

RESEARCH BRIEF

CASE STUDY

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From Goals to Graduation to Post-Completion Success: Why Every Student Needs an Educational Plan

CASE STUDY 4:

From Course Registration to Planning Pathways to Better Jobs and Better Lives at St. Petersburg College

By Davis Jenkins

St. Petersburg College (SPC) demonstrates how a large, multi-campus community college can make individualized career-connected planning routine for nearly 35,000 students. Rather than implementing a single advising initiative or relying on new technology, SPC has progressively redesigned recruitment, onboarding, advising, educational planning, and student support over nearly a decade. Today, career conversations begin before students apply, educational plans connect their interests with transfer and workforce pathways, and technology supports rather than replaces the relationships that help students make informed educational decisions.

This approach reflects an evolution in how SPC thinks about the purpose of educational planning. When Tonjua Williams became president in 2017, she brought more than three decades of experience working with students at the college. She had watched thousands of students enroll hoping to build better futures. Yet many arrived without a clear understanding of why they were there, what careers interested them, or how different educational programs could help them achieve the lives they wanted to lead. Too often, advising began with course registration rather than conversations about students' aspirations.

Williams and her colleagues concluded that it would not be enough to help students choose courses more efficiently. Students first needed opportunities to explore careers, talk with knowledgeable people about their interests and aspirations, understand where different educational pathways could lead, and develop plans connecting those aspirations with good jobs and further education needed for career advancement.

As Williams reflected:

Educational plans helped us move from simply helping students register for classes to helping them make intentional decisions about their future. By connecting academic pathways to career exploration, advisors could better support students in pursuing goals that lead to opportunity and economic mobility. We don't want to educate students into poverty.

Over time, SPC came to view educational planning as a process for helping students make informed choices about their education, careers, and futures. The college's experience shows that scaling individualized planning depends on creating better conversations throughout students' educational journeys, and organizing the institution so those conversations can happen for every student.

This case study of St. Petersburg College is based on interviews with 18 administrators and staff, conducted via Zoom in June and July 2026. In the sections that follow, we describe the evolution of educational planning at SPC and how it has changed and improved the student experience with the college.

The Road to Change

SPC's approach to career-connected planning evolved over nearly a decade as college leaders broadened their understanding of what students need from their experience to build better lives after college.

Over time, SPC expanded its conception of planning from helping students select courses to helping them complete coherent programs and identify educational pathways leading to meaningful careers, bachelor's degrees, and economic mobility.

Guided Pathways Shifted Focus From Courses to Program Pathways

SPC's redesign began with guided pathways in the mid-2010s. Like many colleges, SPC recognized that students often accumulated credits without understanding how courses fit together into programs. Advising focused largely on selecting courses; advisors needed to understand hundreds of programs across the college.

Guided pathways reorganized programs around career and academic communities, allowing students to explore broad fields before choosing a specific program. Advisors developed expertise within those communities and recommended pathways that were built for every program. SPC, meanwhile, redesigned its website to make bachelor's and workforce pathways easier to understand.

These changes made educational pathways clearer. But the process also exposed a deeper challenge: Students could become better informed about programs without necessarily understanding the careers those programs could lead to or how those careers aligned with the futures they hoped to build.

The Pandemic Accelerated Redesign of Onboarding, Advising

The disruptions of COVID-19 reinforced concerns that many students were entering college uncertain about their goals and disconnected from the institution. In response, SPC strengthened onboarding as the beginning of longer-term career and educational exploration and planning, rather than simply a process of orienting students to college and selecting first-term courses.

The college created dedicated onboarding advisor positions, restored mandatory in-person orientation, and introduced a more structured process for familiarizing students with career and academic communities, educational pathways, transfer options, and planning tools before classes started. Most students also meet with an advisor and begin discussing financial planning earlier so they can better understand the costs of college and the longer-term value of different educational pathways.

These changes reflected a broader shift in thinking. Rather than simply helping students register more efficiently, SPC sought to ensure that they entered college with a clearer understanding of where different pathways could lead and greater confidence in the choices they were making.

