



Fostering Future-Focused Graduates:

The Workforce Gateway Internship Model

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Executive Summary

Each year, New York City sees high school seniors graduate who are thoughtful, resilient, and ready to shape their own futures. It is our collective responsibility to ensure that they are well prepared to succeed in today's complex and rapidly evolving world. New York State recently adopted a 'Portrait of a Graduate', a new framework that redefines proficiency and changes graduation requirements¹. One of the six key attributes is being a *Reflective and Future-Focused* graduate who understands themselves, sets meaningful goals, builds supportive relationships, and makes choices that promote their well-being. This framework encourages schools to create opportunities for students to develop these capacities not only through coursework but also through real-world experiences that connect to their interests and goals.

Young people expect their schools to focus on their futures. They are working hard in school and still wondering what comes next. In the recent report, the Commission on Purposeful Pathways provided sobering statistics – while 78% of Gen Z students say it is important to determine career plans before graduation, only 13% feel prepared to do so². Families share these concerns – in a Carnegie / Gallup poll, 45% of parents wish more postsecondary options were available to their children³. In New York City, despite steadily increasing graduation rates to 83%, between 30-40% of graduates leave high school without immediately enrolling in any college or career training program⁴. In 2023, only 56% Black students and 53% of Latino students enrolled in college right after high school, which demonstrates a stark need to address equity of access to postsecondary options⁵.

This paper introduces the Workforce Gateway Internship (WGI), developed by Shared Lane, as a practical, proven way to help students develop career plans that are evidence of Reflective and Future Focused graduates. WGI fills a gap that many students and counselors notice: in most schools, postsecondary advising focuses on college, so nondegree and career training options are often not as visible. WGI is a model in which high school seniors join real-world training at workforce provider sites, build career and technical skills, earn microcredentials, and complete capstone projects. The experience strengthens students' ability to be future-focused by helping them articulate their skills, reflect on their growth, and make informed decisions about their next steps.



The Context

Even as more policies support career-connected learning, most schools still define postsecondary success as college enrollment. Nondegree pathways are often referred to as ‘alternatives’, even though they can lead to jobs with family-sustaining wages and career pathways. Industry-recognized certifications remain largely confined to CTE and Future Ready NYC tracks, making them out of reach for most students. At the same time, the growing number of credentials and training programs can be difficult for students and families to navigate. Counselors need tools, partnerships, and labor market knowledge to offer students nuanced and personalized advising on nondegree options. Meanwhile, for training providers, the task of recruiting learners is daunting, given the number of high schools, and they lament the lack of a steady youth pipeline.

These challenges reveal a broader disconnect between how schools traditionally define readiness and the realities students face when making postsecondary plans. As schools rethink what it means for students to graduate prepared for the future, they need frameworks that value multiple pathways and help students build the self-awareness and decision-making skills to navigate them.

“Making coherent pathways the norm for all students... requires very human, adaptive work to build student agency and cultivate real relationships across sectors.”

— Paul Herdman, Commission on Purposeful Pathways, 2026

The Portrait of a Graduate framework gives schools a clear mandate to rethink what counts as student success and to create the conditions that move learning beyond traditional school walls into immersive, real-world environments. Its Reflective and Future Focused component names the capacities students need to make good postsecondary decisions: genuine self-knowledge, the ability to set authentic goals, the relationships that support their journey, and the judgment to choose a path grounded in their own circumstances. Developing these abilities requires direct experience — encounters with real careers, real workplaces, and real professionals who can show students what different futures actually feel like.



The Gaps WGI Addresses

WGI was designed to answer three persistent questions: **Students** want to understand what workforce training actually looks like. They need exposure and a low-risk way to explore a career pathway and build their clarity and confidence. **Counselors** ask how to connect students to the right career pathway. They need reliable, firsthand knowledge of workforce programs, not just lists of providers, to offer nuanced advice to students and families. **Workforce training providers** need a reliable way to build a pipeline from high schools. They need young adult applicants who are prepared for training and clear on their pathway.



When college is treated as the only viable path, all three go unanswered: students cannot make informed choices, counselors cannot give complete guidance, and providers cannot reach the students who would benefit most. WGI closes these gaps — not as a CTE program housed in a single school, but as a cross-sector model that links multiple schools, providers, and systems. Critically, it reaches the students most often overlooked by existing career-connected programming: those who have had few opportunities to access work-based learning. WGI moves beyond career exposure to authentic participation, allowing students to experience professional learning environments firsthand while reflecting on what fits their interests, strengths, and goals.

“I saw first-hand the power of workforce partnerships in NYC. We’ve been trying to build alternative pathways for years—and WGI helped us bring that vision to life.”

