



**Inspiration and
insights from the U.S.**

SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONING FOR STUDENTS

Part of the project 'Designing a Happier Student Life For
Better Learning: International experiences and capacity
building'

**INNOVATION
CENTRE
DENMARK**

 **Ministry of Higher
Education and Science
Denmark**

DESIGNING A HAPPIER STUDENT LIFE

This case is a part of the project 'Designing a happier student life for better learning,' managed by the Danish Innovation Centres in Silicon Valley and Boston, and the Danish Agency for Higher Education and Science.

About the project

"Designing a happier student life for better learning' is an internationally focused project on how to 'design' a better student life, increase student well-being and thus create optimal conditions for better learning. The project draws on the knowledge and experience of elite US universities working on the well-being agenda and leading experts in the field.

A growing body of evidence shows that student well-being is an essential element of education and overall student success. In a recent national survey of Danish students, 48% reported feeling stressed, and 22-26% felt that they were feeling lonely, which calls for action in both amending bad mental health and strengthening good mental health. Systematically working on improving mental health and building strong and healthy minds has a range of benefits for students personally and their learning, which is why the Danish Agency for Higher Education and Science supports this project.

Via Innovation Centre Denmark in Silicon Valley and Innovation Centre Denmark in Boston, the international perspective and inspiration are integrated into the design of such initiatives by involving key US experts in the field and setting up partnerships for the Danish stakeholders

via:

- Capacity-building
- Knowledge-sharing
- Networks and partnerships

The project targets Danish Higher Education institutions, its students and relevant staff involved in student life and well-being, such as student counselors, faculty, and top management. You can read more about the project (in Danish) here: ufm.dk/designing-a-happier-student-life, where you can also find other cases (in English) and relevant material about the project's activities. If you like to get in touch with the Danish Agency for Higher Education and Science about well-being to discuss the project further, you can mail trivsel@ufm.dk.

SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS IN WELLBEING

TAKE-AWAY POINTS

- The transition in academic level or from student to employee can be challenging in many ways and lead to feelings of insecurity regarding own competencies, expectations, and belonging
- Career counseling can provide students with tools to manage anxiety and decision-making related to career development
- A “co-op model” is used by some American universities to address transitional challenges through close partnerships with companies and industries to alleviate uncertainty about the transferability of skills and prospects
- Mindset interventions within social psychology can be used in a Danish context to “pop the pluralistic ignorance bubble” by reducing the experience of being alone, not belonging, and being inadequate

For many, the transition from student life to being part of the workforce can be a tumultuous time. Many are insecure about their own competencies both socially and professionally, unsure about future workplace expectations, as well as uncertain about general career opportunities.

The leading universities in Silicon Valley and Boston, such as Stanford University, UC Berkeley, Harvard University, and Yale University all work closely with various industries by providing experiences that can help students in alleviating some of their concerns and uncertainty.

Besides career counseling, such experiences might be industry-scholarship programs, student-industry labs, and network facilitation.

The social psychology practice, mindset interventions, has proven to positively increase students' social- and academic performance, especially among minority groups. However, the practice also resonates with students who experience perfectionism and imposter syndrome.

This article displays different institutional arrangements and ways of cooperating with the industry while paying attention to aspects of student well-being that can serve as an inspiration to Danish stakeholders.

FROM STUDENT TO YOUNG PROFESSIONAL

In a report by the Transitions to Adulthood Center for Research at the University of Massachusetts, a large number of college seniors report the transition to an independent and self-sufficient life to be anxiety-provoking and overwhelming.¹

Transitioning from student to employee can be challenging in several ways. The transition can also be difficult to manage socially.



Students are used to a very social educational setting with other similar-aged people, but when entering the workforce many will have to adjust to being in a different social setting where you work with acquaintances rather than close friends. This lack of an immediate support network around you can be challenging to adjust to.

A large number of college seniors report the transition to an independent and self-sufficient life to be anxiety-provoking and overwhelming.

