

→ REVISED JULY 2025

First Destinations

Standards and Protocols for Collecting
and Reporting Career Outcomes for
College Graduates



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Sample Spreadsheet

A sample spreadsheet that shows how outcomes data should be organized is available at: www.naceweb.org/job-market/graduate-outcomes/first-destination/standards-and-protocols/. (See "Examples and Tutorials" > Download a sample of a completed survey.)

Reviewed and revised by the 2024-25 First-Destination
Survey Standards and Guidelines Review Group

Approved by the NACE Board of Directors, July 2025

Introduction

The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) is the preeminent national organization focused on the employment of the college educated. As such, it has a singular responsibility to the profession and the public to provide thought leadership on the relevant issues and trends affecting the college-educated workforce.

In light of escalating higher education costs and perceived returns on the significant investment of time, effort, and resources expended by students and their families, NACE recognizes the critically important public discourse concerning the value and effectiveness of higher education as it relates to preparing the next generation work force. NACE further recognizes the growing importance of institutional outcomes assessment efforts as they relate to improving higher education performance and achieving institutional and academic program accreditation standards.

Efforts to assess the employment- and career-related outcomes for college graduates are not new and, in fact, a great many institutions undertake these efforts in various ways, to differing degrees and at different points in time. There has been significantly growing interest, however, among career services professionals and other stakeholders, in the leadership role that NACE can, and should, play in providing greater direction and guidance in this specific form of assessment to ensure greater consistency and to advance best practices.

In response to the concerns and circumstances, NACE has established these national standards and protocols to guide higher education institutions in collecting and disseminating the vital information regarding the immediate career outcomes of their graduates. In doing so, NACE does not seek to supersede or take the place of other standards established for specific academic programs, e.g., M.B.A. or law, or efforts by various state entities and public higher education systems to assess graduating student career outcomes.

NACE recognizes the enormous diversity among higher education institutions in terms of mission and goals and the inherent difficulty of a simple one-size-fits-all approach. Consequently, the goal of this initiative is to provide minimum standards and protocols that assist institutions with an assessment process and lay the critical foundation for further development and advancement in this vital area of evaluation. Given this goal, the focus of these standards is on the first-destination career activities of students completing their degrees.

Clearly, many institutions have already dedicated the necessary career services office and/or institutional resources to effectively undertake their assessment efforts in the area of graduating student initial career outcomes. Many institutions, for which these standards introduce new and expanded expectations, may struggle initially with allocating the necessary resources to meet these new standards. NACE recognizes that full implementation will take some time for these institutions. The association hopes in establishing these standards to raise greater awareness of the critical nature of these assessments and, in doing so, to help career services professionals in lobbying for the needed resources to effectively undertake them.

NACE also wishes to acknowledge the inherent limitations in focusing on first-destination outcomes. The positive impact of a college education cannot be measured in the simple terms of employment, earnings, or continued studies. The full benefits of the profound personal growth, enrichment, and increased knowledge evidenced by graduates cannot be adequately measured nor properly accounted for in the near-term. The most significant and substantive outcomes occur over the lifetime of the individual graduate.

About the revised standards and protocols

In 2024-25, a work group of NACE members were charged by the NACE Board of Directors with reviewing the standards and protocols for NACE's first-destination initiative. Their revisions, intended to clarify the guidance, were informed by member input.

Previously, there were separate standards for collecting outcomes data for undergraduate and advanced degree levels. The current standards and protocols can be used for both undergraduate and advanced degree level outcomes.

2024-25 First-Destination Survey Standards & Guidelines Review Group

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Guiding Principles

The standards described in this document reflect the guiding principles regarding the collection of graduating student career outcomes established by the NACE Board of Directors in July of 2012. Those principles include, in part, the following:

- Helping students achieve postgraduation career success is a critical element of the mission of the entire higher education institution.
- Higher education institutions should be focused on obtaining career outcomes information from all institutional graduates each year.
- The institution's career services organization should have an integral role—in collaboration with other institutional entities, e.g., academic departments, alumni relations offices, institutional effectiveness reporting—in collecting and disseminating career outcomes information.
- Data collection protocols should be consistent with institutional human subject requirements, and the institutional research office should be aware of and involved with data collection as appropriate.
- Data may be collected from various legitimate sources, e.g., student survey responses; employer-, parent-, or faculty-provided information.
- Data collection should be ongoing, with final summary analysis being completed by six months after the end of the class year.
- Outcomes information reports should provide aggregate data maintaining the confidentiality of individuals in accordance with institutional protocols involving these types of data.
- **Recommended:** Whenever a career outcomes rate is reported, the correlating knowledge rate of that data should also be shared to provide a complete view of the dataset.

