

A STARTER KIT FOR CAMPUS LEADERS

Leveraging Alumni Voices to Drive Value

SEPTEMBER 2025

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Credit: Indiana University Northwest



Acknowledgments

Leveraging Alumni Voices to Drive Value: A Starter Kit for Campus Leaders represents the culmination of a 1.5-year initiative made possible through the generous investment of the Gates Foundation. A special thank you to Jamey Rorison, senior program officer, whose insight, expertise, and belief in this work were invaluable throughout the project.

Of particular importance were the contributions of Charles L. Welch, AASCU's current president and CEO, and Mildred Garcia, AASCU's former president and CEO, whose vision and determination have propelled AASCU's postsecondary efforts. Their leadership has been instrumental in advancing the organization's mission and expanding its role in the value movement.

We are deeply grateful to José A. Cabrales, AASCU's vice president and chief operating officer, whose vision led to the creation of the Alumni Outcomes Data Collaborative. His expertise in alumni engagement, paired with thoughtful leadership and guidance, strengthened this work at every stage. A special acknowledgment goes to Sheden Alsaaty, AASCU's assistant vice president of advancement and partnerships, whose strategic support and thought partnership helped shape the project's purpose from the outset and secure the investment that made it possible.

This project also benefited greatly from the work of Morgan Taylor, AASCU's director of research and business intelligence, and Prateek Basavaraj, AASCU's senior research analyst for student success. Their research acumen, analytical expertise, and commitment were instrumental in defining the project's direction and ensuring its successful outcomes.

Special thanks to Virginia "Ginny" Arthur, president of Metro State University (MN), for offering a compelling presidential perspective on the importance of this work; to Bill Baldus, career center director at Metro State University, for his insightful review and feedback on the Starter Kit's practical steps; and to Charles Guzowski, director of advancement information systems at Oakland University (MI), and Wayne Thibodeau, senior director of the Career and Life Design Center at Oakland University (MI), for sharing their strategies for fostering campus-wide commitment to value-centered alumni engagement. Their contributions have significantly enriched the guidance and real-world examples included in this resource.

Finally, we acknowledge the nine AASCU institutions of the Alumni Outcomes Data Collaborative, whose collaboration and dedication were vital to this effort: California State University, Dominguez Hills, East Tennessee State University, Indiana University Regional Campuses (IU East, IU Kokomo, IU Northwest, IU South Bend, and IU Southeast), Oakland University (MI), and the University of Maryland Eastern Shore. We are deeply appreciative of their executive champions and project managers—David Gamboa, Felicia Hernandez, Michael Hoff, Whitney Goetz, Deborah Ford, Uric Dufrene, Charles Chuzowski, Wayne Thibodeau, Glenn McIntosh, Kadeem Turnbull, and David Balcom—whose leadership and commitment to leveraging alumni voices to enhance postsecondary value brought this work to life.

This publication is based on research funded by (or in part by) the Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the Gates Foundation.



Credit: Indiana University Southeast



Scan the QR code to learn more about AASCU's postsecondary value initiatives and member resources

Postsecondary Value Commission

The Postsecondary Value Commission (PVC) launched in April 2019, with the Institute for Higher Education Policy managing the project. The commission, co-chaired by Sue Desmond-Hellmann, former CEO of the Gates Foundation, and Mildred García, former president and CEO of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), was composed of 30 members, representing educators, executives, policymakers, researchers, advocates, and students.

When the PVC launched in 2019, it asked a simple but important question: What is college worth? The answer, as the commission revealed, depends on who a student is, where they attend, and what support they receive along the way. The difficult truth is that not all students see the same return on their investment—especially women, students of color, low-income students, and first-generation students.

