



# Peeling The “College Career Services Office” Onion: Why They Are Terrible\* What To Do About It

\* Terrible For Any College Student With Low Social Capital, Particularly First-Gen

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## “I’m a high school leader or counselor. What should I tell our First Gen college students as they head out for college?”

You should say something like this:

*Hi First Gen Student. Imagine that it’s August 25th, and you arrive to your new college! Yay.*

*You will see a building called The Dorm. It in fact has a reasonably comfortable bed for you; the building does what it says.*

*You will see a building called Dining Hall, and it in fact has food and staff who serve you food.*

*You see a building called Library, and it in fact has books and librarians to help you find books.*

*You see Infirmary, and it in fact has competent doctors and nurses.*

*You also see this building called “Career Center” and assume that it will be functional, just like all the other buildings. It will help you find Career. Or at least: A Job Upon Graduation.*

*In that, you are profoundly mistaken.*

**This is the only building on campus that doesn’t come CLOSE to doing what it says on the front door.**



**That’s what you, the high school leader or counselor, should tell your college-bound seniors. You need to speak up because the College Leader will not. They’ll hide the truth. A college president who chugged a potion of Radical Candor would say something like this to First Gen students:**

“Our career center is the only building on campus that doesn’t do what you think it does. When we publicize all the cool jobs that our university graduates get, this grad to Google and that grad to Goldman Sachs, we don’t explain to new students that we’re speaking in code. The code really translates to this: if you major in STEM, lots of companies will want to hire you. Or you are an absolute top student in any major, lots of companies will want to hire you. Often the same is true if you’re in a “vocational major” in area with shortages (teaching, nursing in some regions) – they may be aggressively recruiting our college seniors.

Otherwise, you need to use your social capital (from your family) to get your first job. If you lack **social capital**, you will probably find it hard and lonely to get a first job, and there’s a good chance it pays just \$30,000 or so. Your first job sure as heck **is NOT coming from the Career Center.**”

College presidents don’t chug potions of Radical Candor, of course, so they don’t say that. Nobody likes to be the bearer of bad news.

First Gen students need to grasp: when they do arrive at the Career Office, understand that **those counselors** speak in code, just like the college president.

**A career counselor there, if he or she drank that potion of Radical Candor, would say:**

“First of all, perhaps half of our recent First Gen grads are struggling to secure their first jobs. They are frustrated. We know that but hide that. The truth is that a liberal arts degree from our college is NOT the door opener that we like to pretend that it is.

Second, our Career Office is not set up “to get you a job.” We offer you mild edits on your resume, which helps your job search perhaps 3%. We give you a handout that tells you to “Network” but it’s not obvious how to actually do this. We refer you to the Handshake online platform, which you will likely find frustrating to use. We may organize some career fairs, where you’ll wander from table to table, confused about what to say or ask.

Beyond that, we play dodge ball. You try to get our 1-1 help to make some introductions for you, genuine connections to real jobs, and we try to “dodge you” because we don’t actually have many “connections” in that way. We’re not like our college’s therapists, who are in fact willing to see you once a week and really go deep for however many weeks it takes. We typically see any senior once or *twice, then Bye.*”

Real Career Officer Counselors, of course, do not say that.

Instead they might say: “Welcome! Here is our online portal, you will love it. Here is our resume writing workshop, it will really help you. Here is a webinar about networking. We are eager to meet you and help you in any way!”

That’s “code.” These are very nice people who do care about you, but what they mean is in the “Radical Candor” paragraphs above. The thing is, kids who come from families of means often understand this code. Or at minimum, their parents make sure they understand.

**Low social capital students often do not understand this code.**





# What really happens after college graduation?

For high social capital grads, life is often fun. There is often the allure of moving to A Big City, getting that first apartment, going to grown-up bars, landing that first job, maybe buying some new clothes to dress the part.

For the First Gen college grads who were not STEM majors, who were not top liberal arts majors, who were okay college students who persisted to graduate...it is often a frustrating transition to Real Life. Yes, there is a joyous group hug in May with family, wearing that cap and gown, getting a hundred likes on your Instagram.

And then an August despondency. They are probably not living in a cool apartment in the Big City. They are more likely back in their old bedroom next to Mom's. They are often in jobs that don't really need a college degree.

They may describe themselves as feeling **shame**. Their parents are confused: why is our kid struggling professionally if they were the first in the family to climb the hill of College Degree? They feel pressure. They wonder if something is wrong with them.

## **For High School Leaders and Counselors Reading This White Paper:**

This is Mike talking. I founded a charter high school in Boston in 1999, called Match. I was struck over the years by how many of our college grads – our alumni who earned a college degree – still stayed poor! This puzzled me. We had been telling these kids if they earned a degree, they'd escape poverty. I thought that's what the data said.

My friends Roland Fryer and Will Dobbie, Harvard economists, published in 2016 a study about charter school alumni in Texas, including those of KIPP and YES. Sadly, many charter kids, when they grew up, didn't earn almost any additional money as the result of attending a charter school, even those who earned college degrees. They stayed poor. This reflected what I saw with Match.

