

Career Planning Tools

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Executive Summary

Student Connections regularly conducts research with students and academic experts to support the development of innovative and relevant solutions for postsecondary institutions and their students. Recently, we commissioned a survey of former college students regarding their journey through school and preparation for a successful future. We designed this survey in order to:

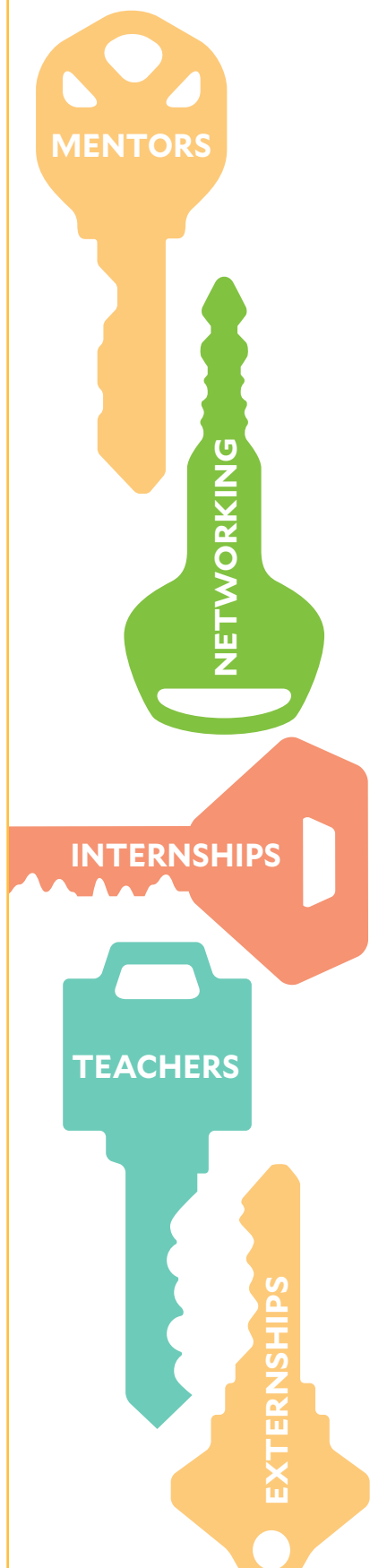
1. Determine what former students value in their future career when in college, versus what they value now.
2. Gauge what tools and extracurricular activities students took advantage of, and if such items led them to a successful career.
3. Understand diverse and evolving student perceptions and preferences about networking.
4. Determine how students feel about their overall outcome.

We analyzed overall results as well as various cross-tabulations, including, among others, student age, highest level of education, and time passed since last college course. The dataset includes 1,176 complete responses.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Student aspirations evolve during the classroom-to-career journey.
- Only a third (35 percent) identified “retirement” as a career goal while they were in college, roughly the same amount as those seeking a “good work-life balance” (33 percent). These two factors experienced the greatest increases in the transition from college to the workforce (12 and four percentage points, respectively).
- Results may indicate that these two factors are key determinants of whether a student will be happy or unhappy later in life. “Gaining life experiences” and “following my passions,” meanwhile, saw the largest decreases (eight and four percentage points, respectively) (page three).
- The two most important tools for a successful future are internships and mentors (71 percent and 70 percent of respondents said they were very or extremely useful, respectively). Yet just one in five students engages a professional mentor as a career-matching tool, compared to about one in three (29 percent) who participates in an internship (page four).



