

Prosocial Possibilities

Building tech that builds students' connections



In education and in careers, **relationships drive how students get by and get ahead.** That's always been true.

But in the age of AI, **those connections could disappear—or never form in the first place.**

AI poses fundamental risks to how students form relationships:

- **short term**, AI risks replacing the real people in students' lives—advisors, peers, mentors—with on-demand chatbot help
- **medium term**, AI risks eroding students' comfort with and practice asking other people for help by offering a frictionless alternative
- **long term**, AI risks shrinking the networks of acquaintances and contacts students rely on to find opportunities, as students have fewer help-seeking conversations with loved ones and strangers alike

Inside schools, edtech could make these risks worse. **Or it could help overcome them.**

Within the current market dynamics that prize efficiency over connection, **edtech could aid the demise of the very social capital that is critical to students** navigating an education system where relationships drive persistence and a labor market where connections open doors to jobs and promotions.

But what if we flipped that script and built AI-enabled edtech tools that are **prosocial by design?**

What is “prosocial” AI?

WHAT IS “PROSOCIAL”?

prosocial

prō-sō-shel

(adjective)

Prosocial designs put tech in service of human connection, not in place of it. Prosocial tools make it easier to find, reach, and rely on others.

What does this look like in education?

Prosocial edtech can **draw students toward connections** that help them accomplish their goals, choose a path, and **build the networks** they need to get the jobs they want.

That means building edtech optimized for more than just content—and instead building tools that **expand students' access to relationships** and their **ability and confidence to mobilize those relationships**.

To explore the possibilities in this space, we set out to **pilot prosocial designs** with 10 college and career guidance platforms, spanning K–12 through the workforce.



These designs were **grounded in empirical research** on social capital development and **tested with student feedback**.

This wasn't about making edtech tools into social media tools. It was about carefully considering **how to create social features and functionalities anchored** in who students are, how they reach out for help, and who can support their education and career goals.

The goal of these prosocial features was to **use online tools to support offline, authentic connection.**

What founders said...

“Prosocial AI is about designing for real-life interactions.”

Nate, Roadtrip Nation

“Prosocial AI's job isn't to send the text. It's to help a student see they're already surrounded by people worth texting.”

Julia, ESAI

“Authenticity was top-of-mind for students, unprompted. Students worried about feeling transactional. That shapes everything about how we design outreach scaffolding.”

Sasha, REACH Pathways

Our cohort of 10 edtech providers received training from our team across **6 evidence-based design principles** on how young people form networks

Align to
identities
& goals

Cultivate
pro-social
mindsets

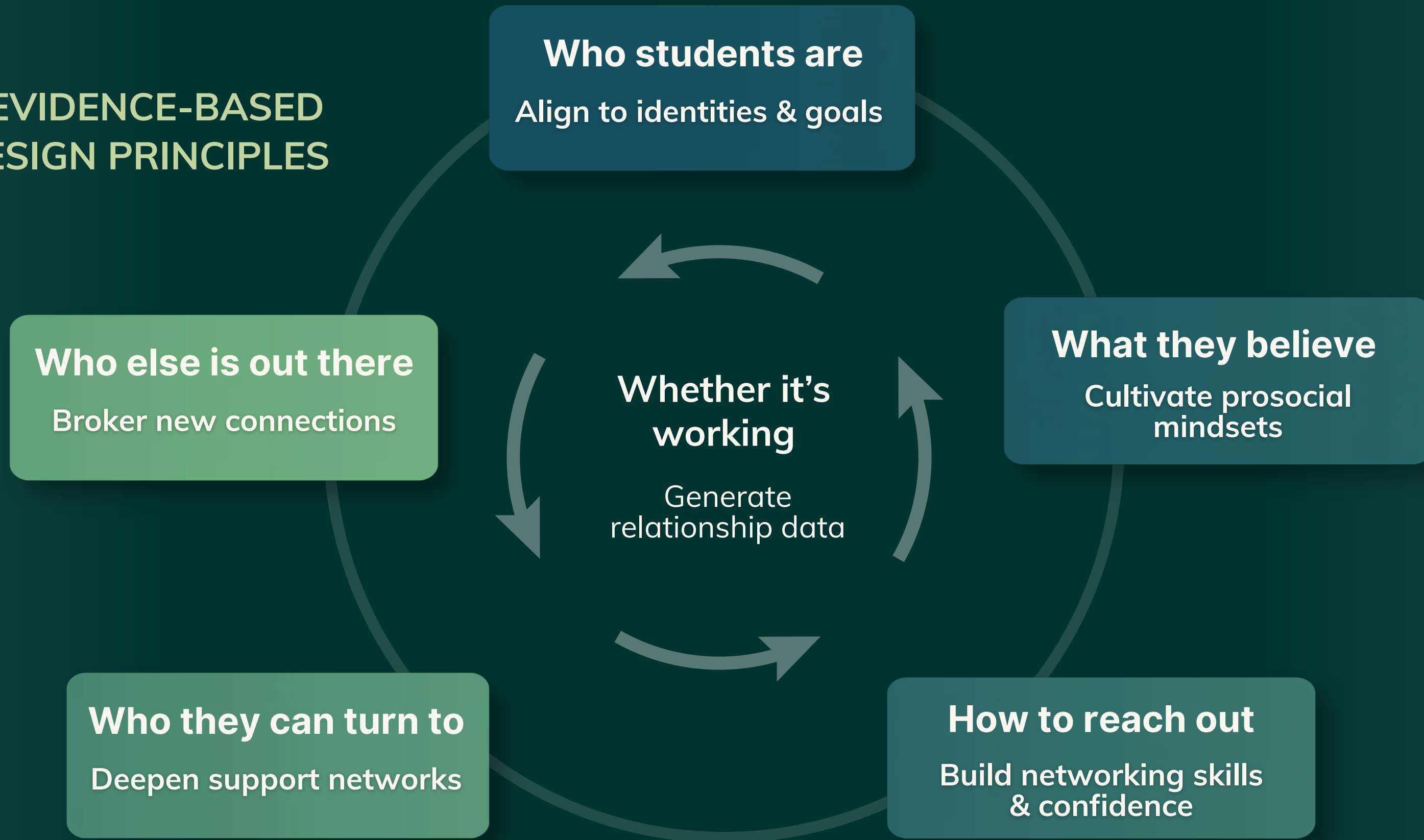
Build
networking skills
& confidence

Deepen
support
networks

Broker
new
connections

Generate
relationship
data

6 EVIDENCE-BASED DESIGN PRINCIPLES



From there, each platform designed a new feature or functionality to **support their users' access to networks, ability to build and mobilize networks, or both**. Then, they conducted rapid-cycle pilots with small cohorts of student users to understand what was working and what needed further development.

Here's what they built—and
what they learned.