This is not a charter school story. It turns out these bad outcomes for First Gen college grads, and particularly African-Americans, is broadly true in the USA.

In 2021, I enlisted my friend Geordie to examine this puzzle. We created a small new organization for research, called 1Up. More on 1Up later.

We wrote this memo together to share what we learned. On the next page, we start our White Paper by summarizing a research brief by the nonprofit Strada.



# 1. Strada’s “Bridging The Gap” report

**“Just 27% of seniors secure a good job before graduation and almost half (50%) of college graduates find themselves underemployed after graduating.**

**The students most vulnerable to this disconnect already face an uphill career battle thanks to societal barriers and inequities that disproportionately impact students of color and students from low-income backgrounds.”**

That’s from Strada’s “Bridging the Gap from Education to Employment” project. Strada is a national social impact organization. They examined 600 students at 7 colleges over 3 years.

[Meanwhile, over at 1Up, we got access to a privately-held data set, put together by Bain Consulting, which told a similar story. They looked at hundreds of college grads from high-poverty charter schools. These charter school alumni were mostly first-in-family to graduate from college, nearly all black and Hispanic. Bain also found roughly **50% of the charter school alumni who were college grads were nonetheless stuck in jobs that didn’t pay a living wage.**]

What drives this failure of college grads to find decent jobs? Strada wrote:

- Nathan Hatch, president of Wake Forest University: Career services offices “rank somewhere just below parking” as an administrative priority.
- An employer partner: Career Centers are “as slow as molasses. The redundancy is absurd.”
- Career exploration is too often left to the student’s personal networks and chance, which means that many students don’t have the opportunity to expand their career horizon.

## **Our take: All true.**

Strada also found:

- “Students need help recognizing career-related skills, both those they enter school with and those they develop in class.”

Our take: Meh. That’s true of Comp Sci majors, for sure, but not many liberal arts majors. Employers don’t value a college student’s ability to write (or get ChatGPT to write) a 10-pager with 1.5” margins about de-colonializing F Scott Fitzgerald. When a student learns “communication” or “critical thinking” for a particular class, in Archaeology or Peace Studies or Political Science, it is not really a “Skill” that is easily adapted for an entry level job.

There’s some truth to “Career Related skills” yet some is rhetorical sleight of hand. College hopefully will increase knowledge of literature or philosophy or psychology or whatever subjects you study, but there’s a limit to how much this generates “transferable skills” that employers covet. Many professors openly acknowledge this, of course, but college administrators keep trying to advance the notion that liberal arts college courses are partially workforce development, and that “Teaching you how to think” is widely adaptable from your sociology class to your job as an associate in a big corporation.

## **Usually: no.**

The Strada report, in our view, is a nice “Beginning” to the College Career Services Office story. But let’s keep it real. Strada has to play nice with colleges, they often partner with college. So they carefully wordsmith their research, to avoid poking the bear. Geordie and Mike are 2 dummies with no relationship with colleges, so we can peel to the next layer of the onion.



## 2. “Abolish Career Services” by Ryan Craig

Let’s advance the story with this guy...a great thinker who **loves** to poke the bear.

Ryan Craig is a venture capital investor, and his newsletter is arguably the best read out there on the failures of Higher Education.

He wrote a great essay with a provocative title. There he made three arguments:

- a. First, there’s a software called **Handshake that has taken over college career offices**. He finds reviews of Handshake like:
  - *I’ve applied to over 50 internships through Handshake and haven’t received a single interview offer.*
  - *It’s perfectly normal to apply to maybe even 150 places before getting a response. You definitely want to be using more than just Handshake.*
  - *Has anyone here actually landed a job with Handshake? i graduated in 2019 and it was useless then. I’m guessing it’s only gotten worse LOL.*

Handshake, Ryan Craig finds, does **not** seem to be perceived by non-STEM majors as very helpful.

[This is resoundingly what we, at 1Up, have found as well.]

- b. Second, Craig argues that Handshake masks the utter haplessness of the college career office, that the office is mostly performative. He writes:

*(Act One). (Back in the day), Colleges did a reasonable job preparing students for jobs. For the attractive careers of the future (think of Mad Men in the ‘60s or L.A. Law in the ‘80s), a bachelor’s degree signaled sufficient cognitive skills, problem solving skills, communication skills, an ability to learn, persistence, and the go-along-get-along-ness required in the workplace. Which explains why career services was located in a dark corner of campus and closed evenings and weekends.*

*(Act Two) But about 20 years ago, as digital transformation took hold of entry-level jobs and hiring processes, most college students began needing help. Career services digitized as well. Folders and binders were replaced with career services management (CSM) systems like Symplicity that handled core functions like job postings, event management, and scheduling counseling appointments and on campus interviews. Symplicity reached 70% market share despite being widely disliked and having its CEO jailed for corporate espionage.*

*(Act Three) Nine years ago, along came Handshake. Founder Garrett Lord saw that career services management was a winner-take-all market: more colleges on the platform = more value for employers = more value for colleges. So Garrett and his team did four really smart things: (1) built a better CSM SaaS platform; (2) prioritized an employer network; (3) priced Handshake under \$10K p.a.; and (4) raised lots of money from Kleiner Perkins and others so it could afford to do 1, 2, and 3.*

