Educate to Enroll

5 Tactics to Engage Today's
Career-Focused Learners

Lightcast

Table of Contents

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). WAt 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 1

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.
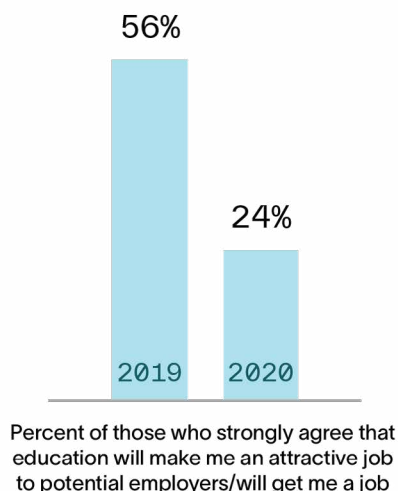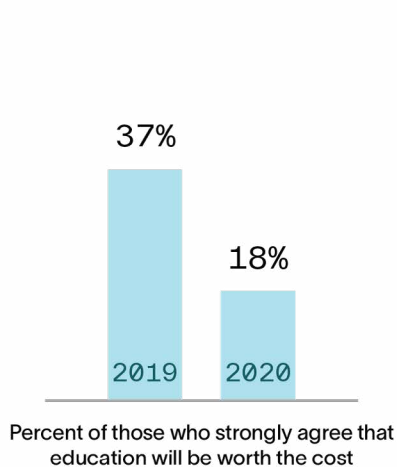
Unsurprisingly, the COVID-induced economic disruption of 2020 heightened this focus on work among learners. The Public Viewpoint Survey showed that "the portion of Americans without degrees who cite the ability to pay bills and take care of immediate needs as the primary benefit of education has doubled 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.

37%

18%

2019   2020

Percent of those who strongly agree that
education will be worth the cost

56%

24%

2019   2020

Percent of those who strongly agree that
education will make me an attractive job
to potential employers/will get me a job

Source: 2020 Public Viewpoint Survey – Strada Center for Education Consumer Insight

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.

Fewer than 1 in 3 adults without degrees say they **understand available career pathways, valuable skills, and details about potential education programs** "very well."

Source: 2020 Public Viewpoint Survey

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.

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.**
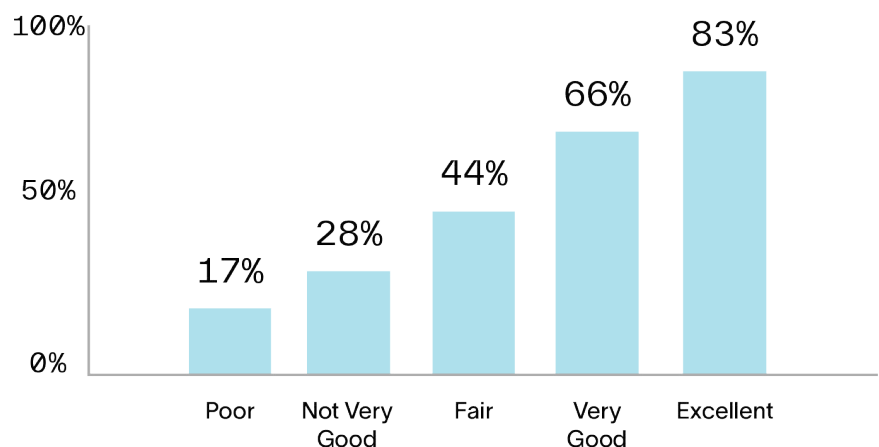
Rating of the college or university's support system for helping students connect their education to a meaningful career

Source: 2020 Public Viewpoint Survey - Strada Center for Education Consumer Insight

