

MARCH 2026

 education**first**

Gates Foundation

Action Guide

High-Impact Practices

PUBLISHED BY
THE COMMISSION ON
PURPOSEFUL PATHWAYS

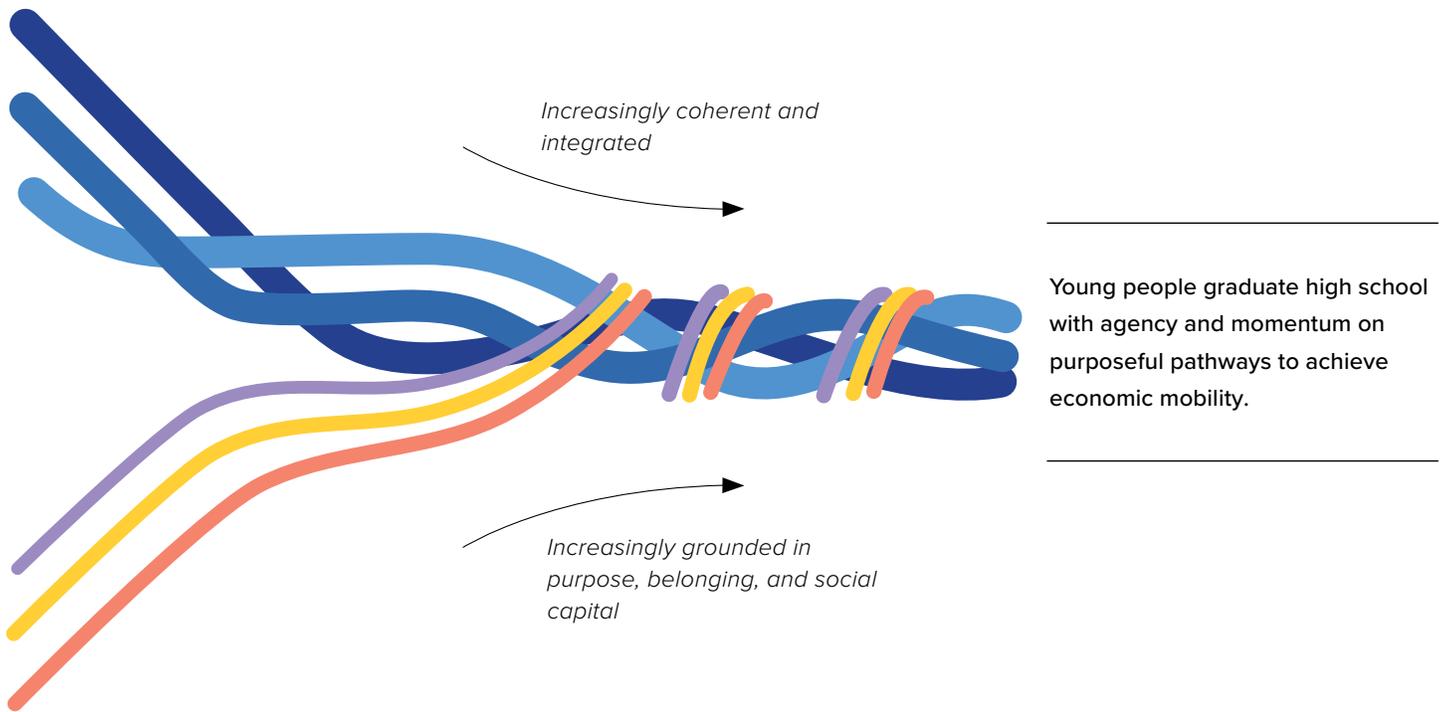


Resource overview

Since March 2025, the Commission on Purposeful Pathways—with support from the Gates Foundation and led by Education First—has brought together 21 national experts and three young adult commissioners to envision and advocate for a future where every young person is equipped not only for a job but also for a fulfilling life, meaningful career, and economic mobility.

The Commission’s full report, [*A Launchpad for Life: A Vision for Purposeful Pathways for All Students*](#), introduces a conceptual framework and a call to action for the field to implement what are defined as purposeful pathways.

Our vision: All students should experience high-quality advising, accelerated coursework, and career-connected learning that cultivate purpose, belonging, and social capital—ensuring that they graduate high school with agency and momentum on purposeful pathways toward economic mobility.



PROGRAMMATIC EXPERIENCES

- High-Quality Advising
- Accelerated Coursework Sequences
- Career-Connected Learning

CULTIVATION OF AGENCY

- Purpose
- Belonging
- Social Capital

Introduction to high-impact practices that support purposeful pathways

This action guide was developed to help regions and states realize the vision for purposeful pathways. The Commission created two additional resources: [Enabling Conditions Action Guide](#); and [Measurement Action Guide](#). Together, these resources provide tangible examples and multiple entry points for leaders to make progress on the recommendations introduced in *A Launchpad for Life*:

- Provide *all* students with purposeful pathways.
- Hardwire purpose, belonging, and social capital into every pathway.
- Move the goalposts beyond the high school diploma to economic mobility.
- Make student transitions a shared responsibility.