Unlocking Opportunity Broadened Focus From Completion to Better Jobs, Better Lives

Participation in the Aspen Institute–CCRC Unlocking Opportunity initiative encouraged SPC to broaden its vision again. Instead of asking only whether students completed credentials linked to jobs, leaders increasingly asked whether those credentials prepared students for family-supporting careers, bachelor's degree attainment, and economic mobility.

That broader vision became the foundation for SPC's Better Jobs, Better Lives. More than a communications campaign, the initiative became a shared institutional purpose. Interviewees repeatedly described it as a reminder that connecting education with meaningful careers is not the responsibility of a single office but the entire college.

The initiative also strengthened collaboration across Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, Institutional Research, employer engagement, and transfer initiatives. Advisors incorporated labor market information more intentionally into conversations with students. Faculty became more engaged in discussing career opportunities within their disciplines. Institutional research shifted from primarily reporting outcomes to providing information that could help advisors and faculty support students' educational and career decisions. As Executive Director of Data Strategy and Analytics Fawzi Al Nassir explained, the research office chose to become "part of the decision-making process," rather than simply producing reports.

Each stage built on what came before. Career and academic communities, educational plans, and advising technology remained important, but SPC increasingly used them to help students make informed choices about careers, further education, and their futures.

How Career and College Planning Changed the Student Experience

At SPC, career and college planning no longer begins with course registration. It begins with conversations that help students explore careers, understand educational opportunities, and imagine the kinds of work—and lives—they hope to build.

Rather than moving quickly from admissions to registration, students now encounter a series of people and experiences designed to help them progressively clarify their goals. Recruiters, onboarding advisors, career and academic advisors, faculty, and technology each play different roles, but all contribute to helping students make more informed decisions before and after they enroll.

Conversations About Long-Term Goals Begin Before Students Apply

For many students at SPC, the first conversation is no longer simply about completing an application. Recruiters begin by asking about their interests, goals, and the kinds of work they hope to do after college. Rather than assuming students already know which program they want, recruiters help them explore possibilities and understand the educational pathways leading to different careers.

Recruiters cover geographic areas and career and academic communities, enabling them to discuss related academic programs, bachelor's degree options, and labor market opportunities. Online career exploration tools support these conversations, but their value lies in helping recruiters engage students in richer discussions rather than replacing those interactions.

As one recruiter advised other colleges, “Start off with a conversation about the student’s goals and interests. We don’t just help them do the application, but guide them before that so they are confident about what they are coming to SPC for. Try to help them understand a path before they apply.”

Onboarding Helps Students Connect Interests With Educational Pathways

Once students apply, dedicated onboarding advisors help them move from applicants to college students.

Onboarding advisors encourage students to explore programs using the Program Explorer tool, which provides information about demand and earnings in St. Petersburg and Florida for jobs targeted by workforce programs; requirements for bachelor's programs in specific majors at SPC or partner transfer institutions; and recommended course sequences for every program.

Advisors recognize that students arrive with different levels of certainty about their goals. Using a simple red-yellow-green framework, they differentiate students who have a clear direction, those who are exploring a broad field, and those who remain unsure, allowing subsequent conversations and supports to be tailored to students’ needs.

As an onboarding leader explained, the goal is to work backward from where students hope to end up: “We want to make sure that [their] career goals match the program that [they’re] in, which match the classes that [they’re] taking. So that way we’re kind of starting at the end and working our way backwards to where they’re actually starting with us.”

Interviewees reported that restoring mandatory in-person orientation to get students registered improved subsequent advising conversations, especially when students attend in person. To manage the large number of new students, orientation sessions are offered starting in April for the fall semester, with about 35% of students registering early before the peak period during the summer. After attending orientation, students arrive at advising appointments better informed about available pathways, allowing advisors to spend less time explaining procedures and more time helping them make educational and career choices. Advising begins with students’ goals rather than course schedules.

Career and academic advisors build on the work begun by recruiters and onboarding advisors. Because SPC organizes responsibilities around career and academic communities rather than individual programs, advisors develop expertise in related workforce and transfer pathways and the careers and further education connected to them. Students, therefore, meet with advisors who understand not only degree requirements but the educational and career opportunities available within their fields of interest.

Interviewees repeatedly contrasted this approach with earlier advising that focused primarily on helping students register for classes. As one advisor explained: “Now there are communities—we are experts. I do health services, science and math, and social behavioral science. We have to advise for everything, but you have specialties. It is very different from five years ago when it was transactional, mostly walk-ins.”

