

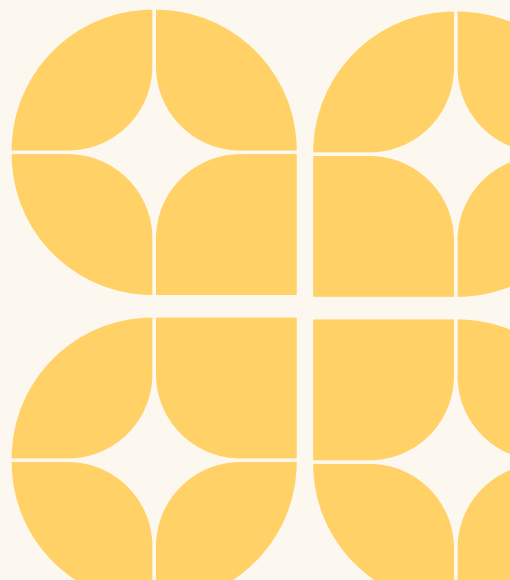
Career Readiness Begins Here:

How Mentorship Builds the
Skills that Matter



Contents

Mind the Gap: Understanding the Disconnect Between Education and Employment	2
Cultivating Workforce Readiness: Key indicators & Mentorship's role	2
Career Decision Self-Efficacy	2 - 4
Career Exploration and Preparation Behaviors	4
Increased Engagement with Career Services	4 - 5
Confidence in Career Skills	5 - 6
Sense of Belonging and Social Capital	6 - 7
Taking the Leap: Supporting the Transition from Degree to Career	7
The Mentee Voice	8
Conclusion: Mentorship as a Scalable Strategy for Career Readiness	9
Appendix	10
References	11
About the Authors	12
About Mentor Collective	12





MIND THE GAP:

Are learners truly workforce ready? Is the workforce learner ready?

Despite growing investments in higher education and workforce alignment, a persistent gap remains between what learners graduate with and what employers actually need. Employers continue to cite significant skill gaps among recent graduates—particularly in areas like communication, critical thinking, and applied technical skills—undermining both productivity and retention (Business-Higher Education Forum, 2024a). Nearly 90 percent of business and higher education leaders now identify partnerships focused on talent development as a top priority (Business-Higher Education Forum, 2024b). Yet, despite these efforts, many learners still struggle to translate academic achievement into career success.

Meanwhile, Strada Education Foundation (2024) reveals that over 40 percent of college graduates are underemployed in their first job out of school, a trend that disproportionately affects first-generation learners and learners of color. Moreover, only 31 percent of learners report that their education helped them develop the skills needed to be successful in the workplace. Graduates who begin their careers underemployed are 3.5 times more likely to remain underemployed a decade later, signaling the long-term impact of early career mismatches. Despite growing evidence that experiential learning improves outcomes—such as internships, which reduce underemployment risk by nearly 49 percent—far too few learners have access to these opportunities. Only 1 in 4 community college graduates and 1 in 5 four-year graduates report receiving personalized career coaching, even though these supports are strongly associated with better employment results (Strada Education Foundation, 2024).

These findings suggest a disconnect not only in curriculum-to-career alignment but in the broader ecosystem of support learners receive as they prepare for the workforce. To bridge this gap, institutions must look beyond coursework and consider scalable, relational strategies—like mentorship—that foster the confidence, clarity, and career-readiness behaviors learners need to thrive in today's complex job market.

CULTIVATING WORKFORCE READINESS:

Key indicators & mentorship's role

There's a growing body of research exploring early indicators of career and workforce readiness in United States college learners. While the exact indicators can vary by study or framework, several evidence-based markers are commonly recognized across higher education and workforce development literature. These indicators tend to fall into a few broad categories, including career decision self-efficacy, engagement in career exploration and preparation behaviors, and sense of belonging and social capital.

Career Decision Self-Efficacy

Career Decision Self-Efficacy (CDSE) refers to an individual's confidence in their ability to successfully navigate decisions related to academic majors, career pathways, and future employment (Betz & Hackett, 1994).