Undergirding each of these recommendations are some initial, actionable steps—as well as a commitment to changing how systems collaborate to ensure that pathways are responsive to what young people, employers, and their communities need.

The target audience for this resource are **members of pathmaking teams**, which include executive leaders, who champion the vision for purposeful pathways; and practitioners, who implement programs within cross-sector partnerships. This guide offers tangible examples that these actors can use as a starting point to apply the vision for purposeful pathways within their communities.

Pathmaking teams

are cross-sector partnerships, ideally backed by governance structures, that empower actors in K-12, higher education, workforce, and intermediary organizations to design, implement, assess, and scale purposeful pathways. Pathmaking teams should be composed of mid-level leaders—senior enough to direct teams and make decisions but close enough to the work that it remains a central part of their responsibilities and they are knowledgeable about its progress. They are championed by executive leaders who can build alignment and bring visibility to their work.

Pathways intermediaries

play a pivotal role as members of pathmaking teams by knitting K-12, postsecondary, and workforce systems together. Their work is an indispensable part of building capacity at the local and state levels, creating reporting and accountability infrastructure through data-sharing agreements, and helping structure internships and apprenticeship programs that connect students to employers. Intermediaries should be thought of as a *function* rather than a specific organization type. [Research has shown](#) that various *organization types*, from independent nonprofits to colleges, schools, or chambers of commerce, can all play this role well.



Photo by Allison Shelley/Complete College Photo Library

Eight high-impact practices

This guide introduces eight examples that illustrate the **integration of two or more components** of the conceptual framework. Communities can replicate or adapt these practices for their own local contexts.

While the field offers many additional examples, the eight highlighted here provide a solid starting point for communities implementing purposeful pathways. Likewise, the examples included with each practice are not intended to be an exhaustive representation of all the work in the field.

1. **Implementing curriculum models that integrate advising into the classroom**
2. **Connecting students to “near-peers” for mentorship and guidance**
3. **Combining different forms of accelerated coursework**
4. **Onboarding students and employers to ensure that career-connected learning cultivates social capital**
5. **Creating intentional opportunities for students to reflect on their purpose and vision for their careers**
6. **Embedding college advisors in the high school**
7. **Partnering with employers on project-based learning (PBL) experiences**
8. **Blending accelerated coursework and career-connected learning**

1

Implementing curriculum models that integrate advising into the classroom

This practice illustrates the effective integration of the following components of purposeful pathways:

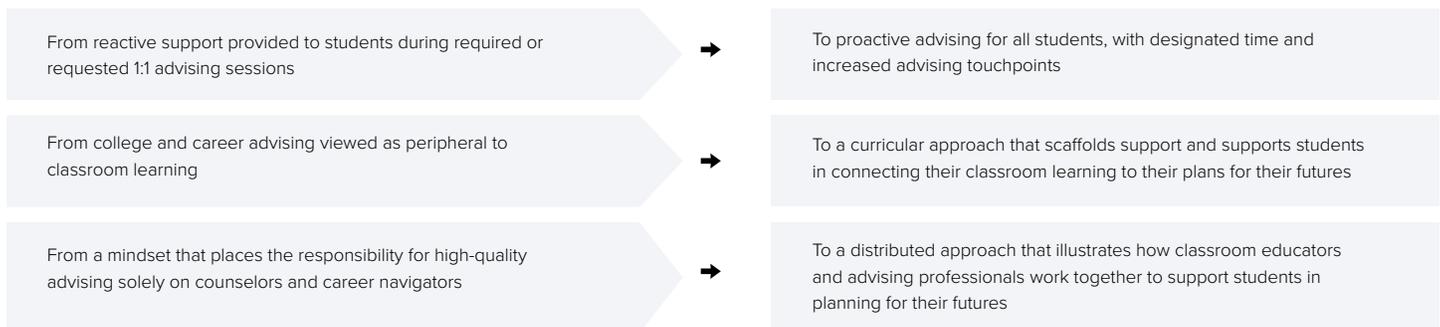
- High-Quality Advising
- Purpose
- Accelerated Coursework Sequences
- Belonging
- Career-Connected Learning
- Social Capital

Overview

Advising caseloads are unsustainable: The [national average](#) is one counselor supporting 376 students, and ratios are worse in under-resourced communities. Distributing responsibility for advising outside of the counselor's office can be one efficient remedy. Providing all students with

a designated class period and an advising curriculum gives them space, time, and support to explore all their options, connect with and articulate their motivations and goals, develop an individual career and academic plan (ICAP), and take actionable steps forward.

Shifts represented in this practice:



Enabling conditions that support this high-impact practice

- **Vision and plan:** Pathmaking teams should consider their shared vision for purposeful pathways when selecting a classroom advising model. Some communities may prefer to develop their own approach, whereas others may benefit from partnership with a national or regional intermediary that can build capacity and support the implementation of their own evidence-based curriculum.
- **Governance and staffing:** District leaders will have to make decisions based on staff capacity about whether existing classroom educators will teach the advisory period or whether outside facilitators or new staff may need to be hired. Curriculum-based professional learning can support classroom educators who teach an advising curriculum.
- **Coherent policies:** High schools may need to shift academic policies to support the implementation of a classroom advising model. District and school leaders can adjust the master schedule to carve out this designated time for all students.

