GETTING SMART

Education Design Lab

Experience Matters

A Common Language for Talent, Trust and Mobility

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About the Organizations

Getting Smart brings deep expertise in mapping learning ecosystems, conducting landscape studies, and designing real-world learning frameworks that connect youth to purpose and opportunity. With more than 15 years of experience leading knowledge mobilization efforts, Getting Smart has produced dozens of publications—including toolkits, case studies, and interactive frameworks—focused on the future of work, career-connected learning, and learner-centered innovation.

The Education Design Lab (the Lab) is a national nonprofit that co-designs, prototypes, and tests education-to-workforce models through a human-centered design process focused on understanding learners' experiences, addressing equity gaps in higher education, and connecting learners to economic mobility. The process helps higher education leaders consider the needs of employers, using curriculum and program design as a gateway to make skills more visible to students and employers alike.

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At-A-Glance Summary

The report addresses a critical "experience gap" in the talent market, where employers demand validated work experience for entry-level roles, but traditional documents like resumes and transcripts fail to capture a learner's full capabilities. The solution proposed is a new, shared common language of experience—a robust, interoperable framework for evaluating, designing, and articulating experience value across any context. This framework is built on three core anchors—Autonomy, Complexity, and Contribution—each of which is measured across a 3-level progression (Follow, Assist, Apply).

In addition, the framework can be implemented in three discrete ways: Evaluation, Design, and Storytelling. When done well, these efforts are aligned and empower learners by validating their experiences and building their confidence. The result is a trusted, high-fidelity talent signal that helps learners understand who they are and what they're good at, and helps employers move forward with confidence with a digital records infrastructure.

Overview: The Structural Failure

We're facing a persistent and structural "experience gap". This gap represents a fundamental market failure: employers increasingly demand candidates with relevant, validated work experience for entry-level roles, yet a systemic chicken-and-egg dilemma prevents learners and job-seekers from gaining and/or communicating this experience. This disconnect is amplified by the rise of skills-based hiring and a VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous) world, rendering traditional signals of capability—resumes and academic transcripts—inadequate. These static documents are often inaccurate and rarely capture both valuable learning experiences and the full breadth of what a learner knows and can do, failing to provide the trusted, contextual evidence employers now require.

Beyond this challenge, too many learners graduate from high school without a clear sense of direction and, more specifically, without support in connecting their strengths to the needs of the world and the market.

This report argues that the solution is not merely new technology, but the establishment of a new, shared Common Language of Experience. This language, or framework, provides a robust, trusted, and interoperable method for *evaluating*, *designing*, and *articulating* the value of experiences had and skills developed in *any* context, from a formal internship to a client-connected project or volunteerism.

Drawing upon foundational research from the Education Design Lab, Getting Smart, the SFIA Foundation, and the Institute for Working Futures, this report synthesizes a model of progressive responsibility and capability. This framework is anchored by three core anchors to describe the context of an experience:

- Autonomy (the agency to act)
- Complexity (the nature of the challenge)
- Contribution(the level of participation and impact on outcomes)

Each of these three anchors can be evaluated across a 3-level progression, allowing for a nuanced and context-rich assessment of any experience:

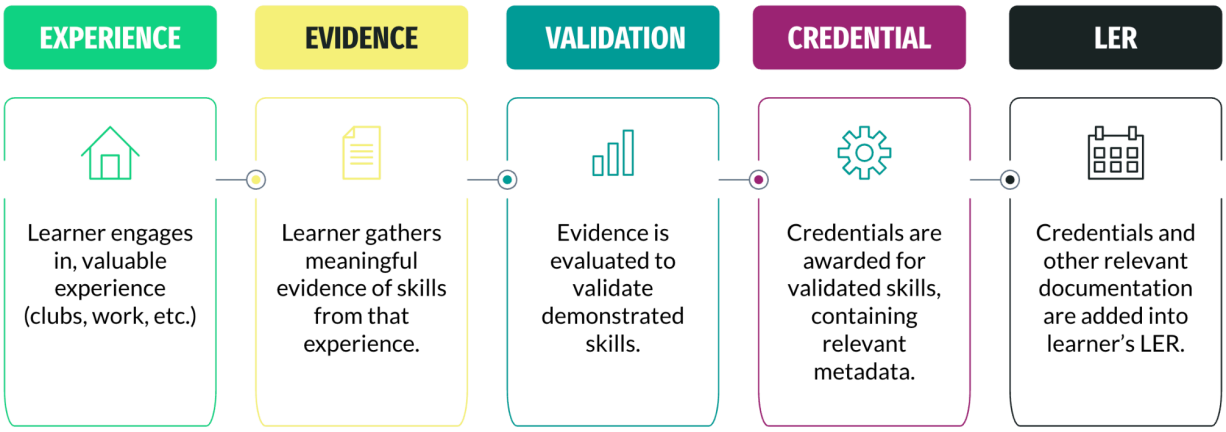
- Level 1 (Follow)
- Level 2 (Assist)
- Level 3 (Apply)

In addition, this report demonstrates how this framework moves beyond failed proficiency or career ladder models by focusing on how the *context* of a skill application changes and deepens over time. We present a practical, three-layer implementation model for employers and educators:

1. The Evaluation Layer: Using the framework as a common rubric for reflecting on and assessing experiences.
2. The Design Layer: Using the framework as a shared blueprint for co-designing high-impact and real-world learning experiences.
3. The Storytelling Layer: Using the framework as narrative scaffolding to empower learners to articulate their value.

By applying this model, we create a critical, causal chain: structured validation empowers learners, demonstrably increasing their confidence and self-efficacy, which in turn equips them to provide the accurate, high-fidelity talent signals that employers crave.

Evidence-Driven Experience Credentialing



This model only works if the infrastructure for digital records is built and adopted at the same time. This ecosystem of digital solutions functions as a network of trust, using digital wallets and AI-powered validation to create a portable, verifiable, and equitable record of human capability. It requires a deliberate commitment to three strategic expansions:

expanding access (ensuring the system works for all learners, especially those on the margins), expanding experiences (viewing experiences as a core component of verifying skills), and expanding value (ensuring the new credentials and records are valued by both learners and the workforce). This system closes the experience gap, providing a more efficient, transparent, and mobile talent market for all.

