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FROM DEGREE TO CAREER

Why Strengthening Employer Partnerships at CUNY Is Key to Boosting Career Success for New Yorkers

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From Degree to Career

Why Strengthening Employer Partnerships at CUNY Is Key to Boosting Career Success for New Yorkers

NO OTHER INSTITUTION DOES MORE THAN THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK (CUNY) TO PROPEL LOW-INCOME students into the middle class. But that role is now under threat, as CUNY students graduate into the toughest entry-level job market in years—one where entry-level postings requiring little to no prior experience have plunged 37.4 percent since 2022 and internships for college students are down 37.1 percent compared to before the pandemic.[1]

In this challenging hiring environment, CUNY's mostly low-income students will struggle to gain access to well-paying jobs unless CUNY develops far stronger connections with employers. Indeed, even before the recent slowdown in entry level jobs, boosting career success was undoubtedly the one area in which CUNY needed to improve the most. While the university has made remarkable progress in helping students succeed in earning a degree—the three-year graduation rate for those attending CUNY's community colleges has doubled over the past decade—more is needed to ensure those degrees unlock well-paying careers. One in ten alumni end up in retail or food service five years after graduation, a figure that rises to 13 percent for community college grads. Many who do break into high-wage fields like business or computer science still earn far less than peers across the city—sometimes only half the median wage of other workers in the same field.[2]

The current job market has made it even more critical for CUNY to accelerate improvement in career success. At Columbia University, with its global reputation and vast alumni networks, 30 percent of the class of 2025 was still seeking work as of September.[3] For CUNY students, the collapse of entry-level pathways is even more daunting, making stronger ties with employers essential to turning degrees into careers.

Paid internships, industry collaborations, and career-connected learning are among the most effective ways to give students the experience and networks they need to compete in today's labor market—at a time when a college degree alone is no longer a passport to a career. Yet too few CUNY students are gaining these opportunities. Just 12 percent of CUNY undergraduates participate in paid internships—up from 10 percent two years ago, but still far below the national average of nearly 57 percent.[4]

At the same time, too many CUNY students are professionally underprepared, causing them to struggle in the hiring process. According to employers we interviewed, CUNY students frequently stumble on technical interviews, miss application deadlines, or submit resumes that aren't on the same level as peers from private universities.

Fortunately, CUNY is making important progress. Chancellor Félix Matos Rodriguez has made career success a higher priority than any previous CUNY leader, and in October 2025 he launched CUNY Beyond, a "roadmap to make career exploration and outcomes central to every student's college experience from the day they set foot on a CUNY campus." The chancellor has said he wants to be known as the "patron saint of paid internships," and under his leadership the share of students reporting paid internships is finally on the rise. With support from successive mayoral administrations, the university has also created the Office of Careers and Industry Partnerships, launched the Inclusive Economy Initiative, and brokered new partnerships with leading employers and nonprofit intermediaries. These efforts have shown impressive early gains, with participating campuses reporting sharp increases in internships, job placement, and starting salaries. But more progress is needed; today, the Inclusive Economy Initiative reaches fewer than 40 of CUNY's 450 departments.

There's a lot more than CUNY will need do to expand on these efforts, but it's unlikely the university will be able to do all this without more help from City Hall and Albany. Mayor Mamdani should make expanding career success for CUNY students one component of his affordability agenda, since doing so will boost incomes and help ensure that far more CUNY graduates can afford to live in this increasingly high-cost city. His administration can do so by helping to scale what's working at CUNY, expanding subsidized paid internships, and recruiting far more private sector employers to actively partner with CUNY on hiring and internships. With a new level of city support, CUNY can transform career outcomes for tens of thousands more New Yorkers each year—and remain the city's most powerful engine of upward mobility amid a fast-changing economy.

Over the past two decades, CUNY has made steady progress in boosting college completion rates, sending a growing number of graduates into the city's labor market with well-earned degrees. These impressive graduation gains happened thanks to intentional university policies that have been emulated across the country, including the highly effective student success programs ASAP and ACE.

But in today's economy, simply getting students to the college finish line is no longer enough to ensure that students thrive financially after graduation. More than ever, setting up students for success requires universities to help connect graduates with careers.

This is where CUNY still needs to improve.

Although the university has made some progress in recent years, just two thirds of CUNY graduates find consistent employment within a year of finishing their degree, and many of those jobs pay less than a living wage.[5] Far too many students are missing out on the early work experiences, career-oriented projects, and network-building opportunities that make a crucial difference in landing a relevant job after graduation—especially given the competition from roughly 100,000 other college graduates in New York City each year.

"If students are not given the opportunity to put something on their resume that will make them stand out or start to develop that network, they're often going to be at a disadvantage," says Merrill Pond, executive vice president of the Partnership for New York City, one of the city's leading business groups.

CUNY leaders echo the concern. "The two biggest things that CUNY students are too often missing are workplace context and social capital that a lot of their peers have but that they don't have," says Jennifer Dillon, senior university director of talent, innovation, and industry partnerships at CUNY.

The current economy has only created more urgency for change. "Today's college graduates are entering an economy that is relatively worse for young college grads than any month on record, going back at least four decades," Derek Thompson recently wrote in The Atlantic.[6]

Our new analysis illustrates the challenge confronting recent college graduates in New York City. Over the past two years, entry-level job postings plummeted from 72,484 (2022) to 45,354 (2024), a 37.4 percent drop.[7] Internship postings across the five boroughs declined at similar rate, 37.1 percent—going from 10,871 postings in 2019 to 6,839 in 2024.[8]

In this environment, if New York City is going to sustain its most powerful engine of economic mobility, it will have to make further progress in connecting graduates with careers.

As this report details, too few CUNY students are applying for and obtaining internships and other opportunities for experiential learning. And although CUNY is partnering with more city businesses than ever before, it is striking how few employers in industries that are driving the growth of well-paying jobs participate in on-campus or virtual career fairs, or have made it a priority to recruit and hire from CUNY.

Several barriers currently stand in the way.
These include:

- Employers report that navigating CUNY's 25 campuses is far too confusing and time-consuming.
- Career services are overwhelmed—with ratios of 1,100 students to one staff member common—and frequently siloed from academics.
- Hybrid academic-career advisors and industry specialists embedded in academic departments are making a difference, but so far exist in only around 40 of 450 departments across CUNY, or fewer than 9 percent.
- Students have too few opportunities for early career exploration and to learn what industry needs, in part because most opportunities are extracurricular and not embedded in required courses.
- Nonprofit and intermediary partners with strong industry ties remain underutilized.
- CUNY still lacks one of the most fundamental tools for managing employer relationships: a modern, systemwide Customer Relationship Management (CRM) platform that would allow CUNY staff the ability to track, coordinate, and share employer engagement across 25 colleges.

- Although several CUNY colleges have implemented Handshake, the widely used employment platform that many employers already know from recruiting at other universities, many other CUNY campuses still rely on their own job boards or third-party services, creating a patchwork experience.

