

Embedding Career Readiness:

How the University of
Montana Reframed the
Classroom-Career Divide



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Shannon Janssen, a faculty fellow and the associate director of student success, working with Robert Stubblefield, a Career Champion and director of the creative-writing program, mapping career-readiness competencies across courses during the Summer Institute.

Jessica Dougherty-McMichael has always sought to incorporate career relevancy in her general-studies writing courses at the University of Montana’s Missoula College. “At a two-year campus with a really robust workplace and work-force focus, I had to start thinking about how to make these courses relatable to students who are very career-focused,” the associate professor and writing-studies lead says. That’s why, when the university introduced a requirement for faculty members to embed career competencies into gen-ed courses in the spring of 2024, Dougherty-McMichael was eager to put into formal practice what she had already been striving for in her classes.

The emphasis on and support for career education has made a difference, she says. “It’s become a lot easier to convince students that

workshopping their papers is a useful task,” when she can frame the exercise as gaining experience in teamwork, and in learning how to self-evaluate and hear and implement feedback. She tells her students, “This is something that you do in any career you end up in.” This kind of thinking reflects a larger shift underway. The university now wants that type of focus on career outcomes to be central to the education it provides its more than 10,000 students.

The relationship between a college degree and the work force has faced increased scrutiny as tuition sticker prices have steadily climbed, leaving many students and families questioning the value of pursuing a college education. According to a November 2025 *Politico* [poll](#), over 60 percent of American adults believe college isn’t worth it because it either costs too much or doesn’t provide enough benefits.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ANDREA VERNON

Andrea Vernon, executive director of the Office of Experiential Learning and Career Success, says that students look to faculty first for career advice.

Many colleges across the country have [embraced real-world readiness](#) through added certifications, digital badges, and microcredentials, and by embedding career competencies into courses and programs. The University of Montana has bolstered its own approach with its [Career Champions program](#), which trains faculty to be career liaisons and focuses career-services efforts on engaging students without them having to come into the Experiential Learning and Career Success (ELCS) office.

The university launched its career-education initiative, [ElevateU](#), in 2020. ElevateU is built around three pillars: explore (career discovery), enhance (skill building), and embark (job search). The program combines coursework, experiential learning, employment, and counseling, to ensure that students are prepared not just academically but with the practical skills necessary to transition into the work force.

Its Career Champions component began with

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a one-year pilot phase in the fall of 2024 before going campuswide the following year. During the pilot year, 200 employees were trained — 50 percent were faculty members, 32 percent were staff members, and 18 percent were administrators. Over all, 437 campus employees have been trained. The idea behind the Career Champions initiative is to engage and integrate faculty, staff, and administrators into ElevateU, while providing students with an accessible way to gain professional skills.

The Career Champions program is voluntary, with three options for engagement: Faculty Fellows, who receive an additional nine hours of training through a workshop series; the Summer Institute, a multiday event where departments discuss barriers and solutions for students; and a Community of Practice, a series of learning events and opportunities open to all Career Champions. All Career Champions participants have access to a monthly newsletter on career events around campus, a digital platform with 12 adaptable lessons in career training, and access to the [Learning Hub](#), which holds numerous resources.

The Career Champions program includes a personalized AI tool for faculty members to evaluate

their syllabi and assignments to align with career competencies. The tool identifies learning objectives and outcomes for students and aligns those with career competencies as well as assignments or activities for class. The university uses the eight career competencies outlined by the [National Association of Colleges and Employers \(NACE\)](#) plus two competencies approved by the faculty.

According to Melissa Dadmun, associate director of curriculum design and integration, and Andrea Vernon, executive director of the [Office of Experiential Learning and Career Success](#), the university is already seeing benefits: Over 5,200 students have been reached through 543 courses taught by faculty members who have gone through this career-support training — and post-graduation outcomes have improved. Ninety-one percent of the 2024 graduates reported being employed, pursuing advanced degrees, serving in the military, or volunteering, which is a [20-point increase from 2020](#).

University leaders say training faculty members to support career education is critical, as many students either don't know about career services on campus, don't opt to take advantage of them, or get started late in their time on campus. Thirty-three percent of college students who responded to *Inside Higher Ed's* Student Voice 2024 [survey](#) said they had no experience with their college's career-services center.

First-generation students, rural students, and/or those from low-income families and historically underrepresented racial and ethnic backgrounds are particularly likely to miss out on internships, extracurricular activities, and research opportunities. Integrating career education into the classroom helps ensure that all students have opportunities to build skills, explore professional goals, and smooth their transition post-graduation.

According to a recent [study](#), more than nine out of 10 faculty members said students had turned to



PHOTO COURTESY OF DAVID FIRTH FOR THE U. OF MONTANA

David Firth, a professor in the College of Business, is one of 437 employees who have been trained as Career Champions.

them for guidance about their future careers. “We do know based on student feedback and national data that students look to faculty first for those career conversations,” Vernon says. The Career Champions program aims for faculty to have the resources and training to fill that role as a mentor, helping students connect to their potential career paths, Vernon adds.

Additionally, the [Griz Career Skills Program](#) offered by ELCS allows students employed on campus to work through career-competency modules — on topics like communication, workplace performance, critical thinking, and teamwork — to help connect their work to career skills while earning digital badges that they can add to their résumés and LinkedIn profiles. By completing the program, they learn how to translate their classroom experiences to their

career goals, and how to effectively communicate their skills to potential employers. In this way, the program combines paid work experience and the career competencies the university believes will land students jobs.