— Mr. B, High School Counselor, NYC

Unique Design Elements

How WGI Works

WGI is a micro training program for NYC high school seniors, embedded in the school day and anchored in the real-world environments of workforce training providers — community-based organizations, community colleges, and tuition-free bootcamps and training programs — across fields including healthcare, technology, construction and building trades, green energy, early childhood teaching, culinary arts, etc. While WGI is micro-training at a workforce provider site, it is termed an ‘internship’ because students noted in their feedback that this helps them recognize the program’s connection to careers. WGI is defined by several distinctive design elements that distinguish it from other career and technical education programs:



Interest-driven matching. Students are matched to their first- or second-choice provider site based on their career interests, ensuring the experience is personally relevant from day one.



On-site, immersive training. Students train on-site at the provider’s facility, taught by workforce instructors — alongside adult learners in a real-world professional training environment. Shared Lane supports each workforce provider in developing a curriculum that includes student onboarding, reflection, and hands-on learning, and that infuses youth development principles. Some providers center their training on industry-recognized credentials, while others offer interactive engagement with a range of occupations within a sector.



Intensive dosage in a short window. The experience is concentrated — approximately six full days of all-day, immersive training — giving students sustained, deep exposure rather than a surface-level overview, with a direct lens on a postsecondary training experience. It is supplemented with in-person and online professional development modules.



Microcredentials and career exposure. Depending on the provider, students can earn an industry-recognized credential, such as Google AI Essentials, DOT Workzone Flagger, CPR, or SafeServe certification. In addition to earning a micro-credential, learners gain broad exposure to careers in the field by meeting program staff and alumni, and participating in field trips to employers.



Reflection and capstone. Ongoing reflection is built into the program guidelines. Students complete a pre-survey and weekly reflective check-ins throughout the experience. A capstone project at the end requires them to articulate what they have learned about themselves and their postsecondary direction. Through the capstone project, students reflect on what they have learned about themselves, identify the skills and strengths they have developed, and take greater ownership of their future plans and next steps.

Who WGI Serves

WGI focuses on a particular group of students: 12th graders who are set to graduate but have not yet decided on their next steps. Many of these students have not had much exposure to workforce training, apprenticeships, or direct-to-career options. They need real-world experience to help them make an informed decision about their future.

These students face real barriers. Many feel pressure to pursue college even when they are uncertain or prefer a direct-to-work path. Financial constraints often require them to contribute to household income soon after graduation. First-generation college students frequently lack family knowledge of non-college options. Some face undocumented status that limits access to financial aid or certain training programs. And many carry quiet anxiety about the unknown – what workforce training looks like, who participates, and how to get in.

WGI meets these students where they are. The micro-training format offers a low-risk trial run – a chance to test-drive a career pathway without a long-term commitment. Students gain hands-on technical skills, professional development, and exposure to peers, alumni, and instructors who help shape their next steps. They leave with concrete direction and a far clearer sense of how to apply, and whether workforce training is a good fit.

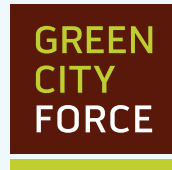
WGI serves the workforce training ecosystem, including a range of sector and provider types: CBOs, bootcamps, community colleges, and tuition-free workforce training programs. WGI providers include:



**BUILDING
SKILLS NY**



**CYPRESS
HILLS**
LOCAL
DEVELOPMENT
CORPORATION



Kennedy
Children's Center

Goddard Riverside
INVESTING IN PEOPLE. STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY.



**THE MARCY
LAB SCHOOL**



PER SCHOLAS



**Rebuilding
Together.**



SOLARone
NYC ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION NONPROFIT

Shared Lane is Building the Pipeline

WGI 2026 Impact Data

DEMOGRAPHICS WGI is designed for students who are most often disengaged from the traditional college and career planning process. In 2026, we served:

34% Black

51% Latino

68% Male

27% Female

49% Speak a language other than English at home

89% of families receive public benefits

65% First internship or work-based learning experience

ENGAGEMENT Over the last 3 years, WGI has grown from a **60-student pilot to serve 125 students**. In 2026:

