FROM UNCERTAINTY TO DIRECTION

Career Self-Discovery Framework | Scholarly conference brief | University of Southern Indiana

The educational challenge: connecting identity, education, and purpose

Higher education asks students to choose majors, complete degree requirements, and prepare for futures they may not yet be able to envision. These consequential decisions are often made before students have developed a clear understanding of their strengths, interests, values, motivations, or the ways their education can open possibilities. When the major becomes the primary organizing principle of college, the relationship between the individual student and the purpose of their education can be overlooked.

This challenge is not limited to undecided students or any one field of study. Students in highly structured programs may reconsider their professional direction; students in more flexible programs may overlook the transferability of their learning. Even successful graduates may struggle to explain what they can do, why it matters, and how their experiences relate to meaningful next steps.

> ***The framework begins with a different question: Before deciding what to study or become, how well do students understand who they are?***

Four educational challenges and the framework's response

1. Choosing a major before understanding yourself

The challenge. Students are often encouraged to select a college major before they have fully explored their interests, strengths, values, motivations, or the experiences that have shaped who they are. Academic decisions may therefore be based on limited information about themselves and the opportunities available to them.

The framework's response. The framework begins with structured personal reflection rather than a major or occupation. Students examine their experiences, natural abilities, interests, and motivations to develop a stronger foundation for intentional academic and career decisions.

2. Difficulty connecting education to future opportunities

The challenge. Students may struggle to recognize how coursework, transferable skills, personal experiences, and educational opportunities connect to their futures. They may view a degree as preparation for a narrow set of occupations rather than recognizing the broader capabilities and possibilities their education can provide.

The framework's response. Through personalized analysis and guided exploration, students identify connections among their strengths, interests, educational experiences, and potential pathways. They can consider how majors, minors, electives, internships, and other experiences contribute to individual goals.

3. Completing a degree without a clear direction

The challenge. Successfully completing a degree does not necessarily mean students are prepared to articulate their capabilities, understand how their education translates into professional opportunities, or navigate employment, graduate education, and other next steps.

The framework's response. Students receive a personalized narrative analysis and practical exploration guidance to help recognize and communicate their strengths, investigate possibilities, develop professional relationships, and prepare for transitions.

4. Uneven access to meaningful academic and career guidance

The challenge. Students' opportunities for personalized exploration may depend on the mentoring, advising, and support they happen to encounter. Faculty and other educators may want to help students explore their futures but lack specialized career development training or a structured starting point.

The framework's response. The framework provides students and educators with shared, theory-informed insights for meaningful conversations. Faculty, academic advisors, career professionals, and mentors can discuss personal patterns and opportunities without independently reconstructing the student's entire story.

Assessment design: why 20 reflective questions?

The framework uses 20 intentionally designed, interview-style questions rather than asking students to choose an occupation from a list or reducing them to a single score. Students describe experiences, preferences, challenges, and aspirations using their own examples. Considering their responses together supports a richer interpretation of recurring patterns than any one answer could provide.

What Comes Naturally to You (questions 1–5). Natural abilities, recurring strengths, and approaches to tasks and challenges.

Values (questions 6–9). What matters to students, what motivates decisions, and what makes experiences meaningful.

Work Style and Environment (questions 10–13). Preferences for collaboration, autonomy, structure, and conditions for effective work.

Interests, Strengths, and Dreaming (questions 14–17). Curiosity, aspirations, interests, and possibilities beyond current assumptions.

Academic Clues (questions 18–20). Learning experiences, academic interests, and clues for curricular exploration.

Theory-informed interpretive foundations

The methodology draws on Career Construction Theory (narrative, identity, and meaning-making); Super's life-span, life-space approach (developing self-concept and changing life roles); Social Cognitive Career Theory (interests, self-efficacy, goals, supports, and barriers); and Holland's person-environment fit (relationships between interests and environments). Strengths-based development, reflective advising, experiential learning, and career readiness inform the movement from insight to exploration and action.

These theories provide interpretive perspectives, not evidence that the 20 questions constitute a validated psychometric scale. The analysis is intended to prompt inquiry, not assign a personality type, prescribe a major, or predict success.

Five-stage journey: from student narrative to meaningful action

1. Discover the student's story

Students answer the 20 reflective questions using concrete examples from their lives. Their stories may include work, family responsibilities, relationships, community participation, and academic experiences that conventional major-first discussions can overlook.