– Transitions to Adulthood Center for Research at University of Massachusetts

The ambiguity of what life will look like post-graduation can also be a huge stressor. Uncertainty and anxiety are not only limited to the period of job search. When students graduate and join the workforce, many have little knowledge of what it means to be an employee as opposed to a student, having spent the vast majority of their lives being students. While some students hit the ground running, others find the change a challenge.

Educational and corporate cultures differ in many ways. For instance, where students' primary challenges were intellectual, they now realize that most challenges that companies face are organizational and/or people-centered.

Students also report² a shift from a focus on personal development to a focus on creating results for an organization. However, students leave the educational setting in search of their identity, which is often manifested in the exploration of a meaningful career.

Finding out what is meaningful and gaining a sense of belonging can be a long and challenging process.³ This can cause frustration and general unhappiness as former students try to situate themselves in this new life. Therefore it is important for schools to motivate and support students in pivotal moments throughout college in preparation for the transition to the workplace.

As illustrated on the next page, it is a hard transition where graduates' perceived differences between college and the workplace are expanded over 15 different parameters.

STUDENT COUNSELING AND CAREER SERVICES

Investment in mental health counseling is growing in the US. A new report conducted by the Californian Legislative Office provides an overview of the state funding of mental health services in California.⁴

For the year 2021-2022, it has been reported that the UC Universities have received \$20 million, the California State Universities (CSU) \$15 million, and California Community Colleges (CCC) \$30 million, amounting to \$65.3 million total spend on mental health services.

This is a large increase compared to the year 2019-2020 – pre-pandemic and the first stages of the pandemic, where only \$15.3 million were allocated to this area, equalling about 1/3 or 1/4 of the post-pandemic budget.

Several studies have pointed to a hesitancy to utilize on-campus services due to stigma around mental health and/or a failure to recognize the potential value of such counseling. However, the tide seems to be changing as more students struggle with mental health issues and more are becoming willing to talk about their struggles more openly.⁵



²College-to-Workplace Transitions: Becoming a Freshman Again

³The College-to-Career Transition: An Exploration of Emerging Adulthood

⁴Overview of Mental Health Services for College Students

⁵First cross-national results from the WHO World Mental Health International College Student Initiative

GRADUATES' PERCEIVED DIFFERENCE BETWEEN COLLEGE AND WORKPLACE

COLLEGE	WORKPLACE
Frequent and concrete feedback	Feedback infrequent and not concrete
Some freedom to set a schedule	Less freedom or control over schedule
Frequent breaks and time off	Limited time off
Choose performance level	"A" level work expected continuously
Correct answers usually available	Few right answers
Passive participation permitted	Active participation and initiative expected
Independent thinking supported	Independent thinking often discouraged
Environment of personal support	Usually less personal support
Focus on personal development	Focus on getting result for organization
Structured courses and curriculum	Much less structure: fewer directions
Few changes in routine	Often constant and unexpected changes
Personal control over time	Responds to supervisor's directions
Individual effort and performance	Often, team effort and performance
Intellectual challenge	Organizational and people challenge
Professors	Supervisor

According to The Chronicle of Higher Education,⁶ the number of students showing up to campus counseling centers has increased dramatically and many student campus counseling centers now have waitlists. Overwhelmed students are seeking help, overwhelming their colleges.

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Counseling gives students an opportunity to express their insecurities and get tools to deal with the uncertainty of the future

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SARAH BROWN
The Chronicle of Higher Education

Counseling gives students an opportunity to express their insecurities and get tools to deal with the uncertainty of the future. Moreover, counseling can also encompass career counseling which specially targets students' abilities to make career decisions.

Here, the goal is to not only help students now but to give them the knowledge and skills needed to make life decisions and build a future career. Such services can help foster realistic expectations and preparedness for life after graduation among college seniors, and help mitigate students' anxiety about the future.

Some US universities have recognized that career development is a process that continues after graduation. The University of San Francisco grants free unlimited services from the Career Services Center for the first year after graduation as a way of continuing to support the students throughout this transition. One year post-graduation, alumni are allowed one complimentary 1-hour career counseling appointment every year.



