VITA◈NAVIS™

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Establishing a Standard Vocabulary for Career Exploration

In an ideal world, high schoolers and undergraduate students would complete their education equipped not only with academic abilities, but a clear path to pursue in the world of work. Having collaborated with career counselors, academic advisers, and student services staff, they would understand their personalities and interests well enough to choose an appropriate career path, one that satisfies them and motivates them to strive for success. In short, they would know enough about themselves to find academic paths and future careers that suit them.

Unfortunately, this idyllic scene is far from the truth for millions of students in America. A 2018 survey found that a meager one-third of college students "feel prepared for the job market and workplace."[1] Similarly, a paltry 35.5 percent of high school students "used counseling about future career possibilities,"[2] with most not even realizing they should consider this option when envisioning their futures. In an increasingly competitive, varied, and potentially confusing working world, students are exiting high school and college without the proper tools to find their professional place.

This is particularly tragic, since, when studied, students "who have identified a career path for themselves [feel] twice as prepared for their futures as those who are unsure of their path."[3] When left to assess their career possibilities alone, students wind up bewildered. However, with the right assistance, they can work with a counselor, student services representative, or administrator to determine a clear direction for their careers. The problem is that students aren't reaching out to these professional advisors, and, even when they do, these departments often struggle to help them.

Underfunded, overextended, and underappreciated, it's no wonder that most career counseling programs are treading water today. At small, well-staffed schools, counseling departments find it difficult to draw students in, and at larger educational institutions, the demand may be higher, but there aren't enough resources to support it. Counseling struggles to find its place at schools of all sizes, suggesting that the field itself must be

reshaped. In order to transform this discipline, we must identify the crux of its issues.

The biggest hurdle by far in career counseling is the fact that no one seems to speak the same language. Myriad ideologies, technologies, and perspectives make it difficult, if not impossible, for students and advisors to understand each other. This lack of common familiarity and language presents a challenge in supporting discussions with students about his or her future. For example, what a student means by "leadership" may be a world away from the way a counselor uses this word. Left with this ambiguity, students and mentors misunderstand each other, become frustrated, and fail to achieve their shared goal of finding a student's ideal place in the working world.

The solution to this counseling conundrum is simple, yet powerful. Supplied with a standard vocabulary with which to engage students, career, admissions, and academic counselors can fully understand a student's proclivities and use these to collaboratively design his or her ambitions. In the following pages, we'll dive deeper into the problems plaguing this field and explain our strategies for resolving them.

CHALLENGES IN CAREER COUNSELING

Although not all carry the official title of "career counselor," many education professionals work in this capacity. Career counseling is simply the process of speaking with and guiding a student regarding his or her occupational future. While an official career counselor might do this, it could also be the job of a student services representative, admissions counselor (if the student's future involves further schooling), or academic advisor (since many jobs require having completed specific degrees or courses). Furthermore,

those who manage career counseling also impact this field. For this reason, CAOs (Chief Academic Officers), Chiefs of Student Services, and other executives at educational institutions are also intimately involved with career counseling.

Regardless of their specific relationship to this field or job title, all professionals in this area struggle with particular problems in this day and age. Facing a changing digital job market, disinterested students, and scattered standards, it's a difficult time to work in career counseling.

First of all, aligning a student with an appropriate career path can feel like a constantly moving target. Even back in 1999, it was reported: "As the youth of today strive to find places for themselves in the world of work, they are faced with considering not only the kind of job they will hold, but also the kind of work environment which will provide them personal satisfaction and growth. Also, as the world of work becomes more complex, and technologically dynamic, the career decision-making

"As the world of work becomes more complex, and technologically dynamic, the career decision-making processes the youth undergo also become much more complex."

Ireh, Maduakolam. 2000. The High School Journal.

processes the youth undergo also become much more complex."[4] In the last two decades, the world of work has grown even more complicated. Exponential technological advancement and an uncertain economy can make finding career solutions for today's youth seem a bit like staring into a cloudy crystal ball.

