

Undergraduate Students' Post-Pandemic Perceptions of Career Opportunities: Implications for Academic Advisors in Higher Education

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Abstract: This study examines undergraduate students' perceptions of career opportunities following the COVID-19 pandemic, with particular attention to the role of academic advisors in supporting career development during periods of uncertainty. Drawing on survey data from 98 undergraduate students at a public university in Northern California, the study analyzes perceptions across three domains: post-pandemic career outlook, pre-pandemic career expectations, and the perceived value of college advisors in career planning. Descriptive quantitative analysis of Likert-scale survey items indicate that students experienced increased uncertainty about job prospects, perceived a growing need to develop new skills, and reported mixed awareness of career pathways. These findings highlight the need for more intentional advisor training; clearer communication of advising roles; and integrated support models that reflect the realities of a transforming workforce shaped by remote work, artificial intelligence, and lifelong learning.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic led to unprecedented disruptions in global labor markets, creating heightened uncertainty for individuals preparing to enter the workforce.

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This manuscript is not currently under consideration or review by any other publication, has not been accepted for publication elsewhere, and has not been published in any other periodical.

The manuscript represents the authors' original research and does not duplicate any previously published material, including the authors' own prior publications. The study involving human participants was conducted in accordance with the appropriate oversight requirements and was approved under Institutional Review Board protocol #23-272.

College students, in particular, had to navigate a rapidly changing employment landscape marked by the emergence of new technologies, shifting

job structures, and evolving employer expectations (Akkermans et al., 2020; Gathmann et al., 2023; Hite & McDonald, 2020). These disruptions highlighted the critical role of higher education institutions in supporting not only academic success but also career readiness through advising and related student support services.

This study is theoretically grounded in the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) Career Readiness Model (2024), which conceptualizes career readiness as the attainment and demonstration of competencies essential for a successful transition into and advancement within the workforce. The NACE framework identifies eight core competencies, namely career and self-development, communication, critical thinking, equity and inclusion, leadership, professionalism, teamwork, and technology, as foundational to workforce preparedness. In the context of pandemic-related labor market volatility, this competency-based framework provides a structured lens for understanding how students interpret their preparedness and how institutions can intentionally cultivate adaptive workforce capabilities.

The economic effects of the pandemic extended far beyond temporary job losses. Students reported lower earnings, fewer internship opportunities, and heightened familial financial stress (Aucejo et al., 2020; Schaeffer, 2022). Furthermore, perceptions of the value of a college degree, the feasibility of securing employment after graduation, and the relevance of existing skills were challenged, particularly for students early in their academic journey. While research indicates that many students did not alter their long-term career aspirations (Hickey et al., 2021), others used the pandemic as an inflection point to reconsider their goals, values, and pathways (Cech & Hiltner, 2022). From the perspective of the NACE (2024) model, such disruptions may shape students' career and self-development competencies, particularly by influencing their

capacity for adaptability and proactive engagement in managing their career pathways. In parallel, the growth of remote work, accelerated adoption of artificial intelligence (AI), and broader labor market volatility have transformed the notion of career-readiness (Bayerlein et al., 2021; Maietta & Gardner, 2022). The pandemic has served as what Akkermans et al. (2020) termed a "career shock," a notable involuntary event that prompts individuals to reevaluate their vocational identities and trajectories. In this context, understanding how undergraduate students perceive their career opportunities and how higher education personnel, particularly academic and career advisors, can support students in building adaptive capacity and resilience is essential.

College advisors play a pivotal role in supporting students' career readiness. Positioned at the intersection of curricular planning, personal development, and institutional policy, these advisors are uniquely situated to help students integrate career exploration into their academic journeys (Houdyshell & Kirk, 2018; Rey, 2022). However, many advising models remain siloed from career services, and the training advisors receive may not fully prepare them to address students' post-pandemic career concerns (Abumalloh et al., 2021). According to the NACE (2024) model, college advisors provide a practical and theoretically coherent structure for this integration by embedding career readiness competencies across academic curricula, co-curricular experiences, internships, and advising interactions.