⁶ [The real campus mental-health crisis and new models for well-being](#)

UNIVERSITY-INDUSTRY COLLABORATIONS

Career development encompasses many skills that are vital to graduate students success but is often not included under this umbrella as mental health, according to collaborative research from three American universities.⁷

However, research shows that “one of the major sources of anxiety centers on skill development, identification, and application”.²

As one way to alleviate the struggles and minimize the distance between life as a student and life as an employee, some American universities have forged close partnerships with the industry. Such close connections can be beneficial to students as they give them an entry point into various industries.



In the US, it is notoriously difficult for students to land a job in their preferred industry, which makes university-industry collaborations attractive as it also makes such jobs more attainable.⁸

These university-industry collaborations also give the students an opportunity to imagine themselves in a workforce situation, validating the usefulness of their academic skills and boosting their confidence.

University-industry cooperation can take many forms. Internships offer students a low-pressure entry into their field and can be a way to prepare them for their professional future.

Research shows that students with internship experience are better able to develop realistic expectations for what the workplace will be like.¹ In the US, it is common for students to do a summer internship with a company or organization. This is often made possible through the vast industrial and corporate network of their university and is thus more university-driven than in Denmark.

Another type of collaboration happens through specific programs or courses, where an industrial or corporate partner is involved. It is common for industry professionals to teach courses at American universities, which helps narrow the gap between university and industry. Additionally, colleges can also seek employer input on course design in order to better prepare students for the workforce.

⁷ [Evidence for a mental health crisis in graduate education](#) ² [College-to-Workplace Transitions: Becoming a Freshman Again](#)

⁸ [30 Colleges That Have Strong Links To America's Prospering Industries](#) ¹ [College to career: Supporting Mental Health](#)

online

THE COOPERATIVE EDUCATION MODEL AT NORTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY

The co-op model at Northeastern University (NEU) is built on the idea of letting students experience the 'real world' before graduating by alternating semesters of academic study with semesters of full-time employment.

The experiential learning program has established itself as a cornerstone of the Northeastern DNA where it has been running for more than 100 years and continues to show its positive impact on student employability. Over 10,000 undergraduate & graduate students participate in the co-op across NEU's eight colleges each year.

During their time at the co-op the students receive the opportunity to refine their professional interests, develop valuable industry connections all while they get a global perspective on their field of choice. Additionally, it allows the students to both integrate and use the skills learned in the academic programs as well as reflect on their applicability.

The model has created results with 50% of the university's students receiving a job offer from their previous co-op employer and 90% of graduates either getting a job or enrolling in further studies within nine months of graduating.

Career boot camps are another approach to help college students gain experience of being in the workplace. Institutions such as Dartmouth College, Middlebury College, and the University of California Berkeley as well as private businesses have created short-term boot camp programs to provide students with real-world work experiences while still enrolled in college.

These boot camps⁹ often teach in-demand skills and put students through a rigorous real-world project that is commissioned by a local employer. This is supplemented by career coaching and allows students to practice their various business skills with instant feedback.

Bringing industries and universities closer together might potentially alleviate some of the struggles experienced by students as they enter the workforce. Such partnerships could potentially ensure a smoother and less ambiguous transition to the workforce as the students are more knowledgeable about future work expectations.

Many Higher Education institutions in Denmark already support the possibility of doing an internship and have industry partnerships in place. It could be a low-hanging fruit to also consider these programs from a mental health perspective, and be more attentive to and explicit about how these programs can serve as a way of validating skills and managing expectations.

⁹ [What happens when colleges fail to prepare graduates for jobs?](#)



PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN STUDENTS AND START-UPS AT UC BERKELEY

Cleantech to Market (C2M) is a partnership between graduate students, startups, and industry professionals to help accelerate the commercialization of leading cleantech solutions.

C2M's 15-week commercialization process trains C2M students in a range of leadership, decision making, and commercialization skills. C2M first identifies promising cleantech solutions from existing start-ups and connect these start-ups with UC Berkeley graduate students from a wide range of disciplines. The students help the innovators with market research and the commercializing process under guidance from industry experts.