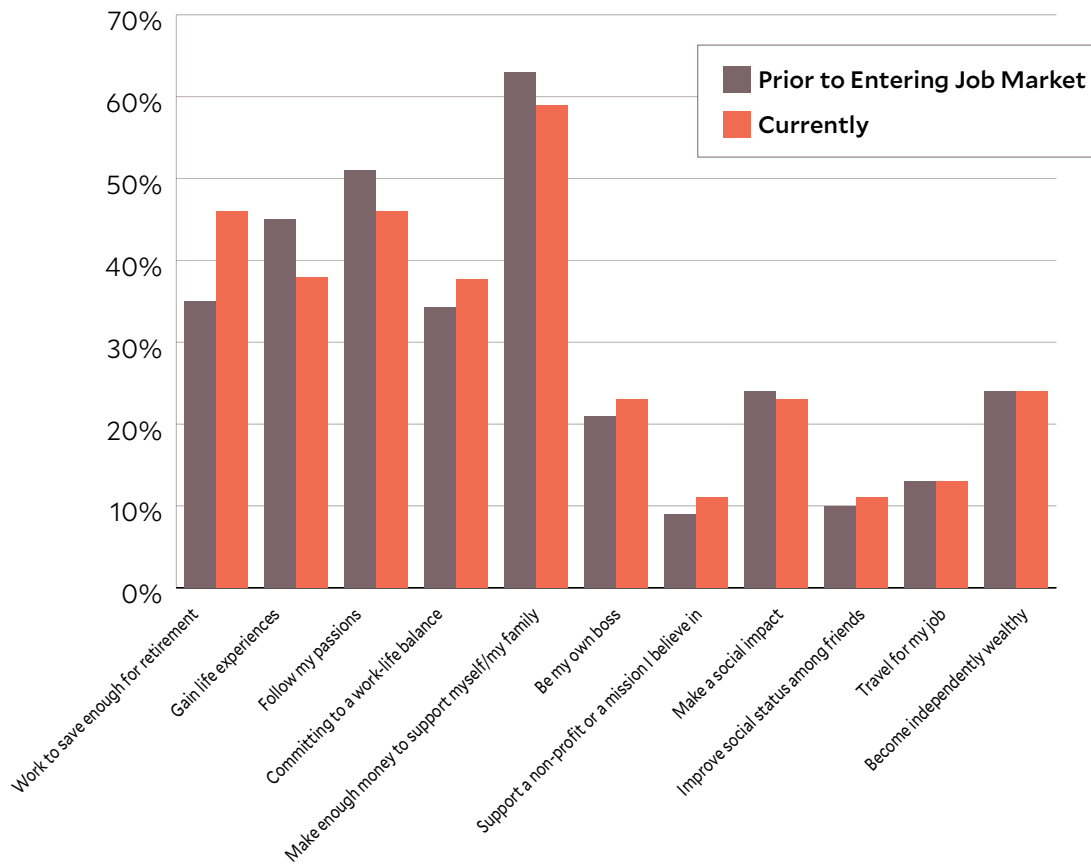


- Meanwhile, even though school-funded career-matching programs are the most commonly used tool among students (33 percent), only about half of students find them useful (see page four).
- Only about half of students (45 percent) said they had a mentor (of any kind) during school, who is most often a teacher or another faculty member, (page five). Part-time students were much less likely to have benefited from a mentor (page seven).
- Teachers and other faculty members are also the most frequently engaged networking source for students (46 percent utilized them). They were also most likely to be selected as the resource that was most helpful to students in planning their careers (page six).
- On average, students look to teachers earlier and more frequently than with any other networking resource. After faculty, students look to other avenues such as family, friends and school counselors (page seven).
- More than half of all respondents (58 percent) say the term “networking” has changed since they were in school, attributing the change to the rise of social media and other technology as a way to stay in close contact with a wider array of people.
- Overall, HBCU students are almost twice as successful in reaching their career goals than non-HBCU students (66 percent vs. 38 percent, page nine).
- Students at HBCUs are significantly more likely to utilize at least one career-building tool (97 percent vs. 78 percent). They are also significantly more likely to engage with their institution’s career-matching program, professional recruiters, and government career guides than non-HBCU students. HBCU students indicate that the jobs or activities they participated in while in school led them into significantly more career opportunities than non-HBCU students (see page eight).
- We observed a strong correlation between completion/level of degree earned and students who reported that an internship is the most important way to start a career (page 10).
- On the broadest scale, more than half (57 percent) of students overall said they would go back in time and do things differently if they could. This also trended with degree completion, with two-thirds of respondents (69 percent) who did not finish school sharing this sentiment (page 11).
- General happiness also correlates strongly with degree completion; 63 percent of respondents, as a whole, said they were somewhat or extremely happy vs. 52 percent of those who had not completed a degree (page 11).

Shifting Priorities

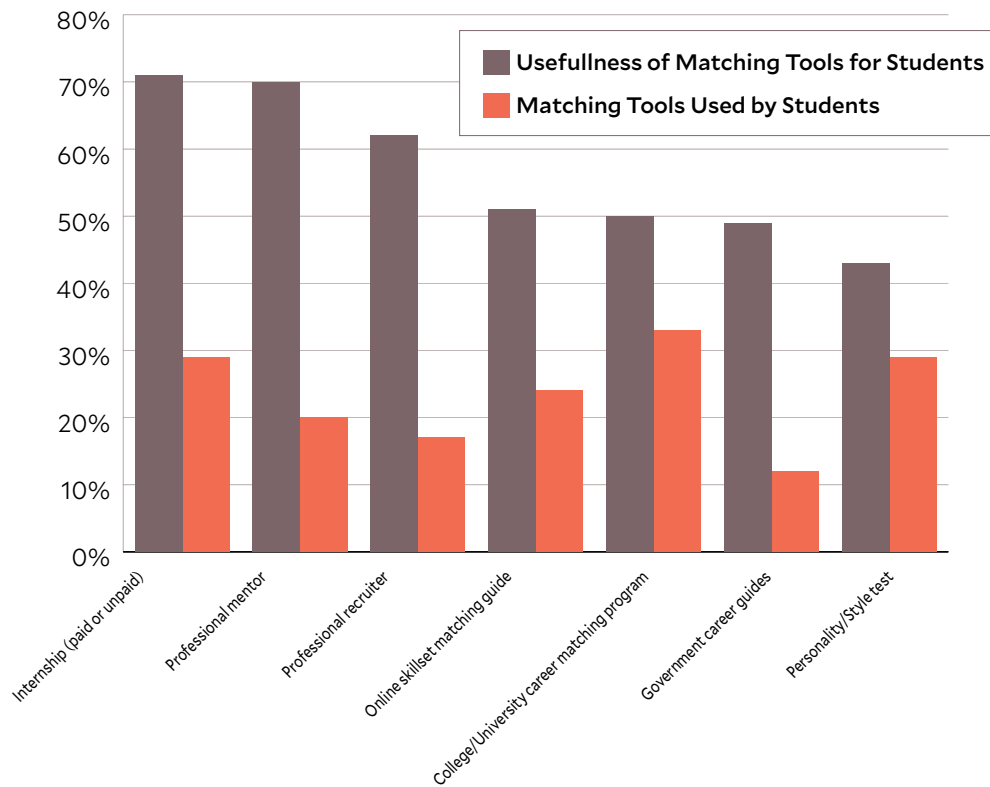
When students are in school, their primary focus is to find a financially lucrative career that will hold their interest for the long term. Results from this survey echo prior research showing that students who consciously search for a career that will allow them to be financially stable – while still achieving a work-life balance – will be happiest and most successful in the future.