This study therefore investigated undergraduate students' perceptions of career readiness following the COVID-19 pandemic, guided by the NACE (2024) Career Readiness Model. Specifically, it examined students' sense of preparedness for the workforce, perceived changes in competencies needed for employment, and beliefs about the role of college advisors in supporting career development. By centering undergraduate

student perspectives within a competency-based theoretical framework, this research seeks to inform how higher education advisors and institutional leaders can recalibrate student support structures to intentionally cultivate the competencies necessary for success in a dynamic and uncertain labor market.

COVID-19 and its Impact on Career Readiness

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a disruptive and destabilizing event that reshaped how many undergraduate students perceived their career pathways, job prospects, and overall preparedness for entering the workforce. Although higher education institutions have long played a critical role in preparing students for their professional life, conditions introduced by the pandemic accelerated the need to reconsider what career readiness entails within a rapidly changing labor market. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE, 2024), career readiness refers to “a foundation from which to demonstrate requisite core competencies that broadly prepare the college-educated for success in the workplace and lifelong career management” (NACE, para. 1). The pandemic placed new requirements on this foundational readiness by altering both the nature of work and employer expectations.

Despite these shifts, student responses to the pandemic's impact on career aspirations have remained complex and varied. In a national study, Hickey et al. (2021) observed that most college students (76.4%) reported that the pandemic did not substantially prompt them to reconsider their career goals. Among students pursuing health care careers, an even larger proportion (94.6%) remained committed to their original aspirations despite the visible challenges encountered by the sector during the height of the pandemic. These findings suggest that although the external labor market changed, students' internal commitments to specific career fields often remained stable.

However, other research indicates a broader reassessment of career priorities and values,

particularly among workers directly affected by job loss or furlough. Cech and Hiltner (2022) reported that these individuals increasingly prioritized meaningful work and personal fulfillment, signaling a possible shift in how students and graduates evaluate future employment. This evolving orientation toward purpose-driven employment may shape how students approach career planning and how advisors frame discussions of goal setting and long-term satisfaction.

Empirical evidence further underscores the economic impact of the pandemic on students' labor market experiences. In a survey of approximately 1,500 undergraduate students, Aucejo et al. (2020) reported a 31% reduction in wages and a 37% decrease in weekly work hours. Additionally, 40% of students lost a job, internship, or job offer, and many reported financial instability within their households. These disruptions represent more than temporary setbacks; they may undermine students' confidence in navigating the labor market and shape future expectations regarding employability and financial security.

National labor data reveal similar trends. Before the pandemic emerged in the United States in early 2020, the unemployment rate for individuals with a bachelor's degree was relatively low at 1.9%. By June of that year, the rate had increased to 6.8% for college graduates and even higher for those with some college education (10.8%) or only a high school diploma (12.2%) (Schaeffer, 2022). Although college graduates maintained a relative advantage in employment stability, the sharp rise in unemployment nevertheless signaled the volatility of even seemingly secure career pathways during a global crisis.

The pandemic also reshaped students' long-term perceptions of post-graduation opportunities. Aucejo et al. (2020) reported that students' perceived likelihood of securing a job before graduation declined by nearly 20%, and their anticipated earnings at age 35 decreased by an estimated 2.5%. These findings suggest that

students anticipate lasting effects of the pandemic on their economic trajectories, reinforcing the need for institutions to provide sustained support that helps students adapt and develop confidence in their future prospects.

In the five years since the onset of COVID-19, students' perceptions of career readiness and the competencies required for successful labor market participation have continued to evolve. Although the acute phase of the pandemic has passed, its residual effects remain salient in student advising contexts. Further research is warranted to examine how these shifts vary across student populations and to identify advising interventions that may mitigate the long-term impact of the pandemic on students' career development.

