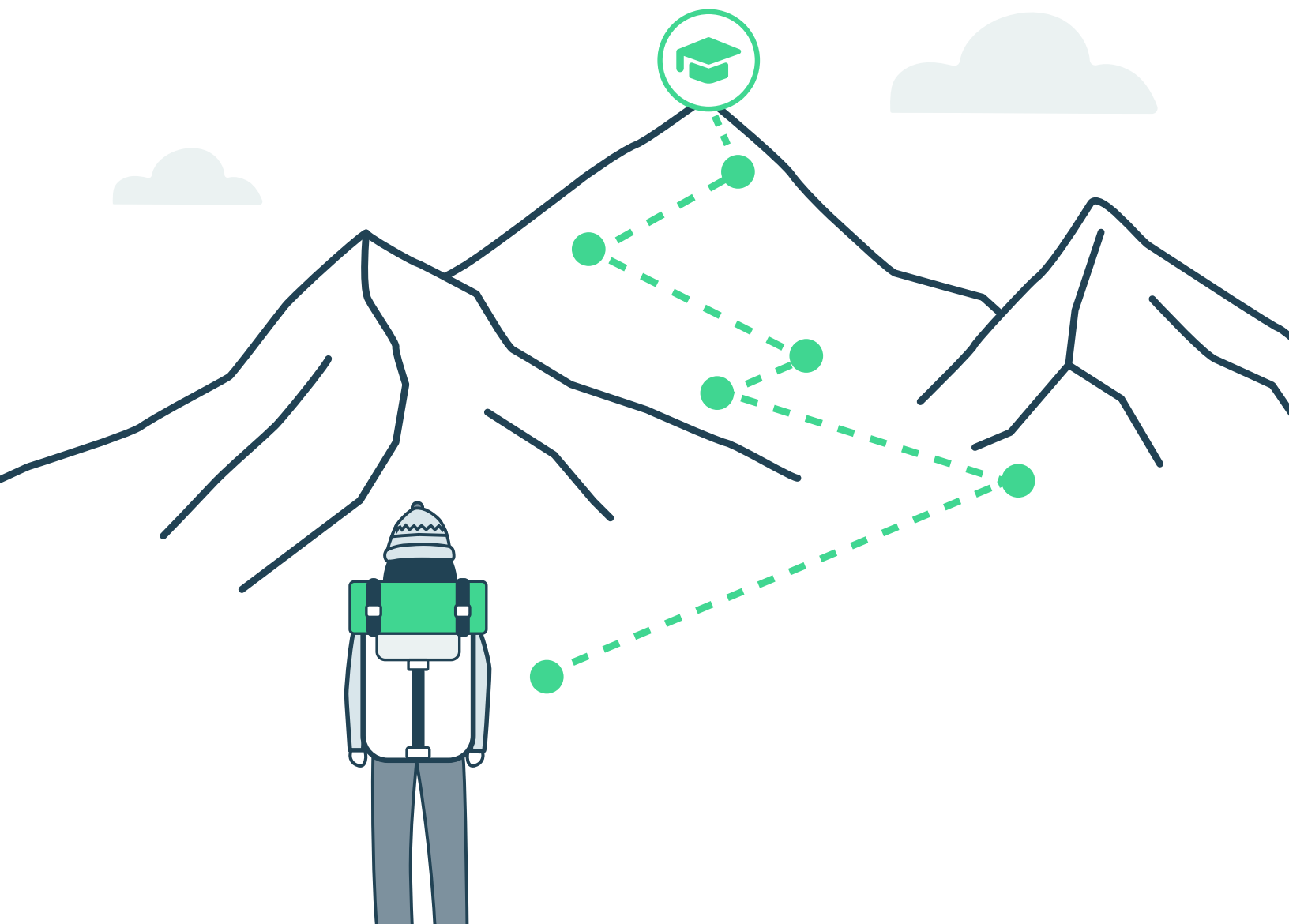
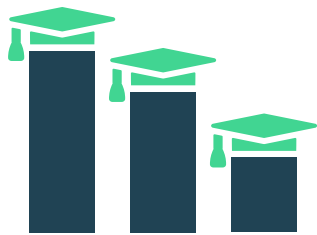


Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION: The Numbers Are In	1
PART ONE: Understanding the Obstacles	2
The priority of work outcomes	
Questioning the value of higher ed	
Lack of confidence and clarity	
Career support matters... but is lacking	
PART TWO: Five Tactics for Educating to Enroll	7
Embedding data	
Facilitating exploration	
Helping learners target skill gaps	
Showing real employment outcomes	
Talking in terms of ROI	
CONCLUSION: The View From the Top	13

INTRODUCTION

The Numbers Are In



When it comes to enrollment in higher education, 2020 could have been worse (thankfully, the more extreme [doomsday prophecies](#) of 20% enrollment decline didn't materialize). At the same time, it certainly could have been better. When the dust settled in December, [National Student Clearinghouse reported](#) a sobering 2.5% drop in national postsecondary enrollment compared to the previous Fall (by June 2021, [the decline grew to 3.5%](#) compared to the previous Spring). More troubling from a trend-watching perspective, a good chunk of that figure came from a striking 13% decline in freshman enrollment.

The question for higher ed. leaders is: **Why?** What's keeping learners from enrolling, and is there anything your institution can do to address those issues?

PART ONE

Understanding the Obstacles

2020 was a challenging year, to put it mildly, with plenty of variables that likely influenced enrollment decisions: health and safety concerns, evolving lockdown and quarantine requirements, sudden job loss and other economic disruptions, etc.

Amid the confusion, studies like the [Strada Education Network's Public Viewpoint survey](#) went straight to the source by asking learners what they thought and felt as 2020 unfolded. To get oriented, we begin with a quick survey of the data from Strada and other sources, noting the prominent themes that emerged in 2020.

1) Better work outcomes are (still) a main motivator for pursuing higher education

Strada's [2018 survey of over 86,000 students](#) demonstrated that “work outcomes are the main reason most people chose higher education, with most reporting job and career outcomes as their primary motivation. This is true across all higher education pathways and demographic subgroups.” The [2019 CIRP Freshmen survey](#) from UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute echoed this finding by showing that 83.5% of entering freshmen considered “getting a better job” a “very important” reason why they enrolled in college.

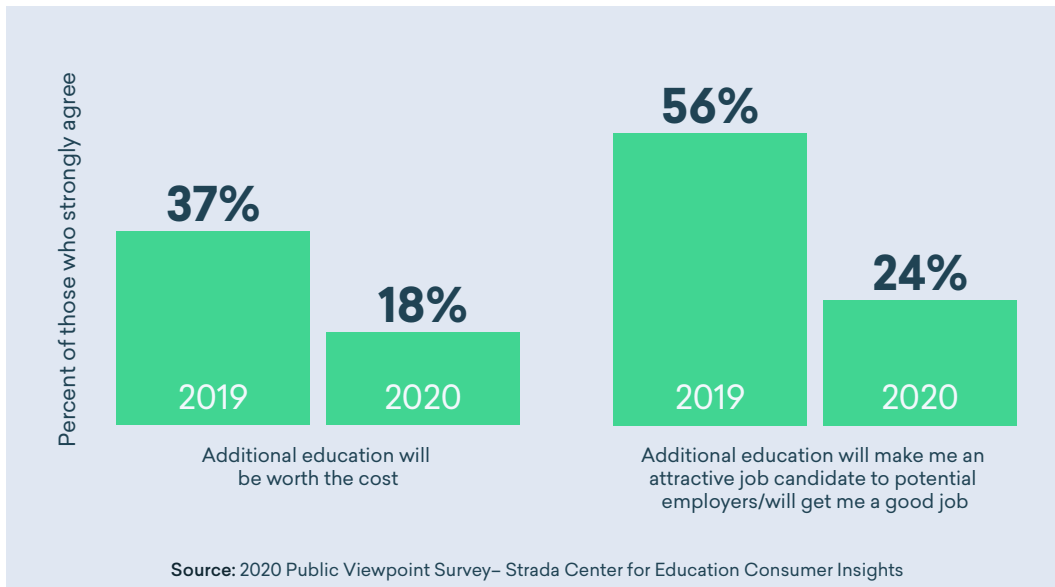


Unsurprisingly, the COVID-induced economic disruption of 2020 heightened this focus on work among learners. The Public Viewpoint Survey showed that “the portion of Americans without degrees who cite [the ability to pay bills and take care of immediate needs as the primary benefit of education](#) has doubled since a year ago.” This helps to explain [learners' strong preference](#) for education options that are work-relevant and may lead to career advancement.