*Quickly, career services offices around were overwhelmed with an irresistible proposition: switch to Handshake to access a massive network of hiring employers (including 80% of the Fortune 500),*





*save money, and you won't hate the platform nearly as much. Handshake added other bells and whistles like student reviews of employers, but the pieces were in place for dominance. Handshake now boasts 1,400 college and university clients, 10M+ active student users (i.e., over half of all enrolled students, and probably close to 70% of undergraduates), and more than 750,000 employers. The platform allows students to apply for jobs “in as few as two clicks.” Earlier this year, Handshake raised another \$200M at a \$3.5B valuation, making it one of edtech's most valuable companies.*

*So here's the show. Due to skill, experience, and credential inflation, it's become harder than ever for graduates to get good jobs. But because students now have access to Handshake and its network, career services has an illusion of progress: a decade ago we had 200 companies recruiting our students, but look, now there's 750,000! That's career services theater (a tragedy, not a comedy).*

- c. Ryan Craig's third and final argument is that **Handshake's existence blocks reform that colleges really need**, which is to ABOLISH career services, to end the “theater,” the performance.

*The dark side of Handshake's success has been delaying the change we desperately need: abolishing career services. Naming career services as college's one-stop-shop for employment absolves every other part of the university – all other staff, faculty, and administrators, comprising 99%+ of the workforce and resources – of responsibility for helping students get good jobs. As Allison Dulin Salisbury noted earlier this month, colleges have focused on “career support as a last-mile service.” But “in order to drive success... it needs to be a primary focus of the first mile.”*

*What does first-mile career services look like? It puts the onus on departments and faculty. Faculty should be charged with making connections between course performance and career opportunities, advising students, and building and maintaining field-specific employer networks; then they ought to be evaluated on these metrics.*

Our reaction at 1Up? We 100% agree with Ryan Craig's critique. And we'd LOVE to see the transformation Craig demands.

**We are, however, skeptical that it can happen – that professors will be willing to play this role, or that they'd be good at this role.**

Our skepticism comes from original, qualitative research at 1Up in 2021 and 2022 to uncover what is “really happening” inside the career services offices.

We see **three key problems** that cannot be solved by engaging professors to do career advising. We'll circle back to this point.



### 3.

## Does anyone disagree that Career Services is broken?

We’ve gotten this critique from a few friends already working in this area of income inequality and social capital. They told us:

“Everyone already knows Career Services is broken.” **We don’t agree!**

Instead, our take is:

- Many insiders know this
- Though many education professionals do not: when we talk to high school leaders and teachers, they’re simply unfamiliar with whether Career Services are generally useful to First Gen non-STEM students, or not
- Some college students from high social capital families know to bypass Career Services and instead open doors for themselves in different ways
- However, few First Gen students, and more broadly few black and Hispanic first generation college students, know this

Here from [The Atlantic](#):

Blacks and Hispanics, as well as first-generation students and students who are older than the traditional college-going population, **rated the help they received from their career-services office and academic advisers more positively than did their white and more affluent counterparts**. Especially for first-generation students, a career center might be the first source of job advice they’ve ever encountered.

These “First Gen” college students are wandering in an “advice desert” – so they (while still at college) appreciate whatever advice they can get. While in college, they rate the Career Center high. After they graduate, though, many reverse themselves, and flip to feeling great frustration with their Career Center experience. Although, again, many First Gen college grads blame themselves – “I think something must be wrong with me” is a narrative we’ve heard at 1Up many times.

### 4.

## This Memo’s 1Up New Research: The Three Key Problems

We think we’ve uncovered 3 problems that are less understood. To do that, we’ve lifted up the hood and studied the engine in two ways.

We interviewed some university-based Career Counselors (off the record), and hired an outside journalist to do the same (just to control for our own bias).

We also interviewed 20 recent college grads, mostly African-American, First Gen, who described themselves as very unhappy in their first job out of college (4 out of 10 on a qualitative scale).

We uncovered **Three Key Problems** that block university Career Services Offices from succeeding.

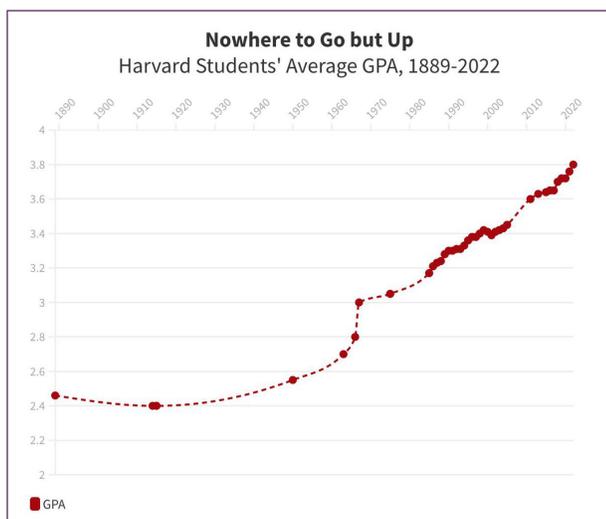


Our Three Key Problems are **beyond** what Strada found (no accountability for these career offices, low priority in the university, “slow as molasses”), though we agree with their critique.