Educational plans, referred to as “My Learning Plans” at SPC, are important to this process, but interviewees emphasized that these plans are not fixed road maps. Students revisit and revise them as they gain new experiences, learn more about careers, or decide to pursue different educational opportunities. The planning process is less about producing a document than about supporting ongoing conversations that help students make increasingly informed decisions.

Technology Makes Planning Conversations More Useful

Technology plays an important role in making this level of individualized planning possible for a college of SPC’s size, but interviewees consistently described technology as a way to make advising more personal rather than more automated.

My Learning Plans, advising dashboards, program and career exploration tools, and predictive analytics help students and advisors understand educational options and monitor progress toward goals. Students can explore pathways before appointments, and advisors can use dashboards to prepare rather than spending valuable appointment time gathering information from multiple systems.

Associate Vice President of Student Success Strategy Kellie Ziemak described how redesigning the advisor dashboard changed the nature of planning conversations: “Before, when you were working with a student, you were spending more time talking through the technology piece than actually talking through customizing plans. With this new [dashboard], we were able to have the advisor move things around, and then ask the student, ‘Hey, does this look right?’ And it became more of a conversation.”

Planning Continues Throughout Students’ Educational Journeys

Career-connected planning does not end once students register. Advisors continue helping students refine their pathways as they gain confidence, discover new interests, prepare for transfer, or respond to changing circumstances. Faculty, career advisors, and others reinforce connections between education and students’ longer-term goals as they progress through college.

The result is a more connected student experience. Career exploration, educational decision-making, and academic planning are woven throughout students’ time rather than confined to a single advising appointment or educational plan.

How St. Petersburg College Scaled Educational Planning

SPC's experience demonstrates that scaling individualized educational planning requires more than developing plans for a greater number of students. The college had to change how different parts of the institution work together so thousands of students could engage in meaningful conversations about their goals and pathways. Four features of SPC's approach have been particularly important.

Organizing the College Around a Shared Purpose

Throughout the last decade, SPC's reforms have been connected by an increasingly explicit purpose: helping students use education to prepare for better jobs, continued education, and better lives. The college did not treat guided pathways, redesigned onboarding, career exploration, employer engagement, educational planning, and technology as separate projects. Each addressed a different part of the same problem: helping students make informed decisions about their educational and career futures.

This common purpose gave the college continuity even as individual initiatives changed. Rather than asking whether a reform was complete, leaders continually asked what students still needed to make good educational and career choices. The Better Jobs, Better Lives framing made that purpose especially explicit and helped different parts of the college see how their work contributed to the same goal.

Making Planning Everyone's Responsibility

Rather than expanding the capacity of its advising office, SPC distributed the responsibility of individualized planning across the student journey.

Recruiters, onboarding advisors, career and academic advisors, faculty, Institutional Research, and technology staff each contribute at different points. Because these roles build on one another, students encounter a more consistent planning process rather than disconnected advice from different offices. Each role builds on the previous one, making it more likely that students encounter a consistent process rather than disconnected advice from different offices.

Ziemak captured the principle succinctly: "Every conversation is a career conversation because when you think about it, even a conversation about registering for classes should help students see how their choices connect to their academic, career, and long-term goals."

Redesigning Roles and Processes, Not Just Planning Tools

The organizational changes behind SPC's model are as important as its educational plans or technology. Career and academic communities enabled advisors to develop deeper expertise. Dedicated onboarding advisors created capacity for more intensive work with students before registration. Required orientation ensured that students learned about career and educational pathways before meeting with advisors. Cross-functional collaboration brought Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, Institutional Research, employer engagement, and transfer work into closer alignment.

These changes illustrate an important lesson from SPC: Individualized planning at scale depends on designing an institutional operating model that makes good conversations possible. Simply adding a new planning requirement to existing advising responsibilities would not have produced the same result.

Professional development has also been important as staff roles change. Advisors increasingly need to know how to discuss career interests, labor market information, transfer options, and educational pathways, not simply program requirements. They also need to use data and technology without allowing those tools to dominate their interactions with students.