Roadtrip Nation

Conducting Career Conversations

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ROADTRIP NATION

Pilot

Roadtrip Nation is a digital platform with videos featuring professionals describing their career journeys. As part of their new virtual roadtrip career exploration and planning tool, the Roadtrip Nation team piloted a **career conversations tool** that taught students about the importance of networking and provided an AI simulation for students to practice setting up and conducting a career conversation with a professional.

The Virtual Roadtrip

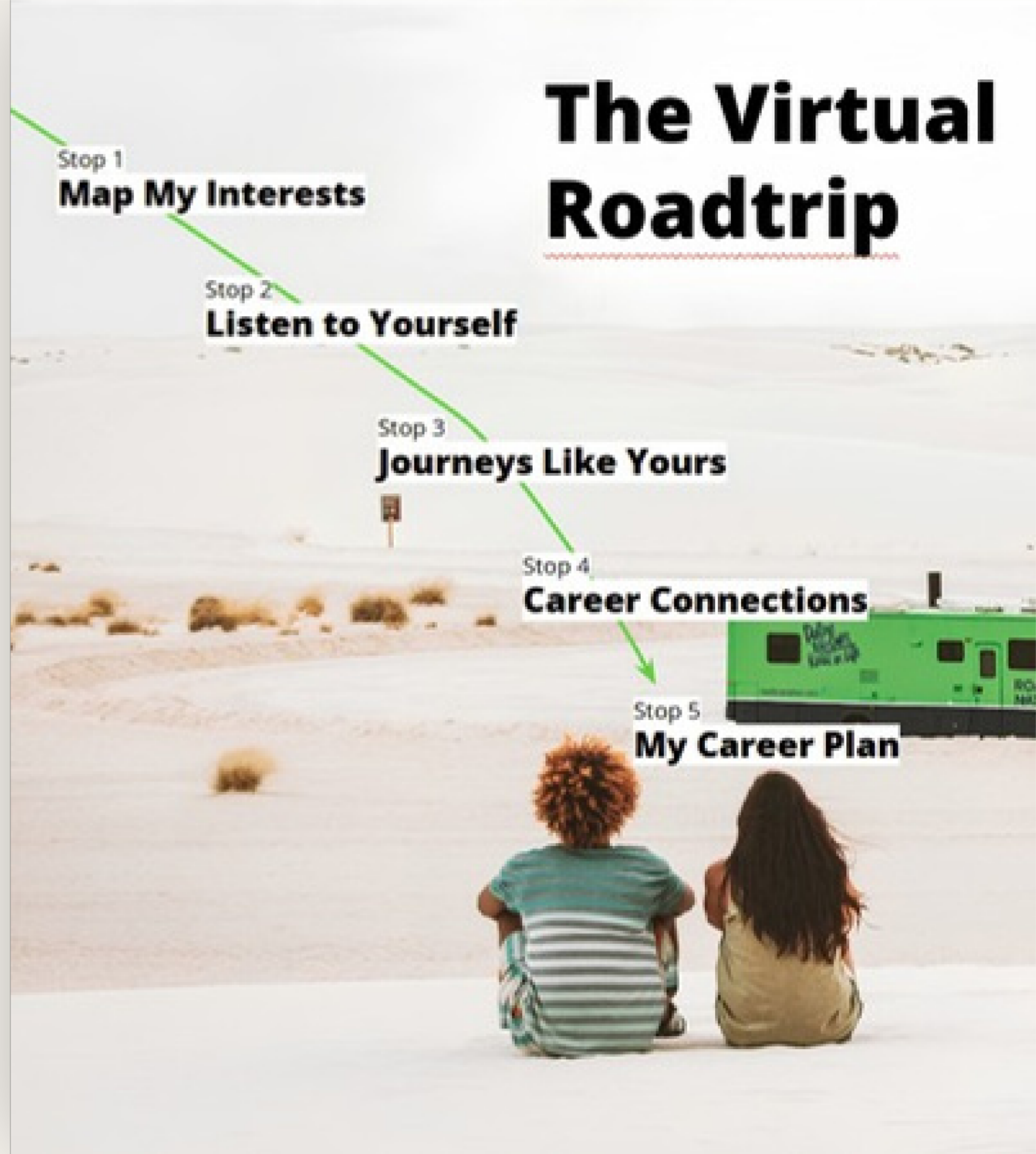
Stop 1
Map My Interests

Stop 2
Listen to Yourself

Stop 3
Journeys Like Yours

Stop 4
Career Connections

Stop 5
My Career Plan



ROADTRIP NATION OUTCOMES

6.7% point increase in students' self-reported confidence booking a career conversation after using the career conversations practice tool

Confidence

Students reported a **4.2 percentage point increase in feeling confident** leading a career conversation with a real professional.

Interaction

With the addition of the career conversations practice tool, users demonstrated **higher depth of interaction** (from 20.76 to 26.99 views per user).

Engagement

With the addition of the career conversations practice tool, users demonstrated and **increased total engagement** per user (from 8m 28s to 11m 10s per user).

What students said...

“By listening to another career journey and struggles they face along the way, you can learn from their mistakes and make sure to not do them yourself.”

“I learned that it's not easy talking to someone from a certain field you're interested in. But once you get used to it, you can be braver in your interviews.”

ESAI

ESAI

Finding the People In Your Corner

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ESAI

Pilot

ESAI is a platform that supports students navigating the college admissions process by providing a roadmap and AI-enabled tools that help with each task. The ESAI team piloted a **network-mapping feature within its existing Activity Planner** tool, prompting students to identify “people in their corner” who could support their extracurricular interests and activities.

NETWORK MAPPING • ACTIVITY PLANNER

Think about your activities and interests. Is there anyone (**#Person In Your Corner**) who supports you or knows something about this area?

Who comes to mind?

Ms. Jenney

How do you know them?

Teacher — AP Chemistry

Describe your relationship with your **#Person in Your Corner** and how they support you

Examples of support: encourages me / gives me advice / opens doors & shares opportunities / helps me improve / listens & believes in me

Ms. Jenney was my AP Chemistry teacher and helped build my confidence in doing labs and science experiments. She is someone I go to for STEM support.

What's one small way you might follow up with them?

An important step in building your social network is to give thanks and keep the relationship reciprocal!

Send a thank-you note about my last lab

Press Enter

Send

ESAI OUTCOMES

10% of students identified their counselor as the person in their corner

Engagement

The feature yielded **high engagement** with a **90.8% scroll depth, 12-minute average session,** and **43% return** users. Among those users, **56.7% submitted the form** identifying people in their corner.

Connection Types

When asked to identify people in their corner, a few types of connections were most common: **family and teacher connections together accounted for 40%** of selections. Only **4% selected their peers.**

Follow-up Actions

After identifying a connection, students selected how they would follow up.

- **53% say thank you**
- **18% share something I'm working on**
- **14% ask one question**
- **14% no follow-up right now**



Viacela

From Sparks to a Constellation of Supporters

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VIACELA

Pilot

Viacela is an advising platform that helps high school students explore their purpose and identify the “sparks” that interest and motivate them. The Viacela team piloted a **“constellation” feature alongside a mentor directory** that would allow students to reach out to and build relationships with mentors aligned to those sparks.