Career Goals Before and After Entering the Workforce



Career-Matching Tools: Demand vs. Supply

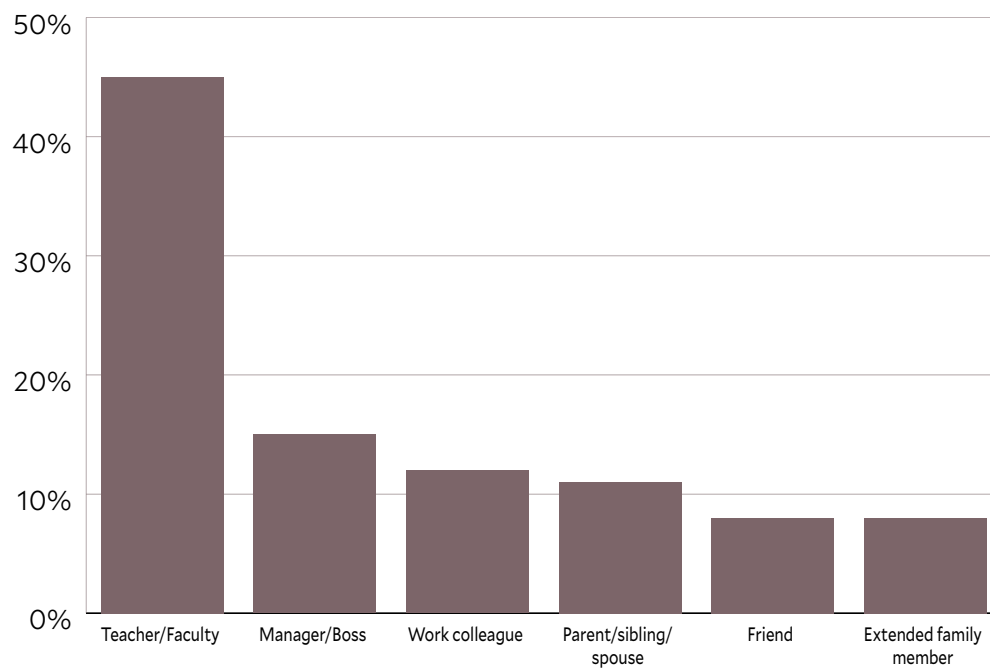
Students say that participating in some form of internship is the most useful tool in finding a career, along with working with a professional mentor. Nonetheless, just one in five students reported that they engaged a professional mentor as a career-matching tool, and only about one in three said they had participated in an internship. On the other hand, even though school-funded career-matching programs are the most commonly used tool, only about half of respondents found it useful.