2) Learners are questioning the value/ROI of higher education

Unfortunately, the survey also documented a decline in consumer confidence when it comes to higher education. The percentage of adult learners who believe additional education will be [worth the cost \(18%\) and help them advance towards their professional goals \(24%\)](#) dropped by half compared to 2019 (down from 37% and 56% respectively).

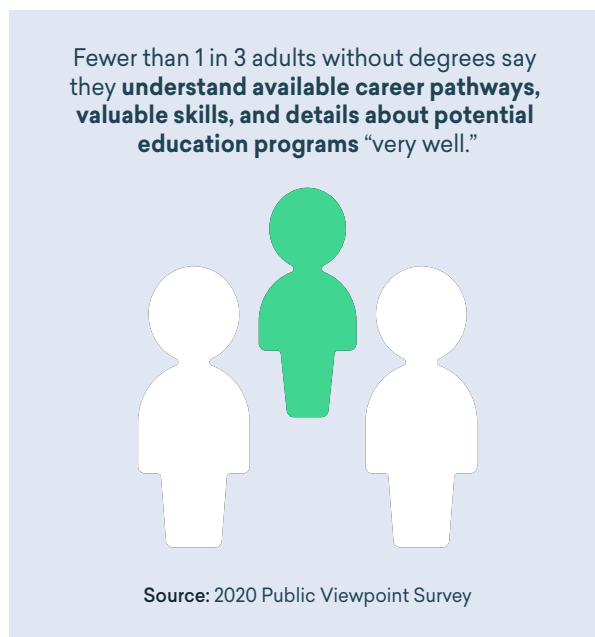
Even currently enrolled students are skeptical: [fewer than 1 in 5 current college students “strongly agree” their degree will be worth the cost.](#)



3) Learners lack confidence and clarity about how to move forward

Digging deeper, we see that many people don't understand their career options and don't know where to start (or fear that the deck is stacked against them because of unfair hiring practices).

[Fewer than 1 in 3 adults without degrees](#) say they understand available career pathways, valuable skills, and details about potential education programs “very well.” Not surprisingly, the pandemic isn't helping: [1 in 5 college students](#) say COVID-19 has made their opportunities for career exploration “much

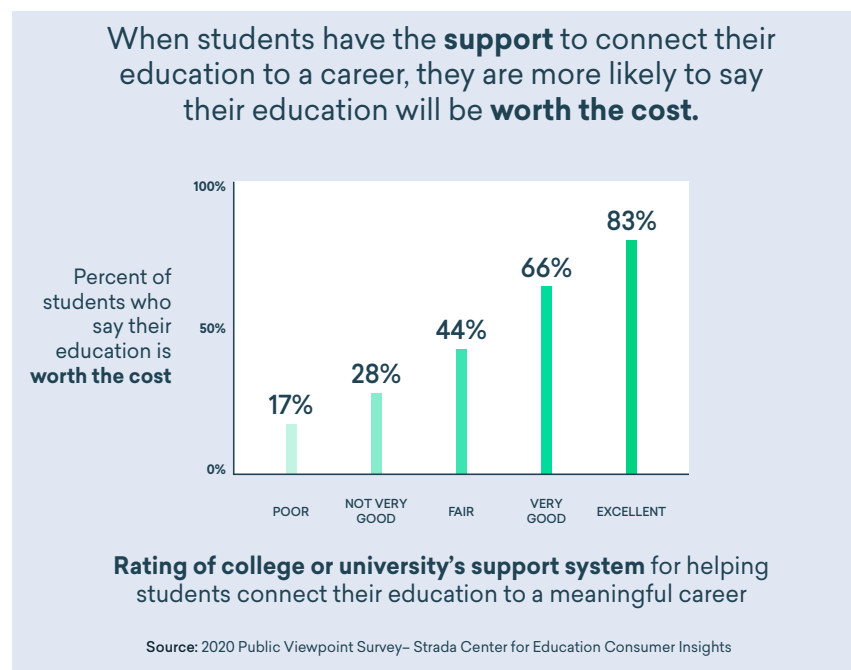


worse.” This is especially troubling given that a recent InsideTrack/UPCEA survey of online college students found that [48% of them consider “career exploration”](#) their top priority for using career services.

