

The Journey Most Aren't Prepared For

The Case for Teaching Career Planning as a Required Course in American High Schools

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Abstract

Today's high school graduates enter a volatile, rapidly shifting economy without a unified educational framework to guide their career and pathway decisions. While secondary education culminates in critical choices that define a student's future working life, a structured, sequenced curriculum in career planning is absent from most of the state graduation requirements examined here. State boards and school districts are the actors positioned to close that gap, by building pathway development into the core curriculum. This paper assembles the national empirical evidence, examines the structural limitations preventing current advisory mechanisms from closing the preparation gap, and argues that the optimal remedy is instructional rather than advisory.

In Gallup's April 2025 assessment, fewer than three in ten students aged 16 to 18 reported feeling very prepared to pursue a postsecondary pathway they had expressed interest in. Concurrently, fewer than two in ten demonstrated comprehensive familiarity with alternative occupational options outside of a traditional bachelor's degree or immediate paid employment. On an international scale, data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) indicates that 39 percent of fifteen-year-olds are unable to articulate a specific occupational expectation for age thirty, or provide answers too broad to classify.

Three concurrent socio-economic shifts have compounded the consequences of this curricular omission. First, the inflation-adjusted list price of public four-year postsecondary institutions has approximately doubled within a single generation, while rising by nearly three-quarters at private nonprofit institutions. Second, the rapid integration of artificial intelligence is fundamentally reordering the composition of work. In September 2026, Andreessen Horowitz, the venture capital firm co-founded by Marc Andreessen, announced the Horowitz Andreessen Academy, an unaccredited program that recruits students directly out of high school as an alternative to a university degree. Third, widespread advocacy efforts led by Mike Rowe and the mikeroweWORKS Foundation have raised the public profile of the skilled trades. However, institutional graduation requirements have failed to adapt proportionally, leaving students ill-equipped to systematically weigh vocational training against a traditional degree.

Three institutional constraints clarify why secondary schools have failed to close this gap on their own. Career activities run in isolation from one another. Public school counselors report spending roughly four-fifths of the year on duties other than postsecondary admission counseling. A majority of states mandate the compilation of career-planning documents, but those mandates are rarely attached to scheduled classroom instruction.

Among the jurisdictions analyzed, Alabama presents the most fully specified design model, requiring career planning as a one-credit graded course recorded directly onto student transcripts. Mississippi requires a named one-unit course, and Indiana requires a graduation credit satisfied through designated course options. In contrast, Florida, Utah, and Virginia embed their mandates within the middle school grades. Crucially, four of these six states permit local districts, schools, or parents to execute substitutions, and no published evaluation of student outcomes was located for any of the six frameworks. To resolve these deficiencies, this paper concludes with five targeted policy recommendations.

Keywords: career development; career and technical education; school counseling; individual career and academic plans; skilled trades; college pricing; postsecondary transition

1. Introduction

When secondary school seniors are queried regarding their postsecondary intentions, their answers usually come out sounding settled. Press on the reasoning behind those choices, and the certainty thins fast. Institutional selection invariably precedes the identification of a field of study; the field of study is chosen prior to evaluating financial costs; and financial costs are accepted long before any objective assessment is made of the actual occupational market the degree is intended to access.

State boards and districts have never required anyone to teach a method for decisions this size. Students are neither apathetic nor incapable. Across a vast majority of the legislative codes examined for this analysis, a student can complete high school without ever taking a required course in how to make these life-altering choices.

This precise systemic omission forms the core focus of this paper. Of the thirty-one state codes analyzed, only six mandate explicit instruction in career and pathway design, and the precise legal operationalizations of those mandates are detailed in section 5.3. In the remaining twenty-five jurisdictions, no statutory mandate was found that allocates dedicated classroom space, assigns credentialed instructional staff, and grades what a student learns; five of those states require alternative programmatic arrangements short of a full course, as described in section 5.3. While state

frameworks rigidly define required sequences in mathematics, English, and science, with many adding a foreign language, they fail to compel students to systematically inventory personal aptitudes against contemporary economic realities.

In those twenty-five unaligned states, requirements do not ask a student to inventory their own aptitudes against real occupations, or to find out what those occupations pay and what it costs to enter them. Standardized curricula do not require an examination of comparative net-price modeling between four-year degrees and vocational apprenticeships on equivalent terms, or the development of a plan that can be iteratively revised.

So the decision secondary education points a student toward is the one thing the required curriculum leaves out. What a student gets instead depends on what they happen to have: a parent who went to college, a coach who takes an interest, a summer job, a conversation that may never happen.

This paper contends that remediation cannot be achieved through traditional advisory expansions. The incremental acquisition of digital assessment platforms, the introduction of standalone career expositions, or variations in counselor staffing levels do not constitute rigorous pedagogy. What is missing is a career development course built with the standard apparatus of a typical academic discipline: dedicated instructional time, a defined body of content, an accountable educator, and a letter grade.

2. Evidence Base and Method

This paper utilizes a secondary synthesis methodology, analyzing existing published empirical data and legal texts rather than reporting primary data collection. Source selection was restricted based on three strict parameters: national relevance, a verified sample size or authoritative statutory foundation, and contemporary recency as of September 2026. The analytical matrix relies on five distinct evidentiary categories:

- National student surveys detailing self-reported postsecondary preparedness.
- Macroeconomic labor-market projections and pricing indexes.
- Secondary school practitioner surveys tracking internal delivery capacity.
- Primary legal and administrative documents outlining state requirements.
- Institutional records from non-governmental and philanthropic organizations.

Where a figure originates with an organization holding a declared position on the question, this paper explicitly states that position. Unverified data points or metrics absent a transparent, traceable methodology have been systematically excluded from this analysis.

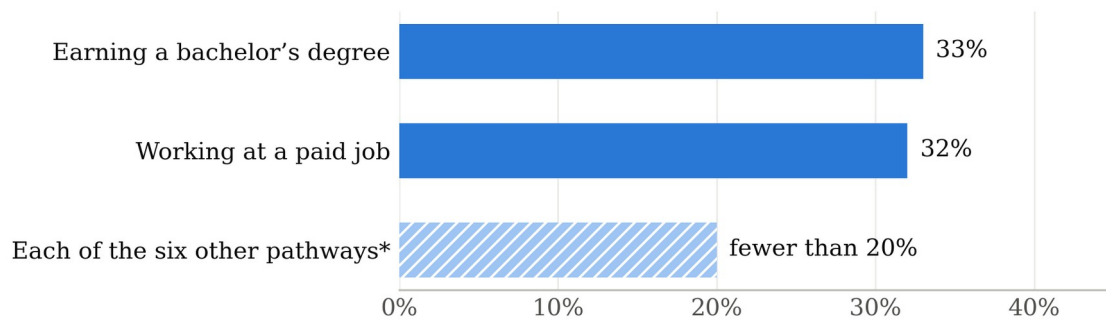
Because no centralized national census tracks high schools utilizing career planning as a credit-bearing course, this argument relies on state-level regulatory mandates and student self-appraisals rather than individual school prevalence. The legal frameworks evaluated in section 5.3 are derived from a direct textual reading of the statutes and administrative codes across thirty-one states; because nineteen states were omitted from this specific textual review, no universal fifty-state generalization is claimed. All corresponding empirical limitations, survey methodologies, and contextual nuances are detailed within the numbered notes. Survey metrics throughout represent self-reported data, and section 8 sets out the clear boundaries those self-reports impose.

3. The Preparation Gap

3.1 What Students Report

In April 2025, Gallup, in partnership with the Walton Family Foundation and Jobs for the Future, conducted a survey of 1,928 individuals aged 16 to 24. The metrics isolated within this paper reflect the specific subsample of 1,327 respondents aged 16 to 18. The results revealed that fewer than three in ten respondents felt “very prepared” to pursue any postsecondary pathway in which they had expressed interest.¹ Students knew much less about the other routes.

Students aged 16-18 who say they know “a lot” about each pathway



*Associate degree, certificate program, apprenticeship, internship, military enlistment, starting a business. Shown as a band: Gallup states only that each is under two in ten.

Figure 1. Awareness of postsecondary pathways, students aged 16 to 18. Source: Gallup, Walton Family Foundation, and Jobs for the Future, 2025 (note 1).