Compounding this quandary is the fact that most students don't feel confident in their schools' career counseling, so they simply don't go. As mentioned above, fewer than 36 percent of high schoolers go see their career counselors, and, when they do, they only rate this department's

usefulness at a 3.89 out of 5.[5] Unfortunately, undergraduate students aren't much better about actually using their career counseling options. In a recent survey of more than 11,000 college students, a staggering "six in 10 recent graduates said they never visited the career office as an undergraduate." For those that did use these resources, "fewer than half…found the career center helpful or very helpful."[6] Of course, it's impossible to improve the quality of career counseling for students that just aren't there.

When students do show up for advice, however, they aren't all equally catered to, and some suffer as a result. Certain types of youth have been found to be underserved by career, admissions, and academic counseling services. For example, a study published in *Professional School Counseling* found that college-bound high schoolers were prioritized over work-bound youth when it came to career readiness skills. The authors of this article explained: "The finding that the counselors perceived a greater need for college-bound students to be able to locate, evaluate, and act upon information about further education appears, at least at a superficial level, to be logical since these students will be participating in post-secondary education after graduation."

In short, the current counseling system is set up to serve students planning to attend college. With such limited time available and pressure put on getting high schoolers into universities, many advisors focus on teaching college-bound pupils about their educational opportunities beyond high school, unfortunately leaving others at a disadvantage. This, however, isn't actually a successful strategy for advising students on their educational and occupational futures. In contrast, researchers found: "Continuous learning is an integral component of career success for both work- and college-bound students. All secondary students, not just those who anticipate attending college, must be proficient at how and where to seek information related to their ongoing training and professional development needs."[7]

Every student must be able to understand his or her aspirations and seek out opportunities to pursue them accordingly. The fact that many

Researchers found that students' interests are:

35.4%
predictive of degree attainment

21.7%
predictive of college persistence

26.6%
predictive of grades in college

high school students never make it to college makes this all the more important. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported in April 2018 that only "66.7 percent of 2017 high school graduates age 16 to 24 were enrolled in colleges or universities."[8] In short, career counseling struggles to serve a full one-third of its intended audience. This sobering statistic is a clear sign this system must be improved. Furthermore, the job of all career counseling departments is to foster *lifelong* learning, encouraging the pursuit of knowledge outside of postsecondary education.

These are all fundamental flaws in contemporary counseling, but highlighting these programs' imperfections does no good without understanding *why* they operate non-optimally.

The first reason this type of advising is so challenging today is the lack of a standard vocabulary in the field. A 2001 article on the state of career counseling aptly described the situation: "One of the main obstacles facing school and career counselors is that, as of yet, there is no single, unified theory or approach that adequately explains the career development process. As a result, counselors are often overwhelmed by a seemingly incomprehensible amount of information on a number of different approaches to career development."[9] This is even more the case in 2018. Pulled in a thousand different directions, attempting to learn dozens of approaches in order to help their students, it's no wonder that counselors aren't able to work as effectively as they could. There must be a single, accepted standard from which advisors can operate and communicate.

Career counseling departments also commonly have very limited resources. Student mentorship is a vastly underappreciated area nationwide. *The Atlantic* reported on a recent national survey that "asked what, if taxes were raised to improve local public schools, the money should be spent on first." Essentially, this questionnaire demonstrated what most Americans prioritize in the sphere of education. Unfortunately, of all the options, "counselors came last, with just 6 percent of" respondents saying they'd like funding to go to counselors first. Furthermore, *The Atlantic* noted that "counselors are overburdened by huge caseloads," and there are "almost 850,000 students who, according to

federal data, have no access to a counselor at all."[10] This means they never have the opportunity to even begin the process of contemplating and planning for their career choices.

Even when students do have a school counselor to turn to for advice as they transition into the world of work, it's likely that their mentors are overextended. For instance, "the American School Counselor Association recommends a ratio of 1-to-250," meaning a single counselor should not be assigned to help more than 250 students.[11] However, in reality, "the median caseload of advisees per full-time advisor is 296 – and for large institutions, it climbs up to 600."[12] As these imbalanced ratios regarding school counselors show, career counseling, student services, and academic advising departments are desperately overextended, which makes the need for definitive guidelines even more dire.

Adding insult to injury is the fact that, while their importance is often ignored, career counseling services *would* suit students' specific needs. *The Hechinger Report* showcases this contradiction by citing two statistics – there has been an "11.4% reduction in career services budgets, yet

85%

of first-year students agree that "studying in a field that really interests me" was an important motivator for enrolling in higher education.