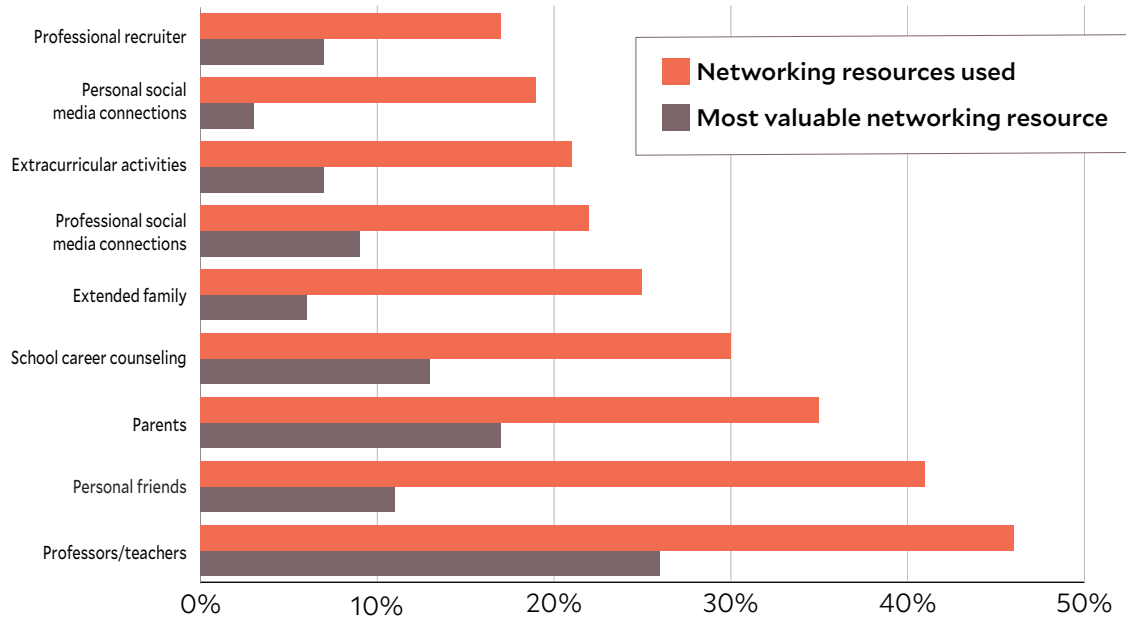
Mentoring and Networking

Only 45 percent of all respondents reported having a mentor (of any kind) who helped them with their career path. Students who use mentors most often look to faculty members, who are also the first resource students turn to for help expanding their professional networks.

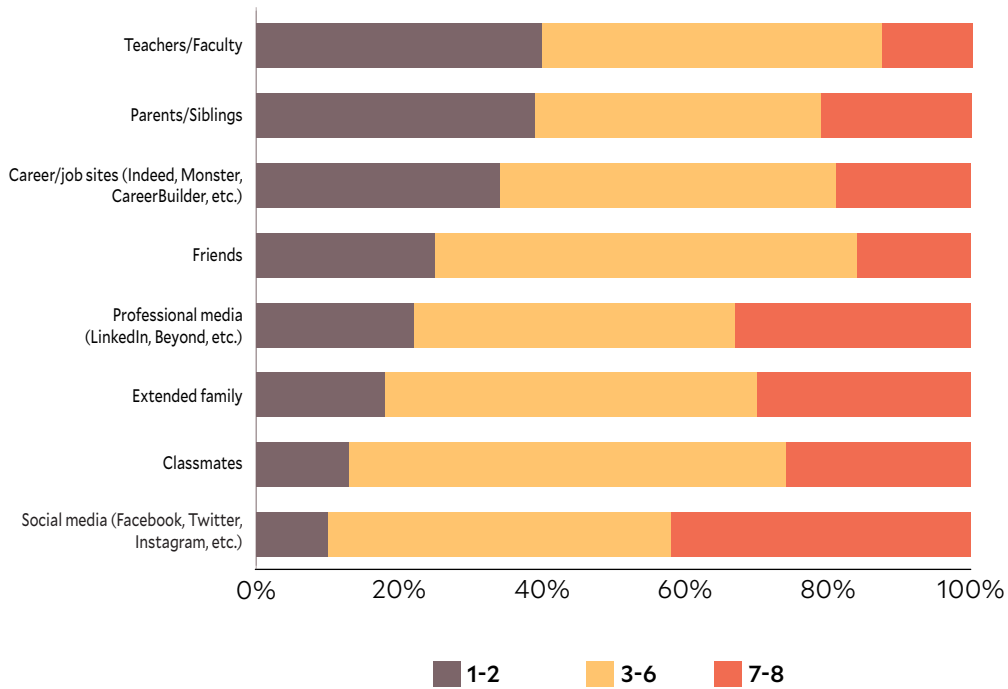
Primary Mentor Who Helped Plan Career Path



After beginning with school staff members, students will expand their search for networking resources to more nonprofessional avenues such as friends and family. Furthermore, 58 percent of students said the term “networking” has changed since their time in school, mainly because of the increase of social media and other ways of keeping in contact with people they may not stay connected to otherwise.

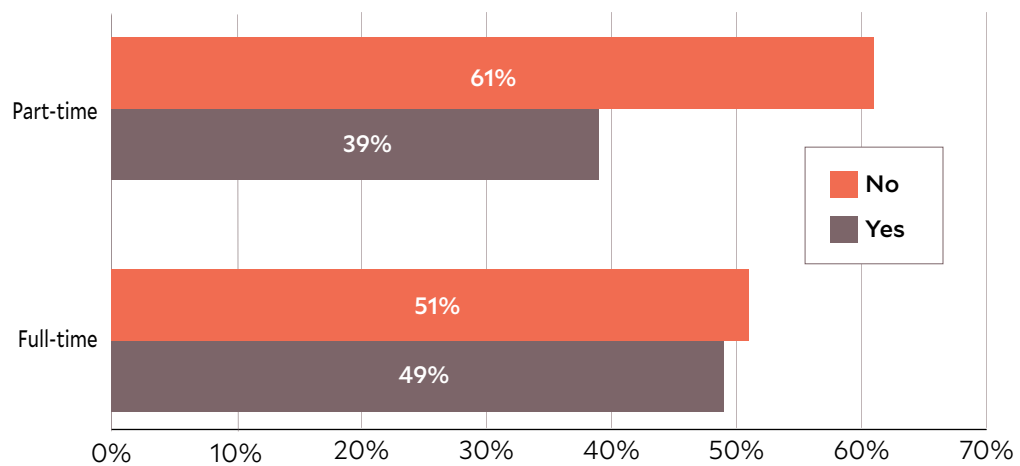


Students' Networking Journey — Ranking Chronological Order of Use



Part-time students were much less likely to have benefitted from a mentor:

