# Student Retention Council



Annual Report
2024 - 2025

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# Meet the SRC

## About the SRC

Alabama's leaders are dedicated to investing in the State's future. As we look towards the next century it is more important than ever that we recruit and retain our college graduates. At the Higher Education Partnership, we believe this is critically important as we propel Alabama into the knowledge-based economy of tomorrow.

As lawmakers considered ways to encourage the best and brightest college graduates to consider Alabama as a career destination, early surveys from the state's Retain Alabama initiative showed opportunities for growth in categories across the spectrum. While the data was compelling, it became apparent that students needed to be more than just numbers in a report – they needed to have a voice at the table.

External market research showed that traditional students in the Generation-Z category are digital media natives, who are less responsive to traditional advertising. Instead, they are persuaded by a perception of authenticity and connection.

Recognizing that the strongest voice to reach students is their peers, the Student Retention Council aims to bridge the gap between community leaders, hoping to recruit young professionals and the future young professionals themselves.

The Higher Education Partnership was honored to receive legislative support to host the Student Retention Council, beginning in Fall 2022. The Partnership serves as the advocacy voice for Alabama's 14 public universities and is uniquely positioned for this project to build onto existing grassroots networks of students, administrators, faculty and alumni advocates across the state.

Student Retention Council members were appointed by the University Presidents for their work ethic, leadership quality, and ability to represent the student voice. The SRC members come from a diverse cross section of student voices – representing a wide variety of majors, hometowns and campus interests.

Throughout the course of the 2024 – 2025 school year, SRC members participated in a fast-paced, hands-on instructional course in which they researched and designed a project they felt was best suited to encourage their peers to consider Alabama.

The Higher Education Partnership would like to thank the following groups for sharing their time to support the students throughout this project: the University Presidents' Council, the League of Municipalities, Innovate Alabama, the Economic Development Partnership of Alabama, Senator Arthur Orr, the staff at the Town of Pike Road, Greg Clark of the Central Alabama Regional Planning and Development Commission Regional Planning Commission, Scott Farmer and the Southeast Alabama Regional Planning and Development Commission. Lindsey Patillo Keane, Executive Director Mid City District Association, Jamie Munoz and Cody Morgan, Owners of Octo Hospitality Group.

# Executive Summary

The Student Retention Council (SRC), developed by the Higher Education Partnership in 2022, serves as a platform aimed at empowering Alabama's college students to voice their perspectives on remaining in-state following graduation. In accordance with this mandate, the Chancellor or President of each of the fourteen public universities appointed student representatives to serve on the SRC for the current academic year. Through the Innovate Alabama's "Innovative Entity" designation, the Student Retention Council also expanded the roles of the SRC to include leadership positions that would build on targeted messaging to strategically reach even more perspectives. This initiative ensures that voices from across the state are comprehensively represented, enabling meaningful dialogue on matters that shape the future of Alabama's college students.

The SRC is structured to fulfill two essential objectives: first, to provide Alabama college students with a platform to express their concerns and opinions, and second, to promote awareness among emerging professionals and communities of the countless career and lifestyle opportunities available within Alabama.

Statistical data underscores the importance of this endeavor: while approximately one-third of out-of-state college students and three-fourths of in-state students remain in Alabama after graduating college, the SRC acknowledges the potential to improve these retention rates. Many students are unaware of the vast opportunities Alabama offers, including its status as having the second lowest cost of living in the nation, a robust job market with outstanding employers, and 21 state parks that contribute to an exceptional quality of life.

During the past year, student representatives and leaders from Alabama's public universities have collaborated to advance the Council's mission by engaging their peers through targeted initiatives. Building on the groundwork established by the first and second SRC cohort, the third cohort has more intentionally explored community development and partnered with groups like the Alabama League of Municipalities, the Alabama Regional Planning Commissions, and more. This report encapsulates the collaborative activities and achievements of the third cohort of Student Retention Council representatives in their continued pursuit of fostering student retention and community engagement across Alabama.

# Cohort III  At A Glance

**Team Members:**

In 2024-2025 Cohort III recruited six new statewide leaders, in addition to presidential appointees representing each campus.

**Results:**

Surveyed career centers – what's working to connect students to careers

Developed in-depth profile of job seekers – both retained and not. Identified "leaky pipeline" and developed potential solutions the SRC could pilot

Reached more than 10 communities with presentations and community ideas through Partnerships with Alabama Regional Planning Commission

From discussions, created four targeted community project plans that could be implemented in partnership with communities:

    a.  Highlighting Career Opportunities Beyond Big Cities
    b.  Growing A Pipeline for Service and Leadership to Emphasize Community Connections
    c.  Raising Awareness of Community Events
    d.  Maximizing Public Spaces for Gen-Z Appeal.

Presidential Appointees Reached More Than 1,000 peers with the message "Consider Alabama," highlighted External Resources.

Thanks to Innovate Alabama, the program expanded to include six application based leadership roles. The designation as an "Innovative Entity" provided an opportunity for student leaders to work directly with communities.

**More Than 1,000 students reached directly**

**More Than 15 communities in discussion**
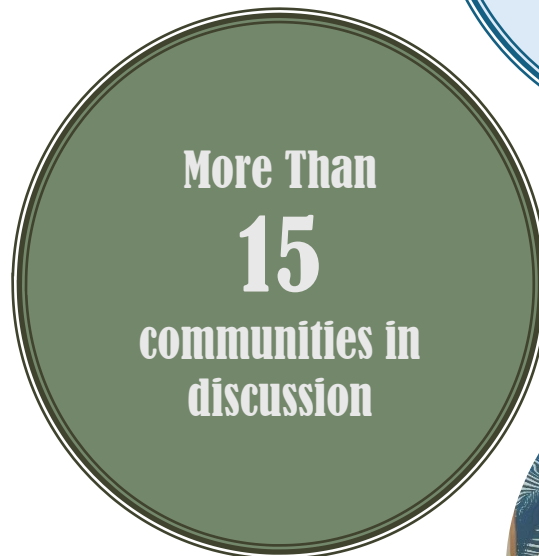
# Situational Analysis

### I.       Introduction

The Higher Education Partnership's Alabama Student Retention Council (SRC) is a collaborative effort among various stakeholders in the state of Alabama, including government agencies, educational institutions, and businesses. The SRC's mission is to address the challenge of retaining Alabama's college graduates and encouraging them to work in the state after they graduate. The SRC recognizes that retaining talent is essential for the long-term economic growth and prosperity of Alabama, and it aims to develop  and implement strategies to support this goal. Through its work, the SRC seeks to foster a culture of innovation, collaboration, and engagement that will benefit both graduates and the broader community. It aims to provide a comprehensive summary of existing research, impressions,



and anecdotal experiences related to student retention in Alabama. This has been done by analyzing the findings



and recommendations of key reports from the Alabama Commission on Higher Education (ACHE) and Economic Development Partnership of Alabama (EDPA). Additionally, by reviewing existing programs and incorporating the student voice, the SRC has sought to gain a holistic understanding of the current situation and the challenges that need to be addressed. This situational analysis aims to build a persuasive case for the plan of work proposed by the Higher Education Partnership's Alabama Student Retention Council (SRC). This analysis will demonstrate how the SRC addresses the challenges identified in the existing research and experiences.

Ultimately, the goal of this situational analysis is to provide a clear, evidence-based case for why the SRC's plan of work is the best option to address the problem statement of retaining Alabama's college graduates to work in the state after they graduate.


### II.      Review and Observations of Key Data in ACHE and EDPA Report

The ACHE report, "*The Economic Impact of Alabama's Public Universities and Colleges,*" highlights the importance of higher education in Alabama's economy and identifies several factors that contribute to student

retention, such as affordability, accessibility, and student support services. The report recommends increasing funding for need-based financial aid and expanding programs such as dual enrollment for universities and distance learning to increase access to higher education. Further, ACHE's ongoing work on the "*Retain Alabama Survey*" and "*The Education Employment Outcomes Report"* shed light on demographic data related to those who choose to stay in Alabama or choose to leave after graduation.



The EDPA report, *"Retain Alabama: A Comprehensive Strategy to Improve Alabama's College Attainment Rates,"* identifies several challenges to student retention in Alabama, including high student debt and limited job opportunities. The report recommends expanding internship and apprenticeship opportunities to provide students with real-world experience and skills, as well as the experience of working in Alabama.



Overall, both reports highlight the importance of collaboration among various stakeholders, including government, education, and industry, in addressing the issue of student retention in Alabama. Additionally, both reports emphasize the need for a comprehensive and coordinated approach to improving student retention, encompassing factors such as affordability, quality of life, social and political factors and career opportunities.

One potential weakness is that the reports may not fully account for the diverse needs and experiences of students from different backgrounds and communities. While the reports touch on issues such as affordability and accessibility, they may not fully address the unique challenges faced by students from low-income or marginalized communities. Further, as existing reports aim to centralize conclusions, unique value propositions and qualitative impressions from each campus are lost in the broader picture. Specificity in addressing each institutional demographic could allow for more targeted strategies. It is our belief that the unique makeup of the Student Retention Council fills some of these gaps by bringing together perspectives from each university.

# The SRC is Uniquely Positioned to Reach Gen -Z

The Student Retention Council is uniquely positioned for success, because its primary objective is to provide Alabama's college students a platform to make the changes they need to remain in-state following their college graduations.

Generation-Z supplements traditional news sources and celebrities with social media and often looks up to their peers from their own campuses more than they do traditionally prominent public figures. In line with this, the SRC is composed of student leaders from each of Alabama's 4-year public universities. The SRC was structured with the knowledge that today's college students are much more likely to collaborate with their peers than with those who they find less relatable.

Moreover, enlisting the help of student leaders all over the state allows a deeper connection to be formed between the mission of the SRC and Alabama's college students, who we're working tirelessly to retain. In charging student leaders from each campus to engage in conversations, collect feedback, and connect with communities, a deeper sense of buy-in is created. In this way, the design of the SRC ensures every college student in Alabama knows they have a platform to utilize their voice.
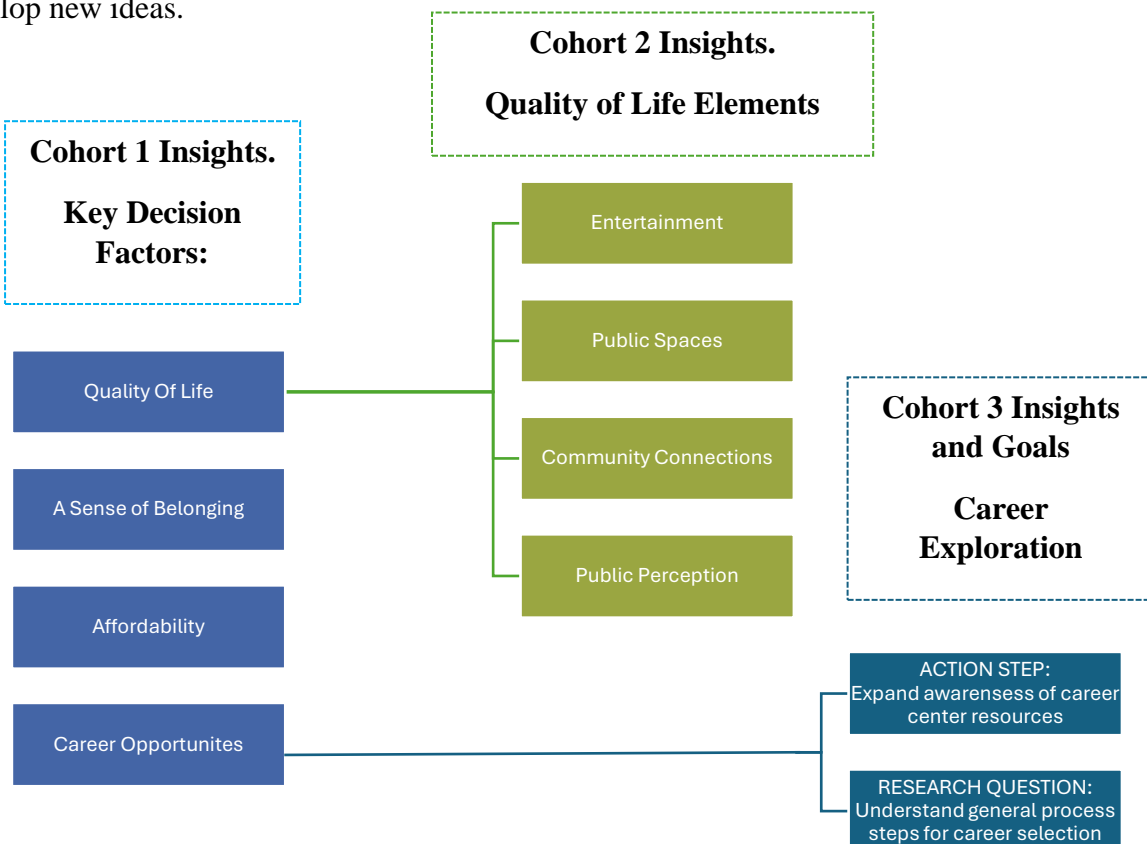
# Background

Cohort I of the SRC worked to develop a survey of their peers to identify key areas of concern when students considered their future career destination. Based on their survey, they identified 4 key areas of interest: quality of life, career opportunities, a sense of belonging, and affordability. Competitive career opportunities was the largest driver of interest across the board. They worked to create an informative presentation that they shared with their peers highlighting Alabama's strengths and resources in these four areas.