85% of students cite getting a good job as a 'critical' reason for going to college."[13] If properly appointed, career counseling, student services, and academic advising departments could provide exactly what high school and college students want from their education.

These factors considered, career counseling is not as successful as it could be today. The obstacles the field faces are cyclical. Counselors wrestle with unclear standards, ill-defined vocabularies, and restricted budgets, making it difficult for them to do their jobs. Students are, to some degree, aware of these weak points. The strained service, confusing communication, and lack of actionable results make students less inclined to partake in career counseling, which further exacerbates the problem. While this is an unfortunate dynamic, it can be repaired by streamlining, standardizing, and simplifying the career counseling process with the correct technologies.

UNDERSTANDING AND INSPIRING STUDENTS

In order to successfully pursue their passions, students need a way to better understand themselves and a standard vocabulary with which to discuss their interests with their career counselors. Career exploration systems, like the VitaNavis® platform, use proven standards and innovative technology to make this a reality. If career counselors and students currently feel as if they are wandering in the dark toward the world of work, our platform provides a lighted pathway.

Career exploration involves helping students understand how their personality traits and interests suit them in a professional context. As Socrates once said, "To know thyself is the beginning of wisdom," and this is certainly true when it comes to working life. Furthermore, career exploration offers students a means to discover specific careers in alignment with their characteristics and interests. Comprehending and guiding what a student wants, how he or she functions, and why he or

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she makes certain decisions can greatly help career counselors enhance their efficacy.

In fact, a wide variety of research indicates that interests are a productive foundation for career development tools. A study published in *Current Directions in Psychological Science* found that interests spur action and, given this quality, "research on interest" should be applied to "practical problems of learning, education, and motivation," all of which are key factors in career counseling.[14] Continuing this research, a 2014 meta-analysis "revealed the power of interests to predict educational and occupational choice, performance, and success," suggesting that interests are the keys to a useful career exploration tool.[15]

Career assessments have been using interests to give students insights for nearly a century. The interest-based tool, the *Strong Interest Inventory*® assessment, as well as the newest SuperStrong® tool derived from it, has been used for over 90 years. As the research on interests has advanced, CPP Innovation Labs (a division of CPP – The Myers-Briggs® Company) has built on the power of assessments and data to develop a robust career exploration system with the VitaNavis platform. The platform and the assessments available through it are informed by decades of research and market feedback to help students achieve the best possible outcomes as they learn about both themselves and their work options.

More recent educational research suggests that career exploration is so vital that it should actually begin in middle school. A 2013 piece in *Middle School Journal* asserts: "Middle level educators must find ways to integrate postsecondary education and career exploration throughout the curriculum." The article highlights the fact that many younger students have little to no awareness of how their education relates to their future work life, since "in a study of sixth and ninth grade students' career development awareness, only about half could identify a skill needed for career success."

In order to address this issue, the *Middle School Journal* article advocates for "online career education resources." This reflects the importance of

integrating career exploration with digital technology to improve students' understanding of themselves and their future in the workplace. The authors of the publication specifically encourage middle level educators to use "the Occupational Information Network, known as O*Net OnLine" because it "provides a wide variety of useful information for hundreds of career fields." This database allows users to "search for careers that require specific skills instead of reading about one type of occupation at a time," with an additional emphasis on "careers associated with the green economy and careers that are going to be in high demand in the future" so that users can look for "promising careers" that have "a bright outlook for future demand."[16] O*Net provides a practical look at viable options in an ever-changing professional world. While simply reviewing this information can be invaluable for students, the VitaNavis platform takes O*Net several steps further by making its data *actionable*.

One of the primary advantages of career exploration tools is that these motivate students to thoroughly consider many options, including and especially occupations they may have never even thought of. For instance, the young woman who grew up wanting to be a veterinarian may find out that her personality attributes and interests actually make her well-suited to scientific research, or the young man who always wanted to be an actor may discover his enterprising nature (based on RIASEC framework) could allow him to excel as a manager instead. Career exploration tools are not meant to *dictate* what students decide to do with their lives; rather, they help students come to an increased awareness of themselves and their potential professional pathways. Furnished with an appreciation of their aptitudes and choices, users can make fully informed decisions about their futures.