Career Readiness Interventions in Higher Education

Higher education institutions are distinctly positioned to support students' career readiness through the coordinated efforts of career centers and advising offices. However, increasing awareness and use of these services remains a persistent challenge. For example, Binghamton University reported a notable increase in first-year student engagement, from 55% in 2021–2022 to 71% in 2022–2023, after implementing targeted outreach strategies. These strategies included leveraging extensive introductory courses, maintaining a visible presence in student spaces, and encouraging proactive student contact with career consultants by the second year (Mowreader, 2023). Such intentional campus-wide approaches highlight promising practices for early engagement. Although short-term interventions are common, research increasingly indicates that sustained developmental approaches are more effective in promoting career readiness. Wetstone and Rice (2023) found that brief workshops did not considerably improve career readiness outcomes, while earlier studies reported stronger effects for semester-long programs. Similarly, Hirdes and Falco (2021) argued that institutions should invest in peer education models and support

students' social-emotional development as key components of long-term career success, particularly given the lingering psychological and developmental effects of the pandemic on undergraduate populations.

As institutions continue to adapt to post-pandemic realities, developing advising structures that empower students to achieve career readiness is essential. One area requiring renewed attention is the relationship between academic advising and career services. Although these functions are often considered complementary, they are typically organized as distinct units with different professional training, goals, and operational models. Academic advisors, while central to students' planning and progression, may not be trained to address career decision-making or labor market preparation in depth (Rey, 2022). Meanwhile, students increasingly expect career-related guidance to be integrated into their general advising experience.

In response to these expectations, some institutions have begun to reconsider and reconfigure advising practices. For example, Tarrant County Community College has developed an integrated model that incorporates specialized caseloads; intentional partnerships between career services and advising staff; and targeted advisor training related to university requirements, technology platforms, and emotional support strategies (Parrent, 2023). This holistic advising model aims to provide students with consistent, personalized support regardless of whether they seek academic or career guidance. Embedding career advising within general advising practices may also contribute to improved student retention and degree completion, as suggested by Menke (2016), who emphasized the importance of helping students articulate their interests, values, and goals within a coherent academic and career pathway.

Despite such innovations, institutional silos continue to limit collaboration between career services and academic advising. These structural

separations can create service gaps that leave students without clear guidance at critical points in their educational journey (Rey, 2022). Beyond improving coordination, Helbig and Matkin (2021) argued that publicly funded colleges must demonstrate their economic and workforce impact, further reinforcing the importance of supporting students' career development as a matter of institutional accountability. Addressing these challenges requires not only structural reform but also professional development for advisors, shared metrics for student success, and leadership that prioritizes cross-functional collaboration.

Importantly, responsibility for career readiness does not rest solely with institutions. Students themselves play an active role in shaping their career trajectories. Akkermans et al. (2020) emphasized the dynamic interaction between individual agency and contextual factors in how students experience "career shocks," such as the pandemic. Empowering students to cultivate career agency, including adaptability, self-reflection, and proactive skill development, is therefore an essential component of any institutional strategy. Insights from the 2020–2021 Recruiting Trends Survey reinforce this perspective. Maietta and Gardner (2022) reported employer recommendations that encourage students to build professional networks, pursue real-world experiences (e.g., internships, part-time employment, volunteering), develop proficiency in virtual technologies, and view their academic studies as pathways to diverse career opportunities rather than solely those aligned with their majors. These findings suggest that preparing students for the future of work requires both institutional support and individual initiative and that advisors can play a critical role in helping students navigate this intersection.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive quantitative survey research design to examine undergraduate students' perceptions of career

opportunities in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The primary focus was the collection of data through a structured survey instrument, supplemented by an open-ended qualitative item intended to provide additional insight into student experiences. The qualitative component comprised a short-response item inviting participants to elaborate on their views; however, because of a low response rate and limited thematic consistency ($n = 4$), these responses were excluded from the final analysis.

Instrumentation

The survey examining post-pandemic career opportunities, pre-pandemic career expectations, and the perceived value of college advisors in supporting career readiness was developed through a review of foundational literature on career development and workforce readiness, as well as emerging research on employment disruptions following COVID-19. Literature on career readiness competencies (NACE, 2024) and workforce preparedness (Aucejo et al., 2020; Hickey et al., 2021) revealed components assessing students' perceptions of employment opportunities, workforce readiness, confidence in skill development, and views of career prospects before and after the pandemic. Research documenting shifts in labor market trends and employment outlooks, together with national workforce data (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2023), informed comparative questions examining changing expectations regarding job availability, employment skills, and career pathways. Additionally, research on academic advising and student development following the pandemic (Abumalloh et al., 2021) informed items evaluating the extent to which advisors support students in identifying career pathways, strengthening workforce preparedness, and enhancing overall career readiness. Grounding the instrument in established theoretical constructs and empirical findings supported its content validity and alignment with career development and higher education advising practices.