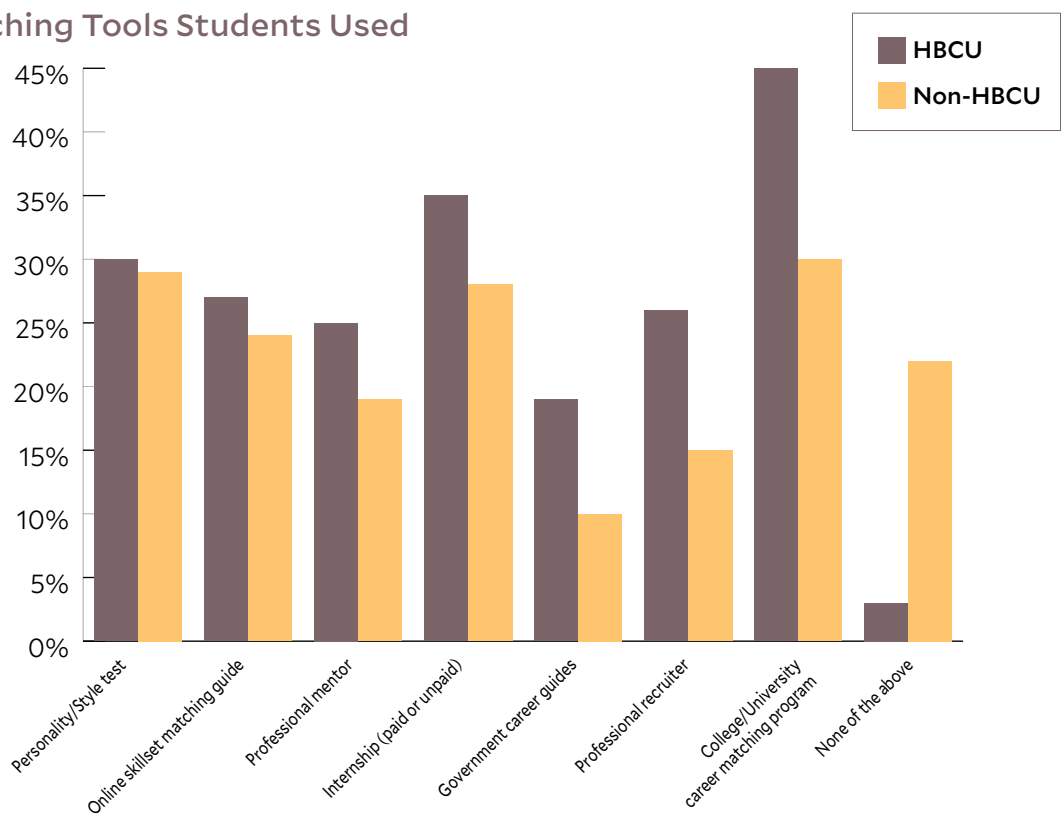
Did You Have a Mentor Who Helped You With Your Career Path?



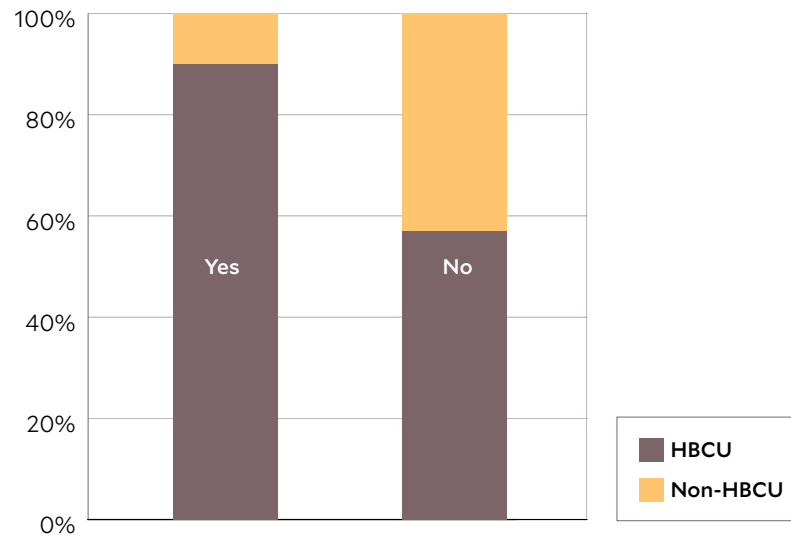
Results by Historically Black College or University (HBCU) Status

Students at HBCUs are much more likely to utilize at least one career-exploring tool than non-HBCU students. Moreover, they are significantly more likely to engage with their institution's career-matching program, professional recruiters, and government career guides. HBCU students also indicate that the jobs or activities they participated in while in school led them into significantly more career opportunities than non-HBCU students. On a broader spectrum, HBCU students say they are almost twice as successful in reaching their career goals than non-HBCU students.