VitaNavis is part of a mission focused on leveling the playing field in education. The platform is designed to provide more universal access to assessments and career search, particularly to underserved students, many of whom only know of retail or food services jobs, or whose families, based on cultural nuances, may push them to pursue career paths which may not align with the student's interests and skill sets. The VitaNavis platform introduces them to previously unexplored possibilities so they aren't limited by lack of knowledge. So, while career exploration tools can be transformative for students from all backgrounds, they are especially life-changing for students who can for the first time begin to visualize their occupational ambitions in a more informed fashion. With their aims established, they can ultimately achieve them through mapping their education plans with academic advisors and engaging more fully in their pursuits to reach their goals.

In addition to helping disadvantaged students, research indicates that career exploration programs may also be distinctly helpful for students who are less academically inclined. Pupils who aren't as engaged in their coursework appear less likely to consider and strive for a variety of career opportunities. Career exploration engages these students and encourages them to consider how their schoolwork could actually be related to what they want to do in life. Once they understand how their academic performance correlates with their personal goals and desires, they appear more willing to engage in school. Furthermore, students who are not high-achieving academically may (wrongly) assume they lack the necessary traits to succeed in their field of choice, and the career exploration process can dispel that. In addition, some may not have given much thought (if any) to their professional life after they finish high school, so simply recognizing their options could galvanize them to become more involved in their education.

A *Phi Delta Kappan* article published on this topic explained: "Our study provides evidence that [career exploration programs] can be a useful

strategy for keeping students in high school and preparing them for further study or training." In short, this study found that participating in career exploration programs helped keep less academically stellar students on track, likely because they could understand how their coursework was preparing them for the professional life they desired. As the piece put it: "Schools need to be able to engage, inspire, and advance students with every kind of interest and ability, including those not highly motivated by academic study. The evidence that is emerging suggests that career exploration programs are one way to accomplish just that."[17]

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Mary G. Visher, Rajika Bhandari, Elliot Medrich. Oct. 2004. The Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. 86, No. 2

Career exploration tools don't just broaden students' understandings of themselves and their professional potential – by virtue of their design and methodology, these systems encourage students to shift their approaches to finding work. A 2008 report in *Professional School Counseling* concluded: "we must explore who we are and what our purpose is, determine what we find meaningful, and understand our [attributes] in order to develop a truly satisfying career."[18] Career exploration systems are fruitful for students in myriad ways, including causing them to assess their assumptions about how their professional lives "have to" or "should" be.

Unfortunately, students are burdened with erroneous ideas about how their career paths are likely to go, at both a conceptual and a practical level. While many assume students inherently understand the world of work and can figure out their occupations on their own, this simply isn't true. For example, *The Guardian* recently reported: "Students have an unrealistic expectation of their job prospects on graduating, a survey has found.

The Student Employability Index, which questioned 4,000 students at 20 universities, finds almost three-quarters (79%) expect to be in a graduate-level job within six months. But government figures show that only around half (53%) of those who graduated within the past five years are in such jobs."[19] Understanding their personalities and interests, as well as how these traits correlate to growing job sectors, can help students form a more practical picture of their professional future.

Furthermore, evidence hints that adjusting their expectations may actually help students excel in their occupations and gain promotions faster. An article published in *Studies in Higher Education* discussed college students' educational performance and "suggested that a realistic expectation of undergraduate study, where the student took responsibility for their own learning, predicted higher end-of-semester marks...These findings suggest that measures taken to encourage a realistic expectation of the nature of undergraduate study and boost academic behavioural confidence may benefit students' performance at [the] university."[20] If correctly comprehending their undergraduate responsibilities and outcomes helps students succeed in college, it follows that more accurate expectations for their professional life would allow them to flourish in their occupations, as well. Career exploration tools like the VitaNavis platform give students the insights they need to foster productive, realistic discussions with their career counselors about their futures. By having more information about their possibilities and fully engaging with the caring educators who are there to help them, students can truly take "responsibility for their own learning," beyond academics and into the professional sphere.

The basis for every benefit of career exploration is ultimately *standardization*. These tools give students and career counselors a set of shared, essential understandings from which to operate. In the process of using these instruments, both students and counselors better comprehend students' interests, viable job opportunities, and the process of finding fulfilling work.