Spotlight on promising models

OneGoal classrooms: The [OneGoal Program](#) is a three-year, teacher-led college and career guidance model that embeds a coaching class into the school day, starting in a student's junior year and continuing through the first year of postsecondary education. This intensive support focuses on building students' academic and social-emotional mindset and skills while providing support for navigating college enrollment, persistence, and career pathways.

Integrating classroom advising with accelerated coursework: In Massachusetts, [the integration of OneGoal's model into four Early College High Schools \(ECHS\)](#) provided more than 300 students with high-quality advising as they took on accelerated courses. OneGoal found that ECHS students were seeking "a sense of community and connection to take risks and navigate challenges," which the classroom-based model helps provide. The result: 73% of OneGoal+Early College students enrolled in an accredited postsecondary pathway, 12% higher than the state average.

Mississippi's Statewide College and Career Readiness (CCR) course: In 2022, [Mississippi implemented a CCR course as a high school graduation requirement](#). The curriculum is organized into comprehensive units covering college selection, career and internship preparation, financial literacy, and digital citizenship. A unique feature of the model is its focus on financial aid; seniors are required to complete the FAFSA or a mock version, contributing to Mississippi's consistent ranking among the top 10 states for FAFSA completion. By codifying these planning activities into the standard academic experience, the state ensures that every student—regardless of their external resources—has access to dedicated teacher support and a structured environment to finalize their postsecondary goals.

Additional resources

- [OneGoal Program](#) (OneGoal)
- [Building Advising Capacity Across Education and Workforce Systems](#) (Education Strategy Group)
- [College and Career Readiness](#) (Mississippi Department of Education)

2

Connecting students to “near-peers” for mentorship and guidance

Overview

The “near-peer” mentorship model has [proven effective](#) in improving both students’ sense of belonging and in their early postsecondary outcomes, including first-semester persistence and GPA. A [2020 study](#) of young adults participating in social capital development programs found that peer mentors were highly effective in expressing care, providing support, and building students’ awareness of opportunities.

This practice illustrates the effective integration of the following components of purposeful pathways:

- High-Quality Advising
- Accelerated Coursework Sequences
- Career-Connected Learning
- Purpose
- Belonging
- Social Capital

College Access: Research & Action (CARA) finds a [triple impact of peer-to-peer advising models](#): High school students benefit from increased advising support, college students who serve as peer mentors benefit from professional development and career exploration, and communities benefit from the creation of a diverse talent pipeline for advising and counseling.

Shifts represented in this practice:



Enabling conditions that support this high-impact practice

- **Vision and plan:** Strong partnerships between K-12 and higher education can support the implementation of a peer mentorship model. Alignment from senior leadership down to the program coordinators can ensure that the program is implemented with fidelity and care.
- **Data and accountability:** Data sharing across K-12 and higher education systems can enable the identification and recruitment of peer mentors who will return to their home communities to support high school students making their own postsecondary plans.
- **Funding:** Peer mentors should be paid for their time spent with mentees and for their participation in training and onboarding. Even so, this model can be cost-effective: The [CARA program costs](#), on average, \$285 per student per year for 12 months; the [CUNY Bridge program costs](#) about \$73 per student for 4 months.

Spotlight on promising models

New York City’s, College & Career Bridge for All: A partnership between the City University of New York (CUNY) and New York City Public Schools (NYCPS) has supported all students in the city since 2020. [The College & Career Bridge for All program](#) leverages [CARA’s full year College Bridge model](#) to connect all NYCPS seniors with a bridge coach—typically a CUNY-enrolled student—to provide guidance and support in navigating the transition after high school graduation. While [nationally](#) 10–40% of college-intending students experience summer melt, this program has reversed that trend, with 82% of intended enrollees matriculating into higher education. This program has increased college enrollment among first-generation, low-income students and provided a career on-ramp for bridge coaches, 73% of whom are pursuing a career in counseling or related fields. This model is replicable across different systems, too: CARA has supported 17 schools in Newark, NJ, in implementing a full year Bridge program.

Kentucky’s Future Forward program: This Teach For America Appalachia program builds students’ social capital by [pairing Kentucky high schoolers with near-peer coaches](#) from local colleges in their own communities to navigate college and career planning. Beginning as early as their sophomore year of college, near-peer coaches receive training on how to help high school students navigate the college application process and build skills such as time management.

COOP Careers: To prepare first-generation students for careers in tech, [COOP Careers](#) recruits program alumni to lead cohorts of recent, underemployed college graduates through a 200-hour professional development curriculum. The curriculum focuses on the “head” to build skills for tech careers; the “heart” to reflect on individual strengths, purpose, and network building; and the “hustle” to build job-hunting skills, develop graduates’ resumes, and prepare for interviews.