94% Completion rate

86% Net Promoter score

94% HS counselors visited their students at training sites

77% Families attended an orientation to learn about workforce training programs

68% Earned industry-recognized credentials

POSTSECONDARY GOALS WGI leads to more purposeful planning

Students with clear plans increased from **28% → 54%**

Students unclear about their plans dropped from **33% → 3%**

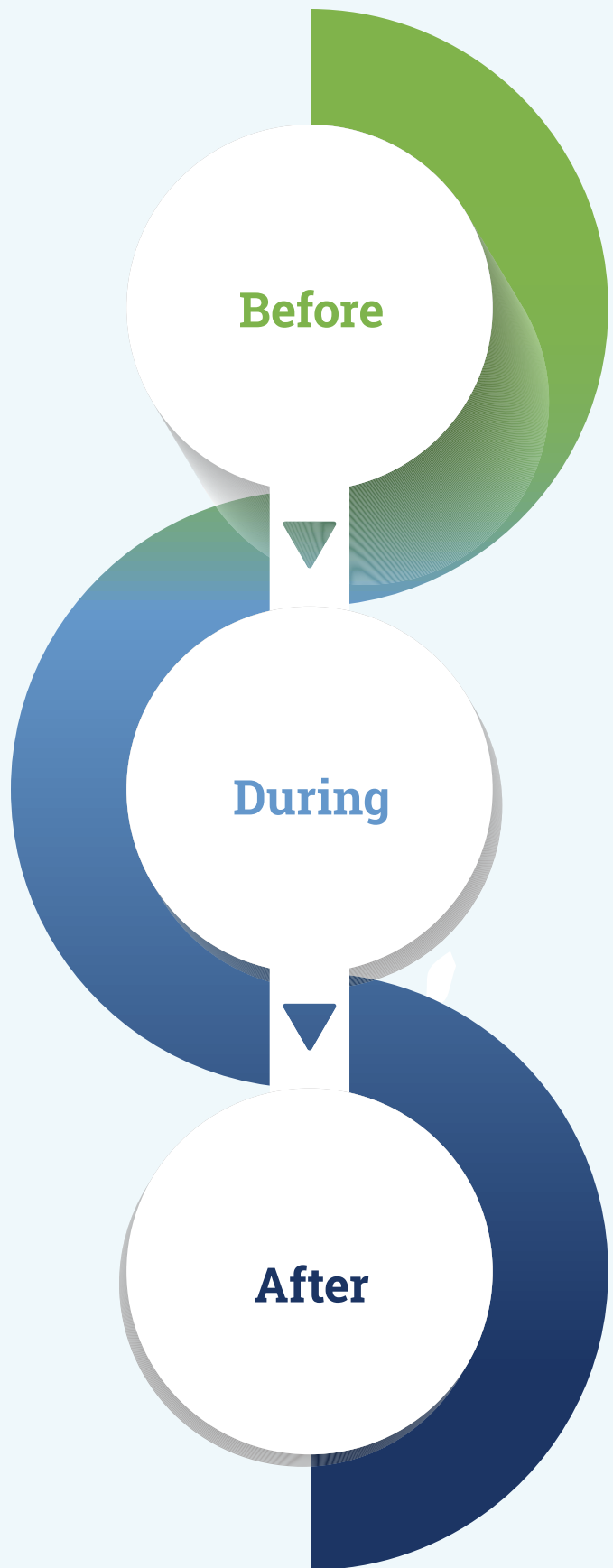
87% of students are considering applying to a workforce training program

WGI follows a Clear Learning Arc:

Students complete pre-work modules on career exploration and professional readiness, attend 'Demo Day' — a career fair where they can interact with workforce training providers in a hands-on way. They are recommended by their school counselors and apply via a short form that asks about their post-high-school plans and career interests. Students attend an in-person orientation to set goals and practice professional behaviors. Families participate in a remote orientation to learn about workforce training and industry credentials.

Students participate in 30 hours of training at a provider site, including technical training, career and professional development, and an admissions workshop. During the program, students complete weekly reflective check-ins, build career readiness and technical skills, earn industry-recognized microcredentials, and complete a capstone project. Families are invited to visit the training site and observe capstone project presentations.

Students who choose to pursue this path after high school graduation are supported through a Match Application process. The Match Application is a single application to providers participating in the WGI network. It is completed during the school year — before graduation — enabling students to receive support and guidance from their counselor. Shared Lane developed the Match Application to significantly reduce barriers to accessing workforce training programs.



Counselors as Navigators

WGI operates in service of NYC Public Schools' [Career Navigation Roadmap](#), a set of milestones and activities that lead to every student graduating with a 'Strong Plan' that is personalized to their career and educational goals. A culminating milestone is for "students to finalize a postsecondary plan that permits entry into a career option of their choosing and complete relevant applications." WGI can offer the ability for all counselors to unlock this opportunity for their students. Shared Lane coordinates the schools, providers, and systems, ensuring that no single school has to build this infrastructure independently.



Mapping WGI to “Reflective and Future Focused”

The WGI design helps students develop purpose by connecting them to pathways that reflect their interests and goals; it fosters belonging by placing them in welcoming learning communities where they can see themselves in the field; and it builds social capital by expanding their relationships with instructors, mentors, peers, and providers who can support future opportunities. The Portrait of a Graduate is more than asking students what they want to do after graduation. It defines four sub-competencies which WGI cultivates:



Self-Reflection. Pre-work modules, career exploration, and capstone projects require students to assess their interests and skills, helping them transition from general interests to an informed foundation for self-discovery.

