

Career Readiness Across the ACS
An Executive Brief for Institutional Leadership

ACS Mellon Academic Leadership
Working Group on Career Readiness

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Executive Summary

Over the summer of 2026, four members of the ACS Mellon Academic Leadership Fellowship explored how ACS institutions connect three important dimensions of the educational ecosystem: academic learning, advising, and career education. We interviewed over thirty faculty members, deans, provosts, and career-services professionals across fourteen ACS colleges and universities. This provides us with a current landscape of ACS institutions.

We conducted interviews that lasted between thirty and forty-five minutes and asked the same five questions in the same order in each conversation. We then collated our data to determine patterns and themes that emerged. Based on the patterns that emerged from within the fourteen ACS schools, we make recommendations for best practices and next steps.

Our methodology ensures that the themes in this report do not focus on any one campus. These themes emerged independently across institutions, which we found often work independently with little knowledge of one another's efforts in the realms of curricular learning, advising, and career education.

We urgently need greater communication both within our institutions and with our students' families, employers, alumni, and the general public. Most graduates find good jobs, yet only about half of employers are convinced colleges deliver the skills the workplace needs. Families are constantly questioning the value of a liberal arts education. We must help our students not only build competencies but name these competencies and tell their stories.

Our central finding is that career readiness at ACS schools is undergoing a quiet structural realignment. Career services offices are moving out of student life and advancement and into academic affairs. Advising is being redesigned so that a single student is supported not just by a sole academic advisor but by a team of higher education professionals dedicated to student success. Faculty, to whom students naturally turn for advice, are increasingly being equipped to lead conversations about career competencies.

Troublingly, the students who most need career support are the least likely to seek it out. Consequently, the challenge for our institutions is to make that career readiness structural rather than optional. This brief distills what we heard into five themes, names the obstacles that impede progress, and offers five key points of reflection for institutional leadership.

Five Key Themes

We have streamlined the many themes that emerged in our conversations to focus on the five that matter most for senior leadership at ACS institutions. Each theme appeared in nearly every interview we conducted. We illustrate each of these themes with the experience of one or two ACS schools.

1. Reach every student to ensure equity.

The most consistent finding across the consortium is that voluntary “opt-in” career readiness and support fails the students who need it most, while self-directed students succeed regardless of the degree of support they receive. This is an equity issue. Davidson makes the point with data: its career center engages about eighty-eight percent of students in a given year, and roughly eighty percent of first-time visitors come back. However, its staff still describe optional services as something that perpetuates inequity, observing that first-generation and international students often begin their career journeys far behind their peers.

Some schools have responded to this challenge not by requiring students to meet with career advisors but by folding career touchpoints into things students already do, such as first-year experiences or the general education curriculum. Spelman frames its approach to career readiness as unavoidable rather than mandatory. Millsaps is building career conversation into the registration advising process that every student must complete. Career services offices and the entire university ecosystem must make explicit what is implicit to support students who stand to benefit the most from career readiness and support. Institutions should reach all students and identify for them the resources, standards, benchmarks, and strategies that will help students in their career journeys.

2. Career readiness and advising belong in academic affairs.

Our interviews suggest a broader organizational shift across the ACS: career services offices are increasingly moving out of student life or advancement and into academic affairs. Richmond moved career development into academic affairs three years ago, alongside academic advising and its learning center. Furman completed a similar move this summer. At Millsaps, both the Center for Career Education and academic advising already reported to Academic Affairs; this summer, academic and career advising were merged into one team. At some institutions, career services still report to advancement or university relations. Perspectives are mixed on this reporting structure. Some colleagues at those institutions think that such a reporting structure is effective and holds promise. Other colleagues at those institutions think that such an institutional structure unintentionally sends a signal and reinforces the silos that everyone is trying to dissolve. For example, although career services at Rhodes is still under Student Life, they are breaking the silo by developing a NetVUE grant that is investing time and resources with Academic Affairs and adapting career readiness into the curriculum.

As part of this broader structural realignment, institutions are reimagining advising. In an ambitious endeavor, Davidson is launching a four-year dual-advisor model that pairs faculty guidance for intellectual development with staff coaching for professional and personal development. Rhodes and Millsaps are each testing their own integrated versions of advising.

However, these moves are not perfect on their own. Structure alone does not sustain collaboration and innovation, and support at all levels of leadership is necessary.