2. Recognize patterns and connections

A structured AI-supported analysis considers the complete set of responses, looking for recurring themes and relationships among abilities, values, motivations, interests, preferred environments, and academic clues. Theoretical perspectives guide possible interpretations. Stronger interpretations should be traceable to students' own examples; uncertain connections remain hypotheses for discussion.

3. Receive a personalized narrative analysis

Students receive an individualized narrative discussing patterns, strengths, values, motivations, working preferences, possible curricular and career connections, growth areas, and practical next steps. The report is a starting point for interpretation and exploration, not a definitive answer about who a student is or what they should become.

4. Make meaning through human conversation

Students discuss insights with an instructor, advisor, career professional, or mentor. They can affirm what resonates, challenge weak assumptions, consider real constraints and opportunities, and translate personal insights into academic and professional decisions. AI supports discovery; human judgment and relationships remain central.

5. Explore, test, and act

Students investigate courses, minors, internships, professional fields, workplaces, mentorship, informational interviews, networking, graduate education, and other experiences. They test possibilities in real settings and revisit their direction as they learn more about themselves and the world.

Recognizing the whole student: transferable and technical skills

Students bring capabilities to college that may have developed long before a classroom assignment or formal internship. Part-time work, family responsibilities, volunteering, community activities, and everyday interactions can provide evidence of communication, empathy, leadership, adaptability, responsibility, initiative, collaboration, and problem-solving. Students do not always recognize these behaviors as transferable skills or know how to explain them to others.

The framework asks students to examine how they actually behave, respond to challenges, and contribute to different settings. It then helps them connect those emerging strengths to the disciplinary knowledge, technical competencies, and applied experiences they can develop through academic choices. Personal and interpersonal capabilities are not substitutes for specialized knowledge; together they contribute to a fuller understanding of what students can offer and how they can continue to grow.

The objective is to help students move beyond listing skills on a résumé toward identifying specific experiences that demonstrate their capabilities, while making more intentional decisions about which additional skills to develop.

Instructional implementation: PRFS 302, Career Exploration and Professional Preparation

At the University of Southern Indiana, the Career Self-Discovery Framework informed the design of PRFS 302: Career Exploration and Professional Preparation. Students from all four colleges and across undergraduate levels participate, from first-year students exploring areas of study to seniors preparing for transitions beyond graduation. Across six sections over two years, 157 students were enrolled in this instructional setting. This enrollment count describes implementation, not assessment completion or evidence of effectiveness.

A progressive seven-week journey

Each week adds another piece to students' developing understanding of themselves. Rather than treating career exploration as a one-time assessment, the course combines reflections, discussions, readings, assessments, modeled conversations, and analyses that build toward an integrated picture of the student's interests, capabilities, values, and possible directions.

Week 1 | Who Am I? — Beginning with self-awareness. Students complete a personality assessment and reflection, examining how personal characteristics and everyday experiences contribute to their understanding of themselves.

Week 2 | What Do I Value? — Understanding what matters. Reflections, readings, and discussions examine values, life interests, lifestyle preferences, and preferred work environments, and how these considerations influence decisions.

Week 3 | My Strengths — Recognizing and understanding strengths. Students explore strengths, emotional intelligence, and confidence through assessments and reflection. The Career Self-Discovery Framework's personalized narrative analysis helps them identify patterns, motivations, and potential connections across their responses.

Week 4 | Working Together — Communication and team dynamics. Team-role exploration and a color communication-style assessment help students examine how they communicate, collaborate, and contribute within groups.

Week 5 | Connecting the Pieces — Finding patterns and emerging direction. Students begin integrating discoveries from earlier weeks, connecting their values, strengths, interests, experiences, and ways of interacting with others.

Week 6 | Where Next? — Moving from insight to action. Students consider who they are now, where they might go, and what concrete steps they can take while earning their degrees to explore opportunities and build toward emerging goals.

Week 7 | Putting It All Together — Reflecting on the journey. A final reflective essay asks students to synthesize their discoveries, recognize meaningful patterns, and explain how the experience has informed their direction and next steps.

It's Time We Talk: modeling the reflective process

Self-exploration is not always intuitive. To demonstrate how reflection works, the course includes It's Time We Talk, an original weekly video series written as simulated instructor-student conversations. The instructor models follow-up questions and helps the student examine ordinary experiences for evidence of strengths, values, motivations, and transferable skills. In one episode, a student's experiences in a grocery store become a starting point for recognizing communication, responsibility, empathy, and problem-solving in everyday actions. Students observe this reflective process, then apply similar questions to their own experiences.