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Perhaps most importantly, career exploration systems give students and counselors a common *vocabulary* with which to discuss careers, address concerns, and strategize. Career exploration materials greatly reduce the margin of error for communications between career counselors and students. When a student discusses one of his or her interests or traits, the counselor knows exactly what he or she means because the career exploration system clearly defines this characteristic. When a counselor proposes that a student consider a certain career path, the student can better understand why and research it using O*Net data and other tools related to the career exploration system. Career exploration tools put students and college counselors on the same page – or screen, as the case may be with state-of-the-art digital tools systems like VitaNavis.

A 2015 article published by the *American Sociological Association* explains that a study found "distrust between counselors and students is due to a lack of shared understanding regarding expectations and roles." Equipped with right vocabulary, expectations, information, and tools, career counselors can build trust with their students and better guide them through the oft-daunting process of finding the right career.

SUPPORTING AND ENHANCING EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

In the previous section, we detailed how career exploration tools can solve some of the most challenging quandaries career counselors currently face. However, in addition to repairing and resolving problems in modern career counseling, career exploration tools also offer a host of clear advantages, actively *strengthening* this system. Such tools are necessary to not only fix the problems in contemporary career counseling, but elevate the field to higher heights than ever imagined with our advanced technology.

First of all, career exploration tools serve more than just student success. Having a standardized tool from which to operate helps teachers support *each other* in helping their pupils. They share a common vocabulary and knowledge base with both their students and their colleagues, allowing them to create a cooperative, rewarding network. As a piece in *Middle School Journal* explains: "online career education resources… can be beneficial to teachers and other school-based professionals, including administrators and counselors, who wish to learn more about careers." Career exploration platforms like VitaNavis allow teachers, counselors, and administrators to engage in continued education about the world of work, opening their eyes to occupational options for their students. This saves them from having to do extensive research on the latest job trends just to keep pace.

In addition, the journal article points out: "these sites also allow for collaboration with other teachers throughout the country and around the world."[21] As well as offering the direct benefits of career exploration tools for educators, these systems also create an interconnected, cooperative network of users who can rely on and learn from *each other*. The shared vocabulary that helps career counselors connect with their students also allows them to forge fruitful relationships with their colleagues. With VitaNavis as a common reference point, teachers, career counselors, administrators, and relevant professionals can work together, providing each other with insights, use cases, and other support.

Career exploration tools also give both educators and students the valuable information they need to align their current curricula with their future goals. Especially if educational institutions implement these solutions early on in a student's career (such as middle school), students, career counselors, and teachers can help create an academic pathway that sets the student up for success. For example, if a student learned from a career exploration tool that she would be suited for a career in medicine, she could plan on taking more elective science courses and volunteering at a local hospital. Similarly, if a student discovered that he would enjoy being

an electrician, he could choose to take a more advanced physics class and begin apprenticing with a local professional in his area.

With this type of professional planning in place, evidence demonstrates that students are more likely to earn their degrees on time. Especially in the current educational environment, this is a significant benefit. According to a report from Complete College America, "far too often, students in American higher education wander aimlessly, picking from a smorgasbord of courses and degree requirements rather than choosing a clearly-articulated, full program of study." Therefore, "the vast majority of college students do not graduate on time" and "many *never* graduate." Of course, one of the primary reasons this problem plagues undergraduates is that they lack the information and guidance to put together a "clearly-articulated" program of study geared toward their occupational interests.

Career exploration tools fill in these knowledge gaps so students can confidently plan and complete their programs. As Complete College America explains, a "purpose first" approach is key: "provide students opportunities to evaluate their interests and explore career options, using labor-market data to reveal trends and possibilities."[22] The VitaNavis platform provides exactly the data students need to successfully carry out their studies.

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In addition to the productive conversations it fosters, the VitaNavis solution offers resources to help direct students on their educational and occupational pathways. The platform gives users further insight into their interests and personality, and abilities through reliable and valid assessments. Users who have taken the career exploration assessment through the platform are presented with potentially compatible career paths based on their corresponding interest theme (RIASEC) codes. If they're drawn to a particular profession, we provide more information about the job outlook, skills required, and education that corresponds to it, based on the latest O*NET, BLS (Bureau of Labor Statistics), and the Department of Education's IPEDs (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System) data. From there, it drills down into personality aspects that are key to focus on (and develop) for the workforce. In short, VitaNavis sets students up with a detailed roadmap for their futures.