NACE further encourages higher education institutions to pursue longer-term studies of the career progression of their graduates to better assess career outcomes over time.

Standards and Protocols

Outlined below and organized by sub-section are the relevant standards and protocols established by NACE concerning the collection and dissemination of graduating student career outcomes.

1. Defining The Graduating Class

- a. Each year's graduating class includes those students who completed degrees between the periods of July 1 to June 30 each year, a time period consistent with degree completion reporting requirements established by the National Center for Education Statistics' Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) program. For example, for purposes of outcomes reporting, the Class of 2024-25 would include all graduates who completed degrees between July 1, 2024, and June 30, 2025.
- b. The graduating class should include all students completing an associate, bachelor's, master's, doctoral, or professional program degree, full or part time, including those with permanent work authorization and those without permanent work authorization.
- c. Career outcomes information about graduates should be sortable by degree program and degree level, i.e., associate, baccalaureate, master's, doctoral.

2. Targeted Knowledge Rates

- a. The term "knowledge rate" defines the percent of graduates for which the institution has reasonable and verifiable information concerning the graduates' postgraduation career activities.

Knowledge rate includes the sum of all employment categories, plus service and military, plus continuing education, plus the number of students still seeking an outcome or not seeking an outcome. It excludes students for whom no information is available. Mathematically, the knowledge rate can be expressed as:

$$(\# \text{ employed} + \# \text{ service} + \# \text{ military} + \# \text{ continuing education} + \# \text{ still seeking employment} + \# \text{ still seeking continuing education} + \# \text{ not seeking}) / \text{total graduates}$$

- b. This information may come directly from the graduates via, for example, a survey method, forms completed, phone calls, emails, or meetings. Relevant data, however, may also be provided by employers, or obtained through other sources, e.g., LinkedIn profiles, other online sources, fellow graduates, parents, National Clearinghouse Data, and faculty. The institution should make good faith efforts to verify the information obtained by any source

other than the graduate or in any case where there is some concern about the accuracy of the available information.

- c. The goal should be the highest possible rate, but institutions should strive for a minimum knowledge rate of 65%. The knowledge rate refers to basic information about the career outcomes of graduates, e.g., employed or continuing education. It is a given that in some instances certain information relative to the details of that status, e.g., salary for those employed, may not always be provided or may otherwise be difficult to obtain.
- d. A sample survey that addresses the specific data needs articulated in the standards is provided in the appendix of this document. The survey is not intended to be prescriptive but merely to represent a basic starting point for data collection. By necessity, the example is based on a paper-and-pencil-survey approach. If the institution uses an online survey approach, then certain data elements will not need to be provided by the respondent. Institutions are free to add whatever additional questions they desire to the sample survey or use a different survey format or style.
- e. Reported knowledge rate: Whenever an institution shares its career outcomes rate, it is suggested that the correlating knowledge rate of the data also be shown to provide a complete view of the dataset.

3. Career Outcomes Reporting Categories

Outcomes data concerning individual graduates should be organized into standardized categories. Individual graduates should be included in the appropriate category that best represents their primary activity upon graduation. While in certain instances graduates may be pursuing multiple activities, e.g., working part time and taking graduate courses, their status should only be reported once in their primary area of activity. Each enrollment should have an outcome attached to it. Each enrollment equals one outcome, and the graduate should determine their status whenever possible.

Reporting categories include the following:

Employed Full Time

Employed full time is generally defined as a position in which the graduate works for 30 hours or more per week.

In recognition of the diverse nature of employment, there are a number of important sub-categories that define employment and should be tracked for individual graduates. Graduates should be included in only one of the following categories:

- Employed as an entrepreneur, i.e., building a business
- Employed in a temporary/contract work assignment (including internships)

- Employed freelance (including independent consultants)
- Employed in a postgraduate internship or fellowship
- Employed in a fellowship, postdoctoral residency, or other postdoctoral appointment
- Employed in a faculty tenure track position
- Employed in a faculty non-tenure track position
- Employed in all other work categories

Data points to be collected include:

- Employing organization
- Position location—city, state, and country
- Job title
- If employed full time, annual base salary amount
- Guaranteed first-year bonus amount if appropriate, e.g., sign-on and/or year- end.
- Whether the graduate was employed in a position already held while pursuing the degree.

Employed Part Time

Part-time employment is generally defined as a position in which the graduate works less than 30 hours per week.

Graduates should be included in only one of the following categories:

- Employed as an entrepreneur, i.e., building a business
- Employed in a temporary/contract work assignment (including internships)
- Employed freelance (including independent consultants)
- Employed in a postgraduate internship or fellowship
- Employed in a fellowship, postdoctoral residency, or other postdoctoral appointment
- Employed in a faculty tenure track position
- Employed in a faculty non-tenure track position

Data points to be collected include:

- Employing organization
- Position location—city, state, and country
- Job title
- If employed part time, annual base salary amount
- Guaranteed first-year bonus amount if appropriate, e.g., sign-on and/or year- end.
- Whether the graduate was employed in a position already held while pursuing the degree.

