

Enhancing the Faculty Role in Student Career Readiness

Embedding career learning in the classroom is the most effective way to reach and expand opportunities to all students, write Karrin E. Wilks and Niesha Ziehmke.

By [Karrin E. Wilks](#) and [Niesha Ziehmke](#)



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Rapid technological advancement has upended traditional views about job-skill requirements and workforce preparation, placing new demands on educational systems. That is particularly true for systems that serve low-income students and students of color, who face multiple barriers in a competitive and selective hiring environment. Public institutions, and especially community colleges, are distinctly

positioned to engage with employers in the transition to a skills-based economy to better prepare students for the future of work.

Improving career readiness, outside of clinical and vocational programs, has traditionally been seen as the work of career advisers. Yet, as detailed in a recent report by Strada Education and Gallup, fewer than 20 percent of students nationally visit their career services offices to participate in campus offerings. And that 20 percent are generally students who can take advantage of extracurricular activities outside the classroom rather than those who need career support most. The challenge is further compounded by pervasive understaffing at public colleges' career services offices, resulting in unreasonably high caseloads.

Higher education institutions can support career readiness for all students at scale only by embedding career learning in required courses, meeting students where they are and providing a specific context for career development. Improving student success, including key metrics such as degree completion and postgraduation employment, is not possible without pervasive, highly visible faculty engagement and leadership. Particularly for first-generation commuter students who are often juggling many family support roles, meeting them where they are is essential—and that is in the classroom.

But while faculty members have deep knowledge and expertise in their disciplines, most have not been engaged in professional development aimed at aligning curriculum and pedagogy with the current expectations of employers for in-demand, high-potential entry-level jobs, as well as the nuances of the application and interview processes for such roles. Having direct access to corporate recruiters and subject matter experts is also essential, as it allows for backward mapping from the specific technical and professional skills of in-demand jobs. However, most faculty members do not readily have such connections, and many colleges are understaffed not only in career services but workforce development, as well.

We've found, however, that professional development and direct access to employers can be facilitated for faculty members through a formal bridge or intermediary between education and industry. That is the role that our organization, the New York Jobs CEO Council is playing with the City University of New York.

The Jobs Council is a nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing the economic prosperity of low-income New Yorkers, particularly communities of color. It is composed of 30 of the largest employers in the New York metro area with a commitment from their CEOs to provide 100,000 family-sustaining jobs to low-income New Yorkers by 2030, including at least 25,000 to students from CUNY institutions. Among the strategies designed to reach that goal, the Jobs Council partnered with CUNY to engage faculty from across its 18 undergraduate colleges in a new program: the Faculty Fellowship in Practice-Based Teaching and Learning. The theory of change behind the design of the fellowship is that embedding career learning in the classroom is the most effective way to reach and expand opportunities to all students—rather than only those who opt in to extracurricular activities.

The Faculty Fellowship is designed to enhance practice-based teaching and learning in targeted degrees aligned with the most in-demand jobs, as well as more broadly through faculty advocacy on their campuses. The fellowship is a yearlong program that connects faculty, both virtually and in person, to company recruiters, subject matter experts and CUNY alumni employed at each company, as well as to Jobs Council partners who provide career development resources.

How It Works

The fellowship starts with a three-week summer intensive—for which faculty are compensated—featuring multiple company and partner presentations. The summer intensive is followed by a series of visiting scholar sessions during the fall and spring semesters, which offer additional direct engagement with employers. The fellowship is punctuated by a formative program assessment session in December and a

summative assessment session in May to evaluate its impact and make any improvements for the next cohort.

Company presentations generally follow a standard agenda:

- Welcome from the company leader.
- Overview of company business and culture.
- Description of entry-level job roles and recruiting timeline and process.
- Panel of early-career hires who are CUNY alumni and/or panel of hiring managers.
- Lunch and networking with employees who are CUNY alumni and/or hiring managers.

This deeper understanding of company culture and recruitment processes offers new resources and industry-based tools to align curriculum and pedagogy with the current expectations of employers for in-demand entry-level jobs. Partners additionally propose design models such as backward mapping from job-skill specifications and embedding credentials and professional competencies in courses.

One of the key deliverables for faculty participation in the fellowship is a redesign of the syllabus for a selected course to enhance practice-based teaching and learning, featuring real-world assignments and assessments—ideally to include a group project focused on solving a problem or task likely to be encountered in the workplace. Additionally, the assignment requires faculty to embed multiple opportunities for students to practice professional skills prioritized by companies and verified by the National Association of Colleges and Employers. Participants also receive expected learning outcomes and a rubric to ensure curricular and pedagogical change as a result of the fellowship.