Cohort II built on these concepts by expanding their survey to interview community leaders working to recruit and retain young professionals. To understand how community leaders might work to address these key areas of importance, they interviewed leaders from three communities and began to brainstorm ideas of how a student group might work with community leaders to further emphasize their strengths. From these discussions, they determined a need to explore a more concrete definition of "quality of life" – understanding that the term means different things for different people and populations. After breaking it down, the SRC identified the following elements of quality of life as opportunities for development: public perception, community connections, entertainment, and public spaces. They believed that future cohorts of the SRC could create more specific ideas in these areas.
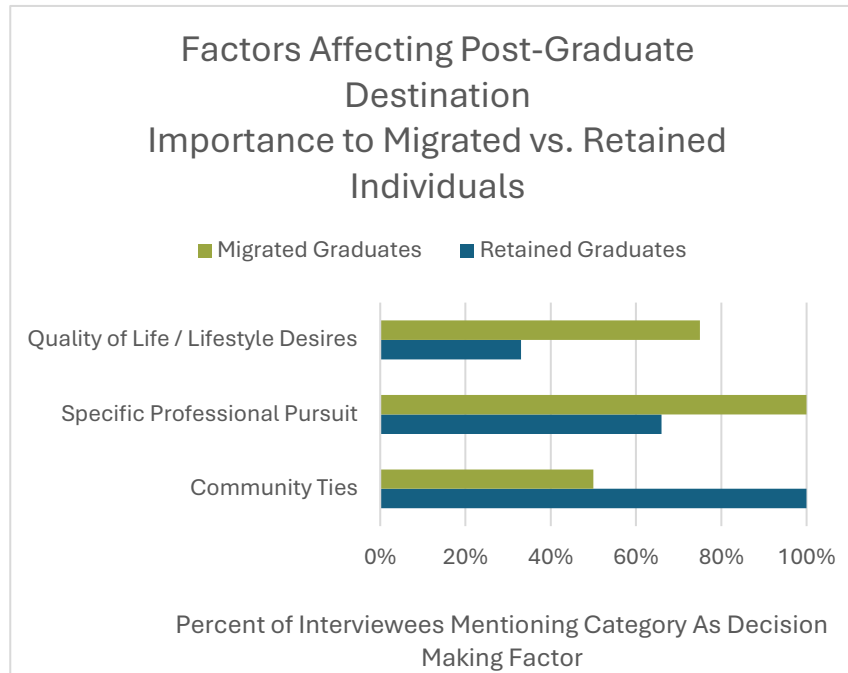
Cohort III combined ideas from both previous groups. First, they worked to identify gaps in knowledge of career opportunities and to better understand the career landscape in Alabama by surveying career centers on campus and creating an in-depth, qualitative profile of job seekers. Second, they took a focused approach to many of the factors listed to create community project ideas that could be implemented through partnerships with the SRC.

All SRC cohorts learn the Stanford Design Method as a method to embrace innovative thinking and develop new ideas.

**Cohort 2 Insights.**

**Quality of Life Elements**

**Cohort 1 Insights.**

**Key Decision Factors:**

Entertainment

Public Spaces

Quality Of Life

**Cohort 3 Insights and Goals**

**Career Exploration**

A Sense of Belonging

Community Connections

Affordability

Public Perception

ACTION STEP:
Expand awarensess of career center resources

Career Opportunites

RESEARCH QUESTION:
Understand general process steps for career selection

# New Insights – An In-Depth Profile on Job Seekers

*Details found in Appendix A*

## Factors Affecting Post-Graduate Destination
### Importance to Migrated vs. Retained Individuals

■ Migrated Graduates   ■ Retained Graduates

Quality of Life / Lifestyle Desires

Specific Professional Pursuit

Community Ties

0%   20%   40%   60%   80%   100%

Percent of Interviewees Mentioning Category As Decision Making Factor

SRC Workforce Director, Jonas Scofield, set out to understand how people chose their post-graduate destination on a deeper level. He completed qualitative interviews with eight recent graduates of Alabama public universities – reaching a range that represented different regions of the state, majors, racial, and gender backgrounds. He interviewed individuals who immediately left the state following graduation, moved away and returned, and some who chose to stay locally after completing their degree. These profiles allowed for the identification of major areas retain Alabama programming could look to intervene to raise awareness of assets or increase opportunities.

**Key Takeaways:**

- Connections made in college are critical.
- Family and familiarity drive successful retention, while professional and lifestyle aspirations drive migration.
- Cultural and community infrastructure like events, church, or affordability highly impact satisfaction.
- Alabama's challenge isn't just retaining young professionals – it's showing them WHY they should stay.

> *"Family and familiarity drive successful retention, while professional and lifestyle aspirations drive migration."*

**Deep Dive into Careers:**

All participants explored jobs both in-state and out-of-state and all participants used networking connections from their university peers, professors, or internships.

Of those who migrated, 100% were seeking, in some form, broader career opportunities. Though some also cited lifestyle or culture mismatch with their experiences in Alabama, it is clear that career opportunities took priority in the search.

In the same vein, the experience of an internship or fellowship in Alabama was a positive retention factor for many of those who chose to stay – including those who went to an undergraduate or graduate institution out of state. However, some discussed the difficulty of finding this type of internship in their field, pointing to better marketed opportunities from major companies in other states. This demonstrates a clear opportunity to amplify the opportunities available and emphasize the creation of more hands-on roles for college students.

**Percentage of Students Using Method For Job Search**

| Method | Percentage |
| --- | --- |
| Internship Connections | 62 |
| Online Search (LinkedIn) | 50 |
| University Networks (peers, professors, career centers) | 87 |
| Community Connections | 38 |

On a macro level, insight from participants should encourage Alabama's economic developers to focus on diversifying the economy through the recruitment of knowledge-based industries and opportunities. While programs like Innovate Alabama work to spur entrepreneurial environments, additional investments can be made to focus on building the breadth of career opportunities that target college graduates – from marketing, to accounting, to strategic tech roles. Alabama's college graduates are prepared to be competitive in the workforce and seeking opportunities to match their skillsets!
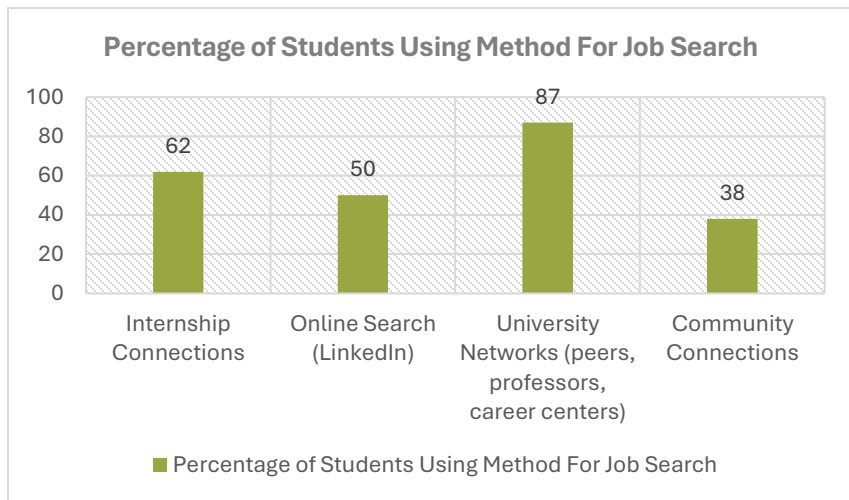
**Pathway to Migration Shows Opportunities to Connect:**

Through these interviews, we were able to compare paths to a career destination, noting similarities in those who chose to locate in Alabama over those who left. We mapped this pipeline to identify opportunities for growth in connecting, comparing the narratives of the successfully retained individuals.

In the chart on the following page, you'll follow one example pathway to migration, in which the Student Retention Council identified key opportunities for retention interventions.

First, it is noted that, despite networking in the state and searching online, this student's first internship experience was in a different state. While programs like Fuel Alabama provide incredible opportunities for students to fall in love with the state, the student must first secure an internship. As a result, this first internship has a pivotal potential. Small to midsize communities can work to attract students by building fellowships students can complete during their time on campus or over the summer in a variety of fields.

Additionally, this shows how valuable networking and peer to peer information about opportunities is to current students. While the interviewee used career center resources, as well as digital sites, the direct connection through professors, recent alumni, or recruiters created a positive association, driving towards those opportunities.

# Campus Strengths in Career Services

Details Found in Appendix B

Students across campuses met with their campus Career Centers to learn more about the ways universities equip their graduates to enter the workforce. We learned that, while Campus Career centers provide rich resources to connect students to their future pathways, they are often under utilized in the job search. Most career centers provide hands-on resources like resume review, mock interviews, cover letter assistance, and even career closets to help students dress professionally when entering the workforce. Additionally, they have the capacity to work with students to identify companies and roles of interest. From virtual search sites like LinkedIn, Handshake, and beyond to in-person career fairs and networking opportunities, the career centers build bridges for students to pursue meaningful internships, fellowships, and careers.

Most career centers provided options for students to filter their job opportunities down to highlight roles in Alabama. While the career centers at every campus successfully amalgamate a wealth of opportunities across the U.S., it is up to the student to select the ones most relevant to them. In this area, the Student Retention Council saw an opportunity to increase interaction in making students aware of the great assets that Alabama has to offer, so that they look first to career opportunities in the state!

# Harnessing Community Assets For Strategic Planning

Details Found in Appendix C

Building on the work of previous cohorts, this year's Regional Directors spearheaded project planning options that could emphasize the assets in small to midsize communities and help to recruit and retain college graduates. Considering the quality-of-life categories and the data about student perceptions, each regional director chose to develop a project proposal that could be implemented to increase appeal to young professionals.



These projects were developed through attending the Alabama Regional Planning Commission's annual summit and discussing opportunities to work together with communities to implement ideas. The Regional Directors considered ideas that would be scalable – taking a big vision for success and breaking it down to immediately implementable concepts.

The full project plans are included in Appendix C. A summary of each is included in this section.

a. Highlighting Career Opportunities Beyond Big Cities
b. Growing A Pipeline for Service and Leadership to Emphasize Community Connections
c. Raising Awareness of Community Events
d. Maximizing Public Spaces for Gen-Z Appeal

**Highlighting Career Opportunities Beyond Big Cities –**



*Plan by Da'Vonte Watson*

Students are seeking opportunities to engage in hands-on learning. Small to mid-size can highlight their opportunities to launch a career by partnering with local universities to create internships or fellowships with local businesses or community leaders. Students from majors like advertising/public relations, marketing, business, social work, community development, accounting and beyond would enjoy learning the ins and outs of community planning and managing local projects and policies, while providing valuable work in their desired field. Noting that some communities are farther away and transportation can pose challenges for on-campus students, this plan suggests working with the university or other partner groups to provide transportation.

**Growing A Pipeline for Service and Leadership to Emphasize Community Connections**

*Plan by Ragan Hope Wilson*

Generation-Z is passionate about community service and leadership. Despite their digital roots, they seek ways to be involved in giving back. On college campuses, this looks like a wealth of service organizations or projects enmeshed in coursework, honors society, or Greek life. However, as students look to enter the professional world, finding a way to get plugged in can seem daunting. This project proposes building a pipeline between civic clubs and leadership groups by lowering barriers (like high dues and internal nomination processes) and targeting students before they even graduate to make them aware of the networking and service opportunities in these civic leadership groups.

