

From Engagement to Outcomes

How Institutions That Prioritize Career Services Engagement Perform on Student Outcomes

Executive Summary

Student outcomes—graduation rates, employment, earnings—have become central to institutional success. They influence enrollment demand, retention, public perception, funding conversations, and long-term sustainability.

But outcomes share a critical limitation: *they are lagging indicators*. By the time outcomes appear in federal data or first-destination reports, institutions can no longer change them for the students those outcomes represent.

Institutions that want to improve outcomes must therefore focus on what comes *before* them.

This report advances a clear thesis:

OUR THESIS

Career services engagement is one of the strongest leading indicators institutions can influence to shape long-term student outcomes.

Using federal outcomes data, first-destination benchmarks, and uConnect client insights, this report explores how institutions that prioritize scalable career engagement—many of whom partner with uConnect—compare to peer institutions that do not.

This is not a causal study. It is a *directional, correlation-based analysis* designed to surface patterns that help institutional leaders think differently about outcomes, investment, and infrastructure.

Why Outcomes Alone Are Not Enough

Outcomes matter more than ever. Prospective students and families evaluate institutions based on return on investment. Policymakers and accreditors increasingly scrutinize completion and earnings.

Boards and presidents feel direct pressure to demonstrate value.

At the same time, outcomes present a strategic challenge:

- They reflect decisions made *years earlier*
- They cannot be improved retroactively
- They offer limited guidance for real-time intervention

In other words, outcomes describe what happened, not what to do next.

Institutions therefore need *leading indicators*—signals that appear while students are still enrolled and while institutional action is still possible.

Career services engagement is one of the few levers that meets this requirement.

Engagement as a Leading Indicator

When students meaningfully engage with career services, a predictable set of behaviors follows:

- Earlier career exploration
- Increased confidence and skill development
- Greater exposure to employers
- Higher participation in experiential learning
- More intentional academic and co-curricular choices

These behaviors compound over time. They do not guarantee outcomes—but they create the **conditions** in which positive outcomes are more likely to emerge.

Institutions that believe this invest accordingly. They staff (and fund) career services. They integrate career into the campus ecosystem. And increasingly, they invest in technical infrastructure to scale engagement beyond what manual processes allow.

This report examines how that focus aligns with student outcomes.

What We Analyzed

This analysis focuses on **four-year colleges and universities** and draws on three primary inputs:

- **College Scorecard institution-level outcomes**, including graduation rates and early earnings metrics
College Scorecard Index (US Department of Education)
- **uConnect client identification**, used to distinguish institutions that have invested in career engagement infrastructure
uConnect
- **First-destination benchmarks**, used as contextual reference points for early outcomes
First-Destination benchmark data (NACE, 2025)

Institutions were segmented to allow for more meaningful comparisons, including:

- Private four-year institutions
- Medium public universities (5,000–10,000 students)
- Large public universities (10,000–20,000 students)
- Extra large public universities (>20,000 students)
- State-level groupings where sufficient uConnect representation exists

Important note: This report does not attempt to prove causation. The findings presented are correlations intended to surface patterns, not isolate variables.

Segment Findings

Private Four-Year Colleges and Universities

Private four-year institutions often face intense pressure to differentiate on value amid rising tuition sensitivity and increased scrutiny of ROI. While these institutions may benefit from smaller student populations and stronger alumni networks, they frequently contend with constrained operating budgets, limited staffing capacity, and high expectations from students and families around personalized outcomes. As a result, scaling consistent career engagement across the full student body, beyond the most proactive students, can be a persistent challenge.

What the data shows:

Average Graduation Rate

uConnect Institutions

~76%

Non-uConnect Institutions

~54%

+22 percentage point difference

Median Earnings Four Years After Completion

uConnect Institutions

~\$65,000

Non-uConnect Institutions

~\$50,000

~30% higher median earnings

Students Earning Above a High-school Earnings Threshold

uConnect Institutions

~1,020 students (avg.)

Non-uConnect Institutions

~420 students (avg.)

More than 2x higher

What this tells us:

Among private four-year colleges, institutions where career engagement is prioritized and scaled tend to outperform peer institutions across both completion and early earnings outcomes. Platform engagement data shows that these institutions are not merely investing in career services—they are reaching students more consistently and at greater scale.

Medium Public Universities

5,000–10,000 Students

Medium public universities typically operate in a resource-constrained environment, serving diverse student populations with varying levels of career readiness, while balancing access, affordability, and workforce alignment mandates. Career services teams at these institutions are often small relative to enrollment, making individualized support difficult to sustain at scale. The challenge is less about intent and more about reach: ensuring that career engagement extends beyond a subset of motivated students and translates into tangible labor-market traction for the broader population.