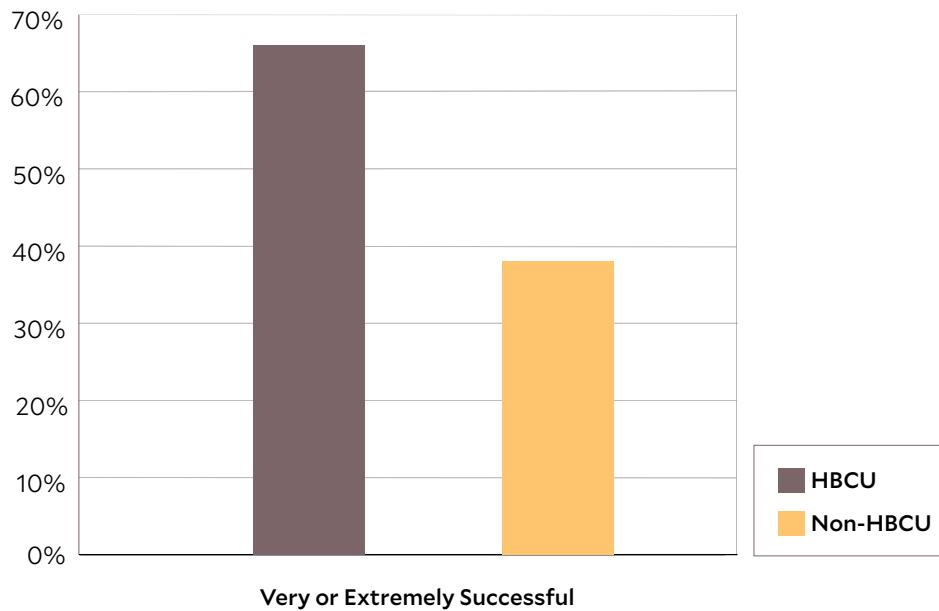
Matching Tools Students Used



Extracurricular Activities Leading to a Future Career



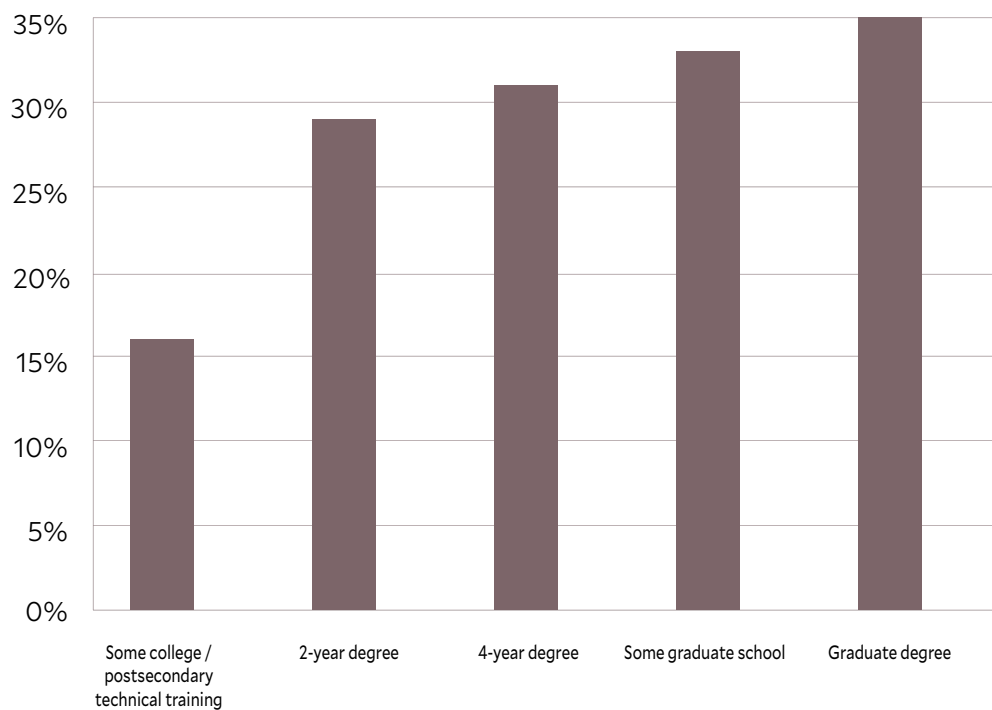
Success in Achieving Career Goals



Completion Factors

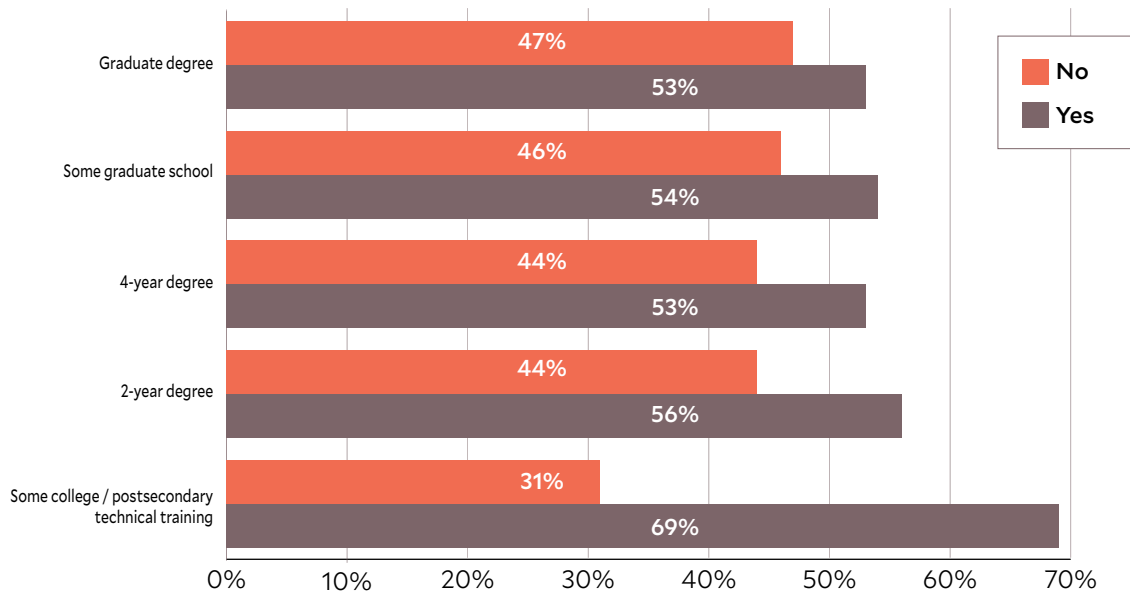
We found a high correlation between academic progression and the use of internships. Students with a graduate degree