Additional resources

- [Report: Unlocking the Power of Peers](#) (CARA)
- [Report: The Triple Impact of Peer-to-Peer Postsecondary Advising Programs](#) (CARA)
- [Effective Strategies for Scaling Near-Peer Mentoring Programs](#) (Accelerate ED)
- [The Far Reach of Near Peers](#) (Christensen Institute)

3

Combining different forms of accelerated coursework

This practice illustrates the effective integration of the following components of purposeful pathways:

- High-Quality Advising
- Accelerated Coursework Sequences
- Career-Connected Learning
- Purpose
- Belonging
- Social Capital

Overview

Assumptions about rigor and quality shape perceptions and advice about different kinds of accelerated coursework. However, different accelerated course offerings have their own unique benefits—and [student and families'](#)

[perceptions are evolving](#). Advisors should guide students toward courses that align with their postsecondary plans, combining dual enrollment (DE), AP/IB, and high-quality Career and Technical Education (CTE) coursework.

Shifts represented in this practice:



Enabling conditions that support this high-impact practice

- **Vision and plan:** K-12 and higher education partners must align on a shared vision for how accelerated coursework benefits students and explore how expanding options like DE can support multiple institutions' strategic goals. This can help to uncover assumptions about different accelerated options and refocus messaging and advising on what works best to give students momentum toward a credential of value.
- **Data and accountability:** Partners should agree on common metrics to track access, participation, and outcomes in accelerated coursework. Disaggregated data can reveal barriers—for example, underrepresentation of CTE-concentrating students in DE or AP, uneven DE uptake across high schools, or gaps for demographic subgroups. Shared data equip teams to determine whether and how well accelerated coursework connects students to college, careers, and long-term mobility.
- **Coherent policies:** System leaders can work together to remove barriers to participation in accelerated coursework. This could include adjusting GPA or testing requirements, expanding transportation to regional colleges, or revising master schedules.

Spotlight on promising models

Promising combinations of accelerated coursework in Texas: [Community College Research Center's \(CCRC\) analysis](#) of coursetaking and outcomes data shows that roughly half of Texas students who took some DE or AP/IB, alone or in combination, enrolled and completed college degrees at much higher rates. Furthermore, by age 24, they earned between 6 and 20% more than students with a CTE focus in high school but no DE and between 26 and 40% more than students who took no accelerated coursework at all. Most notably, researchers found that students who combined DE with AP, IB, or CTE coursework had highest rates of credential completion and the strongest earnings trajectories, underscoring the value of combining multiple forms of accelerated coursework and experiences.

guidance in seven languages on its website. This information provides students, families, and advisors with a simple resource to compare and choose from a broader menu of accelerated courses that result in college-level credit. These pathways are currently being revised to include advanced CTE courses and work-based learning opportunities.

Chicago Public Schools' flexible pathways: [Chicago Public Schools \(CPS\) has developed clear credit articulations](#) to illustrate a range of accelerated coursework that will translate into progress toward a credential of value. To illustrate the equivalencies among AP, IB, Early College (or DE), and Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC) courses, CPS has published "programming pathways"

Leveraging DE as college and career on-ramp in Florida: To respond to student and family demand for DE options that go beyond general education coursework and are clearly aligned to careers, Miami-Dade County Public Schools (MDCPS) and Miami Dade College (MDC) launched [College Connect](#) to more visibly link high school CTE coursework with program-specific college pathways. Now, with clear articulation agreements and pathway maps, students can see how they can use the credit they're earning in high school as on-ramps to MDC associate degrees, eventual transfer to a bachelor's program, and career-technical credentials that lead directly to in-demand jobs in the region.

Additional resources

- [Promising Combinations of Dual Enrollment, AP/IB, and CTE: The College and Earnings Trajectories of Texas High School Students Who Take Accelerated Coursework](#) (CCRC)
- [Deep Insights: Redesigning Dual Enrollment as a Purposeful Pathway to College and Career Opportunity](#) (CCRC)
- [Module 10: Scaling and Improving Dual Enrollment](#) (Aspen Institute)
- [All Options on the Table: Parent Views on Postsecondary Education and Career Paths](#) (Britebound)

Onboarding students and employers to ensure that career-connected learning cultivates social capital

Overview

It's easy to imagine what a career-connected learning (CCL) experience looks like without adequate prep: A student enters the workplace unaware of important norms; the employer is ill-prepared for how to support a young person early in their career journey—the student winds up with mundane tasks and potentially fruitless interactions; the employer fails to benefit from the skill and talent the young person brings.