The Credentialing Landscape

Getting Smart published a previous landscape analysis on the credentialing landscape in K-12, showing the emergent opportunities and points of friction. **Find out more here.**

The Core Framework: A Shared Lexicon

Before understanding *how* to engage, all stakeholders must understand the language. This understanding is built upon three fundamental anchors (Autonomy, Complexity and Contribution) that can be used to design, evaluate or describe any role, project, or experience, synthesizing the frameworks presented in the source materials into one unified model that extends from K-Gray. Within these anchors, increased proficiency isn't always better. While these three anchors evolve across time and experiences, each of them has their time, place, and value.

The Three Anchors of Experience:

- Anchor 1: Autonomy: The level of independence, discretion, and supervision required.
- Anchor 2: Complexity: The intricacy, novelty, transferability and ambiguity of the challenge.
- Anchor 3: Contribution: The ability to mobilize others and impact outcomes.

The framework's true value is in its application. By using the three anchors and the accompanying 3-level progression, stakeholders can universally describe, validate, and communicate the value of *all* types of experience.

We propose a 3-Level Progression rooted in the first stages of the SFIA framework and Human Capability Standards, two frameworks that move beyond static proficiency and instead measure the context of the experience (i.e., in what capacity, to what degree, in what sector, etc.).

The SFIA Framework

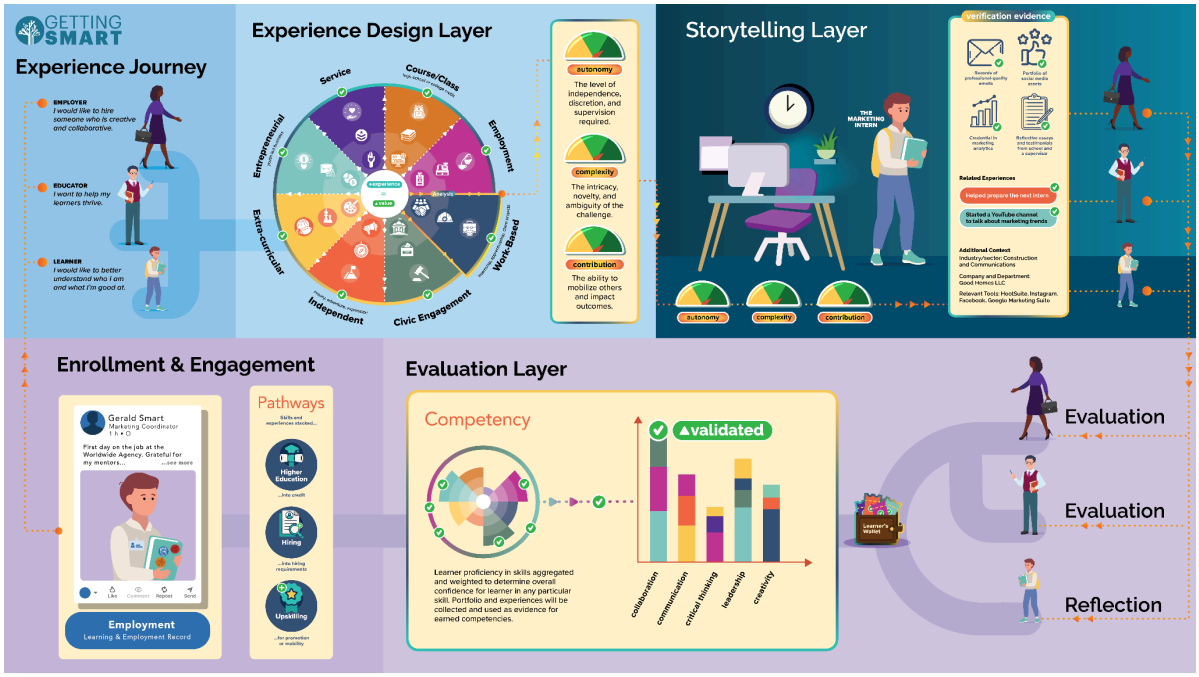
In the SFIA Framework, Contribution is called Influence. We propose transitioning from Contribution to Influence at Level 4 (Enable) in the SFIA progression. Learn more about influence here.

The three levels below correspond to SFIA Levels 1-3 (Follow, Assist, Apply). The SFIA framework extends to Level 7 for senior leadership roles; this framework focuses on Levels 1-3 to address the entry-to-mid-career experience gap while remaining compatible with SFIA for continued growth and workforce development.

The Progression of Experience:

- Level 1 (Follow): Performs routine tasks under close supervision. Focus is on following instruction.
- Level 2 (Assist): Works under routine supervision; uses discretion to solve routine problems. Focus is on independence.
- Level 3 (Apply): Works under general direction; manages own work and solves complex problems. Focus is on ownership.

Category / Dimension	Level 1 Follow	Level 2 Assist	Level 3 Apply
Experience *Whether an internship, a client project, a self-directed learning experience, service learning, etc.*	Performs routine tasks under close supervision, follows instructions, and requires guidance to complete their work. Learns and applies basic skills and knowledge.	Provides assistance to others, works under routine supervision, and uses their discretion to address routine problems. Actively learns through training and on-the-job experiences.	Performs varied tasks, sometimes complex and non-routine, using standard methods and procedures. Works under general direction, exercises discretion, and manages own work within deadlines. Proactively enhances skills and impact in the workplace.



1. For Learners: The User

How to build confidence and articulate value.

The ultimate beneficiary of this system is the learner. Evidence shows that students with valuable real-world and work-based learning experiences have greater confidence and often find more opportunities after (and before) graduation. The Center for Advanced Professional Studies (CAPS) Network, which immerses students in professional, problem-solving environments, found that learners "expressed high increases in overall confidence, resilience, self-knowledge and collaboration through the professional experiences they participated in."

Research conducted at the University of North Texas on the impact of credentialing experiences found that the very *process* of receiving these credentials "increases their self-efficacy. It increases their resilience". This psychological benefit had tangible academic outcomes, including "GPA increases" and a "stronger likelihood of people returning to their degrees because they were getting these things and starting to see the real-life applicability."

This is the first step in a powerful causal chain:

1. A learner participates in a high-quality, designed experience (Design Layer).
2. That experience is validated using a structured framework, like the progression of experience above (Evaluation Layer).
3. The learner evaluates themselves and the experience through the language of the framework to articulate their own growth (Storytelling Layer).

