

STRATEGIC PRIORITY PROPOSAL

Designing DePaul Strategic Plan

Fill out the template as appropriate for your subcommittee's initiatives. Please complete by January 19, 2026.

Initiative Title:	Retention and Career Readiness Programs and Processes
Subcommittee:	Student Advising, Retention, and Career Outcomes Subcommittee
Date Submitted:	01/19/2026

1. INITIATIVE OVERVIEW

Key Institutional Challenges:

What are the key current or future institutional challenges that your committee is tasked with addressing?

*An increasing expectation for a clear and measurable return on investment from a college degree presents a growing institutional challenge. Recent Lightcast survey findings indicate that "career success" is the top reason people give for pursuing a degree, underscoring the need for DePaul to more intentionally demonstrate career readiness as a core institutional priority.

*Access to high-impact career readiness practices remains uneven across the DePaul student population. Currently, approximately 50 percent of students engage directly with Career Center services, while exposure to career readiness content within the classroom varies significantly across colleges. In an increasingly dynamic and competitive labor market, institutions must expand and elevate access to career readiness practices to ensure all graduates are prepared for the workforce and positioned for positive career outcomes. Embedding high-impact career readiness practices throughout the student journey, through curricular integration, accessible online tools, and customized programming, is the most effective way to increase access.

*Delivering comprehensive career readiness services at scale remains an institutional challenge, given the size and diversity of the student population. However, this challenge presents an opportunity to adopt coordinated, high-impact, and technology-enabled approaches that expand access and consistency.

* Volatility in the labor market presents a significant institutional challenge, particularly for new college graduates navigating an increasingly competitive employment landscape. NACE data project only a 1.6% increase in hiring for the Class of 2026 compared to the Class of 2025, signaling constrained growth in entry-level opportunities. Career outcomes survey results for 2024 graduates show that a higher proportion held part-time roles at the time of graduation than in previous years, a pattern that may

persist amid continued economic uncertainty and requires DePaul to strengthen pathways to full-time, career-aligned employment.

Initiative Description:

Describe this initiative and explain how it could potentially address the challenges described above.

The Blue Demon Career Advantage outlines a proactive, integrated career readiness model that would ensure every student engages in career development and positions our university as a leader among its peers. Key elements of the Blue Demon Career Advantage program are supported by proven best practices in the career development field and findings from various national surveys. This model is designed to expose students to high impact career readiness practices via an online interactive four-year plan, cohort programming (Future Forward), and intentional integration of career readiness into academic and co-curricular units. There is a heavy emphasis on increasing student participation in internships/work-based experiences and building social capital based on the positive impact these activities have on career outcomes. By focusing on exposing all students to high impact career readiness practices via the use of technology and strategic integration throughout the campus, DePaul can empower its students to achieve career success and simultaneously elevate its brand.

2. SCOPE

Objectives:

List 3-5 specific, measurable objectives for this initiative.

Objective #1: Expand the Future Forward Program to include all first-year students by Fall 2026.

Future Forward, our first-year career exploration and readiness program, can serve up to 1,500 students annually. Expanding its reach would ensure that every incoming student begins their academic experience with a strong career foundation.

Future Forward overview: Future Forward is a year-long scholarship program for first-year students to explore their career goals and develop career readiness skills. The program engages students in meaningful career exploration, fosters connection with other DePaul students and staff, and helps prepare students for their next step. DePaul’s current Career Cohort program (Future Forward) has had an average retention rate (90-93%) that is higher than the yearly freshman retention rate.

Objective #2: Build and launch the Career Readiness Plan in One DePaul by Fall 2026.

This interactive, phased plan provides all students with clear milestones, tasks & activities, modules & resources, and automated reminders to guide their career development. With a clear sequence of milestones, from exploration to skill-building to professional experience, students are less likely to delay important steps that impact their post-graduation success.

Phase 1 will focus on a traditional four-year model. However, this model is still applicable for transfer students. They will have the option to enter the model where it is most applicable.

Phase 2 will include adding customized resources to serve graduate students.

