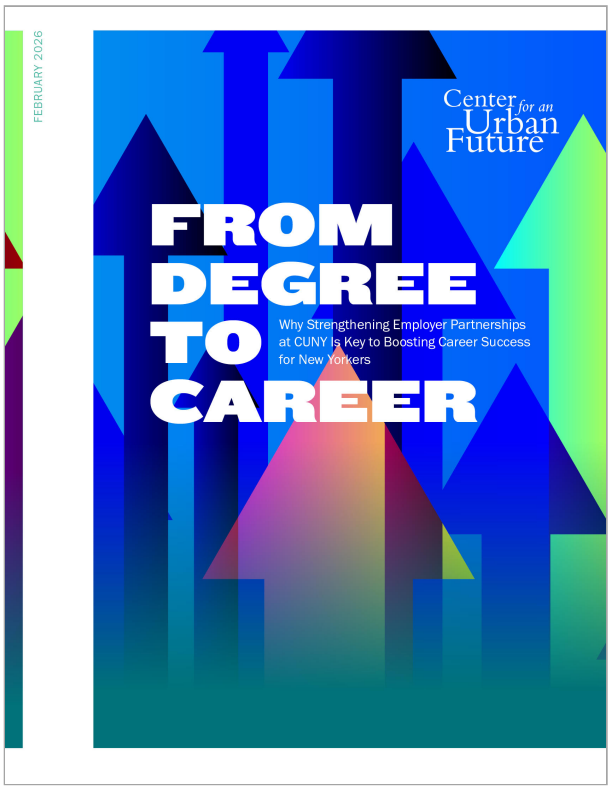
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Report - March 2026

From Degree to Career

In this challenging hiring environment, many of CUNY's students are struggling to gain access to well-paying jobs. This report urges city and state leaders to invest in strengthening CUNY's employer partnerships and expanding its career success initiatives to turn more degrees into careers.

by Eli Dvorkin, Anna Shumskiy, and Andrew Bauld

- Read the full report here.
- Read the report's recommendations here.

No other institution does more than the City University of New York (CUNY) to propel low-income students into the middle class. But that role is now under threat, as CUNY students graduate into the toughest entry-level job market in years—one where entry-level postings requiring little to no prior experience have plunged 37.4 percent since 2022 and internships for college students are down 37.1 percent compared to before the pandemic.[1]

In this challenging hiring environment, CUNY's mostly low-income students will struggle to gain access to well-paying jobs unless CUNY develops far stronger connections with employers. Indeed, even before the recent slowdown in entry level jobs, boosting career success was undoubtedly the one area in which CUNY needed to improve the most. While the university has made remarkable progress in helping students succeed in earning a degree—the three-year graduation rate for those attending CUNY's community colleges has doubled over the past decade—more is needed to ensure those degrees unlock well-paying careers. One in ten alumni end up in retail or food service five years after graduation, a figure that rises to 13 percent for community college grads. Many who do break into high-wage fields like business or computer science still earn far less than peers across the city—sometimes only half the median wage of other workers in the same field.[2]

The current job market has made it even more critical for CUNY to accelerate improvement in career success. At Columbia University, with its global reputation and vast alumni networks, 30 percent of the class of 2025 was still seeking work as of

September.[3] For CUNY students, the collapse of entry-level pathways is even more daunting, making stronger ties with employers essential to turning degrees into careers.

Paid internships, industry collaborations, and career-connected learning are among the most effective ways to give students the experience and networks they need to compete in today's labor market—at a time when a college degree alone is no longer a passport to a career. Yet too few CUNY students are gaining these opportunities. Just 12 percent of CUNY undergraduates participate in paid internships—up from 10 percent two years ago, but still far below the national average of nearly 57 percent.[4]

At the same time, too many CUNY students are professionally underprepared, causing them to struggle in the hiring process. According to employers we interviewed, CUNY students frequently stumble in technical interviews, miss application deadlines, or submit resumes that aren't on the same level as peers from private universities.