Research has shown that learners who feel more capable in making these decisions are more likely to engage in proactive career behaviors such as information-seeking, networking, and goal-setting. Tools like the Career Decision Self-Efficacy Scale measure key beliefs, including whether learners feel resourceful in gathering information or whether they've had exposure to role models who shared how they navigated their own career choices (Betz & Taylor, 2004).

Mentor Collective's internal assessment data echoes these findings, showing consistent improvements in learners' CDSE scores after participating in structured mentorship programs.¹

¹ See Appendix for Methodology

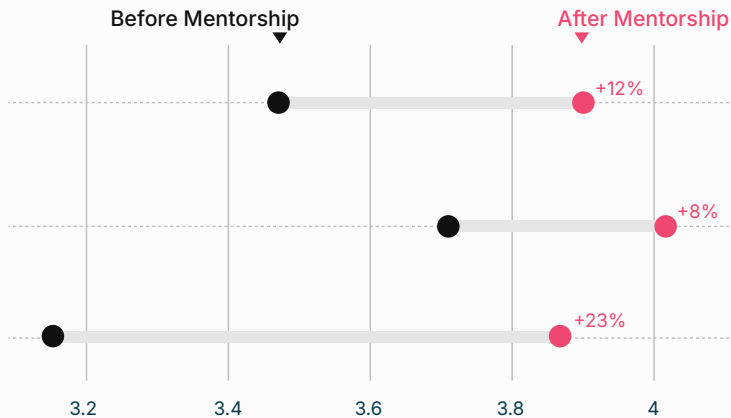
Career Decision Self-Efficacy Before & After Mentorship

Scale of 1-5; n=1421 (Before), 420 (After)

People important to me have let me know that I am resourceful when it comes to gathering information needed to make career-related decisions.

I have observed people I admire who are resourceful at gathering the information they need to make career-related decisions.

I have models who have explained to me how they chose an academic major or career path.



Mentorship significantly boosts learners' confidence in their ability to make career-related decisions. After participating in mentorship, mentees report higher scores across all measured aspects of career decision self-efficacy (compared to mentee reports before mentorship).

The most dramatic difference was in learners feeling they have role models who have explained their career paths, which showed a 23 percent difference increase post-mentorship. This finding directly supports the idea that mentors provide relatable examples and pathways for mentees to follow. Mentees also reported an 8 percent difference in observing people they admire being resourceful in their career decisions. Confidence in their own resourcefulness for gathering career information also grew, with mentees feeling more validated by important people in their lives, reflected in a 12 percent difference increase on this measure.

When looking at the overall measure of Career Decision Self-Efficacy, mentorship appears to shift learners from a state of uncertainty to one of confidence.

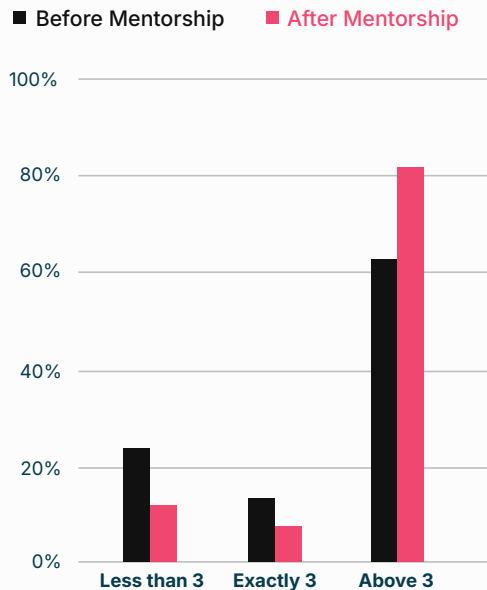
The proportion of mentees with high self-efficacy (a score above three on a five-point scale) increased from 62 percent to 80 percent. Conversely, the percentage of mentees with low self-efficacy (a score below three) was cut in half, dropping from 24 percent to just 12 percent after mentorship. This demonstrates mentorship's powerful effect on building the foundational confidence learners need to navigate their career journeys.

Testimonials from this assessment highlight the transformative impact of mentorship on learners, helping them gain confidence and clarity in their career paths.

Research on first-generation learners reinforces this connection. Peer mentors—particularly those with shared lived experiences—provided validation, direction, and access to resources, significantly increasing learners' confidence in managing their academic and career choices (Winfield, 2022a).