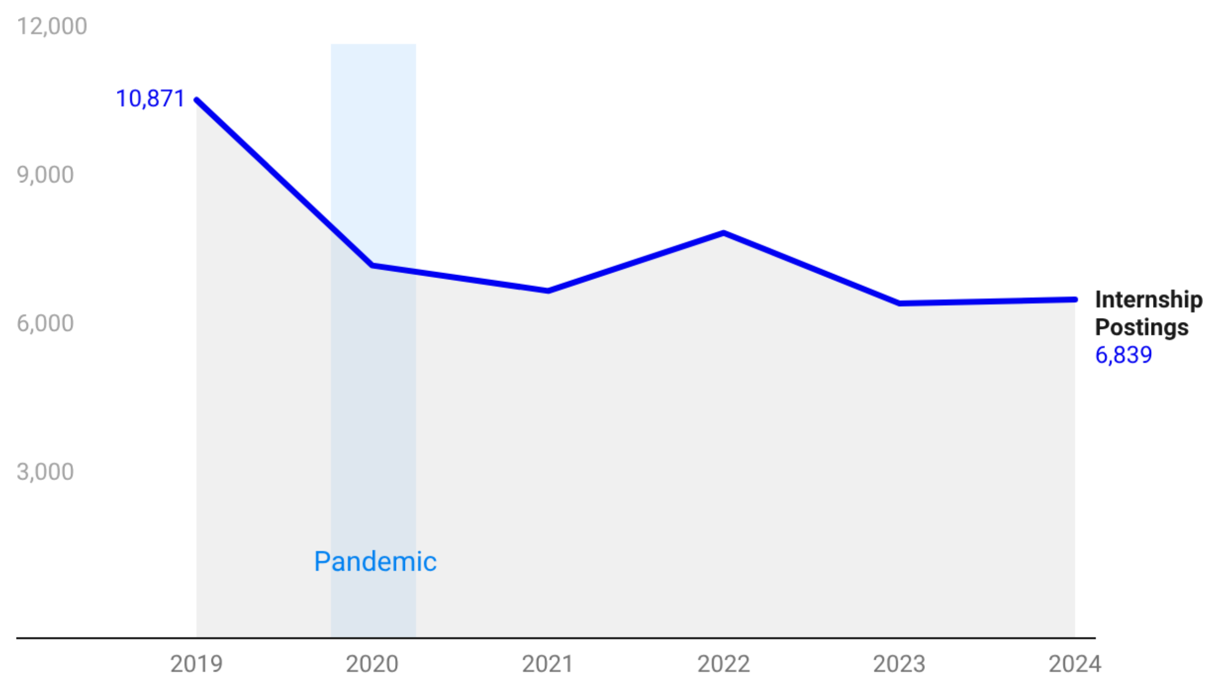
Fortunately, under Chancellor Matos Rodríguez, career success has been elevated to a centerpiece of CUNY's strategic roadmap, with a new emphasis on linking academic programs to workforce skills and employment outcomes from the moment students enroll.

This shift is already underway and holds enormous promise. Each year, the university awards more than 45,000 degrees, with 8 in 10 graduates staying in New York. Since 2019, CUNY has secured more than $43 million from nearly 50 private funders to support career success initiatives, and industries across the city are increasingly turning to CUNY for talent. Nowhere is that more clear than among the members of the New York Jobs CEO Council, who have hired more than 9,500 recent CUNY graduates since 2021—doubling the share of CUNY graduates among their entry-level hires.[9]

But at a time when entry-level opportunities are shrinking, it will take a new level of investment and focus—from policymakers, employers, and across the CUNY system itself—to ensure that promise is fully realized.

Internship postings are down by more than one-third since pre-pandemic levels in New York City

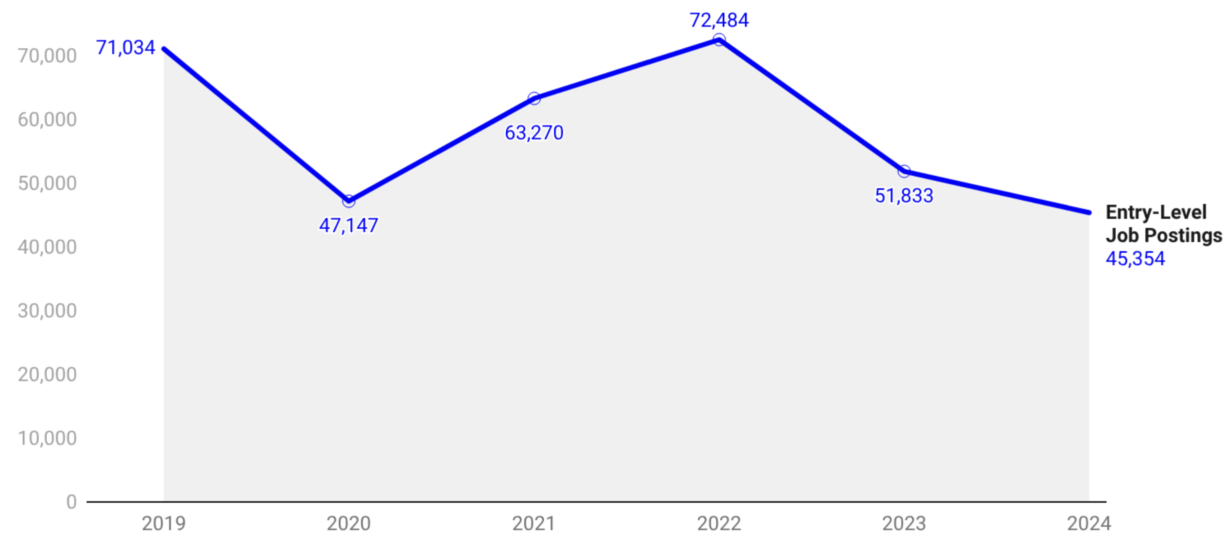
Opportunities are down 37.1 percent for undergraduate students.



Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast. Created with Datawrapper

Entry-level job postings plunge in New York City's tough market

Following a short pandemic rebound in 2022, entry-level job postings have since fallen by 10,000, or one-third of its peak.



Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast. Created with Datawrapper

This report, supported by a grant from The New York Community Trust, shines a light on the need to bolster partnerships between CUNY and employers across the city's economy. It examines why employer partnerships matter more than ever to students' financial success after college, documents the progress CUNY has made, and identifies six key challenges that continue to hold back deeper collaboration between CUNY and employers. To inform this analysis, CUF conducted more than 80 interviews with CUNY leaders, faculty, career advisors, employers, and nonprofit intermediaries; reviewed national research on the link between employer engagement and student outcomes; and analyzed data from the CUNY Wage Dashboard, the New York State Department of Labor, and the U.S. Census Bureau. The result is a clearer picture of what's working, where the gaps remain, and what city and state policymakers can do to close them.

It concludes with actionable recommendations for policymakers—including Mayor Mamdani and the City Council—to sustain CUNY's role as the city's leading launchpad to opportunity. These recommendations include prioritizing public investment where it can have the greatest impact: scaling what's already working, from the Inclusive Economy Initiative to proven intermediary partnerships; and investing in core technology to manage employer relationships more effectively across CUNY's 25 colleges.

The report also advances policy changes that need not carry major new costs: expanding municipal hiring pathways and reserving more public-sector internships for CUNY students; rewarding faculty for participating in career success programs and forging stronger ties with industry; and, most ambitiously, calling on the next mayor to lead a citywide effort to recruit the next 100 major employers that have yet to step up. Together, these steps would help tens of thousands more CUNY students gain the work experience, networks, and industry-relevant skills needed to thrive in today's labor market.

Connecting CUNY Students to Careers: Closing the Employer Partnership Gap

OF ALL THE BARRIERS CUNY STUDENTS FACE IN translating their degrees into careers, perhaps the most significant is the limited and inconsistent engagement with employers. Despite progress in recent years, employers still too often describe the system as frustratingly hard to navigate. With 25 colleges largely operating on their own, companies face a maze of separate contacts and processes rather than a single front door.