Fortunately, CUNY is making important progress. Chancellor Félix Matos Rodríguez has made career success a higher priority than any previous CUNY leader, and in October 2025 he launched CUNY Beyond, a "roadmap to make career exploration and outcomes central to every student's college experience from the day they set foot on a CUNY campus." The chancellor has said he wants to be known as the "patron saint of paid internships," and under his leadership the share of students reporting paid internships is finally on the rise. With support from successive mayoral administrations, the university has also created the Office of Careers and Industry Partnerships, launched the Inclusive Economy Initiative, and brokered new partnerships with leading employers and nonprofit intermediaries. These efforts have shown impressive early gains, with participating campuses reporting sharp increases in internships, job placement, and starting salaries. But more progress is needed; today, the Inclusive Economy Initiative reaches fewer than 40 of CUNY's 450 departments.

There's a lot more that CUNY will need to do to expand on these efforts, but it's unlikely the university will be able to do all this without more help from City Hall and Albany. Mayor Mamdani should make expanding career success for CUNY students one component of his affordability agenda, since doing so will boost incomes and help ensure that far more CUNY graduates can afford to live in this increasingly high-cost city. His administration can do so by helping to scale what's working at CUNY, expanding subsidized paid internships, and recruiting far more private sector employers to actively partner with CUNY on hiring and internships. With a new level of city support, CUNY can help tens of thousands more New Yorkers each year find well-paying jobs—and remain the city's most powerful engine of upward mobility amid a fast-changing economy.

Over the past two decades, CUNY has made steady progress in boosting college completion rates, sending a growing number of graduates into the city's labor market with well-earned degrees. These impressive graduation gains happened thanks to intentional university policies that have been emulated across the country, including the highly effective student success programs ASAP and ACE.

But in today's economy, simply getting students to the college finish line is no longer enough to ensure that students thrive financially after graduation. More than ever, setting up students for success requires universities to help connect graduates with careers.

This is where CUNY still needs to improve.

Although the university has made some progress in recent years, just two thirds of CUNY graduates find consistent employment within a year of finishing their degree, and many of those jobs pay less than a living wage.[5] Far too many students are missing out on the early work experiences, career-oriented projects, and network-building opportunities that make a crucial difference in landing a relevant job after graduation—especially given the competition from roughly 100,000 other college graduates in New York City each year.

"If students are not given the opportunity to put something on their resume that will make them stand out or start to develop that network, they're often going to be at a disadvantage," says Merrill Pond, executive vice president of the Partnership for

New York City, one of the city's leading business groups.

CUNY leaders echo the concern. "The two biggest things that CUNY students are too often missing are workplace context and social capital that a lot of their peers have but that they don't have," says Jennifer Dillon, senior university director of talent, innovation, and industry partnerships at CUNY.

The current economy has only created more urgency for change. "Today's college graduates are entering an economy that is relatively worse for young college grads than any month on record, going back at least four decades," Derek Thompson recently wrote in The Atlantic.[6]

Our new analysis illustrates the challenge confronting recent college graduates in New York City. Over the past two years, entry-level job postings plummeted from 72,484 (2022) to 45,354 (2024), a 37.4 percent drop.[7] Internship postings across the five boroughs declined at similar rate, 37.1 percent—going from 10,871 postings in 2019 to 6,839 in 2024.[8]

In this environment, if New York City is going to sustain its most powerful engine of economic mobility, it will have to make further progress in connecting graduates with careers.

As this report details, too few CUNY students are applying for and obtaining internships and other opportunities for experiential learning. And although CUNY is partnering with more city businesses than ever before, it is striking how few employers in industries that are driving the growth of well-paying jobs participate in on-campus or virtual career fairs, or have made it a priority to recruit and hire from CUNY.

Several barriers currently stand in the way. These include:

