AICD

AI for Career Development Coalition

“How do we know whether these tools are good?”

What education and workforce stakeholders say about trust, access, and the future of AI in career development

Steering Committee:

CareerVillage.org Opportunity @Work WGU MENTOR ONE MILLION DEGREES

Executive Summary

The **AI for Career Development (AICD) Coalition** is a cross-sector alliance united by a single vision: ensuring every individual has access to, and actually uses, high-quality career education and navigation support. Artificial intelligence (AI) has the potential to make this vision real at scale, but only if tools are designed responsibly and our field works together.

Why we formed & our theory of change

The coalition emerged in response to a shared recognition: education and workforce systems remain fragmented, under-resourced, and unevenly accessible, while AI is reshaping the world of work faster than existing supports can evolve. Without collaboration, this moment risks deepening access and equity gaps to career guidance. The coalition exists to ensure AI becomes a force for inclusion by coordinating how the field learns, adapts, and leads.

Our theory of change is that alignment among funders, practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and innovators can unlock AI's potential to democratize career development for all. By developing shared standards, trustworthy data infrastructure and ethics, and measures of impact, the coalition can help ensure that new technologies translate into equitable, high-quality guidance rather than fragmented experimentation. In short, we believe collaboration is the mechanism that turns innovation into impact.

To test this theory, the coalition is mobilizing a coordinated agenda to:

- **Set standards and guardrails** for responsible AI use in career development
- **Publish implementation playbooks and best practices** grounded in evidence
- **Define and adopt shared measures of impact** to align accountability and learning
- **Coordinate policy and funding** to sustain impact beyond pilots

Together, these actions form the basis for a field-wide framework that will demonstrate how responsible alignment can scale access to effective career guidance.

Grounding in stakeholder insights

Formed in 2025 and already 80+ members strong, the coalition is led by a steering committee of CareerVillage.org, Western Governors University, Opportunity@Work, MENTOR, and One Million Degrees. In July and August, we conducted listening sessions and a sector survey to capture the perspectives of practitioners, solution providers, researchers, and funders. Our initial goal was to understand how AI is reshaping career development and how the coalition can help close existing access gaps.

What we heard

While perspectives varied, members agreed on a central truth: AI can either democratize career guidance or deepen existing access divides. Tipping the balance toward better access requires coordinated standards and shared measurement, clear guardrails, catalytic funding, and capacity-building for responsible adoption.

Six themes stood out:

- **Expanding *quality* access must be the vision anchor**. Access is more than availability. AI should extend quality career guidance to learners historically excluded by geography, language, cost, or capacity constraints, without leaving behind those with lower readiness or literacy.
- **Human guidance and support remain central and irreplaceable**. Learners need people not only for trust, empathy, and judgment, but also to build social capital and ensure the quality of AI tools and outputs. When humans remain central, AI can extend the reach of career educators without displacing the relationships learners rely on.
- **Trust in AI starts with trustworthy data and design**. It's easy to launch a chatbot; what's hard, and essential, is curating reliable knowledge, documenting sources, ensuring regular updates, and putting safeguards in place to reduce bias and keep guidance accurate.
- **Impact and quality benchmarks are missing**. Shared definitions of success, baseline metrics, and feedback loops are needed so institutions know whether tools are actually helping.
- **Cost is about sustainability and strategy**. Stakeholders worried about unpredictable pricing, prohibitive costs for underfunded institutions, and the instability of pilot-based funding. Adoption requires clear long-term cost models, not just short-term pilots or one-off grants.
- **Adoption is uneven**. Learners are moving faster than educators;