Many Americans cite [concerns about inequitable hiring, as well as lack of upskilling support from employers](#). A significant percentage also cited [“not having the right skills / credentials”](#) (44%) or simply [“not knowing where to start”](#) (32%) as reasons for feeling powerless to advance. This latter set of barriers is something that colleges and universities are especially well positioned to address, while also partnering with employers to improve hiring and professional development opportunities for all learners.

4) Students highly value career support from their institution... but don't always feel like they get it

Besides identifying the challenges facing higher education, the Strada survey also helps us to see what works. One key insight for higher ed. leaders: “When students have the support to connect their education to a career, they are [more likely to say their education will be worth the cost](#).”



How are institutions doing when it comes to providing this support? Well, only [1 in 3 college students](#) say their school is “excellent” or “very good” at connecting education to meaningful careers. Is it any surprise then that learners are struggling to see the value in higher education? If Americans are going to school to get a better job, then it makes sense that motivation to enroll would wane when the connection between college and career becomes attenuated.

While some of these findings are hard to hear, they also provide insight that can illuminate the way forward. In particular, colleges and universities can use labor market data to address many of the needs identified in this survey, either directly or indirectly. In doing so, institutions will attract and engage learners by giving them the clarity and confidence they need to enroll.

In part two, we’ll turn our attention to five key tactics you can use to get started on this important work.

PART TWO

Five Tactics for Educating to Enroll

1) Embed up-to-date, relevant career data directly on program pages

When site visitors are on your program pages, they're already showing interest in the courses and degrees you offer. That's a good start. But how can you move them from "interested" to "enrolled"?

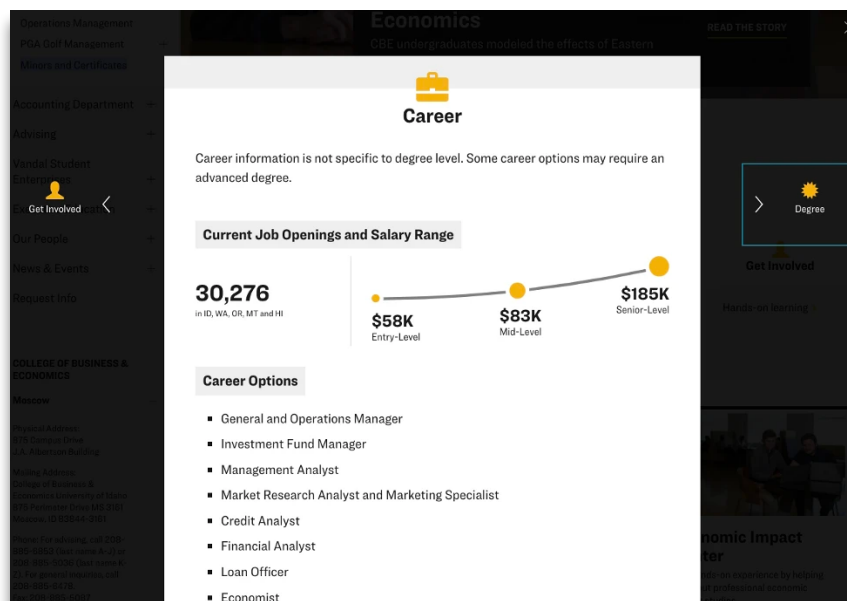
For starters, make sure they understand the opportunities open to them with the right education. In particular, providing data on relevant job titles, growth trends, and average salaries can make the payoff of a degree more concrete, and help them see the connection between required courses and career goals.



Many institutions achieve this by using an [API](#) to integrate relevant career data from a third-party provider directly onto their site. While APIs offer maximum flexibility, they also require fairly sophisticated technical expertise to implement effectively (e.g. you'll need a developer who is familiar working with JSON and HTTP).

As an alternative, colleges and universities are now turning to [widget builders](#) – a low-code solution that offers the same up-to-date data integration capability as an API, but with significantly less time, effort, and technical resources needed to get up and running.

Regardless of *how* it's done, placing career data directly on program pages (alongside tuition cost, time to completion, and other important but sometimes intimidating data points) is a strategic way to help learners keep their eye on the prize when making enrollment decisions.