Gallup evaluated awareness across eight discrete transition pathways. Only two routes, the traditional bachelor's degree and immediate paid employment, are familiar to about a third of these students. Conversely, the remaining six options, including associate degrees, certificate programs, and registered apprenticeships, are understood “a lot” by fewer than two in ten students. This structural unfamiliarity is reinforced by a lack of early workforce integration: 47 percent of respondents had never held a part-time

job or an internship, meaning nearly half had never seen a route into work from the inside.¹

Parents see the same gap. In Gallup's August 2026 survey, 66 percent of parents of K-12 students said they were satisfied with the quality of their oldest child's education, which Gallup reports as a new low. Asked how well schools are preparing students for the current world of work, 27 percent of those parents rated the job excellent or good, the lowest rating parents gave any of the six areas Gallup asked about. Among all adults the figure was 21 percent.² A parent can be satisfied with a child's school and still doubt that it is preparing the child for work, and that doubt is where a career planning course begins.

This preparation deficit extends beyond domestic boundaries. The OECD's 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which evaluated approximately 690,000 fifteen-year-old students across 81 countries and economies, found that on the OECD average 39 percent of fifteen-year-olds could not name a specific job they expected to hold at about age thirty, or gave an answer too broad to classify. The OECD reports that this share has grown substantially since the 2018 assessment.

On the same OECD average, 50 percent of girls and 44 percent of boys expect to work in one of ten jobs, a concentration that has risen steadily since 2000. Most critically, a profound misalignment exists between aspiration and preparation: one student in five expected to enter highly specialized professions requiring a degree while simultaneously reporting that they did not expect to study beyond upper secondary. This structural dissonance escalates to 34 percent among students in the least advantaged quartile, compared to just 11 percent in the most advantaged quartile.³ For many of these students, what they hope for and what they plan for do not match; lining the two up is the work a planning course does.

3.2 What the Gap is a Gap In

To construct an effective diagnostic intervention, policymakers must precisely define the nature of this preparation deficit. Students are not suffering from a scarcity of information. Granular labor-market projections, institutional completion rates, and net-price estimates are published and free to use.

The Gallup and OECD findings point the same way: what students lack is a structured, repeatable method for using that information. A rigorous decision-making methodology requires a systematic sequence: an inventorying of personal aptitudes and interests, an objective analysis of contemporary occupations, a comparative financial calculus balancing entry costs against projected career returns, and low-cost exploratory testing

prior to formal commitment. This is teachable material, and the sequence above is short enough to fit in a semester. What is missing is not the method but the hour on the schedule.

4. Why the Omission Matters More Now

Three structural developments have raised the cost of leaving career planning to chance, explaining why state boards could leave career planning instruction out a generation ago and cannot now.

4.1 The Price of the Default Option

Because the four-year degree remains the default postsecondary option most familiar to students, its price is where a bad decision costs the most.

Average published tuition and fees, one year (constant 2025 dollars)

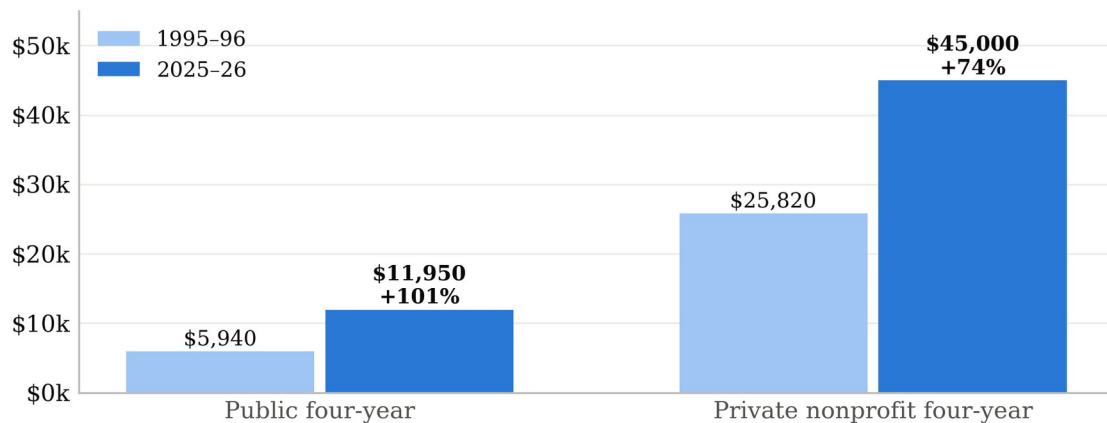


Figure 2. Published tuition and fees, 1995-96 and 2025-26. Annual list prices, not net price. Source: College Board, Trends in College Pricing and Student Aid 2025, Table CP-2 (note 4).

Adjusted to constant 2025 dollars, average published tuition and fees at public four-year universities increased by 101 percent between the 1995-96 and 2025-26 academic cycles. Private nonprofit four-year institutions experienced a parallel 74 percent increase over the same timeframe. These metrics strictly reflect isolated, single-year instructional pricing, not a four-year total; auxiliary costs such as housing, food, books, and transportation are charged separately.⁴

For the 2026-27 academic year, fifteen or sixteen elite universities feature a published cost of attendance exceeding \$100,000 for a single year, depending on the count. Cost of attendance in that series is a comprehensive figure combining tuition, fees, housing, food, books, transportation, and estimated personal expenses. A standard four-year enrollment at this baseline represents a capital outlay exceeding \$400,000, assuming no price increases.

The Princeton Review compiled that count for its 2027 guide, and CNBC reported the figure in June 2026. On September 1, 2026, the Washington Post reported on the same series and put the number at fifteen. CNBC reported sixteen such schools; the Post reports that a year earlier the count was two.⁵

The published figure does not match the actual net expenditures of many enrolled families. Across these specific institutions, the average need-based grant allocated to first-year undergraduates ranges from \$42,000 to \$79,000 annually.⁵ Discounting runs deep across private nonprofit colleges generally; a survey of 258 such schools puts the average institutional tuition discount rate at 57.1 percent for first-time, full-time undergraduates in the 2025-26 cycle, a preliminary estimate against a finalized 54.5 percent the year before.⁶

Subtract the average need-based grant from a \$100,000 published price. An individual family faces a net annual out-of-pocket obligation between \$21,000 and \$58,000, and a similar amount in each of the three years that follow. Many families who cannot cover that out of current income and savings borrow the rest, and the student repays it out of earnings they cannot yet estimate. That is a calculation a student can be taught to run before signing.

Reading a published price against the price a family will be charged is a skill, and it has to be taught. A family can rule a college out on the published price before anyone runs the numbers. The net price is what that family would pay. Federal law requires any college that takes federal student aid and enrolls full-time, first-time, degree-seeking undergraduates to post a calculator estimating the net price.⁴

The estimate is built from what similar students paid in an earlier year, so reading it correctly has to be taught. A student who runs the calculator and weighs the result against a program's completion rate and its graduates' earnings is choosing on better information than a student looking solely at a sticker price.

4.2 The Reordering of Work

The second development involves a profound transformation in the composition of work itself. The Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce estimates that the economy will need roughly 5.25 million additional workers possessing postsecondary education through 2032. Part of the reason is demographic: 18.4 million experienced workers aged 55 to 64 are expected to retire faster than qualified younger cohorts arrive to take their places.⁷

Concurrently, the World Economic Forum projects that approximately 40 percent of core skills workers rely on today will be transformed or become outdated by 2030, necessitating training for nearly six in ten workers over that period.⁸ Both of the Forum's figures are projections rather than measurements. Its skill-instability estimate has fallen across successive editions, from 57 percent in 2020 to 44 percent in 2023 and close to 40 percent now, and it still describes two-fifths of what a worker knows how to do.

Artificial intelligence is part of what is changing which skills employers need, though the projections above do not isolate its effect. In a historically stable occupational structure, a student who chooses poorly could still expect the occupation they chose to exist across a working life. In an era of rapid skill depreciation and structural instability, what lasts is the ability to make a choice and remake it. That means weighing options against evidence, testing an interest before committing to it, and revising a plan when the work itself changes. That is what a required course in career planning is built to teach.

Private investors have begun building their own answer to the same shift. On 22 September 2026, Andreessen Horowitz, the venture capital firm co-founded by Marc Andreessen and Ben Horowitz, announced it was incubating the Horowitz Andreessen Academy in San Francisco. The program is unaccredited and awards no degree. It is open to students who have just finished high school or have completed up to two years of coursework at an "elite university." Its founding class of 50 begins a one-year, tuition-free program in fall 2027, built around courses, independent projects, and co-op placements at partner companies including Anthropic, Google, NVIDIA, and OpenAI. A two-year version is planned for fall 2028, pending regulatory approval, with tuition expected to be similar to that of elite private universities. In a co-authored essay published after the launch, Andreessen wrote: "We owe them more than a warning about what AI might take away. We owe them an education that helps them discover what they can do with it."⁹

Fifty places will not change the options open to most graduating seniors. What the announcement does show is that \$42 million has been committed to a program built as an alternative to college, and that a student leaving high school has one more route to weigh against a degree, an apprenticeship, or a job.⁹ Andreessen's sentence also describes what a career planning course is for. Finding out what a student can do with AI, and with the work that is changing around it, starts with the method this paper describes: inventory what the student is good at, test it against real work, and revise the plan when the work changes.

