



A Guide to Personalized Postsecondary Planning

5 Steps to Help Students
Find Their Best-Fit Path



The Importance of Personalizing Future Planning for Each Student

Personalizing future planning for each K-12 student is crucial in today's evolving education and workforce landscapes. Recognizing that every student has unique strengths, interests, learning methods, and goals is essential for dismantling the “one size fits all” approach that has served as the predominant framework for postsecondary planning in American high schools.

The pathway of matriculating at a four-year college is no longer the only—or best—option for every student. Research from the Burning Glass Institute and Strada Institute for the Future of Work shows that only about half of bachelor's degree graduates secure employment in a college-level job within a year of graduation. A bachelor's degree is not a guaranteed ticket to career success.

Students are better served by learning the full spectrum of postsecondary options, including community colleges, trade and technical schools, professional certification programs, internships, military enlistment, and direct workforce entry. With this knowledge, they can make more informed decisions that better reflect their own curiosities, interests, and strengths.



School counselors play a critical role in guiding students through career exploration and postsecondary planning, but they often face challenges such as large caseloads, overwhelming administrative burdens, and limited resources.

Effective postsecondary planning can also enhance student engagement and school attendance. Personalized learning and career-connected education have been shown to increase student motivation, decrease chronic absenteeism, and foster a sense of purpose in the academic journey.

1

This guide is designed to help counselors work with students in finding their best-fit path by using a **five-question framework**:

“Who am I?”

Students uncover their strengths, interests, and goals.

2

“What can I be?”

Students explore and expand their career awareness.

3

“How do I get there?”

Students research the education, credentials, and experiences they need to move forward in their chosen professional path and form a plan for the future.

4

“Did I pick the right path for me?”

Students are given the freedom to experience work-based learning (WBL) and real-world opportunities to explore their chosen path and either affirm their choice or reimagine a new path.

5

“How can technology help?”

Students leverage technology and AI to help with their planning, perform research, and personalize their pathway.

By working methodically through these questions, counselors can help students:

- **Gain** a better understanding of themselves
- **Form** a clearer picture of where they want to go
- **Plan** concrete steps to achieve their goals
- **Test** their hypotheses to see if they enjoy the work of their chosen career path
- **Reformulate** a new path if they uncover a new interest or aspiration, normalizing the non-linear nature of self-discovery and growth
- **Leverage** technology to enhance their research and set them up for postsecondary success

As Benjamin Franklin famously said, **“By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail.”** Thoughtful preparation and informed decision-making are essential in helping students formulate paths to successful futures. Implementing this five-question framework helps ensure every student is prepared to thrive.

1

Who am I?

Uncovering Student Strengths,
Interests, and Goals





The Importance of Self-Discovery

Helping students understand themselves is vital in uncovering their motivations, passions, and career aspirations. It enables them to better communicate their goals, articulate their values, and increase their confidence.

Giving students the time and space to step back from the daily busyness of their lives and think about bigger questions is an essential first step in helping students envision their future. It also instills the importance of regular self-check-ins for mental and emotional wellness.

Tools and Strategies for Self-Discovery

Journaling, group discussions, and structured writing are all productive ways to stimulate the thoughtfulness required for self-reflection. Career-focused counseling sessions in small groups or one-on-one also help students better identify and articulate their aspirations.

If your school or district uses a college, career, and life readiness solution such as [PowerSchool Naviance CCLR](#), students can access digital self-discovery assessments that help them reflect on their work and learning styles. These assessments can then be used to identify the careers that best align with the student's personality profile.

Counselors can consider asking students questions that fall into four broad categories: self, school, relationships, and purpose. This approach ensures a comprehensive view of the whole student.

There are countless questions that help students begin this reflective work. Here's a small sample of examples:



Self Questions

- What are my top three core values?
- What do I find meaningful?
- What do I stand for, even when it's uncomfortable or unpopular?
- What beliefs have I outgrown?
- What challenges me?



School Questions

- What motivates me to learn?
- What is the easiest part of school for me?
- What is the hardest part of school for me?
- Do I tend toward leader, teammate, or independent contributor roles?
- How do I measure my academic success?