The University of Idaho uses an API to pipe career data directly into program pages

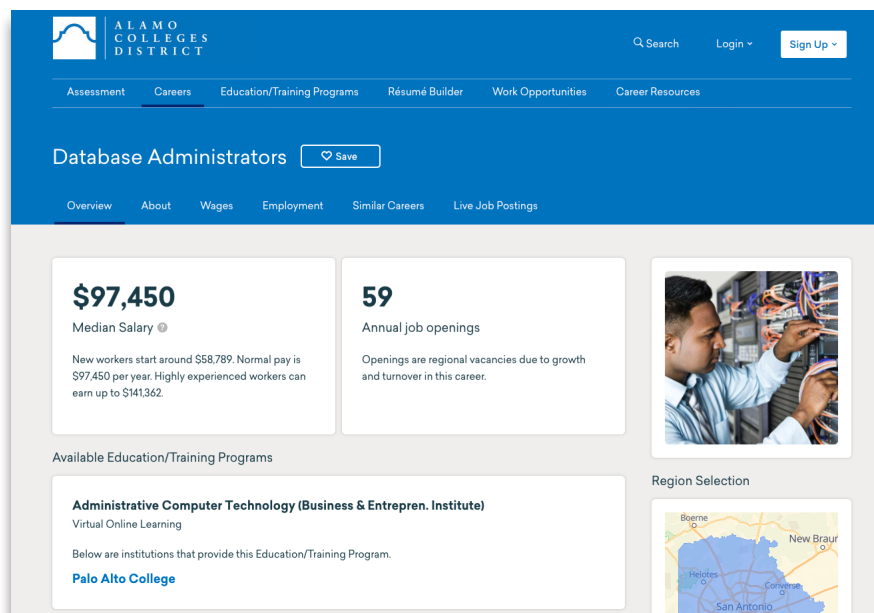
2) Facilitate career exploration that connects to academic programs

Don't assume that high school students or working adults have the

resources and expertise to conduct career research on their own. Instead, you can proactively provide resources for your community that [help people explore career opportunities](#) in your region. For example, providing information on annual job openings, employers hiring, and top required skills can help learners quickly explore and vet career ideas.

Also note that “[finding a job or career I love](#)” ranks almost as high as affording basic necessities as a cause for concern amongst adults without a college degree. While hard facts about economic reality are an important part of the decision-making process, learners also need to find a calling that suits them. So, consider having prospective students take an interests assessment to inform career or academic recommendations.

Institutions should also ensure that career exploration is closely linked to *academic* exploration. This is key to making sure that nothing is “lost in translation” when students try to find the right pathway to their new-found career goals. Help them get, and stay, on the right academic track by making program-to-career connections clear.

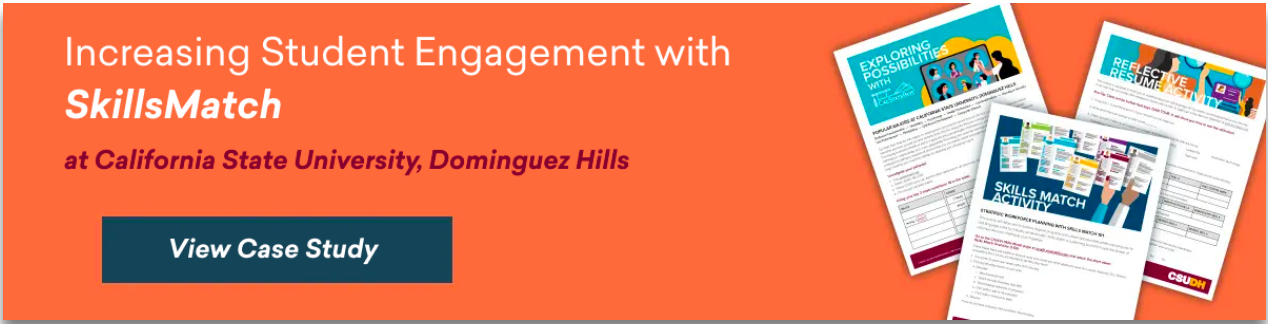


The Alamo Colleges District uses Career Coach to help students explore careers and related programs.

3) Help learners clarify and fill their skill gaps

Many of today's learners, especially working adults, are looking for the most efficient pathways for upskilling to advance in their career or reskilling to make a career change. They may need help exploring how the skills they developed through previous education and work experience position them to pursue their goals.