This intentional process of validation and articulation is what builds confidence and self-efficacy. We are not just credentialing skills; we are empowering learners to recognize, own, and communicate their own value. And, perhaps most importantly, we're teaching them how to do it again and again. After learning the language and increasing skill visibility, learners are better able to self-evaluate their own experiences as they navigate through a multitude of learning environments and experiences.

A. Validating Lived Experience (The Maria Case Study)

Valuable learning experiences happen to all of us, all the time, but it is difficult to capture them and understand how transferable skills are developing in the process. Unfortunately, traditional transcripts often neglect skills and lived experience, relegating them to a line item under Extracurriculars or some other periphery. Consider Maria, who started a non-profit to teach coding.

Table 2: Applying the Anchors: Validation of "Maria's Non-Profit" (Source: Getting Smart, "A Full LER Ecosystem")

Anchor	Maria's Experience Evaluation	Verification Evidence
Autonomy	Level 3 (Apply): "Some agency. Initiated the project, helped manage resources, engaged with community leaders..."	• Grant approval letters • Testimonials from school administrators
Contribution	Level 3 (Apply): "Was the sole contributor to the project. Led the team, managed resources, engaged with community leaders..."	• GitHub coding examples from the work • Testimonials from school administrators
Complexity	Level 3 (Apply): "Complex. Involved setting up a structured program, securing funding, managing a team, and sustaining the initiative over two school years."	• Reflective essays written by Maria • Photos and videos from coding sessions

By analyzing the submitted evidence against the anchors, AI tools can provide a high confidence rating in competencies like leadership, problem-solving, and community engagement across different contexts and domains. This will give a better picture of how transferable Maria's skills are in different contexts, as well as showing how much they have developed and grown across different experiences.

While Maria is demonstrating a Level 3 on the above anchors, she is approaching SFIA's Level 4 (Enable). There is no age or time-bound ceiling; rather, certain experience types lend themselves more naturally to different levels.

This validated record is now stored in Maria's digital wallet and has real currency for communicating capability. For higher education admissions, universities interested in students with proven leadership and community service skills highly regard her application. For employment, companies looking for young leaders with experience in managing projects and teams might reach out to her for intern roles. Her lived experience is no longer an invisible anecdote; it is a validated, high-value asset.

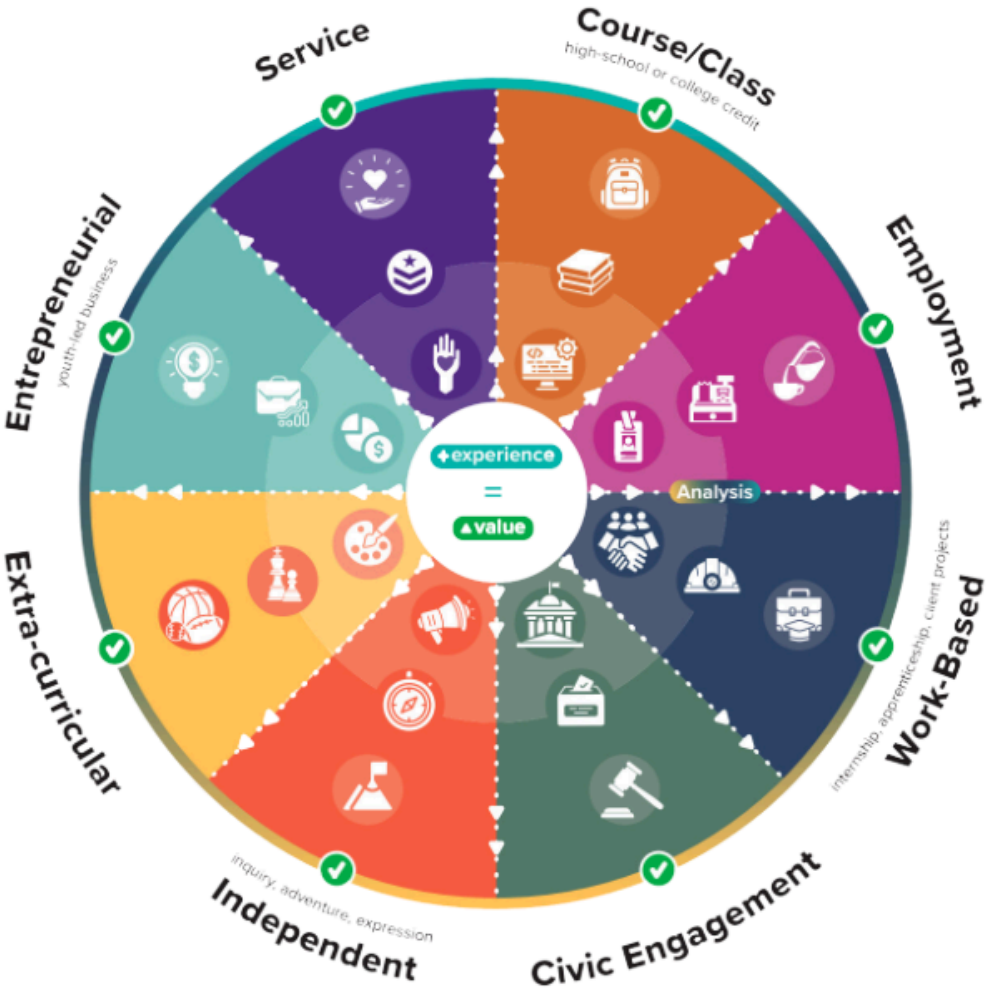
B. The Storytelling Layer: Owning the Narrative

Everyone has had the experience of asking a young person, "What did you learn today?" or "How was your day?" at the dinner table, only to hear *crickets* or the ever enlightening "fine." What would it take to turn these responses into a data-rich recap of growth and learning?

Without the time to reflect, the scaffold to hang your experiences upon, and insight into which part of your story they want to hear, it's no wonder that this question is often left rhetorical. For informal moments like this, or more formal moments like a job interview, learners need to learn how to prompt themselves all along the learning journey, reflecting over and over again upon growth, what they care about, where they've failed, and what they're good at.

Similarly, educators and all school staff members (families too) need to become facilitators of story, key places of reprieve along each individual learning journey for reflection and digging deeper. We all need to become journalists, unpeeling the onion of learning one layer at a time.

