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Increasing Student Access to Labor Market Information: Insights from Qualitative Research

Labor market information (LMI) has the potential to play an instrumental role in student education-to-career decisions. By providing insight into employment opportunities, earnings, and workforce demand, LMI helps students understand how educational pathways most consistently connect to career outcomes. Research suggests that students often have incomplete or inaccurate perceptions of labor market opportunities and that access to information about the economic returns associated with different fields of study can influence educational decision-making and career planning.¹ Given the role LMI can play in shaping educational choices, it is critical to understand how students access, interpret, and use this information. Doing so will help institutions design systems that meet students where they are, optimize the availability and use of LMI, and better support students as they navigate their education-to-career pathways.

Making LMI meaningful is a complex task that is equal parts science (data analysis) and art (engaging students). Employers, policymakers, state agencies, and institutions routinely rely on LMI to understand job availability, industry trends, wages, and in-demand skills. Yet students making consequential education and career decisions typically have limited access to, and understanding of, this resource.² Across federal data sources, state labor market information systems, and workforce research, LMI can include:³



- Occupational demand and growth projections
- Wage data and earning potential
- Required education, credentials, and certifications
- In-demand technical skills
- Regional and local labor market variation
- Career pathways and advancement opportunities
- Institutional outcomes data for alumni, including job placement, industries of employment, earnings, and career trajectories of graduates

To explore current institutional practices and student engagement with LMI, we conducted a series of 37 in-depth qualitative interviews with career services professionals (14) and undergraduate students (23) across a diverse range of institutions.⁴ Three primary themes emerged in these conversations about both the challenges and opportunities of using LMI across academic settings.

Key Finding 1: Student interest in LMI is high, but experiences with it largely are unstructured.

Students report making significant independent efforts to understand how their education can connect to a desirable job, how hard it is to get a job, and how much they could earn. These efforts often are unguided and unstructured, requiring students to independently interpret complex and sometimes inconsistent career information. In many cases, students' information-seeking behaviors appear more focused on securing employment at the conclusion of postsecondary education rather than using LMI earlier to shape education-to-career pathways before entering college programs. In the perceived absence of coordinated institutional guidance, students frequently shoulder the responsibility of navigating and interpreting LMI on their own.

Students use social media and other crowdsourcing platforms to gather and make sense of career information. While many students undertake online research, they also engage with near-peer networks, recent graduates, and others with lived experience to contextualize and validate what they encounter online. These relationships help students translate generalized LMI into practical information that feels personally relevant and actionable. At the same time, reliance on social media and crowdsourced content may expose students to inconsistent, incomplete, or unvetted insights, particularly when institutional guidance and trusted career networks are limited.

Relatively few students reported pre-college experiences that intentionally include LMI in the process of considering and selecting a course of study. Students who did have structured engagement with LMI through pre-college career academies, dual enrollment, or community-based programs, report that early exposure strengthened familiarity with professional norms, career pathways, and strategies for navigating postsecondary and workforce decisions. There appears to be an opportunity to more effectively support students in early education-to-career decisions by integrating LMI resources and activities within existing pre-college programs and resources.

“I go through different websites and look at starting salaries for most entry positions, and then check certain roles, like at universities — if you’re the director of physical therapy, you’re going to make some pretty big bucks. I look at different roles a PT can have, which varies by position and type. My sister helps me, too; she wants me to make the most money I can, and she confirms that what I’m seeing online is accurate.” – RANDY, STUDENT

“Most of what I’ve learned has come from fellow students, mainly seniors who are close to graduating and have already worked in the field. I go to the engineering clubs, and ask people there about the different fields I could go into, what their jobs are like, and the skills or experiences I’d need.” – KAI, STUDENT

Key Finding 2: Career centers and coursework are not yet primary sources of labor market insights.

Students report using career centers primarily for discrete career supports (e.g., resume building and review, interview preparation) rather than as hubs for labor market insights and long-term career planning. Many students are unaware that career centers can, at some level, provide labor market-informed guidance and assistance related to career exploration, wages, job outlooks, and education-to-career decision-making. In addition to increasing student awareness of LMI resources through existing communication from career centers, designing the more commonly sought out transactional career supports to include relevant LMI automatically is a promising opportunity.