Individualized direction across the college journey

The same process can lead to different next steps depending on a student's educational stage. A first-year student may explore possible areas of study or ways to use their current coursework; a student midway through college may seek complementary experiences and new applications of existing skills; a senior may focus on articulating capabilities and investigating employment or graduate education. The weekly 'puzzle pieces' are brought together to support a more informed sense of direction and actionable next steps. These are instructional aims and observations, not formally established outcomes.

Advising and interdisciplinary curricular exploration

The framework also informs early advising conversations in the Bachelor of Professional Studies program, particularly the Individual Studies pathway, where students can shape an interdisciplinary curriculum. It helps connect personal experiences and goals with course selection, skill development, and postgraduation opportunities. Its central principle is not confined to flexible degrees: students in structured programs can also explore minors, electives, applied experiences, and alternative uses of their learning.

Development through iterative refinement

The work began with 20 reflective questions and narrative analyses conducted through ChatGPT. It evolved into a specialized AI agent supported by curated knowledge resources and increasingly detailed instructions for interpreting student narratives and producing individualized guidance. Repeated testing, comparison, and revision have focused on the depth and clarity of analysis, consistency of interpretation, and usefulness of practical next steps. This constitutes methodological development and instructional implementation, not a completed validation or effectiveness study.

Educator access and an independent platform

A central design aim is to make meaningful academic and career conversations more accessible across educational roles without replacing specialized advising, counseling, or career services. The informational website, careerselfdiscovery.com, is live. A separate web-based assessment and analysis workflow is under development, alongside protected educator materials, training, and institutional access controls. The architecture is intended to support future model changes while keeping the educational methodology independent of any single AI system. Privacy and security protections require further verification before broad student access; assessment access is targeted for Spring 2027.

External piloting, collaboration, and iterative refinement

The Career Self-Discovery Framework was developed and piloted beyond the University of Southern Indiana before its engagement with the *Hacking College* Learning Community. Exploratory collaborations with educators at other higher education institutions provided opportunities to examine how the assessment could be used in different educational settings and to gather feedback for refinement.

Engagement with the Hacking College Learning Community

Hacking College: Why the Major Doesn't Matter—and What Really Does, by Ned Scott Laff and Scott Carlson, questions major-centered approaches to college planning and encourages students to connect their interests, educational choices, and future aspirations. This philosophy complements the framework's emphasis on beginning with students' understanding of themselves rather than an occupational destination.

Through the University of Minnesota's *Hacking College* Learning Community, educators at participating institutions have explored the framework and offered feedback on its use with students. That feedback has been particularly useful in expanding the individualized, actionable next steps included in students' narrative analyses, connecting discoveries about strengths, values, and motivations to specific academic and professional possibilities.

Susan Todd presented the framework to the learning community in October 2026 and continues to engage with educators expressing interest in its application across higher education settings. These activities represent exploratory piloting, professional collaboration, and iterative development; they are not a formal multi-institutional evaluation or evidence of effectiveness.

From implementation to research evidence

A proposed next phase is an IRB-reviewed research program evaluating whether structured self-discovery, modeled reflection, narrative analysis, and guided conversation are associated with changes in career clarity, decision-making confidence, academic planning, and professional readiness. Potential settings include PRFS 302, first-year seminars, and interdisciplinary advising. An initial study could use pre/post measures and a suitable comparison condition; longer-term research might examine persistence, degree completion, experiential engagement, and transitions beyond graduation.

Research design will need to address appropriate outcome measures, student consent and privacy, selection effects, differences across populations, comparison groups, and the dual roles of instructors and researchers. Classroom observations and formative pilot feedback can motivate research questions but do not establish causal effects on retention, graduation, or employment.

Spring 2027 institutional pilot: invitation to participate

Faculty, academic advisors, career professionals, and other educators are invited to express interest in using the Career Self-Discovery Framework with students at their own institutions during the Spring 2027 term. The pilot is intended to explore how the assessment and its personalized, AI-supported narrative analyses can be integrated into different educational settings.

Participating educators may use the framework in first-year experiences, academic advising, career exploration or professional preparation courses, or other student-support settings. They will be asked to describe where and how they used it, the student populations involved, and their feedback on the assessment, analyses, and recommended next steps. They may also share observed student responses, discoveries, and emerging academic or career directions.

This formative implementation feedback will guide refinement and help shape future research; it is not, by itself, evidence of effectiveness. Pilot participation is distinct from any later formal research study requiring appropriate approvals.

Explore and connect

Learn about the framework and express interest in the Spring 2027 pilot at careerselfdiscovery.com. Connect professionally: linkedin.com/in/susanrtodd.