Using this framework, a learner doesn't just say "I had an internship." Rather, they might say, *"They pretty much let me run things on my own after the first week. I handled all the daily stuff, like scheduling and customer questions. I only had to ask my boss for help when something really weird or new came up."* With the anchor being visible to all parties, this helps map the learner's experience to real and transferable criteria.



The Experiences Wheel

A key part of this work is the validation of experiences beyond just those in the workplace, this increases the recognition of a wide variety of life and experience, thereby increasing access to high-powered learning experiences. Check out this publication to see how states are expanding access to real world learning experiences and to better understand how the proposed framework might apply to a wide range of experience types.

2. For Employers: The Demand Side

How to hire with confidence and build talent pipelines.

Employers are currently forced to rely on proxies, like a degree, because they cannot trust self-reported activities on a resume. By adopting this framework, employers move from guessing about potential to verifying capability. Resumes often include inaccurate and self-reported information, offering a narrative that is difficult, if not impossible, to verify at scale. More importantly, they rarely convey the full breadth of a learner's skills. They may list a job title or a project, but they fail to capture the *context* of that experience: What was the level of challenge? What was the individual's true scope of responsibility? What was the measurable impact?

Traditional transcripts are rarely better. They are a static, historical record of courses completed and grades received, not a dynamic record of capabilities demonstrated. Additionally, transcripts communicate in one direction, resulting in a modicum of value for the employer but often neglecting the learner entirely. In an environment defined by the rise of skills-based hiring and a demand for practical, validated skills over credentials alone, a transcript is a poor signal of readiness. This is especially true for the Durable Skills—critical thinking, collaboration, creative problem-solving, resilience—that employers value most. These skills are not taught in a single course; they are demonstrated and honed through experience. After all, an experience is a skill applied.

Durable Skills Progressions

The Education Design Lab, in its "Toward a Leveled Durable Skills Competency Framework," explored and ultimately critiqued two traditional models for describing skill progression.

First, it grappled with Proficiency Leveling. Second, it critiqued The Career Ladder. Ultimately, the analysis led to a critical breakthrough: It is the context surrounding the skill that changes, not just the behavior itself.

This disconnect leaves employers in a bind. While work-based learning opportunities for high school-age individuals are growing, the valuable skills gained through these experiences are often unrecognized, undervalued, and difficult to validate in ways that employers trust. Because employers cannot trust the claims on a resume or the grades on a transcript to signal true capability, they default to proxies they *can* measure, such as directly relevant experience, degree pedigree, GPA, or brand-name internships. This practice reinforces existing inequities, systematically overlooking vast pools of talent,

including those Skilled Through Alternative Routes (STARS), who possess the requisite skills but lack the traditional (and often arbitrary) credentials.

However, this framework isn't just for new hires. It can be used to map internal talent, creating transparent pathways for frontline workers to advance based on verified skills rather than credentials, increasing retention. While this publication only goes up to Level 3 (Apply), the full SFIA framework has four additional levels that are better for leadership and more seasoned employees. It is possible that some student experiences (specifically those that have higher degrees of agency like entrepreneurial experiences, and service experiences) will be more accurately described as level 4.

Case Study Validating Durable Skills (Alex & Jordan)

The framework's first critical application is solving the challenge of assessing durable skills. The Alex and Jordan scenario, detailed in the Education Design Lab's research, provides an illustration. In this scenario, two workers in the retail industry—Alex, a Level 1 Customer Service Representative, and Jordan, a Level 3 Chief Customer Officer— are working on building the durable skill "Strengthen Relationships".

The framework, however, allows us to see how this *same skill* manifests in dramatically different ways based on the context of their roles.

Table 1: Durable Skill Progression: "Strengthen Relationships" (Level 1 vs. Level 3) (Source: Education Design Lab, "Toward a Leveled Durable Skills Competency Framework," p. 13)

Anchor	Level 1 Strengthen Relationships - Follow (Alex, Customer Service Rep)	Level 3 Strengthen Relationships - Enable (Jordan, Chief Customer Officer)	Expert Analysis
Autonomy	"Alex makes shoppers feel welcome and valued, creating a friendly atmosphere that encourages repeat visits."	"When Jordan visits a store, she asks questions to ensure Customer Service Representatives feel heard, valued, and aligned with the organization's vision."	Alex's autonomy is interpersonal and immediate, applied within the defined rules of his role. Jordan's autonomy is systemic and strategic; she uses her agency to shape and align the entire organization's vision and culture.

Contribution	"Alex shares encouraging words during busy shifts, ensuring coworkers feel appreciated and supported."	"Jordan attempts to understand the individual motivations of the managers she supervises, addressing concerns with a personal touch."	Alex's contribution is peer-to-peer. He supports his immediate colleagues. Jordan's contribution is organizational; she mobilizes *other leaders* (managers) to achieve broad, long-term success.
Complexity	"Alex resolves minor customer concerns, increasing customer satisfaction."	"Jordan creates strong personal bonds with stakeholders, partners, and customers via outreach and 1:1 calls to customers. Is able to cultivate loyalty and trust when communicating high-level decisions."	Alex's complexity is transactional; he solves known, common problems with established methods. Jordan's complexity is political and multi-variable; she navigates unfamiliar, high-stakes situations with diverse internal and external stakeholders.

This side-by-side comparison gives employers and educators a precise, behavioral way to describe, evaluate, and design experiences at different levels. An employer can now ask a candidate to "describe a time you resolved a minor customer concern" (Level 1) versus "describe a time you cultivated trust with an external partner during a high-level decision" (Level 4).

Consider two candidates claiming the skill "Strengthen Relationships." The framework reveals the difference in their value:

- Candidate A (Level 1): Resolves minor customer concerns within defined rules (Transactional Complexity).
- Candidate B (Level 4): Cultivates trust with external partners to navigate high-stakes decisions (Political Complexity).

A. The Evaluation Layer: Transforming the Interview

For employers, the Evaluation Layer is about moving from guessing about potential to verifying capability. To fix this, employers must integrate the Common Language of Experience directly into their interview rubrics. By shifting the focus from generic skills to the three anchors (Autonomy, Complexity, and Contribution), interviewers can elicit the rich, verifiable data needed to make high-quality hires.

The most practical application of this layer is re-engineering interview questions to target specific levels of the framework. Instead of asking broad questions like "Do you have collaboration skills?", hiring managers should ask Level-based questions that probe the scope of the candidate's responsibility.

The Old Way: "Tell me about a time you worked on a team."