Career Decision Self-Efficacy Before & After Mentorship

Scale of 1-5; n=1,421 (Before), 420 (After)



"Before talking with my mentor, I was very unsure on what I wanted to do with my major. After our first meeting, I had a better understanding of what I could do and what I should do to prepare for my future career. After a few more meetings, I am now more confident in my major and my future."

Mentee



Mentors boost self-efficacy not only by sharing information, but also by modeling resilience and affirming learners' potential—shifting the internal narrative from “Can I do this?” to “I know I can.”

“[My mentor] really helped me out...to get in contact with people who have been in the place that I have been...she helped to connect me to... the Student Success Center...so that I can go there and get a tutor,”

Mentee, (Winfield, 2022a, p. 64).



Increased Engagement with Career Services

Mentorship correlates with increased use of career support services, suggesting that mentors act as a critical bridge, encouraging learners to take advantage of the institutional resources available to them. This includes both structured support (like workshops and counseling) and one-on-one engagement with professionals. Mentor Collective's assessment data illustrates this.

The most significant difference was in learners' participation in individual or group career counseling and workshops, which saw a 45 percent increase after mentorship. Similarly, use of job search support services rose by 37 percent. Other career-preparatory actions also showed notable increases, including seeking resume assistance (+16 percent), practicing interview skills (+13 percent), and attending a career fair (+10 percent). These shifts echo national data linking career services engagement with stronger employment outcomes.

These outcomes are further reflected in learner feedback.

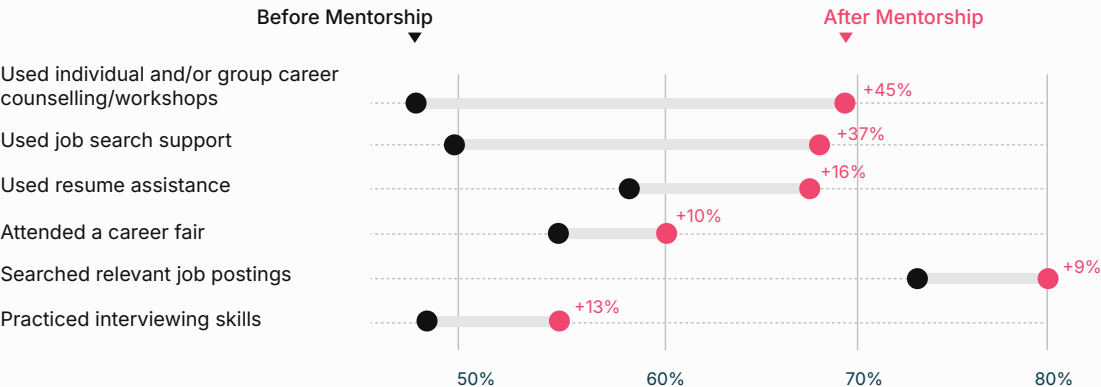
Career Exploration & Preparation Behaviors

Career exploration and preparation behaviors include tangible actions such as building a resume, networking, pursuing internships, attending job fairs, and accessing career counseling services. These behaviors lead learners toward meaningful employment. Mentor Collective's internal assessments confirm that mentees who engage more frequently with career services demonstrate higher levels of career readiness.

This aligns with national benchmarks: National Association of Colleges and Employers (2022) reports that graduating seniors who used at least one career service received an average of 1.24 job offers, compared to just one offer for those who abstained, with each additional service correlated with a 0.05 increase in offers. Their data also show that learners with paid internships receive an average of 1.61 job offers—compared to 0.95 for unpaid and 0.77 without internships—and are 2.2 times more likely to land paid internships when supported by career centers.

Use of Career Services Before & After Mentorship

n=3,452 (Before), 807 (After)



Question phrasing: have you (used service or done activity), either through your college/university or through some other source (e.g., another college, your job, a community organization)?

“My mentor helped me find and apply for internships and reviewed my resume. He also pointed me to the career center on campus, which I hadn’t used before.”

Mentee



"I was struggling to figure out my next steps for after graduation, and my mentor was a great resource. She helped me find workshops on campus for job searching and encouraged me to attend a career fair, which I ended up getting an interview from."