"For many companies, working with CUNY feels like knocking on 25 different doors at once," says Noah Ginsburg, executive director of the New York Solar Energy Industries Association and a longtime CUNY partner.

Even when programs get off the ground, execution and follow-through remain inconsistent. Employers cite wide variation in how the same initiative is carried out across campuses, as well as missed opportunities for basic communication—such as getting notice of career fairs long after corporate recruiting calendars are already set.

These challenges reflect the complexity of a massive system, where campus-level practices still shape much of how employers engage. In recent years, CUNY has brought a new level of focus and coordination through the Office of Careers and Industry Partnerships, but scaling those efforts across such a large and decentralized system will require sustained support—and in some cases, overcoming resistance to change.

"We know employers want CUNY students and have historically had a hard time connecting with the right people at the university to offer them internships or job interviews," says Lauren Andersen, vice chancellor for career engagement and industry partnerships. "We are working to make it easier for them. It won't happen overnight but we look forward to working with our partners in government for the resources to continue scaling up this work."

The contrast with other institutions underscores the stakes. NYU offers employers a vast, coordinated menu of more than a dozen services, including career fairs, corporate presentations, coffee chats, skill-building workshops, site visits, social media promotion, and on-campus interviews—many of which generate revenue for the university while ensuring consistent service delivery. With far greater resources, NYU has built an employer engagement infrastructure that helps maximize opportunities for its students. By comparison, CUNY has a centralized intake form for interested employers but still relies heavily on campus-by-campus arrangements, with offerings and schedules varying widely. This makes it all the more imperative for city and state leaders to help CUNY develop the infrastructure required to compete for employer partnerships at scale.

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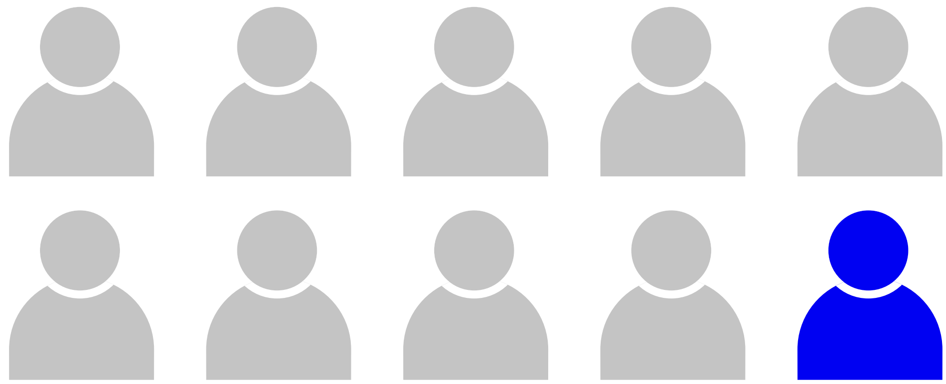
>
> NOAH GINSBURG, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE NEW YORK SOLAR ENERGY INDUSTRIES ASSOCIATION

One in ten CUNY undergradate alumni end up in **retail or food service** five years after graduation



Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes Explorer, United States Census Bureau.

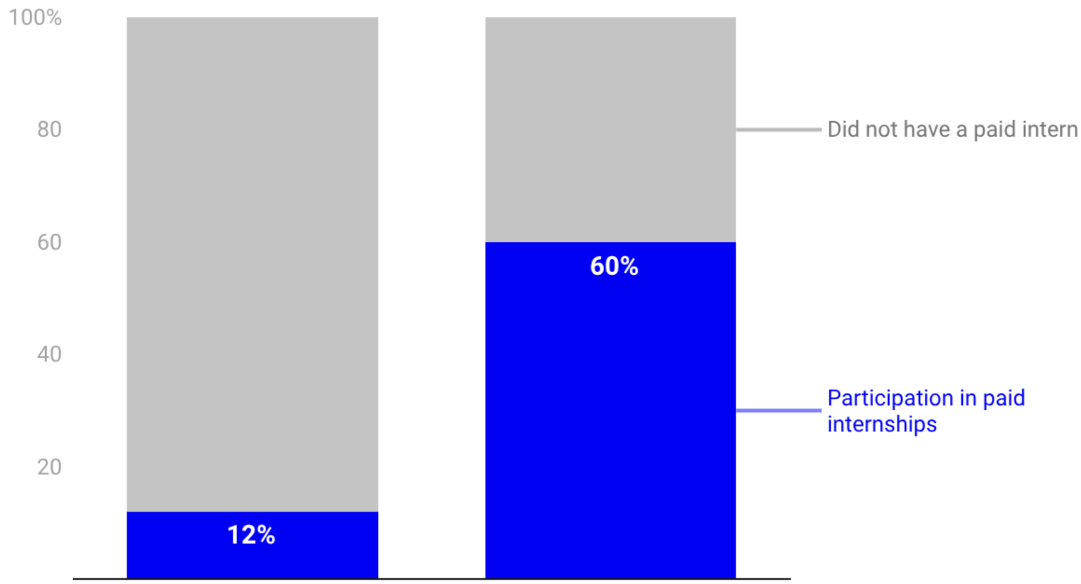
Without further action, too many students will struggle to turn college achievement into career success. CUNY graduates in high-wage fields like business, STEM, and healthcare are out-earned by citywide workers with similar experience, often by twice as much.[10] Computer and information sciences graduates make nearly half the median wage of a citywide worker in the same occupation, and business graduates make over a third less five years after finishing their degree. A significant portion of CUNY graduates—around a tenth—are working in low-wage industries unrelated to their degree, including 10 percent of New York City College of Technology and 15 percent of Borough of Manhattan and LaGuardia Community College graduates who are working in food service or retail five years after graduating.

Paid internships are one of the most effective ways to change this trajectory. National research shows that students who complete paid internships are far more likely to receive multiple job offers and start with higher salaries than peers who had unpaid internships or no internship experience at all.[11] Yet fewer than one in eight CUNY undergraduates ever reports having a paid internship, compared to nearly 60 percent of students nationwide.[12] At NYU, 70 percent of the class of 2023 held an internship at some point during their four years.[13]

These low participation rates are not for lack of interest. An analysis of CUNY data shows that nearly two-thirds of students say they haven't participated in internships because they don't have the time. Meanwhile, nearly half of CUNY undergraduates work for pay in jobs that provide income but rarely the career-building experience that opens doors after graduation.[14]

Yet in recent years, CUNY has also taken important steps to tackle these gaps—piloting new initiatives, building stronger partnerships, and elevating career success as a university-wide priority. These gains provide a foundation to build on, but scaling them will require sustained support and investment.