The Problem: This allows for a generic answer where the candidate might have simply been a participant (Level 1) without distinguishing their actual contribution.

The New Way: "Describe a project where your contribution showed the ability to influence others as you strengthened relationships (Level 3 Contribution), where you had to mobilize others to achieve a result."

The Solution: This forces the candidate to provide evidence of leadership, negotiation, and impact on outcomes.

To implement this, recruiters and hiring managers should be trained to ask follow-up questions specifically designed to uncover the anchors of the experience. In addition, AI interview bots and other tools that draw conclusions from resumes and other work documents should be aligned to the following:

- Probing Autonomy: "What was the scope of your decision-making authority? Did you follow established guidelines (Level 1), or did you have to help define the strategy (Level 3)?"
- Probing Complexity: "Tell me about the complexity of that challenge. Was it a routine issue you had seen before (Level 1), or did it involve navigating ambiguity with stakeholders (Level 3)?"
- Probing Contribution: "Who did you have to interact with? Was your contribution limited to immediate peers (Level 1), or did you have to coordinate alignment (Level 3)?"

B. The Design Layer: Re-Engineering Internships

Internships often don't reach their full potential because they lack structure on both sides of the equation. Educators aren't set up with success with regards to knowing what kind of

experience to ask for and employers aren't set up for success to bring in a blank canvas. Employers can use them to intentionally scaffold experiences:

- Designing a Level 1 Experience: Focus on clear instructions and frequent check-ins. *Goal: Build confidence.*
- Designing a Level 2 Experience: Shift to routine supervision. Allow the intern to handle routine issues independently. *Goal: Build problem-solving.*
- Designing a Level 3 Experience: Provide general direction only. Ask the intern to identify complex issues and strategic solutions. *Goal: Build ownership.*

Feature	Level 1: Follow	Level 2: Assist	Level 3: Apply
Primary Goal	Build Confidence: Focus on following instructions and learning the brand voice.	Build Problem-Solving: Focus on independence in routine tasks.	Build Ownership: Focus on managing workflows and solving complex problems.
Supervisor Role	"The Instructor" Provide step-by-step instructions. Check work frequently (e.g., before every post).	"The Coach" Provide routine supervision. Allow the intern to draft work, but review final outputs before they go live.	"The Director" Provide general direction (goals). Trust the intern to execute the schedule and only intervene for exceptions.
Autonomy & Support	Performs routine tasks under close supervision. Needs a "script" to operate.	Works under routine supervision. Uses discretion to solve known/standard problems.	Works under general direction. Manages their own deadlines and deliverables.

Sample Marketing Tasks	• Posting content *already written* by the team. • Taking photos based on a specific shot list. • Replying to comments using a pre-approved FAQ script.	• Drafting captions and creating graphics for approval. • Researching hashtags and trends. • Answering standard DMs; flagging complex ones to you.	• Planning the content calendar for the full week. • Analyzing engagement data to suggest best posting times. • Identifying negative trends and proposing solutions.

3. For Educators: The Supply Side

How to design high-value learning and validate student growth.

A. The Evaluation Layer: New Rubrics

For educators, the goal of this layer is to move beyond the traditional transcript—which only captures course completion—toward validating the *context* of a student's capability. To do this, educators must integrate the 3-Level Framework (Follow, Assist, Apply) directly into rubrics for Project-Based Learning (PBL), capstones, and work-based learning.

Moving Beyond Proficiency

Traditional rubrics often fail to measure durable skills because they focus on proficiency (e.g., "communicates succinctly"). The observable behavior of a durable skill often does not change; what changes is the context.

- *Old Rubric:* Did the student collaborate well? (Yes/No/Maybe)
- *New Rubric:* In what context did the student collaborate? (Level 1: Within a team vs. Level 3: Influencing a team) .

The Experience Quality Indicators

Educators should adopt a Standardized Marking Rubric that assesses the experience against the three core anchors. This transforms a classroom project into a verifiable data point for a digital wallet or learner record.

1. Assessing Autonomy (Agency): Instead of just grading the final output, assess the *process*.

- *Criterion:* Did the student require step-by-step instruction (Level 1), or did they identify the problem and execute the solution with general direction (Level 3)?.

- *Rubric Application:* "Student collected data and tested ideas under general guidance (Level 2)" vs. "Student co-designed the project and managed resources independently (Level 3)".

2. Assessing Complexity (The Challenge): This measures the difficulty of the environment.

- *Criterion:* Was the work routine and structured (Level 1), or did it involve ambiguity, novelty, and multi-variable problems (Level 3)?.
- *Rubric Application:* "Tasks were well-defined with clear instructions" vs. "Tasks required navigating unfamiliar, high-stakes situations with diverse stakeholders".

3. Assessing Contribution (Impact): This measures the student's role relative to others.

- *Criterion:* Did they simply contribute to a team (Level 1), or did they mobilize others and shape the outcome (Level 3)?.
- *Rubric Application:* "Supported others by completing assigned tasks" vs. "Led or influenced others and had a clear impact on results".

Implementation: Stacking the Deck

This language should not exist in isolation. It should be stacked into high-level measurement protocols, such as Portraits of a Graduate or other institutional outcome frameworks. By using these anchors as the common denominator across different subjects (e.g., a Robotics Club project vs. a Debate Team win), schools can normalize assessment. A Level 3 Autonomy rating becomes a universal signal of capability that both the robotics teacher and a future employer understand

B. The Design Layer: Employer Partnerships

One of the greatest friction points in work-based learning is the language barrier: educators speak in terms of *learning objectives* and *pedagogy*, while employers speak in terms of *productivity* and *ROI*. This framework provides the necessary translation layer to bridge this gap.

Too often, educators approach employers with vague requests like, "Can you host an intern?" or "Do you have any opportunities?" This places the burden of design entirely on the employer, who may not know how to structure a learning experience.

By using the 3-Level Framework, educators can instead approach partners with a specific "spec sheet." They can make actionable, high-fidelity requests that define the scope of work before the student even arrives.

- The Vague Ask: "We have a student interested in marketing. Can they intern with you?"
- The Strategic Ask: "We are looking for a project (Level 2 Autonomy) where a student can work under routine supervision to manage a social media campaign. They need to exercise discretion on daily posts but will require weekly check-ins on strategy".