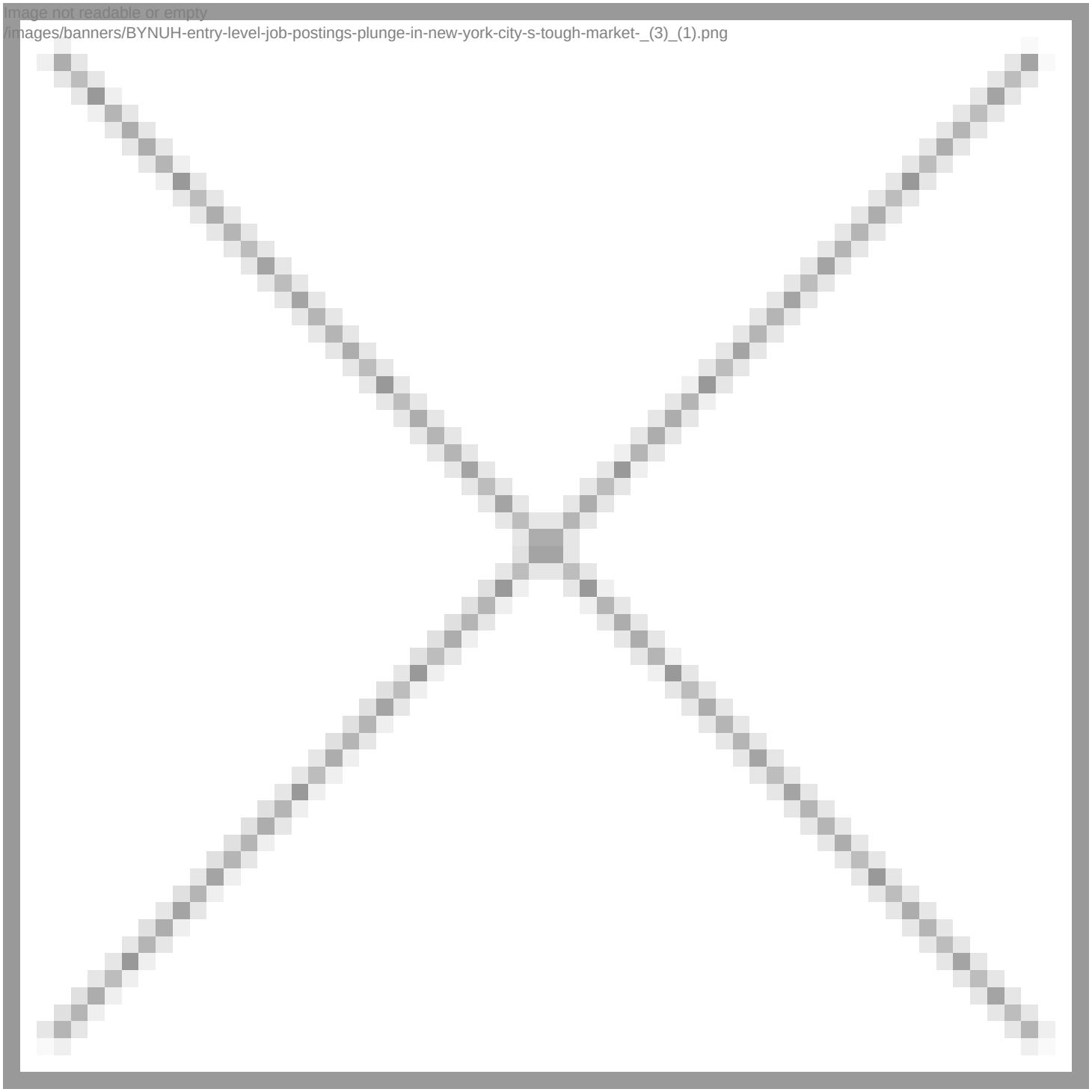
- Employers report that navigating CUNY's 25 campuses is far too confusing and time-consuming.
- Career services are overwhelmed—with ratios of 1,100 students to one staff member common—and frequently siloed from academics.
- Hybrid academic-career advisors and industry specialists embedded in academic departments are making a difference, but so far exist in only around 40 of 450 departments across CUNY, or fewer than 9 percent.
- Students have too few opportunities for early career exploration and to learn what industry needs, in part because most opportunities are extracurricular and not embedded in required courses.
- Nonprofit and intermediary partners with strong industry ties remain underutilized.
- CUNY still lacks one of the most fundamental tools for managing employer relationships: a modern, systemwide Customer Relationship Management (CRM) platform that would allow CUNY staff the ability to track, coordinate, and share employer engagement across 25 colleges.
- Although several CUNY colleges have implemented Handshake, the widely used employment platform that many employers already know from recruiting at other universities, many other CUNY campuses still rely on their own job boards or third-party services, creating a patchwork experience.

Fortunately, under Chancellor Matos Rodríguez, career success has been elevated to a centerpiece of CUNY's strategic roadmap, with a new emphasis on linking academic programs to workforce skills and employment outcomes from the moment students enroll.