Mentee



Qualitative research by Winfield (2022b) reinforces the importance of engagement with career services, indicating that first-generation learners reported mentors played a key role in fostering career exploration behaviors by guiding them toward campus resources, setting goals for career development milestones, and demystifying professional processes. Students described how mentors not only pointed them toward resources like the career center but also offered culturally responsive support that affirmed their identities and experiences. One participant shared that having a mentor who understood their background helped them "stay on track" and provided a safe space to express doubts and ask for advice.

Mentors play a pivotal role in translating intention into action when it comes to career exploration. By demystifying professional norms and processes, mentors help learners break down intimidating tasks like resume writing, networking, or preparing for interviews into manageable steps. They offer concrete feedback on application materials, review LinkedIn profiles, and provide accountability that keeps learners progressing toward their goals. Perhaps most critically, mentors raise learners' awareness of institutional resources and validate their right to access them. For learners who may hesitate to seek help or who are unfamiliar with the landscape of career preparation, a trusted mentor can be the difference between passive intention and proactive engagement (Winfield, 2022a).

Confidence in Career Skills

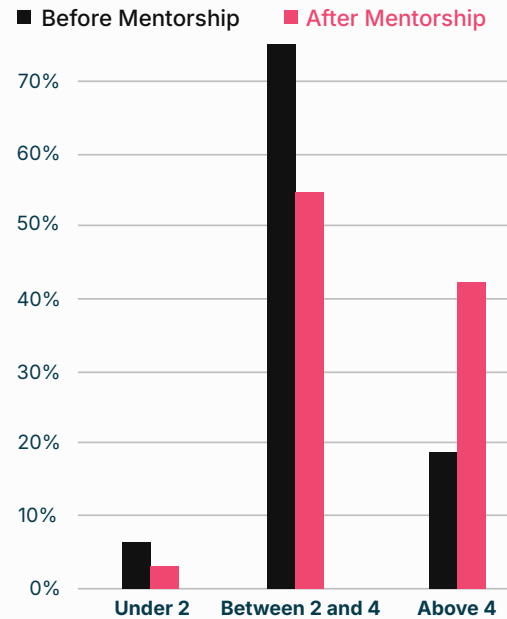
Mentor Collective's assessment data demonstrates that mentorship also helps learners build the professional confidence needed to take advantage of career exploration and preparedness opportunities.

After participating in mentorship, learners report double-digit increases in confidence across a range of professional skills. The most significant change, a 22 percent increase, was in learners' belief that they can develop realistic strategies for locating and securing employment.

Overall, mentorship significantly enhances learners' confidence in their professional skills. The percentage of mentees reporting high confidence (a score above four on a five-point scale) more than doubled, jumping from 19 percent to 42 percent. This shift is mirrored by a sharp decrease in the proportion of learners with low confidence (a score under two), which fell from six percent to just three percent.

Professional Skills Before & After Mentorship

Scale of 0–5; n=3,452 (Before), 807 (After)

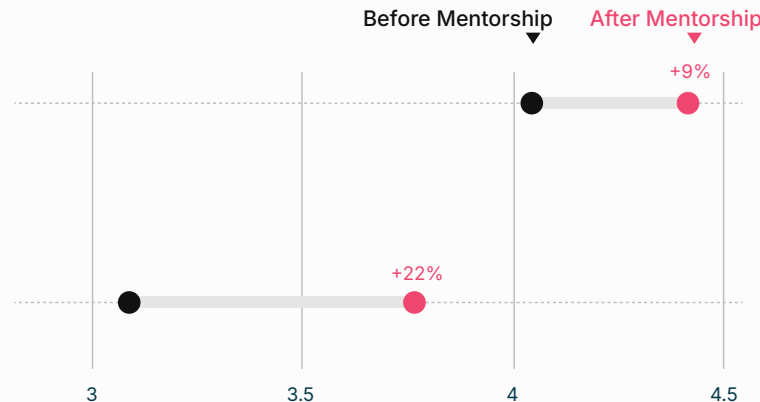


Professional Skills Before & After Mentorship

Scale of 0–5; n=3,452 (Before), 807 (After)

To what extent have you begun thinking about, exploring, or planning your life after graduation, whether that includes more school, a job, volunteer work, or anything else?