**Raising Awareness of Community Events**

*Plan by Cole Wheeler*

Alabama has a rich cultural and event calendar. This project aims to close the gap of students' perspectives by raising awareness about events not only in major urban centers, but also small to midsize communities. Emphasizing the state's existing resources, like the Travel Alabama events page, will raise awareness amongst students of all the exciting events Alabama has to offer. Additionally, the plan suggests small to midsize communities use databases and homepages like this to amplify their events. The Student Retention Council or similar student groups or student ambassadors can partner with local art councils, farmers markets, or others to highlight their events and connect relevant student groups.

**Bringing the Public to Your Spaces Through Community, Connection, and Consistency**

*Plan by Brian Niswonger*

Research shows that young professionals value public spaces highly in their quality-of-life considerations. From trails to parks to breweries, music venues, or even coffee shops, young people are looking for environments to foster connection. This project proposal highlights ways communities can use their existing public spaces to create unique, memorable, and attractive experiences. Recognizing the variety of assets, this project recommends options that could increase visibility and attractiveness of existing spaces or create temporary public spaces for weekend special events.
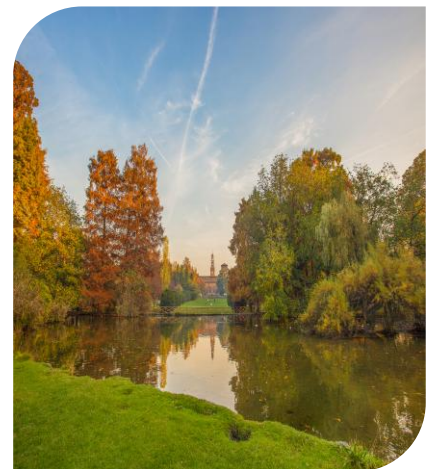
# Reaching Campus

Cohort I reached campus through in-person presentations. In Cohort II, the Student Retention Council worked to refine this approach to highlighting the strengths and opportunities to put them in line with students' key decision factors. Cohort II delivered one-page flyers to leave with students highlighting these key resources. Cohort III built on these strategies to create interactive presentations that highlighted not only strengths and assets of Alabama, but also key resources (like the Career Centers) that students could use to enrich their search for a post-graduate destination.

SRC members raised awareness of other external programming as well, including FUEL Alabama and Innovate Alabama programs. Before presentations, the majority of students reported having no knowledge of these programs, so our work with campus presentations serves as a critical awareness point for the growth of those programs.

Presentations reached a range of participants across a variety of age groups, majors, and influence circles, so this direct message was just the beginning of a larger conversation that could be echoed across campus. Students targeted leadership groups like the Student Government Association, Honors College, University/Department Specific Ambassadors and Social groups like Greek life, mentoring programs, leadership courses and more. In all, SRC members visited presented to more than 1,000 peers directly this year, with additional reach on social media and beyond.

The SRC's Instagram platform is designed to target current college students with engaging content ideas – from sharing behind the scenes insight into the SRC's work, to highlighting exciting events in Alabama, and reposting career and internship opportunities. In the future, the SRC plans to continue growing this digital reach.



Detailed reports from each campus found in Appendix D



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# Future Directions

Insights from this year demonstrate the need for a peer-to-peer group representing the student voice in conversations around recruiting and retaining college graduates. The unique position of the Student Retention Council provides a well-rounded reach across the state, as well as an opportunity to continue building a network of leaders who spread the message that Alabama should be considered a top career destination for college graduates.

Looking ahead, the Student Retention Council aims to continue outreach on campus and into communities, bridging the gap between job providers and the next generation of talent. The SRC will also work to further expand partnerships with key groups that acutely address talent attraction, like Chambers of Commerce. The SRC would like to build on the ideas created by this year's Statewide leadership team to develop pilot projects that could be aimed at students.

The Student Retention Council will also work to expand their work on campus by creating new assets for student access. One pilot project for next year's cohort will be to begin the development of a student-to-student database of internship opportunities. Through our conversations, we learned that a student's internship experience provides an important foundational moment for their final career selection, but that many students have low awareness of competitive internship opportunities in Alabama. Inversely, communications with community and business leaders demonstrated that they had a hard time reaching students with their available positions – it seemed they got lost in the information overload of large databases. The goal of the SRC would be to create a pilot project that emphasized peer-to-peer networking and internship recommendations, by formalizing the word-of-mouth pipeline that students already rely on. The SRC would spread the word amongst our student networks to ask them to submit the title and a brief overview of any internships they had served before. They could also include tags with details about their experiences in the role. At the same time, an SRC member would work with our community partners to gather more information about available roles in their areas – specifically targeting small to midsize communities to raise awareness about roles that might not have previously hosted traditional internships.

Additionally, the SRC would like to work with more partners like the Outdoor Recreation Council or Trails Society on projects that might raise awareness about Alabama's beautiful outdoor landscape. The goal of the SRC would be to supplement the work being done by Innovate Alabama and others by

connecting more students to trails or potentially working on either volunteer projects or marketing/raising awareness.

Another partner the SRC would like to engage is civic and leadership groups across the state. As the team explored pipelines for service and community leadership, it was evident that civic groups were eager to expand their base to include young professionals, and that college students relied on mentorship and networking opportunities like those in civic groups. In the upcoming year, the SRC will work to connect with civic or leadership groups and begin to develop a pilot project that would create a feeder system linking college students to some of their local organizations/

Finally, the SRC plans to continue to expand our social media presence. With awareness of the great work done by pages like BhamNow, Visit Alabama, our research shows that current students respond more strongly to content from people in their same age group. It is our goal to continue to develop the Student Retention Council Instagram to highlight small to mid-size communities, as well as major well-known events across the state. Partnering with groups like the Alabama League of Municipalities and their campaign "Live Locally" could provide a strong background for the Student Retention Council to add a new audience to this messaging, promoting the quality of life opportunities across the state.

# Conclusion

The 2024 – 2025 Student Retention Council accomplished a strong move forward as they grew the reach of the message to their peers: "Consider Alabama as your career destination." This cohort's depth of research and creative brainstorming creates a pivotal opportunity for growth as the SRC looks to the future. The SRC is encouraged by the results achieved in the last three years, and optimistic that our work will build the sentiment for young professionals that Alabama is their prime destination for sweet home. The Higher Education Partnership is proud to continue hosting the Student Retention Council. Graduates from Alabama's 14 public universities are shaping the future. Engaging student voices to build opportunities for those graduates to call Alabama home is just one way these bright students

More information:

www.higheredpartners.org/src

Instagram: @src.al

# Appendix

# Appendix A: In Depth Qualitative Interview – Results

**SRC Qualitative Research**

**Data Takeaways:**

Young Professionals in Alabama: Why They Stay or Leave

A Qualitative and Quantitative Look at Career Decisions After Graduation

**Profile Overview: Sample Size – 8 Young Professionals**

75% Attended Alabama Higher Education Institutions

75% born or raised in Alabama

63% currently work in Alabama (retained)

37% currently work out of state (unretained)

**Key Takeaways**

Connections made in college are critical- 7 of 8 participants landed jobs through relationships built during college.

Family and familiarity drive retention, while professional and lifestyle aspirations drive migration.

Cultural and community infrastructure, like events, church, or affordability, highly impact satisfaction.

Alabama's challenge isn't just retaining young professionals- it's showing them why they should stay.

**Job Search Patterns**

Job Opportunities Explored:

All participants explored jobs both in-state and out-of-state

62% considered roles related to internships or fellowships

87% leaned heavily on networks built during college

Top Resources Used:

100% used college or internship connections

50% used online tools (LinkedIn, Indeed)

38% cited church or community connections

25% received offers through senior year connections

**Why They Chose Their Current Job Location**

For those working in Alabama:

100%: Family was a factor

83%: Opportunity through prior connection

66%: Passion for community or specific field

50%: Campus involvement led to job-related connections

For those working out of state:

100%: Chose city based on personal aspirations (field, lifestyle)

75%: Desired lifestyle not found in Alabama

50%: Did not feel strong community fit in Alabama

**What Keeps Young Professionals in Alabama?**

Family ties – 100% of retained professionals cited this

Community or church connections – 66%

Cost of living – 50%

Enjoyment of job/field in-state – 50%

Cultural comfort / Alabama lifestyle – 33%

**Why Some Leave Alabama**

Broader professional opportunities- 100%

Lifestyle / culture mismatch- 75%

Desired city (e.g. Nashville, DC, ATL)- 75%

Better infrastructure or walkability- 50%

Did not feel tied to Alabama community- 50%

**If They Could Change One Thing About Alabama…**

Top Suggestions:

62%: Broader career opportunities (especially in rural areas and niche industries)

50%: More visibility and marketing for jobs

38%: More support for community engagement

25%: Increased diversity of people, jobs, and cultures

25%: Better education and infrastructure (public transit, healthcare)


**Profile:**

Alabama Public Higher Education Graduate (USA)

Born and Raised within Alabama

Super Involved in college

Currently works in Mobile

1. **What job opportunities were you exploring?**
   a. **What resources were you using while job hunting?**
      i. Resources from connections made through campus involvement
2. **What made you choose to work at an *insert place of work*?**
   a. Family
   b. Opportunities present
   c. Community service connections through campus involvement
3. **What do you like about the area you choose to work in?**
   a. Cultural opportunities
   b. Events
4. **\*\* For retained young professionals\*\* What led you to stay in Alabama?**
   a. Hospitality
   b. Proximity to Family
5. **If you could make one change to Alabama what would it be?**
   a. More opportunities to get connected with community
6. **Profile:**

From Alabama

Alabama Public University (Troy)

Worked on Campus job

Interned in youth ministries

Currently works in Troy

**What all job opportunities were you exploring?**

1. **What resources were you using while job hunting?**

   a. Connection from senior year of college

2. **What made you choose to work at an *insert place of work*?**

   a. Connection made in college connections

3. **What do you like about the area you choose to work in?**

   a. Relationships built

   b. Connections made through church community

4. **\*\* For retained young professionals\*\* What led you to stay in Alabama?**

   a. Family

   b. Connections made through church

5. **If you could make one change to Alabama what would it be?**

   a. More investments in rural communities (Healthcare, quality jobs, childcare)

   b. Investments in small businesses


**Profile:**

Alabama Public Higher Education Grad (UAB)

Involved in Campus Organizations

Work studies and Internships within the state

Currently works in D.C.