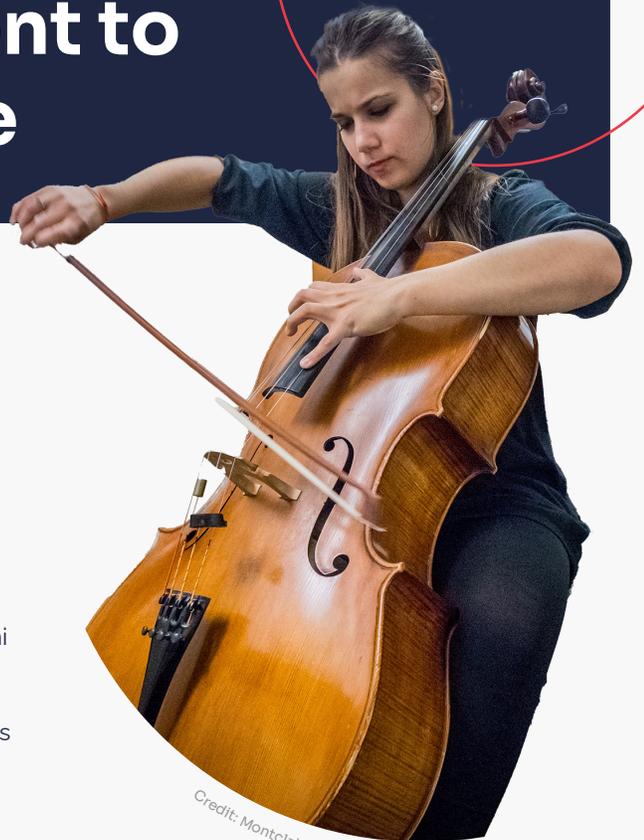
The PVC 2021 report offered a conceptual definition of value, a postsecondary value framework, and an ***action agenda*** outlining policies and practices that institutional leaders, federal policymakers, and state policymakers should implement to ensure all students benefit from postsecondary education and achieve economic and social mobility.



Credit: Indiana University Northwest

AASCU's Commitment to Postsecondary Value

AASCU has been deeply involved with the Postsecondary Value Commission from the start, with Mildred García, former AASCU president and CEO, serving as a co-chair and helping shape the commission's vision. When the PVC concluded in 2021, AASCU reaffirmed its commitment to advancing the PVC work by launching the Presidential Postsecondary Value Task Force, co-chaired by García and Charles L. Welch. As the AASCU board chair at the time, Welch played a key role in mobilizing AASCU members around the commission's action agenda and spotlighting campuses already leading in value-centered promising practices. Since then, AASCU has continued to work to champion and carry forward the PVC's action agenda across its member institutions. One example of this is the Alumni Outcomes Data Collaborative, described below in more detail. Rooted in public service and social mobility, our members are championing the postsecondary value movement to ensure that higher education delivers meaningful outcomes for all students.



Credit: Montclair State University (NJ)

AASCU's Alumni Outcomes Data Collaborative

Alumni are a powerful source of evidence for demonstrating the true value of postsecondary education. For this reason, AASCU is committed to elevating alumni voices through testimonials, storytelling, and its Telling Our Story podcast, as a vital part of advancing the postsecondary value movement.

To support members in further deepening their understanding of postsecondary value from the perspective of their graduates, AASCU launched the **Alumni Outcomes Data Collaborative**. Nine institutions—California State University, Dominguez Hills, East Tennessee State University, Indiana University (IU) regional campuses (IU East, IU Kokomo, IU Northwest, IU South Bend, and IU Southeast), Oakland University (MI), and University of Maryland Eastern Shore—were competitively selected in spring 2024. Following a structured onboarding process over the summer, campuses administered the **National Alumni Career Mobility (NACM) survey** in fall 2024. Through this collaborative effort, the institutions were equipped to better understand how their graduates experience economic mobility and career progression, essential data for advancing postsecondary value on their campuses.

AASCU's director of postsecondary value initiatives, in partnership with representatives from Lightcast, facilitated a series of cohort-wide engagements between March 2024 and August 2025, including a kickoff, midpoint check-in, data forum, and closing session, to guide institutions on strategies to increase survey response rates, interpret alumni data, and connect findings to their campus postsecondary value strategies.

About the NACM Survey

The **NACM survey**, administered by Lightcast, is a tool for institutions seeking to understand and improve the long-term value of the student experience. This nationwide survey gathers feedback from alumni five and 10 years after graduation, providing insight into outcomes like career mobility, job satisfaction, income progression, and the perceived worth of a college degree.

With over 100 survey questions, NACM offers a comprehensive view of alumni success, both economic and personal. To align the NACM survey with the Postsecondary Value Commission's action agenda, AASCU's Presidential Postsecondary Value Task Force selected a set of qualitative questions to complement the existing survey questions and ensure all five focus areas (see figure 1) were reflected in the findings.