How confident are you in your ability to develop realistic strategies for locating and securing employment?



Testimonials further highlight how mentorship translates into tangible skill-building.

"My mentor has been a great help in my professional development. He's helped me with my resume, my LinkedIn, and my general networking skills. It's a lot less scary to reach out to people when you have someone in your corner to encourage you."

Mentee



These findings create a compelling case: institutions that foster mentorship alongside structured career services help learners develop the exploration habits that directly translate into more job offers and more aligned early-career placements.

Sense of Belonging and Social Capital

A learner's sense of belonging and access to social capital—defined as feeling connected to their academic or professional community and having access to networks and insider knowledge—are critical, research-backed indicators of career readiness. Students with strong social capital are more likely to learn about job opportunities, gain mentorship, and access career-specific guidance.

Data from Mentor Collective's assessments show that mentorship helps learners build confidence in networking and seeking professional support,

with mentees reporting increased comfort in identifying job opportunities through their networks and reaching out to established professionals for career guidance.

Confidence in soliciting help from professionals and using social networks to identify job opportunities both improved by 21 percent. Students also reported a 19 percent increase in their comfort meeting new people in careers of interest. These findings suggest that mentorship not only encourages engagement with career services but also builds the social capital and interpersonal readiness learners need to make those services, and their own efforts, more effective.

Learner stories underscore the impact of these results.

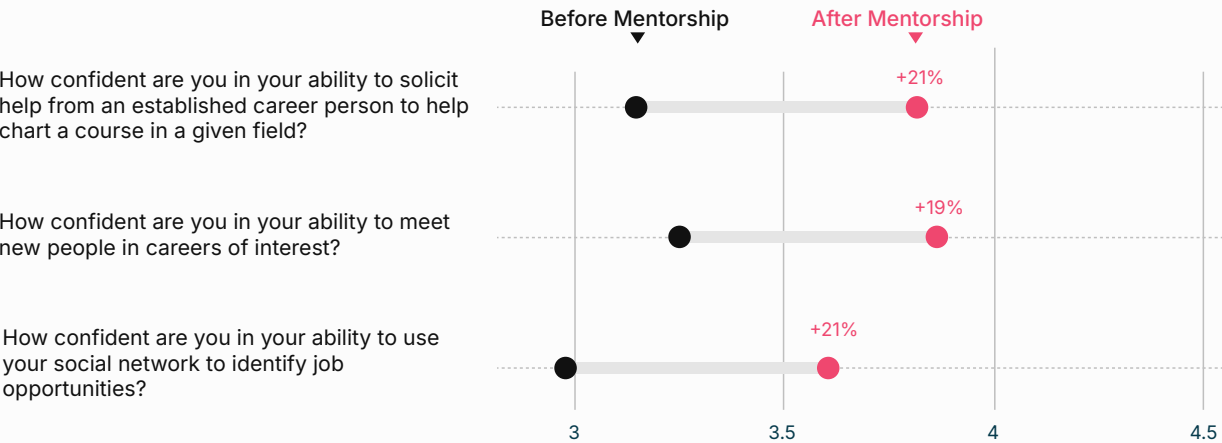
"I learned a lot from my mentor about how to navigate my career path and build my professional network. She helped me identify people to reach out to and even reviewed the emails I sent. I wouldn't have known where to start without her."

Mentee



Sense of Belonging and Social Capital

Scale of 0–5; n=3,452 (Before), 807 (After)



These relational dynamics are particularly critical for learners who may be unfamiliar with the “hidden curriculum” of higher education and professional preparation (Jack, 2019). By pairing proactive career behaviors with mentorship rooted in trust and shared understanding, institutions can more effectively close equity gaps and support first-generation learners as they translate academic progress into career outcomes.

National research reinforces these findings: social networks are among the most powerful predictors of upward mobility, and learners from low-income backgrounds are far less likely to have access to economically diverse or professionally connected peers (Chetty et al., 2022). Research also highlights the importance of representation and relational inclusion, particularly for first-generation and historically underserved learners (Winfield 2022b). As one learner reflected, “You don’t see people like yourself around you... but I just feel like you have to be that person that you want to see in a room.” Mentorship programs that center inclusion and shared experience help fill these gaps—ensuring that learners feel seen, supported, and socially equipped to navigate their future careers.



pivoting into new fields, and connect mentees to reskilling resources, thus blending the roles of learner and worker into a seamless growth trajectory. For those re-entering education later in life or shifting careers, mentorship offers accountability and insider knowledge that static coursework alone cannot provide. By centering mentorship in career transition and reskilling initiatives, institutions and employers can create more inclusive pathways for all types of learners—whether straight out of college, mid-career, or pursuing lifelong learning amid rapid labor-market change.