were most likely to believe that an internship is the most important way to start a career.

Internship/Externship Was Most Useful Resource



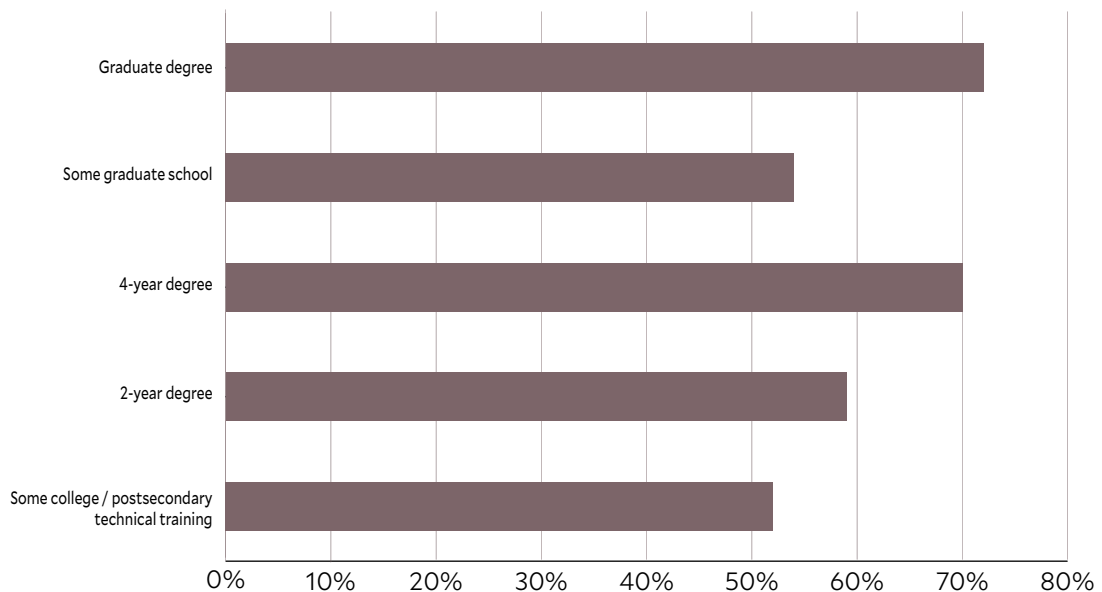
On a broader scale, more than two-thirds (69 percent) of respondents who did not finish school say they would go back and do things differently.

Do You Wish You Had Done Things Differently in Life?