NACM Survey Focus Areas:

1. Career Insights
2. Economic Mobility
3. Education Satisfaction
4. Career Satisfaction
5. Learning Outcomes and Experiences
6. Community Engagement

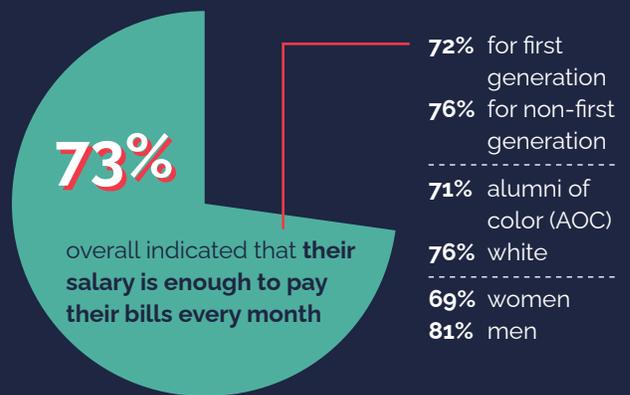
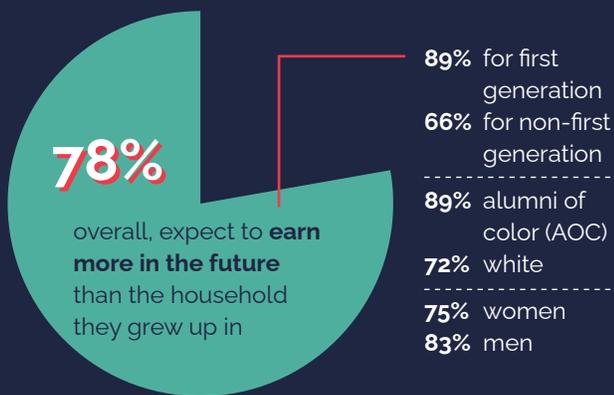
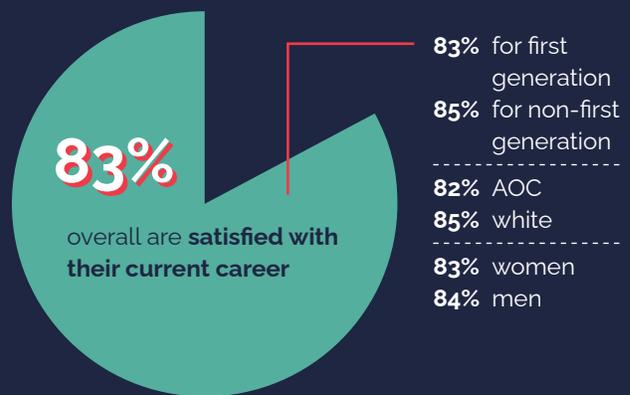
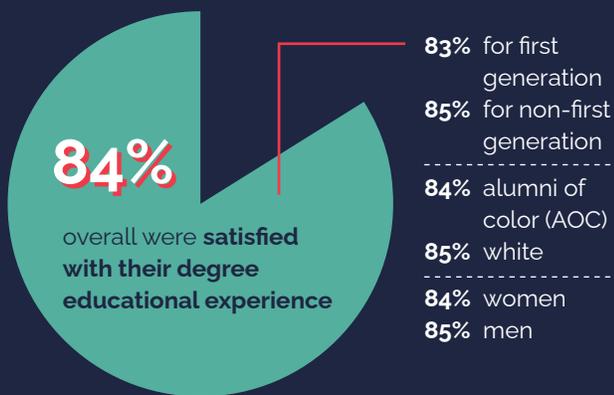
Participation Overview

- 1,828 alumni respondents
 - 1,376 undergraduate alumni responses, 4.9% response rate
 - 452 graduate alumni responses, 5.7% response rate
- 714 (39%) graduated in 2014
- 1,114 (61%) graduated in 2019
- 790 (43%) identified as first-generation students
- 595 (33%) identified as a race/ethnicity other than white
- 134 (7%) identified as a person with a disability
- Gender:
 - 1,017 (56%) identified as women
 - 503 (28%) identified as men
 - 15 (1%) identified as nonbinary/genderqueer/genderfluid

Findings: Alumni Perceptions of Postsecondary Value

HIGH-LEVEL FINDINGS

Data on satisfaction, employment, and future outlook were collected from alumni from nine AASCU member institutions.



Motivations for pursuing degree

What were the top 3 motivations for choosing to pursue a degree?