TAKING THE LEAP:

Supporting the transition from degree to career

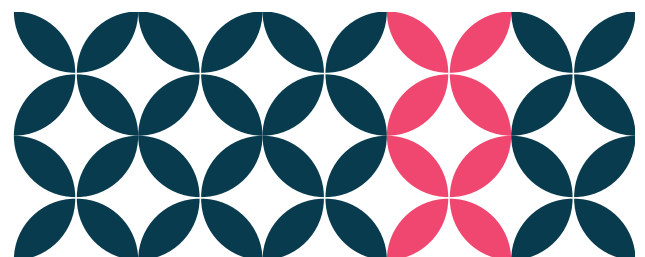
The transition from higher education to the workforce requires learners to develop not only domain expertise but also the adaptability to enter, exit, and re-enter learning and work contexts (“boundary crossing”). First-generation and limited-income learners face particular challenges here, often lacking the “hidden curriculum” that makes pivots and reskilling feel approachable.

Industry data paint a clear picture: in Deloitte’s 2020 Global Human Capital Trends survey, 53 percent of executives reported that half or more of their workforce would need to update their skills within the next three years (Deloitte Insights, 2020). The World Economic Forum’s Future of Jobs Report (2025) projects that over 22 percent of global jobs will be redefined by technological and economic shifts in the coming half-decade, with nearly 60 percent of workers requiring upskilling by 2030 (World Economic Forum, 2025). FirstGen Forward’s landscape analysis further reveals that first-generation learners often feel unprepared to translate academic achievement into career entry, citing a lack of exposure to industry norms and networks (Freeman, 2025).

Intentional, relationship-based strategies like structured mentorship can ease these transitions by providing tailored guidance on when and how to upskill, by whom, and toward which credentials or experiences. Mentors familiarize learners with emerging industry expectations, share insights on

“My mentor has helped me to feel less alone in my journey. It’s so nice to know there is someone in my corner who has been in my shoes and has come out the other side successfully. It makes me feel like I could do it too.”

Mentee



The Mentee Voice

Beyond survey data, the testimonials provided by mentees offer compelling insight into how mentorship shapes their academic and professional journeys. Three primary themes emerged:

Mentees frequently described how mentors helped them navigate the unspoken norms and expectations of academic and professional life. From networking and communicating with professors to planning long-term career steps, mentors made complex, often intimidating processes feel more approachable. One learner noted that their mentor helped them “understand the steps it takes to get to my career” and made them feel “like I could do it too.”



Demystifying the Hidden Curriculum



Providing Representation and Fostering Confidence

Seeing a mentor with a shared background or career interest was profoundly affirming for mentees. It provided a tangible example of success, which in turn built their own confidence and sense of belonging. Mentees described feeling more “confident and prepared” because their mentor had already walked a similar path. This relational support helped mentees shift their internal narrative from doubt to self-efficacy.

Mentors served as a crucial bridge to institution-provided resources and professional networks. They didn’t just offer advice; they actively guided mentees to career services, helped them find internships, and reviewed their application materials. One mentee shared, “My mentor helped me find and apply for internships and reviewed my resume.” This proactive guidance translated mentee’s intentions into tangible actions.



Acting as a Critical Connector to Resources

Together, these themes reinforce what the data makes clear: mentorship plays a vital role in helping learners build confidence, gain access to resources, and envision success for themselves in tangible, actionable ways.



CONCLUSION:**Mentorship as a scalable strategy for career readiness**

As institutions continue to invest in closing the gap between higher education and the workforce, it is clear that traditional academic offerings alone are not enough. Learners—especially those who are first-generation, from underserved backgrounds, or navigating nontraditional pathways—need more than technical skills to thrive in today's evolving job market. They need confidence, social capital, clarity of direction, and a sense of belonging.