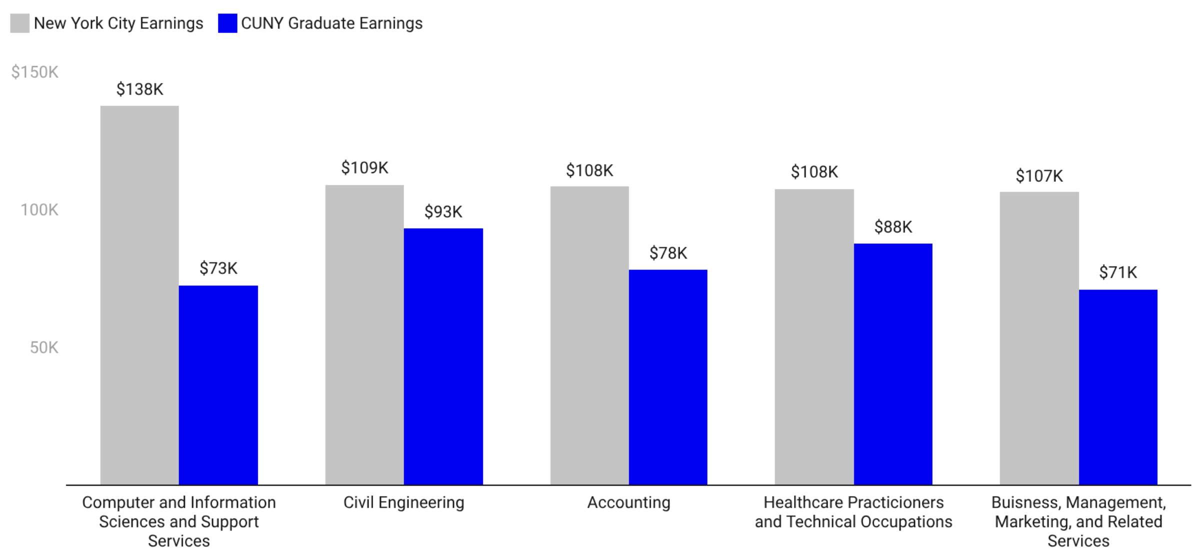
CUNY undergraduates are five times less likely to have paid internships than peers nationwide



Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes Explorer, United States Census Bureau. Created with Datawrapper

CUNY graduates in high-wage fields like business, STEM, and healthcare are out-earned by citywide workers with similar experience

Median wages for CUNY grads and New Yorkers within 5 years of finishing their degree



Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of New York State Department of Labor Occupational Wages data. Created with Datawrapper

Building on Momentum: Strengthening What Works in CUNY's Employer Partnerships

OVER THE PAST DECADE, CUNY—OFTEN IN PARTNERSHIP with city and state leaders, philanthropic foundations, and nonprofit organizations—has taken important steps to connect more students with employers and make career success a university-wide priority. These efforts hold enormous promise, but sustaining them—and growing them to match the scale of a system that graduates more than 46,000 students a year, including nearly 25,000 with bachelor's degrees—will require greater investment, sharper focus, and much wider reach. For CUNY to help far more students launch into meaningful careers, these early gains must expand across all 25 colleges, engage a broader swath of the city's 4.3 million private-sector jobs, and address the shrinking supply of entry-level roles and internships.

"When it comes to employer relations, we're in a much better place than we were," says Jessica Perez, director of the Center for Career and Professional Development at CUNY's

LaGuardia Community College. "Fortune 500 companies wouldn't necessarily look at a community college student. But in the last decade, we [built] strong partnerships with organizations like Deloitte, Apple, Google, with unique programs for two-year students."

CUNY students are already seeing the benefits. Graduates in several in-demand fields such as nursing, business, and engineering are outpacing citywide median wages—sometimes earning $100,000 or more after five years of employment. Partnerships with employers like JPMorgan Chase, Bloomberg, and Amazon are opening doors: Baruch College alone counts 1,500 alumni at JPMorgan Chase and 1,200 at Citi.

Several recent initiatives illustrate the progress underway:

- Office of Careers and Industry Partnerships (OCIP): Launched in 2017 to provide a clearer "front door" for employers, OCIP has expanded rapidly. Through its Industry Support Hub and network of industry committees, CUNY has engaged more than 2,000 employers and created 2,400 paid positions for over 3,000 students since 2022. In its first two years, the Industry Support Hub and campus-based industry specialists grew the number of employer partners by more than 200 percent—from 319 to 967. Through OCIP, CUNY has launched a new employer-facing landing page, "Hire CUNY," which provides a single entry point for companies interested in recruiting CUNY students—although at present it still functions as a basic expression-of-interest form.

- Partnerships with intermediaries: CUNY has deepened ties with nonprofit intermediaries that bring strong employer networks. In 2021, CUNY joined the New York Jobs CEO Council, a coalition of more than 30 of the city's largest employers. By 2024, Council members had hired more than 9,500 CUNY graduates into family-sustaining jobs—doubling the share of CUNY graduates among their entry-level hires.

- CUNY Inclusive Economy Initiative (CIE): Launched in 2022 with $28 million in city support, CIE is helping connect academic programs to careers at scale. Hybrid academic-career advisors paired with industry specialists have been embedded in 17 departments across nine campuses (with 20 more advisors joining over the past year). Degree-to-career maps have expanded from 20 to 300 departments, reaching tens of

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>
> UDARA MENDIS, ALUM

thousands of students. At the College of Staten Island, results include a 43 percent increase in internship participation, a 144 percent increase in full-time jobs at graduation, and a 34 percent increase in starting salaries.

- Work-based learning programs: Paid experiences like Career Launch, Futures in Finance, CUNY 2X Tech, and Internship to Employment (I2E) are creating clearer pathways into growing fields. Since 2017, CUNY 2X Tech has seen average salaries for graduates rise from $78,000 to $92,000, while full-time employment has increased by 16 percent.

CUNY has also begun to prioritize careers in the classroom. The Careers Across the Disciplines initiative is linking coursework to workforce skills, while the Career Success Fellowship has trained more than 50 faculty fellows across CUNY's 25 colleges to integrate career competencies into teaching.

"CUNY now has a lot of initiatives that I wish, when I was a student at City College ten years ago, that I had," says alum Udara Mendis. "A lot of my friends ended up being underemployed for at least one or two years in their career because they didn't develop the appropriate skills."

New employer engagement data also suggests the beginnings of a shift. A first-ever CUNY-wide baseline found that more than 31,000 unique employers sought to recruit CUNY students—likely an undercount, since several colleges had yet to be included. In 2024 alone, 7 of 10 Fortune 25 companies and 8 of 10 Fortune 1000 companies based in New York City hired CUNY students.

There's so much more momentum around career development," says Johanna Meadows, Managing Director, Head of the Centerbridge Foundation. "I talk to many potential employers trying to figure out how to hire more CUNY students. And how did that happen? I think it's because there's been a push from both leadership internally and supporters externally; student outcomes is now number one priority for CUNY, and that was not the case before.

Six Challenges Holding Back Employer Partnerships at CUNY

Employers struggle to navigate a huge, decentralized system.

For many employers, working with CUNY feels like trying to knock on 25 different doors at once. With each campus largely responsible for its own employer relationships, companies face a maze of separate contacts, job boards, and processes. That makes it far harder to tap into CUNY's talent pool than recruiting from other universities, where employers often encounter a single front door and a streamlined experience.

"[The campuses] believe that they're stronger independently and not collectively," says Nikki Evans, senior vice president for workforce development and education at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. "But from an employer perspective, no one wants to have to figure out, of the 25 colleges, where do I go to get employees?"

Basic communication is another pain point. Recruiters accustomed to clear timelines at other institutions describe CUNY's process as disjointed. At Bloomberg, recruiter Alexis Polanco notes that career fairs at peer institutions routinely end with a "save the date" for the following year. At CUNY, she says, invitations often arrive too late to align with corporate recruiting calendars. Ashley Atherton formerly of American Express agrees: "By the time I get [this information], it's almost always too late, because we're already thinking about what the fall season will look like."

Other employers echo the frustration, even as they remain eager to connect with CUNY students. Montefiore Medical Center, one of the Bronx's biggest employers and a frequent hirer of CUNY graduates, reports that forging partnerships can be cumbersome. "We love working with CUNY. But sometimes it requires a lot of meetings and conversations with different people to get things off the ground," says Melissa Haber, director of community workforce programs at Montefiore. "And then a new school comes, and we have to do it all over again. For us to be able to reach more than one school at the same time, a standardized approach would help."