This specific request tells the employer exactly what is required: they don't need to baby-sit (Level 1), but they shouldn't expect full application (Level 3). It turns a favor into a defined scope of work.

Co-Designing with the Supervisor Guides

Once a partnership is established, the framework serves as a shared blueprint for co-designing the experience. This collaborative process leverages the unique strengths of both parties: the educator designs based on their knowledge of the student's current capabilities, and the employer designs based on the organization's needs.

Educators should provide employers with the Supervisor Guides (see *The Employer Section*) to help them structure the daily environment:

- For a Level 1 Request: The educator advises the employer to prepare clear instruction manuals and schedule daily check-ins to build confidence.
- For a Level 2 Request: The educator advises the employer to step back, allowing the student to handle routine issues and learn from minor failures.

This process might follow the following steps:

1. Initial employer outreach with level-specific request
2. Co-design meeting to align student capabilities with employer needs
3. Provision of Supervisor Guides and framework training
4. Ongoing check-ins during experience
5. Final evaluation using the framework

Student-Centered Design

Finally, this layer offers a unique opportunity to invite the student into the design process. By sharing the framework with the learner beforehand, educators can ask, "What level of autonomy are you ready for?" This ensures the placement is not just a job, but a personalized developmental step aligned with the learner's zone of proximal development.

C. The Storytelling Layer: Teaching Narrative Currency

Educators must explicitly teach this framework to students via career navigation courses. Students need to move from simple journaling to structured reflection using the framework's driving questions:

- Autonomy: "What was your specific role? How available were resources and mentorship, or did you have to find them yourself?".
- Complexity: "How difficult and intricate was the experience? Did you follow existing rules, or did you have to define new ones?".
- Contribution: "How much of a leadership role did you take? Did you simply participate, or did you mobilize others to achieve the outcome?"

The Enabling Infrastructure: Data Sovereignty and AI

When this common language and a synergistic digital wallet are fully adopted, the experience gap that currently defines our talent market will close. It requires a deliberate commitment to three strategic expansions: Expanding Access (ensuring the system works for all learners, especially those on the margins), Expanding Experiences (viewing experiences as a core component of verifying skills), and Expanding Value (ensuring the new credentials and records are valued by both learners and the workforce).

This new ecosystem, built on a foundation of trusted, verifiable evidence, creates a more transparent and equitable market. Learners from all backgrounds—K-12, community college, university, and the existing workforce (STARS)—can finally have their diverse experiences validated and translated into a common, understood currency of capability:

1. Employers gain accurate signals to hire the right talent.
2. Educators provide durable, verified value to their students.
3. Learners gain transparency and agency over their own futures.

The final vision is one of transparency and agency, where every individual has the ability to identify their current location on the continuum and navigate a true, skills-based market. The Learner Employment Record, powered by a common language of experience, becomes the new, equitable engine for human advancement and economic mobility.

Appendix I: Detailed Evaluation and ReflectionTool for High School Internships

A Common Language For Evaluating Real-World Learning

For a common language for evaluating Real-World Learning, we need a common practice for evaluating and designing experiences. We have created a prototype that is built upon the anchors in this report. It is specifically designed for internships; however, can be extrapolated to other experiences such as: client-connected projects, service learning experiences, entrepreneurial experiences, and more.

Purpose of this Tool

This supervisor evaluation tool provides a structured, shared language for assessing the context of a student's internship experience (both how they worked and what they did). It is designed to:

- Help supervisors evaluate the level of Autonomy, Complexity, and Contribution demonstrated
- Confirm whether the intern achieved the experience as designed (Level 1, 2, or 3).
- Support a reflective conversation that prepares the student for future storytelling, interviews, and documentation.

Supervisors can use this tool as both an evaluation rubric and a conversation guide. This tool should be used all throughout the internship, as well as when undergoing the final evaluation.

Anchor Evaluation Framework

Each anchor includes:

- Three structured rating questions (aligned to the 3-Level Progression)
- Evaluator prompts to surface evidence
- Student storytelling prompts for reflection and articulation

Anchor 1: Autonomy - From Following to Leading

Definition: *The extent to which the intern exercises agency over decisions and actions, and the level of supervision required to complete their work.*

A. Supervisor Rating:

Which statement best describes the level of autonomy this intern demonstrated?

Level	Description
Level 1- Follow	The intern followed instructions closely and needed frequent guidance to complete tasks.
Level 2- Assist	The intern worked independently on routine tasks and checked in as needed.
Level 3- Apply	The intern managed their own work under general direction and made decisions about how to approach tasks.

B. Evaluator Prompts

Ask yourself:

- What decisions did the intern make without needing approval?
- How often did the intern require step-by-step instruction?
- Did the intern anticipate issues or wait for direction?
- If the intern had more autonomy than planned, why?
- If they had less, what barriers appeared?

C. Student Storytelling Prompts

Use these to help the student narrate their experience later.

- "What decisions were you trusted to make on your own?
- "Describe a moment when you figured something out without asking for help."
- "How would you explain the level of independence you demonstrated to a future employer?"

Anchor 2: Complexity - From Routine to Unfamiliar

Definition: *The degree of novelty, ambiguity, variety, spontaneity, or challenge in the intern's tasks. Complexity assesses whether the intern applied known rules or had to define new ones.*

A. Supervisor Rating:

Which statement best describes the level of complexity of the intern's work?

Level	Description
Level 1- Follow	The intern completed routine, well-defined tasks with clear instructions
Level 2- Assist	The intern adapted known methods to situations with some novelty or variety.
Level 3- Apply	The intern navigated non-routine or ambiguous tasks requiring independent problem-solving.

B. Evaluator Prompts

Ask yourself:

- What kinds of problems did the intern face - routine or ambiguous?
- Did the intern encounter unfamiliar situations? How did they respond?
- Did the intern create or modify tools, processes, or guidelines?
- Did their tasks increase in complexity over time?

C. Student Storytelling Prompts

Use these to help the student narrate their experience later.

- "What was the hardest or most unfamiliar part of your work?"
- "Describe a moment when the task didn't have a clear answer. What did you do?"
- "What made your work challenging, and how did you handle that challenge?"

Anchor 3: Contribution- From Supporting to Steering

Definition: *The extent to which the intern contributed to outcomes and supported others. Over time, contribution becomes influence: the ability to mobilize others and affect results.*

A. Supervisor Rating:

Which statement best describes the intern's level of contribution?