First, we must acknowledge a hard truth: social capital has become a career prerequisite. First-generation learners—and anyone navigating a path unfamiliar to their family—often enter professional spaces without access to the “hidden curriculum.” These unwritten rules of advancement include knowing how to build a network, advocate during a job offer, or navigate workplace norms. Yet fewer than 40 percent of institutions offer career support specific to first-generation learners, and foundational skills like interview preparation, salary negotiation, and networking remain underemphasized, even though they're critical for career success (Karp, Lyons, Stalowski, & Fugate, 2025).

At the same time, we must recognize that most learners are already workers. Over 70 percent of college learners today are balancing jobs and school, and among adult learners, more than half are returning not to begin careers but to reskill, upskill, or pivot entirely (Carnevale, Smith, Melton, & Price, 2015). The needs of these learners cannot be met by curriculum alone.

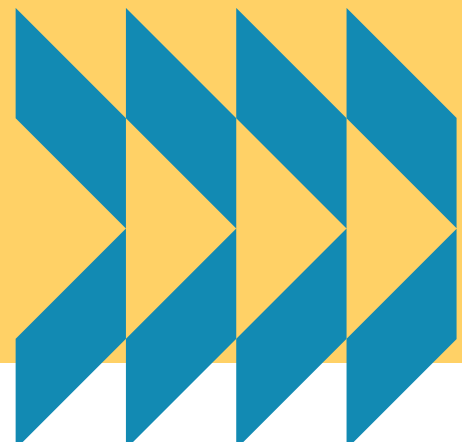
This is exactly where mentorship can serve as a powerful bridge. It helps learners feel seen. It connects them with mentors who share their lived experiences and understand their challenges. It provides relational support that builds confidence and belonging while also opening access to the kind of career support that doesn't always live inside a syllabus or a career office (Karp et al., 2025).

Mentorship stands out as a uniquely effective and scalable strategy to cultivate these essential career readiness indicators. From increasing career decision self-efficacy to fostering engagement in proactive career behaviors and expanding access to networks, structured mentorship programs deliver measurable outcomes for learners and institutions alike. These programs are not just “nice-to-haves”—they are critical infrastructure for workforce development, particularly as industries demand more adaptability, lifelong learning, and inclusive talent pipelines.

For higher education leaders, employers, and policymakers aiming to build equitable, future-ready systems, the message is clear: mentorship is not peripheral. It is central to learner success and workforce alignment.



Career readiness doesn't begin at the job offer. It begins with relationships that empower learners to imagine, plan, and pursue meaningful futures. And mentorship, done right, delivers exactly that.



Appendix

Methodology

Data for this study was gathered from participants in Mentor Collective programs between April 2023 and June 2025. Participants were enrolled in college or university mentorship programs designed to support career readiness and post-graduate success.

Participants completed surveys at two points in time: once before their mentorship began and again after the program concluded. The number of responses varied by focus area. For the Career Decision Self-Efficacy (CDSE) measures, 1,421 participants completed the pre-survey and 420 completed the post-survey. For items related to professional skills and use of career services, there were 3,452 pre-survey responses and 807 post-survey responses. In addition to the quantitative survey data, 620 participants submitted written testimonials reflecting on their mentorship experience.

Grouped Scores Explanation

Each assessment area—Career Decision Self-Efficacy, and Professional Skills—represents a group of related survey questions, or “items,” designed to measure different dimensions of career readiness. These groupings reflect well-established categories in higher education research and are consistent with how Mentor Collective defines career readiness outcomes. For each area, a composite score was calculated by averaging the responses to all relevant questions for each participant, then averaging those scores across the full respondent group. This approach allowed for tracking of meaningful shifts over time while also reporting on patterns (such as the percentage of learners with high or low confidence) within each category.

