# 3 Tactics for Improving the Student Employment Challenge

Published 29 November 2023 - ID G00790577 - 10 min read

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Initiatives: Education Technology Optimization and Modernization

Higher education institutions face increasing pressure to prepare students for successful careers postgraduation. Higher education CIOs tasked with implementing technologies can take an orchestrating role in responding to the student employment challenge with our three tactics.

## Overview

### Key Findings

- Higher education institutions are at a crossroads between changing workforce demands and a shortened half-life of skills that students learn in prerequisite and compulsory courses. The curriculum may be outdated and might not reflect the current labor market.
- Employers have decreasing confidence in the work readiness of graduating students, causing the additional constraint of allocating time and financial resources to train them.
- While career service departments have existed for decades, expanding and investing in these resources to connect students with employers more quickly has become critical.

### Recommendations

Higher education CIOs and academic curriculum leaders responsible for technology optimization and modernization must work together to:

- Embed data and analytics into the decision-making process to inform a modern curriculum design that meets market demands and sets students on a projected positive career path.

- Assist campus leaders in selecting a credentialing technology that fits with their institutions' requirements by studying the vendor landscape and evaluating the frameworks and standards used to authorize, issue, validate and secure credentials digitally.
- Provide employment metrics to the career services team and to the students as they select majors and courses of study.

## Introduction

In the past two decades, higher education institutions have struggled to provide relevant courses, programs and services that adequately prepare students for the workforce. As an example, according to recent data, nearly 53% of U.S. college graduates are unemployed or underemployed. [1]

While it is critical that higher education institutions focus on increasing student enrollment and retention in order to maintain an effective business model, focus should increasingly be placed on the tail end of the student life cycle from graduation to employment. [2] This issue often creates a shared frustration that students have spent a considerable amount of time participating in the university experience, only to graduate with no realistic job prospects. [3] In a complex and demanding labor market, the value proposition of a traditional degree is being scrutinized more than ever before.

Among institutional concerns and student discouragement, there are bright spots. Institutions can differentiate themselves by creating career dashboards to improve relevant courses, and by building integrated vocational programs, such as automotive and hospitality programs, to tackle high dropout rates and facilitate a pipeline of workforce-ready students (see Case Study: Vocational Programs Bridging K-12 and Higher Education to Enhance Career Readiness). There is a growing urgency to empower students with the tools and services they need to create an environment in which they can be confident that their time and monetary investment will lead to appropriate employment.

Higher education CIOs, curriculum and career service leaders must work together to facilitate more valuable education pathways for traditional and nontraditional learners. This research entails best practices for:

- Implementing data and analytics (D&A) into the decision-making process to inform curriculum design

- Leveraging academic digital credentialing solutions to better signal career readiness to employers
- Launching career service tools to improve student understanding of the job market and improve student employment outcomes

# Analysis

## Implement Data and Analytics to Inform Curriculum Design

Higher education CIOs must work with institutional leaders to develop a data-driven approach that connects students to new and relevant courses that more accurately reflect the labor market. A long-standing concern is that institutional curricula are not keeping pace with student and workforce demands. This concern is now being compounded by the impact of automation, coupled with generative AI (GenAI) that will rapidly reshape organizations, prompting even faster updates to traditional higher education curricula. [4] It is becoming increasingly critical to develop an agile curriculum that better equips graduates with industry-specific knowledge and skills.

One way to combat this growing concern is by implementing data-driven insights that create an opportunity to target investment toward the development of courses that meet market demands and have a projected positive career path. Several institutions have either built or bought solutions that can help accomplish this desired outcome (see Case Study: Enhancing Student Outcomes Through Analytics and Job Insight Dashboards).