Career Readiness Model/Plan

Phase/Theme	Available Resources & Activities	Potential Facilitators
Phase 1 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Career Exploration & Self-Assessment Personalized Career Plan & Toolkit 	Future Forward Online Career Plan & Modules Spring Career Days (by Industry)	Career Center Career Center Partnership between Colleges & Career Center

Traditional 4-year: Years 1/2 Transfer: 1 st two quarters (if needed)		
Phase 2 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gain Experience • Build Professional Network • Update Career Plan & Toolkit Traditional 4-year: Years 2/3 Transfer: 1 st academic year Graduate: 1 st academic year	Online Career Plan & Modules Internship Accelerator (Group Sessions) Class Lesson or Assignment Employer-Student Connection Events	Career Center Career Center Faculty Partnership between Colleges & Career Center
Phase 3 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Job Search Best Practices • Interviewing & Skills-Based Hiring Best Practices • Recruiting Events Traditional 4-year: Years 3/4 Transfer: 2 nd academic year Graduate: 2 nd academic year	Online Career Plan & Modules Job Accelerator (Group Sessions) Niche Career Fairs Employer-Student Connection Events	Career Center Career Center Partnership between Colleges & Career Center

Objective #3: Facilitate college career readiness strategy meetings to develop a customized Career Readiness Integration Plan for each college by Fall 2026.

A customized Career Readiness Integration Plan is needed to meet the unique needs of each college’s students. Developing this plan requires the coordination of strategy meetings between key administrators and staff from each college and the Career Center. In these meetings, each college will identify college-wide career steps for all students in addition to working with department leadership to define tailored, department-specific career plans. To do this in a timely fashion, additional staff and resources are needed. Plans will cover strategic career readiness integration into the student experience via various tactics. Tactics can include classroom integration, large scale programming, niche student-employer connection events, and asynchronous modules/resources.

Deliverables:

What tangible outputs will this initiative produce?

Service/Resource deliverables:

- *Increased capacity for Future Forward to accommodate all first-year students.
- *DePaul Career Readiness Plan launched within the Salesforce Success Module.
- *Per college, identify departmental representatives and key administrators to participate in career readiness strategy meetings.
- *Customized Career Readiness Integration Plan per college. Plans will cover strategic integration of career readiness into the student experience via various tactics. Tactics can include classroom integration, large scale programming, niche student-employer connection events, and asynchronous modules/resources.
- *Portfolio of reoccurring career readiness programs (Spring Career Days, Internship Accelerators, Job Search Accelerators, Industry focused Student-Employer Connection events, Niche Career Fairs)

- *Increase in career readiness assignments or activities integrated into classrooms
- *Create 10+ new classroom career readiness resources and activities that can be utilized at scale.

Out of Scope:

What is explicitly NOT included in this initiative?

[Describe boundaries and exclusions]

This initiative does not include the Career Center developing distinct career readiness programs for each department within an academic college. This is not feasible based on the number of staff in comparison to the number of departments and students. College Career Readiness Plans will prioritize tactics that can be implemented on a large scale, such as activities/resources that can be utilized across classes or programming that address the needs of multiple departments/majors. Although there isn't the capacity to implement distinct programs for each department, resources are available to help guide faculty and staff interested in implementing additional department specific programming.

Success Metrics:

How will success be measured? Include baseline data if available.

Engagement metrics:

Engagement tracking tools will be used to monitor the involvement of students, faculty, and staff across all initiative elements.

- *Increased number of first-year students engaged in Future Forward.
 - Current participation: 1225
- *Increased number of students engaged in high impact career readiness practices via classroom & department integration, Career Center events & programming, and co-curricular programming
 - Career Center Classroom engagement: 3845 students; 137 classroom presentations
 - Career Center Fairs: 4464 students; 9 fairs
 - Career Center Coaching: 4258 appointments
 - Career Center Student-Employer Connection events: 703 students; 16 events
 - Career Center Co-Curricular programming: 470 students; 20 programs
 - Career Center student employment programming: 17 departments
 - Academic Department & Faculty career readiness integration: 2026 will be a formal benchmark tracking year. Individual college career readiness activities are occurring, but no central comprehensive tracking exists.
- *Career Readiness Plan engagement rate
 - Number of individual students - benchmark year
 - Inclusion in departmental introductory courses – benchmark year

Impact metrics:

These metrics will be measured via pre- and post-program survey questions and career outcomes surveys.