This shift is already underway and holds enormous promise. Each year, the university awards more than 45,000 degrees, with 8 in 10 graduates staying in New York. Since 2019, CUNY has secured more than $43 million from nearly 50 private funders to support career success initiatives, and industries across the city are increasingly turning to CUNY for talent. Nowhere is that more clear than among the members of the New York Jobs CEO Council, who have hired more than 9,500 recent CUNY graduates since 2021—doubling the share of CUNY graduates among their entry-level hires.[9]

But at a time when entry-level opportunities are shrinking, it will take a new level of investment and focus—from policymakers, employers, and across the CUNY system itself—to ensure that promise is fully realized.

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This report, supported by a grant from The New York Community Trust, shines a light on the need to bolster partnerships between CUNY and employers across the city's economy. It examines why employer partnerships matter more than ever to students' financial success after college, documents the progress CUNY has made, and identifies six key challenges that continue to hold back deeper collaboration between CUNY and employers. To inform this analysis, CUF conducted more than 80 interviews with CUNY leaders, faculty, career advisors, employers, and nonprofit intermediaries; reviewed national research on the link between employer engagement and student outcomes; and analyzed data from the CUNY Wage Dashboard, the New York State Department of Labor, and the U.S. Census Bureau. The result is a clearer picture of what's working, where the gaps remain, and what city and state policymakers can do to close them.

It concludes with actionable recommendations for policymakers—including Mayor Mamdani and the City Council—to sustain

CUNY's role as the city's leading launchpad to opportunity. These recommendations include prioritizing public investment where it can have the greatest impact: scaling what's already working, from the Inclusive Economy Initiative to proven intermediary partnerships; and investing in core technology to manage employer relationships more effectively across CUNY's 25 colleges.

The report also advances policy changes that need not carry major new costs: expanding municipal hiring pathways and reserving more public-sector internships for CUNY students; rewarding faculty for participating in career success programs and forging stronger ties with industry; and, most ambitiously, calling on the next mayor to lead a citywide effort to recruit the next 100 major employers that have yet to step up. Together, these steps would help tens of thousands more CUNY students gain the work experience, networks, and industry-relevant skills needed to thrive in today's labor market.

To read the full PDF of the report go here.

Read the report's recommendations here.

14 IDEAS FOR BOLSTERING CUNY'S CAREER SUCCESS OUTCOMES BY STRENGTHENING EMPLOYER PARTNERSHIPS

To realize more of the gains CUNY has made over the years and help thousands more students achieve social and economic mobility, the city and state will have to help CUNY invest more in career success— expanding the scale of the Inclusive Economy Initiative (CIE), supporting faculty in bringing career skills into the classroom, and leveraging the impact of intermediary organizations to connect with more employers. CUNY will also have to take more responsibility for improving employer relationships by making it easier for companies to engage with students and faculty, while continuing to build a true campus-wide culture that treats career success as integral to academic success. And finally, the city's employers should approach CUNY as a partner in developing their future workforce by diversifying ways of engaging with campuses—from early career exploration to co-designed curriculum updates to paid internships and work-based learning opportunities to committing to hire more CUNY graduates.

1. Make a major public commitment to support employer partnership and career success efforts across CUNY. The next mayor should commit, in his first 100 days, to strengthening CUNY's career success efforts, ensuring every student has access to work-based learning and employer connections. The mayor should integrate the recently launched CUNY Beyond initiative into his first budget: expanding the Inclusive Economy Initiative to half of all CUNY departments (up from 9 percent today), building campus-level staff capacity, and embedding hybrid academic–career advisors and industry specialists across disciplines. Proven efforts like CUNY 2X Tech should be renewed and expanded, while the Practitioners-in-Residence Corps should grow into new sectors like healthcare and business. The city should also set a measurable goal: ensuring at least 30 percent of CUNY students complete a paid internship before graduation. Without these steps, tens of thousands of graduates will continue leaving CUNY each year with degrees but little work experience, while local employers miss out on a critical source of diverse talent.