### Institutional Approach

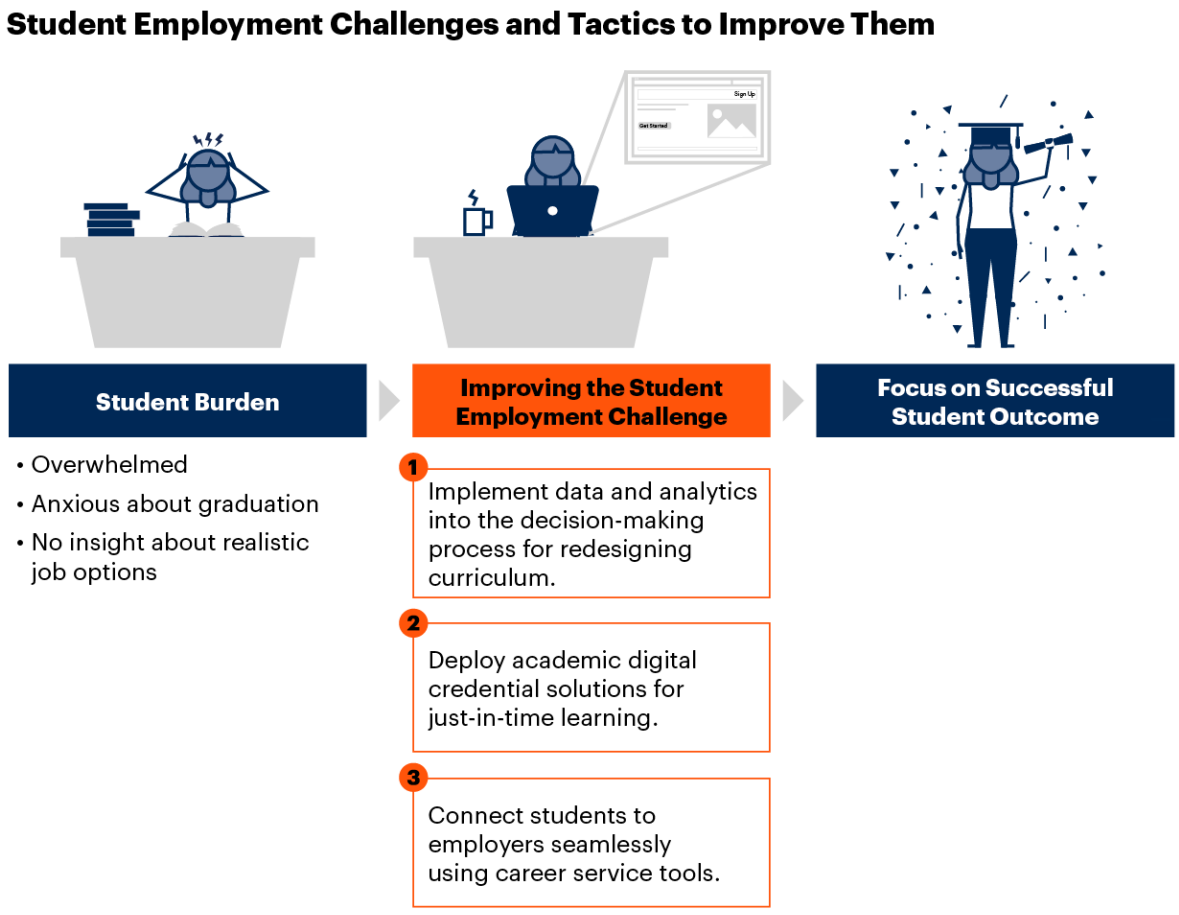
Victoria University's data insights team collaborated with IT leaders to create comprehensive dashboards linked to federally gathered data that offered in-depth information exposing gaps in the university's current course offerings. This was achieved by aligning the top searches for currently unavailable courses at VU, and linking that data to O*NET OnLine to inform the university of potential new course development.

The university granted students access to the dashboards to search particular fields of employment via detailed job titles in order to display projected employment growth or decline over the coming years. The students were also able to match those results with courses and units offered at VU. By combining these insights, the university was able to construct new courses to maximize market relevance and enhance employment outcomes for graduates.

### Vendor Approach

Vendors in the higher education technology market have also created career trends dashboards so students and institutional leaders can better understand relevant courses necessary for a successful starting career, and see the gaps in the institutional curriculum (see Figure 1). Anthology's Occupation Insight [5] gives students current labor market information and highlights links between their acquired skills, courses they have already taken at their institution and potential careers to explore. The D&A dashboard also provides students with highly in-demand job opportunities, open positions and earning potential by job function. Lightcast [6] (formerly Emsi Burning Glass) provides higher education leaders with a Program Demand Gap Analysis (PDGA) report that aligns course programs with regional employment, validates successful course programs, identifies at-risk programs, and offers new opportunities to expand curriculum and courses.

## Figure 1: Three Tactics for Improving the Student Employment Challenge




Source: Gartner
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## Leverage Academic Digital Credential Solutions

For higher education institutions looking to adapt the curriculum to maximize a learner's potential in the near term, academic digital credential solutions will be a critical component for addressing the student employment challenge. Academic digital credential solutions are the digitalization of diplomas, microcredentials, professional licensure, certifications, badges and informal credentials.

There are hundreds of academic digital credential solutions, and the market is crowded and diverse. [7] Given this congested market, higher education CIOs will need to work with academic leaders to get buy-in for a digital solution so that degrees, diplomas, certifications, badges and every other credential offered at the institution can be digitized. This digitalization helps in the portability of the credential so that it can be shared across multiple platforms, and it makes the credential verification process much easier and faster. Higher education institutions in Italy have pioneered an MIT-led experiment to design a system capable of guaranteeing portability and verifiability of university degrees, without any need to contact the issuing university, but providing the highest security. [8]

New credential programs can be identified by engaging local partnerships that support local and regional economic growth. For example, Florida International University in Miami, Florida, offers a hybrid learning hospitality and tourism operations microcredential badge that focuses on the fundamentals of restaurant and hotel and lodging operations. [9]

Elon University created the Elon Experiences Transcript (EET), which captures students' participation in several areas such as internships, leadership roles, community service, athletics and/or study abroad opportunities. This digitized transcript presents a holistic view of a student's time spent in university that can be meaningful to a potential employer. The digitized transcript is designed as an infographic presented chronologically along a four-year timeline. As students engage in experiential opportunities on and off campus, information about those experiences is collected for the student and verified by university faculty and staff. Graduates are then expected to share this digitized transcript with future employers. [10]

Higher education CIOs looking to deploy an academic digital credential solution must:

- Collaborate with faculty and curriculum leaders to leverage these solutions to be more responsive to the changing nature of the labor market, improve the needs of nontraditional learners and facilitate the student-to-employer pathway.