Employers that do break through often encounter uneven execution across campuses. A program may look very different at Hunter than at City Tech, with one campus offering multiple events a semester and another only a handful. Even the same initiative can be implemented inconsistently. Blackstone LaunchPad, for example, partnered with eight CUNY campuses to deliver entrepreneurial training and internships, but found wide variation in how often events were offered and how students were recruited.

These challenges reflect the complexity of a vast public system serving nearly 238,000 students. With campus-level practices still shaping most employer interactions, it is no surprise that partners sometimes struggle with follow-through or lose opportunities to scale. CUNY has taken important steps to change this dynamic, including the creation of the Office of Careers and Industry Partnerships (OCIP), which has begun to centralize outreach and coordination. But scaling those efforts across 25 colleges—and overcoming the natural tendency of campuses to operate independently—will require sustained investment, stronger infrastructure, and support from both city and state.

One example of progress is CUNY's ongoing transition to Handshake, the widely used employment platform that many employers already know from recruiting at other universities. All but two CUNY colleges have moved onto the platform—a significant shift for the university after decades of reliance on unique job boards. However, even where Handshake is in place, the employer-facing experience varies widely. Most colleges have no direct "hire our students" link on their homepages, with career office pages often buried three or four clicks deep in menus. Several campuses do not list a dedicated contact person, and some employer-facing webpages are inactive or broken. Bronx Community College recently launched a new chatbot to make its site easier to navigate, but when asked about hiring BCC students, the chatbot suggested visiting the admissions page.

Employers themselves recognize what is at stake. As one senior CUNY administrator says, “We have an employer who wants to engage with us and whose strategic goal is to hire more CUNY grads but is being prevented every step of the way. Not getting the right information, not being led to the right places … employers really get fed up.”

To its credit, CUNY has already started to address these concerns. OCIP has created industry support hubs, built advisory councils to align curricula with employer needs, and piloted new systems for tracking partnerships. But until city and state leaders focus on helping the university make it as simple for employers to work with CUNY as it is with other institutions, too many opportunities will slip through the cracks.

Colleges need better technology to manage employer relationships.

For all the progress CUNY has made in strengthening partnerships with employers, it still lacks one of the most basic tools for managing those relationships: a modern, systemwide Customer Relationship Management (CRM) platform. Unlike an employer-facing job board or portal, a CRM is designed for CUNY itself—giving staff the ability to track, coordinate, and share employer engagement across 25 colleges.

Right now, that coordination is largely missing. Campuses and central offices maintain their own contact lists, job boards, and systems for managing partnerships. Employers often hear from multiple CUNY representatives at once, with duplicative requests and no clear sense of who is responsible for the relationship. For a large company, that can mean fielding outreach from a dozen or more different CUNY offices in a single semester.

A systemwide CRM would change the dynamic. By capturing where employers are already connected, recording touch points, and clarifying who owns the relationship, CUNY staff across colleges could collaborate rather than compete. A staff member at York College, for instance, could see that LaGuardia already has a strong connection with a major Queens hospital. Instead of starting from scratch, York could coordinate with their LaGuardia colleagues to pitch a new nursing program—ensuring the hospital hears a unified voice from CUNY.

The same system could help surface opportunities that now go unnoticed. At Baruch, industry employment specialist Rychelle McKenzie observed that almost no employers had discovered the Inclusive Economy Initiative webpage on her campus—even though it was designed to connect companies with students. The issue isn’t that creating an employer-facing page was misguided, but that employers rarely find these resources on their own. With a well-functioning CRM, staff across the system would have isibility into program strengths and existing employer connections, enabling them to route opportunities to the right campus contact and boosting the visibility of relevant resources systemwide.

CUNY has allocated initial funds to begin the lengthy and complex process of developing a CRM. But this work is still in its early stages, and scaling it across all 25 campuses will not be possible with philanthropic dollars alone. The investment required is relatively modest: about $500,000 annually for licenses, plus roughly $800,000 for data migration and configuration at the campus level. Additional resources will be needed for ongoing support to clean and organize data, maintain functionality, and adapt as employer needs evolve.

The payoff, however, could be transformative. A robust CRM would reduce redundant outreach and confusion for employers, while also giving CUNY staff a clearer systemwide view of engagement. Today, many promising initiatives remain invisible beyond the campus where they began, limiting opportunities to scale what works. With sustained city and state support, a CRM could finally give CUNY the infrastructure it needs to manage employer partnerships at scale and ensure far more students connect to career opportunities.

Career services are stretched thin, and can’t do it alone.

Career services offices across CUNY are doing vital work under extremely difficult conditions. Ratios of 1,100 students to one staff member are common, leaving career counselors with nearly impossible choices between prioritizing external relationships and working one-on-one with students. For most staff, employer engagement is just a small portion of the job, with much of their time spent preparing students for interviews, workshopping resumes, providing career-related academic guidance, and organizing campus events.

Just 25 percent of CUNY undergraduates have accessed career services by the time they graduate.

"It could be challenging [and] overwhelming if I'm overseeing every aspect of the department and then I'm also maintaining these external relationships," says Jessica Perez, director of career and professional development at LaGuardia Community College. Her office has seven staff members—relatively well resourced compared to other CUNY campuses—but still faces a continual struggle allocating sufficient bandwidth to employer partnership development.

Career center leaders from different CUNY campuses describe a continual struggle allocating sufficient bandwidth to developing partnerships with employers. At City College, the career team recently grew from five to eight permanent members, but even so, most staff time is consumed by student preparation. "We could easily be a staff of 20 and still be very, very busy because the students are professionally underprepared," says Katie Nailler, director of the Career and Professional Development Institute.

Community colleges often face the steepest hurdles, as staff report significant needs among students that take time away from employer-facing work. Students arrive with highly varied levels of preparation, and many require extensive, individualized support. "Think about all the employers my career specialists could be meeting in the time they were doing 100 resumes each," says Jessica Seliger of Bronx Community College.

The funding model for many of these offices further compounds the problem. Staff who support career success are often funded through short-term grants, making it difficult to sustain relationships over time. "Our people who are engaging employers and connecting students to jobs are being funded on grants that are coming and going," says Hannah Weinstock of LaGuardia. Even promising initiatives like City College's CO-OP program, which placed computer science students in paid internships, faltered when external funding ran out and staff positions disappeared.

Yet the challenge is not only one of resources. Even a fully staffed career services office would struggle to meet the scale of demand across a university system serving more than 238,000 students. Career services also tend to reach only a small share of students: just 25 percent of CUNY undergraduates have accessed them by the time they graduate. For most students balancing jobs, classes, and family responsibilities, career development needs to be integrated into the academic core—or it risks falling down the long list of priorities that students navigate every day.

Through the Inclusive Economy Initiative, CUNY has begun to embed hybrid academic-career advisors and industry specialists in select departments, pairing career guidance with coursework. This model ensures that students are exposed to industry expectations and opportunities without needing to carve out extra time to visit a career office. As Scott Millstein of iMentor explains, "We hear from students they don't have the capacity to add one more extra-curricular. We need to integrate it as much as possible into the spaces they've already invested their time and money in."

Scaling these efforts will require both new investment and new thinking. Strengthening employer relationships will require a campus-wide strategy, involving senior leadership, department chairs, connected faculty, and advisors, all working together with support from CUNY Central. Career services play an important role in this work, but they cannot—and should not—be asked to carry the full weight of CUNY's career success mission on their own. Embedding career preparation across the academic program, while simultaneously bolstering the capacity of career centers and department leads, will be crucial to ensuring that every student has access to the guidance and industry connections they need to succeed after graduation.