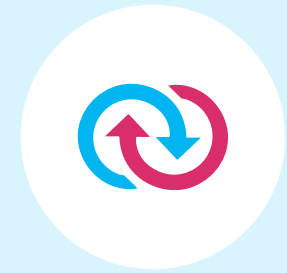
Relationship Questions

- Who do I rely on for advice?
- What relationship have I learned the most from?
- How do I treat the people in my life?
- What is a moment in a relationship when I wish I handled a circumstance differently?
- What do I contribute to my relationships?



Purpose Questions

- What is my definition of success?
- What motivates me?
- If money didn't matter, what would I want to do after high school?
- What kinds of people do I admire? Why?
- What do I want to contribute to my community?



Connecting Learning to Life

While many schools wait until students are in their junior or senior years of high school to begin this self-discovery work, research shows that engaging students by establishing connections between curriculum and their lives outside the classroom leads to better academic outcomes and improved preparation for careers.

Schools and students are best served by connecting learning to life as early and often as possible.

2

What can I be?

Exploring and Expanding
Career Awareness





Introducing Career Exploration Early

Many schools begin job readiness programming late in high school, but starting earlier helps students think bigger and plan better. [Research shows that learning about jobs early helps students explore interests, build skills, and imagine more possibilities for their future.](#)

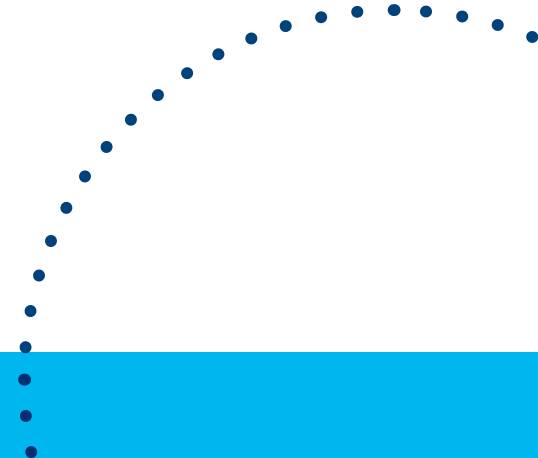


How counselors can help:

Build career awareness with activities that introduce students to different professions.

For example, a fourth grader at a school in [Cajon Valley Union School District \(CA\)](#), began the school year wanting to become a professional football player. After participating in a curricular unit that involved looking at Google satellite images of neighborhoods and designing his own housing development, he is now considering becoming an engineer or geographer.

Schools can begin building career awareness in elementary school (K-5) with activities that introduce students to different professions. Middle and high school students can engage in career exploration through job shadowing, industry field trips, and career fairs.



Broadening Understanding of Career Pathways

Many students grow up with a limited view of career possibilities, often focusing on traditional fields like medicine, law, or business. While careers in these professions are valuable, today's job market offers a much wider array of opportunities, including fields that didn't exist a decade ago. By expanding students' awareness of career options, educators can help them discover paths that align with their interests, skills, and the evolving demands of the workforce.

One way to broaden students' horizons is by introducing them to emerging and trending industries. Careers in cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, data science, and green technology are rapidly growing and offer exciting prospects for the future. As the world transitions to sustainable energy, fields like wind and solar power are also becoming critical areas of employment. Highlighting these industries not only exposes students to innovative career paths but also helps them see the connection between their education and the world's changing needs.



How counselors can help:

Introduce students to emerging and trending industries—like cybersecurity, AI, and green career opportunities.



Beyond simply learning about different careers, students should also understand how industry trends impact job demand. Factors such as projected industry growth, technological advancements, and regional economic conditions influence which careers will thrive in the coming years. By considering these elements, students can make informed decisions about their future, selecting career paths that offer stability, fulfillment, and opportunities for growth.

3

How do I
get there?

Planning Postsecondary Paths





Exposure to Postsecondary Pathways

When planning for life after high school, students benefit from understanding the wide range of opportunities available to them. While traditional four-year colleges and universities remain a common choice, they are just one of many potential pathways. Community colleges offer a more affordable and flexible route, often serving as a steppingstone to a bachelor's degree or providing career-focused programs that lead directly to employment.