Volunteer Service

This category is defined as those graduates who are participating in a volunteer or service program, e.g., Peace Corps, mission work.

Data to be collected include:

- Organization
- Assignment location—city, state, country
- Role or title

Military Service

This category is defined as those graduates serving in the U.S. Armed Forces or armed forces of a home country. Data to be collected include:

- Service branch
- Rank, if possible
- Specialization

Continuing Education

This category is defined as those who have been accepted to and plan to matriculate into a program of further study. This includes graduate school or other specialized training.

Data to be collected include:

- Name of institution
- Location of the institution—city, state, and country
- Program of study
- Degree to be earned

Seeking Employment

This category is defined as those graduates who have indicated that they are seeking employment or engaged in the job-search process.

Seeking Continuing Education

This category is defined as those graduates who have indicated that they are seeking and have not yet enrolled in a program of continuing education.

Not Seeking

This category is defined as those graduates who have indicated that they choose not to pursue either employment or continuing education at this time.

No Information Available

This category is defined as those graduates who, despite reasonable efforts on the part of the institution, have not responded to efforts to obtain information about their postgraduation career plans.

4. Career Outcomes Rate

In lieu of the term “placement rate,” these standards instead focus on the notion of a “career outcomes rate.”

The career outcomes rate is the number of graduates who have landed in any of the employment categories, plus service and military, plus continuing education divided by the number of graduates for whom the outcome is known. It excludes those graduates identified as not seeking an outcome.

Expressed mathematically, the career outcomes rate is:

$$\frac{(\# \text{ employed} + \# \text{ service} + \# \text{ military} + \# \text{ continuing education})}{(\# \text{ employed} + \# \text{ service} + \# \text{ military} + \# \text{ continuing education} + \# \text{ still seeking employment} + \# \text{ still seeking continuing education})}$$

5. Timeline For Summary Data Collection and Reporting

The target date for gathering all summary career outcomes data is December 31 of each year. For example, all career outcomes data collection for graduates from the Class of 2024-25 (as defined in #1 above) would be completed by December 31, 2025. This common deadline provides a consistent metric to be used in reporting and comparing summary outcomes.

The precise timing for collecting outcomes data during the period defined above is left to the discretion of the individual institution. However, we suggest that a school collect outcomes information for a particular graduating class at the least at two specific points in time—at graduation and then again in the December following the end of the class year. It is perfectly acceptable for a school to schedule follow-up outreach—including phone calls, emails, surveys, or meetings with their graduates—between graduation and the December close. The number of times a school schedules follow-up outreach is completely at the school’s individual discretion.

When reporting an individual graduate’s outcome, NACE suggests that the latest known outcome in the collection period be reported. For example, if in the initial survey the graduate reports “still seeking employment” as the primary status and it becomes known later in the collection period that the graduate is employed full time, the graduate should be listed as employed in the December report. Conversely, if the graduate’s initial status is “employed full-time” but subsequent information indicates that the graduate is no longer employed but is now seeking employment, then the December reporting status should be “still seeking employment.”

NACE recognizes that there are many reasons to collect and summarize outcomes data at other points in time, e.g., at graduation; three months following graduation. In addition to the December 31 deadline, institutions may continue to collect and report data subsequent to that period as suits their particular interests and circumstances.

In accordance with federal and various state regulations and policies, career outcomes data—including the knowledge rate tied to the career outcomes data—should be readily available to all appropriate parties. All information provided through public outlets should ensure the confidentiality of individual respondents, and individual respondents' information should only be provided in accordance with an institution's internal policies concerning private information. Institutions should use whatever means they believe are most effective in making this information available to their stakeholders or as required by some other agency or entity, e.g., state system reporting process.

Each year, NACE will request summary data from all institutions in order to track and share broad trends in hiring and continuing education. Participation in this process is voluntary. A sample spreadsheet that describes how these data should be organized is included as part of these standards. This same spreadsheet tool may be effective for individual institutions whether they choose to provide information to NACE or not.

Institutions should track outcomes by degree-level and by individual academic programs within each degree level. When reporting outcomes by individual academic programs the institution should report by the Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP)—the categorization used to report degree completions to the federal government—and use the coding system connected with this classification to identify individual academic programs (a list of current CIP codes by academic programs is contained in the sample spreadsheet in the appendix). In addition, while not required, it is recommended that graduate outcomes be tracked and reported by gender and ethnicity. Institutions should track outcomes for those graduates with permanent work authorization and those without permanent work authorization; consequently, summary analyses should be maintained.