Data were collected through an anonymous online survey administered via Qualtrics. This survey captured students' perceptions across three domains: (1) pre-COVID career perceptions, (2) post-COVID career perceptions, and (3) perceptions of college advisors. These domains were operationalized through 12 Likert-type items assessed on a 7-point scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." Each item was derived from a review of literature examining the impact of COVID-19 on student career development and the role of academic and career advising during periods of uncertainty. In addition to these items, the survey included four demographic questions and an invitation to participate in a follow-up qualitative component. Quantitative data from the survey were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, version 28. Descriptive statistics, reported as percentage responses, were calculated for each of the 12 Likert-scale items to identify student perceptions across the three key domains (Table 1).

Participants

Before recruitment, approval to conduct the study was obtained from the institution's Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. Participants were volunteers enrolled in an undergraduate major and career exploration course offered at a public, urban, four-year university in California. Students were invited to participate through an email that included a link to the survey questionnaire, and a follow-up reminder was sent two weeks after the initial invitation. A total of 98 undergraduate students completed the survey. The participants' age ranged from 18 to 29 years. Regarding gender identity, 39% identified as female, 54.9% as male, and 1.9% preferred not to disclose. The racial and ethnic composition of the sample was diverse: 58% identified as Asian, 5.9% as Black or African American, 13.7% as Hispanic or

Latino/a/x, 2.9% as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 10.8% as White, 3.9% as multiracial or mixed race/ethnicity, and 2.9% preferred not to state their identity. Class standing was also recorded: 68% of the participants were first-year students, followed by 11.76% of sophomores, 7.8% of juniors, and 7.8% of seniors.

Results

Post-COVID Career Perceptions

A majority of students (65.3%) agreed that the pandemic changed the skills required for workforce participation, and a similar proportion (59.2%) reported a heightened need to prepare for entering the workforce. These responses indicate heightened student awareness of the evolving nature of employability and skill demands in a post-pandemic labor market.

Although students recognized the disruptive effects of the pandemic, their perceptions of career opportunities were more ambivalent. Most respondents (81.6%) either disagreed with or selected "Neither Agree nor Disagree" in response to the statement "The COVID-19 pandemic has increased my career opportunities." This result suggests uncertainty or skepticism about whether the pandemic expanded or improved career prospects. In contrast, more than half of the respondents (53.1%) agreed that the pandemic allowed them to reflect on and identify possible career pathways. This finding suggests a shift in perspective, wherein some students used the pandemic as a period for reflection and re-evaluation rather than viewing it solely as a setback.

Finally, the participants' responses to the item "The COVID-19 pandemic has changed my view of employment" ($M = 5.11$, $SD = 1.16$) indicated that many students experienced a shift in how they conceptualize work, possibly reflecting the expansion of remote employment, changing job expectations, or increased awareness of labor market volatility.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics

Question	Mean	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Post-Covid Career Perceptions								
The COVID-19 pandemic has increased my career opportunities.	3.53	7.1%	19.4%	16.3%	38.8%	11.2%	3.1%	4.1%
The COVID-19 pandemic has changed my view of employment.	5.11	0%	1.0%	7.1%	21.4%	32.7%	25.5%	12.2%
The COVID-19 pandemic has allowed me to identify career pathways that I may want to pursue.	4.56	2.0%	3.1%	10.2%	31.6%	30.6%	19.4%	3.1%
The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the need to prepare for the workforce.	4.79	1.0%	6.1%	2.0%	31.6%	28.6%	24.5%	6.1%
The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the skills I need to develop for the workforce.	4.89	1.0%	4.1%	7.1%	22.4%	29.6%	29.6%	6.1%
The COVID-19 pandemic has created more	5.22	0%	4.1%	6.1%	12.2%	28.6%	38.8%	10.2%