“WGI helped me to identify my goals and skills, and also where this might lead me in the near future. It also taught me to determine my interests and why this particular field is a good fit for me....”



Setting Meaningful Goals. The capstone project is a culminating experience designed to help students reflect on their internship, demonstrate career readiness, and serve as a bridge to post-high school opportunities. At the end of the internship, each student presents the story of their internship. They are asked not only to talk about what they did, but also to reflect on what they learned about themselves and how they will use that knowledge to inform their post- high school trajectory. The conversion rate to provider admissions shows that students translate exploration into concrete action.

“I know what I want to pursue in my future career, and I have narrowed it down to two main options which I didn’t have before the internship.”



Social Awareness and Supportive Relationships. Through on-site training and weekly check-ins, students are integrated into professional networks comprising mentors and peers beyond the school environment.

“I liked being able to listen to professionals because it helped me understand the careers better.”



Responsible Decision-Making. By positioning postsecondary planning as a matter of alignment rather than a default path, WGI empowers students to make evidence-based decisions rooted in their individual strengths, personal goals, and specific circumstances.

“It helped me realize that I did want to do something in the healthcare field and that there are many routes I can take.”

“It made me realize that the plan I had might not be the best plan while I am young.”

What We Can Learn from WGI

WGI has demonstrated that career-connected learning — when designed with intention and delivered at a meaningful scale — can shift how students understand their futures. These are some insights for school and district stakeholders to explore as they integrate some of these principles into their own practice.

Intentional connections to workforce training and community colleges. For students who do not want to enroll in college directly after high school, a nondegree training program is a next step that can lead to earning credentials that lead to a more economically secure entry to the workforce. It could be short-term training at a workforce program, earning credentials from a community college, a registered apprenticeship, or an employer-led pathway. Schools can learn from these institutions: What skills do they value? What does orientation and onboarding look like? What makes a student stand out as prepared? Designing work-based learning experiences with these answers in mind—not just as exposure, but as a real pipeline—helps create a smooth transition from school to what comes next.

Reflection and building social capital are the main goals. Too often, work-based learning focuses on what students *do*, not what they *learn about themselves*. For WBL to help students become *Reflective and Future Focused*, schools need to design experiences that help students learn about themselves and build a network of instructors, peers, alumni, and professionals they can turn to as they move forward. Helping students reflect and build social capital is at the heart of WBL. Schools should design advising, check-ins, and final projects around these real-world skills.

Move beyond exposure to authentic training. Exposure, such as a site visit, job shadowing, or a panel, is an important component of career-connected learning. In and of themselves, they do not build the self-knowledge that the Portrait of a Graduate calls for. On the other hand, lengthy exposure in work settings without real training can lead to disengagement. Students need training to do authentic work that enables them to tackle complex tasks and practice professionalism in supportive settings where they can learn from mistakes. The experience should be calibrated so that learning can be recognized with industry certifications, microcredentials, and proven skills that help them take their first step into the working world. Short-burst training that is authentic and hands-on makes reflection meaningful and helps students make well-informed postsecondary decisions.

Professional learning opportunity for counselors. Counselors cannot guide students on pathways they have never seen. When counselors take part in WGI—by visiting provider sites, meeting workforce instructors, and observing training programs—they gain the firsthand knowledge needed to support students. This exposure helps counselors understand how work is changing: how AI is affecting different jobs, which skills are becoming more important, and what credentials and career pathways are valued in the labor market. This enables more informed advising for students and families.

Conclusion

Moving Forward Toward a New Portrait of a Graduate

The Portrait of a Graduate framework asks schools to answer four questions for every student: Where can learning happen? How will learning be captured and measured? How will student agency grow over time? And how will students' skills stay relevant in a changing workplace? WGI provides a student-centered example to follow and offers a model of coordination across high schools and workforce training ecosystems. Students cannot become reflective and future-focused by imagining possibilities alone. They develop these capacities through meaningful experiences that allow them to test interests, build relationships, reflect on their growth, and make informed decisions about what comes next. It is our shared responsibility to keep learning how to leverage the Portrait of a Graduate and to support our students in being successful in the complex and changing world they will navigate.



“It felt exciting to meet new people, a little challenging keeping up, and rewarding because I feel as if my future is being written.” – WGI student

Endnotes

- ¹ NY Inspires: A Plan to Transform Education in NY State <https://www.nysed.gov/news/2025/state-education-department-announces-ny-inspires-plan-transform-education-new-york-state>
- ² A Launchpad for Life: A Vision for Purposeful Pathways for All Students, The Commission on Purposeful Pathways, March 2026
- ³ Family Voices: Building Pathways from Learning to Meaningful Work, Carnegie Corporation of NY
- ⁴ NYC Mayor's Management Report, 2025
- ⁵ Research Alliance for NYC Schools, Equity Indicators, 2025.