2026 KENTUCKY STUDENT ACCESS SUMMIT

From Classroom to Career:
Building Professionalism, Breaking Barriers

Evelyn Thrasher
Dean

Monica Duvall
Director of Student Experience and Success

Gordon Ford College of Business • Western Kentucky University

WKU GORDON FORD COLLEGE OF BUSINESS

SESSION ROADMAP

Where We're Headed

1

The Challenge

Why optional professionalism programming leaves first-gen and working students behind

2

Our Model

The Professionalism Academic Core and a college-embedded Student Success Center

3

Try It Yourself

A paired share-out: adapting the model to your own campus

4

Takeaways & Resources

A replicable framework, key contacts, and open Q&A

WHY THIS MATTERS

Readiness Can't Be an Afterthought

> *Employers consistently point to communication, professionalism, and workplace readiness as the skills new graduates need most — and the skills too many students leave college without.*

At Gordon Ford, we stopped treating those skills as something students pick up if they have the time and means — and started teaching them to everyone, on purpose.

THE BARRIER

When Readiness Is Optional, Equity Suffers

?

The Common Assumption

Professionalism develops through internships, student organizations, and other extracurriculars — valuable experiences, but entirely optional ones.

!

The Reality for Many Students

First-generation students who work and help support their families often can't afford the time optional programming requires — leaving them further behind peers who can attend.

OUR APPROACH

Two Parts, One Required Experience

PC

Professionalism Academic Core

A required, four-course curriculum embedded directly into every business degree — not an elective, not an add-on.

SSC

Student Success Center

A college-embedded hub for advising, internships, career coaching, and recruitment/retention — built around business students specifically.

Built together. Required for every student. No added tuition cost.

What Students Take

1	BA 170 / 175 -OR- BA 220	Business Student Basics Business Student Basics for Transfers and Changes of Major	*1 cr. hr.*
2	BA 261	Business Communication	*3 cr. hrs.*
3	XXX 399	Career Readiness in the Disciplines (specific to each major)	*1 cr. hr.*
4	XXX 499	Senior Seminar in the Disciplines (specific to each major)	*1 cr. hr.*

Three of these four courses carry just 1 credit hour each.

PROFESSIONALISM ACADEMIC CORE

Designed So It Costs Nothing Extra

15 → 16

credit hours for a full-time student — still one tuition rate

Not 18 — so academic rigor stays reasonable, too.

1 **We revised the business core**

to make room for professionalism coursework, rather than bolting it on top.

2 **Three of four courses are 1 credit hour**

so a full-time student moves from 15 to 16 hours — inside the flat-rate tuition band.

3 **No optional fees, no extra semester**

every student gets the same required, embedded experience.

STUDENT SUCCESS CENTER

Embedded in the College, Not Just the University

WKU offers university-wide student support — and Gordon Ford built its own, business-specific layer on top of it, placed inside the college students already call home.

1

Academic Advising

Business-specific guidance from staff who know the curriculum.

2

Internships

Direct placement support connected to employer relationships.

3

Career Coaching

One-on-one preparation for interviews, resumes, and offers.

4

Recruitment & Retention

Proactive outreach that keeps students enrolled and on track.

By the Numbers for 2025-2026

[2435]

students advised each semester

[580]

mock interviews

[70%]

graduates with documented internship experience

WHY IT WORKS

Equitable Access to Career Readiness

1

Accelerate Access

A required core reaches every student on day one — no waiting for them to discover optional programming.

2

Break Barriers

Removing the cost and time barriers that optional programming creates for working and first-generation students.

3

Create Connections

A college-embedded center links coursework directly to advising, internships, and employers.

Try It Yourself

A Paired Share-Out (8 minutes)

Discussion prompt: What is one piece of "optional" professionalism or career-readiness programming on your campus — and what would it take to make it required and accessible for every student?

1

Jot

2 min on your own

2

Pair & Share

3 min with a neighbor

3

Report Out

3 min as a room

WKU GORDON FORD COLLEGE OF BUSINESS

WHAT YOU CAN TAKE HOME

A Replicable Framework

- Embed professionalism in required coursework — not optional programming — to remove barriers for first-generation and working students.
- Redesign, don't just add: revise an existing core to make room so new requirements don't raise tuition costs.
- Build a college-embedded success center that places advising, internships, and career coaching inside students' academic home.
- Connect coursework to real opportunities, linking classroom learning directly to internships and employer relationships.

STAY CONNECTED

Resources & Contact

Evelyn Thrasher

Dean

evelyn.thrasher@wku.edu

Monica Duvall

Director of Student Experience and Success

monica.duvall@wku.edu

Gordon Ford College of Business

Western Kentucky University

We're glad to share our course outlines, advising model, and lessons learned — reach out any time to talk through adapting this for your own campus.

Thank You

Questions & Discussion

Evelyn Thrasher • Monica Duvall

WKU GORDON FORD COLLEGE OF BUSINESS