Career exploration and preparation starts too late, and isn't tied tightly enough to industry.

CUNY has made an important commitment to expand paid internships, but most students today are still unlikely to complete one before graduation. Even as CUNY makes progress toward increased participation, more is needed from the beginning of the college experience to prepare students for their first professional role—navigating career options, gaining job readiness, and building confidence in the world of work. For most students, that preparation often comes too late, with consequences throughout their time at CUNY and beyond.

Employers, faculty, and students alike say many struggle just to get through the hiring process. Employers report that too many stumble on technical interviews, miss application deadlines, or submit resumes that pale in comparison to peers from private universities.

"For many industries there is a secret curriculum," says Scott Millstein of iMentor, referring to everything from industry jargon and background knowledge to social cues and styles of dress. "First-gen students just do not have the same access to those resources as many other continuing-generation students do."

The gaps are visible to employers. "What employers are saying is that the CUNY students don't have the experiential learning or the career exposure needed before it's time for them to get their first professional internship," says Erica Lock of the Blackstone Charitable Foundation.

Our research suggests that the biggest barrier to earlier participation is structural: CUNY students have to prioritize for-credit coursework, then earning money and taking care of family responsibilities. Nearly 30 percent of CUNY students report spending 11 hours a week or more providing care for other people, and more than half are working. As a result, many opt not to participate in career-related learning simply because they do not have the time.

To address this, students need earlier, structured career experiences that can count toward college credit—case studies, career-infused assignments, and work-based learning opportunities like co-ops and apprenticeships. Some campuses and employers are already piloting this approach. Montefiore Medical Center, one of the Bronx's largest employers of CUNY graduates, has struggled to fill large numbers of vacancies because too few students arrive with the skills or credentials required.

"This is our big challenge," says Angie Mercado, Montefiore's director of HR recruitment. "Often, when we get referrals, they don't always have the skill set or the credentials required for those particular positions. So, we need a narrower pool of individuals that are being trained in those skills and who have those credentials."

To close these gaps, Montefiore has launched costly residency programs for nurses—a model that could potentially expand to other in-demand positions. But employers alone are unlikely to shoulder all the cost. With city and state support, CUNY could expand industry-linked, for-credit career exploration and work-based learning programs, increasing the likelihood that students will be a strong fit for paid internships and job openings in their chosen fields.

CUNY is beginning to move in this direction. Its new CUNY Beyond career success model—which launched on four campuses in 2025, will embed career preparation across the student experience, from career-infused degree maps and joint academic-career advising to required career-connected coursework. Importantly, the model aims to integrate career advising and academic guidance so students' program choices are linked to career goals, closing the gap between classroom and workplace expectations. Given the limits of an extracurricular, opt-in model, policymakers should prioritize enabling this initiative to expand.

Faculty are pivotal to employer engagement and career success, but lack time, incentives, and support.

Faculty are the most consistent and influential point of contact students have at CUNY, and an important conduit to employers. While only a fraction of students ever visit the career services office, nearly every student sees their professors week after week—building trust and shaping how they understand the link between coursework and future opportunities. This gives faculty a uniquely powerful role in helping students explore career options, gain job readiness skills, and connect classroom learning to the world of work.

As Brooklyn College's Natalia Guarin-Klein notes, "What about that student who doesn't come [to events]? If the faculty are prompting them, 'Did you know about this event? Have you done an internship yet?' then we're reaching more students than we could on our own."

Right now, too much of the responsibility for preparing students falls on individual employers. Bloomberg, for example, has built its own bootcamps to upskill students specifically for Bloomberg roles—a recognition that many arrive without the technical or professional preparation to succeed. Other employers described similar stopgap efforts, from running in-house trainings to sponsoring ad hoc workshops. But most firms cannot take this on, and even those that do reach only a small fraction of CUNY students.

This is why faculty matter. Embedding career preparation into the courses students are already taking is the only way to ensure it reaches everyone. Integrating resume-building, technical and behavioral interview prep, or industry-relevant coding languages into existing courses is a lighter lift than creating entirely new classes, and far more sustainable than leaving the work to employers. Faculty can also adjust coursework with input from employers, making career readiness a recognized part of the academic program rather than an extracurricular option.

CUNY has started to recognize this leverage point. In 2023, the university launched a Career Success Faculty Fellowship, training 50 professors to embed career success into their teaching. Fellows received a $2,500 stipend, but with more than 18,000 faculty system-wide, the reach is limited.

The appetite among faculty is clear. A 2022 survey of more than 1,600 CUNY professors found that over 90 percent believe it is their responsibility to prepare students for postgraduate success. But 87 percent said they were not trained or equipped to meet this need, and 78 percent reported feeling unrewarded for their efforts.

Structural barriers reinforce those perceptions. "The way faculty…is evaluated on their jobs does not include these metrics. We have to reward [them] for doing this work," argues Jennifer Dillon of CUNY's OCIP. Without incentives, career-connected learning remains extra credit, not core work.

Training is equally important. Many professors—particularly those without industry backgrounds—lack direct knowledge of hiring practices. "It was really eye-opening," says Accenture's Jennifer Malach, describing a session where faculty visited the firm's offices. "It's going to be really helpful for the professors to understand how what they're teaching in class translates to industry work." Making faculty–employer connections routine—not one-off—will be essential to align curricula with fast-changing industry standards and help professors guide students more effectively.

One promising path is dual appointments and ongoing partnerships with employers, where faculty co-teach with industry professionals or receive structured training in emerging skills. This not only benefits students but also helps ensure that professional skill-building is continually refreshed in the classroom.

City and state leaders could make a meaningful difference by dedicating funding to faculty development in career-connected learning, and strongly encouraging both CUNY campuses and city employers to unite around this emerging model. With the right incentives, training, and support for employer connections, faculty can become a powerful bridge to industry for the students who may never otherwise benefit from structured career services.

CUNY and government can do more to scale the impact of nonprofit and intermediary partners.

Strengthening employer partnerships requires more than one-off recruiting visits. A network of nonprofit and intermediary organizations already plays a critical role in connecting students, faculty, and employers—often with impressive results. Organizations like the New York Jobs CEO Council, COOP Careers, Project Basta, Break Through Tech, and iMentor have shown that intermediaries can develop strong relationships with employers in ways that dramatically boost career outcomes for CUNY graduates. But while they represent one of CUNY's greatest untapped resources, their reach today is limited, inconsistent across campuses, and difficult to sustain without additional public support.

The Jobs CEO Council illustrates the power of these partnerships. Launched in 2020 by two dozen CEOs with the goal of hiring 100,000 low-income New Yorkers—including 25,000 CUNY graduates—member companies have already hired more than 50,000 people into well-paying jobs. More than 9,500 of those hires are recent CUNY graduates, and member firms have doubled CUNY's representation in their entry-level cohorts since 2021. The Council has also facilitated over 7,300 internships for students from low-income communities, with program completers earning 38 percent higher median salaries than their peers one year after graduation. These results show what's possible when employers collectively commit to building structured pipelines in partnership with CUNY.

Other intermediaries are also making a significant impact. iMentor expected to serve 300 students in fall 2024 and link them to 70–80 companies. COOP Careers has placed hundreds of underemployed graduates into stable, well-paid jobs. Project Basta, a rigorous career-prep program, has worked with hundreds of CUNY students to help them land a first job with an average starting salary of over $65,000. Together, these efforts demonstrate how intermediaries can fill critical gaps in CUNY's capacity, particularly when their roles are formalized and supported.