Level	Description
Level 1- Follow	The intern reliably completed assigned tasks that supported the team's work.
Level 2- Assist	The intern contributed to ideas, improved processes, or shaped parts of the project.
Level 3- Apply	The intern drove key aspects of the work, collaborated to solve problems, or guided peers.

B. Evaluator Prompts

Ask yourself:

- How did the intern's presence improve the work?
- Did they support only their own tasks, or others' as well?
- Did they take the initiative to move the project forward?
- Did they offer ideas that the team adopted?
- Did others rely on them?

C. Student Storytelling Prompts

Use these to help the student narrate their experience later.

- "How did your work make a difference to the team?"
- "Describe a time when someone relied on you."
- "What part of the project changed because of your ideas or effort?"

Overall Assessment: Did the student achieve the experience as designed?

This rating reflects the overall level of the internship experience - how much independence, challenge and contribution the design intended and whether the intern reached that level.

A. Intended Experience Level

Completed by the educator and supervisor together before the internship.

- ☐ Level 1 Experience - Follow
- ☐ Level 2 Experience -Assist
- ☐ Level 3 Experience - Apply

B. Achieved Experience Level (Supervisor Evaluation)

Considering the intern's autonomy, complexity of work, and contribution, which statement best reflects the intership experience they actually demonstrated?

Level	Description
Level 1- Follow	Focused on following directions and completing routine tasks.
Level 2- Assist	Involved initiative, problem-solving, and responsibility for a range of tasks.
Level 3- Apply	Required ownership, coordination, or solving complex problems.

C. Attachments: Evidence of Experience

Provide specific observations or artifacts that validate the experience. Examples may include:

- Work samples or deliverables
- Meeting notes showing decisions made
- Emails, messages, or documentation verifying contributions
- Observed behaviors in unfamiliar or challenging situations

Student Reflection and Storytelling

Supervisors should complete this section *with* the student as a conversation.

A. What story does this internship tell about the student's growth?

(Write together)

B. Draft a "story sentence" for interviews and digital records.

Template: "During my internship, I operated at Level _ in Autonomy, Level _ in Complexity, and Level _ in Contribution. One example of this is when I …. (add specific story + evidence)."

C. What should the student highlight (skills, moments, learnings) when describing this experience to employers or colleges?

Tips for Evaluators:

1. Use evidence, not impressions. Focus on observed actions, decisions and outcomes.
2. Use the anchor as your lens. Ask:
    a. How much independence did they have?
    b. How challenging was the work?
    c. How did they influence others or outcomes?
3. Discuss the evaluation with the student. This is a developmental conversation, not a score.
4. Help the students build their narrative. Your examples become the talking points for interviews, college essays, and digital records.

Final Note:

This tool is not simply an evaluation instrument. It is a key part of building a Common Language of Experience, enabling learners, educators, and employers to describe and validate real-world learning in a way that builds confidence, trust, and, ultimately, economic mobility.

Appendix 2: Quick Evaluation Tool for High School Internships

Anchor 1: Autonomy - From Following to Leading

Definition: *The extent to which the intern exercises agency over decisions and actions, and the level of supervision required to complete their work.*

Supervisor Rating:

Which statement best describes the level of autonomy this intern demonstrated?

Level	Description
Level 1- Follow	The intern followed instructions closely and needed frequent guidance to complete tasks.
Level 2- Assist	The intern worked independently on routine tasks and checked in as needed.
Level 3- Apply	The intern managed their own work under general direction and made decisions about how to approach tasks.

Anchor 2: Complexity - From Routine to Unfamiliar

Definition: *The degree of novelty, ambiguity, variety, spontaneity, or challenge in the intern's tasks. Complexity assesses whether the intern applied known rules or had to define new ones.*

D. Supervisor Rating:

Which statement best describes the level of complexity of the intern's work?

Level	Description
Level 1- Follow	The intern completed routine, well-defined tasks with clear instructions

Level 2- Assist	The intern adapted known methods to situations with some novelty or variety.
Level 3- Apply	The intern navigated non-routine or ambiguous tasks requiring independent problem-solving.

Anchor 3: Contribution- From Supporting to Steering

Definition: *The extent to which the intern contributed to outcomes and supported others. Over time, contribution becomes influence: the ability to mobilize others and affect results.*

D. Supervisor Rating:

Which statement best describes the intern's level of contribution?

Level	Description
Level 1- Follow	The intern reliably completed assigned tasks that supported the team's work.
Level 2- Assist	The intern contributed to ideas, improved processes, or shaped parts of the project.
Level 3- Apply	The intern drove key aspects of the work, collaborated to solve problems, or guided peers.

Overall Assessment: Did the student achieve the experience as designed?

This rating reflects the overall level of the internship experience - how much independence, challenge and contribution the design intended and whether the intern reached that level.

D. Intended Experience Level

Completed by the educator and supervisor together before the internship.

- ☐ Level 1 Experience - Follow
- ☐ Level 2 Experience -Assist

☐ Level 3 Experience - Apply

E. Achieved Experience Level (Supervisor Evaluation)

Considering the intern's autonomy, complexity of work, and contribution, which statement best reflects the intership experience they actually demonstrated?

Level	Description
Level 1- Follow	Focused on following directions and completing routine tasks.
Level 2- Assist	Involved initiative, problem solving, and responsibility for a range of tasks.
Level 3- Apply	Required ownership, coordination, or solving complex problems.

Appendix 3: Documentation Guide for Capturing Experience Inputs

An Evidence Gathering Guide

For these experiences to be validated and communicated, documentation is critical. This documentation will likely vary depending on the experience type and local requirements, however, to articulate what this might look like, we've created a documentation guide mapped onto three experience types as defined by Kansas City's Real World Learning Initiative: Internships, Client-Connected Projects, and Entrepreneurial Experiences. In Kansas City these are called Market Value Assets (MVA). This appendix provides guidance on how to structure the capture of evidence and information which serve as the inputs for each phase of the proposed experience framework in the repor. The same principles can be adapted for other experience types including service learning, student-led research, athletic leadership roles, and more. For guidance on adapting this framework to other contexts, contact Mason@GettingSmart.com.

A Guide to Documenting Experience: Evidence for a New Era

Each experience has a unique structure, but the documentation process follows a consistent pattern of regular reflection, evidence gathering, and external validation. This guide is addressed directly to the student to help them better understand their own role in the documentation and validation process.