- *Growth in self-reported clarity of values, interests, strengths and purpose
- *Increased confidence in evaluating potential career paths and making career decisions
- *Increased student participation rate in internships or career experiences
- *Post-graduation employment rates

3. SWOT ANALYSIS

Analyze the strengths and weaknesses of this initiative in terms of addressing the challenges described in Section 2. Discuss internal and external opportunities and threats that will increase or decrease the likelihood of achieving stated objectives.

Strengths:

What strengths does this initiative leverage? What advantages does it have?

*The Career Center has demonstrated proven success with several tactics within the model that are designed to serve students at scale, including cohort-based programming, student-employer connection events, and robust online resources. Notably, the structured design of the Future Forward Program has enabled its expansion from serving 250 students to a current capacity of 1,500. The integration of online modules and built-in completion mechanisms has further increased the program's reach, allowing it to support significantly more students than would be possible through an exclusively in-person model.

*The Executive Director has facilitated career readiness strategy conversations with staff/administration for most of the colleges. There is a strong interest in each college to advance career readiness for their students. Several partnerships are already in place. These early conversations and existing collaborations provide a strong foundation on which to formalize a comprehensive, university-wide career readiness plan.

*Several colleges have already made substantial investments in integrating career readiness into the student experience. For example, the Driehaus College of Business and the College of Science and Health have implemented recurring programs and embedded career readiness components within their curriculum. These initiatives effectively function as career readiness plans for their respective colleges. This work can serve as inspiration and examples for other colleges.

Weaknesses:

What weaknesses or limitations does this initiative face?

*The Future Forward Program (with its current capacity of 1500 students) was implemented by a full-time Assistant Director. However, this position was vacated during the 2025 academic year. The Career Center was approved to have a part-time position to complete the academic year during the hiring freeze. This program cannot be coordinated efficiently without a full-time position.

*Developing a Career Readiness Integration Plan for each college requires sustained coordination of strategy meetings, implementation of relevant programs and resources, and, where appropriate, training for faculty and staff. Both the Career Center and academic units have experienced resource reductions in recent years, limiting capacity. While the Executive Director currently leads all college-

level career readiness strategy meetings, reliance on a single point of coordination has constrained the pace of progress. Additional staffing or dedicated support would substantially enhance the institution's ability to advance coordinated planning and implement high-impact career readiness initiatives across colleges.

*Some faculty express reservations about integrating career-focused content into the classroom, which can result in uneven exposure to career readiness messaging and activities across courses and programs. This inconsistency may limit the overall reach and effectiveness of campus-wide career readiness efforts. Addressing this challenge will require clear communication, alignment with academic priorities, and appropriate faculty support.

Opportunities:

What internal and external opportunities will increase the likelihood of this initiative achieving its goals?

Internal Opportunities:

*Consistent messaging and directives from the President's Office and College Deans regarding the importance and necessity of integrating career readiness throughout the student experience can support the success of this initiative.

*To expand the Future Forward Program to include all first-year students, a full-time Assistant Director needs to be reinstated with an additional part-time or full-time assistant.

*Additional financial aid is needed to expand the Future Forward Program and provide all participants with a scholarship.

*To facilitate timely creation and implementation of college-specific Career Integration Plans, two Campus Integration Manager positions are ideal.

External Opportunities:

*Employer willingness to partner with DePaul on internship and job pipelines.

*Growing demand from employers for graduates that possess transferrable career and work ready skills. There is a significant shift towards skill-based hiring with employers emphasizing what a candidate can do rather than solely relying on a degree or GPA.

*Increased availability of internships and career experiences.

*Families and students have an increased interest in career outcomes.

*Foundation funding for career readiness initiatives. Applications for additional funding from foundations have been submitted.

Threats

What internal and external threats will decrease the likelihood of this initiative achieving its goals?

Internal Threats:

*Resource constraints to fund various initiatives

*Varied student engagement due to time constraints or lack of motivation

*Varied receptivity by colleges to engage in curricular-embedded work and preparedness/skill of faculty

External Threats:

*Economic uncertainty affecting hiring and experiential opportunities

*Decline in employer engagement or partnership

Stakeholder Feedback:

Summarize feedback gathered from relevant internal and external stakeholders that informed this analysis.