Why Alumni Persisted and Whether It Was Worth It

AASCU added qualitative questions to the NACM survey, including what helped alumni persist through their degree completion and whether they felt their education was worth the student debt, if they accumulated any.

What helped you persist through your degree completion? In other words, what helped you stay motivated to complete your degree?

Of all survey respondents, 1,288 (70%) answered the question. The majority of the respondents selected multiple motivators.

CAREER, ECONOMIC MOBILITY, AND ACADEMIC ADVANCEMENT (88%)

I grew up really poor and I wanted to change the trajectory of my life. Obtaining a degree and then working toward my law degree was my only way out of poverty.

The top three motivators for alumni persistence related to career, economic mobility, and academic advancement.

SOCIAL SUPPORT AND FAITH (40%)

Breaking the mold as the first in my family to earn a degree, thereby paving the way for my younger siblings to pursue their dreams without limitations.

The top three motivators for alumni persistence related to social support and faith.

Do you think your education was worth the student debt (if any) you accumulated? Why or why not?

Of all respondents to this question, 1,004 (62%) reported having incurred student loan debt while earning their degree.

YES. EDUCATION WAS WORTH THE ACCUMULATED DEBT. (43%)

I earn more now than what I borrowed. Definitely worth it.

The top three reasons respondents felt their education was worth the debt were the return on investment from obtaining their degree, needing the degree for their job, and graduating with minimal debt. Others stated the accumulated debt was worth it because they valued education or enjoyed the experience, gained skills that transferred directly to a job, or used their degree to pursue additional education.

NOT SURE. UNSURE IF EDUCATION WAS WORTH THE ACCUMULATED DEBT. (10%)

It depends on the day. I love my job and the work I do—my student debt is a significant burden though that has impacted my ability to make other financial decisions in my life.

The majority of alumni who shared that they are not sure if their education was worth the debt they accumulated reported that their compensation does not justify the cost of their degree, and that student debt has impacted other areas of their life. Others said the degree was necessary or the education was strong, but the price was simply too high. Other alumni mentioned they had not yet seen any clear benefit from earning their degree. These insights highlight a critical opportunity for institutions to strengthen postsecondary value by reducing the long-term burden of student debt.

NO. EDUCATION WAS NOT WORTH THE ACCUMULATED DEBT. (27%)

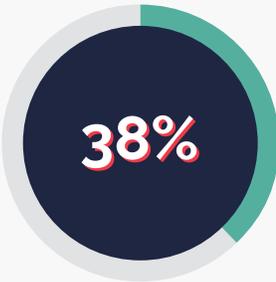
No, education at the college level has become too expensive. The return on investment to be a teacher is very low.

The top three reasons respondents stated their education was not worth the debt were that the cost was too high regardless of the value of the degree, their current salary was not worth the debt, and they cannot or will never be able to pay off their loans. Others reported it was not worth it because they are working in a different field that does not use their degree or because their education did not improve or provide additional skills.

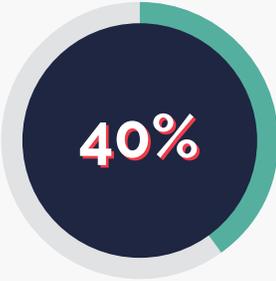
Opportunities to Strengthen Impact in Postsecondary Value

While NACM data largely reinforced the value of a college degree, alumni responses also pointed to clear opportunities for institutions to strengthen trust and deliver greater postsecondary value by addressing gaps in career preparation, earnings by gender, and the long-term burden of student debt.

AREAS OF GROWTH



of alumni respondents, overall, indicated that **their student loan debt had been manageable.**



of alumni respondents, overall, indicated that **their institution helped them network with employers.**



of male alumni indicated that their salary is enough to pay their bills every month, while



of female alumni indicated the same. This data demonstrates that more needs to be done on a systemic level to **close wage gaps by gender.**



of alumni respondents, overall, indicated that **they received career advice.** Of those who did receive it,



stated that the advice was helpful.

43%

of alumni respondents, overall, indicated that **their institution invested in their career.**

49%

of alumni respondents, overall, indicated that **their institution helped them create a plan** for their career.

62%

of alumni respondents, overall, indicated they **incurred student loan debt** while earning their degree.