With the right career exploration tools, educators, students, career counselors, CAOs (Chief Academic Officers), Chiefs of Student Services, and other administrators can not only overcome the barriers this field faces, but develop more informed curriculums and set data-driven goals to help their students and organizations truly *thrive*.

A STANDARDIZED SOLUTION TO CAREER EXPLORATION

When it comes to combating the problems facing career counseling today and empowering students to enhance their occupational outcomes, any career exploration tool is better than none. However, not all career exploration tools are created equal. A truly successful system would synthesize decades of established research, innovative technology, an up-to-the-minute database on the world of work, and an interface designed to smoothly guide users through all of these resources. VitaNavis delivers the shared vocabulary career counselors, educators, administrators, and students urgently need, packaging them in a beautiful, interactive platform that makes the most of everything career exploration tools have to offer.

In addition to providing every benefit discussed in prior pages, VitaNavis is offered in both English and Spanish with several exceptional advantages. These include:

- **An intuitive interface.** When they log in, students are guided through a set of questions designed to pinpoint their interests and personality traits. This is powered by the SuperStrong® assessment (based on the *Strong Interest Inventory* tool). This process takes less than 10 minutes on average and can be done on a mobile device as well as a computer.

- **Nuanced observations.** Rather than simply finding out which jobs are popular today or being lumped into a broad, vague category of interest, students answer a series of work style scales. By asking, for example, whether they prefer to learn through lecture versus reading a book or if they tend to take risks versus maintaining a cautious approach, VitaNavis gains valuable, actionable insights about users. Upon concluding the assessment, the platform presents students with their occupational themes (areas that might interest them), personal styles (i.e. leadership, teamwork, etc.) based on sliding scales, and career interests (specific occupations they might choose to further research in our detailed database).

- **A network of supplementary resources based on and beyond the assessment.** VitaNavis is integrated with leading occupational databases like O*Net, BLS, and the Department of Education's IPEDS in order to help students access the latest information on occupations that suit their interests. Furthermore, VitaNavis links with your academic institution's offered programs and contact information, encouraging students to discover new opportunities.

- **A model backed by decades of research.** The *Strong Interest Inventory* assessment is based on decades of research. In addition, the SuperStrong® assessment was derived from it with advanced data science, using novel statistical methods to develop scoring algorithms. Extensive comparison studies have been conducted

to ensure validity, reliability, and accuracy of the SuperStrong® assessment.

Another telling measure of potential impact lies in student reaction to available tools. In self-reported data from VitaNavis partner institutions, students' responses when surveyed, indicate that 90 percent of students said "this was a valuable experience," 97 percent said they had a "clear understanding of [their] results", 85 percent became "aware of more major options," and 89 percent felt "better equipped to make decisions" about their occupations.[23] In Latin, "vita navis" translates literally to "life ship." With this career exploration tool at your disposal, students can confidently set sail into their professional lives.

EXPLORE VITANAVIS

In the rapidly-evolving twenty-first century world of work, students need clear, productive guidance to help them find their way. Although career counseling is more vital than ever, its value is often underestimated. As career counselors, academic advisors, student services representatives, and other education professionals grapple with this, students become disheartened, only worsening the issue. Furthermore, misunderstandings between students and advisors mar what could be one of the most important mentoring relationships they'll forge.

Fortunately, research and practice demonstrate that career exploration tools offer a simple, streamlined, successful solution to the challenges facing career counseling. By giving students and counselors a standard vocabulary to use, career exploration tools can reignite pupils' passion for pursuing their future occupations and provide career counselors with actionable tools to help them. With an effective career exploration tool, career counseling departments can not only repair themselves, but become stronger than they've ever been.

Backed by decades of research, powered by an approachable interface, and bolstered by a network of supplementary resources, the VitaNavis platform gives students the detailed observations they need to pursue

What are students saying about their experience with Vitanavis?

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the correct careers for them. Most importantly, the VitaNavis platform offers a *standard*, compelling method for career counselors and students to engage with each other, benefitting all involved.
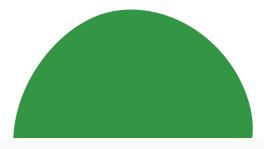
To explore VitaNavis for yourself, sign up for a free trial or register for one of our weekly webinars.

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