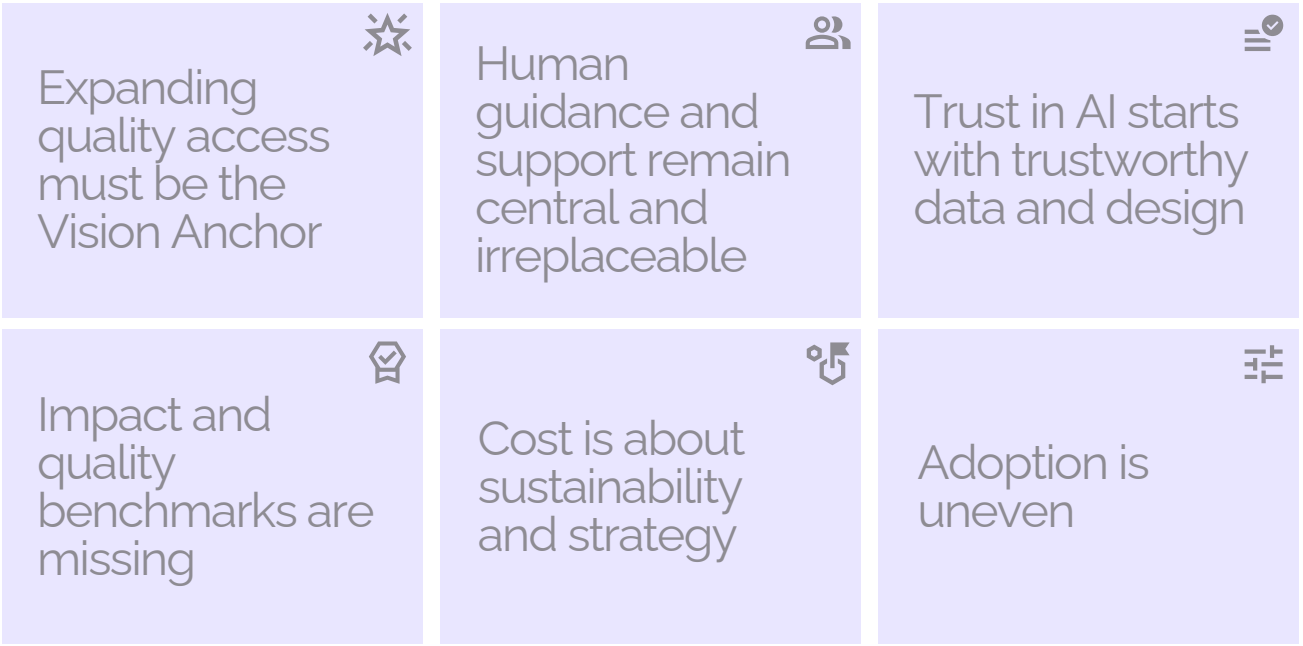
readiness and professional development for frontline staff are critical to avoid widening gaps.

AI has put a magnifying glass on long-standing weaknesses in our ecosystem, from limited access to inconsistent guidance, to gaps in measurement and due diligence. This moment is urgent: **the tools are scaling fast; the question is whether they will truly democratize access**. The coalition was formed to help our sector choose that path.

The path forward

This report verifies much of the existing narrative our sector has surfaced about AI in career development and social impact, while adding fresh insights from stakeholders at the bleeding edge. As a coalition, we invite funders, employers, practitioners, policymakers, and solution providers alike to join us in turning these insights into collective action and practical priorities for the sector: invest in **broad access and thoughtful design**, build **trustworthy data infrastructure and ethics**, define and adopt **shared measures of impact**, fund **human-centered implementation capacity**, and establish **shared guardrails and standards** so good intentions become consistent, responsible practice.

The path forward isn't about whether AI will shape career development, but how we choose to shape it together. ✓



Methodology >

Methodology

To capture a wide range of perspectives, we engaged three main stakeholder groups:

- **End User Serving (45%)** – Practitioners, program designers, educators, workforce leaders, and tool builders working directly with learners from K–12 through adulthood across nonprofits, EdTech, higher education, and workforce organizations.
- **Funders (18%)** – Philanthropic foundations, family endowments, corporate social impact leaders, and employer-affiliated initiatives investing in career readiness and AI innovation.
- **Policy Institutes and Researchers (38%)** – Leaders from national and applied research organizations and policy institutes focused on CTE, workforce and labor-market analysis, AI literacy and ethics, and education innovation.

We conducted a series of listening sessions with representatives of 40 organizations. Sessions consisted of a 45-minute guided dialogue facilitated by a steering committee member using a consistent set of questions on four themes: **vision for AI**, **current use and exploration**, **risks and safeguards**, and **coalition support**.

In addition to the listening sessions, all coalition members were invited to complete an anonymous survey designed to augment and extend the conversations. We received 44 responses. The survey covered similar themes while also probing ecosystem perspectives, organizational barriers to AI adoption, and organizational ability to evaluate AI tools and partners.

Across the listening sessions and survey responses, six key themes emerged consistently, cutting across all stakeholder groups and organizational types. Some themes, like the centrality of human relationships, reflected near-universal agreement. Others, like questions around cost and sustainability, surfaced ongoing challenges where the field is still developing shared approaches. **Together, these six themes form the foundation for the Coalition's priorities and point toward where collective action can have the greatest impact**.