4.3 Awareness Has Improved; Instruction Has Not

A final development provides the single piece of encouraging news. Mike Rowe and the mikeroweWORKS Foundation have campaigned since Labor Day of 2008 to change how the public sees skilled work. The foundation's stated purpose is to change perceptions surrounding manual labor, or in Rowe's words "better PR for the trades." Since its inception, the entity has distributed nearly \$12 million in work ethic scholarships to over 2,000 Americans, including a single-round allocation of \$2.4 million to more than 300 recipients in July 2024.¹⁰

Applicants must sign the foundation's S.W.E.A.T. Pledge, a document framing vocational pursuit as a matter of personal accountability and behavioral disposition rather than merely a wage alternative.

However, an external advocacy campaign lacks the statutory power to insert instruction into the school day. That step belongs to schools, and Gallup's 2025 dataset shows what is left to do: despite nearly two decades of national attention to the trades, fewer than two in ten high school students possess a deep understanding of registered apprenticeships.¹ Cultural awareness of an option is fundamentally distinct from the analytical ability to evaluate that option against competing pathways. A course teaches the weighing. The next piece of work belongs to schools: teach students how to weigh a trade against the alternatives, and the awareness the campaign builds turns into decisions students can defend.

5. Why Current Provision Does Not Close the Gap

5.1 Fragmented Delivery

One reason this gap stays invisible is the volume of career-related activity a school already runs. Within a single academic year, a school may run or pass along:

- a standalone career day in the fall
- an online interest inventory completed by sophomores in one class period
- a college fair
- an evening financial aid presentation
- a notification about a summer program

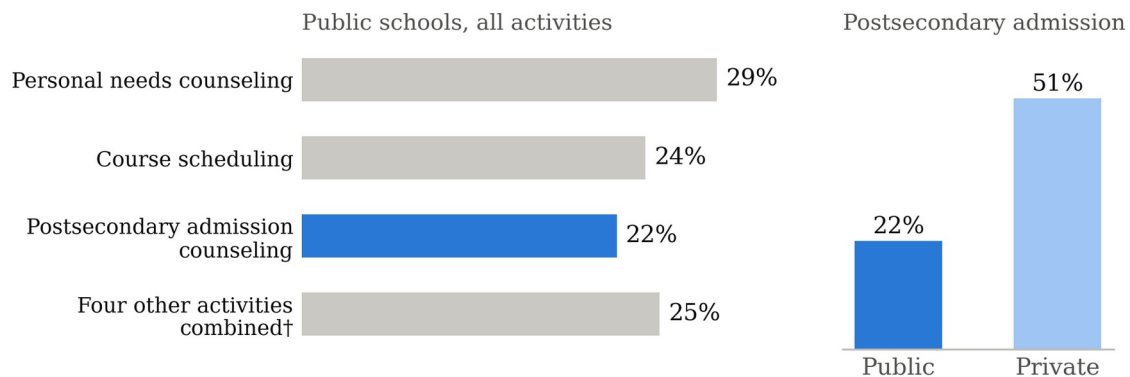
Each of these is worth doing. They operate in isolation from one another. No rule ties the sophomore inventory to the college fair, and no rule ties either one to a discussion of cost. Nothing ties the cost discussion to whether a four-year degree suits what the student has said they want. When each activity belongs to a different staff member on a different calendar day, no one is accountable for the sequence, or for whether the pieces add up to anything.

From the outside it looks like a plan taking shape. From the student’s side, senior year arrives with a folder of disconnected exercises and no method for turning them into a decision. Sequence those same activities inside one graded course and the folder becomes a plan.

5.2 Counselor Capacity

State plan mandates and school job descriptions commonly assign responsibility for the preparation gap to school counseling departments. That assignment does not match how counselors spend the year. In a 2023 national survey of approximately 2,800 high school counselors conducted by EAB and the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC), public school staffs reported spending 22 percent of the year on postsecondary admission counseling, compared to 51 percent in private schools.¹¹

Share of counseling staff time over the academic year



†Remainder of the public-school column (100% minus the three categories shown); EAB reports seven activities in total.

Figure 3. Counseling staff time by activity. Self-reported departmental estimates. Source: EAB and NACAC, 2023 Survey of High School Counselors (note 11).

Personal needs counseling, EAB’s category covering disciplinary, social and psychological work, took the largest single share at 29 percent, followed by course scheduling at 24 percent, which is more of the year than college advising. On these figures, approximately four-fifths of a public school counselor’s year goes to duties other than postsecondary admission counseling.¹¹

National aggregates indicate that for most high schools, the primary constraint is not a raw deficit in counseling personnel. The American School Counselor Association recommends a target ratio of one counselor for every 250 students. In the 2024–25 academic cycle, the 35 states tracking counselor metrics by specific grade bands reported high school ratios sitting between 195 and 224 students per counselor. ASCA’s release for that year

noted that the high school ratio met ASCA's recommended threshold for the first time.¹²

One group of schools sits outside that picture entirely. Drawing on the U.S. Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection, ASCA reports that approximately 17 percent of American high schools employ no school counselor at all. Roughly 643,700 students attend those schools, most of which are small.¹² A course with an assigned teacher represents one of the few viable remedies open to an institution with no counselor.

For every other school, staffing is not the constraint this paper is describing. A school could cut its caseload to one counselor for every hundred students and still have no scheduled hour in the master schedule dedicated to explicit career planning instruction. Where no one is assigned to teach career planning, and no period is set aside for it, the caseload is not the binding constraint. Career planning is fundamentally an instructional teaching function, and it falls to counselors by default. Give the curriculum to a classroom teacher, with a period on the schedule and a grade at the end, and counselors get those hours back for the work they trained to do.

5.3 A Plan Document Is Not a Course

Counselor time is one constraint. The plan document is another. Most states require students to produce a career plan portfolio. Six of the thirty-one states whose codes were read for this paper also require a formal course.

Most states require a plan document, generally termed an Individual Career and Academic Plan (ICAP); South Carolina calls it the Individual Graduation Plan, and Wisconsin calls it the Academic and Career Plan. A January 2020 Regional Educational Laboratory post carries the most recent national count located for this paper: 34 states mandating an education and career plan, with a further 10 strongly encouraging one. The post never says when its authors reviewed state policy.¹³ The structural timing varies considerably: Wisconsin mandates coverage across grades 6 through 12, South Carolina enforces completion by the end of eighth grade, and Colorado requires the process to begin no later than ninth grade. Oklahoma's ninth-grade statutory reference designates the first affected cohort rather than an operational deadline.¹⁴

However, a compliance document and an instructional course do not do the same work. In a national survey published by Advance CTE and ASCA in February 2018, close to a quarter of school counselors stated they were unaware whether their state's mandated portfolio plan was intended to serve as a career advising and development tool, which says more about how the plans were introduced than about the counselors. Advance CTE reported in its own prose that no counselor rated these plans as extremely effective,

while 42 percent judged them to be only somewhat effective or not effective.¹⁵

A compliance portfolio records what a process produced without teaching the cognitive process itself. Absent scheduled time and an accountable teacher, the document can become a form that is completed once to secure graduation and rarely reopened.