3. Faculty must feel ownership of career readiness conversations

Students turn to faculty first, which makes faculty engagement one of the most important dimensions for integrated career-readiness initiatives to succeed. A NACE study¹ reports that more than ninety percent of students and sixty percent of alumni look to faculty for career advice, even as about a third of faculty feel unprepared for it.² The schools making progress treat faculty-student trust as an asset, but they engage faculty strictly on faculty terms. Centre has made its career office a silent partner behind a visible faculty champion program that pays a modest stipend to faculty. Centre expects the culture shift resulting from this new partnership to take about three years. Furman has placed a career liaison in every department and has observed partnerships increase meaningfully.

Faculty are most likely to willingly partner in career readiness conversations when they are simply asked to rename the work they already do, usually through a shared vocabulary such as the NACE competencies, rather than add to their workload. Several institutions have reframed these NACE competencies in ways that are institutionally specific: Spelman has reframed the NACE competencies as essential skills, and Rhodes expects to create career readiness toolkits that would help faculty engage with NACE competencies in ways that might save time in their course or advising planning.

Regardless of whether they are presented as NACE competencies or institution-specific variants, they are generally paired with ready-made syllabus language for faculty to voluntarily implement. Top-down mandates, by contrast, repeatedly failed to take hold. Faculty should be encouraged and empowered to engage with students in career advising conversations and help their students to reflect on how their coursework relates to future careers by including faculty career readiness conversations and providing faculty with tools and resources.

4. Students must be taught to reflect on their learning and describe its value

Our students generally have the competencies employers want, but they cannot yet name and narrate them. Trinity described students who are unable to narrate their college experience succinctly in an interview. Students must be taught to reflect on their experiences and put their learning into words. Institutions must help students articulate the value of their education well before graduation through structured reflection. This will allow students to translate their academic skills into career competencies. A student's ability to articulate the value of their education in a compelling narrative is the mechanism by which the skills they have gained are recognized in a fast-changing job market. Of all ACS schools, Berea goes furthest of all in its attentiveness to structured reflection, treating the campus job every student holds as a formal site of competency development, complete with a reflective evaluation that turns ordinary work into a story a student can tell.

¹ *Faculty Attitudes: The Integration of Career Readiness Into The Curriculum.*
<https://www.aacu.org/research/faculty-attitudes-and-behaviors-the-integration-of-career-readiness-into-the-curriculum>

² At Centre, seventy-eight percent of seniors report talking with faculty about careers, against forty-two percent nationally.

High-impact practices, particularly experiential learning and internships, are especially effective at helping students translate academic skills into career competencies. Guaranteeing funding for all students to participate in these experiences can therefore be a powerful way to ensure equitable access, regardless of students' financial circumstances. The Richmond Guarantee at The University of Richmond funds an internship or research experience for every student. It provides a stipend for one summer to all students so that cost of living does not decide who is able to accept an internship. The Sewanee Pledge does the same with study abroad.

5. AI is already a workplace skill, but using it well is an equity issue.

Artificial intelligence was a consistent throughline through every conversation. Career offices are consistently ahead of academic units in using AI. The University of Richmond publishes a curated library of copy-and-paste prompts designed to prepare students for a meeting with career advisors. Centre replaced roughly a hundred and forty individual faculty AI policies with a single four-category framework in which faculty place themselves, reducing confusion for students. A majority of students already use AI in their coursework at least weekly, whether or not their campus sanctions it. Consequently, staff colleagues increasingly treat AI literacy as a baseline workplace skill, comparable to using spreadsheets efficiently, while still asking students to reflect on the ethics of using (or not using) AI.

Spelman raised an important point that deserves the attention of all ACS schools: AI systems carry bias against Black and marginalized groups, which makes critical, informed use a matter of equity as much as a skill. As colleagues at Berea observe, the more hiring is automated through applicant tracking systems, the more networking becomes important for students. Colleagues also noted that AI strengthens the argument for a liberal arts education: adaptable graduates who can learn quickly are well suited to a labor market full of jobs that do not yet exist. Still, conversation around AI has not found a clear action or pathway in any institution, which brings a great deal of anxiety and uncertainty to faculty, staff, and leadership.

Challenges

The same difficulties appeared across very different campuses, and each is worth naming.

Faculty time and capacity are limited.

Faculty are stretched thin. Consequently, faculty resist new initiatives that add to their responsibilities. Institutional progress occurs most successfully when career readiness is framed as embedded within the work that faculty already do instead of as something new that adds to their workload.