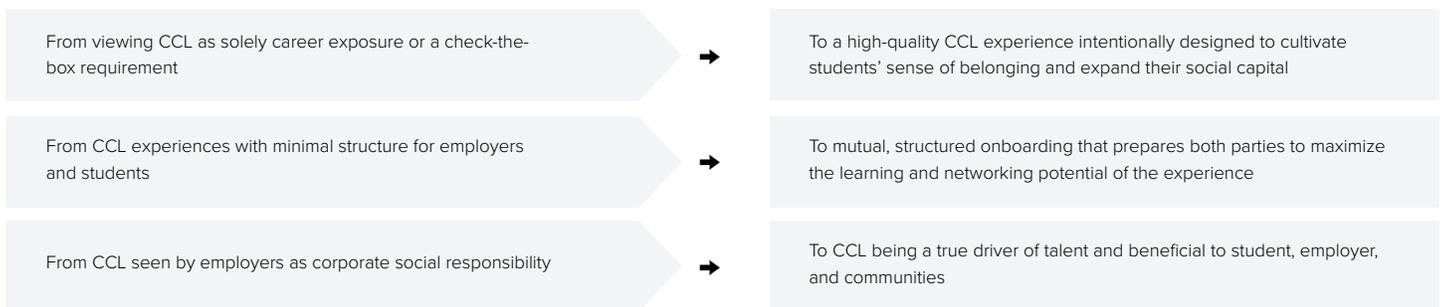
Onboarding processes help students both understand workplace expectations and prepare to effectively network and cultivate social capital.

This practice illustrates the effective integration of the following components of purposeful pathways:

- High-Quality Advising
- Accelerated Coursework Sequences
- Career-Connected Learning
- Purpose
- Belonging
- Social Capital

For employers, effective onboarding ensures they are equipped to provide a supportive and productive environment that offers meaningful career exploration rather than just simplistic tasks. Ultimately, a strong mutual onboarding process tees up a high-quality, reciprocal experience that results in student learning, skill development, and professional connection building—plus a return on investment for the employer in the form of new ideas and authentic work.

Shifts represented in this practice:



Enabling conditions that support this high-impact practice

- Vision and plan:** Sharing a vision for high-quality CCL as a win-win driver of talent and economic thriving in the region makes it easier to agree that onboarding processes are worth the time and effort. Mutual prep and onboarding should be explicitly included in strategic plans to maximize student outcomes and employer engagement.
- Governance and staffing:** Dedicated staff, potentially CCL coordinators or pathway intermediaries, are needed to manage the mutual onboarding process, ensuring quality control and clear communication between schools and employers.
- Coherent policies:** School and district policies must integrate CCL preparation into the student experience, potentially through required pre-orientation or curriculum that covers professional behavior and networking best practices.

Spotlight on promising models

Resources and training to prepare employers for CCL: ElevateEdAZ, a workforce intermediary in Phoenix, recognizes that employers and supervisors are critical mentors who connect classroom theory and real-world application. As outlined in their Employer Work-Based Learning guide, [ElevateEdAZ](#) encourages employers to offer structured mentor training that equips managers to go beyond just supervision. The onboarding resources emphasize how to support students' holistic growth, monitor progress through formal evaluations, and foster a caring, emotional connection that helps young people feel connected to the professional community.

Providing tools to build students' understanding of social capital: Students need help to develop social capital, and [relationship mapping](#) is a great first step. This activity helps young people more clearly identify the community connections who can help open doors. Basta uses [Seekr](#), an AI tool, to map first-generation students'

networks to understand their personal and professional connections as well as the level of seniority of their connections.

Learning about social capital in the classroom: In Nashville, LEAD Public Schools prepares students for the world of work with a "mini unit" on social capital embedded into their fourth-year seminar. This curricular approach helps students recognize that building intentional relationships and networks is essential for achieving their post-high school goals. The units culminate in live "career conversations" with industry partners and staff, where students practice their networking skills by leading Q&A sessions about educational and professional journeys. LEAD adapted the unit from a Scope and Sequence developed by Education Strategy Group as part of the [Cultivating Connections toolkit](#).

Additional resources

- [Students' hidden networks: Relationship mapping as a strategy to build asset-based pathways](#) (Christensen Institute)
- [Employer Work-Based Learning Guide](#) (ElevateEdAZ)
- [Work-Based Learning With Small Business](#) (Jobs for the Future)
- [First-gen students' social capital and networks—key infographics and trends](#) (Basta)
- [Cultivating Connections](#) (Education Strategy Group)

5 Creating intentional opportunities for students to reflect on their purpose and vision for their careers

This practice illustrates the effective integration of the following components of purposeful pathways:

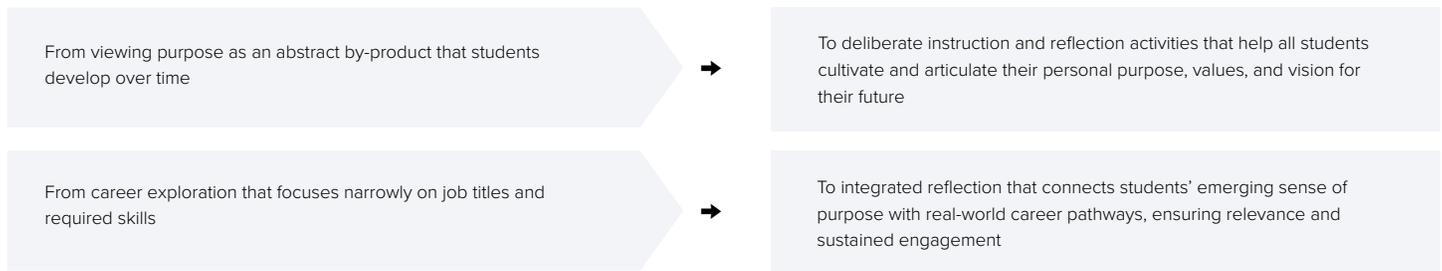
- High-Quality Advising
- Accelerated Coursework Sequences
- Career-Connected Learning
- Purpose
- Belonging
- Social Capital