Getting Started — How to Leverage Alumni Voices to Enhance Value



Taking part in the Alumni Outcomes Data Collaborative finally gave us hard, longitudinal evidence to match the student success stories we hear every day. Through the National Alumni Career Mobility (NACM) survey we learned that 86% of our graduates are satisfied with their CSUDH education and over 81% are satisfied with their careers, while 89% expect to surpass the earning power of the households they grew up in. We can now put those numbers next to compelling narratives and confidently tell prospective students, parents, donors, and policymakers exactly how a CSUDH degree transforms lives.

—Felicia Hernandez, Director, Alumni Relations & Annual Giving, University Advancement, Office of Alumni Relations, California State University, Dominguez Hills (CSUDH)



Credit: University of Maryland Eastern Shore

Key Steps at a Glance

1. The Case for Value-Centered Alumni Engagement
2. Evaluate Your Starting Point
3. Build a Cross-Functional Work Group/Steering Committee
4. Choose the Right Tool
5. Identify Funding and Resources
6. Commit to a Multiyear Plan (three to five years)
7. Launch Data Collection
8. Craft a Data Strategy
9. Take Informed Action
10. Let Alumni Do the Talking

STEP 1: THE CASE FOR VALUE-CENTERED ALUMNI ENGAGEMENT

Tracking alumni career and economic mobility beyond first destination surveys can reinforce your value proposition, support student success, and strengthen public trust.

- Strengthen messaging to stakeholders using real alumni stories and outcomes.
- Improve programs by aligning academic offerings with alumni career paths and workforce needs.
- Identify gaps to enhance postsecondary value and better serve future graduates.

STEP 2: EVALUATE YOUR STARTING POINT

Convene campus leadership, including institutional research, alumni relations, advancement, and career services, to assess existing alumni data, identify gaps, and determine institutional readiness.

STEP 3: BUILD A CROSS-FUNCTIONAL WORK GROUP/STEERING COMMITTEE

Building a cross-functional work group ensures campuswide collaboration, aligning the NACM survey strategy with institutional goals, and maximizing the impact of the results. It also helps coordinate outreach, improve data use, and foster shared ownership of alumni success. Suggested work group members follow:

- Alumni Relations
- Marketing and Communications
- Advancement
- Institutional Research
- Presidential Cabinet
- Career Services
- Student Affairs
- Student Leadership

STEP 4: CHOOSE THE RIGHT TOOL

Select a credible, research-backed platform such as the NACM survey to ensure consistent, comparable, and actionable data.

STEP 5: IDENTIFY FUNDING AND RESOURCES

Consider working with Advancement to identify potential funding sources or explore the option of sharing costs across steering committee member offices that will directly benefit from the survey data.

STEP 6: COMMIT TO A MULTIYEAR PLAN

Approach this as a long-term investment. A three- to five-year strategy allows you to track trends over time, build momentum, and deepen institutional insight.

STEP 7: LAUNCH DATA COLLECTION

Begin collecting data from alumni five and 10 years after graduation to understand long-term career and economic mobility outcomes.

STEP 8: CRAFT A DATA STRATEGY

Leverage analysts or research teams who are part of the steering committee to interpret the findings. Before sharing results, clarify your purpose. What story do you want the data to tell? Why did you collect the data? Define your goals, your audience, and the actions you want to inspire. A focused strategy ensures your findings drive impact.

STEP 9: LEVERAGE ALUMNI INSIGHTS AND AASCU RESOURCES TO DRIVE ACTION

Utilize AASCU member resources to drive institutional improvements and translate alumni career and economic mobility data into actionable insights.

Amplify your value proposition by sharing your alumni's success and strengthen your strategic messaging with support from AASCU's [Messaging Toolkit](#), which features talking points, infographics, and news media templates.

Address identified gaps by embedding accountability into your institutional strategic plan, drawing on AASCU's [Making Value the Strategy: Infusing the Postsecondary Value Framework Into Strategic Planning](#).

STEP 10: LET ALUMNI DO THE TALKING

Feature authentic alumni narratives and career and economic mobility data that reflect your institution's value and resonate with prospective students, parents, policymakers, and internal audiences. Amplify these stories across your website, presidential speeches, new student orientation, alumni events, and digital and campus channels. Let real alumni experiences bring your data to life.



Credit: Oakland University (MI)

Start the Conversation: Key Questions to Ask Across Campus

These questions are designed to ignite strategic dialogue across your institution. The goal is to challenge assumptions, align priorities, and move from conversation to action. In keeping with AASCU's mission of delivering America's promise, long-term alumni data serves as more than a report. It is a strategic asset. With [AASCU resources](#) available to support this work, campus leaders can use these insights to strengthen academic programs, improve student outcomes, and demonstrate the lasting public value of a college degree. This is a starting point for coordinated, institution-wide action that reinforces your campus mission and advances student success.