challenges to job employment.	Pre-Covid Career Perceptions							
Before the COVID-19 pandemic, I had more career opportunities.	4.19	1.0%	8.2%	9.2%	53.1%	13.3%	11.2%	4.1%
Before the COVID-19 pandemic, I felt more optimistic about getting hired with a college degree.	4.48	1.0%	5.1%	9.2%	39.8%	24.5%	15.3%	5.1%
Before the COVID-19 pandemic, I was looking forward to entering the workforce.	4.60	0%	6.1%	7.1%	37.8%	22.4%	22.4%	4.1%
Before the COVID-19 pandemic, I already identified career pathways for myself.	4.42	1.0%	14.3%	15.3%	17.3%	23.5%	20.4%	8.2%
College Advisor Perceptions								
College advisors can assist me with identifying a career pathway.	5.22	1.0%	2.0%	3.1%	20.4%	28.6%	30.6%	14.3%
College advisors are essential as a	5.13	1.0%	5.1%	2.0%	19.4%	27.6%	33.7%	11.2%

support for
students'
post-
pandemic.

Note: (N = 98)

Pre-COVID Career Perceptions

The pre-COVID career perceptions subscale included four items that asked participants to reflect on their beliefs and attitudes about their career pathways and employment expectations before the onset of the pandemic. The purpose of this subscale was to provide a comparative baseline for understanding how students' perceptions may have shifted following the pandemic.

In this category, 48.9% of students agreed with the statement "Before the COVID-19 pandemic, I was looking forward to entering the workforce," suggesting that many respondents felt optimistic about transitioning from college to employment before the pandemic. Similarly, 44.9% agreed with the statement "Before the COVID-19 pandemic, I felt more optimistic about getting hired with a college degree," indicating moderate optimism regarding employment prospects.

However, only 28.6% of respondents agreed that "Before the COVID-19 pandemic, I had more career opportunities," reflecting ambivalence about their future in the job market. This pattern suggests that some students were uncertain about the availability of career opportunities even before the pandemic, a perception that may have intensified in the post-pandemic period. Moreover, just over half of the participants (52.1%) agreed that they had already identified a career pathway before the pandemic. These findings indicate that although many students entered college with a general sense of career direction, the pandemic introduced substantial uncertainty and prompted a re-evaluation of both short- and long-term employment goals.

College Advisor Perceptions

The third subscale, college advisor perceptions, included two items examining students' views of the role of academic advisors in supporting career development during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Students expressed strong agreement with both statements. The item "College advisors can assist me with identifying a career pathway" received agreement from 73.5% of respondents, indicating that most participants viewed advisors as valuable resources in their career exploration process. Similarly, 72.5% of students agreed with the statement "College advisors are essential as a support for students post-pandemic." These findings suggest that students recognize the important role of advisors in facilitating career readiness, particularly in response to the complex transitions introduced by the pandemic. However, the response distributions also indicated that approximately one-quarter of respondents were either uncertain about or disagreed with the advisor-related statements. This pattern suggests an opportunity for institutions to more clearly communicate the scope of advising services and strengthen connections between academic advising and career development support.

Summary of Findings

This study investigated how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced undergraduate students' perceptions of career opportunities and the perceived role of college advisors in supporting students during that period of disruption. The study was conducted across three thematic domains: post-COVID career perceptions, pre-COVID career perceptions, and college advisor perceptions. These domains illustrate how

students' career-related views evolved in response to the pandemic and highlight implications for advising practice and institutional support.

College Students' Perceptions of Career Opportunities Post-COVID-19

The data revealed that undergraduate students were highly aware of the pandemic's impact on the job market but held mixed views regarding its influence on their own career opportunities. Notably, 43% of participants disagreed that the COVID-19 pandemic improved their career opportunities, while another 38.8% selected "Neither Agree nor Disagree." When combined, 81.8% of students expressed uncertainty or skepticism about whether the pandemic created new career pathways. This pattern suggests that, for most respondents, the pandemic was not a period of professional growth or expansion but rather one marked by ambiguity or perceived lost opportunities.