1. **What all job opportunities were you exploring?**

2. **What resources were you using while job hunting?**

   a. Used Linkedin and Indeed to find jobs

   b. Used connections through college

   c. Used connections made from involvement

3. **What made you choose to work at an *insert place of work*?**

   a. Opportunities for specific field

4. **What do you like about the area you choose to work in?**

a. Specific field of work

5. **\*\* For unretained young professionals\*\* Is there anything you miss about Alabama?**

        a. Cost of Living

        b. Bigger Community

        c. Hospitability

        d. Drivability

6. **If you could make one change to Alabama what would it be?**

        a. More diversity of opportunities pushed by colleges

        b. Public transits


**Profile:**

Grew up in Southern Cal

Undergrad in California

Law school at UCLA

Spent summer fellowship at Alabama Public Defender's Office in Montgomery

1. **What all job opportunities were you exploring?**

2. **What resources were you using while job hunting?**

        a. Used fellowship connection

3. **What made you choose to work at an *insert place of work*?**

        a. Cost of living

        b. Opportunity

        c. Benefits of State Employee

4. **What do you like about the area you choose to work in?**

        a. Community

5. **\*\* For retained young professionals\*\* What led you to stay in Alabama?**

        a. Specific field

6. **If you could make one change to Alabama what would it be?**

        a. Better Education

        b. More opportunities

**Profile:**

Grew up in Huntsville

Undergrad at Alabama Public Higher Education (UA)

Worked on campus in college

Worked at UAB now works in Nashville Hospital System

1. **What all job opportunities were you exploring?**

2. **What resources were you using while job hunting?**

    a. Had plenty of opportunities in Alabama from campus, but always wanted to go to Nashville

3. **What made you choose to work at an *insert place of work*?**

    a. Community

    b. No family ties anywhere else

    c. Did not like Alabama Community

4. **What do you like about the area you choose to work in?**

    a. Transplant young professional

    b. Friendly environment

    c. Shopping/Nightlife

    d. Walkability

    e. Feels safer

    f. Food options

    g. Payment

    h. Lack of state income tax

5. **\*\* For unretained young professionals\*\* Is there anything you miss about Alabama?**

    a. None


**Profile:**

Originally from LA

Went to college in Maine

Law school at Havard

Internships in LA and public defender in DC

Works in Montgomery

1. **What all job opportunities were you exploring?**

2. **What resources were you using while job hunting?**

   a. Through course in law school got plugged into a Birmingham office

   b. Law School fellowship programs

   c. Only looking at public defender offices program

3. **What made you choose to work at an *insert place of work*?**

   a. Cost of living

   b. Opportunity

   c. Did not want to be in a large city

4. **What do you like about the area you choose to work in?**

   a. Natural spaces (Hiking, parks)

   b. Proximity to big cities

   c. Music, food, and cultural experiences for cheap

   d. Cost of living

5. **\*\* For retained young professionals\*\* What led you to stay in Alabama?**

   a. Family

   b. Enjoys Alabama community

   c. Enjoys Job

6. **If you could make one change to Alabama what would it be?**

   a. College football culture

**Profile:**

Originally from Mobile Alabama

Undergrad through Alabama Public Higher Education (ASU)

Finance Internships out of state

Held jobs on campus

Heavily involved on campus

Works in Atlanta currently

1. **What all job opportunities were you exploring?**

2. **What resources were you using while job hunting?**

    **a.** Utilized network

    b. Used campus opportunities

3. **What made you choose to work at an *insert place of work*?**

    a. Opportunity from internship

4. **What do you like about the area you choose to work in?**

    a. Size of Atlanta

    b. Diversity of people and industries

    c. Events (festivals and concerts for all)

    d. Proximity to airport

    e. Quality of life for young professionals

5. **\*\* For unretained young professionals\*\* Is there anything you miss about Alabama?**

    a. Proximity to family

    b. Cost of living

    c. Drivability

    d. Nature resources (Biodiversity)

6. **If you could make one change to Alabama what would it be?**

    a. Diversification of jobs and cultures


**Profile:**

Originally from Birmingham

Undergrad through Alabama Public Higher Education (AUM)

Internships in Montgomery, Alabama

Still enrolled in MBA program in Alabama

Works in Birmingham

**What all job opportunities were you exploring?**

1. **What resources were you using while job hunting?**

    a. Network through past work experiences and college

2. **What made you choose to work at an *insert place of work*?**

3. Job opportunity

a. Family

4. **What do you like about the area you choose to work in?**

    a. Diversity of people

    b. Restaurants

    c. Drivability

    d. Young professional groups

    e. Entertainment

5. **\*\* For retained young professionals\*\* What led you to stay in Alabama?**

    a. Family

6. **If you could make one change to Alabama what would it be?**

    a. Job opportunities

    b. Not big marketing for opportunities

# Appendix B: Campus Strengths Through Career Centers

**Q&A with Athens State Career Development Center:**

1. **Who did you meet with at the career center?** - Dr. Michael Radden, Director of Career Development Center
2. **What services does your career center offer to students?** The CDC offers a wide range of services. Resume prep, resume critique, interviewing skills, mock interviews, networking, and career guidance. The office provides many resources to help students learn about opportunities as well as frequently invite employers to recruit on campus.
3. **How can students access the services available?** – Services can be accessed via email, zoom, or in person appointment.
4. **What, if anything, is available to connect specifically to careers in Alabama?** The CDC uses Handshake, which is an online platform where students and alumni can search for different kinds of opportunities such as internships or permanent employment. Students can filter their search to include jobs specifically in Alabama. I am also a member of an organization known as AACE (Alabama Association of Colleges and Employers). This organization often sponsors statewide virtual career networking events.
5. **Where are the best or most desirable locations for careers inside Alabama/where is your university most likely to send graduates?** That would depend on the type of major. Technical, computer science and math careers are more likely to be found in the Huntsville/Madison County area. Healthcare, nursing jobs are pretty widespread. Accounting, business and management careers are often found in the Birmingham, Montgomery area. Students typically prefer either Birmingham or the Gulf Coast.


Other things to consider:

- **What types of jobs does the career center often place students in?** – The career center is not a placement office. We do however try to assist students with all types of jobs and other opportunities.
- **What softwares/online platforms does the university use?** We use Handshake and LinkedIn. Both platforms are pretty easy to navigate for finding in-state jobs.
- **Does the career center help with internships or other job opportunities while you're completing your degree?** Yes, we help with all types of internships and jobs all throughout the state.
- **What advice would I give?** I would tell students to not wait until the last semester to start job searching. It is a process that can take anywhere from 3 – 6 months.

**Career Building Opportunities on Athens State University Campus:**

1. Top Majors on Campus:
    a. Elementary Education/Any Education Major/Education Certification Program
    b. Business Administration and Management
2. Three Emphasized Disciplines on the main campus:
    a. Education
    b. Business Administration and Human Resources
    c. Technology such as CyberSecurity
3. My Program- Visual Arts Education:
    a. It is a small degree program that is underneath the umbrella education program. Athens State offers many secondary education certifications similar to visual arts education such as physical education, biology, history, and etc. These programs are arranged so that students receive a major in something with their minor in education. For example, a major in accounting but a minor in secondary education. This allows students to seek jobs outside of education but also be experts in their respected fields. This also makes them more desirable hires as teachers because of their expertise in their chosen area rather than just an education major. The students in these programs have to complete both work in their area of study and meet all of the college of education requirements. It feels like a dual major but it is not.

Career Building Within Programs Examples:

1. Project and Work Experience:
    a. Athens State prides itself on the fact that their classes offer students hands-on real life experience and internships before they enter the job market. Students are prepared and equipped when they graduate from Athens state because the classes have not been in theory. I can attest to this because many professors want students to be ready and able to make a living at whatever they choose to do.
    b. All education majors spend many hours within the physical classroom during their time in the program in order to gain as much hands-on experience as possible. This is classified as field experience. In the classes leading up to field experience, students create lessons and classroom management plans so that they are equipped for a real school setting. All education majors and certification minors have a specific number of field experience hours that they must obtain before completing their internships within their final semester. The internship culminates their degree program and takes place for an entire semester. During the internship, students will complete their EdTPA portfolio which involves videos of them teaching a class, lesson plans, and other criteria which they must meet in order to become a certified teacher. Athens State follows both state and national standards for their education programs. Visual arts education also follows both state and national standards.
    c. The cybersecurity majors received a cyber lab that is on its internet network separate from campus. This allows students practice in solving various situations that the professors can set up on the separate network.

d. Health sciences and nursing majors partner with Huntsville Hospital for field experience, classes, and internships.
e. Biology majors work with Dauphin Island Sea Lab and other ecological centers to provide opportunities for their students.
f. Graphic design majors and concentrations create work for real companies within the North Alabama area. For example, students are currently creating social media marketing and websites for the girl scout organization in Huntsville. In the past, graphic majors have also designed packaging for local businesses to build their portfolios before they graduate.
g. Art Majors - The art professors at Athens State University take a different approach to art as a career than other universities. All of our professors are working artists meaning they are actively selling their work and making a living off of it. In other words, it is not a hobby, or they are creating art for academic purposes. The university has begun to offer new opportunities for this to happen. For example, the university now has a studio space in Lowe Mill Arts Center in Huntsvilles where students can work and interact with professional artists in order to make connections and display their work. There are various juried art shows within the area that students enter to expose their work.
   i. All art students, this includes graphic and education, are required to take a portfolio class their last semester. This class is teaching them how to create their portfolio, build resumes, market artwork, and other various skills. It culminates with an end of semester art show that is curated by the students within the class. For example, graphic majors will display packaging, posters, and marketing banners that they created for local companies.

Finding Jobs:

1. In visual arts education, most students are hired after their internships or schools will contact our faculty advisor. There is currently a demand for certified visual arts teachers in North Alabama. Many schools contact our faculty advisor who then contacts graduated students. Many students are hired quickly from this program.
2. Many majors are hired with companies that they worked with during their internships. Many students find jobs based on word of mouth, handshake, connections made during internships, connections made through faculty, and connections made at events such as Meet the Firms that the university hosts.
3. Many students at Athens State University are non-traditional. This means that they are older, have families, and are working. Some students receive a higher paid position such as full-time teaching position in a school that they were already working in as teacher's aide upon graduation. This is true for business and other majors as well.

Links:

https://www.athens.edu/athens-state-opens-new-cybersecurity-lab/

https://www.athens.edu/academics/education/departments/tes/field-experience/ https://www.athens.edu/academics/arts-and-sciences/research/

https://www.athens.edu/resources/qep/student-projects/

https://www.athens.edu/program-focus/secondary-education/

**University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa**

The Career Center employee I met with was Julie Abernathy, a Program Manager. I began our meeting by asking her to tell me about the resources that the center offers. She started with career fairs and told me that the center was having two that week–one for business, and one for engineering. She then told me about Iris, the photo booth where students can go and take free headshots. She said that the Crimson Career Closet allows students to rent out business clothes and learn about proper professional attire. When asked what online platforms the career center uses, Mrs. Abernathy said that the main ones were Handshake and VMock. Handshake is the university's online recruiting system that allows students to build profiles and search for jobs. VMock uses data from the career center to edit resumes, cover letters, and interview responses. She added that students are also free to schedule a meeting with any career center employee to speak about any of these topics at any time. These are scheduled through Handshake, which also has the option for students to register for any of their many workshops focused on topics like "Internships 101."

Mrs. Abernathy said that the only thing focused specifically on connecting students to careers in Alabama was a special Alabama Career Fair held once a year. However, there are a few Alabama companies that have partnerships with the university, and specifically recruit on our campus. Also, The University of Alabama was the career center's biggest employer of students, so many that they work with do end up staying in-state. Outside of Tuscaloosa, the biggest places they see students locating in Alabama are Huntsville, Birmingham, and Mobile. She said that most of the students she sees aiming to settle in rural Alabama are in social work or healthcare.

Some of the degree programs at the University of Alabama with the most annual graduates are engineering, business, and nursing. The College of Engineering teaches skills such as attention to detail, teamwork, computer literacy, critical thinking, math, and logic. It offers hands-on learning opportunities like The Cube, which is a suite of labs that students can use to practice collaborative engineering in a hands-on fashion. The college's entrepreneurship academies encourage students to begin thinking of innovative, real-world applications of their coursework. They also offer an active cooperative education and internship program which lets students work as practicing engineers. They connect a lot of their students to jobs through engineering-specific career fairs or the large Co-op Interview Day.

The Culverhouse College of Business teaches skills such as finance, statistics, human resources, leadership, management, and entrepreneurship. They connect many of their students to internships through Handshake. The Business Honors Program, a program within the college, has on their website a list of companies to which they typically send students.

Interestingly, only a couple listed on the map are located in Alabama. Culverhouse has a business-specific career center. On their website, they offer advising, resume and cover letter advice, and interview tips. They also list co-ops, internships and jobs, volunteer opportunities, a website with simulated work experiences, and a place where you can apply for micro-internships.

Next, the Capstone College of Nursing takes a bit of a different approach in preparing their students for the medical field. They highlight skills like empathy, adaptability, technology skills, time management, emergency response, and patient care. Pre-nursing students focus on completing their coursework and applying to the upper-division school. After they have been accepted, students complete clinicals each semester to gain real-world experience.

My own program is unique. I am in New College, so my major is technically called: "Interdisciplinary Studies with a Depth Study in Urban Planning and Community Development." Every student combines multiple fields and pursues their own course of study based on their interests. Therefore, everyone learns different skills, but all of us have to be self-motivated, innovative, and creative. New College offers very personalized advising, which often leads to career connections. They also facilitated my internship in Jasper last summer, in which 7 of us each worked in a local non-profit relevant to our career interests. A cool thing that they offer for entrepreneurial students is the Levitetz Leadership Program. This program prepares students for leadership roles in business, government, and non-profits through offering workshops, innovation seed grants, Light Bulb Research Awards, and summer internship stipends.