What the data shows:

Average Graduation Rate

uConnect Institutions

~51%

Non-uConnect Institutions

~48%

+3 percentage point difference

Median Earnings Four Years After Completion

uConnect Institutions

~\$52,000

Non-uConnect Institutions

~\$49,000

~\$3,000 higher

Students Earning Above a High-school Earnings Threshold

uConnect Institutions

~2,000 students (avg.)

Non-uConnect Institutions

~1,460 students (avg.)

~37% higher

What this tells us:

In this segment, the most pronounced differences appear in labor market outcomes rather than completion alone. Engagement data suggests that career platforms play an important role in helping students translate enrollment into workforce traction, even when institutional constraints limit staffing and individualized support.

Large Public Universities

10,000–20,000 Students

Large public universities face complexity at scale. With tens of thousands of students, decentralized academic structures, and wide variation in student needs and career goals, consistency becomes a central challenge. Even well-resourced career teams can struggle to maintain visibility, coordination, and sustained engagement across the institution. In this context, outcomes are increasingly shaped not by individual programs or advisors, but by the strength of systems that embed career engagement into the everyday student experience.

What the data shows:

Average Graduation Rate

uConnect Institutions

~63%

Non-uConnect Institutions

~54%

+9 percentage point difference

Median Earnings Four Years After Completion

uConnect Institutions

~\$56,000

Non-uConnect Institutions

~\$50,000

~11% higher median earnings

Students Earning Above a High-school Earnings Threshold

uConnect Institutions

~2,780 students (avg.)

Non-uConnect Institutions

~2,310 students (avg.)

~20% higher

What this tells us:

At a larger scale, engagement infrastructure appears even more consequential. Institutions serving tens of thousands of students that demonstrate sustained, high-volume engagement show stronger aggregate outcomes—suggesting that systems, not just staffing, matter when scale increases.

Extra Large Public Universities

>20,000 Students

Extra large public universities face the hardest scaling challenge: decentralized colleges, huge variation in student needs, and the operational difficulty of keeping career services consistently visible across the full student lifecycle.

What the data shows:

Average Graduation Rate

uConnect Institutions

~71%

Non-uConnect Institutions

~63%

+8 percentage points

Median Earnings Four Years After Completion

uConnect Institutions

~\$57,000

Non-uConnect Institutions

~\$55,000

~\$2,000 higher

Students Earning Above a High-school Earnings Threshold

uConnect Institutions

~5,105 students (avg.)

Non-uConnect Institutions

~4,227 students (avg.)

~21% higher

What this tells us:

At extreme scale, engagement infrastructure appears most consequential. Extra large public institutions with scaled career engagement (as reflected by their uConnect partnership) show stronger completion and early earnings alignment, reinforcing the “systems, not just staffing” story already present in the medium or large segments.

Geographic Patterns

State-level analysis reveals similar patterns: uConnect institutions frequently outperform non-uConnect peers within the same geographic and regulatory environments.

Examples from selected states:

	Graduation rate		Median earnings	
	uConnect Institutions	Non-uConnect Institutions	uConnect Institutions	Non-uConnect Institutions
Connecticut	~85%	~62%	~\$69,000	~\$58,000
California	~76%	~57%	~\$61,000	~\$57,000
Florida	~71%	~49%	~\$51,000	~\$45,000
North Carolina	~87%	~47%	~\$71,000	~\$46,000
Washington	~66%	~45%	~\$58,000	~\$50,000
Massachusetts	~76%	~62%	~\$72,000	~\$56,000

What this tells us:

Across diverse state contexts, institutions that make sustained investments in career engagement—and operationalize that investment through scalable systems—show stronger completion and early earnings outcomes than peers. These patterns suggest that outcomes are shaped less by geography and more by whether institutions actively drive student engagement with career development throughout the student lifecycle.

First-Destination Outcomes: The Earliest Signal

Federal outcomes data captures results years after enrollment. First-destination outcomes provide a much earlier signal.

Among uConnect institutions that report first-destination data, the observed **positive career outcome rate is approximately 90%**, compared to a national benchmark of approximately **85%**.

First-destination outcomes sit at a critical intersection:

- They follow student engagement
- They precede long-term earnings and repayment outcomes
- They reflect the immediate effectiveness of career preparation and employer connection

Seen together, uConnect client insights, first-destination outcomes, and long-term federal outcomes form a coherent narrative arc.

Why Infrastructure Matters

Career engagement does not scale on spreadsheets, emails, or disconnected tools. Institutions that serve thousands—or tens of thousands—of students require intentional systems to translate strategy into day-to-day student behavior.

Across the market, institutions invest in career services infrastructure like uConnect for four core reasons:

1. Increasing Engagement With Career Resources and Opportunities

Career services can only influence outcomes if students actually engage. Modern institutions require systems that surface relevant career content, opportunities, and resources early and often—meeting students where they already are.