Simultaneously, more than half of the participants (53%) agreed that the pandemic prompted them to identify potential career pathways. This response may reflect increased personal reflection as students reevaluated their career interests, values, or preferred working conditions in light of the pandemic. A larger proportion (70%) reported that the pandemic changed their overall view of employment, suggesting a broader reframing of how they conceptualize work and its role in their lives.

Students also expressed a heightened sense of urgency regarding preparation for the workforce. Nearly 60% agreed that the pandemic made it more essential to prepare for employment, and 65.5% reported that it changed the skills they believed were necessary for career success. These responses indicate greater student awareness of evolving employer expectations and the importance of adaptability in a post-pandemic labor market.

Notably, 77.6% of students agreed that the pandemic created additional challenges for employment, underscoring persistent concern about entering the workforce. This finding

aligns with national labor trends and highlights the need for institutional support that addresses both practical skill development and students' emotional readiness for career transitions.

Comparing Pre- and Post-Pandemic Career Perceptions

When reflecting on their pre-pandemic career outlook, students reported generally neutral to moderately positive perceptions. However, their responses suggested that even before COVID-19, many students were uncertain about their career aspirations. For example, only 28.6% agreed that they had more career opportunities before the pandemic, while more than half (53.1%) selected "Neither Agree nor Disagree," indicating ambivalence regarding job availability before the crisis.

Students' optimism regarding employment with a college degree also appeared limited. Although 44.9% agreed with the statement that they felt more optimistic about being hired before the pandemic, 54.1% either disagreed or selected the neutral response. Similarly, only 48.9% agreed that they were looking forward to entering the workforce before COVID-19, whereas 51% either disagreed or selected the neutral option.

When asked whether they had identified a career pathway before the pandemic, 52.1% responded affirmatively. However, nearly 47% either disagreed or were uncertain. This distribution reinforces the observation that career decision-making remains fluid for many undergraduate students and highlights the need for institutional career development initiatives that support clearer and earlier pathway identification.

These findings suggest that the pandemic did not necessarily disrupt well-established career plans for most students but instead compounded pre-existing uncertainty. This pattern underscores the importance of sustained, proactive advising strategies that address both long-term career ambiguity and the disruptions introduced by public health and economic crises.

Student's Perceptions of College Advisors and Their Role in Career Development

Students generally viewed college advisors as important figures in supporting career exploration and decision-making. A combined 72.5% of respondents agreed that college advisors can assist students in identifying career pathways, and 73.5% agreed that advisors serve as essential sources of support in the post-pandemic environment.

Despite these positive perceptions, a notable minority of students remained uncertain or skeptical about the role of advisors. Approximately one-quarter of respondents either disagreed with or selected "Neither Agree nor Disagree" for both advisor-related items. These responses may reflect uncertainty about the scope of advising services, limited prior engagement with advisors, or a perceived disparity between academic advising and career guidance.

This ambivalence highlights an opportunity for institutions to more clearly communicate the function of advising centers, clarify the distinction between academic and career advising, and strengthen collaboration between these services. It also reinforces the need for ongoing professional development that equips advisors to support integrated advising models wherein career readiness competencies are incorporated into general academic advising sessions.

Implications

The findings of this study underscore the urgent need for higher education institutions to strengthen and reevaluate their approaches to career readiness and advising in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although many undergraduate students retained their long-term aspirations, the data revealed widespread uncertainty about career pathways, job prospects, and employability skills, echoing national trends (Aucejo et al., 2020; Hickey et al., 2021). These challenges are compounded by limited awareness of available advising and career

services and by structural disconnects between academic advising and career support units (Hirdes & Falco, 2021; Rey, 2022). When viewed through the lens of the NACE (2024) Career Readiness Model, this uncertainty suggests gaps not only in occupational knowledge but also in students' perceived development of workforce competencies required for a successful transition into employment. The implications outlined below highlight three key areas for intervention and discussion among stakeholders: (1) strengthening student career knowledge, confidence, and competency development; (2) bridging academic advising and career services; and (3) preparing students for a rapidly evolving workforce landscape.