Momentum depends on individuals and structures.

Fragile momentum and leadership turnover stunt growth. One school watched a promising integrated-advising effort unravel when a president left. Another saw its signature program stall amid a transition. A program can work for three years and then collapse when one person leaves the institution.

Silos and incompatible systems impede communication.

Career centers, advising offices, and academic units often speak mutually unintelligible languages. They can also rely on different platforms, which makes data sharing difficult. It is not unusual for a student's advising record and career record to sit in different systems that cannot be accessed by the different constituencies that advise students.

Thin staffing and tight budgets limit capacity.

At smaller ACS institutions, career offices are effectively an office of one. Offices at institutions have shrunk as gift funding expired, even as student demand has grown. Ironically, offices most successful in achieving high levels of student engagement are overwhelmed by the volume of students they serve.

Chasms grow when career services offices do not report to academic affairs.

Where career services report to advancement or university relations rather than the provost, some colleagues noted that the reporting structure can make collaboration with academic affairs more challenging. Separate reporting structures may also reinforce perceptions among faculty that career readiness sits somewhat outside the academic mission, rather than being a responsibility shared across the institution.

Recommendations for Institutional Leadership

These five recommendations mirror the five themes described earlier in this report. For each theme, we suggest new directions or initiatives that might be taken at the dean, provost, and president level. Each is something that only deans, provosts, and presidents can decide, because each recommendation is dependent on structure, incentives, or funding rather than on the goodwill of any single office. For every recommendation, we name the underlying best practice and one first concrete step that campus can take.

1. Make career support structural, not optional. Voluntary services often reach the students who least need them, so an equity-minded approach requires that every student receives career support without having to seek it out. The best practice is the “unavoidable-not-mandatory”: a career conversation folded into something students already have to do, so that ongoing academic advising quietly guarantees that career conversations happen.

***One Step Forward:** Add a single, scripted career conversation to the registration-advising appointment every student already completes. Give advisors three good questions to ask students. Script conversations so that advisors encourage students to visit the career office. Track student participation to confirm this intervention reaches those most likely to opt out. This is something that must be repeated every semester, both for the professional advisors and faculty advisors.*

2. Align career services with academic affairs and integrate advising. The schools making the fastest progress have relocated career services under the provost and paired each student with both an academic advisor and a career coach. In the future, the dual-advisor model may become a best practice, with division of labor and communication between advisors outlined in writing before launch. Coordinating an integrated advising model – not designing it – is often most difficult for schools to implement.

***One Step Forward:** Move career development into academic affairs. Then pilot a paired advising approach with a faculty guide and staff career coach for one cohort of incoming students. This integrated advising model should be supported by a single, shared advising-notes platform and a written plan dividing the labor.*

3. Invest in faculty with modest incentives. Faculty engage with excitement when they perceive that the work is theirs, see that it is championed by respected colleagues, and feel acknowledged by the leadership. A top-down conscription model creates resistance and resentment among faculty. The best practice is a faculty career champion in every department, with built-in support from the career office. This faculty career champion is offered a shared vocabulary of career competencies and ready-made materials to implement with students and faculty colleagues. Faculty career champions should work with faculty colleagues to change the culture in their department.

***One Step Forward:** Fund one faculty career champion per department with a stipend (ranging from a few hundred to a couple thousand dollars depending on institutional*

resources). Convene these faculty career champions as a cohort so they learn from one another. Provide faculty career champions with plug-and-play syllabus language so that participation means renaming or reframing work that they already do and not adding to it.

4. Guarantee a funded experience for every student and build a template for reflection.

Competencies grow through experience and reflection. Cost is the main barrier that makes family resources the condition for participation in programs and internships. The best practice is to offer a funded-experience guarantee. This could be a flat amount for at least one internship or research experience for every student, paired with structured reflection so students can name and narrate what they gained.

***One Step Forward:** Establish a funded-experience guarantee at a single flat amount so location and family means do not decide who benefits. Attach a short beginning, middle, and end of experience reflection to every funded experience. This ensures that the learning becomes a story students can tell. This narrative should be shared with a mentor who should help the student reflect more deeply on career readiness and competencies.*

5. Treat AI as a baseline workplace skill and teach it ethically. Employers expect AI fluency even though they cannot yet define what that fluency entails. Most students already use AI tools whether or not the institution sanctions them. The best practice is to teach AI as a workplace competency while keeping human relationships at the center of what we do. Students should also be instructed directly about the bias these systems can carry.