Overview

Purpose is often thought of as a by-product of career awareness and exploration rather than a driving factor that should be maintained and cultivated. Treating purpose as an input, a motivational driver—rather than an outcome—can shift how students engage with their learning. As the examples below show, structured opportunities to reflect on purpose can

help students clarify what motivates them and find new relevance in their coursework. Integrating purpose-driven reflection into existing curriculum, such as advisory periods or accelerated coursework sequences, ensures that students regularly examine how their current activities align with their long-term vision.

Shifts represented in this practice:



Enabling conditions that support this high-impact practice

- Vision and plan:** Cross-sector partners must align on a shared vision to ensure that career-connected learning experiences are designed intentionally to cultivate students' sense of purpose over time through ongoing reflection and exploration.
- Data and accountability:** Community leaders should survey young people to understand where K-12, higher education, and workforce systems have been effective in cultivating students' sense of purpose. With this data, pathmaking teams can replicate what's working and be more intentional about infusing relevant reflection into the core programmatic experiences.

Spotlight on promising models

nXu's focus on ongoing reflection: The education nonprofit nXu has developed a curriculum that features evidence-based purpose development activities for middle- and high school classrooms. The curriculum can be woven into any part of the school day and is organized around six competencies framed as Learner, Reflector, Communicator, Collaborator, Contributor, and Critical Thinker. An [IRB-approved evaluation of the curriculum](#) found that the average student reported their sense of purpose had grown three-fold while they deepened key mindsets and strengthened skills linked to academic and career success.

GripTape's student-driven learning challenge: The [GripTape Challenge](#) was designed to shift high school students from being in a passive role to taking on the driver's seat to explore their passions and interests. Students participating in the challenge design their own 8–10 week projects, receive a modest project grant, and are supported by a Champion who provides encouragement, reflection, and

accountability, rather than direction. The evidence of the [Challenge's impact](#) is substantial: Participants consistently report increased confidence, clarity about their interests, improved self-esteem, and a stronger sense of purpose, and many go on to lead more self-directed learning or assume leadership roles. [External research](#) found that students' ability to progress toward their Challenge goals strengthened a sense of purpose.

Motivate Lab, The Navigator Toolkit: [The Navigator Toolkit](#) is an online platform that provides vetted resources specifically for postsecondary advisors to implement Mindset GPS practices—which focus on growth mindset (G), purpose and relevance (P), and sense of belonging (S)—into student programming. Created to address the demand for tools that boost student motivation in postsecondary planning, the toolkit links evidence-based, motivationally supportive strategies directly to advising practices.

Additional resources

- [GripTape Learning Challenge](#) (GripTape)
- [The Contribution Project](#) (Purpose Commons)
- [Introducing the Navigator Toolkit](#) (Motivate Lab)

6 Embedding college advisors in the high school

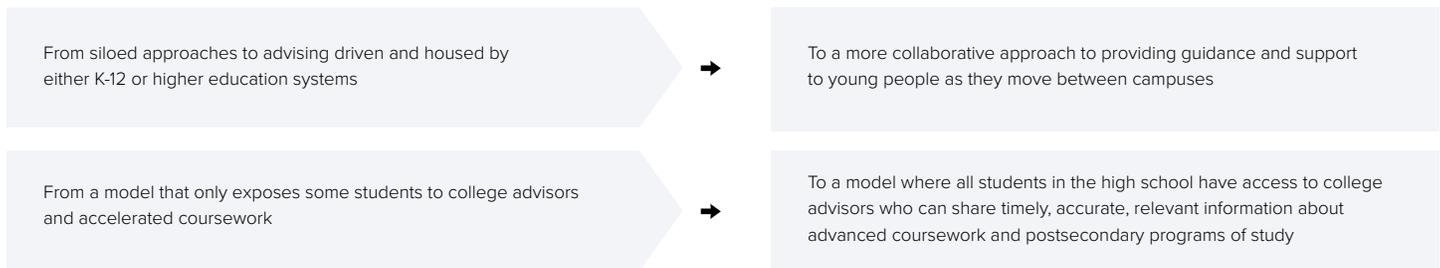
This practice illustrates the effective integration of the following components of purposeful pathways:

- High-Quality Advising
- Accelerated Coursework Sequences
- Career-Connected Learning
- Purpose
- Belonging
- Social Capital

Overview

Embedding college advisors in the high school can [increase student participation in dual enrollment \(DE\) courses and their likelihood to enroll and persist toward a college degree](#). This practice can also cultivate students' sense of belonging in postsecondary education by blurring the boundaries between high school and college.