Resources:

Engineering: https://coop.sa.ua.edu/
https://coop.sa.ua.edu/cooperative-education/
https://eng.ua.edu/current-students/learning-opportunities/

Business: https://students.culverhouse.ua.edu/business-honors-program/opportunities/ https://info.parkerdewey.com/rolltide

https://www.theforage.com/
https://careercenter.culverhouse.ua.edu/resources/

Nursing: https://nursing.ua.edu/academics/undergraduate/

New College: https://llp.ua.edu/ https://newcollege.ua.edu/degree-program/independent-study/

**Jacksonville State University (Jacob Shears)**

*I met with Alex Wilkerson at our College of Business and Industry*

**Advisors:**
- Jennifer Gault: Director of College Career Initiatives
- Alex Wilkerson: Career Advisor for College of Business and Industry
- Kirsten Hughes: Career Advisor for College of Health Professions and Wellness / Social and Behavioral Sciences
- Joseph McMullin: Career Advisor for College of Arts, Humanities, and Sciences / Education and Professional Studies

**Services:**
- Job/Internship Search Assistance
- Resume/Cover Letter Assistance
- Mock Interviews
- General Career Advising (explore all possible opportunities/needs)

**Access:**
- Schedule meeting through Navigate (app used by JAx State for all kinds of student services)
- Once a month drop in day at the Houston Cole Library from 8-4:30 available to anyone

**AL Careers:**
- Utilize AL Works
- Handshake (program similar to LinkedIn that is in its infancy at Jax State)
- Alumni networking
- Career Workshops, Job Fairs, Career Fairs

**Hot Spot Careers:**
- Huntsville, Birmingham, Increasing in Mobile
- Computer Science/Applied Engineering (RedStone Arsenal/Lockhead Martin, Blue Origin)
- Communications (WVTM)
- Healthcare
- Education

Job types depend on students' majors/programs: see heavy involvement with the corporate world and smaller businesses.

**Apps/Programs:**
- Navigate

- Handshake
- Forage (virtual job shadowing)

**Filtering AL Careers:**
- Every app/program has location filters
- Works with Calhoun County Chamber of Commerce to connect students
  - All In Alabama
  - Fuel Alabama
  - Leadership Summits

**Internships:**
- Students encouraged to pursue internships while completing degree
- Alabama Power, Honda, Regions
- Nursing/Education have similar type models built into their program

**Dream Job Advice:**
- Flexible when job searching
- Be involved in college to build skill set and network
- Take advantage of opportunities

**Top 4 Programs:**
- Nursing
- Education
- Business
- Criminal Justice/Forensics
  *Interviewed friends in each of these programs*

**Nursing:**
Skills taught in Nursing can be classified in three categories.
- Skill Check-Offs: the ability to show proficiency in skills (IVs, vitals, catheters, etc)
- Patient Care: the ability to show proficiency in caring for patients pre and post operation
- Communication: teaches students how to properly communicate with patients with compassion, knowledge, and understanding

Projects: Due at the end of every semester. Groups are required to make concept maps that track a patient's info and compile priorities of their care.
Job Outreach: Hospitals send representatives to interview students during their last semester.

**Education:**
Skills:

- Classroom management, Child Development, Instructional Strategies, Assessment/Evaluation, Technology Integration, Cultural Competency, Literacy/Numeracy

Projects: Extensive project based program. Very hands-on program as well.

Job Outreach: Jobs are mainly found through connections. Student who I interviewed got her job at the same school where she interned. She said many students have similar experiences.

**Business:**

Skills:
- Brand creation, Resume/Portfolio/Website Creation, Supply Chain/Procurement Proficiency, Money Handling

Projects: Individual and group projects. Extensive hands-on work and collaboration. For completion of a Business degree, students are required to also have a minor and complete an internship to ensure their skill set is diverse. Faculty/Career advisors help students find and secure internships.

Job Outreach: Connections are also a large part of this program as well. Connections through advisors networking, internships, or personal connections made along the way. LinkedIn is also strongly encouraged to be constantly updated and utilized.

**Criminal Justice/Forensics:**

Skills:
- Crime Scene Investigation, Data Analysis, Forensics Comprehension
- Actively works on crime scenes and provide training for crime scene technicians

Projects: Hands-on crime lab in the basement of Ramona Wood. Multiple projects throughout the semester.

Job Outreach: Connections made through Jax State's involvement with local police departments and forensic labs. Connections and internships heavily found through the professors.

Additional: Center for Best Practice in Law Enforcement, runs the AL Investigator Academy and Southeastern Command College, and provides free training to law enforcement in many local areas. Creating a fully functional digital forensics lab to assist law enforcement in securing evidence from digital formats. Cadaver lab is also in the works to assist in training students in medicolegal death investigations.

[Jax State Career Advising](#)

**Alexandra Thomas - Alabama State University**

Students have access to a variety of career services resources Alabama State University that are intended to support their achievement. Important services include Handshake, an online network that matches students with internship and career opportunities through customized suggestions, and Interview Practice, which offers practice interviews with personalized feedback in many forms. Additionally, Inroads concentrates on professional development and internships for diverse students, encouraging networking and mentoring, while Travel Engagements gives students the opportunity to attend conferences and workshops, increasing their exposure to specialists in the field. We also provide InternXL, as well as Thurgood College Marshall Fund which is a prominent non-profit organization that gives back to HBCUs.

By evaluating these resources, we can identify significant opportunities for collaboration and integration into our plans. This approach will not only enhance student engagement and retention but also create a robust support system that prepares students for successful careers. Leveraging these strengths will help us better serve our community and align with the goals of the Student Retention Council of Alabama, which is to showcase the opportunities that Alabama encourages students to stay.

**AUM - Jalen Bradley**

Auburn University at Montgomery (AUM) focuses on creating opportunities for students within Alabama. This includes connecting students with local employers, informing employers about student needs, and inviting employers back to campus to provide students with the information they seek.

AUM (Auburn University at Montgomery) is currently in the process of developing an exciting new initiative scheduled to take place on November 13, 2024. The Career Development Center (CDC) is organizing a special event called "State of Alabama Day." This event aims to provide students with valuable insights and opportunities related to state-level employment within Alabama. During the event, employers from various organizations across the state of Alabama will converge at AUM to actively engage with students. The primary focus will be on educating students about the process of applying for state-level jobs. Additionally, students who have already applied for specific positions will have the unique opportunity to participate in interviews with the employers for those roles.

Furthermore, students interested in pursuing internship programs will also have the chance to explore relevant opportunities. The "State of Alabama Day" event is designed to serve as a platform for students to gain practical knowledge about the application process for state-level employment, engage directly with potential employers, and potentially secure opportunities for positions or internships within the state of Alabama.

AUM is committed to enhancing its engagement with a diverse student body, including both non-traditional and traditional students. Recognizing the challenges some students face in attending in-person events, the CDC has introduced a new initiative called "Q&A Wednesday." This initiative will take place bi-weekly on Instagram and will feature interactive sessions where local employers will join students for discussions, both in person and via social media, to shed light on the various opportunities available through their programs. The aim is to create a platform where students can gain valuable insights and awareness about the employment landscape and potential career paths, thereby fostering a more inclusive and informed student community.

At our campus, AUM promotes two valuable resources for students: Handshake and Alabama Works. Handshake is a platform that allows students to create profiles showcasing their skills, experiences, and career interests. The Career Development Center (CDC) workers strongly encourage students to keep their Handshake profiles updated regularly, as the platform's database accurately targets students' demographics. By doing so, students can increase their chances of being matched with relevant job opportunities and internships. Additionally, CDC workers use Handshake to actively communicate with students, highlighting new job openings and career opportunities that align with their interests and qualifications. This targeted approach ensures that students are informed

about relevant opportunities within their field of study, enhancing their overall experience and career prospects.

Finally, each college at AUM has its unique approach to equipping students for successful careers and post-graduate success. Internships are a key component and are highly emphasized across various departments such as Education, Business, Nursing, and Liberal Arts. In fact, students in these colleges are mandated to complete a semester of local internship relevant to their major before they can qualify for graduation. This hands-on experience not only provides practical skills but also offers invaluable networking opportunities and real-world insights into their chosen fields.

**UNA – Eleanor Fitz**

**Who did you meet with at the career center (name/role)?**

I met with Dr. Rickey McCreless, who is the assistant director of external connections and student success at UNA.

**What services does your career center offer to students?**

UNA's career center offers a variety of services. They host career fairs allowing students to connect with employers for internships, offer interview coaching and practice sessions, resume review sessions, and a range of online resources students can access at anytime from anywhere.

**How can students access the services available?**

Many of the resources can be accessed virtually. For example, V-Mock, a resume building platform, is available to students and alumni through the UNA website. While in person meetings are available to students, they are also welcome to schedule virtual career counseling sessions to allow for more flexibility.

**What, if anything, is available to connect specifically to careers in Alabama?**

The majority of recruiters who work with UNA have locations in the state of Alabama. That being said, the goal of the career center is simply to get students placed at a job following graduation. The career center wants students to succeed even when that means they move out of state for an opportunity. While they are thrilled to see many students stay in-state, that is not the top priority.

**Where are the best or most desirable locations for careers inside Alabama / where is your university most likely to send graduates?**

The majority of students at UNA are prioritizing jobs along the I-65 corridor. Many students look for jobs in Birmingham or Huntsville.

**Did the career center have any additional resources to suggest?**

One resource which was highlighted during our discussion was the Focus-2 Assessments which are evaluations to help students identify potential careers which match their personality and values. This resource is generally under-utilized by students, however it can be a great asset in determining potential career paths.

**Other Notes:**

Overall, while placing students with careers in-state is a good goal, most of the time the career center has to prioritize other goals first. This is a reflection of the fact that staying in state is not a major goal for many students. At the end of the day, the career center wants students to achieve their own goals and ambitions, and therefore the interests of the students become the priorities of the career center. Right now, staying in-state is not a top priority for many students.

**Top Disciplines at UNA:**

UNA's top disciplines are nursing, business administration, and education.

**Nursing Highlights:**

UNA Nursing is ranked in the top 10 most up-and-coming nursing programs in the south. One of the features of the program is the work the student nurses do at local hospitals. It is a mandatory part of the curriculum. Additionally, the state of the art nursing building offers learning labs to allow students to practice their skills in a hospital like environment.

One program that attracts many high school student's to UNA's nursing program is the

Aspiring nurses camp.

https://www.una.edu/nursing/aspiring-nurses-camp/index.html

This program gives students the chance to explore the discipline of nursing while learning about UNA and its offerings.

Because different states have their own regulations surrounding nursing, many students attend nursing school in a state they are interested in staying in long term. Because of this, many UNA nursing students stay in Alabama.

**Business Administration Highlights:**

The course work of each Business administration varies greatly based on each individual major within the discipline. For example, accounting majors spend most of their time in lecture style classes, while entrepreneurship majors learn through hands-on and learning and collaborative work. Internships are not required, however they are supported and students can receive academic credit for them.

One unique opportunity which is open to all majors but hosted by the college of business is the Smart Start Startup Competition. This weekend-long event gives students the opportunity to create a business plan for their idea and pitch it to Alabama business leaders. The winners of this competition often go on to compete in the Shoals Idea Audition, where participants pitch their ideas and win cash prizes to get their business off the ground.

Another opportunity for business majors at UNA is Keller Connections. Each week, a different company comes and tables in the college of business, giving students the opportunity to meet and connect with potential employers. Many of these companies are local to North Alabama or Alabama

in general. Many students find jobs through this opportunity.

**Education Highlights:**

The College of Education at UNA is a unique program because UNA has an elementary school called Kilby Laboratory School. This school gives students the opportunity to learn about education through hands-on observation. Additionally, students are placed to work in classrooms across the shoals region, giving them connections and experience to help get a job after graduation.100% of education majors at UNA participate in an instate education internship as a part of their studies.

Another great feature of UNA's Education program is the LEAD initiative. https://www.una.edu/education/lead-initiative.html

This program gives current educators in Alabama the opportunity to advance their careers through higher education. Teachers and other educational staff can get their masters, various certificates, and other advanced credentials at a greatly reduced cost. This program is great because it serves teachers who are in Alabama already and encourages them to stay. When they obtain further educational credentials, they often receive pay increases. Additionally, they are better equipped to serve young students in Alabama, increasing the quality of education overall.

Many education students at UNA seek careers within the schools where they interned because they already have connections and experience within the environment. Because of this, UNA's

# Student Retention Council

# September Assignment

PREPARED BY

Gabrielle Tumbleston

education program helps keep future educators in state.