***One Step Forward:** Publish one clear, easy-to-remember AI policy that reduces confusion for students. Teach students to use AI thoughtfully as a tool that strengthens their preparation for interviews, applications, and career decisions, building the skills and confidence they will carry into professional life rather than substituting for the person-to-person conversations that remain at the heart of good advising. Address AI bias openly, since these systems can disadvantage marginalized students.*

Conclusions

ACS schools are proactively engaging with career readiness. Our colleges are converging, often independently, on thoughtful, equitable, and distinctly liberal arts initiatives to better knit together curricular and experiential learning, advising, and career readiness. Our ACS schools are shifting career readiness into the sphere of academic affairs. Our colleagues are trusting faculty to lead career readiness conversations, funding the experiences that let students grow, and ensuring that the students who need the most help are reached first. ACS schools have many good ideas, but collectively they lack a way to see what initiatives have been successful on specific campuses. Sharing our 2026 findings as a report on the current landscape is the most cost-effective and fastest improvement available to every campus.

Next Steps

The next step is to bring these findings to the whole consortium in a live ACS webinar or presentation. Our working group can present the five themes and our recommendations for institutional leadership. During a live webinar, we can add what a written brief cannot: provide more granular detail and field participant questions. We can also describe in greater detail innovative work underway among schools in our consortium. These include a dual-advisor redesign; a department-by-department champion network; a funded-experience guarantee; a single memorable AI policy; and a student worker program that turns every campus job into named, resume-ready experience.

Appendix A: ACS Schools and Individuals Consulted

Berea College (KY)

- Andrew Oles, Senior Executive Director of Career Pathways & Partnerships
- Collis Robinson, Dean of Student Labor

Centenary College of Louisiana (LA)

- Debbie Bury, Director of Career Development and Internships

Centre College (KY)

- Joy Asher, Associate Dean for Career Readiness and Executive Director, Center for Career & Professional Development
- Kelly O'Quin, Assistant Dean of General Education and Associate Professor of Biology

Davidson College (NC)

- Fuji Lozada, Senior Associate Dean of the Faculty and Professor of Anthropology
- Josh King, Associate Director for Engagement & Athlete Career Development
- Mike Summers, Chief Career Officer and Executive Director of the Matthews Center for Career Development
- Cindy Hauser, Associate Dean for Advising Strategy & Development and Keiser Family Professor of Chemistry
- Ashley Bodie, Assistant Director for Exploration and Experiential Learning

Furman University (SC)

- Lauren Payne, Assistant Vice President of Career and Professional Development

Millsaps College (MS)

- Ryan Colvin, Director, Center for Career Education
- Jennifer Lewton-Yates, Assistant Dean for Student Success and Chair, Dept. of Greek and Roman Studies
- Sue Carrie Drummond, Associate Professor of Art and Chair, Art Department

Rhodes College (TN)

- Amy Moen, Associate Director of Career Services
- Amy Ware, Assistant Vice President for Career Integration and Rhodes Family Executive Director, Center for Career and Professional Development
- Rashna Wadia Richards, Associate Provost
- Amy Benson, Associate Professor of English

Rollins College (FL)

- Valerie Mandel, Executive Director, Center for Career & Life Planning
- Paul Reich, Interim Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Professor of English

Sewanee: The University of the South (TN)

- Alex Bruce, Associate Dean for Undergraduate Academic Affairs and Director of Academic Advising & Professor of English
- Kate Reed, Director of Data and Operations at Sewanee Career Readiness

Southwestern University (TX)

- Adrian Ramirez, Director of the Center for Career & Professional Development
- Jessica Hower, Assistant Vice President for Academic Affairs and Professor of History

Spelman College (GA)

- Venetta Coleman, Director of Institutional Effectiveness and Director of the Quality Enhancement Plan
- Keokuk Kight, Institutional Effectiveness, Staff and Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) Manager

Trinity University (TX)

- Katherine Ramirez, Director of the Center for Experiential Learning and Career Success
- Lapetra Bowman, Director for the Office of Academic Advising
- Raquel Meyer Alexander, Dean of the Michael Neidorff School of Business

University of Richmond (VA)

- Nicole Maurantonio, Associate Provost for Academic Affairs
- Damon Yarnell, Associate Provost & Executive Director of Career Development