Improving Students' Career Knowledge, Confidence, and Skill Development

Recent studies suggest that many graduates lack the skills, confidence, and competencies necessary to transition smoothly into the workforce (Bayerlein et al., 2021; Packer, 2022). Findings from the present study reinforce this concern: although more than 70% of the participants viewed college advisors as essential supports in the post-pandemic environment, nearly half reported uncertainty about their career direction. This disconnect suggests that students may value advising in principle yet remain underprepared or insufficiently informed in practice. To address this gap, institutions can prioritize early and sustained career development education by integrating labor market awareness, transferable skill development, and reflective career exploration into both curricular and co-curricular programming. Gallo and Roberts (2019) demonstrated the effectiveness of an interdisciplinary career exploration approach through a case study of a curriculum designed to strengthen students' career decision-making and self-efficacy. The curriculum incorporated a formative learning process culminating in a summative assignment. Students engaged in structured activities including self-assessments

of personality, interests, values, and skills; reflective journaling based on assessment outcomes; research on potential majors and careers; and the development of a five-year vision board to articulate future goals. These findings suggest that thoughtfully designed interdisciplinary career exploration experiences can meaningfully enhance students' clarity and confidence in navigating career decisions.

Bridging Academic Advising and Career Services

The findings of this study also echo concerns in the literature that academic advising and career services, although complementary, often remain organizationally siloed (Helbig & Matkin, 2021; Rey, 2022). Students in this study expressed general confidence in advisors' ability to support their career development, yet a notable portion were unsure about the distinction between advising functions or uncertain about how to access available support. This pattern suggests the need for greater cross-training among advising staff and stronger integration of career services to create a seamless and comprehensive support network that addresses both academic and career development needs. Morley, Boerchia, and Schwemmin (2026) illustrated how academic advising and career education teams strengthened collaboration by integrating appreciative advising and design thinking into shared professional development initiatives. Appreciative advising, which emphasizes rapport building, open-ended inquiry, strength identification, and action planning, provided a common framework for student conversations, while design thinking introduced complementary approaches for exploring student goals. To establish shared language across units, advisors invited career educators to present life design concepts at the institution's annual advising conference, and advisors developed an appreciative advising resource workbook for the career team. Their joint mapping of programs to clearly defined learning outcomes reflects a competency-based approach

aligned with the NACE framework, enabling institutions to intentionally track and reinforce career readiness outcomes across units.

A similar example of cross-campus collaboration was presented by Decapua, Mihlon, and Chacon (2025), who highlighted the development of career communities, an initiative that brought together academic support services, experiential learning programs, STEM engagement efforts, and faculty across disciplines. This model created a network of professionals collectively invested in students' academic and career success by integrating academic and career advising into a cohesive support structure. Students in the STEM and health sciences career community received guidance on course selection as well as opportunities to attend networking events with professionals in their fields. Each community offered a supportive network that helped the members connect their academic studies to long-term career goals.

By addressing structural gaps and fostering intentional collaboration, institutions can provide clearer developmental pathways that align advising practices with nationally recognized career readiness standards.

Preparing Students for a Rapidly Changing Workforce Landscape

Participant responses in this study reflected not only uncertainty but also an awareness of substantial shifts in the post-pandemic labor market, including increased reliance on remote work, digital platforms, and emerging technologies such as AI. As noted by Gathmann et al. (2023) and Maietta and Gardner (2022), the pandemic accelerated transformations in how, where, and why people work. In response to these changes, advisors and career services professionals must broaden their competencies and adapt advising frameworks to emphasize lifelong learning, technological adaptability, and resilience in the face of ongoing disruption. Advising practices must evolve to help students interpret labor market trends and prepare for careers that may differ substantially from those

of previous generations. These shifts elevate the importance of NACE (2024) competencies such as technology, communication, critical thinking, and professionalism, particularly in digitally mediated and hybrid work settings.