A note on the use of AI in drafting this report

All information and insights were collected, analyzed, and synthesized by members of the steering committee working in shared documents to facilitate collaboration. Large language models (LLMs) were used as a secondary check to validate findings and identify potential gaps. The report was initially drafted by humans, with targeted LLM support on subsequent drafts for clarity and polish. No personally or organizationally sensitive information was entered into LLMs at any point. ✓

How we put this report together

1. 45-minute listening sessions with guided dialogue
2. Anonymous survey to augment and extend the conversation
3. Human-led analysis and synthesis, with LLMs used to cross-check, surface gaps, and add polish

Takeaways >

Takeaways

Quality access must be the vision anchor

Access emerged as the single most unifying theme. Two out of three survey respondents pointed to access as the most exciting potential of AI in career development. They described how AI could "*radically democratize access to growth, guidance, and opportunity*" by offering 24/7 support, surfacing hidden opportunities, and reaching learners in rural areas or outside traditional advising hours.

Yet stakeholders were equally clear-eyed about the risks. **Nearly half (48%) believe that, as a whole, today's education and workforce institutions are missing the mark, with AI tools failing to reach underserved populations**. Another 25% said tools are reaching only a limited slice of those who need them most, and 15.9% warned that new technologies may already be deepening inequities by bypassing learners with the greatest need.

This feedback underscores that access is not simply about availability. True access requires quality characteristics like cultural relevance, localization, strong safety and privacy, and learner-centered design. It also requires readiness: AI literacy for both learners and educators, organizational capacity for responsible adoption, and safeguards to ensure underserved communities are not left further behind. As one participant put it, "*AI can multiply and amplify scale without removing humans from the center of the work.*"

> True access requires building tools that are culturally relevant, localized, safe, private, and learner-centered. In other words: *quality* tools.

Expanding quality access, then, means more than scaling technology. It means building AI tools for career development that strengthen the human relationships and institutional supports learners rely on, while ensuring that those who have historically been excluded are among the first to benefit.

Human guidance and support remain central and irreplaceable

Across all stakeholder groups, participants emphasized that human relationships must remain at the heart of career development. The reasons were multidimensional:

- **Building social capital**. Stakeholders worried that AI-only solutions could isolate learners, especially young people, from the networks and interpersonal skills they need to thrive. Career development has always relied on conversations, connections, and mentorship that no algorithm can replicate. "*AI could be a threat to the skills students need to build in order to develop social capital, something that currently relies on strong communication skills and human interaction*," noted one participant. "*Maybe AI will strengthen those skills... but we think this is something to be reasonably concerned about.*"
- **Preventing overreliance**. Many expressed concern that learners might treat AI as a substitute for their own critical thinking, or that institutions might lean too heavily on technology at the expense of empathy, trust, and good judgment. Humans play the essential role of helping learners use AI as a tool rather than a crutch.

> "We need to be careful about [AI] hallucinations that can lead to bad career choices."
>
> - survey response

"*There are many ways that students could use their brain power and AI together for some really advanced projects, but it also can easily become a replacement for critical thinking*," noted one survey response.

- **Ensuring quality.** Several stakeholders noted that humans remain the best arbiters of information and guidance. They can assess whether AI outputs are accurate, relevant, and useful, and provide context for decisions that technology cannot make on its own. As one participant said, "*AI can make mistakes just as any human, so knowing how to use AI is critical in this space. It should not replace human thinking and intuition*." Another noted, "*We need to be careful about [AI] hallucinations that can lead to bad career choices.*"

Trust in AI starts with trustworthy data and design

Stakeholders were clear that the real challenge in AI is not building chatbots but building trustworthy foundations. As one participant put it, "*We don't know what we don't know! Is the data coverage and completeness enough? Accuracy of outputs is a concern. Bias is a concern.*" The barrier to launching a tool may be low, but the harder and more important work lies in curating knowledge bases, documenting sources, establishing governance, and keeping data updated and, as much as possible, publicly accessible. This work is especially urgent given that historical data often encodes systemic bias.

Half of survey respondents named bias or data privacy/governance as their top concern. Some worried that AI could simply "*replace the biased system we have now with another system that is merely biased differently.*" Others raised alarms about ownership of data, surveillance risks, and whether learners' personal information is adequately protected. Funders emphasized that AI tools must not replicate systemic barriers, while practitioners flagged that clear explanations of data sourcing and update processes are essential for educator buy-in.

Concerns also extended to how data and design choices affect inclusion and access. Stakeholders cautioned that self-help tools built on unexamined data could further isolate learners, especially young people who depend on networks and mentoring to build social capital. They also emphasized the need for greater transparency and accountability in how tools are built and maintained, so that learners and educators can trust the guidance they receive.