The assignment outlines expected student learning outcomes as follows:

- Complete and present on a real-world project relevant to their discipline and industry partners.
- Demonstrate proficiency in one or more NACE career competencies (career and self-development, communication, critical thinking, equity and inclusion, leadership, professionalism, teamwork, technology).
- Update their résumé to include the project and NACE career competencies.
- Successfully speak to the experience and NACE career competencies learned in the project in a mock interview or similar exchange.

The assignment requires participating faculty to submit a revised syllabus, including the new or enhanced assignment and associated assessment tools. The rubric provided for self-assessment includes four rating categories: practice-based teaching and learning, professional skills/NACE career competencies, résumé readiness, and interview readiness. Faculty members use the rubric to rate themselves as they redesign their syllabi, based on the extent to which their new assignment comprehensively addresses these categories.

Finally, the fellowship program requires faculty to present a pedagogical leadership plan to advocate for practice-based teaching and learning in their departments and more broadly in their colleges. At the end of the summer intensive, fellows present their syllabus redesign and pedagogical leadership plan in flash presentations of no more than five minutes. Common themes and strategies have been evident in alignment with the expectations and tools shared by companies and partners during the summer intensive. Many faculty incorporate structured group work around a real-world problem that includes assigning and rotating team member roles and using the STAR framework (situation, task, action, result) for final presentations to be included on student résumés and used as a model for interview preparation.

To understand the fellowship's impact on curriculum, pedagogy and advocacy, the flash presentations are evaluated for performance in the following critical areas:

- NACE competencies addressed and mapped to learning outcomes.
- Forage simulations embedded.
- Google Certificate embedded.
- Structured group project with assigned roles.
- Résumé enhancement component.
- Interview prep–STAR embedded.
- Industry visit or co-planning embedded.
- Pedagogical leadership and advocacy plan.
- Aligned programs on campus.
- Career services integration.

Many faculty incorporate online job simulations from Forage, a Jobs Council partner, into their courses. The platform offers projects and day-to-day work simulations created in partnership with more than 150 employers, including many Jobs Council members. Students who complete projects can compare their work with model answers and earn a certificate, add the certification to their résumé and LinkedIn profile, and connect with recruiters. According to Forage's data, students are four times more likely to land a job after completing a job simulation.

Looking Ahead

The Faculty Fellowship in Practice-Based Teaching and Learning has evolved and expanded since its inception in 2021, including inviting former fellows to share their strategies for enhancing practice-based teaching and pedagogical leadership, as well as their results to date. Now in its third cohort, the fellowship features an integration of career services staff and academic advisers, called career fellows, into the program. In some cases, the faculty and career fellows from the same college had never met each other. As required by the assignment, faculty members map their course learning outcomes with NACE career competencies, often including this on the redesigned syllabus to make explicit the importance of professional skills and their alignment with course content. The integration of career fellows is central to this alignment and to embedding résumé and interview preparation into course assignments with the support of career services.

Finally, in the flash format, faculty members present their pedagogical leadership and advocacy plans, which have varied based on whether or not they have held a special role such as department chair or course coordinator; several have also sat on departmental or collegewide curriculum committees. Those formal leadership roles provide a natural platform for pedagogical leadership. Others have committed to meeting with their colleagues, chairs, deans and even provosts to share their findings and advocate for enhanced practice-based teaching and learning in their departments and collegewide.

The Faculty Fellowship in Practice-Based Learning is a proven and replicable strategy, especially when recruiting faculty members who have formal leadership roles and the capacity to influence colleagues and benefit hundreds of students in targeted courses and disciplines aligned with in-demand jobs. Colleges interested in offering a similar faculty development program would benefit from partnering with an intermediary like the Jobs Council, a chamber of commerce or a regional workforce board to provide direct access to key employers in their service area. Offering tools for faculty to align curriculum and pedagogy strengthens and equalizes career pathways into great first jobs, an essential element of student success.

Mehdi Samimi, assistant professor of economics and business at City College of New York, summed up the benefits of our fellowship program: “I understand the importance of adapting to the changing demands of the job market and industries to guide students towards excellence in their chosen professions. Together, we can create an environment where students thrive and develop essential skills to become successful contributors to society.”

Karrin E. Wilks is chief learning officer at the New York Jobs CEO Council and past president (interim) and senior vice president and provost at Borough of Manhattan Community College, City University of New York. Niesha Ziehmke, senior director of career pathways at the council, is past dean of academic innovation and career success at Guttman Community College, City University of New York.

Written By

Karrin E. Wilks

Niesha Ziehmke