

Empower Students to Take Control of Long-Term Planning



Can a student's excitement for the future be channelled into actionable long-term planning? It can with the right tools and support.

When you're a busy educator juggling the many demands of the job, the task of creating a comprehensive career map for every individual student can feel downright Herculean. You want to give each student equal time, attention and support, but sometimes it feels like there aren't enough hours in the day.

This year, empower your students to take ownership over their future by guiding them on a pathway to personalized long-term planning. Here are 5 ways to help every student get where they need to be long before graduation—without having to clone yourself!

1. Encourage Working Backwards to Create a Step-by-Step Plan

It can be tough for a fickle 14 year old to understand that the academic choices they make today will have an impact on their future career in a very real way. But long-term planning can make all the difference between achieving success and spinning their wheels in uncertainty.

Ask your students to zoom out to adulthood and reflect on the kind of work they see themselves doing. Remind them that it's okay to have multiple ideas—the goal is to generate as many as possible and choose what best matches their interests, talents and skills. Give students online resources to help them research a variety of careers and have them save favorites to create their very own library of options. Conversations with students become even more productive when you're able to access their student profiles and look at them together or, better yet, in preparation for a meeting. When you're working from a shared vision, you can easily help them identify patterns that emerge from their choices and guide them in setting realistic goals.

With the insights they've uncovered about themselves and a clear end-goal in sight, course selection starts to feel more relevant. Lean on the insights gathered during

exploration to help students to see the big picture and build four-year plans that align to their college and longer term career aspirations. If students have expressed an interest in particular areas of study or subjects, steer them toward specialized diplomas if your school offers them. For classes they're more reluctant to take, reference their career goals to reinforce why these courses are needed and how they might be used on the job. When a student sees how a course connects with a desired profession, they're more likely to graduate on-track to pursue their future goals, without any surprises or, "Oops, I don't have the right prerequisites" panic.

2. Align Extracurriculars with Long-Term Goals

Academics aren't the only thing that can help prepare students for post-secondary success. Sports, student council, music, clubs and other extracurricular activities can help them with time management, skill building and, in some cases, offer a distinctive edge in the college admissions process.

As they create their long-term plan, encourage students to include extracurricular activities that are related to their goals. If there are no obvious links, help them uncover new talents or interests or resurrect a passion from their earlier years. Remind students that volunteer opportunities or even part-time employment can also be considered enhancements to their academic career.

When they have clear extracurricular options aligned to their interests, ensure students are able to track these experiences so they can easily be added to post-secondary applications as well as resumes for future employment. Keeping a record of experience in a career planning program or elsewhere eliminates last-minute scrambling to recall what they've achieved and ensures nothing is accidentally left off the list.

3. Get Parents Involved

It's helpful to involve parents as early as possible. Early conversations with the family can help avoid conflict later on, particularly if a child has post-secondary plans that differ from their parents' expectations or if he or she isn't interested in taking a traditional pathway after graduation.

If your students are building their profiles online, encourage them to share their portfolios with their parents. With a clear view of their child's long-term goals, including colleges, majors and programs of interest, parents can offer valuable and relevant guidance. Their advice and support will be in line with their child's ultimate goals. When you recruit parents as allies early on, you create a proactive team dedicated to helping that student achieve future success.

4. Help Students Familiarize Themselves with Post-Secondary Schools

You can help students make informed decisions for their post-secondary shortlist by helping them explore colleges and training in a comprehensive and strategic way.

For juniors and seniors, you may facilitate field trips to local college fairs or bring in representatives from various schools for class visits. Encourage students to do their research from reputable online sources to find information about on-campus demographics, admission requirements and extracurricular options for their chosen schools. In many online programs, this information is at their fingertips, embedded right into the software, with comprehensive profiles that help differentiate schools from one another in meaningful ways. With additional tools like Street View via Google Maps or virtual tours students can even place themselves in the campus to see what it's like to wander around!

With all the moving parts in the application process, it's easy for things to get missed. Once they've made their shortlist, work with students to ensure they understand key dates for things like transcript requests, financial aid and scholarships. Save links and information in a centralized spot so everything is easily accessible.

Applying to programs is a stressful time for students. When they have a plan and a place to manage information, much of that anxiety can be alleviated.

5. Equip Them with the Skills to Pivot, If Necessary

Even the best researched and outlined plans can get off track. Maybe your student doesn't get into their dream college. Or their much-needed scholarship falls through. Unexpected life events are always a possibility. Part of preparing students for success involves equipping them with the life skills to handle changes and make back-up plans.

You can do this early by introducing activities that will help them see the bigger picture and easily identify alternate paths for achieving their goals. Integrate lessons that teach these real world skills into your career planning curriculum to help students develop critical decision making, planning and problem solving skills that will give them the resilience to pivot.

Encourage them to keep their eye on the prize, but offer other pathways to get there. This might include taking a gap year to gather more experience aligned with their goal, starting at community college and transferring credits later or switching gears entirely. It's important that students understand that not everyone takes a linear path—and that's okay, as long as they have the tools, skills and knowledge to identify and navigate an alternate route.

For many students, encouraging them to take the lead in their career planning promotes engagement and ownership over their own futures. Using technology to make it easier, involving parents and providing resources, not solutions, allows educators to play a valuable supporting role. When the long-term planning is complete, students will have a personalized pathway—and the skills see their goals through long into their careers.



ABOUT HEATHER

Heather Hudson is a Toronto-based freelance writer and journalist. She specializes in content marketing, corporate storytelling and good old-fashioned journalism. You can read some of her work in *The Toronto Star* and learn more about her at heatherhudson.ca.