Formal agreements could help expand reach and set clear enrollment or placement targets. COOP, for example, has operated on CUNY campuses since 2014 but is only now negotiating official agreements with Brooklyn and Queens College that would enroll 150 alumni at Brooklyn College alone. "It takes a lot of dedicated resources and relationship development to work through the bureaucracy," says Sarah Wessel, former managing director of partnerships at COOP.

Intermediaries also encounter the same structural challenges as employers: resistance from some faculty to adapt curricula, decentralized decision-making, and slow data-sharing. Henry Street Settlement has seen uneven faculty engagement across campuses. "We're used to collaborating with the professor on which students are doing well, and which are not," says Jeanie Tung of Henry Street. "It has to be a partnership when the goal is setting students up for success. So, it does become difficult when a college tells us that the professors are only paid to teach and cannot assist with addressing the student's learning more holistically."

CareerWise New York, a youth apprenticeship program, has faced similar roadblocks in trying to connect industry and college faculty. "What we've heard from employers is that what faculty are teaching is too often outdated," says Greg Mateo, director of credentialing at CareerWise New York. "But it takes a really long time to change anything."

New York is also home to a number of nonprofit, adult-focused workforce development organizations that have developed lasting employer partnerships and consistently deliver strong career outcomes to their learners—many of whom were previously CUNY students. Some leaders in the sector say the missing link is funding to enable more current students to participate in these proven programs, perhaps by allowing more of them to count for college credit.

"CUNY rightfully feels that they have to solve for everything, [but] we've been doing this work for a very long time and you don't need to invest that much money or energy—just pay us to do that part of the job," says one leader of a nonprofit tech training organization, who requested anonymity in order to speak candidly.

The demand far outpaces the supply. One workforce development organization estimated that two to three times more students seek opportunities than employers can accommodate—requiring 40 to 50 additional companies each year just to keep up. As one nonprofit leader put it: "The only thing that limits the scale of the number of students we can support is the number of companies we can get to say yes."

Policy support can help unlock this capacity. Tax incentives or subsidies for firms that host interns through nonprofit intermediaries could accelerate employer participation. Formal MOUs between CUNY and high-performing intermediaries or training providers could scale successful models across multiple campuses. And streamlined data-sharing would give both CUNY and its partners the tools to track progress and course-correct. Without these steps, CUNY risks leaving major capacity on the table at a time when student demand for career opportunities far exceeds supply.

Changing Minds

Employers need to rethink CUNY talent

CUNY HAS MADE SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS IN EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT, BUT TOO MANY companies still fall back on traditional filters—GPA, alma mater prestige, or prior internships—that overlook qualified candidates.

"Finance is very difficult to break into because there are a lot of entrenched beliefs like Ivy League educated, [high] GPA, high-caliber internships," says Sheila Sarem of Project Basta. "But we work really well with employers that are open to thinking differently about what makes a good candidate—those not super tied to GPA or the prestige of the college."

Others highlight a mismatch in expectations. "We just want people that show up on time, that dress and speak well," employers often say, notes Evelyn Fernandez-Ketcham of Hostos Community College. "But then, when we put those candidates in front of them, they say, 'We want them to have much more.'"

As former CUNY administrator Nikki Evans explains, the fix is to start the partnership earlier—with employer engagement embedded in classrooms, on-campus exposure, and structured touchpoints throughout the college journey. "Companies keep doubling down on the same tactics to engage and not paying attention to that [diverse] population breakdown," says Evans. "Sometimes you have to explore other means of engaging with those students in a meaningful way, and before they actually get into your internship pipeline."

Opportunities extend beyond large companies. Small businesses, from e-commerce startups to accounting firms to healthcare offices, need exactly the kind of local talent CUNY can provide. And the public sector remains a largely underdeveloped resource: one recent CUNY–MTA internship drew over 16,000 applicants for just 150 slots.

Success stories already show that shifting perceptions is possible—and most effective when employers hear it from their peers. The Jobs CEO Council has helped lead the way, even launching a campaign to spotlight the value of hiring local talent. But a major untapped opportunity remains: bringing the next 200 largest companies, along with thousands of small businesses, into the fold.

Recommendations

14 ideas for bolstering CUNY's career success outcomes by strengthening employer partnerships

TO REALIZE MORE OF THE GAINS CUNY HAS MADE OVER THE YEARS AND HELP THOUSANDS MORE STUDENTS achieve social and economic mobility, the city and state will have to help CUNY invest more in career success—expanding the scale of the Inclusive Economy Initiative (CIE), supporting faculty in bringing career skills into the classroom, and leveraging the impact of intermediary organizations to connect with more employers.

CUNY will also have to take more responsibility for improving employer relationships by making it easier for companies to engage with students and faculty, while continuing to build a true campus-wide culture that treats career success as integral to academic success. And finally, the city's employers should approach CUNY as a partner in developing their future workforce by diversifying ways of engaging with campuses—from early career exploration to co-designed curriculum updates to paid internships and work-based learning opportunities to committing to hire more CUNY graduates.

1. MAKE A MAJOR PUBLIC COMMITMENT TO SUPPORT EMPLOYER PARTNERSHIP AND CAREER SUCCESS EFFORTS ACROSS CUNY. The next mayor should commit, in his first 100 days, to strengthening CUNY's career success efforts, ensuring every student has access to work-based learning and employer connections. The mayor should integrate the recently launched CUNY Beyond initiative into his first budget: expanding the Inclusive Economy Initiative to half of all CUNY departments (up from 9 percent today), building campus-level staff capacity, and embedding hybrid academic–career advisors and industry specialists across disciplines. Proven efforts like CUNY 2X Tech should be renewed and expanded, while the Practitioners-in-Residence Corps should grow into new sectors like healthcare and business. The city should also set a measurable goal: ensuring at least 30 percent of CUNY students complete a paid internship before graduation. Without these steps, tens of thousands of graduates will continue leaving CUNY each year with degrees but little work experience, while local employers miss out on a critical source of diverse talent.

2. RECRUIT THE NEXT 100 MAJOR EMPLOYERS INTO STRUCTURED CAREER DEVELOPMENT PARTNERSHIPS. Through the New York Jobs CEO Council, roughly 30 companies have hired more than 50,000 New Yorkers since 2020—including 9,500 CUNY graduates—and doubled CUNY's representation in their entry-level cohorts. But most of the city's large and mid-sized companies remain on the sidelines. The next mayor should lead an effort to recruit 100 more firms into structured partnerships with CUNY, setting measurable goals for hiring, curriculum alignment, and paid internships. Industry associations and nonprofit intermediaries can help aggregate demand, while the city provides training grants, technical assistance, and public recognition.

3. SCALE UP A SYSTEMWIDE CRM TO MANAGE EMPLOYER RELATIONSHIPS. CUNY has begun piloting a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) platform to coordinate employer partnerships, but philanthropic dollars alone cannot bring it to scale. Today, campuses and central offices still maintain separate systems and contact lists, leading to duplicative outreach and missed opportunities. A fully implemented CRM would give staff across 25 campuses the ability to share contacts, track outcomes, and coordinate outreach—creating a streamlined experience for employers. The investment is significant, but the payoff is transformative: a scaled CRM would reduce redundancy, highlight underutilized programs, and finally give CUNY the infrastructure to manage partnerships at scale.