Six of the thirty-one state codes read for this paper move career decision-making onto the required schedule of courses. Three name the course, two require a course defined by content rather than by name, and Indiana requires a credit that state guidance, not the rule, ties to a course:

State	What is required	When taken	Credit	Substitution
Alabama ¹⁶	Career Preparedness, covering academic planning and career development, financial literacy, and technology	Grades 9-12	One credit, graded, on the transcript	District waivers allowing the content to be folded into other courses closed after the 2024-25 cohort and expired 30 June 2026
Mississippi ¹⁷	College- and Career-Readiness, a named course	Grades 9-12, in any of four approved sequences	One Carnegie unit	Five approved substitute units, among them work-based learning
Indiana ¹⁸	"One (1) credit in career preparedness"	High school; first affected cohort is the class of 2029	One credit	None stated. The rule names no course, and state guidance designates a course that satisfies the credit
Florida ¹⁹	"One course in career and education planning," ending in a completed plan	Grades 6, 7, or 8	None set by statute	The course may be integrated into another course or courses
Utah ²⁰	College and Career Awareness, part of the General Core	Grade 7 or 8	None set by rule	A parent or student may request a course or experience similar to College and Career

				Awareness
Virginia ²¹	A career investigations course chosen from a state-approved list	Middle school	Not specified by regulation	A division may deliver the content another way if the alternative is equivalent in content and academic rigor

Four of the six, Mississippi, Florida, Utah and Virginia, carry a substitution clause, so those four are not absolute mandates. Alabama once let districts fold the content into other courses under a waiver, and no longer does. Career Preparedness is a graduation requirement recorded directly as a graded credit on the transcript, and the policy waivers allowing districts to fold the content into other courses closed to new cohorts and expired on 30 June 2026.¹⁶ While Mississippi and Indiana tie formal graduation credits to their requirements, their delivery configurations remain more open than Alabama's. Mississippi permits five distinct substitute units alongside the course.¹⁷ The Indiana rule names no course at all, leaving the choice to state department guidance, and the class of 2029 represents the first cohort the rule reaches.¹⁸

Florida targets students at the earliest developmental stage, maintaining explicit statutory language regarding course content. The Florida educational code requires the course to be Internet-based and customizable, using research-based assessments. The resulting plan must cover, among other things:

- graduation requirements and diploma designations
- the career and technical education pathway to a standard diploma
- Florida Bright Futures scholarship requirements
- state university and Florida College System institution admission requirements
- opportunities to earn college credit in high school, including dual enrollment
- work-based learning, internships, preapprenticeship, and apprenticeship programs

The course must also teach each student how to access and update that plan, and the statute encourages annual updates. Where a district delivers the course as the statute describes, a student enters ninth grade with a plan a counselor can build on.¹⁹ Utah and Virginia place a comparable course in the middle grades. The Utah rule requires at least one course in College and Career Awareness in grade 7 or 8, letting a parent or student request a substitute.²⁰ Virginia requires every middle school to provide a career

investigations course, permitting a division to deliver the content another way if the alternative is equivalent in content and academic rigor.²¹

Five other states require related programmatic arrangements that stop short of a required course. West Virginia mandates a career exploration middle school experience that a county may satisfy through field trips or guest speakers. North Dakota lets a district choose between a nine-week course and an individual consultation. Hawaii attaches a half-credit value to a personal transition plan without regulating how the work is taught. Iowa requires districts to offer and teach career planning in grades five through eight without requiring a student to complete a discrete course. Nevada prescribes a course of study without specifying credit, grading, or completion mechanisms.²²

A required course is only as good as the instruction delivered within it, and for none of the six states was published evidence located regarding long-term student outcomes or instructional quality. What these six have done is move career decision-making onto the list of core subjects a school must schedule and staff, and Among the six, Alabama has been the most specific about how the credit is recorded, placing it as a graded credit on the transcript.

6. What Students Say They Do Not Know

6.1 Registered Apprenticeship

The consequences of this curricular omission show most plainly in registered apprenticeship, about which fewer than two in ten high school students say they know a lot.¹

In 2024, approximately 680,000 Americans were actively enrolled in federally registered apprenticeships, a figure representing 0.3 percent of the total working-age population. Comparative analysis by Third Way indicates that per capita participation runs roughly five times higher in Canada, seven times higher in Germany, and eleven times higher in Switzerland.²³ These global metrics do not compare identical regulatory categories, given that German and Swiss figures capture mainstream secondary vocational education in those countries while the American metric is a narrow federal legal classification. The difference in participation is real, and the multiples are ceilings rather than point estimates.

Absent structured classroom instruction that describes apprenticeship in the same detail as college, few students will run the comparison. A registered apprentice earns a wage under the apprenticeship agreement from the first day of training, and typically finishes without the tuition debt a four-year student carries. The wage at completion can be set against a college graduate's starting salary. For a seventeen-year-old, weighing four years of

tuition obligations against four years of paid training is among the most consequential comparisons available. In the United States, state and federal agencies run apprenticeship programs outside the school pipeline, so a high school has to gather the program details itself before it can teach them in a class period.

6.2 The Four-Year Default and Non-Completion

A student chooses with most confidence among options a teacher has described and analyzed with them. Parents and schools promote the four-year university as the responsible default, which can make any other choice look like settling.

Higher education remains a necessary path for millions of individuals, and the difficulty is rarely college itself. The difficulty is college entered by default, without a plan, when no other option was explored with equivalent depth. As of July 2023, approximately 37.6 million working-age American adults under the age of 65 had completed college credits but left without securing any formal credential, up from 36.8 million a year earlier.²⁴ The list of options is also growing. Programs built by industry outside the accredited system, such as the Horowitz Andreessen Academy described in section 4.2, now recruit students directly out of high school.⁹ Taught to systematically compare options before enrolling, a student who chooses college chooses it on purpose.

7. What the Evidence Supports

The intervention with the best evidence located for this paper is direct exposure to real work, and it remains an exception rather than a standard graduation requirement.

The Strada Education Foundation analyzed the Department of Education's Baccalaureate and Beyond survey, which tracked the graduating class of 2015-16, and found that holding a paid internship was associated with a predicted annual wage premium of \$3,096 one year after graduation. Bachelor's holders who did work-based learning of any kind were 19 percentage points more likely than those who did not to say their education had helped them reach their goals.²⁵ That research covers college students.

Direct immersion through an internship, a job shadow, or a paid apprenticeship provides a student with operational insight that a digital interest inventory cannot replicate. In the same Gallup survey, 47 percent of the respondents aged 16 to 18 said they had never held a job or an internship.²⁶ This is the finding a single school can act on fastest: one placement, arranged once, moves a student out of that 47 percent.

In the absence of state mandates, individual higher education institutions have begun constructing localized programs. The University of Nebraska-Lincoln College of Business designs and funds three free summer programs for high school students, each running three days. Two are built around one quantitative field each, Discover Accounting and Discover Actuarial Science, while the third, DREAMBIG Academy, is built around a group of students: juniors who would be first-generation college students, who come from low-income households, or who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

Under the parameters announced in 2024, DREAMBIG participants qualified for an institutional scholarship valued at \$8,000 over four years, and nearly 100 participants attended across the three programs in 2025.²⁷ A three-day residential camp cannot substitute for a career planning curriculum. These models are outstanding examples of programs built to meet students where they are, and they illustrate what a school district could reach with a scheduled instructional hour of its own.

8. Limitations

This paper reports no original data; every figure is drawn from a published source and carries the methodological constraints its authors placed on it.

The student sentiment metrics cited from Gallup are cross-sectional self-reports; the sub-metrics tracking preparedness were restricted to respondents who had already stated at least some interest in a given pathway, rather than a universal sample. The cohort aged 16 to 18 was accessed indirectly through adult household panel members rather than direct sampling frames. The international career metrics reported by the OECD reflect international aggregates across diverse economies and cannot be used as point estimates for the United States.

The postsecondary pricing metrics published by the College Board represent institutional list prices rather than the net expenditures families are charged. The case in section 4.1 rests on the long-term rate of increase over a thirty-year generation, and on the widening distance between public list prices and realized net expenses. The institutional counts tracking universities crossing the \$100,000 threshold reflect a single academic year's list price and are drawn from two distinct media reports, CNBC reporting sixteen schools and the Washington Post reporting fifteen; because neither outlet published a precise data cutoff date, both counts are reported.

The delivery-capacity metrics represent annual departmental estimates compiled via survey instruments rather than direct observational logging. The EAB percentages reflect self-reported estimates of departmental time across a year, not observed hours. The survey data cited from Advance CTE

lacks reporting on raw sample sizes or field dates within its public documentation.

The national metric identifying 34 states with mandated portfolio laws dates to a 2020 Regional Educational Laboratory blog post that carries no primary statutory citations and no policy review date; because subsequent literature has repeated this aggregate figure without re-surveying the states, it should be treated as an approximation.

Because there is no national census tracking individual high school master schedules, this paper cannot quantify the volume of individual schools running these courses in states lacking statutory mandates. The legal analysis in section 5.3 is limited to the thirty-one state codes read directly; the remaining nineteen jurisdictions were not reviewed, and additional mandates may exist within them.

The Strada wage findings track undergraduate college populations and report a statistical association rather than a causal effect, so applying the same reasoning to high school work-based learning is an argument by extension. The scholarship metrics published by the mikeroweWORKS Foundation are the foundation's own reported totals and have not been independently audited.