Task 1:

> Schedule meeting with on campus career center, learn and document resources and existing ways students on your campus can connect with careers in Alabama.

## **Meeting Details:**

- Career Consultants Interviewed - **Ryley Corliss & Natalie Weston**
- Services Offered:
  - **Individual Appointments (Virtual or In-person)** - Assistance with resume development, interview preparation, job searches, and career and major exploration
  - **Classroom & Group Presentations** - Individualized workshops on career-related topics geared toward particular groups
  - **Career Fairs & Employer Visits** - Multiple semesterly events that connect students with potential employers across all majors

- ○ **Dedicated Career Consultants** - Each consultant focuses on specific colleges to provide catered support

- ○ **Digital Resources** - Available for self-guided career planning and development

- Access to Services - All students can access services through the University's website at https://www.southalabama.edu/departments/careerdevelopment/ or via various social media platforms.

- Alabama Specific Career Opportunities:

  - ○ The Career Center focuses on career opportunities in Alabama, as many students prefer to stay within the state after graduation

  - ○ While a wide range of opportunities is available, consultants guide students based on individual preferences and goals, ensuring the best career fit

- Popular Career Locations in Alabama - According to the consultants most students at the University have a preference for staying in Mobile or within the state of Alabama

- Additional Resources:

  - ○ **Personality Assessments -** Helps students understand their work preferences and potential career paths

  - ○ **Interview Simulation -** Provides practical interview experience

  - ○ **Handshake Platform -** Specifically tailored for South Alabama students to connect with job opportunities

  - ○ **"What Can You Do with Your Major?" Tool -** Offers insights into potential career paths and occupational outlooks

- Types of Jobs - The Career Center assists students in becoming marketable through resume development and other preparation tools but does not directly place them in jobs. Support is offered based on each college's focus.

- Internship & Graduate School Assistance - The Career Center helps students secure internships and co-op opportunities, including placements with
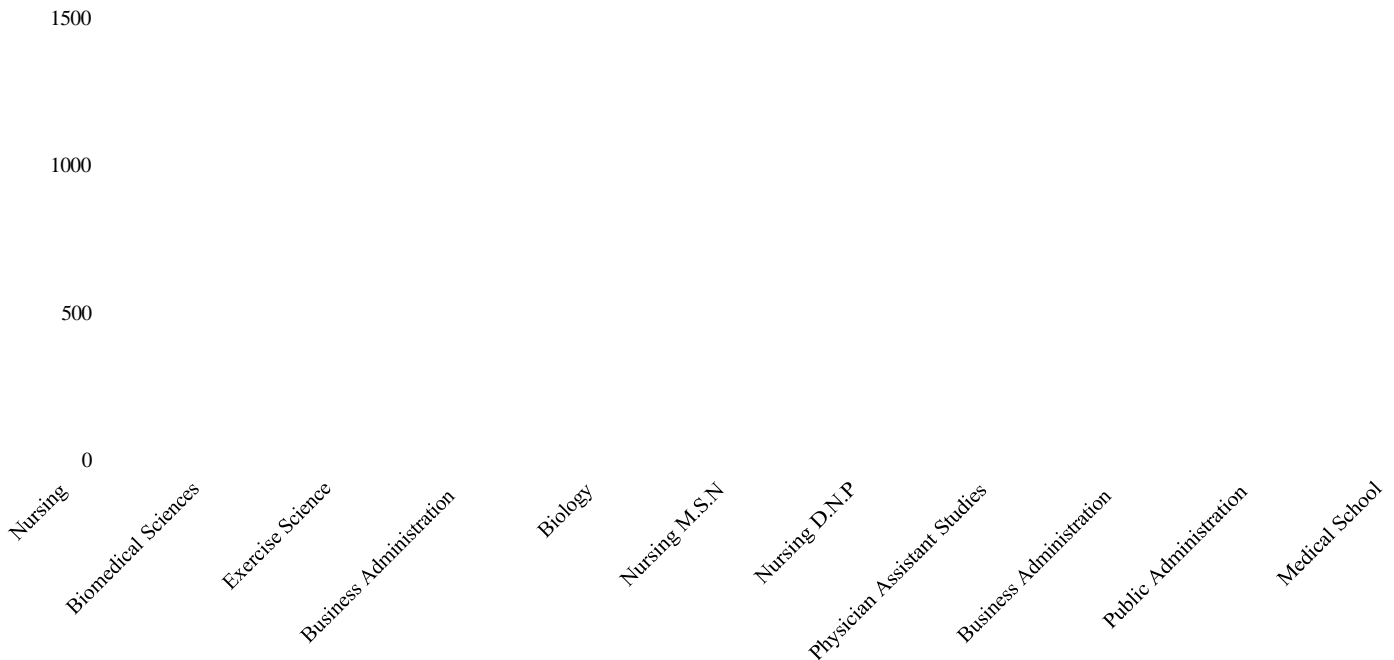
Alabama companies. Assistance is also available for graduate school applications and letters of intent.

- Advice for Securing Ones Dream Job in Alabama:
  - It's important for students to assess their skills broadly and explore a variety of career options. The consultants emphasize not limiting yourself and exploring all potential opportunities.
  - Students are encouraged to engage with the Career Center early and often. The consultants are approachable and dedicated to helping students find the right career solutions.

- Different Types of Appointments Offered: ○ Career & Major Exploration

  ○ Co-Op & Internship Assistance ○ E-Branding

  ○ Graduate School Preparation ○ Interview Preparation

  ○ Job Search Assistance ○ Resume Development

- Digital Resources - https://www.southalabama.edu/departments/careerdevelopment/digitalresources.html

- Main Takeaway - The Career Center is here to support students at every step of their career journey, from choosing a major to finding a job in Alabama or beyond.

Task 2:

Research and document career building opportunities in each major discipline on your campus. Prepare to answer the question, "How is your university preparing you for a career and helping you succeed in landing the post-grad job?"

Fall 2024 Semester Statistics for the University of South Alabama (Constituents per College)



Chart axis values:
- 1500
- 1000
- 500
- 0

Categories: Nursing, Biomedical Sciences, Exercise Science, Business Administration, Biology, Nursing M.S.N, Nursing D.N.P, Physician Assistant Studies, Business Administration, Public Administration, Medical School

Undergraduate and Graduate Top Disciplines/Majors 2024

## (Total Enrollment 14,003)

## Highlights of 4 of the Top Majors at the University of South Alabama

| 1. Nursing - https://www.southalabama.edu/colleges/con/ | |
|---|---|

| | |
|---|---|
| What skills are taught in the course work? | Clinical skills, patient care, communication, leadership, and healthcare management |
| Are there project-based classes? Required/supported/facilitated internships? Service-learning opportunities? Unique/separate career centers? | Clinical Rotations - Nursing students are required to complete clinical rotations in local hospitals, providing hands-on experience. Service-Learning Opportunities - Partnerships with local healthcare organizations for volunteer work. Project-Based Classes - Nursing students often engage in research projects and community health initiatives. |
| How do students most often find their jobs? | Many students secure employment through partnerships with local hospitals or the USA Health System |
| 2. Biomedical Sciences - https://www.southalabama.edu/colleges/alliedhealth/biomedical/ | |

| | |
|---|---|
| What skills are taught in the course work? | Students develop strong analytical and critical thinking skills, which are crucial for problem-solving in biomedical fields. They also gain proficiency in laboratory techniques and scientific research, enabling them to analyze data and conduct experiments effectively. |
| Are there project-based classes? Required/supported/facilitated internships? Service-learning opportunities? Unique/separate career centers? | • Students in this program often engage in project-based learning, particularly in laboratory courses where hands-on experience is emphasized. Faculty-led research opportunities are also available, allowing students to apply theoretical knowledge to real-world problems.<br>• Internships are highly supported within the program. The department encourages students to seek internships in local hospitals, research labs, or pharmaceutical companies, providing valuable work experience. Many students secure internships through the university's partnerships with healthcare facilities in the Mobile area and beyond. |
| How do students most often find their jobs? | The proximity to medical facilities like USA Health provides a rich environment for job placement in Alabama. |

| 3. Business Administration - https://www.southalabama.edu/colleges/mcob/management/generalbusiness.html | |
| --- | --- |
| What skills are taught in the course work? | Financial analysis, strategic management, marketing, entrepreneurship, and leadership. |
| Are there project-based classes? Required/supported/facilitated internships? Service-learning opportunities? Unique/separate career centers? | Internships - Business students are encouraged to participate in internships with companies like Regions Bank, local startups, and government agencies. Service-Learning Projects -Community engagement projects offer students experience working with local businesses. Career Services - The Mitchell College of Business has a dedicated career center that offers resume reviews, interview prep, and job placement services. |
| How do students most often find their jobs? | Many students secure jobs through networking events and internships. |

## 4. Biology (My Major) - https://www.southalabama.edu/colleges/artsandsci/biology /

| What skills are taught in the course work? | <ul><li>Analytical and critical thinking, scientific research methods, and lab techniques.</li><li>Communication skills for presenting scientific findings and writing research papers.</li><li>Proficiency in data analysis using statistical software, which is critical for conducting biological research.</li></ul> |
|---|---|

Are there project-based classes?
Required/supported/facilitated internships?
Service-learning opportunities? Unique/separate
career centers?

- Several biology courses include lab components where students engage in research and experiments. These project-based classes offer hands-on experience with real-world biological issues and problem-solving.
- Capstone research projects, where students conduct independent research under the guidance of a faculty mentor, preparing them for post-graduate work or professional roles in the sciences.
- The biology program facilitates internships at local organizations, research labs, and environmental agencies. These internships provide

| | |
|---|---|
| | practical experience in biological research, healthcare, and conservation.<br>• Fieldwork opportunities are available in collaboration with organizations like the Dauphin Island Sea Lab, which offers marine biology experiences.<br>• The department also supports service-learning projects, encouraging students to participate in community-based research or ecological preservation efforts |
| How do students most often find their jobs? | • Many students find their post-grad jobs through faculty connections, internships, and local research institutions like the Dauphin Island Sea Lab.<br>• Networking events, job fairs, and alumni connections through the university are key pathways for securing positions in fields such as medicine, environmental science, and biotechnology. |

## Conclusion -

- The University of South Alabama takes a comprehensive approach to preparing students for successful careers by combining academics with

practical, hands-on experiences. Through a range of degree programs, project-based coursework, internships, and service-learning opportunities, students are equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to thrive in their chosen fields. Career development services, such as personalized career consulting, career fairs, and industry-specific resources, further enhance students' ability to connect with employers and secure meaningful job opportunities.

# Appendix C: Community Project Proposals

# SRC Civic Life Map: "Invested to Stay: Civic Strategy for Retaining Alabama's Young Leaders"

Vision/Summary:

Alabama loses over half of its college graduates within five years—a trend that threatens local leadership pipelines and long-term community health. The Student Retention Council Civic Life Map offers a tangible strategy to reverse this by connecting young professionals with meaningful civic and service opportunities across the state. By mapping out key civic, political, and

service-oriented organizations, this project gives local leaders a tool to promote engagement, address common barriers (such as lack of awareness, time, or cost), and foster long-term connections. Civic engagement becomes not just a community value but a workforce strategy.

Background:

Young professionals and college students often struggle to find clear entry points into civic and leadership groups. Despite their interest in service and community engagement, they may perceive membership fees, time commitments, or a lack of accessible information as obstacles to involvement.

Research shows that civic engagement enhances social capital, which, as Robert Putnam describes, "makes us smarter, healthier, safer, richer, and better able to govern a just and stable democracy." However, small and midsize municipalities often lack clear strategies to integrate younger demographics into existing service organizations. By providing a structured map of engagement opportunities, we help convert interest into action.

Over 50% of Alabama college graduates leave the state within five years. The Civic Life Map is a targeted effort to counteract this trend by offering young people clear ways to connect with their community and develop lasting professional and civic ties.

Rather than requiring new infrastructure, this project builds on resources already present in Alabama's towns and cities. Public municipal directories, youth councils, civic service models, and leadership networks can all inform how communities structure and sustain their engagement pathways. By aligning these with the needs and interests of young professionals, communities create a more inviting and accessible civic environment.