In addition to the following experiences, the following information must be included on the final badge and in the program:

- Industry/sector
- Company and Department
- Project Goal (and/or problem statement)
- Project Steps (including project deliverables, where applicable)
- Relevant Tools
- Team Members
- Roles

Entrepreneurial Experiences (EE)

In an EE, you identify a social or market need and work to solve it. The documentation here focuses on your initiative, creativity, and resilience.

A. Reflection:

- Short Weekly Check-ins: A brief written, oral or video reflection every week to track progress, challenges, and learning.
- Milestone Reflections: Deeper reflections at three key stages:
  1. Problem Identification: After you've defined the problem you're solving.
  2. Mid-Project: After initial prototyping and stakeholder feedback.
  3. Final Pitch/Launch: Upon completion of your business plan and final presentation.

B. Reflection Prompts (Tied to Student Outcomes):

- Be Proactive
  - What specific steps did you take this week to move your project forward?
  - How did you know these steps needed to happen?
  - How did you prioritize?
- Conduct Research & Refine Plans
  - How did you get in touch/select your stakeholders?
  - What stakeholder feedback did you receive, and how exactly did it change your business plan or prototype?
- Work Through Difficulty
  - Describe a significant roadblock you hit. What was your immediate response, and what concrete steps did you take to overcome it?
- Seek Feedback
  - Who did you seek advice from (SME, mentor)?
  - What was the most critical piece of feedback you received and how did you implement it?

C. Required Artifacts (The Evidence):

- The Problem: A market and stakeholder research summary.
- The Plan: A formal business plan, including cost-benefit analysis.
- The Process:
  - Photos or short videos of prototypes at different stages.
  - Dated journal entries or a blog documenting the project's journey.
  - Copies of emails or a log of conversations with Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) and mentors.
- The Pitch: A recording of your final "Shark Tank" style pitch or presentation.

D. Supervisor/Mentor Sign-Off:

- 4+ Hours of Mentorship: You must log at least four hours of interaction with one or more SMEs or mentors.
- Mentor Verification: Mentors should verify progress at 30-day intervals throughout the experience, with documented touchpoints including brief email confirmations or logged meeting notes. This will results in a brief, signed statement from your primary

mentor confirming:

- The authenticity of the problem you identified.
- Your engagement in the project for a minimum of 24 hours.
- Their evaluation of your final business plan and pitch.
- Incremental verification:=

Internships

An internship provides an authentic taste of a profession. Your documentation should capture both the tasks you performed and the professional growth you experienced.

A. Reflection:

- Weekly Journal: A consistent log of your activities, challenges, and what you learned about the industry and yourself.
- Monthly Review: A more in-depth reflection reviewed with your internship supervisor.
- Final Reflection: A summative paper or presentation at the conclusion of the internship, summarizing your growth and key takeaways.

B. Reflection Prompts (Tied to Student Outcomes):

- Real World Learning
    - What was different about this project compared to school? What did you learn about yourself in the process?
- Comfortable in Different Contexts
    - Describe a situation where you felt out of your comfort zone. How did you adapt your communication or behavior to fit the professional environment?
- Plan & Manage Projects
    - What project or significant task did you manage? How did you break it down into steps and ensure it was completed on time?
- Benefit from Social Capital
    - Who did you build a professional relationship with? What did you learn from them, and how might you maintain that connection?
- Communicate Clearly
    - Share an example of a professional email you sent or a contribution you made in a team meeting. What was your goal, and how did you ensure your communication was effective?
- What's Next?
    - Are you interested in further pursuing this industry?

C. Required Artifacts (The Evidence):

- The Role: A copy of your official job description and work plan.
- The Work:
  - Samples of non-proprietary work you completed (e.g., a research brief, a design, a section of code, a marketing graphic).
  - A log of your hours (minimum 120 hours, with at least 60 on-site).
  - Photos/videos of you at the worksite or engaged in a key task.
- The Feedback: A copy of your final performance evaluation from your supervisor.
- The Story: Your final reflection paper or a link to your presentation.

D. Supervisor Sign-Off:

- Regular Check-ins: Mentors should verify your progress at 30-day intervals throughout the experience, with documented touchpoints including brief email confirmations or logged meeting notes. In addition, your personal weekly/monthly reflections should be initialed or briefly commented on by your direct supervisor.
- Final Evaluation: A formal, signed evaluation from your supervisor is required. This document should confirm your hours and provide feedback on your performance and skills.

Client-Connected Projects (CCP)

In a CCP, you collaborate with a team to solve a real-world problem for an external client. Documentation focuses on collaboration, problem-solving, and delivering value.

A. Reflection:

- Post-Client Meeting Debriefs: After each meeting with the client, conduct, record and upload a team reflection on what was heard, decided, and what the next steps are.
- Mid-Project Review: A formal team reflection on project progress, team dynamics, and challenges.
- Final Project Retrospective: After delivering the final product, a comprehensive team and individual reflection on the entire process and outcome.

B. Reflection Prompts (Tied to Student Outcomes):

- Collaborate to an End:
  - Describe a disagreement your team had. How did you work together to find a compromise and move toward your shared goal?
  - Did collaborative work get easier or harder as time went on?
- Seek Feedback from Mentors:
  - What was the most challenging piece of feedback the client gave you? How did your team process it and use it to improve your work?

    - What was something you learned from one of your teammates? What do you think they learned from you?
- Plan & Manage Projects
    - Attach your team's project plan. Where did you deviate from the plan and why? What did you learn about project management?
- Communicate Clearly
    - How did your team decide to present your final product to the client? What was your specific role in that presentation?

C. Required Artifacts (The Evidence):

- The Problem: The official project prompt from the client.
- The Team: Your team agreement, including roles and norms.
- The Process:
    - Minutes or notes from client meetings.
    - A project plan (e.g., Gantt chart, timeline).
    - Key email communications with the client.
- The Solution:
    - The final output or product delivered to the client.
    - A recording or slide deck of your final presentation to the client.

D. Supervisor/Client Sign-Off:

- 4+ Hours of Client Connection: You must document at least four hours of direct interaction with the client
- Client Feedback: A formal feedback form or signed letter from the client is required upon project completion. This should confirm:
    - The project has met the 24-hour engagement minimum.
    - The final product was valuable and addressed their problem.
    - Their evaluation of the team's professionalism and process.