Finally, no rigorous, published evaluation tracking student outcomes across the six states with mandated career planning courses was located, which is a major analytical constraint. Until field studies are published, the case for these interventions rests on their design: allocated time, an accountable educator, and a required credit in Alabama, Mississippi and Indiana. The first jurisdiction to fund and publish a longitudinal evaluation of its curriculum will give every other state evidence that none of them has today.

9. Recommendations

1. ****Require career planning as a graded course and place it directly on the student transcript.**** States and local school districts should require a standalone course for graduation, placed as early in high school as the schedule allows. This course should be integrated into the standard schedule, backed by a credit value, and assigned to a credentialed educator held accountable for curriculum delivery. Among the six, Alabama's rule is the most specific: it closed its embedding waivers and locked in a graded credit, though it allows the course anywhere in grades 9 through 12. The other five states require something in the same family, from a named course to a credit with no course named in the rule. The Alabama, Mississippi and Florida requirements have been in force long enough to be studied. Virginia's rule took effect in 2024 and Utah's in 2026,²¹ and Indiana's first affected class graduates in 2029.¹⁸

2. ****Convert an existing portfolio mandate into direct instructional time.**** Given that 34 states already require the compilation of an education and career plan, the legal foundation is in place. A district can use its administrative authority to attach that requirement to a scheduled block without waiting for state legislative intervention.

3. ****Teach students to evaluate net pricing and economic outcomes.**** Curricula should move beyond generic discussions of higher education and teach the mechanics of net-price calculation, closing the gap between published and net price described in section 4.1. Students should be trained to run federally mandated net-price calculators, weighing estimated out-of-pocket costs against institutional completion rates and longitudinal earnings data. These tools are already public and free to use, so a school adds the instruction.

4. ****Present vocational apprenticeships on the same terms as collegiate options, at the same time.**** Vocational pathways should be analyzed in the same class periods, using the metrics applied to four-year degrees. A module should state an apprenticeship's entry prerequisites, wage scale, and debt profile as plainly as the school states a college program's prerequisites, price, and expected earnings. Apprenticeship should be presented as a first choice with its own entry standards, not as what is left over for a student whose grades slipped. Nearly two decades of public advocacy have primed students to consider these fields; schools now need to provide the class periods required to evaluate them.

5. ****Place every student inside a real workplace before the junior year, and replace "follow your passion" with a testable question.**** "Follow your passion" assumes a student already has one, fully formed, waiting to be found. Students who treat an interest as a fixed trait waiting to be discovered show less curiosity about unfamiliar fields than students who treat interest as something built, and the fixed-trait group loses interest sooner when the material turns difficult.²⁸ High schools should embed at least one workplace immersion experience, such as a job shadow or a structured internship, before the eleventh grade, shifting the student's inquiry away from abstract passion and toward a concrete question: what am I interested in becoming competent at?

10. Conclusion

Selecting a professional direction from an array of competing economic pathways requires deliberate effort. This analytical competency can be taught using the same apparatus applied to every other core academic discipline: dedicated master-schedule placement, standardized curricular benchmarks, an accountable instructional staff, and assessment on the same terms as any other subject.

The secondary evidence synthesized here cannot establish a causal link to improved long-term student outcomes, because no state-level longitudinal research was located. It does substantiate four things. First, the career preparation gap is systemic and international in scope. Second, the financial consequences of postsecondary decisions have escalated over a generation, yet fewer than three in ten students say they feel very prepared to pursue a pathway they have expressed interest in. Third, public school counselors report spending 22 percent of the year on postsecondary admission counseling, leaving them without the hours or the structural mandate to deliver universal career training. Fourth, six states have put career decision-making on the required schedule of courses, three of them carrying a credit toward graduation. That gives every other state a design to work from.

The advocacy campaigns have done the part that belongs to them, and they have done it well. They have shifted public perception and primed a generation of students to consider a broader range of labor pathways, yet Gallup's 2025 survey still found fewer than two in ten students who know a lot about an apprenticeship.¹ What remains is the ordinary work of schooling: naming the economic knowledge a young person needs, carving out a block on the master schedule, assigning a classroom teacher, and grading what the student learns.

This preparation gap does not disappear at high school graduation. No general requirement that colleges teach the transition from undergraduate study to workforce entry was located either, and that omission is the subject of the companion paper in this series.²⁹ An individual can pass through both high school and college and be asked twice to make life-defining financial and professional decisions with no formal instruction behind them. Treating career planning with the same rigor, instructional space, and academic accountability afforded to every other foundational discipline is the reasonable next step.

Appendix. A Note on Sources

Several methodological decisions govern the scope of the assertions made throughout this paper.

Where media reporting stands in for a primary document. The count of domestic universities maintaining a list price above \$100,000 for a single academic year originates within proprietary data compiled by The Princeton Review. Because this data was published within a printed commercial guide rather than a public report, and the corresponding press releases omit the raw count, this paper relies on secondary media reporting. CNBC counted sixteen institutions in June 2026 and the Washington Post counted fifteen in September 2026, and neither outlet published its analytical cutoff date or master list, so section 4.1 reports both counts. Apart from the description of

the Horowitz Andreessen Academy in section 4.2 (note 9), two figures in this paper come from news coverage: the count, reported by CNBC and separately by the Washington Post, and the range of average need-based first-year grants, which comes from CNBC's reporting of Princeton Review data.

Where competing sources were filtered and selected. Counselor workload metrics were taken from EAB's 2023 dataset rather than the older NACAC 2019 State of College Admission report, since the EAB instrument is more recent and uses a task-isolation design. EAB's 2024 study points the same way, and the 2023 release is used because it contains the granular percentage breakdown required for the analysis in section 5.2. The national count tracking state-level portfolio laws is taken from a 2020 Regional Educational Laboratory post rather than the more widely reproduced aggregates in Solberg and colleagues (2018), listed in the Bibliography, because that figure combines strict legal mandates with loose encouragement in a single total. Neither source publishes a policy review date.

How to read the counselor ratios. The student-to-counselor metrics distributed by ASCA are ratios calculated by dividing gross state enrollment records by total full-time equivalent counseling positions. They do not represent measured practitioner caseloads, and no counselor represented in those counts was asked how many students they work with.

What the internship regression controls for. The undergraduate wage figures reported by Strada report an association, not a causal effect. Strada's published methodology controls for race and ethnicity, gender, field of study, and cost of living by state of residence; it lists no control for the institution attended, prior academic achievement, or family income, each of which is correlated with a student's probability of obtaining a paid internship in the first place.

Organizations with declared positions, and sources reporting on themselves. Third Way, which supplies the per capita global apprenticeship comparisons, is a national think tank with a standing public position favoring apprenticeship expansion. Advance CTE advocates for career and technical education; its statement that no counselor rated portfolio mandates extremely effective appears only in its prose and is not a value read off a published chart. Andreessen Horowitz, co-founded by Marc Andreessen, who is quoted in section 4.2, invests in artificial intelligence companies and supplied \$35 million of the Horowitz Andreessen Academy's \$42 million in funding. The Academy has not yet enrolled a class, so no outcome data exists for it.

The mikeroweWORKS Foundation reports its own award totals, and they are not independently audited. Separately, in the Gallup report the values behind Gallup's own chart are not legible in the published PDF. Section 3.1 therefore restates the report's summary sentence. The figure there plots the two pathway values Gallup states in prose, and shows the remaining six pathways as a band, the range the report describes, rather than as invented point values.

What could not be located. No centralized national census tracking high schools running career planning as a credit-bearing course. No national survey of counselor perceptions of portfolio mandates later than the 2018 Advance CTE brief. No state statute or rule requiring a written career portfolio before grade six. No published evaluation of student outcomes for any of the six state courses. No fifty-state regulatory review; thirty-one state codes were read directly for this paper, and nineteen were not.

NOTES

1. Gallup, Walton Family Foundation, and Jobs for the Future, *Voices of Gen Z Study: Known Unknowns: Gen Z's Limited Awareness of Non-College Pathways*, 2025. Gallup Panel web survey, 15-25 April 2025, 1,928 respondents aged 16 to 24; the figures here are the subsample of 1,327 aged 16 to 18, reached through adult panel members in their households rather than sampled directly. Preparedness was asked only of students expressing at least some interest in a given pathway, so the base is interested students rather than all respondents. On awareness the report states: "About one in three say they know 'a lot' about earning a bachelor's degree (33%) or working at a paid job (32%), while fewer than two in 10 know a lot about any of the six other options presented." The six are an associate degree, a certificate or certification program, an apprenticeship, an internship, enlisting in the military, and starting a business. On preparedness the report asks whether students feel "very prepared" to pursue a pathway in which they have expressed at least some interest. It also reports that "[a]bout half of students have never talked to a job recruiter (51%) or had a job or internship (47%)."