Insight Hub

Student

Personalized for your interests



For You



Browse Questions



Find Mentors

My Constellation

A curated set of mentors aligned to this student.



J C.



VIACELA OUTCOMES

33% of students utilized the “Spark” feature

Reaching Out

Only **2%** (n=2) of students in the pilot ended up **reaching out** to mentors with questions.

Mentors

None of the students (n=109) **added a mentor** to their constellation. In other words, students had sparks but were hesitant to connect them to people they didn't know.

Backgrounds and Interests

Students may want access to a broader base of mentors who have similar backgrounds and interests. Viacela plans to foster more partnerships with mentor organizations and explore its own recruitment strategy for mentors.

VIACELA

What students said...

“It’s hard to start a new conversation with someone, but having an easy way to ask a question when something comes up helps.”

“The first conversation feels so formal. I wish it felt more like a normal conversation.”



Uprooted Academy

Identifying a Community and Its Superpowers

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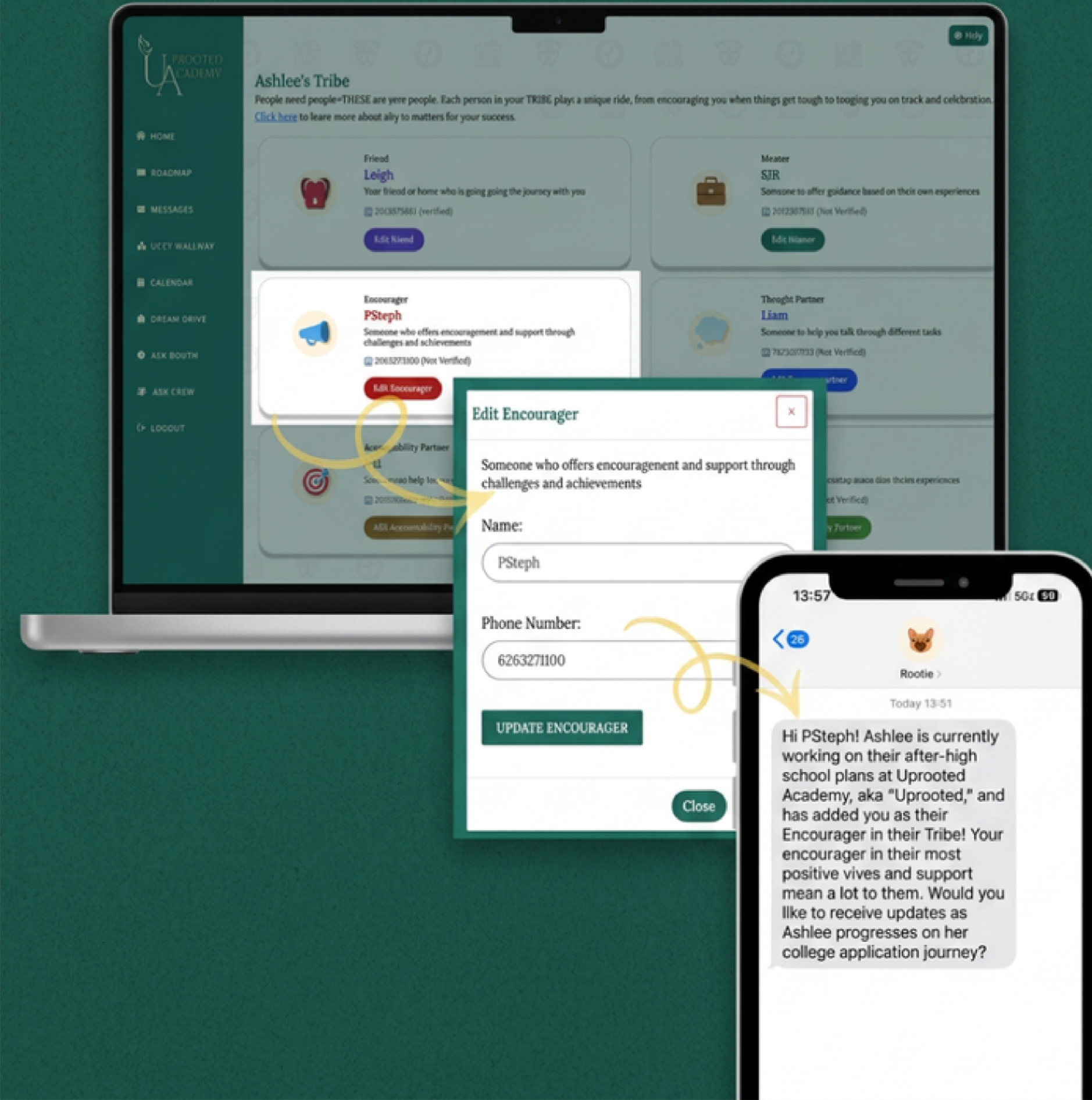
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UPROOTED ACADEMY

Pilot

Uprooted Academy is an AI-powered college access platform designed to support first-gen college students' wellbeing and college application journey. The Uprooted team piloted **an outreach function to nudge students** to identify and reach out to their support network, as well as a **new data feature to ask the members of students' support networks to identify their 'superpowers'**—i.e., the areas they think they can be especially helpful to students' postsecondary success.



UPROOTED ACADEMY OUTCOMES

100%

of the members of students' support networks added their superpowers within 48 hours of receiving the text prompt

Nudges

Students received multiple nudges over the course of a week. Across the two nudges, **100% relogged in, but only a quarter logged in both times**, suggesting that students need multiple outreaches to stay engaged.

Superpowers

100% of students added 3 or more individuals to their tribe. Every student added at least one parent, with mentors as the second most prevalent connection type. The superpower response rate suggests that students' existing communities are primed to engage and support young people's college journeys.

Support

Once students were prompted to think more concretely, they began to realize that support could look different from what they initially assumed. For example, some students recognized that a family member could help review an essay, or a coach could provide encouragement around deadlines.



Overgrad

Turning Graduates Into Guides

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OVERGRAD

Pilot

Overgrad is a college and career planning platform designed to support students through college and into early career. The Overgrad team piloted an **alumni directory feature** designed to help schools keep track of their alumni and for current students to connect with recent alumni attending colleges or working in the industries they're interested in.

● ● ● overgrad · professional network

Alumni from your school

Vetted by your counselor. Available to meet.

All paths

Medicine

Law

Psychology

JR

Jasmine R. · Pediatrics resident

Roosevelt HS '16 → UCLA → Drexel Med

◆ AI PICK · MATCHES YOUR GOAL

DM

Daniel M. · Public defender

Roosevelt HS '12 → Howard → Georgetown Law

AVAILABLE TO CONNECT

AN

Ana N. · Clinical psychologist

Roosevelt HS '09 → Tufts → Yale

AVAILABLE TO CONNECT

OVERGRAD OUTCOMES

75% of students reported preferring the counselor-brokered introduction model over cold outreach on LinkedIn or email

Outreach preferences

100% of students preferred using the alumni directory form of outreach over LinkedIn.