This study incorporates two forms of data:

01

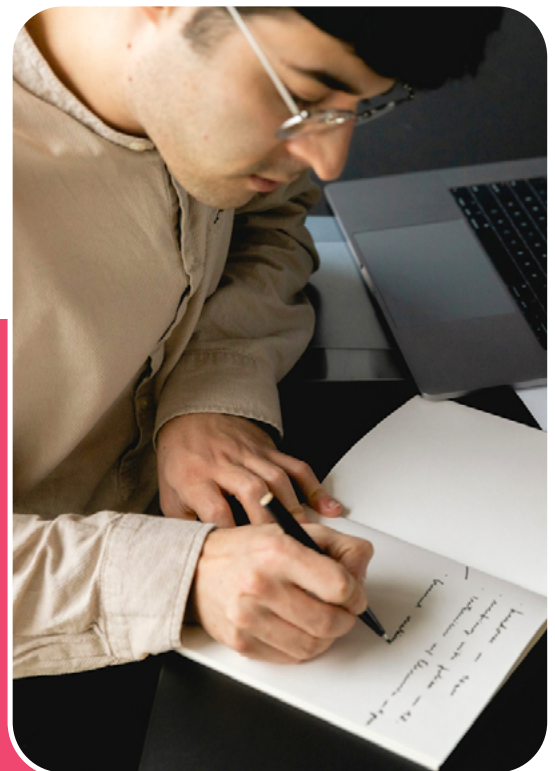
Quantitative assessment data gathered through a pre- and post-mentorship survey that measures shifts in career readiness indicators.

02

Qualitative data drawn from open-ended testimonials submitted by participants during the same period.

The assessment measures change across three key areas:

- *Career Decision Self-Efficacy (CDSE)*
- *Professional Skills*
- *Use of Career Services*



About the Career Readiness Assessment

The Mentor Collective Career Readiness Assessment was developed by adapting and integrating several validated research instruments to measure key indicators of learner preparedness for life after graduation. These include the Career Decision Self-Efficacy Scale (Betz & Hackett, 1994; Betz & Taylor, 2004), Career Search Self-Efficacy Scale (Solberg et al., 1994), Awareness and Use of Career Services Scale (Fouad et al., 2006), Academic Help-Seeking Intentions (Schwartz et al., 2018), and Youth Strength of Relationship Scale (Rhodes et al., 2005; Rhodes et al., 2017).

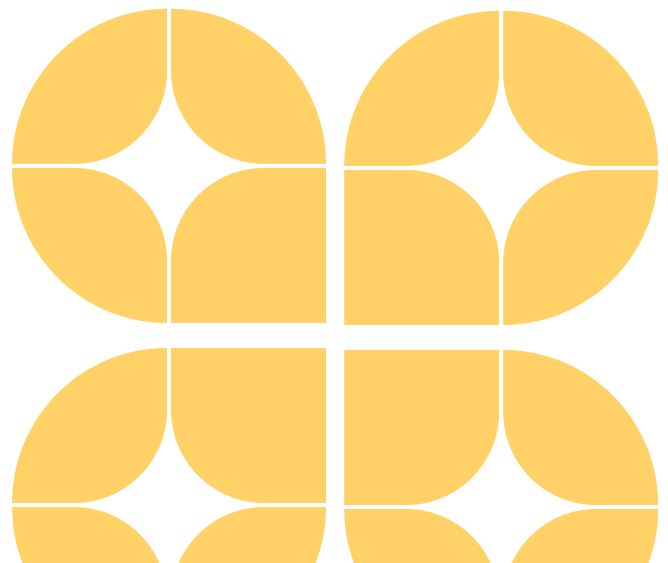
The assessment includes questions such as:

- I know how to find role models who have navigated my potential career path.
- I feel confident navigating decisions about my academic major.
- I am comfortable asking professionals in my field for advice or support.



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About Mentor Collective

Mentor Collective is the premier Mentorship Operating System, enabling organizations to embed mentorship ecosystems into their institutions using their unique goals and data. Our proven approach supports learner and employee success, improves retention, and builds stronger talent pipelines, transforming the fragmented journey from education to meaningful employment.

Backed by the most extensive dataset on mentorship outcomes and student and employee wellness, our platform strengthens authentic human connections at scale. We identify where relationships need support, then deliver data-informed interventions that grow robust social networks and measurable outcomes.

With over a decade of results and over 500,000 mentorships across 200+ partnerships, we've driven significant gains in confidence, career clarity, and engagement. Our real-time insights help organizations act proactively, making mentorship a durable engine for belonging and opportunity.

To learn more, visit mentorcollective.org