Shifts represented in this practice:



Enabling conditions that support this high-impact practice

- Vision and plan:** Leadership within the K-12 and higher education systems should have a shared commitment to and definition of the outcomes they seek to deliver for students and the broader community via postsecondary attainment. For this practice to take root across both systems, it should be embedded in strategic plans and aligned to institutional goals, such as dual enrollment participation and postsecondary enrollment for the high school and conversion of dual enrollment students into full-time students for the college.
- Staffing and funding:** K-12 and higher education leaders must also consider how they will allocate staff across their teams to ensure that embedded advising is viable and cost effective. Some districts use state DE funding to cover shared advising staff salaries. Shared FTEs can bring cost efficiencies for partners and also deepen collaboration across institutions.

Spotlight on promising models

Lee College: In a suburb of Houston, Texas, [Lee College has developed strong partnerships](#) to serve students across three counties. Goose Creek Consolidated Independent School District in particular stands out with robust efforts to expand students' access to and participation in DE. Embedded advisors work alongside Goose Creek students to select dual credit courses that tightly align with students' intended programs of study, thus enabling students to make real progress toward credentials. This is made possible by institutional cost sharing: The high school and college both contribute half of the funding to cover each shared advisor's salary.

Palm Beach State College (PBSC): Florida's first public community college provides another example of the influence of this high-impact practice. Since 2019, PBSC has implemented an embedded advisor model—placing advisors in 17 local high schools. Achieving the Dream detailed this [effective integration](#) of advising and accelerated coursework sequences, citing a 35% increase in students participating in DE courses and a 21% increase in those students matriculating to community college after high school graduation.

Additional resources

- [DEEP Insights: Redesigning Dual Enrollment as a Purposeful Pathway to College and Career Opportunity](#) (CCRC)
- [Resources for Counselors & Home Education Families](#) (PBSC)
- [Belonging by Design for Dual Enrollment Students](#) (Accelerate ED)

Partnering with employers on project-based learning (PBL) experiences

This practice illustrates the effective integration of the following components of purposeful pathways:

- High-Quality Advising
- Accelerated Coursework Sequences
- Career-Connected Learning
- Purpose
- Belonging
- Social Capital

Overview

While internships or apprenticeships can provide highly impactful on-the-job training, connecting every student to a high-quality, relevant internship or apprenticeship is challenging, as supply cannot keep up with student demand. As an alternative, project-based learning (PBL) in the form of challenges or design sprints can provide more students with opportunities

while also building their career awareness, exposure, and career-ready skills. Time-bound project experiences can reduce the stakes for industry partners who may be new to hosting young workers; likewise these experiences can provide students with deep learning in a shorter time frame—a chance to “try on” a job and explore different industries and skills.

Shifts represented in this practice:



Enabling conditions that support this high-impact practice

- **Vision and plan:** When K-12, workforce, intermediary, and other community leaders hold a shared vision for career-connected learning, employer-led PBL serves as a lower-lift way to begin to deliver on that vision. A co-created “menu” of ways for employers to engage with young people can bring more employers into this work and build the roster of workplaces that are ready and willing to host students.
- **Governance and staffing:** Workforce development organizations or chambers of commerce are key partners in scaling these opportunities; they naturally have connections to a wide variety of employers, including the many small and midsize regional businesses that often go untapped. Including these partners in the regional pathmaking team can deepen employer and industry collaboration over time and ensure that opportunities provide mutual benefits for learners and employers.

Spotlight on promising models

U.S. Chamber Foundation EPIC initiative: The U.S. Chamber Foundation’s [Employer Provided Innovation Challenges \(EPIC\) initiative](#) is piloting this project-based approach across the country, connecting high school and college students to a national network of employers. While this initiative was not designed with the explicit cultivation of student purpose in mind, PBL allows students to leverage their durable skills and can be scaffolded with reflection on what aspects of the experience resonated with students. While the industry content itself may not be a fit, students may uncover a passion for problem-solving or collaborating with teams that they can continue to explore in other career-connected learning experiences. [In Illinois](#), industry partners like Amgen and Medline have utilized EPIC to source fresh, community-informed perspectives on complex business challenges such as diversifying clinical trials. This model provides employers with a streamlined, low-administrative-burden way to cultivate a diverse talent pipeline while gaining validating insights from a new generation of problem-solvers.

Nationally recognized CAPS programs: High schools in the [Center for Advanced Professional Studies \(CAPS\) Network](#) are recognized for their innovative approaches to immersing students into the world of work through “profession-based learning,” which builds on the concepts of project-based and problem-based learning and provides unique value for students, instructors, and business leaders. Programs are varied—but unified in a commitment to providing real-world experiences, aligning with local business and community needs, fueling students’ self-discovery, developing professional skills, and cultivating entrepreneurial mindsets. A [2025 CAPS alumni study](#) found that their graduates are entering the workforce with up to 50% higher wages than national peers; [alumni also reported](#) big jumps in confidence as well as in the “ability to positively respond to mistakes” and in “accessing professionals and adding them as social connections.”