Comfort reaching out

Profile information density mattered: multiple students wanted richer professional bios, photos, and background stories on alumni to build comfort before requesting an introduction.

Feeling reassured

Students described how knowing that professionals are willing to connect removes the primary barrier to outreach: fear of rejection or bothering someone. The tool's "available to connect" status was described as "welcoming" and "reassuring."

OVERGRAD

What students said...

"LinkedIn sucks. Nobody actually wants to meet anybody there."

"AI help should be a starter point. Something to edit, not send."



Climb Together

Scaling Career Chats Across Different Contexts

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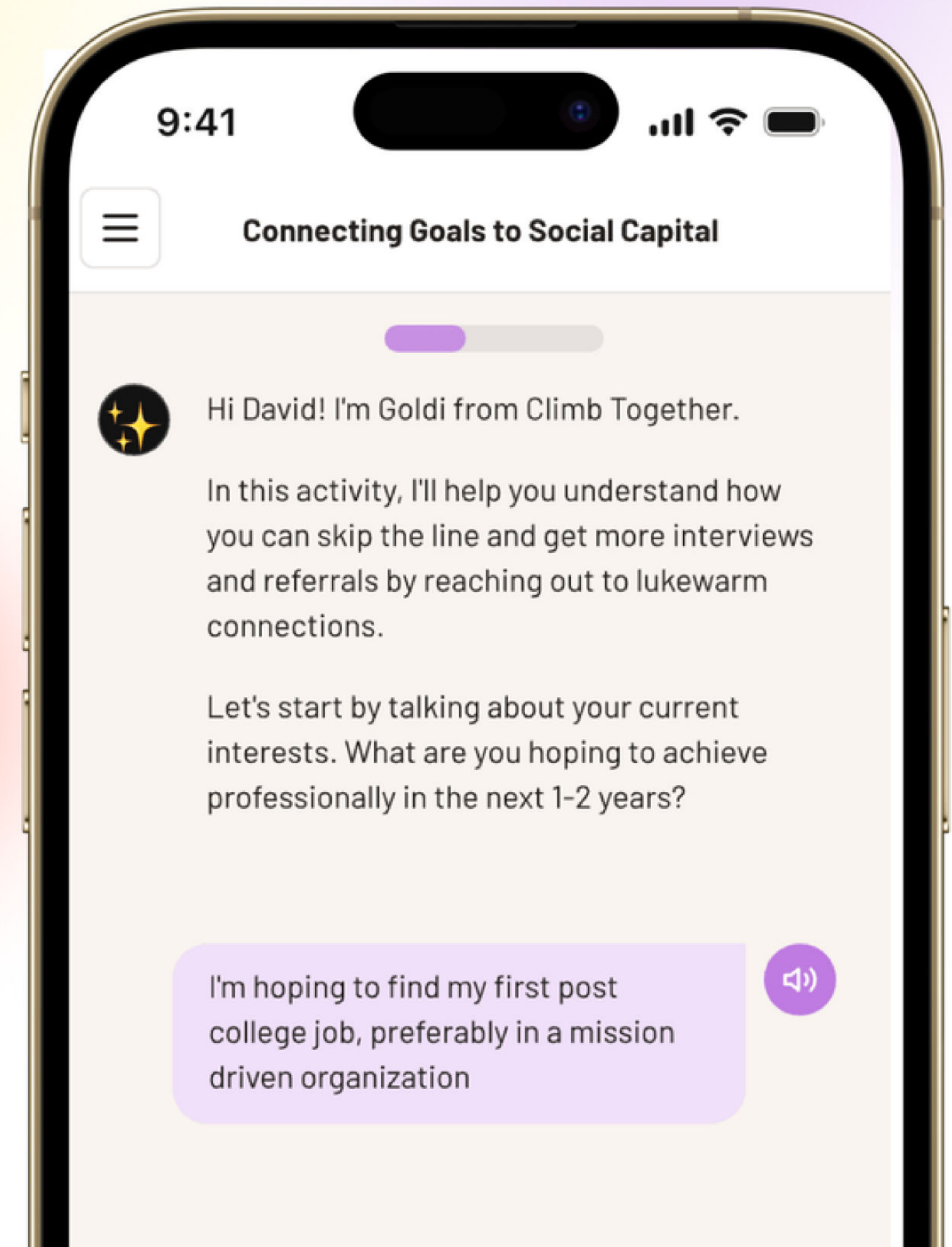
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CLIMB TOGETHER

Pilot

Climb Together is a platform that teaches students and job seekers how to develop professional networks. The Climb Together team piloted an **AI-powered voice-enabled career chat coaching tool** called Goldi in different contexts to test what circumstances drove confidence and networking behaviors: (1) after sharing career stories and practicing career conversations with peers, (2) through a career-readiness program with a real-life human cohort, and (3) embedded in interview preparation programming.



CLIMB TOGETHER OUTCOMES

48% of students who practiced with their peers had more confidence in connections as a job search strategy

Confidence

Among students in pilot 1 who practiced with their peers and filled in both pre-/post-survey, **45% felt less awkward** about having networking conversations.

Outreach

Among career-readiness program participants in pilot 2 who completed AI chats, the **number of times they reached out to someone** in their network for career advice, support, or a referral **increased from an average of 1.86 times** (pre-AI practice) **to 2.45 times** (post-AI practice). The number of times they **reached out via LinkedIn** increased from an average of **1.2 times** (pre) to **1.95 times** (post).

Career conversations

Among students in pilot 1, **nine of the 11 students** who completed the 30-day post-survey had a **career conversation with a strong tie**, but none spoke with a new contact. Among participants in pilot 2, the number of **informational interviews conducted increased from an average of 0.9 times** (pre) **to 1.3 times** (post).

CLIMB TOGETHER

What students said...

“On Valentine's Day, a woman complimented my jacket. Normally, I might have just said thanks, but Goldi had given me the confidence to keep the conversation going. It turned out she was a retired professor whose mentor was an anthropologist, which is exactly what I'm studying. In the weeks following, she's loaned me some books and became my mentor for the year.”

“I really appreciated how much the listening aspect aligns with your voice. ...It helps it feel natural to truly set you up for talking in an interview.”