As Ziemak explained, “We train advisors to use these tools through an empathetic lens. It’s not about handing students a set of data points. It’s about understanding students’ goals and using data to have a more meaningful and supportive conversation.”

Using Technology to Strengthen Relationships

SPC’s approach also challenges the assumption that serving more students necessarily requires replacing individualized interactions with automated services.

The college invested in planning tools, dashboards, predictive analytics, and other technologies to reduce administrative work and put useful information in the hands of students and educators. The aim is to create more time and better information for conversations in which students can explore alternatives and make informed choices.

Building on Each Improvement Rather Than Waiting for a Perfect System

Finally, SPC did not wait until it had the ideal technology, organizational structure, or planning process before changing the student experience.

Guided pathways clarified educational pathways but also highlighted the need for earlier career exploration. The pandemic exposed weaknesses in onboarding and accelerated its redesign. Those changes strengthened students’ preparation for advising. Unlocking Opportunity broadened the college’s focus from credential completion to the value students receive from their education. Each improvement exposed another dimension of the student experience that SPC could strengthen.

Ziemak advised colleges not to let the search for a perfect model prevent them from improving what students experience now: “Some institutions wait too long to launch, because they want everything to be perfect. No matter what, you’re not going to be perfect, so the key is to be able to adapt as you go when you’re seeing that things aren’t working right. You can’t wait for the perfect ... circumstance in order to try something.”

This willingness to keep asking what students still need—then adapt roles, processes, and technology accordingly—has enabled SPC to continue improving its model rather than treating career and college planning as a completed reform.

Sustaining and Further Improving the Model

Interviewees pointed to encouraging signs that SPC's redesign is changing how students experience the college. Students arrive at advising appointments better prepared because they have already begun exploring careers and academic pathways through conversations with recruiters and onboarding advisors. Advisors spend less time explaining procedures and more time helping students think through educational and career choices. Advisors identify students who remain uncertain about their goals earlier and provide them with additional opportunities to explore careers and educational options before committing to a program.

Interviewees also described changes in how different parts of the college work together. Recruiters, onboarding advisors, career and academic advisors, faculty, and Institutional Research staff increasingly understand their respective roles in helping students connect education with longer-term goals. Rather than functioning as separate offices and activities, these functions are becoming parts of a more coordinated process extending from students' first contact with the college through completion, transfer, or employment.

Several interviewees also noted improvements in persistence, course completion, bachelor's transfer, and career outcomes, while cautioning against attributing those improvements to career-connected planning alone. They are a result of multiple institution-wide reforms, with career-connected planning serving as an important thread connecting them.

Significant challenges remain. Many students balance work, family responsibilities, and financial pressures that complicate educational planning. Others remain uncertain about career goals or unaware of opportunities available to them. Providing meaningful career and college conversations for close to 35,000 students across 11 campuses will require SPC to continue refining its staffing, processes, and technology.

College leaders are already looking toward the next stage. They are exploring how artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies might reduce routine administrative work and give advisors more timely and useful information about students' progress and needs. Consistent with SPC's broader philosophy, however, the aim is strengthening rather than replacing relationships.

The college also wants to strengthen connections between planning and employer engagement by giving more students opportunities to learn directly from employers, alumni, and others working in fields they are considering. Leaders described further work to improve planning for students in bachelor's degree programs, dual enrollment, and workforce education and to strengthen connections among academic programs, transfer pathways, and labor market opportunities.

SPC therefore does not regard its current approach as a finished model. Sustaining planning at scale means continuing to learn where students are struggling, where institutional processes remain disconnected, and where staff need better information or support—then continuing to improve the model.

Conclusion

SPC's experience suggests that it is possible to scale individualized career and academic planning across a large, complex institution without standardizing or automating planning. Doing so, however, requires more than creating educational plans or purchasing better advising technology. It requires redesigning the institution around the conversations students need to make informed choices about their education and futures.

Over a decade, SPC has progressively connected recruitment, onboarding, advising, educational planning, faculty engagement, data, and technology around a common purpose: helping students find pathways to better jobs, further education, and better lives. Its central lesson for other colleges lies in SPC's organization. Scaling individualized planning means making career and educational planning everyone's work, using technology to give people more capacity for meaningful interactions, and continually improving the processes that connect students' aspirations to clear educational pathways.

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