2. Recruit the next 100 major employers into structured career development partnerships. Through the New York Jobs CEO Council, roughly 30 companies have hired more than 50,000 New Yorkers since 2020—including 9,500 CUNY graduates—and doubled CUNY's representation in their entry-level cohorts. But most of the city's large and mid-sized companies remain on the sidelines. The next mayor should lead an effort to recruit 100 more firms into structured partnerships with CUNY, setting measurable goals for hiring, curriculum alignment, and paid internships. Industry associations and nonprofit intermediaries can help aggregate demand, while the city provides training grants, technical assistance, and public recognition.

3. Scale up a systemwide CRM to manage employer relationships. CUNY has begun piloting a Customer Relationship

Management (CRM) platform to coordinate employer partnerships, but philanthropic dollars alone cannot bring it to scale. Today, campuses and central offices still maintain separate systems and contact lists, leading to duplicative outreach and missed opportunities. A fully implemented CRM would give staff across 25 campuses the ability to share contacts, track outcomes, and coordinate outreach—creating a streamlined experience for employers. The investment is significant, but the payoff is transformative: a scaled CRM would reduce redundancy, highlight underutilized programs, and finally give CUNY the infrastructure to manage partnerships at scale.

4. Launch a pay it forward revolving internship fund. Paid internships remain one of the most powerful on-ramps to careers, yet only 12 percent of CUNY undergraduates ever complete one. Funding is the biggest barrier: CUNY's central office reports it can cover just 20 percent of campus requests for subsidized, embedded internships. At Queens College—the CUNY-wide hub for community and social service internships— student demand is four times greater than the number of subsidized slots available, and only half of applicants can be funded each year. And while many employers can and should pay for CUNY interns, boosting supply will almost certainly require a steady influx of dollars to underwrite placements in sectors where funding is limited— such as nonprofits and small businesses—and to help reduce the risk as employers perceive it. A $25 million "Pay It Forward" fund—seeded by city, state, employer, and philanthropic dollars—would subsidize thousands of internships upfront. Employers that later hire their interns full-time would repay into the fund, creating a sustainable cycle. Modeled on San Antonio's Pay It Forward program, this approach would expand access to paid experiences while giving employers a low-risk pipeline to talent they have already trained.

5. Embed career exploration earlier and make it count for credit. Most CUNY students begin thinking seriously about careers far too late in their academic journey. To change that, CUNY should integrate structured career exploration into first-year experiences and College Now courses, launch a universal for-credit career exploration course, and embed career modules into orientation. By making early career exposure part of the curriculum, students—especially first-generation and working learners—can explore industries sooner, build confidence, and position themselves for internships well before graduation.

6. Make it far easier for employers to work with CUNY. Employers still describe CUNY as confusing and fragmented, with multiple offices reaching out separately and inconsistent processes across campuses. CUNY should overhaul its employer-facing systems to create a single, streamlined entry point, redesign the Hire CUNY portal to be user-friendly, and spotlight employer testimonials and data that show strong outcomes. A coordinated marketing campaign aimed at industry could further highlight CUNY's role as a source of prepared, diverse talent. By rolling out a clearer "welcome mat," CUNY can attract many more employers who are eager to engage but put off by the current complexity.

7. Strengthen department-embedded industry specialists and hybrid academic-career advisors. The Inclusive Economy Initiative has shown the impact of embedding industry specialists and hybrid academic– career advisors within departments, boosting internships and salaries where implemented. But it currently reaches only a fraction of CUNY's 450 departments. Scaling this model would mean training current advisors, hiring new specialists, and building campus systems to track milestones. Making industry engagement a built-in feature of every department would align academic programs with workforce needs and provide employers with a clearer, more consistent pipeline of talent.

8. Scale up the Career Success Faculty Fellowship and Practitioners-in-Resident Corps. Faculty are the most consistent point of contact for students, yet most lack the support to embed career skills into their teaching. The Career Success Faculty Fellowship has reached just 50 professors, while the Practitioners-in-Residence Corps has been concentrated in tech. Scaling both initiatives—with dedicated funding and broader sector coverage—would empower faculty to connect coursework to careers and bring hundreds of industry professionals directly into classrooms. Partnering with associations like Tech:NYC and the Greater New York Hospital Association, CUNY could recruit 500 practitioners to strengthen faculty–employer ties and give thousands more students exposure to real-world practices.