InScribe

Connecting Across a Digital Community

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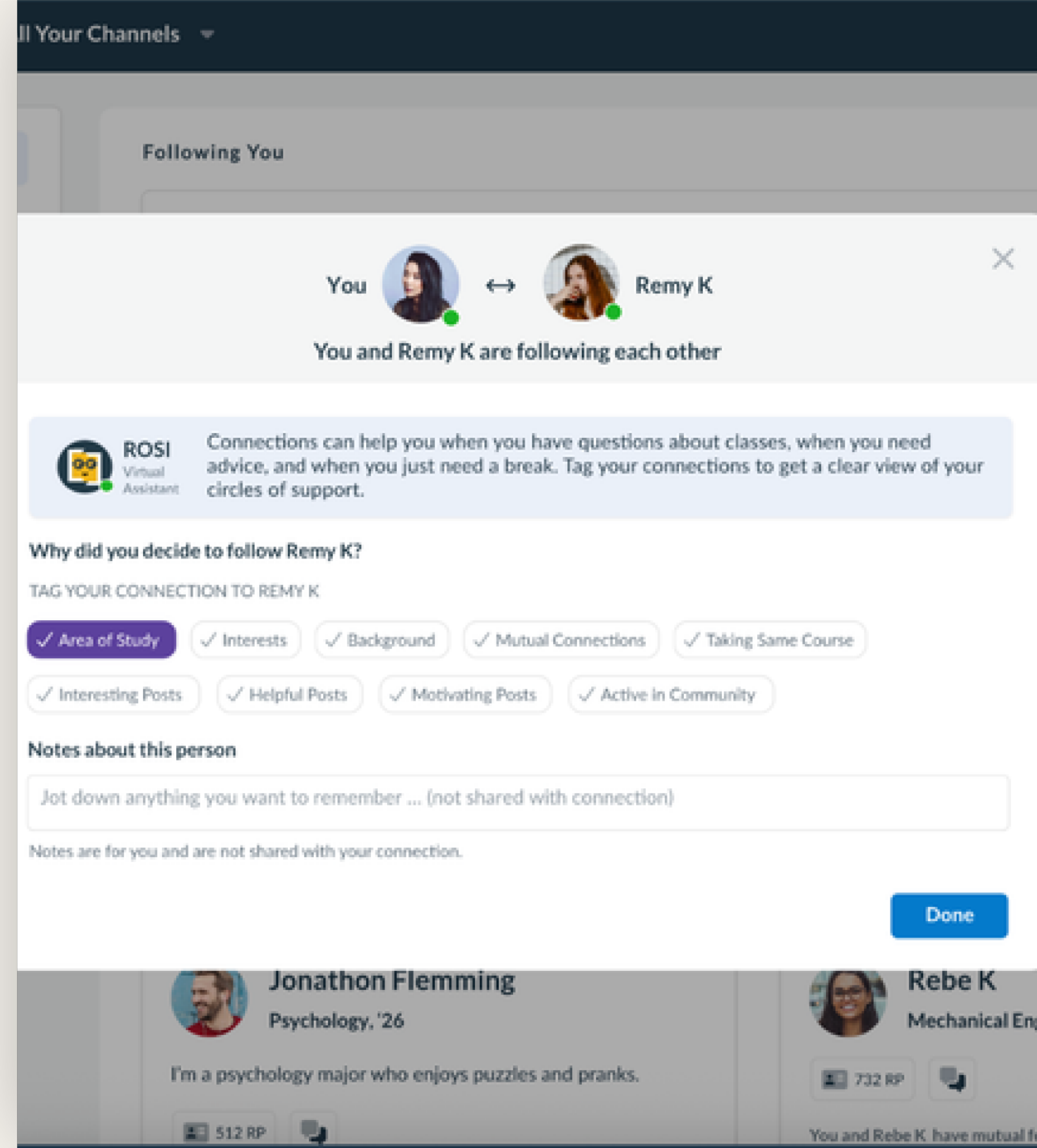
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INSCRIBE

Pilot

InScribe is a digital community that helps institutions scale student support and build belonging to drive persistence. The InScribe team piloted a new feature called **InCircle**, designed to allow students to connect and follow one another's posts on the platform, building their own networks within the broader online community. They piloted the new feature at two colleges.



INSCRIBE OUTCOMES

22.9% point difference between institutional belonging (85.4%) and feeling directly connected to peers (62.5%), highlighting the need for features that strengthen peer connectedness

Feature usage

8.6% of users adopted the new community features at College 1. Adoption at College 2 was lower and dropped off after the first month. For both colleges, the group of users who adopted the new features was **4 times more active** than the other community users, particularly in how often they post to the community.

Followers

The **average number of people followed was 3.4**, and the **median was 2**. Students followed peer moderators more often than they followed other students.

Connection topics

Across the two colleges, in aggregate, students connected most on “Area of Study” and “Interests,” but also connected to people they found motivating and helpful.

INSCRIBE

What students said...

“As someone who really values feeling supported and connected during my classes, I appreciate having a space where I can meet people who understand the ups and downs of the college experience.”



FutureFit AI

Coaching to Build Confidence

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FUTUREFIT AI

Pilot

FutureFit AI is a career navigation and workforce platform for job seekers. The FutureFit team piloted **SideBar, an AI networking coach** designed to help job seekers build the confidence to activate their networks.

I'm just curious about her tra

Perfect — that makes for a really natural conversation. Here's a draft that focuses on her recent transition:

This keeps it casual since you're university friends, and focuses on her recent experience rather than asking for anything specific. She'll probably have great insights about job searching, workplace culture, and just the reality of post-grad life.

Does this feel right to send?

Outreach message for her transition in general

 Copy

Hey Sarah,

Hope you're settling in well at your new job! I remember you were a few years ahead of me at university, and I'd love to hear how the transition from student life to the working world has been going.

Would you have 15 minutes for a quick coffee chat sometime? I'm trying to figure out my next steps after graduation and would love your perspective on what that jump was really like.

Let me know if that works!
Jonathan

FUTUREFIT AI OUTCOMES

90% of users completed the primary task of reflecting on their network and reached the “outreach message” stage

Network identification

75% of participants updated their network connection’s status to **“Scheduled”** and clicked on the “Help me prep” action item. **45%** of participants updated the network connection’s status to **“Met”** and clicked on the “Debrief” action item.

Outreach

80% said they would **send the AI-drafted outreach message as-is or with only minor edits**, indicating intent to act.

Feature usage

The **majority** of participants stated they were **likely to use the AI networking coach again: 45%** said very likely and **30%** said likely.

What students said...

“[It was] much better than working with a career counselor because it’s not as awkward and annoying, and you can also look back on everything.”

“Working with this agent felt nearly stress-free compared to having a talk with an in-person mentor. I have not had a real career counselor before, but I do have a non-work-related mentor, and sometimes conversations like this would cause me anxiety in everyday life.”



REACH Pathways

Discovering Hidden Helpers

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REACH PATHWAYS

Pilot

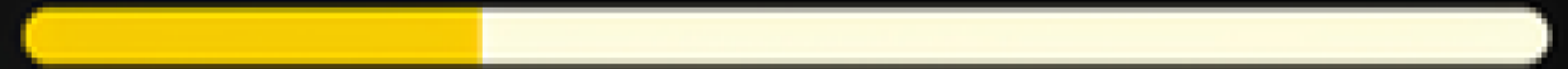
REACH Pathways is a platform that helps high school and college students explore careers, build real-world skills, and access internships. The REACH team piloted **a social capital “quest”** in which users learned the ins and outs of social capital through videos featuring other young people, mapped their own networks, and planned ways to reach out to their network.