Community Assets to Highlight:

Our project leverages existing civic and service organizations, highlighting how they can engage young professionals. Community leaders should consider including (these are examples, not specific recommendations endorsed by the SRC. Each community should consider their existing assets and specific needs):

Service Organizations:

Habitat for Humanity, Food Banks, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Humane Societies

Political Engagement Groups:

League of Women Voters, Local Political Parties, Chamber of Commerce Public Affairs Councils

Civic/Professional development organizations:

Rotary Clubs, Junior Leagues, Leadership Councils

Local businesses and universities:

Providing meeting spaces, sponsorships for student memberships, or internship connections

Municipal infrastructure and resources:

Use tools such as the Alabama League of Municipalities directory to identify civic groups and leaders; adapt successful youth engagement programs supported by ALM; align language and outcomes with widely used municipal development frameworks

By mapping these organizations and their contacts, community leaders will have a practical resource to guide young professionals toward involvement.

Project Plan:

Create a Civic Engagement Task Force

Assemble a working group including economic developers, university reps, city officials, and civic leaders.

Identify a lead organization (e.g., Chamber of Commerce or Rotary Club) to manage the project.

Identify and Map Civic Groups

Use public directories and municipal data to locate and contact civic groups and local leaders

Document key info:

Organization names, missions, contact points, meeting schedules, youth involvement opportunities

Create a regional map in both print and digital formats.

Address Barriers to Engagement

Work with local organizations to establish scholarship-based membership programs for students and young professionals.

Promote flexible involvement options (short-term projects, remote participation, mentorship programs)

Develop Outreach and Awareness Initiatives

Create a digital hub or printed guide featuring the SRC Civic Life Map

Partner with universities and local businesses to distribute materials

Host engagement fairs where young professionals can meet organization leaders

Align awareness campaigns with community events or regional initiatives that promote local pride and investment

Suggested Event Sample: Civic Engagement Kickoff Fair

Opening remarks from a  town's Mayor or other local leaders

Organization booths with sign-up sheets

Speed networking sessions between students and civic mentors

Door prizes or food trucks to increase attendance

Sustainability and Future Growth

Encourage mentorship programs between established civic leaders and young professionals.

Engage economic development leaders to integrate civic involvement into workforce retention strategies.

Use public communications platforms (e.g., newsletters, bulletins) to share outcomes and invite new participants.

Allow communities to update and maintain the map annually

Example from Another Community:

*In Auburn, collaboration between Auburn University and the Auburn Chamber of Commerce has produced successful engagement strategies through initiatives like the Auburn Young Professionals (AYP) program and university-supported Habitat for Humanity projects. AYP connects professionals aged 21 to 40 with leadership and service opportunities, while Auburn students have contributed directly to community development by building homes and volunteering alongside local organizations ([Auburn Chamber](), [CADC Auburn]()). This type of intentional, cross-sector collaboration is a strong example of how communities can actively retain students post-graduation. It could be replicated elsewhere with support from statewide bodies such as the Alabama Higher Education Partnership and the Alabama Talent and Student Retention Council, which may serve as coordinating or funding partners for similar efforts.*

Implementation Tools & Resources:

Sample invitation email for civic organizations

Social media caption template promoting young professional involvement

Editable Civic Map spreadsheet template

Checklist for mayors/city councils:

Identify 5+ local civic/service orgs

Meet with focus group of young professionals about barriers and the specific needs of each community

Schedule and host a Civic Engagement Fair

Share Civic Map via Chamber and local social media

How SRC and Statewide Partners Can Help:

The SRC can offer direct support to local communities by:

Helping research and map civic organizations

Assisting with event planning

(e.g., civic fairs, speaker panels)

Offering editable templates and planning toolkits

Coordinating peer-to-peer learning with other communities

In addition, statewide organizations such as the Alabama Higher Education Partnership and the Student Retention Council may serve as collaborators by:

Promoting campus-community partnerships

Supporting pilot programs that replicate models similar to Auburn's

Connecting institutions of higher education to civic engagement pipelines

Conclusion:

The SRC Civic Life Map is a scalable and actionable tool for community leaders looking to engage young professionals in civic service. By highlighting existing organizations and assets, addressing barriers to engagement, and promoting intergenerational collaboration, we create a model that enhances community connectedness and strengthens local leadership pipelines, and—critically—helps retain Alabama's emerging talent.

By drawing from the work and infrastructure already present in Alabama's municipal ecosystem, this project ensures that community leaders have informed, accessible, and adaptable models for civic engagement. Investing in these pathways today will help cultivate a more vibrant, civically connected Alabama for the future. This initiative does not ask communities to reinvent themselves. Instead, it invites them to reconnect the assets they already have—civic groups, local leaders, and young people eager to serve—into a shared strategy for long-term belonging and state retention.

# Topic/Idea: Showcasing and Planning Community Events to Reach Young Professionals

Vision/Summary:

This project will promote the Alabama Travel Events Calendar

([https://alabama.travel/festivals-and-events](https://alabama.travel/festivals-and-events)) as a go-to resource for showcasing events and opportunities happening all over the state, especially those that appeal to recent college graduates and young adults. The vision of this project is to help shift the perception of Alabama as a place full of opportunity, where graduates can build a life and a career, particularly in smaller and rural communities. In the short term, the project will help community leaders connect with college students and young professionals by encouraging them to attend local events and experience what life in Alabama has to offer beyond their campuses. This project will focus on spreading the word and promoting the calendar through social media and direct outreach to colleges and universities, working with Alabama Travel and local partners to make sure the calendar is not only known, but used as a tool to attract and keep young talent in the state.

Background:

*Why this will work:*

Young people want more than just a job after graduation—they're looking for community, connection, and a good quality of life. This project works because it highlights the events and experiences already happening in Alabama that make towns vibrant and appealing. By promoting the Alabama Travel calendar through social media and campus outreach, we help recent graduates see what's available right here at home.

*Where we noticed a gap:*

There's a disconnect between perception and reality. Many young people think they need to leave Alabama to find exciting experiences, when in fact, communities across the state are already hosting great events. The issue isn't the lack of events—it's that they aren't being seen by the people most likely to benefit from them.

*Why it matters:*

Social opportunities play a major role in where young professionals decide to live. Events give them a reason to explore, connect, and picture a future in a community. A well-promoted, easy-to-access calendar helps towns showcase their personality and attract young talent looking for more than just a job.

Community Assets to Highlight:

This project relies on the pre-existing network of local events, festivals, and traditions that already exist across Alabama's communities. Key partners include Alabama Travel, local communities, and colleges and universities across the state. Alabama Travel provides the platform, the events calendar, that serves as a statewide hub for promoting what's happening in each town. Communities provide the events, local opportunities, and unique experiences that help showcase each place. Universities help connect students and recent graduates to those experiences, both through campus communication channels and student organizations. Community leaders should consider involving local tourism offices, chambers of commerce, arts councils, festival organizers, college outreach staff, and anyone who contributes to the energy and visibility of their town and how those groups can help aid what makes their community unique and attractive to young professionals.

Project Plan:

To put this plan into action, a community leader would start by ensuring their local events are submitted to and listed on the Alabama Travel events calendar. From there, they would work with local event organizers, tourism boards, and university partners to identify which events have the most potential to appeal to college students and young professionals (ex. music festivals, art walks, downtown nights, food truck rallies, etc.)

Leaders should also connect with nearby colleges and universities to promote those events directly to students through campus newsletters, student organizations, alumni networks, and career centers. Social media will be key, and communities should create shareable content to help with promotion.

The Alabama Higher Education Partnership would work closely with Alabama Travel to ensure that the events calendar reaches the right audience, particularly recent graduates and young professionals. Using their university connections, the Student Retention Council would help spread the word about the calendar to universities across Alabama, working with campus communication offices, career services, and student organizations to promote the events. Additionally, the Student Retention Council would also help connect all of the key partners in this project through existing and new connections.

Conclusion:

The goal of this project will be to promote the Alabama Travel Events Calendar as a go-to resource for showcasing events and opportunities happening all over the state, especially those that appeal to recent

college graduates and young adults. By working together with Alabama Travel, local communities, and universities, we can help encourage young people to make Alabama their home after graduation.

# Spaces to Thrive:

## *Bringing the Public to Your Spaces Through Community, Connection, and Consistency*

Brian Niswonger (The University of Alabama in Huntsville)

Vision Summary:

In partnering with the Student Retention Council, we hope to provide the information, guidance, and perspective needed to help attract young professionals to your town. Through public spaces, recognition, residency, and foot traffic in small towns can all be improved within the demographic of graduating college students. In enhancing and sharing public spaces, these individuals can experience the culture and history of your town, allowing them to find connections with their peers and neighbors. Fostering a community welcoming to college students leads them to develop a greater sense of belonging to the culture of your town - making them more likely to consider it a post-graduate destination.

Background:



Through our research, Cohort 2 of the Student Retention Council found that young professionals are highly interested in living within communities that provide four main categories within quality of life: public spaces, community connections, entertainment, and public perception. Public spaces are unique as they can be molded to help facilitate the other three categories, making them a crucial concept to focus on. Public spaces additionally hold a physical presence within the towns and communities, directly presenting venues for these opportunities to be explored.

Graduates are often curious about the opportunities and experiences within a town or municipality. The development of these spaces, whether within the realm of outdoor recreation, dining, commerce, transportation, or more, will all help shape the image of your town into a unique and attractive place for these individuals to call home. It is also important to note the importance of infrastructure directly outside employment and residential. Locations like coffee shops, libraries, and recreational spaces are often described as "third

places." The term coined by American sociologist, Ray Oldenburg, describes the places outside of the home and the workplace where individuals can go to socialize, relax, and connect within their community. As noted by Madeleine Roberts-Ganim from the University of Chicago[1], "[Third Places] can act as a meet-up spot for friends, a place to strike up a conversation with a stranger, a performance venue, or even a second office for some." These locations are the ones that often facilitate the moments that allow new residents or inquiring individuals to find a sense of belonging to a location. By focusing on creating opportunities for young professionals to experience your town through the third places offered, they will be more inclined to consider it as a destination for possible employment or residence.

In our interviews with students across the fourteen public universities that the SRC represents, we found that many expressed the idea that Alabama has a unique and special quality compared to other states. Despite having growing metropolitan and urban areas, Alabamians tend to have a slower way of life - often expressing interest in more community and recreational-based experiences. While some young professionals are looking for a fast-paced life, filled with bright lights and big cities, many expressed the desire to have a fun place to live, work, and engage in. Similarly, it has been noted in a study by Credit Karma, that 40% of Generation-Z say that they are willing to spend more money on experiences than necessities[2]. Public spaces within your community that provide experiences, such as festivals, farmers markets, music venues, and museums can act as a starting piece for creating tangible ways that individuals can interact with their town. Locations such as amphitheaters, parks, squares, and concert halls can all serve as flexible and variable locations to host such events. In developing these venues, one can tailor their city to fit these desires, crafting an environment that allows for work, life, and play.

Community Assets to highlight:

In providing and promoting public spaces with experiences, it is important to communicate with the correct individuals. By partnering with groups such as a local arts council, music association, or film association one can bring art and historical experiences for graduates to interact with. Similarly, by promoting parks and recreation, cuisine, and commerce, individuals can connect with not just their physical surroundings, but especially the people that comprise the community. Providing service opportunities through groups such as the Rotary Club helps young professionals interact with their community firsthand.

In highlighting community assets, it is crucial to consider individual needs, wants, and progress in your town. We understand that there may already be current projects that fall under these suggestions. Rather, we want to identify opportunities in which you can utilize pre-existing projects and spaces to capture the interest of graduating college students through meaningful community interactions.

Project Plan:

*Identify Opportunities:*

Because every community is unique in aspects that are crucial to highlight, the approach to each may need to be slightly different. However, identifying opportunities to emphasize culture, community, and connections is the first step of the process. Whether your town has a rich history of agriculture, arts, or athletics, tailoring projects toward the identifying characteristics can help create a marketable image. Utilizing public squares as a facilitator for bigger community events can serve this purpose directly. Events such as small business block parties, a community chalk art showcase (see right for 'Chalktoberfest' hosted in Marietta, GA), and farmers' markets can create community engagement and interest while promoting local talent and encouraging young professionals to get involved.