And our problems are **beyond** what Ryan Craig has written (that the underlying university intent is to **pretend** to care about making sure low social capital students get decent jobs, rather than to **actually** care – and be accountable for – these making sure these grads get decent jobs), though we agree with his critique.

These counselors themselves say:

## Truth 1. We (college career counselors) are not free to be authentic and direct/blunt with students. We are muzzled.



Let’s look at an analogy. In the classroom, grades are supposed to reflect performance. But there is a huge increase in grade inflation.

Administration isn’t just complicit. They nominally give faculty the authority to grade students, but they won’t protect them against any sort of student protest for “grading too hard.” Everyone is told “You are great.” There is very good data on this nationally, it’s inarguable.

**Career counselors do their own version of “grade inflation.”** They tell students who present (in real life) as weak job candidates that they come across as good job candidates. They tell what we might describe as “D” grade applicants that they are “A” grade applicants.

College Career Counselors told us that they are not permitted to say that a particular student needs a major intervention or is highly unlikely to land a good entry level job upon graduation – even if it is accurate. That is considered too blunt.

In this way, they adopt *almost the opposite approach of physicians presenting a diagnosis to a patient.*

The counselors told us that the university officials want them to **sidestep 4 types of “unpleasant” (but essential) messages.**

**A1.** The first unpleasant message: Your college degree in sociology (for example) just by itself is ***NOT the door opener you think it is.*** There’s enough of a shortage of STEM majors that the degree alone opens many doors. Sometimes there are other regional shortages – for example, nursing or education majors – who have the same employer open door experience.

Other majors, by contrast, often struggle in the job market if the college senior tries to rely on their degree alone to open the door. That’s because you will be ***competing with people who have the same degrees but much more social capital.***



**A2.** The second unpleasant message: You will have to work your tail off during senior year on your job search – putting in way more effort even than you put into any single class.

This is at minimum a 10-hour-a-week job for you, minimum, all year long from September onward, until you have accepted an offer.

And of course this is “Unpaid” work – unlike your work-study job at the library (where you get paid by the hour) or your college courses (where you get credit for your effort). So it’s very easy to put this task on the back burner.

(Again, this is a message that counselors know but sidestep: they allow a student to think that spending a few hours clicking on job applications in spring of their senior year is likely to result in a job, when they privately say they know in many cases that it is unlikely to result in a job).

**A3.** The third unpleasant message: Our *“Handshake” online platform is mostly an illusion.* Handshake will not actually have many listings that you are likely to get. Moreover, even for the jobs that would be a good fit, applying through that portal – the very portal we’re telling you to use – reduces your chances of reaching the interview stage, because everyone else is clogging that portal. You should bypass Handshake wherever possible, and apply for that same job on the website of the company itself, or better yet, find a way to connect with someone via LinkedIn who works for that company, and try to get your application in “a side door.”

**A4.** The fourth unpleasant message: *you may have unrealistic expectations of the Entry Level jobs you can plausibly get upon graduation.* This is partially because our college tells stories of the UNUSUAL, OUTLIER, COOL jobs our seniors do land. Many of these jobs, though, are found by high social capital classmates. We also publicize Rhodes Scholars and medical school admissions and so forth. We certainly don’t tell the stories of those who struggle to get jobs, who are working at Starbucks upon graduation and getting dirty looks from Mom who thinks “Is this the best you can do?” Those “struggling” stories are airbrushed away.

**From these career counselors, we heard various sorts of stories about the Muzzling. Importantly, there’s a lost-in-translation aspect to it.**

For example, one counselor said:

I’ve had, you know, some students this spring that [go] “oh, my gosh, I have — I have — I don’t understand what’s happening?! I have, I sent out a bunch of applications. And I haven’t heard back.’ And I’m like, okay, let’s, let’s break this down. What’s going on? How many applications have you sent out? “Eight.” Okay, and what was the time period? “In the last two weeks.” I’m like, no, that’s unfortunately, I know, it feels like a lot. That’s not a lot. That’s not how it really rolls. Even in a good economy. Do not just randomly send out applications. You need to be able to understand why you’re qualified for this position or what you have to offer that employer. You know, you’re gonna have to do a little bit more than that.

“A little bit more than that”?

Translation should be: “Hey college senior, *you’re not even in the right ballpark* of effort, in number of applications, or in the amount of time you spend on each application, making an effort to stick out from competing applicants.”



The low social capital student doesn’t get the translation. The counselor says the phrase “a little bit more than that” and the college student understandably takes it literally: “Oh, instead of 2 hours a month, I should put in 3. That is a reasonable definition of a little bit more.”

The muzzling of college Career Counselors has always been there. But we think there’s a fairly new component from the past 5 to 8 years, that the polarizing political climate on campus makes it even harder for an open conversation, particularly with the African-American college alumni that we serve at 1Up.