Emerging directions in advising are likely to prioritize digital literacy and remote collaboration skills, enabling students to better understand how AI and automation are reshaping industries and career pathways. Decapua, Mihlon, and Chacon (2025) suggested that institutions move beyond traditional advising models toward more holistic approaches that intentionally integrate academic, career, and personal development. Leveraging AI-enabled tools and learning analytics dashboards can further enhance institutional advising capacity while maintaining individualized support. When thoughtfully implemented, these innovations can strengthen proactive outreach, personalize student guidance, and equip graduates with the skills required to thrive in an evolving workforce.

These shifts in program delivery and services are neither static nor temporary. Rather, evolving institutional supports can provide flexible and adaptive models that reflect the need for career advising to remain responsive to volatility and complexity in a global economy.

Limitations of the Study and Future Research

While this study provides key insights into undergraduate students' perceptions of career readiness and the role of college advising in the post-pandemic context, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study was conducted at a single public, urban, four-year university in Northern California, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other institutional types, such as community colleges, private institutions, or rural campuses. Moreover, the sample size ($N = 98$) was relatively modest, and the demographic composition, particularly the high proportion of Asian-identifying and first-year students, may not reflect the broader

diversity of undergraduate populations across higher education institutions in the U.S. In this context, institutions with different student demographics, institutional missions, or regional labor markets may yield distinct patterns of perception and advising engagement.

Second, the majority of participants were first-year students (approximately 70%), many of whom may not have had extensive experience with academic advising, career advising, internships, or other career preparation resources. Their perspectives, while valuable, may considerably differ from those of upper-division students who are further along in their career development process. Furthermore, the qualitative component of the study yielded insufficient responses for analysis, limiting opportunities to explore student narratives and lived experiences in greater depth. Future research should address these limitations by using larger and more representative samples across multiple institutions, incorporating longitudinal designs to track changes in student perceptions over time, and expanding qualitative inquiry to better understand the complexities of student decision-making, advising experiences, and the institutional contexts that shape them.

Third, additional research is needed to examine how institutional structures, such as co-located advising models, cross-training initiatives, and integrated advising platforms, influence student engagement with career services. Future studies could also explore advisors' perspectives on their evolving roles in supporting career readiness, particularly in response to technological change and workforce uncertainty. Investigating how students from historically underserved or career-uncertain populations navigate post-pandemic transitions may also yield valuable insights for advising practice and policy development.

Conclusion

This study found that most students reported greater challenges in securing employment (77.6%), a stronger need to develop new skills

(65.5%), and an increased need to prepare intentionally for the workforce (59.2%). Although a majority (70%) indicated that the pandemic shifted their view of employment, only a small proportion believed that it improved their career opportunities. Notably, more than 70% of participants agreed that college advisors played an essential role in supporting students during and after the pandemic, yet approximately one-quarter expressed uncertainty about the role or effectiveness of such support.

These findings highlight the importance of developing proactive and clearly communicated advising strategies that address both students' cognitive perceptions of career readiness and their emotional readiness to make informed decisions. They also underscore the need for institutions to provide structured career exploration opportunities, particularly for first-year students, and to strengthen advisors' capacity to support students in navigating a volatile labor market.

In response, higher education institutions must consider integrating career development into academic advising as a structural and strategic priority. This includes strengthening partnerships between advising and career services, offering targeted interventions for students experiencing career uncertainty, and aligning institutional curricula with the competencies demanded by a rapidly transforming workforce. Students in this study expressed both a need for greater support and a belief that advisors can play a meaningful role in career planning. However, a substantial portion also reported uncertainty about where and how to access such support.

Addressing these gaps requires clearer communication, more intentional advisor training, and the redesign of advising systems to reflect the realities of post-pandemic career preparation, including the expansion of remote work, AI, and lifelong learning models. Future research should examine how academic advising systems can be redesigned to align with

emerging workforce trends, such as remote work, artificial intelligence, and lifelong learning, and assess how advisor training and institutional structures support students in navigating these changes. Comparative and longitudinal studies could also explore how different advising models influence students' career confidence, technological adaptability, and perceptions of institutional responsiveness.

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