For students interested in hands-on learning, technical and trade schools provide specialized training in fields such as healthcare, automotive technology, IT and computer science, and skilled trades like plumbing or electrical work. These programs equip students with industry-specific certifications and practical skills that lead to well-paying careers without the need for a traditional degree. Similarly, internships and certification programs allow students to gain real-world experience while earning credentials that can make them more competitive in the job market.

Beyond formal education, other paths include military enlistment, which offers structured career training, education benefits, and leadership development. Some students may choose to enter the workforce directly, gaining immediate experience and income while developing skills on the job. Regardless of the path they choose, it is essential that students have access to resources that help them research the degrees, certifications, or skills required for their desired careers.

By exposing students to these diverse pathways, educators and counselors can help them see that success is not limited to a single trajectory. Every student's journey is unique, and with the right guidance, they can find a path that aligns with their interests, strengths, and goals.

Financial Literacy

The [student loan crisis has reached the level of a national emergency](#), burdening millions of Americans with debt that can take decades to repay. Rising tuition costs, coupled with the increasing necessity of higher education for career advancement, have led to a situation where students often take on significant financial obligations before they even enter the workforce. The long-term effects of student loan debt can impact major life decisions, such as buying a home, starting a business, or even saving for retirement. Addressing this crisis requires not only policy reform but also a stronger emphasis on financial literacy for students before they take on debt.

One of the most critical aspects of financial literacy is understanding the different ways to finance postsecondary paths. For those pursuing higher education, students must be aware of the distinctions between grants, loans, and scholarships. Grants and scholarships provide funding that does not need to be repaid, making them the most financially sound options. These can come from federal and state governments, private organizations, or colleges themselves, often based on financial need, academic merit, or specific talents. In contrast, loans—whether federal or private—must be repaid with interest, meaning students can accumulate substantial debt over time—often quickly.

Students may choose to work while earning a degree, helping to offset the cost. This may mean taking more time to graduate but doing so from a sounder financial position. Alternatively, workplaces often contribute to their employees' continuing education, so students may consider working for an employer who will invest in their long-term growth. Counselors should encourage students to research what most people do in their chosen postsecondary path to make the wisest financial decisions.

The financial choices students make at the age of 18 can have long-lasting consequences. Without proper guidance, many students take on loans without fully understanding the repayment terms, interest rates, or long-term impact on their financial stability. **By equipping students with essential financial literacy skills, educators can empower them to make informed decisions about their education and future.** Ensuring that students explore all available funding options before resorting to loans can help reduce the burden of debt and set them on a more secure financial path.



How counselors can help:

Help build financial literacy skills to empower students to make informed decisions about their futures.

4

Did I pick the
right path for me?

Experiencing Work-Based
Learning Opportunities



The Power of Experiential Learning

Work-based learning (WBL) provides students with invaluable first-hand experience in professional environments, bridging the gap between classroom theory and real-world application. By engaging in hands-on learning, students can develop essential skills, gain industry insights, and build professional networks that will support them in their career journeys.

More importantly, WBL allows students to test their interests and career choices before making long-term commitments. Experiencing a profession first-hand can confirm that they are on the right path—or reveal that they should pivot to something else while they still have the flexibility to do so. This early exploration can prevent costly missteps in education and career planning while fostering a sense of purpose and direction.

Types of Work-Based Learning Opportunities



Internships: Internships give students the opportunity to apply their academic knowledge in professional settings, gaining real-world skills while building valuable industry connections. Many internships also provide course credit, financial stipends, or full-time employment opportunities after graduation.



Job Shadowing and Mentorship Programs: Shadowing professionals allows students to observe day-to-day responsibilities in their field of interest, helping them understand industry expectations and workplace culture. Mentorship programs provide direct guidance from experienced professionals, offering career advice, skill-building support, and personal development insights.



Entrepreneurial and Project-Based Learning: Hands-on experiences in entrepreneurship and project-based learning encourage students to develop leadership, problem-solving, and teamwork skills. By working on real-world projects—whether through school-sponsored initiatives or independent ventures—students learn to navigate challenges, make decisions, and innovate in meaningful ways.