Competencies / **Collaboration & Teamwork** /



Social Capital - Mapping Your Circle

3 / 10 completed



Discover the power of the people you already know. In this quest, you'll create a visual map of your relationships and start seeing how your circle can help you reach your goals.

Rewards

 170,000



Pre-Social Capital Quest Feedback Survey

Please fill out the Pre-Social Capital Quest Feedback Survey. [>](#)



What Is Social Capital?

REACH PATHWAYS OUTCOMES

92% of participants reported increased confidence reaching out to someone in their network for support or advice

Confidence

Younger participants (18–19) and those earlier in their career journeys showed stronger **gains in confidence**.

Outreach

Participants reported taking action. In response to “Have you already reached out to someone from your relationship map since starting this quest?” **86% reported either taking action or developing a clear plan to engage their network, 36% reported already initiating conversations, and 50% reported planning specific outreach.**

Completion

Length of quest mattered: students often completed partial quests rather than full end-to-end completion.

What students said...

“Something that surprised me was remembering connections in higher positions at their companies, with whom I only interacted once or twice.”

“Honestly, loved the quest a lot, made me feel more confident about reaching out. One suggestion: have students draft an email or a script for what they would say (I had to do something like this for college classes, and I think it increases the chance of a student actually reaching out if they know exactly what they are going to say).”



iCouldBe

Learning From Trends in Connection Data

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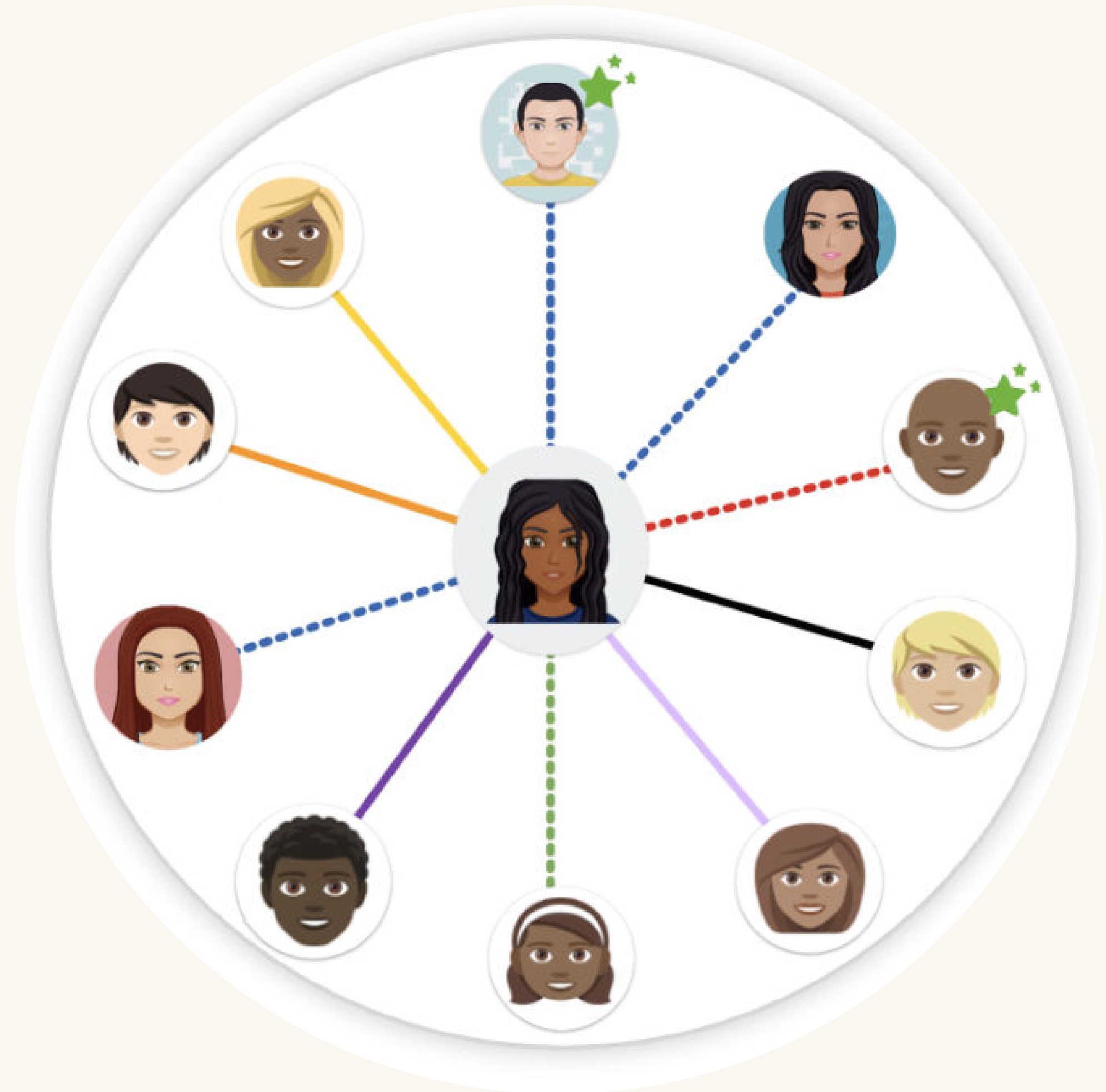
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iCOULDBE

Pilot

iCouldBe is an online mentoring program that provides students with “quests” to prepare for academic and career success. The iCouldBe team conducted an **original analysis of relationship data collected through the platform’s “Connections Map” feature**, cross-referenced with student survey data on social capital development, networking skills, and confidence.



iCOULDBE OUTCOMES

48% of the students identified that the type of support their connections provided was around academic and/or career help and advice

Connection types

Comparing the connections maps of students who showed the most versus the least social capital growth (as measured by the platform's social capital survey), the lower growth group added **a higher percent of family member roles** (Parent or Guardian, Sibling) and the higher growth group added **a higher percent of school roles** (Teacher, Guidance Counselor, Classmate, School Administrator, etc.).

Connection context

54% of relationships reported on students' connection maps were **family** relationships, and **30%** were from **school**. Only **1%** of relationships reported on students' connection maps were from students' **work, internship, or volunteer** opportunities, and **1%** were from their **community, neighborhood, or faith** community.

Support

The types of support students reported their connections provided them with were varied: **27% was academic help/advice, 21% was career advice, and 2% was around networking**. Contrary to iCouldBe's initial hypothesis, the lower growth group tagged more connections as 'weak ties' than the higher growth group. That may be due to overall weaker support networks for this group.

What do these 10 pilots tell us
about the future of prosocial
navigation technology?

Outreach > scripting

We need tools that support networking—but don't script it.

Prosocial AI has to thread the needle between
lending social support and building social skills.

Students consistently report that reaching out for advice or help can be daunting.