This analysis was informed by extensive feedback from both internal and external stakeholders, reflecting broad alignment around the need to strengthen career readiness efforts. College administrators and staff across multiple units have expressed strong interest in implementing targeted tactics that better prepare students for the workforce. External employer partners have similarly

indicated a desire to engage with students through more varied and meaningful formats beyond traditional career fairs, signaling opportunities for deeper, more sustained collaboration.

Enrollment Management has demonstrated openness to strategically redirecting scholarship dollars to support the expansion of the Future Forward program, recognizing its potential to positively influence retention and student success. Additionally, a number of faculty and staff have expressed significant enthusiasm for serving as career champions within their colleges and departments, along with a desire for expanded resources and support to help students achieve positive career outcomes. Collectively, this feedback underscores both institutional readiness and stakeholder momentum to advance a more integrated, scalable approach to career readiness.

Information Needed:

What additional information, research, or data will need to be gathered to support this analysis?

Conduct a comparative analysis of peer and competitor institutions to benchmark career resources, curricular integration, and career readiness initiatives. Additionally, review college- and program-specific ranking data that explicitly emphasizes career outcomes to inform positioning and identify opportunities for improvement.

4. TIMELINE

Fiscal Year 2026 (Current Year)

Phase / Milestone	Target Date	Key Activities
Review and update Future Forward Program curriculum and structure	<i>February - August 2026</i>	-Review/update online modules -Review/update requirements and completion tactics
Launch Future Forward Program for all first-year students	<i>September 2026</i>	
Facilitate Career Readiness strategy meetings	<i>February - June 2026</i>	-Schedule meetings with identified representatives per college -Build tech infrastructure to streamline planning and communication
Develop Career Readiness Integration Plans with each college	<i>March - August 2026</i>	-Identify Phase 1 classrooms for career readiness activities & assignments -Identify Phase 1 large scale programming that will connect students with employers in relevant industries.
Build Career Readiness Plan in Salesforce. Phase 1 will cover traditional 4-year and transfer students	<i>February - August 2026</i> <i>September – November 2026</i>	-Create all modules/resources that will be linked from the plan -Work with IS to finalize the module -Meet with advisors to share how they can reference or utilize the plan in their student advising sessions

Fiscal Year 2027 (Planning Horizon)

Phase / Milestone	Target Date	Key Activities
Implement Phase 1 large scale programming	<i>January 2027 – June 2027</i>	-Coordinate events that bring students and employers together to showcase skills and to network. Can include Spring Industry Days, Niche Career Fairs, Employer Treks, Case competitions, etc.
Implement large scale Internship Accelerators	<i>January - June 2027</i>	-Coordinate and implement multiple sessions that assist students with: -locating internships or career experiences -best practices for applying and interviewing -workplace readiness and professionalism
Implement large scale Job Search Accelerators	<i>April – July 2027</i>	-Coordinate and implement multiple sessions for graduating students focused on: -locating opportunities -best practices for applying -best practices for skills-based hiring & interviewing
Build customized resources for graduate students in the Career Readiness Plan (Phase 2)	<i>April - August 2027</i>	-Create all modules/resources that will be linked from the plan -Launch Fall 2027
Implement Phase 2 classroom integration	<i>September 2027</i>	-Integrate career readiness activities or resources in identified classrooms -Training of faculty on career readiness activities & resources (if necessary)
Implement Phase 2 large scale programming	<i>September – December 2027</i>	-Coordinate and expand on last academic year’s events that bring students and employers together to showcase skills and to network. Can include Spring Industry Days, Niche Career Fairs, Employer Treks, Case competitions, etc.

Key Dependencies:

Adequate staffing to expand student capacity for Future Forward Program
 Funding for additional Future Forward scholarships
 Adequate staffing to coordinate career strategy meetings, the creation of Career Readiness Integration Plans, and coordination of programming in partnership with each college
 Capacity of IS staff to create the Career Readiness Plan in Salesforce Success module by Fall 2026

5. PROJECTED EXPENSES & REVENUE

Describe projected expenses and potential revenue associated with the implementation of the initiative. Provide best-guess estimates on the likelihood of achieving the projected revenue.