2. Gallup and the Walton Family Foundation, "Satisfaction With K-12 Education Hits New Low," Gallup, 7 September 2026. Satisfaction with the oldest child's education comes from the telephone poll, 3-24 August 2026, of 1,200 adults, including 233 parents of K-12 students (margin of error ± 4 points overall, ± 8 points for parents). The six ratings of how well schools prepare students come from an online Gallup Panel survey, 3-17 August 2026, of 2,143 adults, including 530 parents of K-12 students (± 3 points overall, ± 5 points for parents). Satisfaction with the oldest child's education fell from 74 percent in 2025, and the series high was 83 percent in 1999. The item reads "Preparing students for the current world of work." Among K-12 parents, excellent-or-good ratings were 51 percent for adapting to new technologies, 38 percent for working effectively with others, 37 percent for college readiness, 34 percent for using AI tools effectively, 29 percent for thinking critically, and 27 percent for the world of work. Gallup reports that parents' rating of U.S. K-12 education overall matches the national average of 32 percent. These are self-reported ratings, and the parent subsample carries a wider margin of error than the full sample.

3. OECD, *The State of Global Teenage Career Preparation*, OECD Publishing, 20 May 2025, drawing on the 2022 PISA assessment of about 690,000 fifteen-year-olds across 81 countries and economies. All figures are OECD-country averages rather than United States estimates. PISA classifies a student as career uncertain if the answer to the question about the job expected at about age 30 is left blank “but also if the response given is too vague or broad to allow for identification within the International Standardised Classification of Occupations,” so the 39 percent is a coding-derived measure rather than a self-report of having no plan. The report states that the share “has grown substantially since 2018” and gives no numeric 2018 comparator in its text. On concentration: “on average across the OECD 50% of girls and 44% of boys expect to work in one of ten jobs,” and since 2000 “levels of this career concentration ... have steadily increased.” The OECD does not describe the composition of that list as unchanged; it notes instead that occupations appealing to both girls and boys rose from three in 2000 to five in 2022. One student in five expects to work in a profession “which typically requires tertiary education as an entry qualification” while not planning to continue past upper secondary, a figure that is 34 percent among the least advantaged quarter of students against 11 percent among the most advantaged.

4. College Board, *Trends in College Pricing and Student Aid 2025*, 6 November 2025. All figures are in 2025 dollars and are annual charges for one academic year. Average published tuition and fees at public four-year institutions rose from \$5,940 in 1995–96 to \$11,950 in 2025–26, and at private nonprofit four-year institutions from \$25,820 to \$45,000; the report prints those thirty-year increases as 101 and 74 percent in the change column of Table CP-2. Over the most recent decade the same series moves the other way: published tuition and fees “declined in the public sectors and increased by 2% in the private nonprofit four-year sector, after adjusting for inflation.” Published prices rose in dollars of the day across that decade, from \$9,410 to \$11,950 at public four-year institutions and from \$32,405 to \$45,000 at private nonprofit four-year institutions, so the real declines reflect general inflation of roughly a third over the same period rather than falling bills. Published prices are list prices for one year of full-time enrollment; net price is cost of attendance minus grant and scholarship aid, reported as a sector average. The calculator requirement is at 20 U.S.C. § 1015a, added by the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008. Title IV institutions enrolling full-time, first-time degree- or certificate-seeking undergraduates were required to post one by 29 October 2011, and the Department of Education describes the estimate as based on “what similar students paid in a previous year.”

5. The Princeton Review’s cost-of-attendance figures for 2026–27, compiled for *The Best 392 Colleges: 2027 Edition* (Penguin Random House, on sale 18 August 2026) and reported in “College sticker prices top \$100,000 at 16 schools — but many students pay significantly less,” CNBC, 10 June 2026, which counts sixteen institutions and names Duke, Georgetown, New York University, and the University of Chicago among them. Cost of attendance in that series is a one-year figure combining tuition, fees, housing, food, books, transportation, and estimated personal expenses. It is a list price rather than a measure of what students are charged, and every count reported here is of institutions above \$100,000 per academic year, not across a degree. “As more colleges surpass \$100,000 price tag, here’s the true cost,” *The Washington Post*, 1 September 2026, puts the figure at fifteen and states that a year earlier it had been two. The range of average need-based first-year grants at those institutions, roughly \$42,000 to \$79,000 for the year, is from the same Princeton Review data as reported by CNBC.

6. National Association of College and University Business Officers, 2025 NACUBO Tuition Discounting Study, results released 1 June 2026, from 258 private nonprofit colleges and universities. The 57.1 percent average institutional discount rate for first-time, full-time undergraduates and 51.3 percent for all undergraduates are preliminary estimates for 2025-26; NACUBO cautions that preliminary figures change because the survey is completed in the fall, before enrollment and aid data are final. The finalized 2024-25 rates were 54.5 and 50 percent. The study covers private nonprofit institutions only and its participants are self-selected among NACUBO members, so the rates are not a national average.

7. Nicole Smith, Martin Van Der Werf, Madeleine Adelson, and Jeff Strohl, *Falling Behind: How Skills Shortages Threaten Future Jobs*, Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 16 September 2025. From 2024 through 2032 the economy will need 5.25 million more workers with education and training beyond high school, 4.5 million of them with at least a bachelor's degree. The report finds 18.4 million experienced workers aged 55 to 64 with postsecondary education expected to retire, "far outpacing the 13.8 million younger workers who will enter the labor market with equivalent postsecondary educational qualifications."

8. World Economic Forum, *The Future of Jobs Report 2025*, 7 January 2025. "On average, workers can expect that two-fifths (39%) of their existing skill sets will be transformed or become outdated over the 2025-2030 period," and if the global workforce "was made up of 100 people, 59 would need training by 2030." These are global employer-survey figures rather than United States estimates. The report states that this measure of skill instability "has slowed compared to previous editions of the report, from 44% in 2023 and a high point of 57% in 2020," so the trend is falling even as the absolute level stays high.

9. Marc Andreessen and Erik Torenberg, "College Isn't for Everyone. So We're Building a New Kind of School.," *The Free Press*, 25 September 2026, <https://www.thefp.com/p/horowitz-andreessen-academy-college-silicon-valley>. Program details: Erik Torenberg, "Incubating The Horowitz Andreessen Academy," Andreessen Horowitz, 22 September 2026, which lists co-op partners including Anthropic, Coinbase, Google, Meta, NVIDIA, OpenAI, Palantir, Replit, and Stripe. "Andreessen Horowitz Launches AI School as College Alternative," CBS News, 22 September 2026, describes "the unaccredited program" as "one year long and tuition-free," with 50 places for fall 2027, "aimed at students who have just graduated from high school or those who have completed up to two years of coursework at an 'elite university'"; it states that tuition for the planned two-year program "is expected to be similar to that of elite private universities," and quotes Ben Horowitz: "The training that worked for the Industrial Revolution isn't going to map perfectly onto the AI revolution, so somebody has to pioneer how you train a person for this new world." Mary Whitfill Roeloffs, "Billionaire Venture Capital Firm Launches 2-Year College Alternative," *Forbes*, 22 September 2026, reports \$35 million from Andreessen Horowitz and \$7 million from other investors, \$42 million in total, and that the two-year program depends on regulatory approval. That the program awards no degree is from "No Grades, No Tests, No Degree: Andreessen Horowitz Launching SF Academy for 'Builders,'" *The San Francisco Standard*, 22 September 2026. The Academy has not yet enrolled a class; program terms are the organizers' announced plans.

10. mikeroweWORKS Foundation, "About the Foundation" and Work Ethic Scholarship Program pages, mikeroweworks.org, accessed 5 September 2026; the foundation has

operated since Labor Day 2008. Award figures are the foundation's own and are not independently audited. "The mikeroweWORKS Foundation Surpasses \$11 Million in Trade Scholarships," PR Newswire, 10 July 2024, reports "nearly \$12 million" awarded to "more than 2,000 Americans" cumulatively since founding, and \$2.4 million to more than 300 recipients in the round announced that day. These are lifetime program totals rather than annual figures. Rowe, in the same release: "If we really want to close the skills gap, we need to change perceptions in the broadest possible way. That means better PR for the trades." Applicants are required to sign the foundation's S.W.E.A.T. Pledge.