To overcome that, **tools must walk the line between scaffolding and scripting outreach and conversations**—giving students guidance on how to reach out for career conversations or ask their existing networks for help, without handing them pre-fabricated messages that risk depriving students of the chance to develop social skills on their own.

Technology tools can **break down outreach** into manageable steps and **facilitate low-stakes practice** that helps students build skills and confidence.

Tools can also help students zero in on **what kind of help to ask for**, without making that ask on their behalf.

What founders said...

“The authentic arc is gratitude → sharing → asking. Prosocial AI should mirror that rhythm, not skip to the ask.”

Julia, ESAI

“Many students had people they could turn to like family, teachers, mentors. Fewer students knew exactly what to ask those people for or how to ask. There was a gap between “I have people who support me” and “I know what to ask them for to move forward. ... Specific prompts (e.g., “ask X for Y”) are more doable.”

Tiffany, Uprooted Academy

As more students turn to AI for help, there's a real risk that they **lose or never develop the ability and confidence to ask people for help.**

Like emerging studies on balancing academic support with cognitive offloading, in the coming years, **prosocial edtech tools will need to evaluate how to engineer social support without atrophying social skills.**



Students need skills *and* access

Expanding students' networks in equitable ways will require breakthroughs in tech that build skills and broker connections.

While it's tempting to see social capital development as only a skill, building a network is also about **accessing a network**—being connected to people who are willing to help you and to introduce you to others.

Prosocial AI should ultimately go beyond skills and practice to **support warm introductions and access to community**.

Doing so might mean **building directories and infrastructure** that enable advisors and educators to connect students to alumni or professionals.

It could also offer more **platforms that partner** directly with employers and community organizations to source and vet mentors willing to connect with their users.

The field needs to continue to make the case that schools and businesses should support brokering functionalities.

Because the **most equitable prosocial AI navigation tools** will likely include features that don't just build students' skills, but that put more relationships within reach.

What founders said...

“The most surprising finding was how strongly students preferred the counselor-brokered introduction over direct outreach. Even a student who had successfully cold-emailed doctors said she would start with this instead of Google. The depth of anxiety around cold outreach, even among confident, proactive students, validated the hypothesis that reducing the friction of professional networking is a significant unmet need for students.”

Ryan, Overgrad

“Without prosocial tools and resources, youth from under-resourced communities may have access to the same information as everyone else, but they lack access to the people who can help them apply that information to their own lives, goals, and aspirations. The gap is not informational, it is relational.”

Michelle, iCouldBe.

Relationship-rich environments

Prosocial AI will yield the best results inside of relationship-rich environments—not in place of them.

Prosocial AI can be powerful in a context that **primes students' mindsets and builds in opportunities** for community rather than as a standalone tech tool.

For online supports and experiences to translate into offline social capital, prosocial AI tools will work best **inside of relationship-rich environments** where students are repeatedly exposed to the power of social capital and can put online practice and resources to use in the real world.

Not all learning environments are equally social. In the coming years, to increase outcomes, platforms may have to **integrate features and functionalities** that directly support the social environments they're operating within. They could do this **through infrastructure** to support experiential learning **or better data** to reveal relationship access and gaps across a school community.

Building that demand for those extra capabilities will require building awareness about prosocial possibilities through **deeper research** on the results that prosocial tools can create and **case studies** on how schools can use relationship data to improve their outcomes.

What founders said...

“There is a significant difference in built-in networking opportunities based on the type of school a student attends. Students from [one school] mentioned that completing an internship every year is a required part of their curriculum from 6th through 12th grade, and they are expected to be entirely independent in finding them, which provides motivation. Students from another school relied on an optional program, which operates within the community and is offered at their school, for networking and college preparation.”

George, Viacela

4

Relationship data

Relationship data reveals crucial relationship opportunities—and misses.

Better relationship data is crucial to understanding if and how prosocial AI is building students' access to and ability to mobilize relationships.

The more that platforms can **measure growth** in these areas, the more they can improve their products.

But data also offers a critical window into how students view their existing networks. Relationship data can reveal existing assets, but also **gaps in students' mental models** of who can help and how.

Multiple platforms found that students are likely to think of **family and teachers** as core supports in their college and career journey.

But **many leave out peers** as a key source of information and support. Products can shift that by showing students the extent of their networks and building out more comprehensive relationship maps over time.

What founders said...

“Alumni and near-peer relationships are among the highest-leverage connection types for college access and career development, yet they are nearly invisible in students’ current mental maps. This points to a clear and addressable gap.”

Julia, ESAI

“Prosocial designs are hard to capture if they are not fully on the platform. But it doesn't mean it's not worth it. We need new ways to create a feedback loop to understand the true impact of connections that start on platform and end IRL.”

Tiffany Green, Uprooted Academy



Collective R&D

Innovators can work together to learn, test, and improve prosocial AI faster than the market currently demands it.

Prosocial AI has the power to unleash the connections students need to get by and get ahead. But **market demand for these designs remains weak.**

That means prosocial AI isn't developing on pace with academic and information systems.

The good news is that **builders aren't waiting.**

Instead, they are working together and testing better ways to drive social engagement, develop students' social skills, and deepen their confidence.

The stronger the case that platforms can make collectively, the sooner schools will catch up to the need to **ask for (and pay for) prosocial features and functionalities.**

In turn, navigation and guidance technology can become a true engine of opportunity, not just an engine of information.

What founders said...

“Participating alongside other organizations testing adjacent hypotheses exposed us to new approaches, which helped sharpen our own evaluation strategy.”

Sasha, REACH Pathways

“Without prosocial design, economic gaps will widen, and many will be left behind, especially in the era of AI where there are major labor market shifts and career navigation is a key life skill to get ahead. If you don't know how to build and leverage professional relationships, you will be left behind.”

Dominique, Climb Together

We can build toward a
prosocial future.

Every student deserves human help, not just AI-generated answers.

These 10 pilots are small in scope, but they mark a radical departure from traditional tools.

Prosocial design could be the **next frontier of edtech.**

These pilots weren't just about curbing unhealthy dependence on tech; they were about **building products that help users cultivate the relationships** they need to accomplish their goals.

They're showing a path toward using AI not just as a student self-help machine, but as a **human help multiplier**.

And they're showing what's possible when we build—and demand—**tech that makes students more connected, not less**.