Note: FY26 should only include expenses if any are required. We do not expect any revenue impact for FY26. Please work directly with Financial Affairs through the PMO to estimate any potential finances.

Projected Expenses

Cost Category	FY26	FY27	FY28
Future Forward Scholarships (repurposed not new funds)	\$3,307,500	\$9,393,000	\$9,393,000
Staffing: Assistant Director, Future Forward (assuming hired May 2026)	\$39,333 salary \$14,160 benefits	\$59,000 salary \$21,240 benefits	\$59,000 salary \$21,240 benefits
Staffing: Campus Integration Manager (assuming hired May 2026)	\$39,333 salary \$14,160 benefits	\$59,000 salary \$21,240 benefits	\$59,000 salary \$21,240 benefits
Staffing: Campus Integration Manager (assuming hired May 2026)	\$39,333 salary \$14,160 benefits	\$59,000 salary \$21,240 benefits	\$59,000 salary \$21,240 benefits
	\$	\$	\$
	\$	\$	\$
	\$	\$	\$
TOTAL PROJECTED EXPENSES	\$	\$	\$

Potential Revenue & Savings (FY27-FY28)

Revenue/Savings	FY26	FY27	FY28
Calculations based on first year class of 3100 students at tuition rate of \$40,000 per year			
Scenario 1: Increase retention rate from 86.4% to 88% (retain an additional 50 students)		\$2,000,000	\$2,000,000
Scenario 2: Increase retention rate from 86.4% to 90% (retain an additional 112 students)		\$4,480,000	\$4,480,000
		\$	\$
		\$	\$
		\$	\$
		\$	\$
TOTAL POTENTIAL REVENUE/SAVINGS		\$	\$

Likelihood Assessment:

Provide your best-guess estimate on the likelihood of achieving the projected revenue above. What assumptions are these projections based on?

Revenue/Savings	Likelihood (High/Med/Low)	Key Assumptions
Retention Impact	Medium	The overall retention rate for 2024 was 86.4%. Future Forward’s retention rate is 90%. The assumption is that including all first-year students in Future Forward will raise the retention rate.
	[High/Medium/Low]	[Key assumptions]
	[High/Medium/Low]	[Key assumptions]

Net Financial Impact Summary:

[Summarize overall financial picture: total investment needed, expected returns, timeline to break even or achieve positive ROI]

This initiative requires a total investment of \$9 million in repurposed scholarship funds, coupled with the addition of three to four staff positions to support the expansion of the Future Forward program and the development and coordination of Career Readiness Integration Plans across colleges. The primary financial return is driven by improved student retention: increasing the retention rate from 86.4% to 88% or higher among a cohort of 3,100+ students. Even a modest gain of this magnitude represents a significant preservation of tuition revenue that would otherwise be lost to attrition, while also strengthening long-term enrollment stability and institutional outcomes.

A one-year implementation period is required before retention gains are realized, positioning the initiative to begin generating positive returns in Year 2. Once the improved retention rate is achieved and sustained, the institution is expected to reach a positive return on investment through recurring retained tuition revenue, alongside non-financial benefits such as stronger career outcomes, increased student satisfaction, and enhanced institutional reputation. Over time, these combined impacts position the initiative as both financially responsible and strategically transformative.

6. COLLABORATORS

Collaborating Units:

Which colleges, departments, or offices will need to be involved?

Unit	Nature of Collaboration
Career Center	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Coordinate Future Forward Program -Collaborate with Enrollment Management regarding Future Forward scholarships -Facilitate Career Readiness Strategy meetings with each college -Partner with college administration and staff to create Career Readiness Integration Plans per college -Implement portfolio of standard career readiness programming
Enrollment Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Fund scholarships for all Future Forward students -Collaborate with Career Center on participation and scholarship logistics
All academic units - LAS, COE, COMM, DCOB, CSH, CDM, Theatre, Music	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Designate key administrators/staff to attend career readiness strategy meetings -Partner with Career Center staff to create Career Readiness Integration Plan -Designate key staff to partner with Career Center for implementation of large-scale programming (when applicable)

External Partners (if applicable):

Employer partners that are willing to establish internship and job pipelines - TBD
 Alumni interested in participating in programming and/or advocating for student placements