Students also reported limited exposure to LMI through coursework or faculty interactions. Although many indicated that receiving career-related information at multiple points throughout their educational journeys, few reported meaningful exposure to LMI in coursework, or otherwise, early in their college experiences. This finding aligns with data from the State Opportunity Index student survey, which indicates that only 21 percent of four-year students and 33 percent of two-year students received LMI during their first year.⁵

Overall, students from this qualitative study expressed strong interest in engaging with faculty and coursework to understand better how labor market trends connect to their majors, skills, and long-term career outcomes. The analyses point to an opportunity for career-connected support in widespread student experiences, including coursework, registration for classes, declaration of a major, and academic planning.

“Last spring, I took a seminar where we did projects on what careers we wanted and resume writing. **Our instructor made us intensely research educational requirements, salary, who do you need to know, and what companies you could possibly work for.** We also had a few speakers. Because of how he formatted the class, **we got so much knowledge and were able to kind of look within and say, ‘Okay, is this really what I want? Is this where I want to go?’**” – LEANNA, STUDENT

“Having a career coach, **somebody to guide me and tell me what I need, would be helpful.** But **I really have no clue if they have career coaches or advisors on my campus.**” – IMANI, STUDENT

Key Finding 3: Scaling personalized labor market insights is a challenge.

Our interviews with career services leaders revealed their depth of knowledge, resources, and institutional capacity related to the use and impact of LMI in education-to-career advising. Practitioners emphasized the value of personalizing LMI through advising, workshops, and classroom-based efforts to help students connect their individual strengths to career pathways. This often included helping students interpret salary and workforce data, identify transferable skills, explore career options aligned with their interests and values, and better understand how academic experiences connect to workforce opportunities. Practitioners described that exposing students to LMI often sparked greater curiosity about career possibilities, prompting them to ask more questions, explore pathways more deeply, and think more intentionally about how their interests, skills, and educational choices align with future opportunities.

Practitioners also emphasized the importance of culturally responsive and student-centered approaches that recognize students' lived experiences, backgrounds, identities, and varying levels of familiarity with labor markets, career pathways, professional networks, and workforce systems. These approaches also may account for students' personal realities, such as financial constraints, caregiving responsibilities, strong community bonds and being place-bound, or other commitments that shape career decision-making. When delivered in these ways, LMI can increase student engagement, confidence, and clarity in career decision-making by ensuring the data reflect their reality.

While some institutions are embedding LMI into the classroom and advising contexts, both practitioner perspectives and student narratives suggest that these efforts not yet are pervasive, visible, or consistently experienced across the college journey. Practitioners identified challenges in scaling LMI efforts, including uneven faculty engagement and low workshop participation. This may stem, in part, from students' limited understanding of what career services offices offer. Because career services often reach only a subset of students, embedding LMI into classrooms and other structured academic experiences may offer an important opportunity to expand access to career-relevant guidance.

“We use labor market information when meeting with students who are undecided. **After they take a few career assessments and begin narrowing down their options, we educate them on what’s out there for opportunities, job responsibilities, skills needed, education requirements, and employment prospects.**

This helps students make more informed decisions about potential careers.”

– HANNAH, CAREER SERVICES PROFESSIONAL

“**We created a network of career champions and host twice-quarterly webinars for advisors and faculty on labor market trends, employer needs, and student resources.** While attendance is strong, about 95 percent of participants are academic advisors, highlighting the ongoing challenge of engaging faculty in these conversations.”

– REINA, CAREER SERVICES PROFESSIONAL



“You can’t just slap labor market stats or apps on a website and hope it works. You have to integrate it into the student journey, and an easy way to do that is through their course assignments.”