Service Learning and Volunteering: Participating in service learning and volunteer programs helps students develop civic engagement and social responsibility. These experiences not only allow students to contribute to their communities but also build empathy, communication, and teamwork skills that are valuable in any career path.



Benefits of Work-Based Learning

Work-based learning equips students with essential career readiness skills that are difficult to develop solely through traditional classroom instruction. Through hands-on experience, students enhance their:

-  **Communication:** Learning to effectively articulate ideas, collaborate with others, and engage with diverse audiences
-  **Collaboration:** Working in teams to solve problems, manage projects, and achieve shared goals
-  **Problem-Solving:** Developing critical thinking skills by tackling real-world challenges
-  **Leadership:** Taking initiative, managing responsibilities, and inspiring peers
-  **Adaptability:** Navigating change, learning from experience, and staying resilient in dynamic work environments

Beyond skill development, WBL experiences help students gain clarity about their career paths. Many students enter programs with certain expectations, only to discover that their true interests lie elsewhere. By exploring different roles and industries early on, students can make informed decisions about their future before investing time, money, and effort into a career that may not align with their passions or strengths. Whether confirming their chosen path or redirecting their focus, work-based learning empowers students to take control of their futures with confidence.

5

How can technology help?

Leveraging Technology to Personalize Planning



Leveraging Technology to Personalize Planning

Technology and artificial intelligence (AI) are transforming the way students navigate their academic and career journeys. By integrating AI-driven tools into education, schools can provide more personalized support, enhance career readiness, and improve overall student outcomes. From streamlining administrative tasks for counselors to offering students real-time labor market insights, technology has the potential to make postsecondary planning more efficient and effective.




How Technology and AI Can Support Counselors

School counselors play a crucial role in guiding students toward their future careers, but high caseloads and administrative demands often limit the time they can spend on individualized support. AI-powered tools can alleviate these challenges by automating administrative tasks, ensuring that students remain on track to meet graduation requirements. These systems can flag missing credits, monitor academic progress, and send reminders for important deadlines, allowing counselors to focus more on student engagement.

Additionally, technology enables counselors to manage their caseloads more efficiently. AI can help personalize the student experience at scale, identifying students who may need additional support while allowing counselors to dedicate more one-on-one time to those facing significant academic or personal challenges. Furthermore, AI-driven analytics can detect early warning signs of disengagement, attendance issues, or declining academic performance, enabling schools to intervene proactively before problems escalate.



How AI Can Maximize Counselor Impact

-  Quickly complete time-intensive tasks such as writing letters of recommendation or finding information in student profiles
-  Provide real-time answers to common student questions, serving as a resource that helps take the burden off counselors
-  Direct counselors to essential information so they can efficiently and effectively support students

How Technology and AI Empower Students

AI and technology also provide students with tools to take ownership of their academic and career planning. One of the most powerful applications of AI is personalized career and academic recommendations. By analyzing students' strengths, interests, and goals, AI-powered platforms can match them with potential career pathways, suitable college programs, or alternative education options such as trade schools or certification programs.

Beyond personalized guidance, students can use AI to access real-time labor market data. By exploring salary trends, in-demand jobs, and essential skills sought by employers, students can make informed decisions about their educational and career choices. Tools like PowerSchool Naviance CCLR further support students by offering digital portfolios, career planning resources, and self-assessments. These platforms allow students to research colleges, track progress, build resumes, and set long-term career goals, ensuring they stay on the right path.

AI-driven technology can also personalize academic and career recommendations and has been designed for this purpose in PowerBuddy for College and Career.

How Technology Impacts Districts

Integrating AI-driven career readiness tools into school curricula has far-reaching benefits for school districts. [Research indicates that student engagement directly correlates with](#)

[stronger academic performance and positive workplace outcomes](#). Engaged students are **2.5 times more likely to excel academically and 4.5 times more likely to feel optimistic about their future compared to their disengaged peers**. Furthermore, early exposure to career exploration can significantly impact dropout prevention, reducing the risk by 23%.