“The No.1 reason most students come to college is to get a good job,” says Vernon. Embedded competencies could help graduates do just that.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JENNIFER THOMSEN

Jennifer Thomsen, an associate professor and the director of the program, says she’s become a lot more explicit about how her courses connect to employment skills.

Career Skills Take Center Stage

More than ever before, today’s students will need technological know-how and flexibility to succeed in the work force, and so Dougherty-McMichael started having her students use Microsoft Teams to complete online writing assignments. She says many of her students had experience with Google Suite from high school,

but she knew — and had confirmed by students with work experience — that Microsoft tools are more [common](#) in the workplace.

“We have to learn new technologies,” she says. “We have to adapt and become flexible. You may not end up in a job where you have to use Microsoft, but if we can master this technology, we’re better prepared to master another technology.”

Instructors in the university’s parks, tourism, and recreation management program have evaluated

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its curriculum to ensure students are building valuable skills.

Jennifer Thomsen, an associate professor and the director of the program, says she’s become a lot more explicit about how her courses connect to employment skills. In both her syllabus and her communication with students, she explains how the class’s goals and assignments are linked with specific career competencies.

“By the time they are in their senior year, they’re doing high-impact practices with these competencies like a capstone experience with a professional, having internships, doing experiential learning,” Thomsen says. It really lets “them apply what they’re doing with these skills, but after they’ve already built the foundation.”

Creating a Community of Practice

Before the Faculty Senate approved the policy of requiring career competencies in gen-ed courses, there was some hesitation among faculty about adding more work to their already full plates, Dougherty-McMichael says. However, she adds, positive feedback from students helped shift faculty attitudes.

Thomsen agrees. At first, emphasizing and formalizing these career competencies was a foreign concept and not mainstream, she recalls, adding that some of the early pushback from faculty members stemmed from the evergreen debate over the role of higher education — whether it's to get students jobs, or to advance a bigger mission around education.

“For me, and others who are part of these initiatives, we don't see them as separate or contradicting goals,” she says. “We see them as really embedded together.” Now, as the campus has embraced this work, she says, there's a lot more buy-in.

“We're hearing it from our students,” Thomsen says. “We're hearing it from the people that work directly with them. We're hearing it from the employers. And so now it's more, ‘How do we do this?’ We know it's important, we wanna do it.”

The communal aspect of this work — from students to faculty members to career-services officials — has helped scale the endeavor. All Career Champions participants are invited to join in various Community of Practice events, learning lunches, and workshops, where faculty, staff, and administrators can work together.

“I think with the way it's been done at University of Montana, and with the Office of Experiential Learning and Career Success, is that it wasn't done *within* colleges and degree programs. Rather, it was creating a community of practice *across* the colleges and degree programs at the university. And that really created a space to learn from each



PHOTO COURTESY OF MELISSA DADMUN FOR U. OF MONTANA.

During a Community of Practice event, participants have small-group discussions on what's working in the classroom.

other,” Thomsen says.

The university offers a stipend for Community of Practice members, and faculty fellows receive a much larger payment — currently \$3,000 — to reflect their time commitment. Stipends are funded by the Dennis & Phyllis Washington Foundation, according to Vernon.

However, Dougherty-McMichael says it's less about the amount and more about the thought behind it.

“That the university is willing to invest in facul-

ty's time to do this work ... reinforces the idea that this is something that the university as a whole values," she says. "It's really appreciated, especially at a time in the academic world where we are asked to take on so many new things without any kind of compensation or recognition of that extra workload."

Beyond the Résumé

Trey Webster, a senior political-science major, dreams of going into policy or advocacy work in Washington, D.C., after graduation and has already garnered an extensive résumé — with support from the career preparation he's received at the university. He says his in-class assignments helped him develop skills like communication and teamwork. In a "Politics in China" course he took in late February, he participated in a group project where students went through a simulation of the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, discussing which policies to implement and working within a budget. Webster says the communication and collaboration required in group projects like this helped him build broad transferable skills he can implement in his career.

A first-generation college student, Webster feels confident that his internship experiences, networking opportunities, and the career skills he's developed in his classes will be key once he gets his degree: "So many people have bachelor's degrees. You have to stand out when you graduate."

Student input — Dadmun and Dougherty-McMichael even collaborated with a graduate-student program to create student focus groups — was crucial to the scaling of the Career



PHOTO COURTESY OF MARLEY BARBOIESEL FOR U. OF MONTANA

Eli Redeker, an administrative associate manager and adviser in the department of public administration and policy, offers suggestions for employer engagement.

Champions program. Dadmun says that the way they collect data on the initiative's impact has improved greatly.

"One of the things that we were very, very mindful of" was gaining feedback from students whose voices aren't always heard, Dougherty-McMichael says. "Not necessarily the students who normally show up to these things, or who aren't already engaging."

Dougherty-McMichael says this initiative has actually helped engage her students more: "When you teach gen ed, it's not always easy to get buy-in from students why they're in this required course." Connecting the material to career skills more explicitly has helped show them that each course matters. What has most fascinated Dougherty-McMichael about embedding career-readiness competencies in her literature courses is that it has opened up a broader conversation. She says it has provided a framework to talk about careers, and also an opportunity for the students to think about themselves as "students, as having future careers, and just as human beings."

Questions or comments about this report? Email us at ci@chronicle.com.

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