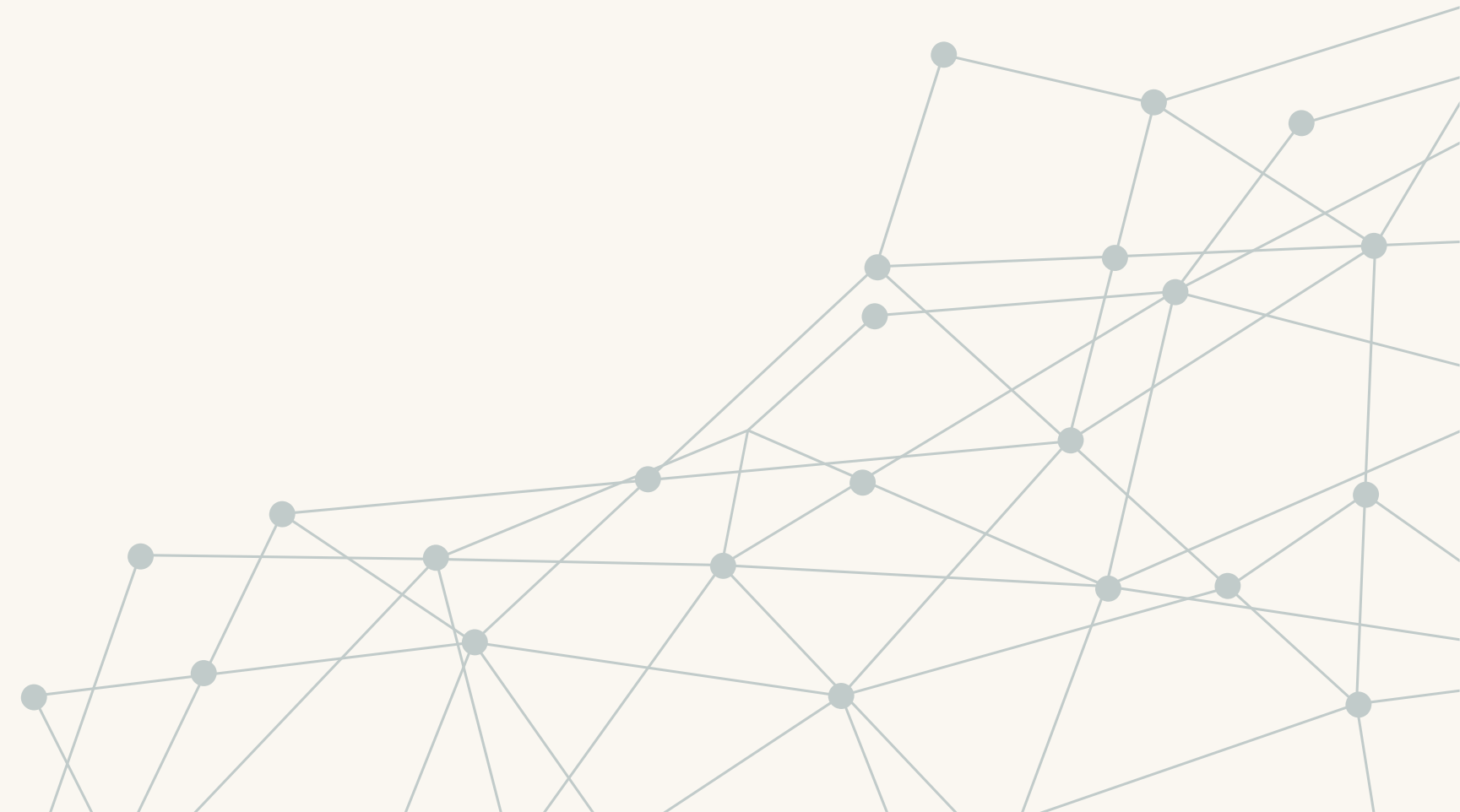
Acknowledgements

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Appendix A

Building edtech that connects:
A framework for prosocial edtech design

For a full description of these design principles and the research behind them, see [Building edtech that connects: Pro-social indicators, features, and functionalities for college & career advising technology](#).



Design Principle #1

Understand who students are:
A clear sense of identity and direction

Young people thrive when they have “sparks”—interests that light a fire in their lives and motivate them. They need relationships that nurture those sparks, with caring connections who can motivate and support their interests, along with mentors and peers who share those interests ([Ito](#); [Search Institute](#)).

Technology built with these core principles will be more likely to drive engagement ([Weiler et al.](#)).

Design Principle #2

Expand what students believe:

A growth mindset toward building relationships

How young people think about relationships shapes how they build them—their networking mindsets and willingness to turn to others for help influence whether their social capital grows (Kuwabara et al.). Those mindsets can be developed through priming, de-stigmatizing help-seeking, and providing opportunities to practice outreach in low-stakes ways (Schwartz et al.).

Design Principle #3

Teach how to connect:

The skills and confidence to reach out and follow through

Skills like asking for help, telling their stories, and seeking out opportunities are critical to young people successfully nurturing a network (CASEL; Kregar et al.; Thompson). To learn these skills and build the confidence to apply them in the real world, young people need opportunities to practice them—both with existing connections and through cold outreach.

Design Principle #4

Surface who students can turn to:
A strong network of people who show up

Young people need webs of support—across family, community, and school—and those networks, when strengthened, buffer against risk and drive academic and economic opportunity (Granovetter; Kraft; Rajkumar et al.; Yosso; Zaff & Vargas). But awareness matters: young people need to recognize and be willing to turn to those connections, and the adults and peers around them need to show up as accessible and willing resources. Targeted outreach should also align with key milestones and deadlines (Page et al.).

Design Principle #5

Identify who else is out there:

Access to new people and opportunities

Having access to a broad range of connections and resources beyond their existing networks is key to expanding young people's opportunities, options, and future earnings—especially for students on the wrong side of opportunity gaps (Chetty et al.; Pew Research; Stanton-Salazar). Knowing and keeping in mind young people's interests and goals is essential when brokering these new connections (Austin et al.; Obstfeld et al.).

Design Principle #6

Determine whether it's working:
Evidence that connections are taking root

Social connection matters more than we tend to measure it. Only by understanding the depth and scope of the relationships and resources that students can depend on can we build tools and systems that ensure every young person has the network they need to thrive (Boat; Charania & Fisher) and intervene when relationships are absent or going through periods of struggle (Spencer).

Appendix B

Pilot data types and sample sizes

APPENDIX B

Pilot data
types and
sample sizes

Services and Benefits	Data type	Feature/functionality pilot users	Platform users during pilot period
ESAI	Engagement data Survey data	67 users 67 respondents	~77,000
Viacela	Focus group data	15 participants	~3,000
Uprooted Academy	Engagement data Focus group data	15 users 15 participants	~7,200
Roadtrip Nation	Engagement data Survey data	202 users 85 respondents (Platform impact survey) 120 respondents (Feature pre/post)	480
Overgrad	Engagement data Focus group data	4 users 4 participants	~250,000
Climb Together	Engagement data Focus group data Survey data	7 beta testers 11 interview and 7 focus-group participants 645 respondents (Pre/post) 11 respondents (30-day post) 71 respondents (Social capital program alumni)	~4,000
InScribe	Engagement data Survey data	1,595 users	~18,000
FutureFit AI	Focus group data	20 users 20 respondents	~3,000
REACH Pathways	Engagement data Focus group data Survey data	25 users 11 participants 14 respondents	~40,000
iCouldBe	Survey data Connections Map data	475 respondents 463 users	510