A straightforward, facts-oriented message to college seniors – that 50% of our low social capital students will struggle to get a job that pays more than \$30,000 per year – might lead to social justice demands to change that reality, perhaps even protests. The administration does not want that.

Counselor:

Literally, I had one student say to me, “okay, so I know I’m an overachiever and perhaps set my sights too high, but I want to work at Google, Amazon, or, you know, Disney.” I’m like, “Okay, what have you — Okay, good, good for you. You’ve got a goal, great. What have you done? Or where are you at?”

Translation: **“Do you realize that, in my judgment, you are unlikely to stick out in these insanely competitive pools? You would have to pour in a huge amount of effort to transform the fundamentals of your story, not just tinker with your resume to tell your story a little better.”**

**Again, the low social capital student doesn’t grasp the translation, the code.**

That brings us to the second Key Problem, after Muzzling.

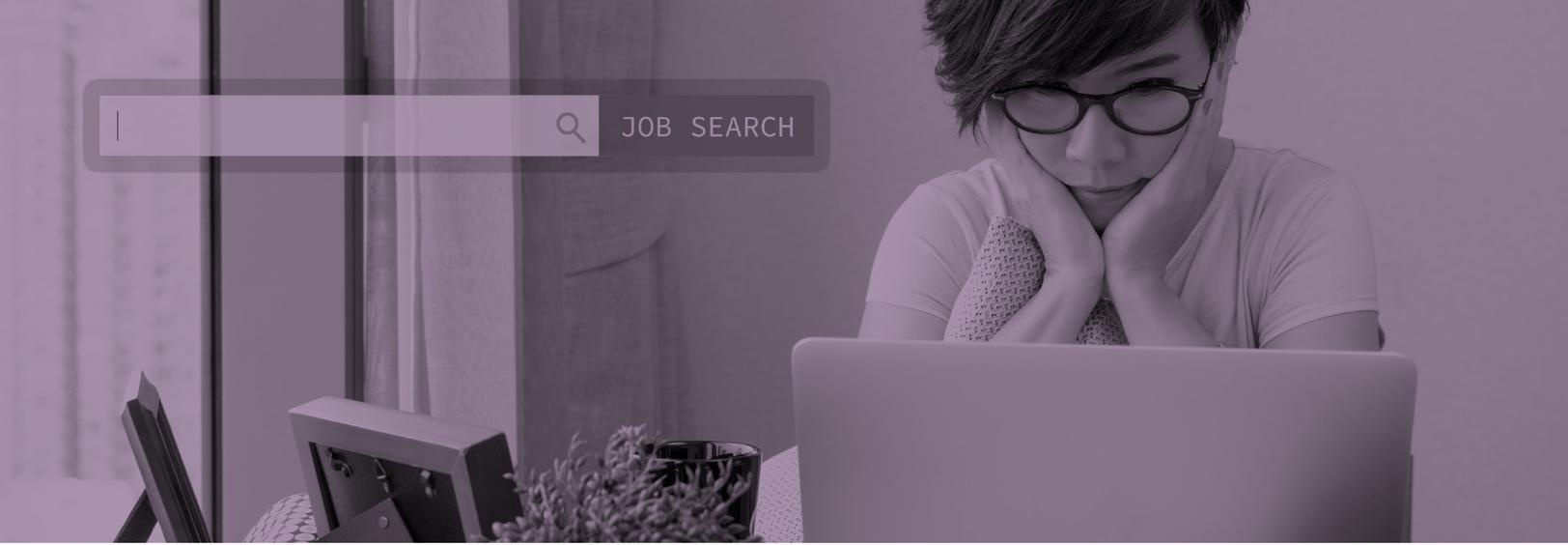
## **Truth 2. What do the most at-risk college seniors need, in order to actually secure a good job? 1:1 dosage in the style of a personal trainer. Career Offices generally do not offer that service.**

What do students receive from the Career Office besides Handshake, if not high dosage 1:1?

They get very low dosage 1:1 help: usually a light “resume edit” and a vague 30-minute consult. And they get invitations to Career Fairs and Employer Campus Visits. But these are typically dominated by employers seeking elite, quant-strong grads. A counselor told us:

Students who are not part of these sorts of really well-oiled recruiting machines where employers come to campus — I would say just about everyone outside of business and tech falls into this category — they don’t really understand how competitive things are, and also what the probability of success is and how many applications they need to send out, or how many auditions they need to go on, or even how to conduct — how to ensure or improve your probability of success by reaching out to alumni, strangers, friends, and places where you’d like to work before applying, and having a long tail of influence, kind of keeping — keeping people warm for a while so that you have a higher probability of being able to translate that to a lead, to an offer. And so yeah, I think there’s a lot of mystery around how to actually land that job.





We did find one office, the exception to the rule, where the college president promised to get every senior a job. Therefore, the career counselors were deployed to deliver 1:1 coaching.

Our counselors divided up the graduating seniors. Assigned cohorts of 70-80 to each one of us and tracked and stayed with them, and rode them pretty hard. We did heavy tracking, we did texting campaigns, we made sure that everyone had been touched multiple times, that opportunities were curated, you know, that we let them know, we just — we basically dropped everything else that we were meant to be doing.