For districts looking to measure the return on investment (ROI) of these initiatives, tools like the [PowerSchool Naviance CCLR ROI Calculator](#) provide valuable insights. By incorporating college, career, and life readiness (CCLR) planning into school curricula, districts can enhance attendance and graduation rates—both of which directly impact state funding.

The Role of AI Literacy in Career Readiness

As AI continues to shape the workforce, AI literacy will become an essential skill for students. Understanding how to effectively and ethically leverage AI tools will be crucial for career success in an increasingly automated and technology-driven world. Schools must equip students with the knowledge to use AI for research, problem-solving, and decision-making while also addressing ethical considerations, such as bias in algorithms and responsible data usage.

By integrating AI literacy into career readiness programs, educators can prepare students for the evolving job market, ensuring they graduate with the skills needed to thrive in the workforce of the future.

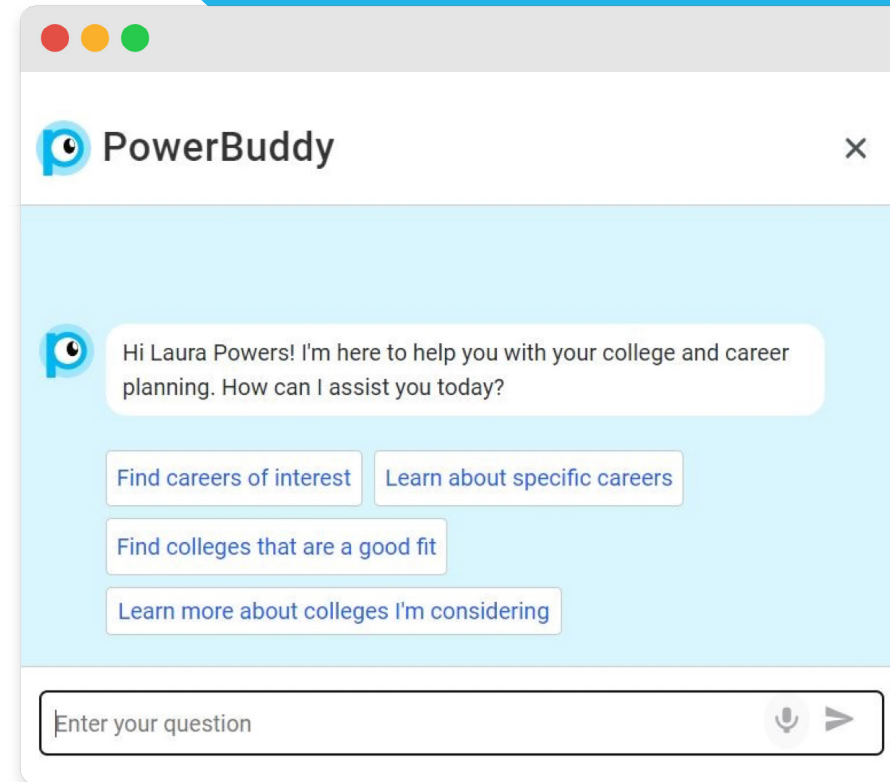
Walking the Path

Helping students find their best-fit postsecondary path after K-12 education is more than just a one-time decision—it's a journey of self-discovery, exploration, and informed choice-making. By providing students with the right tools, guidance, and opportunities, we empower them to take ownership of their futures and pursue paths that align with their skills, interests, and aspirations.

As educators, counselors, and stakeholders in student success, our role is to ensure that every learner has access to personalized support, reliable resources, and a comprehensive understanding of their options, whether that means pursuing a four-year college, community college, vocational training, military service, or entering the workforce directly.

By fostering a culture of informed decision-making, encouraging career exploration, and integrating technology-driven solutions, we can help students navigate their postsecondary options with confidence. Their success is not defined by a single choice but by their ability to adapt, grow, and pursue lifelong learning.

Ultimately, the goal is clear: to guide students toward a future where they feel fulfilled, prepared, and empowered to thrive—wherever their journey takes them.



Personalize postsecondary planning to help every student find their best-fit path.

[Learn More](#)



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