The program is a great opportunity for students from a wide array of academic disciplines to connect with future employers, gain hands-on experience while the guidance and mentorship ensures a smoother transition from being a student to working in the Cleantech industry.

AMERICAN MINDSET INTERVENTIONS FOR DANISH STUDENTS

In the USA research has shown great performance gaps between students who feel a sense of belonging with their educational institutions and those students who do not share that experience.¹⁰ The performance gap is especially noticeable between minority groups and the overrepresented group.¹¹

In general, the transitional phases, from bachelor to master's degree or from student to young professional tests the students' experience of belonging with their education or new workplace, increasing the experience of inadequacies.¹²

¹⁰ [Teaching a lay theory before college narrows achievement gaps at scale](#)

¹¹ [A Brief Social-Belonging Intervention Improves Academic and Health Outcomes of Minority Students](#)

¹² [Encouraging a Sense of Belonging \(3:40-4:08\)](#)

When the experience of belonging is threatened – either socially or academically – normal educational situations such as eating lunch alone or receiving constructive feedback from a professor will be perceived by students as a sign of “I can’t make friends here, I don’t belong” or “All the other students are performing better than me”. These intrusive feelings result in negative behavioral patterns such as procrastination or other coping strategies.

To combat the performance gap, Stanford Professor Greg Walton has developed a toolbox with mindset interventions as the key component. The interventions have statistically improved student wellbeing, performance, and retention compared to students who have not participated in mindset interventions.¹⁰

For students, the mindset interventions consist of a session at the very beginning of a transition phase, where they are engaging with senior students, without knowing the purpose of the session.¹³

The senior students then share their experiences of transition and feelings of not belonging and how that is a common and temporary evolving experience for all despite ethnicity, gender, and sexuality.

By doing so, the misperception of students as being alone with their challenges is minimized.

For institutions, on the other hand, mindset interventions require the ability to develop educational environments that foster inclusive experiences for students and structurally change the prevailing norms and practices that leads to minority groups' experiences of not belonging.¹¹

In Denmark, The Danish Student Counseling Service (Studenterrådgivningern) has in recent years seen a rising tendency of students experiencing the need to perform perfectly both socially and academically. Perfectionism can manifest itself to such a degree that students end up experiencing imposter syndrome, a persistent doubt about their own skills, talents, and accomplishments leading to a constant fear of being exposed as a fraud.¹⁴

According to the Department Head of The Danish Student Counseling Service, Jesper Madsen, a very large group of Danish students experience perfectionism and imposter syndrome to such an extent that it is relevant to discuss the phenomenon as “pluralistic ignorance”.


 A circular icon with a teal background and a white border. Inside the circle, the word "online" is written in a white, lowercase, sans-serif font. The circle is partially overlapping the teal box below.

online

ONLINE RESOURCE

The [College Transition Collaborative](#) bridges research and practice to help colleges create learning environments that foster equitable student engagement and success.

Their mission is to help institutions understand how their students experience moments of transition and how specific messages, practices and programs can be useful. Greg Walton, Associate Professor of Psychology at Stanford University is one of the founders.

¹¹ [A Brief Social-Belonging Intervention Improves Academic and Health Outcomes of Minority Students.](#)

¹³ [Social-Psychological Interventions in Education: They're Not Magic](#)

¹⁴ [Når det perfekte tynger](#)

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The experience of not belonging or performing adequately in a social and academic context is not limited to the minority but is a characteristic of the majority as well

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JESPER MADSEN
Psychologist & Dept. Head
The Danish Student Counseling Service

Pluralistic ignorance refers to when the majority of the students feel like they do not perform as well socially and academically as their peers, an experience that is often enhanced by students believing that they are alone with their experience.

As Danish and American Students experience the same challenges, mindset interventions can be relevant to include in institutional strategies.

Hence, the educational system is going forward to improve - not only the transition to the workplace - but also the overall well-being of the students as they turn into young professionals.