Part 2

Five Tactics for Educating to Enroll

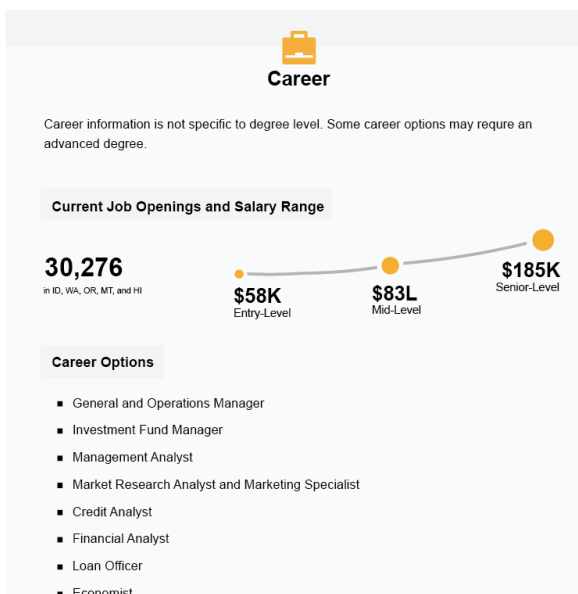## 1) Embed up-to-date, relevant career data directly on program pages

When site visitors are on your program pages, they're already showing interest in the courses and degreqes 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.

Career

Career information is not specific to degree level. Some career options may requre an advanced degree.

Current Job Openings and Salary Range

30,276
in ID, WA, OR, MT, and HI

$58K
Entry-Level

$83L
Mid-Level

$185K
Senior-Level

Career Options

- General and Operations Manager
- Investment Fund Manager
- Management Analyst
- Market Research Analyst and Marketing Specialist
- Credit Analyst
- Financial Analyst
- Loan Officer
- Economist

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

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.

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 closel 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 newfound career goals. Help them get, and stay, on the right academic track by making program-to-career connections clear.

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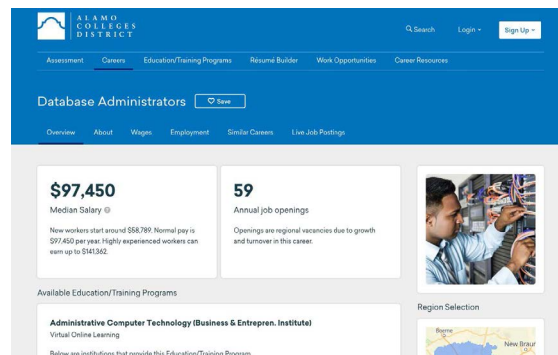
The Alamo Colleges District uses Career Coach to help students explore careers and related programs.

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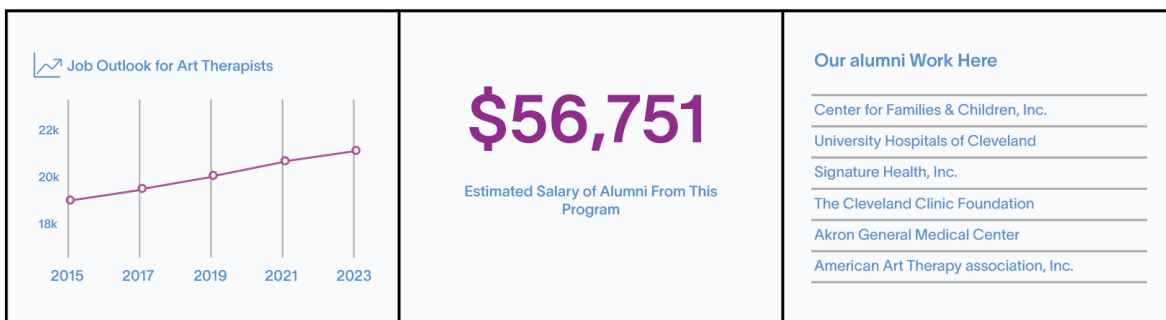
If you choose to go right to work after earning your bachelor's degree, you'll be ready to **hold any position that uses art media in the service of people.** You can access positions providing direct care in children's treatment agencies, nursing homes, or assisting therapists ina variety of healthcare,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

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, Lightcast 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 shortterm 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.

About Lightcast

Lightcast, formerly Emsi Burning Glass, delivers job market analytics that empower employers, workers, and educators to make data-driven decisions. The company's artificial intelligence technology analyzes hundreds of millions of job postings and real-life career transitions to provide insight into labor market patterns. This real-time strategic intelligence offers crucial insights, such as what jobs are most in demand, the specific skills employers need, and the career directions that offer the highest potential for workers. Visit lightcast.io for more information.