– MONICA, CAREER SERVICES PROFESSIONAL

Looking Ahead

This study highlights both the importance of LMI to students' education and career decision-making and the challenges many students face in accessing timely, relevant, and actionable information. While students consistently expressed interest in understanding how education connects to career outcomes, their experiences with LMI often were fragmented, self-directed, and inconsistent. Career services professionals described promising efforts to personalize and contextualize LMI, yet students frequently reported relying on online searches, social media, and peer networks to access information about careers, earnings, and workforce opportunities. The findings highlight several areas and opportunities for institutions to strengthen how students access, interpret, and apply LMI throughout their education-to-career journeys:

- **Help Students Become Effective Consumers of Career Information.** Because students frequently rely on social media, online platforms, peers, and informal networks for career and labor market information, equipping them to invest this energy effectively is important. Curated resources, guiding questions, and frameworks for evaluating information can help students make more informed education and career decisions.
- **Intentionally Engage Students in Structured LMI Experiences.** Provide structured opportunities to engage with LMI through both curricular and cocurricular experiences during key educational milestones, including college choice, major selection, the first year of college, internships, and other experiences that help students connect their education to future opportunities.
- **Build “Career Everywhere” Institutional Culture.** Faculty and staff development, plug-and-play resources, cross-campus partnerships, visibility into alumni employment outcomes, and shared

responsibility for career-connected learning help create a “career everywhere” culture in which faculty, staff, and students consistently encounter LMI within the context of education-to-career guidance throughout their college experience.

- **Strengthen Career Information Across Student Networks of Support.** In addition to faculty and staff, families, community organizations, near peers, and recent graduates all play important roles in supporting students as they develop their understanding of careers and workforce opportunities. Programs and resources that strengthen LMI fluency across these groups promote shared understanding and consistency in this support to students.

Additional research, including rigorous evaluations and longitudinal studies, can complement this work by examining other dimensions of how students use LMI. For example:

- Does early exposure to LMI influence students' educational and career decision-making, including the extent to which it supports students in selecting pathways that align with their goals, interests, and labor market opportunities?
- Do these relationships vary across fields of study, institutional contexts, or student populations?
- Is early engagement with LMI associated with post-graduation outcomes, including employment, earnings, and career satisfaction?
- How is LMI delivered and integrated into advising and instruction, and used by students?

Readers interested in a deeper discussion of the qualitative research insights from this summary, including institutional examples and implications for practice, are encouraged to review the full report, [“Making Labor Market Information Meaningful: Insights from Student and Career Service Leader Experiences?”](#)⁶

Endnotes

1. Rachel Baker, Eric Bettinger, Brian Jacob, and Ioana Marinescu, "The Effect of Labor Market Information on Community College Students' Major Choice," *Economics of Education Review* 65 (August 2018): 18–30; M. Najeeb Shafiq and Robert K. Toutkoushian, "Perceived Returns and Regrets Among College Graduates," *Education Economics* 32, no. 5 (May 2024): 686–702.
2. State Opportunity Index 2025: Measuring State Progress in Connecting Education with Opportunity (Indianapolis and Washington, DC: Strada Education Foundation, 2025), accessed April 3, 2026, <https://www.strada.org/state-opportunity-index>.
3. Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), (Washington, DC: The Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, accessed April 3, 2026), <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/>; Occupational Outlook Handbook (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025); "Employment Projections," (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed April 3, 2026), <https://www.bls.gov/emp/>.
4. To read a full account of the findings, see [Stephanie M. Breen and James Dean Ward, "Making Labor Market Information Meaningful: Insights from Student and Career Service Leader Experiences," \(Indianapolis and Washington, DC: Strada Education Foundation, October 2026\), https://doi.org/10.65702/VHCB7549](https://doi.org/10.65702/VHCB7549).
5. State Opportunity Index 2025: Measuring State Progress in Connecting Education with Opportunity, <https://www.strada.org/state-opportunity-index>.
6. To read a full account of the findings, see [Stephanie M. Breen and James Dean Ward, "Making Labor Market Information Meaningful: Insights from Student and Career Service Leader Experiences," \(Indianapolis and Washington, DC: Strada Education Foundation, October 2026\), https://doi.org/10.65702/VHCB7549](https://doi.org/10.65702/VHCB7549).

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