Infrastructure enables:

- Persistent visibility of career resources
- Self-guided exploration beyond office hours
- Repeated touchpoints across the student lifecycle

Higher engagement is not an end in itself—it is the prerequisite for every downstream outcome.

2. Scaling the Role and Impact of Career Services

No career team can grow headcount fast enough to match institutional scale. Infrastructure allows institutions to extend the reach of career services without burning out staff or sacrificing quality.

With the right systems in place, career teams can:

- Automate low-value, repetitive work
- Focus staff time on high-impact advising and partnerships
- Serve significantly more students without proportional cost increases

In this way, technology becomes a force multiplier—not a replacement—for human expertise.

3. Embedding Career Into the Broader Campus Ecosystem

Career readiness cannot live solely within a single office. Institutions that see the strongest outcomes embed career across the student experience—academics, enrollment, student success, alumni relations, and beyond.

Infrastructure makes this possible by:

- Giving faculty and staff easy access to career resources
- Enabling campus partners to reinforce career messaging
- Integrating career development into everyday student interactions

This distributed model ensures that career development is not optional or episodic, but continuous and culturally reinforced.

4. Strengthening Employer Relationships

Employer engagement is a critical—but often constrained—component of career outcomes. Institutions need systems that allow employers to interact with students efficiently and at scale.

Infrastructure supports employer relations by:

- Creating consistent, visible pathways for employer participation
- Reducing friction in posting opportunities and engaging students
- Allowing career teams to manage and grow employer partnerships strategically

Stronger employer engagement increases opportunity access for students while reinforcing the institution's value proposition to the labor market.

The Career Services Investment Flywheel

The pattern observed in the data aligns with a broader institutional flywheel:

1. Investment in Career Services Infrastructure

Institutions prioritize career services and put systems in place to support engagement at scale.

2. Better Career Engagement

More students engage earlier and more consistently with career tools, resources, and opportunities.

3. Stronger Career Outcomes

Improved preparedness leads to stronger employment and earnings outcomes for graduates.

4. Secured Government Funding

Strong outcomes support performance-based funding, grants, and public accountability metrics.

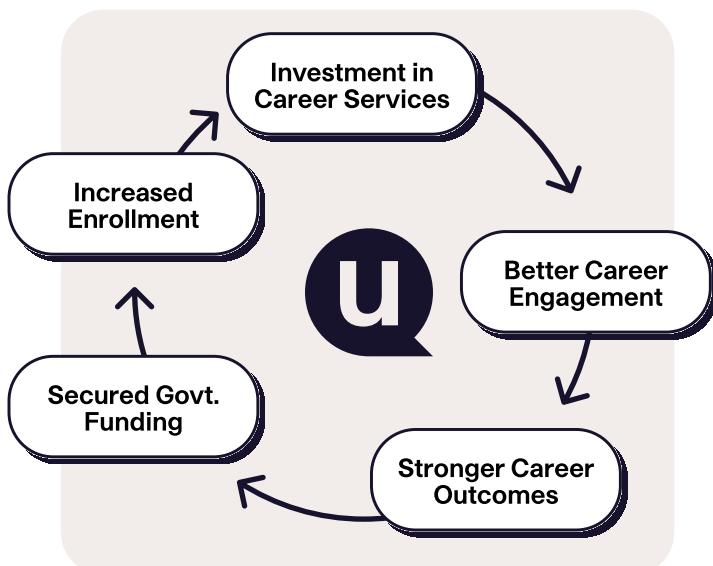
5. Increased Enrollment

Demonstrated outcomes strengthen institutional reputation and value, driving enrollment demand.

6. Reinvestment in Career Services

Increased resources and stability enable further investment—reinforcing the cycle.

Engagement fuels outcomes. Outcomes reinforce investment.



What Institutional Leaders Should Take Away

This analysis points to several clear takeaways:

- Outcomes should not be the starting point—they should be the destination
- Career engagement is one of the few leading indicators institutions can influence directly
- Institutions that prioritize career services engagement tend to show stronger outcomes
- Infrastructure like uConnect enables scale, consistency, and accountability

Outcomes may be the engine of institutional sustainability—but *career services engagement is the fuel*.

Institutions that understand this distinction are better positioned to shape their future rather than simply report on their past.

About Connect

uConnect partners with colleges and universities that prioritize career services as a core component of student success. Serving as the central infrastructure for career engagement, uConnect's Virtual Career Center platform enables institutions to scale access to career tools, resources, and opportunities across the full student population.

By making career services visible, accessible, and embedded throughout the student lifecycle, the Virtual Career Center increases the frequency, consistency, and breadth of student engagement. This sustained engagement supports stronger alignment between institutional investment, student behavior, and long-term outcomes.

uConnect helps institutions move beyond intent—translating a commitment to career services into measurable engagement and, ultimately, stronger student outcomes.



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