Additional resources

- [Employer Provided Innovation Challenges](#) (U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation)
- [CAPS Network](#) (Center for Advanced Professional Studies)
- [Diving Into Profession-Based Learning](#) (Center for Advanced Professional Studies)

Blending accelerated coursework and career-connected learning

This practice illustrates the effective integration of the following components of purposeful pathways:

- High-Quality Advising
- Accelerated Coursework Sequences
- Career-Connected Learning
- Purpose
- Belonging
- Social Capital

Overview

When dual enrollment courses (DE) are integrated with career-connected learning (CCL), students can simultaneously “learn and earn”—earning both college credit and, ideally, wages. This integration requires detailed coordination between K-12, higher education, and workforce sectors (aligning course design, grading, and credit systems), but when it works,

schools, colleges, and employers build a shared, sustainable pipeline that benefits students and regional workforce needs. These blended experiences accelerate students toward a credential and a career and, ideally, include pay that alleviates financial barriers to participation.

Shift represented in this practice:

From opportunities that compete for students’ time and attention, forcing them to pick one over others



To integrated experiences that allow students to learn and earn simultaneously

Enabling conditions that support this high-impact practice

- **Funding:** Secure sustainable funding from various sources, including state/federal grants, employer contributions (for wages/admin), foundation support, and braided public funds (e.g., Perkins V, WIOA). Funding should cover tuition, books, transportation, and student wages for CCL.
- **Coherent policies:** Develop clear written policies that integrate DE academics with paid CCL. This includes articulation agreements, guidelines for job assignments and supervision, clear student performance expectations, and alignment with workforce needs and industry standards.

Spotlight on promising models

Expanding “learn-and-earn” pathways at Lorain County Community College (LCCC): In Ohio, [LCCC has pioneered an integrated “learn-and-earn” model](#) that connects DE students directly to high-demand technical fields, such as advanced manufacturing and automation. Through partnerships with local industry, students participate in paid apprenticeships while completing specialized college coursework, allowing many to earn an associate degree and a stackable industry credential simultaneously with their high school diploma. This model eliminates financial barriers by providing a debt-free pathway to high-paying regional careers, ensuring that the talent pipeline is both inclusive and responsive to the needs of the evolving workforce. LCCC’s high school partnerships team coordinates with faculty in these technical programs, high school principals, and counselors align dual enrollment coursework to high school requirements and help recruit interested students. The college has also partnered with local employers to develop a “Industry 4.0 Instructor Certification Program” to upskill high school CTE teachers to be able to teach the college-level dual enrollment coursework in robotics and automation.

Piloting Dual Enrollment Work-Based Courses (DE-WBC) in Tennessee: The [Tennessee Department of Education piloted a collaborative approach](#) in which DE students spent around 80% of their learning time in the classroom and 20% in an employer setting. Building on the pilot, the state is now scaling the DE-WBC model statewide to bridge the gap between academic credit and paid work experience, helping students gain career-readiness skills and wages alongside college credit. This approach aims to make accelerated coursework sequences both more relevant and financially accessible.

Integrating Youth Apprenticeship with DE in Wisconsin: [Gateway Technical College](#), the largest provider of DE in Wisconsin, has expanded “earn and learn” models by leveraging the [state-supported Youth Apprenticeship \(YA\) program](#). State grant dollars enable Gateway staff to build new employer partnerships and expand YA spots—about 300 students participate each year. Participating businesses anticipate and plan for youth apprentices as part of their ongoing talent pipeline, illustrating a shift from one-off YA placements to durable, employer-backed apprenticeship pathways. Gateway is exploring ways to award additional college credit for on-the-job learning through expanded prior learning assessment, further deepening the integration between academic credit and paid work experience.

Additional resources

- [A Road Map for Dual Enrollment Work-Based Courses](#) (Jobs for the Future)
- [Creating Pathways to College Degrees Through Apprenticeships](#) (New America)



Photo by Allison Shelley/Complete College Photo Library

Learn more about purposeful pathways

All high school students should have access to purposeful pathways—regardless of where they are getting started or where they want to go. Readers are encouraged to [explore the full Commission report and accompanying action guides](#) to learn more.

- ***A Launchpad for Life*** introduces the vision for purposeful pathways, the evidence behind the programmatic experiences, and the cultivation of agency. Includes galvanizing recommendations for K-12, higher education, workforce, and intermediary leaders to implement and scale purposeful pathways in their communities.
- ***Enabling Conditions Action Guide***: Explores five enabling conditions to support, sustain, and scale purposeful pathways at the local, regional, and state levels.
- ***Measurement Action Guide***: Introduces a measurement framework and key considerations for pathmaking teams to implement and continuously improve purposeful pathways.

- ***Pursuing Purpose: A Playbook for Meaningful Student Engagement***: This resource, produced by Big Picture Learning and young adult commissioners, equips school and system leaders with strategies to co-design with youth to ensure pathways are relevant and responsive to students' needs.

Acknowledgments

This action guide was developed on behalf of the Commission on Purposeful Pathways. The research, writing and production of this action guide were led by members of the [Education First](#) team: **Sarina Sheth Noone, Kelly Kovacic Duran, and Juan Jimenez.**