Half of survey respondents named **bias** or **data privacy/governance** as their top concern.

Together, these perspectives make transparent design non-negotiable. Building trust requires not only strong data governance but also preparing learners and practitioners to engage critically with AI. Stakeholders stressed the importance of pairing AI literacy with broader critical thinking skills so people can evaluate outputs, question assumptions, and make informed use of these tools.

Impact and quality benchmarks are missing

AI's rapid pace has left career development leaders without reliable baselines for measuring effectiveness. Traditional outcomes data in education and workforce, such as graduation rates, employment, or wage gains, are already slow to collect and difficult to attribute. Stakeholders said this makes it nearly impossible to assess AI tools in real time.

Nearly half (46%) of survey respondents listed case studies and pilots as one of their top coalition priorities, reflecting a demand for real-world evidence to guide adoption. At the same time, when asked to rate their confidence in evaluating AI tools or partners, most respondents scored their organizations at 4 or 5 out of 5. This reported confidence contrasted with qualitative feedback that revealed uncertainty about how to evaluate tools consistently. Some admitted, "*we don't know what we don't know*," pointing to gaps in data coverage, accuracy, and quality assurance. In listening sessions, participants described a "*Cambrian explosion of innovation*" in career tech, with tools proliferating but rarely connected or measured against common standards. Funders echoed this uncertainty, asking whether to invest in platforms, benchmarking, or technical assistance.

Taken together, these findings highlight that confidence in evaluating AI tools remains fragmented and largely subjective. Without shared definitions of success, baseline metrics, and feedback loops, institutions and funders alike cannot easily determine whether tools are actually helping learners. This gap underscores a clear role for the coalition in establishing common impact frameworks and building evidence that the field can trust.

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Cost is about sustainability and strategy

Stakeholders repeatedly flagged cost as both a barrier and an uncertainty in adopting AI for career development. Some raised concerns about unpredictable pricing models, noting that "*the more you use, the more it costs*," which makes it hard for nonprofits and education systems to plan. Others pointed

out that community colleges and similar institutions simply "*don't have deep pockets to invest in this right now*," making even modest costs prohibitive.

Funding instability adds to the challenge. Organizations described partners losing or fearing the loss of funding and having to abandon AI tool partnerships as a result. Leaders also worried about locking into a single vendor without knowing the long-term cost model, and about the hidden costs of staff training and ongoing maintenance.

Taken together, these concerns highlight that the real cost issue is not just adoption, but sustainability. Institutions need clarity on the total cost of ownership and investment models that extend beyond short-term pilots. Without this, even promising tools risk stalling out when initial grants expire or usage costs scale unpredictably.

Adoption is uneven

Stakeholders consistently observed a gap between how quickly learners are adopting AI and how slowly institutions are adapting. Students and job seekers are already relying on tools like ChatGPT and other AI assistants, often without guidance. As one educator admitted, "*very few teachers are using this [in my institution], but a lot of students are using it.*" This mismatch leaves many learners navigating on their own, with uneven results.

Educators and frontline staff, meanwhile, reported low AI literacy and limited preparation to integrate these tools into advising or curriculum. Some described hesitation and even retreat, such as reverting to paper-based assessments in response to fears about plagiarism.

This uneven adoption raises the risk of widening gaps. Institutions serving historically underserved learners are least equipped to keep pace, which could leave their students further behind as new technologies take hold. Without intentional investment in staff readiness and professional development, AI adoption will remain fragmented, and the learners who most need support will be the ones least likely to benefit.

Key Opportunities >

Key Opportunities

Stakeholders across the field made clear that realizing the promise of AI in career development will require more than tools alone. It will take investment, standards, professional development, and collaboration across sectors. Based on the themes surfaced in listening sessions and surveys, here are opportunities for each stakeholder group to lead.

Opportunities for funders

Funders have a critical role to play in **reducing risk for under-resourced institutions** and **enabling the field to move from experimentation to sustainable adoption**.

- Catalyze investment in educators, advisors, and program staff readiness by underwriting training stipends and capacity-building for frontline staff.
- Seed funding for shared infrastructure, such as benchmarking systems, data governance frameworks, and guardrails, so innovations scale beyond isolated pilots.
- Back research-practice partnerships that generate timely outcome data and reduce guesswork in grantmaking.

Opportunities for policy institutes & researchers

Policymakers and researchers can **help establish the standards and evidence base** that the field urgently lacks.

