

Quality Coaching is Driven by Student Agency

Principle 2

- Principle 1: Centered on education-to-career-outcomes
- Principle 2: Driven by student agency
- Principle 3: Foundation and universal
- Principle 4: Rooted in relationships
- Principle 5: Informed by data and evidence



This principle emphasizes supporting students in identifying their interests, values, and goals, while providing personalized guidance that reflects their identities and circumstances and builds the skills, mindsets, and confidence needed to pursue their chosen paths.

In practice, this approach positions students as the authors of their own education-to-career journeys, supported by a community that strengthens their confidence, mindsets, and readiness to pursue their goals. It also centers students' backgrounds and experiences, helping them make informed

choices that are meaningful and aligned with who they are and what they value.

Research on this Quality Coaching principle suggests that early, strengths-based, culturally responsive, and structured career supports can build student confidence, clarify pathways, and strengthen connections between education and careers. However, these benefits are not equally realized, as students from historically marginalized backgrounds continue to face systemic barriers.

What the Evidence Shows¹

High school career supports that center student backgrounds build confidence and expand pathways, especially for young women and rural students. Multi-week STEM curricula and collaboration between counselors and science teachers help students identify strengths, explore career values, and understand postsecondary and workforce options beyond their local context.²

Strengths-based, interest-aligned assessments increase career self-efficacy when paired with coaching. Career assessments embedded in college-level career or life-planning courses lead to gains in decision-making confidence, exploratory behavior, clarity of career goals, and satisfaction with career information.³

Perceived barriers shape how students engage with career exploration and support. Although student experiences with career exploration vary across backgrounds and circumstances, research within the collegiate context frequently examines the

experiences of underserved and historically marginalized students, particularly Latina, low-income, first generation, and undocumented students. Because identity can shape a student's perceptions of barriers when navigating education-to-career pathways, these students commonly experience financial, time, and networking constraints that influence confidence and career decision-making. They often rely on faculty and supervisors for trusted guidance, as traditional networking activities may not resonate equally across disciplines or student backgrounds.⁴

Spotlighting Effective Practices and Models in the Research

Possibilities in Postsecondary Education and Science

(PiPES) is a researcher-designed career exploration curriculum implemented in rural Appalachian high schools in Tennessee to increase awareness of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math, and Medical Science) pathways and postsecondary options. Delivered by high school staff over a six-hour curriculum, the program integrates career exploration tools, online assessments, and information on college affordability. A defining feature of PiPES is its emphasis on connecting STEM careers to students' cultural and community values, an approach intended to resonate with the interdependent context of rural Appalachian youth. The curriculum also helps students identify careers aligned with their interests and better understand education pathways and earnings potential. Evaluation of student and staff data suggest the program is engaging and useful, with students reporting increased knowledge of career options, college planning, and future earnings. While students valued the exposure to new information, they also expressed interest in deeper learning about specific careers, college pathways, and life skills.⁵

Idaho "Build Your Future" Program is a structured, state-based career and financial readiness initiative developed by the Idaho 4-H Youth Development Office. It guides high school students through a series of learning activities that help them identify their interests, skills, and values, and connect them to potential careers, college majors, and postsecondary pathways. Students engage in activities such as career research, interviews, internships, portfolio development, and learning about how postsecondary education affects earnings. The program also includes financial planning content (e.g., understanding loans, credit, and investing) and an optional college campus visit to provide real-world exposure to higher education environments. Evaluation data show strong gains across multiple measures of career readiness. Students demonstrated substantial increases in their ability to identify career pathways, understand required education and skills, research salaries and benefits, and recognize funding options for postsecondary education. Overall, the program significantly improved students' knowledge, confidence, and decision-making skills related to education, careers, and financial planning.⁶

Endnotes

¹ [A group of national experts developed the five Principles for Quality Education-to-Career Guidance, which guided this systematic literature review.](#)

The review examined U.S.-based peer-reviewed and high-quality grey literature published between 2016 and 2025, including studies, policy briefs, and reports focused on high school and higher education populations. Sources were selected using replicable inclusion criteria to ensure relevance to education-to-career coaching and guidance practices.

²Autumn L. Cabell, Dana Brookover, Amber Livingston, and Ila Cartwright. "It's never too late: High school counselors' support of underrepresented students' interest in STEM." *Professional Counselor* 11, no. 2 (May 2021): 143-160; Melinda M. Gibbons, Erin E. Hardin, Anna Lora Taylor, Emily Brown, and Danielle Graham. "Evaluation of an SCCT-based intervention to increase postsecondary awareness in rural Appalachian youth." *Journal of Career Development* 47, no. 4 (August 2020): 424-439.

³Cabell et al., "It's never too late: High school counselors' support of underrepresented students' interest in STEM."; Rhea L. Owens, Thomas C. Motl, and Thomas S. Krieschok. "A comparison of strengths and interests protocols in career assessment and counseling." *Journal of Career Assessment* 24, no. 4 (November 2016): 605-622.

⁴Kelsey L. Autin, Ryan D. Duffy, Caitlin J. Jacobson, Kabeel M. Dosani, Dominique Barker, and Elizabeth M. Bott. "Career development among undocumented immigrant young adults: A psychology of working perspective." *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 65, no. 5 (October 2018): 605-617; Kenneth J. Levine, and Melinda Aley. "Career barriers affecting first-generation college students: Can socializing messages increase career confidence?" *Southern Communication Journal* 86, no. 5 (November-December 2021): 498-510; Rosemary J. Perez., Liane I. Hypolite, Genia M. Bettencourt, and Ronald E. Hallett. "How the game is played: Low-income students' experiences with career development programming." *Journal of Postsecondary Student Success* 4, no. 3 (Spring 2025): 56-81; Cassandra A. Storlie, S. Jeffery Mostade, and Deborah Duenyas. "Cultural trailblazers: Exploring the career development of Latina first generation college students." *The Career Development Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (December 2016): 304-317.

⁵Gibbons et al., "Evaluation of an SCCT-based intervention to increase postsecondary awareness in rural Appalachian youth." *Journal of Career Development* 47, no. 4 (2020): 424-439.

⁶Nancy Marie Shelstad, Carrie Clarich, and Suzann H. Dolecheck. "Build your future: Connecting career exploration and postsecondary education." *Journal of Youth Development* 15, no. 5 (September 2020): 159-171.