CABINET LEVEL *(for presidents and vice presidents)*

- How might we leverage AASCU resources such as the [Telling Our Story Messaging Toolkit](#), the [Promising Practices Digital Library](#), or AASCU's [Making Value the Strategy: Infusing the Postsecondary Value Framework Into Strategic Planning](#) readiness guidebook to embed this work into our strategic plan?
- What do we know about alumni career outcomes five and 10 years after graduation?
- How do we demonstrate the long-term value of our degrees to external stakeholders?
- Are we using data to evaluate the long-term impact of specific programs or initiatives?
- How does our understanding of alumni success inform institutional strategy?
- Could long-term alumni data help us advocate more effectively with trustees, policymakers, or donors?
- How are we measuring the return on investment for students and families over time?

ACADEMIC AFFAIRS ADMINISTRATORS *(for deans, associate deans, department chairs, and program directors)*

- Do we have a clear picture of how our graduates are doing professionally five and 10 years after graduation, by major or program?
- How can career mobility and economic mobility data help with program review, resource decisions, or external reporting?
- Could alumni insights help validate or strengthen the direction of our academic offerings?
- What questions do we wish we could answer about our graduates—and what's stopping us?

FACULTY *(for faculty across disciplines)*

- What have your former students told you about how they're using what they learned here?
- How could alumni feedback help deepen faculty advising or mentoring?
- Would insights into graduate outcomes help students connect classroom learning to career goals?
- What would you want to know about your students 10 years after they leave your classroom?
- How could career mobility data affirm or illustrate the value of your teaching and your discipline?

ADVANCEMENT AND FOUNDATIONS

- Are there specific long-term outcomes that donors or boards want to see—but we currently can't provide?
- Could longitudinal data help fill in the gaps for donors about the real, lasting impact of their support?
- How might this data reinforce the case for investing in scholarships, student support, or career readiness programs?
- Are we missing opportunities to engage alumni who have reached significant career or financial milestones?
- Can we better align our messaging with stories of mobility and success that resonate with donor values?

ALUMNI RELATIONS

- How can we use career and mobility data to better tailor engagement efforts?
- Are we maintaining relevance in alumni lives as their goals and needs evolve?
- Could longitudinal data help us reconnect with disengaged alumni through shared milestones or industries?
- How might we use this information to design more meaningful engagement opportunities, mentorships, or regional networks?

CAREER SERVICES

- So much emphasis is placed on the first destination. What does this data tell us about career trajectories or arcs and the college/career narrative?
- How can we use data from five and 10 years after graduation to identify which programs consistently lead to upward mobility?
- Could this data help us identify industries or employers where alumni thrive in the long term?
- How might career trajectory trends help shape future internships, mentoring, or experiential learning strategies?
- Are we equipping students not just for their first job—but for career growth and resilience over their lifetimes?

OUTREACH AND RECRUITMENT

- What long-term outcomes can we confidently speak to in our recruitment materials?
- How could alumni success stories—backed by data—build trust with prospective students and families?
- Are there gaps in our messaging that long-term data could fill (e.g., financial stability, career progression, graduate school outcomes)?
- How can we use alumni mobility data to better explain the return on investment of our degrees?



Credit: Indiana University South Bend

STUDENT AFFAIRS

- How can we enhance career growth over time for students through cocurricular experiences?
- Could this data show the value of internships, experiential learning, service, and leadership experiences?
- How might we use career mobility and economic mobility data to improve programming that supports life skills and career readiness?
- What patterns can we uncover about which student experiences correlate with long-term satisfaction or success?
- Are students leaving with the tools they need to thrive beyond 10 years after graduation?

STUDENT GROUPS/STUDENT LEADERSHIP

- How can alumni career data help us build stronger mentorship or networking opportunities for current students?
- What can we learn from alumni experiences that might inform how we prepare for life after graduation?
- Could data on alumni career paths help us advocate for new programs, internships, or resources we don't currently have?
- How can we use stories and outcomes from alumni to inspire and motivate students across campus?
- What do we wish we knew about our future lives five or 10 years from now—and how can alumni data help answer those questions?



Credit: University of Maryland Eastern Shore

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