We started doing like September check-ins like, why wait till March, April, May to check in with the seniors, like, let's find out, even if they have an offer that they've accepted, what other supports might they need? Do they need help with, you know, a place to live or meeting up with people, connecting with alums, in the place? Like, you know, we can continue to care about them, even if they look like they're all set with a job.

But I will say it takes a tremendous amount of — it means that you're doing very little else. It's really hard to do that level of one on one advising and intensity, or follow through, and also pay attention to all the other class years, like, who also really need — like, the support is needed at the front end.

Did the high dosage 1:1 work?

Yes and no, said the counselor. Yes, it seemed students were much better off. No, it did not seem sustainable. In any case, there wasn't good data to answer the question.

"We kept 2 sets of books," she explained. "One for the president and media, the other for us." So she couldn't articulate the exact payoff of the 1:1 investment.

We did find one part of many universities that provided high dosage 1:1 Career Prep. **Law Schools.** That's because **they are accountable for job outcomes, it's part of their rankings.** So instead of using low-wage counselors, they mobilize their best alumni, those who run law firms, to prepare law school students for the job search process. These law firm partners are unmuzzled — they give very tough feedback for interviews. It's interesting what gets done when the incentives are aligned.

You know which undergraduates do get high dosage 1:1 counseling? Often: kids of wealthy parents! One counselor told us her story:

I started working with Oberlin, Carleton College, Vassar, you name it, lots of private liberal arts students just on a private basis, helping them go from what I would say is relative cluelessness to employability, in roughly three months.



And, you know, the thing that most troubled me — when people are paying you, they expect you to also place the college grad, rather than just teach them how to fish, that’s one. And number two is they’ve already spent like \$70-\$80,000 a year on tuition, the parents have, so they’re not super excited to lay out five grand for private coaching.

And so, and it limited my ability to, you know, scale the practice, and to really serve students who needed it most, especially low income first gen students. I thought maybe once I got a nice book of business, I could, you know, have some scholarships and things like that available. But, you know, you’re having to monetize every conversation.

And, you know, the students who need it most, who need both the scaffolding and self advocacy skills, and the confidence to talk about themselves, especially the modest and humble students who need help seeing themselves in spaces — that was, that was a challenge.

So I actually came into the Career Office so that I could scale my practice and have lots of room to experiment on what worked and to think about how we could get to solutions faster, how could we get to awesomeness.

This is an amazing, entrepreneurial career counselor who, in our opinion, just needs to be unleashed inside her college. But like the entrepreneurial teacher, soldier, nurse on the front lines...she cheerfully does her job to the best of her ability, while an outside observer laments her constraints.

The issue here is not simply the Career Office orientation towards low dosage 1:1 and not “High Dosage 1:1 Coaching.” It’s also the whole tone of the Center. It’s not for the most at-risk students. One counselor says:

We had a donor-funded Big New Initiative. Students who came to visit us were the ones who were very career focused and frequent fliers. So I feel like the number of total students we got to see went down — the number of unique students, you know — and everyone else, you know, so first generation low income students, students of color, humanities students, anyone who had any questions about what they might want to pursue in life, did not come in. You know, because there was no kind of entry point; it was just intimidation. We looked — the building was corporatized, there was nothing playful about it, the word “career” was front and center in every conversation, which is also terrifying for most students, and there was no place or point of entry for anyone who was in discovery mode. You know, if you — if you didn’t have a path that you had given yourself or had any uncertainty, you didn’t know who to talk to, because each advisor was a specialist.

A counselor might notice a disparate impact but is not encouraged to Speak Truth To Power.

When I looked at who was not faring well, particularly in this moment, it was our Posse Scholars, who are students of color, high academic potential, but they were underrepresented in the students who came in for career advising. If you’re a Posse scholar coming from Houston, and you know, you’ve been stuck in (a faraway state) and maybe there were complex issues. I have students who have siblings in foster care; or had to transfer because their parents couldn’t fill out FAFSA forms for them and lost out on a year’s worth of financial aid. Lives are messier. Posse has its own alumni support but they fare the least well, at least at (our college), though I can’t speak to that nationally.

This reality is hidden in plain sight.



## **Truth 3. Even if resourced to provide 1:1 coaching dosage, accountable for results, and unmuzzled...many career counselors were never employers themselves. They don't truly know the Employer Perspective.**

Few career counselors have ever hired (or fired) scores or hundreds of people in the “real world” in previous jobs. Few have been managers in other industries. They don't know how to provide that aggressive 1:1 coaching, even if they were unmuzzled – they miss nuance. One said:

I mean, not to defame my employer, but career centers everywhere are really facing a major talent shortfall. First of all, there's no real promotional path. So in the best of times, usually you're dealing with trailing spouses or people who are reluctantly now finding themselves in whatever geography you're in and having to like — just, like, this is a way to do joyful work. You're not paid well, many of our graduating seniors make more than the experienced career counselors. The best people are sometimes poached by corporate employers for their HR teams, or even the tech players like Handshake.