11. EAB in partnership with the National Association for College Admission Counseling, *The Counselor Perspective: Insights from EAB's 2023 Survey of High School Counselors*, published 4 October 2023; n = 2,800, fielded 8 December 2022 to 17 January 2023. Respondents were asked to "consider the counseling staff's workload over the course of the academic year and estimate the percentage of time spent on the following activities," so these are self-reported estimates of departmental time rather than measurements of an individual's hours. The published table gives postsecondary admission counseling 22 percent of public school counseling staff time against 51 percent in private schools, with the public column summing to 100 percent across seven activities. EAB's largest public-school category is "personal needs counseling (disciplinary, social, and psychological counseling)" at 29 percent, ahead of course scheduling at 24 percent. The four-fifths figure in section 5.2 is the complement of the 22 percent, not a separately published value. EAB's 2024 survey, fielded 24 April to 29 May 2024 with 1,519 respondents, reports the same pattern on a different instrument and is not relied on here. <https://www.nacacnet.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Counselor-Perspective-EAB-Survey.pdf>

12. American School Counselor Association, "School Counselor Roles & Ratios," 2024–25, released 13 February 2026 and the most recent year available. ASCA recommends a ratio of one school counselor for every 250 students. ASCA states that "not all states report counts for elementary/middle vs. secondary school counselors, so it's not possible to calculate exact ratios by grade level," and gives a range from 195 to 1 up to 224 to 1 for high school counselors across the 35 states that do report by level. ASCA's press release of 13 February 2026 states that "the high-school student-to-school-counselor ratio meets the ASCA recommended ratio for the first time." That claim rests on the range above rather than on a single computed figure, and the two ASCA statements sit in tension: the association publishes no single national high school ratio and no national count of high school counselors. These are ratios built from state-reported enrollment and counselor counts, not measured caseloads, and no counselor in that data was asked how many students they work with. The nearest measured figure is older: the National Center for Education Statistics, in the 2015–16 National Teacher and Principal Survey, counted 44,800 full-time-equivalent counselors in public high schools serving 14,345,370 students, or 310 students per counselor, counting only the high schools that employed at least one counselor. The schools-without-a-counselor figure appears on the same ASCA ratios page and is credited there to the U.S. Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection; ASCA does not say which year of that collection the figure comes from. ASCA's parenthetical describing the 643,700 students as "4% of all students" is not reproduced here, since 643,700 is about 1.3 percent of national K–12 enrollment and reaches nearly 4 percent only when measured against high school enrollment alone.

13. Helen Duffy, "Individual Learning Plans: Students Creating Their Pathways to Postsecondary Success," Roundup Blog Series, Regional Educational Laboratory

Southwest, 10 January 2020: “Currently, 34 states—including Arkansas, Louisiana, and New Mexico—mandate ILPs for all students with an additional 10 states that strongly encourage their use.” This is a government blog post that never says when its authors reviewed state policy to arrive at the count. The quoted sentence carries a footnote marker, but the endnote it points to is a clarifying aside about states requiring plans only for students at risk of dropping out rather than a citation for the count, and nothing in the post’s reference list would supply a state-by-state policy tally. No systematic national count later than 2020 was located. The Duffy post is quoted and relied upon in T. Torre Gibney and M. Rauner, *Education and Career Planning in High School: A National Study of School and Student Characteristics and College-Going Behaviors*, REL 2022-127, U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory West, November 2021, which defines the instrument as “[e]ducation and/or career plan (ECP). A formal document, portfolio, or similar artifact assembled as part of the education and career planning process.”

14. Grade spans are taken from the states’ own statutes and rules: Wis. Stat. § 115.28(59)(a), “academic and career planning services to pupils enrolled in grades 6 to 12”; Fla. Stat. § 1003.4156, “[o]ne course in career and education planning to be completed in grades 6, 7, or 8”; S.C. Code § 59-59-90, requiring eighth graders to select a preferred cluster of study and develop an individual graduation plan before the end of the second semester; 1 CCR 301-81 § 3.5, as amended effective 14 January 2025, governing the Individual Career and Academic Plan (ICAP), “[t]he ICAP process shall begin no later than ninth grade, but can begin earlier if the district or institute charter school chooses to do so”; and 70 O.S. § 1210.508-4, conditioning the diploma on completing the ICAP process “[b]eginning with students entering the ninth grade in the 2019-2020 school year,” which is a cohort designation rather than a start date. Career exploration reaches lower: South Carolina requires that “career awareness and exploration activities ... be integrated into the curricula for students in the first through fifth grades” (S.C. Code § 59-59-80), and Iowa, under House File 316 (2025), adds career planning and pathways to the subjects Iowa districts must offer and teach in grades five through eight while leaving the plan itself at grade eight under Iowa Code § 279.61.

15. Advance CTE and the American School Counselor Association, *The State of Career Technical Education: Career Advising and Development*, February 2018. As reported by Advance CTE: “nearly one-quarter of school counselors do not know if their state’s individual learning plan (ILP) is meant to serve as a career advising and development tool” and “no school counselors feel that the ILPs are extremely effective for career advising and development, and 42 percent believe they are only somewhat effective or not effective.” Both figures are quoted from Advance CTE’s own release announcing the report. No sample size, respondent count or fielding date appears in that release, on the resource page, or in trade coverage of the report, and February 2018 is the publication date rather than a fielding date.

16. Alabama State Department of Education, 2021 Alabama Course of Study: Career Preparedness, which supersedes the 2013 edition. The current text reads that “Career Preparedness focuses on three integrated areas of instruction: academic planning and career development, financial literacy, and technology,” and standard 3a asks students to “[p]articipate in assessments that identify personal areas of interest and aptitude, and utilize results to develop a high school educational plan.” The 2013 edition described a “four-year high school educational plan” and recommended the course be taken in grade nine; the 2021 edition drops the four-year framing and the grade-nine recommendation,

gives the course as grades 9–12, and permits Career Preparedness A in grade 8 for half a credit. Alabama State Department of Education, Alabama High School Graduation Requirements: Guidelines for Implementation and Additional Information, updated 19 March 2024, states that waivers allowing districts to embed the Career Preparedness content in other courses “will no longer be issued to the 2024-2025 cohort or future cohorts,” and that existing waivers expire no later than 30 June 2026. The department’s February 2025 requirement sheets list Career Preparedness at one credit for the classes of 2026, 2027, and 2028 and beyond.

17. Mississippi State Board of Education, “Accreditation Policies of the State Board of Education,” Mississippi Administrative Code, Title 7, Part 24, Appendix A-6, the Traditional Diploma course requirements, and Appendix A-9, the Distinguished Academic Endorsement. The requirement appears in the table as “COLLEGE- and CAREER-READINESS,” one Carnegie unit, and applies to “all entering ninth graders” from the 2018-2019 school year, meaning the class of 2022 onward. A footnote to the appendix states that “[t]he purpose of the College and Career Readiness Course is to provide planning and instruction for postsecondary transition,” and permits the unit to be taken in the senior year, the junior year, split across two years, or at a quarter unit a year from grade nine. The same footnote approves five substitutions: one Carnegie unit of Career and Technical Work-Based Learning, Dual Credit SmartStart, JROTC III, AP Seminar or an equivalent, and a designated seminar course at Early College High Schools. Accessed 7 September 2026. <https://www.law.cornell.edu/regulations/mississippi/Miss-Code-tit-7-pt-24-ACCREDITATION-POLICIES-OF-THE-STATE-BOARD-OF-EDUCATION-app-7-24-A-6>

18. Indiana State Board of Education, 511 Ind. Admin. Code 6-7.2-20(b)(12), effective 1 July 2025. The provision reads in full: “One (1) credit in career preparedness.” It applies to students “entering high school in the 2025-2026 school year or a subsequent school year,” meaning the class of 2029 onward, and forms part of the 42-credit Indiana Diploma. Final Rule, LSA Document #24-220, https://www.in.gov/doe/files/LSA24-220_FINAL-Rule-IDOE-Diplomas.pdf. The rule names no course. Course 5394, Preparing for College and Careers, is designated to satisfy the credit by department guidance rather than by rule: Indiana Department of Education, “UPDATED 2026-2027 Indiana Diploma Course Eligibility,” 13 February 2026, <https://www.in.gov/doe/files/2.13.26-UPDATED-26-27-Indiana-Diploma-Course-Eligibility.docx.pdf>. A designation made in guidance can be changed without rulemaking. Both accessed 7 September 2026.