In utilizing pre-existing spaces, the approach should be in the mindset of using the area to create new and exciting experiences for graduating students. Whether it be partnering with shops in a downtown square, offering student discounts, or holding college student nights that give the chance for individuals to meet up and connect with their peers while participating in the event hosted, having events that prioritize their interests can help create pull. One key example I still personally think about is the college student night that was hosted at the Huntsville Art Museum. At the event, entry was free if a valid student ID was shown, complimentary dinner was provided, and live music was performed. This event had significant attendance and is something that directly got me interested in further exploring the various spaces around the city.

If the opportunity presents itself, and funding is available, refurbishing older spaces can also serve a valuable function. Some examples of this revitalization can be seen in North Alabama with locations such as Lowe Mill (seen to the left), a former textile mill, Campus 805, a former high school, and Stovehouse, a former stove factory. These locations now are postcard experiences from Huntsville and serve as a unique piece of history and current culture. If your town has spaces that would otherwise be demolished, consider possible renovations that could turn them into commerce spaces.



*Engage with the SRC:*

At the Student Retention Council, we are students first and foremost. This allows us to share perspectives with those around us on our campuses. Engagement with the SRC enables communication between community leaders and young professionals in a way that can help gauge interest, advise in marketing, and consult on directions to head for future projects. By relaying information on what our peers are showing interest in, we can act almost as a market research

group for your town! Similarly, as projects and events are beginning to be implemented, we can relay back to graduating and near-graduating students, encouraging them to bring their friends and experience your town.

*Creating Consistency and Communication:*

After implementing ways to utilize your public spaces to create unique experiences, it is important to have a somewhat consistent schedule of when you will be doing events catered to the young professional demographic. While many pilot events can be great in gauging interest and making initial impressions with students, the follow-up events will help drive staying power. Consider how often these will take place. Will the event be a yearly event tied to a calendar holiday, or will it be a monthly event on the same day each month? Even having consistency weekly, with a certain day of the week being a discount day, can set a standard of understanding for these individuals that if they missed the first time - it may not be too long to wait until the next outing!

Similarly, it is crucial to communicate the information, photos, and promotional materials for these events on a social media platform. Having a dedicated page for what's happening in your community can help students follow along and imagine what it may be like to live locally. Accounts such as Huntsville Blast and Athens Alabama Main Street, @hvilleblast and @athensalmainstreet on instagram, do a great job at showcasing events, shops, and members of the community. When events are coming up, sharing the details of such, as well as any photos that may have been taken from previous visits, on that page can serve as a one-stop digital destination for them to understand what the event is all about. This can serve as a much more nuanced advertisement than a physical flier or billboard as students can directly see what they can experience if they come to the event.

Concluding Thoughts:

Public spaces hold a critical role in the success of attracting young professionals to your community. With Generation-Z preferring to spend money on experiences, crafting experiences highlighting amenities and infrastructure is valuable. In emphasizing arts, culture, and history, students can find connection and belonging with their friends and peers, creating a lasting impact on their post-graduate destination decisions. There is no 'one size fits all' approach to building out public spaces, which allows room for collaboration and creativity in making the opportunities unique to your community. We hope that in partnership, the Student Retention Council can help bring interest and foot traffic to your town. By sharing what you can offer in places to live, work, and play, we can help give them confidence and excitement in visiting. Similarly, we can share their feedback, opinions, and concerns with you as developers to help bring their voices directly to the table. Creating a rich culture of experiences through public spaces can help not just build interest in your town, but ultimately create a more well-rounded quality of life, further improving the lives of current and future residents.

*1)* Roberts-Ganim, Madeleine. "Third Places: What Are They and Why Are They Important to American Culture?" *English Language Institute*, The University of Chicago, 1 Nov. 2023, https://esl.uchicago.edu/2023/11/01/third-places-what-are-they-and-why-are-they-important-to-american-culture/.

*2)* "Cost of Living Crisis Spurs 'Failure to Launch' among Gen Z ." *Intuit Credit Karma*, 28 June 2022, www.creditkarma.com/about/commentary/cost-of-living-crisis-spurs-failure-to-launch-among-gen-z.

# Beyond Big Cities

Executive Summary

Rural communities in Alabama hold untapped potential to serve as career launchpads for college students. Despite this, many students overlook or abandon these areas due to limited transportation access, a perceived lack of opportunities, and social disconnect. The Beyond Big Cities initiative is designed to reverse that trend by connecting students from both 2-year and

4-year institutions to meaningful internships and early-career opportunities in rural towns through a regional commuter bus system, strategic industry partnerships, and immersive community engagement models.

This report outlines what attracts students to rural communities, how to facilitate access via transit infrastructure, and what rural employers and civic leaders can do to make their communities more appealing. It includes real-world models, data-backed strategies, and a framework that can be adapted by any Alabama town.

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Section 1: Why Students Leave—and What Brings Them Back

Barriers to Retention

Transportation gaps prevent students from commuting to rural internship sites (ACHE, 2023).

Job visibility is low—students often aren't aware of high-skill roles in rural industries (Brookings, 2023).

Lack of youth social infrastructure deters students from envisioning a long-term future in small towns (Robinson, 2017).

Outdated perceptions of rural life—students associate it with boredom, stagnation, or limited professional growth.

What Attracts Students

Affordable cost of living, especially housing (FuelAL, 2024).

Hands-on experience and leadership opportunities—students report greater autonomy in rural internships (MSU Rural Study, 2020).

Community belonging and impact—small towns provide students with visibility and personal connections that are often missing in cities (CERIC, 2017).

Balance and peace—students cite slower pace and access to nature as boosts to mental wellness.

"It's not that students don't want to stay—it's that they don't see how to." – FuelAL Intern, 2024

## Section 2: The Commuter Bus System

### Vision

Create a regional commuter shuttle system that transports college students to and from rural internship and job sites.

### Design Model

Hub-and-spoke structure linking urban campuses with rural towns.

Stops at major institutions: Alabama State, Auburn, Tuskegee, Wallace CC, Lawson State, etc.

Destination towns: Selma, Demopolis, Troy, Alexander City, and others selected based on employer readiness.

### How It Works

State-funded through ALDOT, ALTRANS, and ADECA mobility grants.

Local employers coordinate schedules with shuttle availability.

Amenities: Wi-Fi, power outlets, and ADA compliance. Flexible scheduling during academic year and summer.

### Comparative Models

Tulane's public service shuttle for interns (Tulane University, 2022).

Chattanooga State & CARTA student routes with local employers (Hechinger Report, 2021).

Rio Hondo College (CA) free passes system.

### Impact Projection

According to pilot projections:

Communities with shuttle access could see a 30–40% increase in student internship participation.

Rural employers get skilled temporary labor, with a potential long-term hire pipeline.

Students save 15–25% on average on commute and housing costs.



Student Preference: Rural vs. Urban Internships



Internship Participation Over Time
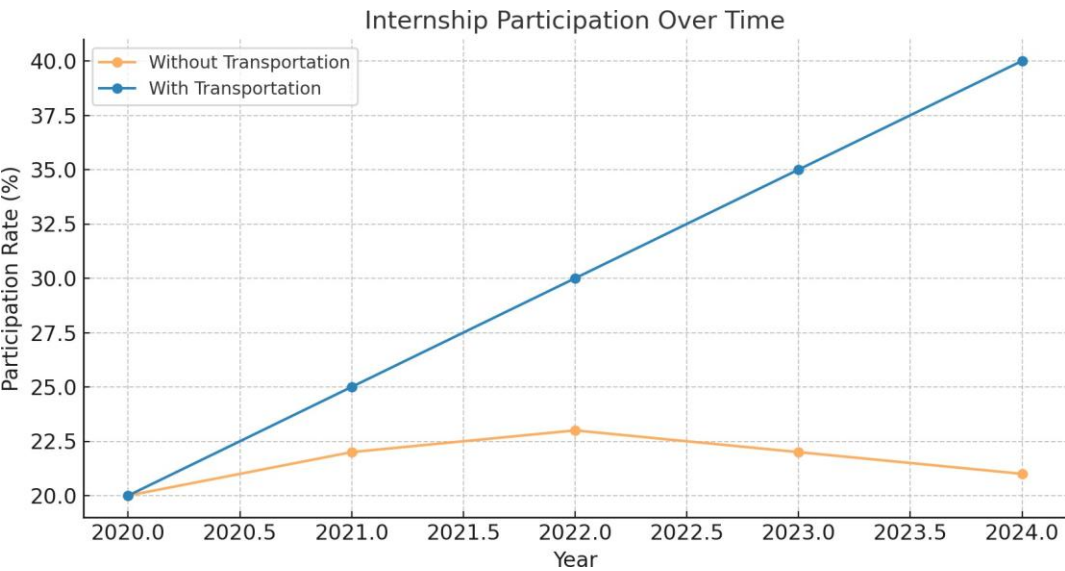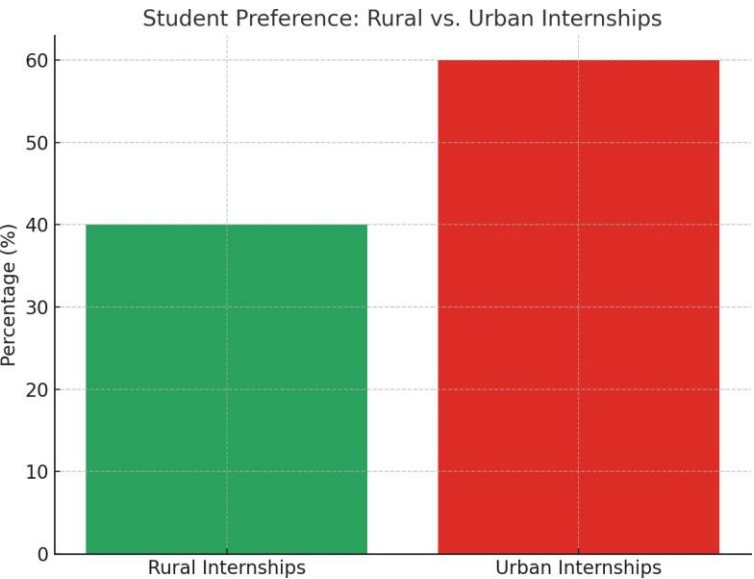
## Section 3: Target Industries and Employers

### Industries That Fit Student Interests and Rural Needs

Healthcare: rural clinics, hospitals, telemedicine startups.

Agribusiness & forestry: co-ops, ag suppliers, land management.

Advanced manufacturing: aerospace parts, automotive suppliers.

Public sector & nonprofits: county governments, schools, libraries.

Digital & remote work: co-working hubs for tech, marketing, or finance.

### Employer Examples

Enviva (Sumter Co.): renewable energy internships in wood pellets.

Jackson Hospital (Montgomery Co.): rural rotations for nursing students.

Catfish Producers of Greene Co.: aquaculture and agribusiness.

Walker County Foundation: nonprofit and communications internships.

"We don't need to convince students rural jobs exist. We need to show them *why those jobs matter.*" – Rural Talent Report, 2022

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## Section 4: Immersive Experience & Student Retention

### Key Elements That Help Interns Stay

Structured work with mentorship

Access to quality housing (or host families)

Built-in social life: local excursions, mixers, cultural events

Integration into community life: public speaking, volunteering, mentoring youth

### Case Studies

Walker County Internship (UA New College): immersive civic internship, 80% of students reported wanting to return.

SECU Fellows Program (NC): paid local government internships, many students stayed post-grad.

FuelAL (Alabama): weekend events that changed student perceptions of the state's job landscape.

"I didn't think I'd ever want to live in Alabama again—but this showed me I was wrong." – FuelAL Intern, 2024

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Section 5: Implementation Timeline

Phase 1 (0–6 months):

Identify pilot cities and college partners

Secure funding (Innovate Alabama, ADECA, private sponsors)

Recruit employers for internships

Launch awareness campaign

Phase 2 (6–18 months):

Deploy 2–3 commuter routes

Place 25–50 interns per region

Document success stories and gather data

Phase 3 (18–36 months):

Expand regionally across SRC areas

Establish permanent job/internship pipelines

Launch return-to-community incentive for graduates

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## Conclusion

The Beyond Big Cities initiative positions rural Alabama not as a last resort, but as a smart first choice. With transportation, internship infrastructure, and community readiness, students will see rural areas as launchpads—not stopgaps.

The opportunity isn't just to help students—it's to revive whole communities with young energy, modern skills, and future leaders.

Let's build this. For students. For Alabama. For what's next.

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# Appendix D: Campus Outreach, Individual Campus Work Summaries