Also, you're looking at the whole person, you know, it's not just like focusing on the employment aspect, you're dealing with people that have complex lives, and the pandemic sort of brought to the surface, you know — 70% of our students were seeing people for either anxiety or depression. And some of these are sort of situational, others are lingering, or, you know, Covid just kind of brought to the surface stuff that was, you know, hanging out there. Career counselors have to deal with all the social issues, too – again that's not our expertise.

**We did meet some outliers, counselors who truly had it all, and persisted even in the face of all the adversity. Here's one woman we loved. We'll call her Lisa. She said:**

I think if you can focus on the optimistic message, but also, then you have the ability to — and the credibility, too — as long as you, if you have the capacity to help students sort of see their awesomeness, and, and frame it in a very positive and optimistic way, then you would have earned the trust to be able to say the hard things too, and to provide the coaching that they need.

You know, so I actually say pretty direct things, you know, but it's because, you know, my first lens is to help you find “your awesome.” Let's — let's make sure that your resume is not wearing sweatpants and doing you a disservice. I think there's really gold here in the story that you have to tell, but the gold is not coming through, so let's make sure it is. I want to help tell your stories, and it's really hard to do for yourself, you know, I try to take sort of the weight — like, you're not failing the resume, the resume is failing you. You don't think there's anything special about you — that's why you're not an asshole, you know? [She laughs.] You don't even see how fabulous you are. Let me help you. You know, I'll be your fluffer and promoter.

Students have an expectation of one on one, you know, those who come into a career center want to have individual, they don't, they don't want generic advice, they want it to be specific to their particular situation. And so, and if they don't feel like they've gotten much accomplished, or don't leave your office from a one on one appointment feeling really optimistic and energized and clear about what what they're



expected to do next, then they won’t come back, and they won’t get that, the support that they need to really go from sweatpants to, you know, super shiny, you know, fabulous.

So the challenge is to make each touch point really compelling to make them want to come back, they need to believe that that there’s value in each interaction, and that they understand how to prepare and what to — how to make the most use of the time, let’s just say, and so that there is a need to subtly transfer some of the accountability to the student, but to also communicate that you’re there and that they will see direct progress.

**Lisa was not just unusual in her willingness to deliver 1:1 to her students, overriding tradition and her job description. She’s ingenious! Lisa continues:**

I try to construct some experiments where employers will give us two-hour kind of “quick fire challenges” where we ask them for a creative brief, what’s a problem that your business is trying to solve, and we’ll set up teams of four with disparate, you know, academic backgrounds and interests and talents, to, chew on something really juicy and get, you know, put two hours of creative thought into it.

And employers love it, because they get to sort of crowd source some great ideas, they get to see students, you know, creative thinking, and their ability to articulate themselves and present complex ideas, to build an argument, to analyze data, or whatever is involved.

And students get to — with fairly low risk — see what they’re capable of and see what the world of work actually feels like, and get to have stories to tell about problems that they solved in the real world.

**More like her, please!** To sum up:

Many others have ably argued that Career Services is Broken, like Strada and Ryan Craig. We agree.

**We respectfully disagree with Ryan Craig and others that the shift should be towards professors leading this work.** Professors suffer the same situation that we’ve identified with counselors:

1. **Muzzled.** Perhaps even more so than Career Office staff. Would professors be comfortable telling students that their major – the Department they teach in - is actually very weak at generating skills employers truly want? Professors are already bowing to grade inflation demands; would they be inclined to talk frankly about a kid’s likely troubles in securing a good paying job?
2. **Unused to high dosage, results-oriented 1:1.** In fact, professors already have a certain amount of “Academic Advising” – which is often organized to give the least amount of time possible to students. The idea that professors, inculcated in a low-dosage, low accountability framework for Course Advising, could reverse themselves for purposes of helping graduates get jobs – gee that seems steeply uphill.
3. **Unsuited:** most professors have never been Real World Employers. They are probably even less aware of the nuances of Real World hiring than Career Office staff.

**What’s The Way Forward?**



## We need a College Career Counseling system – and it may not come from the college itself – that:

- Starts with **clear data** about First Gen grads who are not in STEM tracks; it should be fairly easy for any university to predict which of their sophomores, juniors, and seniors are at risk of being very unhappy in their first jobs (or even unable to land them)
- **Accountable for outcomes** (hard earnings data, combined with job satisfaction data gathered by an outside, impartial organization, rather than surveys with low completion rates and nearly zero reliability)
- **Permission-based** to generate truth telling: You have to ask First Gen students if they want it straight. Let them decide. Be clear about what “straight” means and that it may be frustrating to hear, that their degree may not open doors like they hope, that the effort they’ll spend may be 10 times what they were expecting, etc. Use analogies like doctors with bad news in asking for permission. Get them to sign clear statements asking for this, to free up any counselor to discard the filter.
- We hypothesize that these 3 things would trigger:
  - 1:1 dosage needed to get the job done, as the basic product
  - A priority to hire Career Counselors like “Lisa” who we described in this publication, who a) instinctively grasps the Employer perspective because they have been Employers before, and b) can translate that “hidden curriculum” to First Gen students in ways they understand