- Conduct longitudinal studies to track AI's impact on job placement, earnings, and mobility across geographies and populations.
- Establish shared measurement standards so institutions can compare effectiveness and funders can invest responsibly.
- Integrate AI literacy and critical thinking into education standards, so learners and educators can navigate this technology with confidence.
- Support responsible AI procurement, ensuring tools adopted by schools and workforce training providers are bias-tested and accessible to diverse learners.

Opportunities for practitioners (educators, nonprofits, workforce providers)

Practitioners are on the front lines of adoption. They can **document practical guidance** and **inform the development of tools** that enhance, not replace, their work.

- Use AI to handle routine tasks in learners' career development (such as formatting resumes) while reserving staff time for deeper interventions.
- Support the development of playbooks for "responsible AI advising" that provide practical guidance for integrating AI into counseling, classrooms, or career navigation.
- Pilot training for learners on "how to ask better questions," building AI literacy as a workforce readiness skill in itself.
- Teach learners to move beyond generating outputs to reviewing AI-generated drafts for accuracy, relevance, and tone; adding their own experiences or examples; and polishing the final product so it reflects their authentic voice and judgment.

Opportunities for tool providers & innovators

Tool providers and innovators hold responsibility for ensuring that **design choices reflect the needs of learners and the educators, counselors, and mentors who serve them**.

- Prioritize underserved learners in user testing, data sourcing, and UX design, from cultural and linguistic relevance to mobile-first delivery.
- Embed transparency and explainability features (e.g., showing sources, clarifying limits, flagging bias) as a baseline, not a luxury.
- Co-build with practitioners to ensure tools reduce workload and align with real service delivery contexts.
- Contribute to shared data governance and quality-control standards, ideally open-sourced or subsidized by philanthropy.

Open Questions >

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Through listening sessions and surveys, coalition members surfaced a set of big questions that will shape how AI is developed and adopted in career development. These questions cut across stakeholder groups and highlight where shared exploration is needed.

Systemic barriers

- How do we ensure AI tools acknowledge and address systemic barriers to careers, rather than masking or reinforcing them?
- How can tools be made accessible across geography, cost, readiness, and language so that underserved learners are not left behind?

Balancing human & AI support

- What are effective models for combining human and AI support, and where should the line be drawn?
- How do we preserve or amplify community, connection, and human traits like empathy, trust, and resilience alongside AI-enabled development?

Readiness & skills

- How do we support career development professionals and institutions that are slower to adopt AI, so they can use it responsibly and effectively?
- What technical assistance is needed for state and system leaders to implement AI for career development?
- How do we equip learners with AI literacy, upskilling, and resilience to thrive in a changing workplace?
- How can we create a global community of learning in the development of AI guidelines, implementation, and data privacy?

Data & infrastructure

- How do we ensure quality, accuracy, and transparency in the data and frameworks that power AI career development tools?
- How do we account for bias in datasets and coaching models, and integrate reliable labor market data?
- What shared benchmarks and ROI measures will prove these tools are truly helping learners and institutions?

- What infrastructure is needed to connect tools and supports, rather than letting innovation remain siloed?
- Who would be responsible for maintaining publicly accessible datasets?

Economic disruption

- How can we prepare for and respond to an influx of workers needing to pivot careers due to AI?
- How do we ensure under-resourced learners have pathways to participate in the economic wealth AI will generate, not just adapt to its disruption?

Next Steps for the Coalition >

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The insights in this report confirm that AI is already reshaping career development, but they also show that the sector lacks shared benchmarks, sustainable models, and consistent readiness. That is precisely why the coalition exists: to help the field act together rather than in silos.

In the coming year, the coalition will focus on three priorities:

1. **Build shared standards and guardrails.** Convene members to co-develop frameworks for trust, transparency, and impact measurement that can be adopted across institutions and programs.

2. **Support readiness and capacity.** Create resources, training opportunities, and playbooks for practitioners and institutions so they can adopt AI responsibly and effectively.

3. **Elevate evidence and practice.** Gather and share case studies, pilots, and research-practice partnerships that demonstrate what works and reduce guesswork for funders, policymakers, and practitioners alike.

By pursuing these priorities, the coalition aims to answer the question at the heart of this report: "*How do we know whether these tools are good?*" In doing so, we hope to ensure that AI in career development expands opportunity rather than narrows it. ✓

Members

Steering Committee:

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Discovery Partners Institute (part of the University of Illinois system)*

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Education Leaders of Color (EdLoC)

Educators Cooperative

Enterprise for Youth

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WhereWeGo

W.K. Kellogg Foundation

Year Up United

YouthWell*

Zendesk

Listening session participant

*Joined after initial cohort