9. Launch an NYC AI Service Corps to help CUNY's tech degree students gain paid work experience. New York City now has an oversupply of recent tech graduates for the first time on record, even as postings for entry-level tech jobs have plunged by half since 2022. As a result, CUNY graduates with computer science and technology degrees are facing the most challenging job market in years. To help more of these students get on the path to careers, the city should launch a paid, six-month NYC AI Service Corps to pair recent graduates with small businesses, nonprofits, and city agencies. Fellows would work on practical data and AI projects, improve basic digital systems, and help organizations address operational challenges using technology.

10. Renew and expand the highly successful CUNY 2X Tech Initiative. CUNY 2X Tech has proven to be one of the city's most effective strategies for boosting career success among computer science and technology majors, significantly increasing internship rates, job placements, and employer engagement at participating campuses. But the initiative currently reaches only a fraction of CUNY's tech-degree-seeking students and is not embedded on all campuses. Renewing and expanding CUNY 2X Tech would allow more colleges to grow employer partnerships, expand access to paid internships, and boost career outcomes—and could be paired with an NYC AI Service Corps and an expansion of the CUNY Tech Prep program to maximize impact.

11. Mobilize small businesses to tap CUNY talent. New York's small businesses account for nearly half of all private-sector jobs, yet many struggle to adopt new technologies or manage essential functions like accounting, compliance, and marketing. CUNY could launch new Small Business Corps to pair students with local firms that need this support. The opportunity is clear: CUNY students bring cultural competency, language skills, and neighborhood savvy—in addition to their academic knowledge—that can make them especially effective in helping small businesses grow. For employers, it's a low-risk way to access skilled, motivated talent. For students, it's a pathway to gain paid, career-relevant experience while strengthening the city's economic backbone.

12. Expand municipal hiring opportunities for CUNY students. City government is one of New York's largest employers, yet too few CUNY students gain access to internships and career pathways in the public sector. The scale of demand is clear: a 2023 CUNY–MTA internship partnership drew over 16,000 applicants for just 150 slots. Public agencies should dramatically expand the number of CUNY interns they host, streamline approval processes, and adopt an "internship-to-employment" model that converts successful internships into permanent roles. This would provide clear career pathways in government while helping agencies fill critical vacancies with local talent that already understands the city's needs.

13. Attract more employers to recruit at CUNY with citywide CUNY Career Weeks each semester. CUNY career fairs and recruiting events remain far smaller than those at peer institutions. While NYU routinely draws nearly 200 companies, most CUNY campuses attract only a few dozen employers—many from government or nonprofits rather than high-growth industries. The next mayor should lead a campaign to bring more companies to CUNY campuses, partnering with industry associations and chambers of commerce while offering recognition and support to firms that step up. One option is to launch a CUNY-wide Career Week each semester, with the city leading the charge by marshaling private sector leaders to participate. By raising CUNY's visibility and making recruitment easier, the city can ensure that far more employers tap into the university's deep pool of diverse talent.

14. Strengthen partnerships with nonprofit intermediaries to scale impact. New York is home to a powerful ecosystem of nonprofit and intermediary organizations—like Coop Careers, Project Basta, Break Through Tech, iMentor, and Per Scholas—that already connect thousands of students and graduates to employers. These groups often have stronger employer ties and proven track records of placement and wage gains than CUNY can achieve on its own. Yet their reach across the system is limited, and forming official partnerships with CUNY has often been slow and inconsistent. Formal agreements could help expand enrollment targets, replicate successful models across campuses, and give employers a clearer way to engage through trusted intermediaries.

ENDNOTES

1. Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast.
2. Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes Explorer, United States Census Bureau.
3. Center for an Urban Future analysis of preliminary survey data from Columbia University.
4. Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from the 2024 CUNY Student Experience Survey and the NationalAssociation of Colleges and Employers, 2024.
5. CUNY, “Fiscal Year 2026 Budget Request,” December 2024.
6. Derek Thompson, “Something Alarming Is Happening to the Job Market,” The Atlantic, April 30, 2025.
7. Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast. Entry-level is defined as postings requiring zero to two yearsof experience. Data is for private sector jobs.
8. Ibid.

From Degree to Career is a publication of the Center for an Urban Future. Researched and written by Eli Dvorkin, Anna Shumskiy, and Andrew Bauld. Edited by Dorian Block and Jonathan Bowles. Additional research by Rachel Neches, Madison Chen, and Harry Frahn.

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