- Ensure the digital credential solution has embedded security features that prohibit forgery or modification to maintain the credibility of learner achievement.
- Enable institutional branding features that present university logos and colors where students can proudly post their completion of digital credentials on employment-focused platforms like LinkedIn.

## Launch Career Service Tools to Empower the Student Life Cycle

Career service teams are responsible for assisting all current students, alumni and employer clients in the development of career education, career identification and search, and the pursuit of employment opportunities. [11] At large institutions, it is increasingly difficult for every student to meet 1:1 with a member of the career services team. Deploying career-focused technology solutions on campus will alleviate some of the workload placed on the career services team and expand the network for students seeking career opportunities outside of their local or state region.

The alignment of curriculum and career services tools will help to smooth the transition from classroom to workforce. The higher education CIO, along with faculty, deans and department chairs, will analyze the federally gathered data that informs curriculum design and further determine the skills that students need to succeed in their first jobs. With the help of academic advising about relevant courses, as well as readily available career service tools, students are put in the best position possible for gainful employment.

Higher education CIOs and career service leaders must assess technologies that can support the student-to-employer pipeline. There is a vast array of career service tools within this market, including the following types:

**Traditional Career Service**:

- Ability to designate and select specific career interests to narrow down to desired jobs and internships
- A way for students to manage appointments with career advisors and coordinate campus interviews
- Administrative access to communicate upcoming career-related events to students
- Student and administrative direct access for connecting with employers
- Ways to connect students to alumni or mentors in their chosen fields

- Some analytics capability to help administrators assess outcomes
- Sample vendors:
  - Forage
  - Handshake
  - WayUp

**Alumni and Mentoring:**

- Facilitate the alumni or professional mentoring aspect of career preparation to help students gain clarity when they are contemplating a particular career
- Sample vendors:
  - AlumnIQ
  - GradLeaders
  - Graduway
  - PeopleGrove

**Student Employment Recruiting:**

- Focuses on recruiting, job recommendations and job matching, which are more transactional in nature
- Sample vendors:
  - Avenica
  - Jopwell
  - Lever
  - UConnect

**Skills and Skill Planning:**

- Identification of the skills in demand

- Confront competencies students may be lacking
- Emphasis on interview preparation and planning
- Sample vendors:
  - 12twenty
  - PSI Testing Programs: Am I Job Ready?

**Career Fair Management:**

- Manage the hosting of in-person and virtual career fairs
- Sample vendors:
  - Brazen
  - Easy Virtual Fair
  - JobsConnected

A common misconception is that once a career service tool, or a suite of tools is implemented, students will immediately rush to use it. For many students, using this type of software will be a culture change and something they are not used to. Gartner has had several conversations with higher education clients who have mentioned that half the battle is awareness and perception of the offering. Career service teams find that they must do a lot of education and external marketing to really get the program on the right track.

For career service tools to become an efficient and well-used part of your internal technology environment, make sure that they integrate with your other major systems, like the SIS, calendaring and credit-card-processing solutions (see Top 10 Strategic Technologies Impacting Higher Education in 2020).

## Evidence

[1] Stats and Facts About College Graduates Unemployment Rate (2023), What to Become.

[2] F. Dey and C. Cruzvergara, Evolution of Career Services in Higher Education, John Wiley & Sons.

[3] Recent, Upcoming College Graduates Share Frustrations of Finding Work, 26 Northeast Wisconsin.

[4] Generative AI Presents Challenges, Opportunities for Higher Education, Atlanta Business Chronicle.

[5] Put Them on Course for Career Success, Anthology.

[6] Program Demand Gap Analysis, Lightcast.

[7] Publish Pathways Using Credential Engine's New Pathway Builder and Attend Launch Webinar, Credential Engine.

[8] Digitizing the University Degree: How Blockchain Is Going to Redefine Bachelors, Bestr blog.

[9] Micro-Credentials Catalog, Florida International University.

[10] Visual Experiential Transcript, Elon University.

[11] National Association of Colleges and Employers.

## Acronym Key and Glossary Terms

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| Academic Digital Credential Solutions | Academic digital credentials are the digitalization of diplomas, microcredentials, professional licensure, certifications, badges and informal credentials. They indicate an individual's knowledge, specialized skills or qualifications via a secure framework to digitally capture and visually present achievements that are verifiable and portable. |

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