4. LAUNCH A PAY IT FORWARD REVOLVING INTERNSHIP FUND. Paid internships remain one of the most powerful on-ramps to careers, yet only 12 percent of CUNY undergraduates ever complete one. Funding is the biggest barrier: CUNY's central office reports it can cover just 20 percent of campus requests for subsidized, embedded internships. At Queens College—the CUNY-wide hub for community and social service internships—student demand is four times greater than the number of subsidized slots available, and only half of applicants can be funded each year. And while many employers can and should pay for CUNY interns, boosting supply will almost certainly require a steady influx of dollars to underwrite placements in sectors where funding is limited—such as nonprofits and small businesses—and to help reduce the risk as employers perceive it. A $25 million "Pay It Forward" fund—seeded by city, state, employer, and philanthropic dollars—would subsidize thousands of internships upfront. Employers that later hire their interns full-time would repay into the fund, creating a sustainable cycle. Modeled on San Antonio's Pay It Forward program, this approach would expand access to paid experiences while giving employers a low-risk pipeline to talent they have already trained.

5. EMBED CAREER EXPLORATION EARLIER AND MAKE IT COUNT FOR CREDIT. Most CUNY students begin thinking seriously about careers far too late in their academic journey. To change that, CUNY should integrate structured career exploration into first-year experiences and College Now courses, launch a universal for-credit career exploration course, and embed career modules into orientation. By making early career exposure part of the curriculum, students—especially first-generation and working learners—can explore industries sooner, build confidence, and position themselves for internships well before graduation.

6. MAKE IT FAR EASIER FOR EMPLOYERS TO WORK WITH CUNY. Employers still describe CUNY as confusing and fragmented, with multiple offices reaching out separately and inconsistent processes across campuses. CUNY should overhaul its employer-facing systems to create a single, streamlined entry point, redesign the Hire CUNY portal to be user-friendly, and spotlight employer testimonials and data that show strong outcomes. A coordinated marketing campaign aimed at industry could further highlight CUNY's role as a source of prepared, diverse talent. By rolling out a clearer "welcome mat," CUNY can attract many more employers who are eager to engage but put off by the current complexity.

7. STRENGTHEN DEPARTMENT-EMBEDDED INDUSTRY SPECIALISTS AND HYBRID ACADEMIC-CAREER ADVISORS. The Inclusive Economy Initiative has shown the impact of embedding industry specialists and hybrid academic–career advisors within departments, boosting internships and salaries where implemented. But it currently reaches only a fraction of CUNY's 450 departments. Scaling this model would mean training current advisors, hiring new specialists, and building campus systems to track milestones. Making industry engagement a built-in feature of every department would align academic programs with workforce needs and provide employers with a clearer, more consistent pipeline of talent.

8. SCALE UP THE CAREER SUCCESS FACULTY FELLOWSHIP AND PRACTITIONERS-IN-RESIDENCE CORPS. Faculty are the most consistent point of contact for students, yet most lack the support to embed career skills into their teaching. The Career Success Faculty Fellowship has reached just 50 professors, while the Practitioners-in-Residence Corps has been concentrated in tech. Scaling both initiatives—with dedicated funding and broader sector coverage—would empower faculty to connect coursework to careers and bring hundreds of industry professionals directly into classrooms. Partnering with associations like Tech:NYC and the Greater New York Hospital Association, CUNY could recruit 500 practitioners to strengthen faculty–employer ties and give thousands more students exposure to real-world practices.

9. LAUNCH AN NYC AI SERVICE CORPS TO HELP CUNY'S TECH DEGREE STUDENTS GAIN PAID WORK EXPERIENCE. New York City now has an oversupply of recent tech graduates for the first time on record, even as postings for entry-level tech jobs have plunged by half since 2022. As a result, CUNY graduates with computer science and technology degrees are facing the most challenging job market in years. To help more of these students get on the path to careers, the city should launch a paid, six-month NYC AI Service Corps to pair recent graduates with small businesses, nonprofits, and city agencies. Fellows would work on practical data and AI projects, improve basic digital systems, and help organizations address operational challenges using technology.

10. RENEW AND EXPAND THE HIGHLY SUCCESSFUL CUNY 2X TECH INITIATIVE. CUNY 2X Tech has proven to be one of the city's most effective strategies for boosting career success among computer science and technology majors, significantly increasing internship rates, job placements, and employer engagement at participating campuses. But the initiative currently reaches only a fraction of CUNY's tech-degree-seeking students and is not embedded on all campuses. Renewing and expanding CUNY 2X Tech would allow more colleges to grow employer partnerships, expand access to paid internships, and boost career outcomes—and could be paired with an NYC AI Service Corps and an expansion of the CUNY Tech Prep program to maximize impact.

11. MOBILIZE SMALL BUSINESSES TO TAP CUNY TALENT. New York's small businesses account for nearly half of all private-sector jobs, yet many struggle to adopt new technologies or manage essential functions like accounting, compliance, and marketing. CUNY could launch new Small Business Corps to pair students with local firms that need this support. The opportunity is clear: CUNY students bring cultural competency, language skills, and neighborhood savvy—in addition to their academic knowledge—that can make them especially effective in helping small businesses grow. For employers, it's a low-risk way to access skilled, motivated talent. For students, it's a pathway to gain paid, career-relevant experience while strengthening the city's economic backbone.

12. EXPAND MUNICIPAL HIRING OPPORTUNITIES FOR CUNY STUDENTS. City government is one of New York's largest employers, yet too few CUNY students gain access to internships and career pathways in the public sector. The scale of demand is clear: a 2023 CUNY–MTA internship partnership drew over 16,000 applicants for just 150 slots. Public agencies should dramatically expand the number of CUNY interns they host, streamline approval processes, and adopt an "internship-to-employment" model that converts successful internships into permanent roles. This would provide clear career pathways in government while helping agencies fill critical vacancies with local talent that already understands the city's needs.

13. ATTRACT MORE EMPLOYERS TO RECRUIT AT CUNY WITH CITYWIDE CUNY CAREER WEEKS EACH SEMESTER. CUNY career fairs and recruiting events remain far smaller than those at peer institutions. While NYU routinely draws nearly 200 companies, most CUNY campuses attract only a few dozen employers—many from government or nonprofits rather than high-growth industries. The next mayor should lead a campaign to bring more companies to CUNY campuses, partnering with industry associations and chambers of commerce while offering recognition and support to firms that step up. One option is to launch a CUNY-wide Career Week each semester, with the city leading the charge by marshaling private sector leaders to participate. By raising CUNY's visibility and making recruitment easier, the city can ensure that far more employers tap into the university's deep pool of diverse talent.

14. STRENGTHEN PARTNERSHIPS WITH NONPROFIT INTERMEDIARIES TO SCALE IMPACT. New York is home to a powerful ecosystem of nonprofit and intermediary organizations—like COOP Careers, Project Basta, Break Through Tech, iMentor, and Per Scholas—that already connect thousands of students and graduates to employers. These groups often have stronger employer ties and proven track records of placement and wage gains than CUNY can achieve on its own. Yet their reach across the system is limited, and forming official partnerships with CUNY has often been slow and inconsistent. Formal agreements could help expand enrollment targets, replicate successful models across campuses, and give employers a clearer way to engage through trusted intermediaries.

Endnotes

1. Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast.
2. Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes Explorer, United States Census Bureau.
3. Center for an Urban Future analysis of preliminary survey data from Columbia University.
4. Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from the 2024 CUNY Student Experience Survey and the National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2024.
5. CUNY, “Fiscal Year 2026 Budget Request,” December 2024.
6. Derek Thompson, “Something Alarming Is Happening to the Job Market,” The Atlantic, April 30, 2025.
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8. Ibid.
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