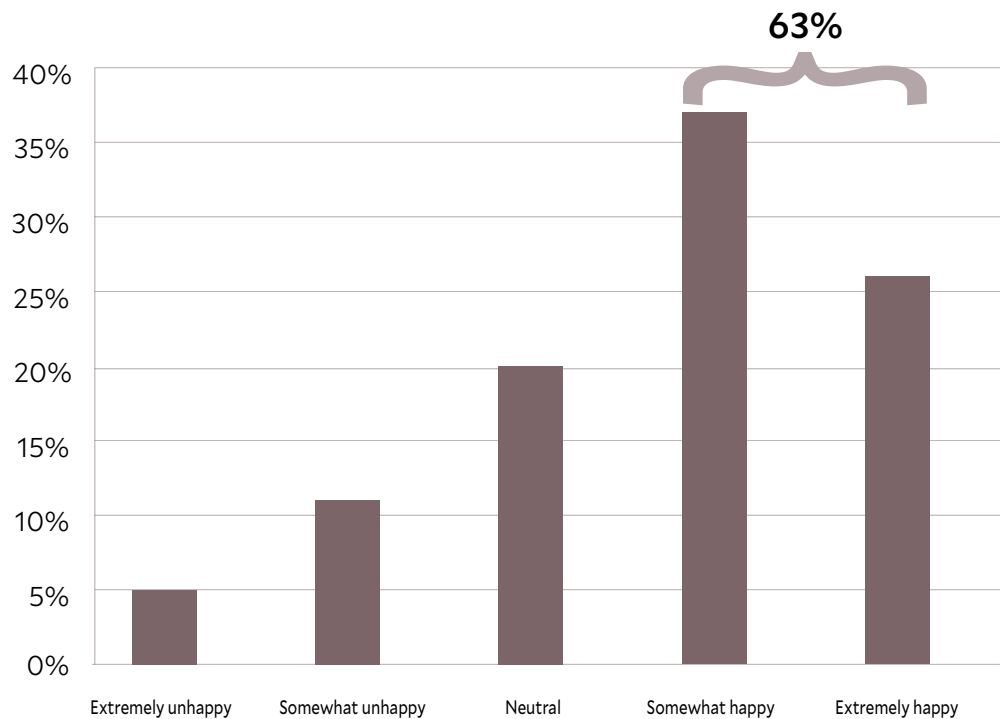
Overall happiness correlates with degree completion as well:

“Somewhat” or “Extremely” Happy With Current Situation



Overall Student Outlook and Success

Overall, students rarely have a direct path that they pursue in life. More than half (57 percent) of all respondents surveyed say they wish they could go back and do things differently. Those who would go back most often say they would either start taking classes sooner or not drop out of school and finish their degree in a relevant field. Nonetheless, most respondents report being happy with their current situation.



Conclusions

Institutions should consider these findings – and, to the extent possible, any feedback they can gather from their own unique campuses – to increase vigilance against any disparities between their own perspectives and those of their students. As we’ve shown in this survey, there may be some dissonance between theory and practice regarding tools intended to support the process of finding a successful career. For example, most students perceive great value in mentors and internships, while a minority reported using them. Surveying alumni may be an effective way for institutions to stay abreast of student outcomes and perceptions.

Students who do use mentors clearly look to teachers as a provider of this opportunity. Institutions should ensure that faculty are integrated into student success measures that transcend academic performance.

Institutions may find significant improvement opportunities in expanding mentorship opportunities to part-time students, who report far less access to this resource. In general, regardless of who is mentoring students, expanding mentorship opportunities for students is likely to increase their chances of connecting their college experience with a rewarding career.

HBCU students were more likely to avail themselves of career-building resources. At the same time, they were more likely to say that jobs, internships, research programs or other extracurricular activities had led them to a future career. Overall, they were nearly twice as likely to report success in achieving career goals. A better understanding of how HBCUs are motivating their students to prepare themselves for success after graduation could help inform additional best practices in supporting student retention, completion and postgraduate success.



Contrary to what we observed with some career-matching tools, there was a strong positive correlation for networking tools with respect to what students tend to use and what they most value. By a substantial margin, faculty are both the most commonly used networking resource and the one students find most valuable. Moreover, students are most likely to turn to faculty early in their networking efforts. Institutions that are not already marshalling faculty in this manner should begin to do so, and those that are should look for opportunities to further capitalize on this opportunity for their students.

Because students who had completed degrees (especially advanced degrees) were more likely to report that internships/externships were a useful resource, institutions should support and encourage all students in the pursuit of such opportunities.

While the majority of the students we surveyed (63 percent) reported being happy, more than half (57 percent) also indicated they would take the opportunity to change some of their decisions. As might be expected, a general sense of happiness and an inclination to undo past decisions correlate with college completion. Those who completed a degree were more likely to be happy today, and those who did not complete a degree were most likely to wish they had done things differently in life.

Although it is unlikely that any institution needs another reason to encourage student retention and completion, these results are a clear reminder that college is a critical gateway in the lives of students in all walks of life. Those who transition through it successfully unlock a lifetime of opportunities. In turn, institutions who dedicate responsive, relevant resources to student success, not only during but after enrollment, are investing in both their students and the value proposition of higher education itself. ©





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Student Connections, a Strada Education Network company, is a nonprofit corporation passionate about helping students overcome the barriers that can get in the way of attending college, completing their programs of study and achieving success while in school and after graduation.

