

Extending a Hand to the Future Generations: An OpEd

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Chicago Area

A PROGRAM OF
HEALTH & MEDICINE



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Project Focus: Mentorship and skill development for first-generation college students interested in pursuing healthcare careers

Project Site: Dominican University Chicago Campus and Richard T. Crane Medical Preparatory High School

"Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day.
Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a
lifetime."

But what if a person doesn't even know fishing is an option? Or what resources are needed, how to fish effectively, or which kind of fish to pursue? How does someone know they even want to fish? This is the situation many high school and college students find themselves in as they embark on their career journeys, overwhelmed by decisions about their education and careers after nearly two decades of being told what to do in school.

Despite unprecedented access to information, a significant portion feel unprepared for life after graduation. In the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's 2025 report on "The State of Global Teenage Career Preparation," their research found that 34% of students don't feel well-informed about possible paths after school, and nearly half lack the confidence to make decisions about their future. As a result, many enter college or the workforce without a clear sense of their interests or goals.

The challenges are compounded for first-generation students, who navigate higher education without parental experience or guidance. According to the

Pell Institute's 2024 Is College Worth It?: Black, Latinx, and Indigenous Student Voices on the Value of Postsecondary Credential study, first-generation college students bear the burden of financial hardships, often carrying numerous student loans, and start their careers in significant debt. Many first-generation students also experience stigma from being first-generation, racial discrimination, and feelings of isolation, all making their college experience emotionally and mentally challenging. Numerous studies in the last decade have shown that first-generation students are less likely to engage in activities that promote social capital, such as networking and mentorship, which have been shown to increase job prospects and help students navigate their education and career more effectively through social support and mentorship.

Without structured opportunities for career exploration and self-reflection, students struggle to process their emotions and opinions during their educational journey, which can lead to frustration, decreased mental health, and leave them underprepared for the workforce.

Rather than sending 18-year-olds into the world with little direction after years of prescriptive schooling, schools should help students pursue their

education intentionally and align academic paths with personal values. This helps them avoid going into debt and losing valuable time and money on career paths that don't fit their goals.

with highlighting the opportunities and resources needed to build it in the first place.

One example is through providing structured opportunities for mentorship, where students are not on their own to find individuals in their field who can provide insight and guidance on how they can plan for the next steps in their careers after graduation. Numerous research studies have shown that student connections with mentors help students make career decisions and are linked to better career outcomes, as mentors can provide resources and connections in professional spaces. Schools can also create workshops and spaces for students to connect with professionals and participate in guided self-reflection sessions, allowing them to learn from each other and build support networks with peers, helping them to develop their social capital at an early point in their education.

As a medical student who previously worked in healthcare workforce development and has spent many years in higher education, from college, to a master's program, to medical school I have learned the hard way how not taking the time to self-reflect has led me to feel lost throughout my educational journey and am realizing many lost opportunities because I didn't know what it was that I wanted in my career. That is why, as a current Albert Schweitzer Fellow, I have dedicated time for my students to ask the hard questions and think about their futures in a structured way, asking probing questions about their career goals and encouraging them to think about their futures early, laying the groundwork for a purposeful plan.

Career readiness isn't about telling students what to do in their careers. Rather, it's about offering a hand to invest in the longevity future workforce's well-being, ensuring that those who come after us are engaged and stable rather than floundering into adulthood. WE owe it to our younger counterparts that, as we want to create a brighter future, it starts