6. Further Assessments

The standards and protocols articulated here are intended to capture the core elements of career outcomes assessment deemed essential for the initial launch of these standards. It is expected that, as institutions become more familiar and comfortable with these initial standards and fully implement them, the standards will be expanded over time. As such, they do not cover every area of immediate or potential assessment interest to every institution. In fact, many institutions may already be including additional assessments beyond the minimums established in these standards. If so, they should continue that practice in anticipation of future development of the standards.

Recognizing the diverse interests in this area, NACE endorses and encourages supplemental efforts to gather and analyze other information as it relates to and influences career outcomes. Institutions are free to extend their efforts beyond these initial minimum standards, for example, to evaluate questions such as the following:

- What is the level of graduates' satisfaction with their initial career activity following graduation? A common practice would be to use a 5- or 7-point Likert scale to measure satisfaction along a continuum from "not satisfied" to "highly satisfied."
- What is the relationship between the graduates' first-destination activity and their degree program? While this may be of limited interest to certain academic disciplines, e.g., liberal arts, it may be of particular interest to others, e.g., engineering or business. Again, a common practice would be to use a 5- or 7-point Likert scale to measure the relationship along a continuum from "not at all related" to "directly related."
- What is the relationship between the graduate's initial career activity and the nature and extent of participation in the institution's experiential learning programs and activities e.g., internships, cooperative education? Common assessments in this area include asking questions about the extent of the graduate's participation in such activities and whether the first postgraduation position was taken with an employer for whom the graduate worked previously as part of an experiential learning program.
- What is the relationship between the graduate's career outcomes and the nature and extent of participation in relevant institutional programs and activities, e.g., research, publications, graduate assistantship responsibilities?
- What is the relationship between the graduate's career outcomes and use of the institution's career services and/or academic adviser? Common assessments in this area include asking graduates to rate services and prioritize their value in helping to achieve the postgraduate career activity. Increasingly, these assessments are being used to develop correlations between graduates' use of services and the likelihood of specific career outcomes.
- What numbers of job offers were received by graduates and/or what were the amounts of those salary offers?
- What were the hire dates for graduates? This is especially important for programs that, for ranking or other compliance purposes, are required to track outcomes during very specific time periods.

Of course, these questions, and several others, can be addressed in different ways and for different populations depending on the interests and goals of the institution.

Appendix

Appendix: Sample Survey

Data in this initial section may be prepopulated if using an online survey process. Certain of these data, e.g., name or ID number, may be suppressed if the institution desires confidential responses

Your Name (First, Middle, Last) _____

Academic Program _____

Degree Level _____

Graduation Date _____ Your ID number _____

Are you authorized to permanently work in the United States? Yes No

Which of the following BEST describes your PRIMARY status after graduation? Please select only ONE of the following categories:

Employed full time (on average 30 hours or more per week)

Employed part time (on average less than 30 hours per week)

Participating in a volunteer or service program, e.g., Peace Corps

Serving in the U.S. military

Serving in home country military

Enrolled in a program of continuing education

Seeking employment

Planning to continue education but not yet enrolled

Not seeking employment or continuing education at this time

If your PRIMARY status is employed full time OR employed part time please select the category which BEST describes your employment:

Employed as an entrepreneur

Employed in a temporary/contract work assignment

Employed freelance

Employed in a postgraduate internship or fellowship

Employed in a faculty tenure track position

Employed in a faculty non-tenure track position

Employed in all other work categories

If employed, please provide the following information concerning your employment:

Employing organization _____

Position location (city, state, and country) _____

Job title _____

If employed full time, annual base salary amount in U.S. dollars: \$ _____

Guaranteed first-year bonus amount in U.S. dollars, if you are receiving one: \$ _____

Were you employed in this position while you were pursuing your degree? Yes No

If your PRIMARY status is participating in a volunteer or service program, please provide the following information about your assignment:

Organization _____

Assignment location (city, state, and country) _____

Role or title _____

If your PRIMARY status is serving with the U.S. military, please provide the following information about your assignment:

Service Branch _____

Rank _____

If your PRIMARY status is serving with your home country military, please provide the following information about your assignment:

Service Branch _____

Rank _____

If your PRIMARY status is enrolled in a program of continuing education, please provide the following information concerning your education:

Name of institution _____

Location of the institution (city, state, and country) _____

Program of study _____

Degree you are pursuing _____



About NACE

Established in 1956, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) connects more than 17,600 career services and early talent recruiting professionals, as well as the business solution providers that serve this community.

NACE believes in a world that is unifying in approach and where equal opportunity and access exist for all.



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