Institutions can serve these learners by helping them start with a self-inventory to [pinpoint skill gaps, and then recommending courses and programs](#) that align with their objectives. The very process of developing a skill inventory helps some learners grow in confidence as they take stock the transferable skills they already have, while clarifying their aspirations and next steps to take.



Increasing Student Engagement with
SkillsMatch
at California State University, Dominguez Hills

[View Case Study](#)

4) Show real employment outcomes of past students

As countless campus tours have demonstrated, sometimes the best guides for future students are former ones. [Sharing alumni employment outcomes](#) can help prospective learners see the real-life (tried and true!) connections from college to career that are unique to *your* programs.

Alumni employment outcomes are worth sharing with prospects for at least two other reasons as well: 1) They offer a preview of your

programs' alumni network and 2) they're the proof in the pudding that demonstrates the quality of your programs (and hire-ability of your graduates).

If you choose to go right to work after earning your bachelor's degree, you'll be ready to **hold any position that uses art media in the service of people**. You can access positions providing direct care in children's treatment agencies, nursing homes, or assisting therapists in a variety of healthcare, residential and community-based agencies.



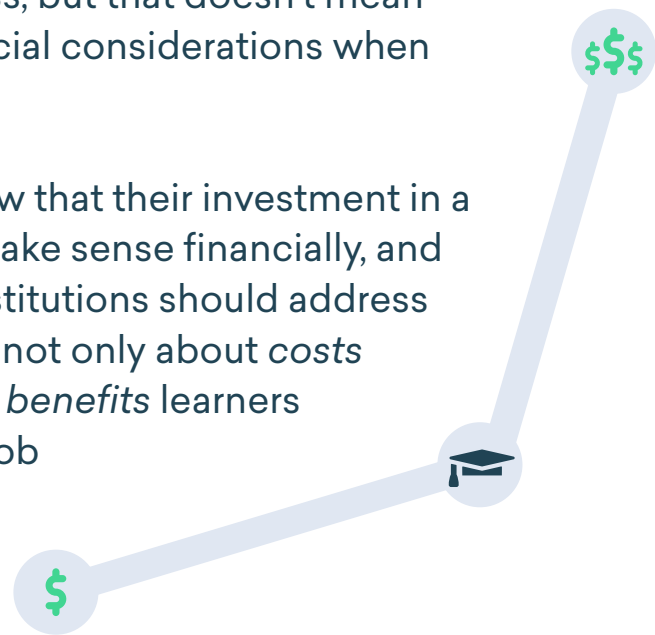
Ursuline College uses GoRecruit to share alumni career outcomes

5) Talk in terms of ROI

A good education may be priceless, but that doesn't mean learners can afford to ignore financial considerations when making enrollment decisions.

The reality is, learners need to know that their investment in a degree from your institution will make sense financially, and pay off (literally) in the long run. Institutions should address this head-on by being transparent not only about costs like tuition and books, but also the *benefits* learners can expect in terms of rewarding job opportunities and higher wages.

While national averages are useful, region-specific career and wage data is even better (i.e. more realistic and actionable for prospective learners). Data



based on [your own alumni's career outcomes](#) is best of all. In fact, using alumni employment outcomes data, Emsi can calculate your students' average "payback period" – the number of years it will take for a graduate to recoup their initial investment. Providing this concrete figure in dollar terms can give learners the confidence to endure the short-term sacrifice of tuition for the long-term benefit of higher lifetime earnings.

CONCLUSION

The View From the Top

For many learners, exploring education options is like staring up the side of a mountain at the beginning of a long hike. It's a little exciting... but a lot intimidating. They aren't sure which path to take, or if the journey will even be worth it.

A career goal helps prospective learners envision the view from the top, so they can see that the climb is worth it *and* discover the best trail to reach the summit. To make this happen, enrollment teams, career counselors, and academic advisors all have an essential role to play as trusted, knowledgeable guides for incoming students. And strategic use of labor market data can help to scale their efforts, helping you reach more learners at earlier stages of the enrollment funnel.



ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

About Emsi

Emsi provides colleges and universities with labor market data that helps create better outcomes for students, businesses, and communities. Hundreds of institutions use Emsi to align programs with regional needs, drive enrollment, connect students with in-demand careers, track their alumni's employment outcomes, and demonstrate their economic impact on their region. Visit economicmodeling.com/higher-education to learn more or connect with us.