19. Florida Statutes § 1003.4156, General requirements for middle grades promotion, current through the 2024 amendments (ch. 2024-6 and ch. 2024-163). The statute is silent on the course’s credit value. On content the statute provides that the course “must be Internet-based, customizable to each student, and include research-based assessments to assist students in determining educational and career options and goals,” and that the resulting plan “must inform students of high school graduation requirements, including a detailed explanation of the requirements for earning a high school diploma designation under s. 1003.4285 and the career and technical education pathway to earn a standard high school diploma under s. 1003.4282(10); the requirements for each scholarship in the Florida Bright Futures Scholarship Program; state university and Florida College System institution admission requirements; available opportunities to earn college credit in high school, including Advanced Placement courses; the International Baccalaureate Program; the Advanced International Certificate of Education Program; dual enrollment, including career dual enrollment; work-based learning opportunities, including internships and

preapprenticeship and apprenticeship programs; and career education courses.” The list in section 5.3 is a selection from that provision rather than the whole of it. The section governs promotion from the middle grades rather than high school graduation. It provides that the course “may be taught by any member of the instructional staff” and “may be implemented as a stand-alone course or integrated into another course or courses,” and requires the course to “teach each student how to access and update the plan,” meaning the student’s own education and career plan, and to encourage annual updates.

20. Utah State Board of Education, “R277-700. The Elementary and Secondary School General Core,” Utah Administrative Code, effective 7 April 2026. R277-700-5(2) provides that “[a] student in grades 7-8 shall complete the courses described in Subsection (3),” and R277-700-5(3)(i) requires “at least one course in each of the following in grades 7 or 8,” listing College and Career Awareness among them. The rule sets no credit value and is silent on grading and transcribing. R277-700-5(7) permits an LEA, “[u]pon parental or student request” and with parental consent, to substitute a required course with “a course, extracurricular activity, or experience that is ... similar to the course requirement” or “consistent with the student’s plan for college and career readiness,” and Subsection (8) requires every LEA to adopt a substitution policy with a parental appeal process. A separate rule, R277-916, defined the course for funding purposes and is being repealed; the requirement itself rests on R277-700-5. Accessed 7 September 2026. <https://schools.utah.gov/adminrules/R277-700>

21. Virginia Board of Education, “Regulations Establishing Standards for Accrediting Public Schools in Virginia,” 8 Va. Admin. Code § 20-132-90 and § 20-132-140(C)(2), effective 25 September 2024. Section 20-132-90 provides that “[e]ach middle school shall provide a course in career investigation in accordance with the provisions of 8VAC20-132-140,” and § 20-132-140(C)(2) that “students shall complete a career investigations course selected from the career and technical education state-approved list or a school division-provided alternative means of delivering the career investigations course content, provided that the alternative is equivalent in content and academic rigor.” Middle school students must also complete a career interest inventory and select a career pathway. Accessed 7 September 2026. <https://law.lis.virginia.gov/admincode/title8/agency20/chapter132/section140/>

22. Five arrangements requiring something short of a course, excluded from the count of six. West Virginia Board of Education, Policy 2510: Assuring the Quality of Education: Regulations for Education Programs, requires counties to “implement a comprehensive Career Exploration middle school experience” and states that the experience “may include but it is not limited to Career Technical Education (CTE) Foundational Courses, standalone Career Exploration Courses and mini courses ..., field trips, guest speakers, and career mentors,” and that “[c]areer exploration may be integrated throughout the middle school experience or taught as separate courses in grades 6, 7, and 8,” so a course is one permitted option among several, <https://wvde.us/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/24877-Policy-2510-Middle-School-Guidance-UPDATE.pdf>. North Dakota Century Code § 15.1-21-18 requires a career interest inventory in grades seven through ten and gives districts a choice between an individual consultative process and a nine-week course. Hawaii requires a Personal Transition Plan carrying half a credit recorded on the transcript, without prescribing how the plan is taught: Hawaii State Board of Education Policy 102-15, https://boe.hawaii.gov/wp-content/uploads/policy_102-15_20160621.pdf. Iowa, under House File 316 (2025), adds career planning and pathways to the subjects districts must offer and teach in grades

five through eight (see note 14) without requiring a student to complete a discrete course, and is classified with these arrangements rather than with the six. Nevada Administrative Code § 389.195(2) prescribes “a course of study in academic achievement, career exploration, and personal and social development ... for pupils in seventh or eighth grade,” but specifies no credit, no grading, and no completion requirement, <https://www.leg.state.nv.us/NAC/NAC-389.html>. All accessed 7 September 2026.

23. Curran McSwigan and Frank Avery, “What Five Countries Can Teach America About Apprenticeships,” *Third Way*, 30 October 2025. Third Way describes itself as “a national think tank and advocacy organization that champions moderate policy and political ideas” and, separately, describes its work as being “on the center left.” Apprenticeship expansion is a standing Third Way position. “In 2024, there were 680,000 Americans in registered apprenticeship programs which represents just 0.3% of the working-age population,” and “the share of working-age adults in apprenticeship programs was over five times higher in Canada, seven times higher in Germany, and 11 times higher in Switzerland.” The multiples are Third Way’s own calculation, apprentices divided by working-age population, with each country’s count taken from its own government’s published figures. The comparability caveat that follows is this paper’s; Third Way offers no such caveat. The United States figure counts only federally registered apprenticeships, a narrow regulatory category, while the German and Swiss figures capture mainstream upper-secondary vocational education, which is why the multiples are treated here as ceilings rather than point estimates.

24. Jason Cohen, Jennifer Causey, Brianna Randolph, Matthew Holsapple, and Doug Shapiro, *Some College, No Credential: A 2025 Snapshot for the Nation and the States*, sixth in the series, National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, June 2025. As of 31 July 2023 the report counts “nearly 43.1 million” adults with some college and no credential, of whom “37.6 million are working age adults under age 65.” The fifth report in the series, published June 2024, put the working-age count under 65 at 36.8 million as of 31 July 2022.

25. Dave Clayton, Nichole Torpey-Saboe, and Elaine W. Leigh, *The Power of Work-Based Learning*, Strada Education Foundation, 16 October 2023. The wage estimate comes from the U.S. Department of Education’s Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Survey, which tracked the graduating class of 2015–16, rather than from Strada’s own fieldwork. Strada’s wording: “participating in a paid internship as an undergraduate is associated with a predicted increase in annual wages of \$3,096 one year after graduation.” Bachelor’s holders who did work-based learning were 19 percentage points more likely than those who did not to say their education helped them reach their goals, and among recent graduates the gap was 39 points. Strada reports controlling for race and ethnicity, gender, field of study, and cost of living by state of residence; it lists no control for the institution attended, prior achievement, or family income. The study covers college students, not high schoolers.

26. Gallup, Walton Family Foundation, and Jobs for the Future, *Voices of Gen Z Study*, see note 1: “About half of students have never talked to a job recruiter (51%) or had a job or internship (47%).”

27. University of Nebraska–Lincoln, “Three free summer business programs offered for teens,” *Nebraska Today*, 12 February 2024, and University of Nebraska–Lincoln College of Business, “Nebraska Business Camps Give High School Students a Preview of College, Careers,” 29 July 2025. Eligibility and the scholarship come from the 2024

announcement: Discover Accounting for current juniors and seniors, Discover Actuarial Science for sophomores and juniors “with a 3.0 GPA or higher” who “have completed algebra II,” and DREAMBIG Academy for juniors who are first-generation, low-income, or eligible for free or reduced lunch, whose participants “qualify for the university’s Emerging Leaders Scholarship, worth \$8,000 over four years.” Those terms are as announced in 2024. The college’s 2025 materials describe Discover Accounting as open to rising and graduating seniors, allow a teacher recommendation in place of completed algebra II for Discover Actuarial Science, and describe a different DREAMBIG award without reference to the \$8,000 scholarship, so anyone acting on any of these terms should check with the college. The 2025 article is the source for the programs being residential and for the “nearly 100 high school students” who attended across the three; both articles describe the programs as free.

28. Paul A. O’Keefe, Carol S. Dweck, and Gregory M. Walton, “Implicit Theories of Interest: Finding Your Passion or Developing It?” *Psychological Science* 29, no. 10 (2018): 1653–64. The measured outcomes are interest ratings rather than observed behavior: across five studies a fixed theory of interest “was more likely to dampen interest in areas outside people’s existing interests,” and when a new interest became difficult to engage with, “interest flagged significantly more” for those induced to hold a fixed theory. Participants were university students and adults recruited through online panels, not high school students.

29. James E. Willett, *The Cliff at Commencement: The Case for Teaching the Transition to Work as a Required Course in American Colleges* (C2 Consulting, 2026), the companion paper in this series.

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