## There are some promising efforts in and around this Onion.

1. There are some efforts to create very different universities from scratch. Stig Leschly’s College Postsecondary Commission hopes to create an independent accreditors that would measure universities on the earnings gains for their students, particularly First Gen students. Incentives like these would turn Career Services upside down: instead of the least important office at a college, it becomes the most important.
2. There are great nonprofits like Year Up and Per Scholas which serve this population by at least initially bypassing college altogether; they have been validated in multiple rigorous randomized trials to generate earnings gains.
3. There are also promising-but-not-yet-randomly-evaluated programs like Braven, Beyond 12, Basta to help students develop social capital during college. Braven RCTs are starting soon, however, which is encouraging! In each case, they combine a lower-cost group experience with a higher-cost 1:1 coaching experience.
4. Our startup, called 1Up, is a tiny part of this larger effort at non-profit driven change. We just provide the 1:1; there is no group experience.



## What is 1Up?

1Up is a fairly new, boutique R&D organization that provides free career counseling to First Gen college graduates, 80% African-American. We serve only clients who describe themselves as struggling in the job market, and frustrated with their first job out of college. The mission is to increase economic mobility quickly. We "learn by doing." Average age: 23.

We offer ~30 hours of "unmuzzled" (honest, direct) 1:1 job search coaching over three months. There is no upskilling. The 2 outcome variables we're chasing are: job happiness and earnings.

This is a permission-based sort of coaching: we basically ask for permission to "speak without any filter." It is the choice of any potential client of whether they want this coaching. Importantly, these young people say they want unfiltered, very blunt, very direct, highly specific coaching. Typically they say it's never been available to them.



Our first 1Up cohort, 30 clients, saw an average change in Job Satisfaction from 4 out of 10 to 8 out of 10, and an average salary increase of 25% — all in 3 months with no “upskilling.”

Our second 1Up cohort, 50 clients, is currently underway. But we’re seeing similar results.

Through this direct service, we’re discovering, with each case study, the nuanced “hidden curriculum” that blocks these First Gen college grads from jobs they find more satisfying. We’ll share that in the future.

**For now, our main finding thus far is clients welcome unusual clarity and honesty!** The needed diagnostic details and specific actions of job search can’t be covered up with vague phrasing or false reassurance. A very specific type of honesty is not just the best policy, but we’d argue, the only plausible policy to help this group.

Some early readers of this document asked: precisely HOW do you ask the client for permission to speak freely?

Geordie has not encountered any friction in this process, just using common sense.

But if you or your organization wanted to systematize Permission To Speak Freely - so as to unmuzzle your Counselors - you could create a simple disclosure form:

- \* I acknowledge that a Career Coach sometimes worries that if they say what they are thinking, a Client (like me) could take offense.
- \* But I sought out this Career Coach precisely because I \*WANT\* someone to tell me where I might be going wrong...to say to my face what others might be thinking behind my back. So yes, please please please, speak OPENLY and HONESTLY to me. Like they would if I were a cousin or niece or nephew.
- \* If I don’t agree with Career Coach, no problem - I’ve heard their point of view, and of course I might reject that point of view. I’m still better off knowing their opinion, because their intent is to help me.
- \* I promise that even if I find this feedback difficult to hear, I won’t complain about it. After all, the whole point here is that sometimes Career Coaches hold back good advice because they are afraid of offending Clients - and in my case, I’d much prefer to “hear it straight.”
- \* And of course, this type of coaching is ENTIRELY optional. We have “normal” coaching available where the Counselors remain very cautious in what they say to you, so there’s no risk of you being bothered.

Finally, a personal note from Mike. My wife Pru is an oncologist. Her work involves, several times a week, telling people they have cancer. In Pru’s sample of some 5,000 cancer patients over 20+ years across every ethnic, racial, gender, and economic group, she estimates that 60% want the doctor to “Give it to me straight.” There is great, similar upside in a permission-based Straight Talk with all Career Counseling.



# About us

## **Geordie Brackin** **(Co-founder / Director)**

Geordie happily counsels First Gen college graduates all day. He was the co-designer of Health Sciences Leadership in Philadelphia, a high school aimed at preparing students for careers in health care. He also served as Director of Innovation at Bridge International Academies, an organization that has launched over 500 elementary schools in Kenya, Uganda, Liberia, India, and Nigeria. Geordie was a public high school teacher in Nashville, TN, and Cape Town, South Africa with the LEAP Science and Math School. He is a Fulbright recipient and former magazine journalist.

## **Mike Goldstein** **(Co-founder / Advisor)**

Mike is the founder of Match Charter Schools in Boston. His alumni contact since 2004, in person and on Facebook and the phone, has motivated him to dig deeper on this issue. That interest was accelerated when Harvard economists Roland Fryer and Will Dobbie published their 2016 research on the earnings outcomes of Texas charter school alumni. Mike then assisted economist Tom Kane in launching a Long Term Charter Schools study, which is ongoing. We are grateful to the Yass Family and Charter Growth Fund for their help.

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