Building Better Alumni Services

Co-designing post-training enhancements with Per Scholas Alumni

Alumni Experience Handbook
COURSE CATALOG | 2021

PER SCHOLAS

ALUMNI

Opportunity @Work

PER SCHOLAS

IDEO

STARs
SKILLED THROUGH
ALTERNATIVE ROUTES

Who You Are, Who We Are

If you're reading this, you or your organization likely play a role in helping people prepare for and secure quality jobs. You might support programs that enable job seekers — especially those from systematically excluded racial and ethnic groups — to work, learn, and earn to their full potential. Your team might focus on people with experience from previous jobs, military service, community college coursework, or training and certification programs, but without a four-year degree. You know that STARs, those Skilled Through Alternative Routes, are unfairly overlooked, and you're working to transform the world of work to be more equitable, diverse, and inclusive.

We're With You

At Opportunity@Work, we envision a world where employers value candidates for the skills they have, regardless of how they were attained.

We work to rewire the labor market so businesses can diversify their talent pipeline and people can thrive in their careers.

We know that no solution will be effective or durable if STARs themselves aren't at the center. At our STARs Studio, we collaborate directly with end users to plan, design, test, and implement projects that tackle the barriers keeping people from thriving careers and financial security. In all our work, we leverage design thinking, a creative

problem solving approach that starts with deeply understanding people and ends with solutions tailored to meet their needs.

It's this approach, sometimes referred to as human-centered design, that we'd like to offer as a concrete tool for your toolbox. A recent pilot project that we co-hosted in our STARs Studio brought this approach to life. We hope talent developers and collaborators like you will integrate it as a mode of engagement in your future work.

"Consider this document a case study in using participatory human-centered design to interrupt barriers to economic mobility."

Human–Centered Design for Alumni Services

Per Scholas, a talent development organization that provides no-cost skills training and access to employer networks to individuals often excluded from tech careers, approached us with a challenge. To date, 16,000 graduates have completed hands-on courses and launched successful careers in tech. But the team noticed that alumni weren't getting the full support they needed to thrive—making it clear that post-program engagement needed to begin on day one of the training itself to clarify what to expect and set the tone for continued community building. As Per Scholas Technical Instructor Kayla Mejire described: "[Our] alumni community needs to be more engaging. [It] needs to be more collaborative."

Economic mobility isn't only about the first job, but the next job and the job after that. Completing a learning program through a talent developer like Per Scholas is only the beginning of the journey toward a better career, and alumni need services tailored to their particular circumstances and dreams. As one Per Scholas alum explained: "I have young kids and the pandemic has made it impossible for me to look for a job. It's hard when the only alumni engagement opportunities are around seeking employment. I can't do that right now, and I'd like other ways to stay engaged and connected." What could Per Scholas do to better support alumni to continue thriving in careers beyond graduation?

Co-designers Shape Their Own Solutions

To address this need, Per Scholas and the STARs Studio, in partnership with IDEO, a global design and consulting firm, worked together to bring a collaborative approach to reimagining Per Scholas alumni engagement. From January 2021 to July 2021, project facilitators from all three organizations spoke to Per Scholas staff and alumni, as well as workforce experts, to develop early hunches about the nature of the challenge and a new approach. We believe the Alumni Services project sets a strong example of how to empower STARs to design solutions to problems they have identified and experienced themselves.

The STARs Studio then centered on the people who would ultimately be impacted by program updates. From a pool of over 30 applicants, we selected 11 alumni to join a Co-Design Council, a working group dedicated to co-creating a new alumni experience, where they'd react to our early hunches, informed by interviews with subject-matter experts, and move forward with their own ideas. The group reflected a diversity of experiences, graduation dates, level of prior engagement with Per Scholas, geographies and identities, and demographics.

So, what did I sign up for again?

We believe that designing with communities is an important way to bring the voices of people into the design process. As Per Scholas seeks to better understand how to support alumni, we know it's important to create a new vision with alumni. As a member of the Per Scholas Alumni Design Council, your lens is truly valuable and important.

Share — inspiration, ideas, and builds.

Brainstorm — and generate new ideas.

Collaborate — with other alumni, the Per Scholas team, and the IDEO team to create something new.

Learn — from each other and share our learnings with others, leaning into curiosity.

Build — to learn from our failures, try something new, and rebuild again.

During the Per Scholas Alumni Design Council onboarding workshop, the STARs Studio team oriented 11 Per Scholas alumni to their role in co-designing a better alumni experience, including a foundational lesson in design thinking.

At our first joint session, we welcomed participants with a Co-Design Council Toolkit, covering information about the time commitment, shared agreements, and a statement of the existing challenge facing Per Scholas. Co-designers then completed a short course from IDEO, called IDEO U, on the basics of human-centered design, the same course offered as part of a professional certificate program. Co-Designers received compensation for their time ($1200 honorarium), and despite the challenges of running sessions during the COVID-19 pandemic and on top of other commitments, participants remained eager and engaged. Mejire shared: "I like to be a part of something that...bring[s] people together, build[s] people up...I like to be [part of] something that grows a network of great opportunities."

"Being made hyper-aware of their roadblocks and things that are getting in the way, thinking through solutions from them, that was enlightening."

Sierra Harvey, director, alumni engagement and training at Per Scholas

8 Subject-matter expert interviews

4 Co-Design Sessions

2 Completed Prototypes

11 New Designers

100s of Brainstormed Ideas

4 Refined Concepts

A series of four co-design sessions allowed alumni to define their own needs around career advancement and share valuable information with Per Scholas staff. Sierra Harvey, director, alumni engagement and training at Per Scholas, saw the value of these meetings immediately: "I knew that it's important to have wraparound-type services, but I don't think that I realized the depth of it…Being made hyper-aware of their roadblocks and things that are getting in the way, thinking through solutions from them, that was enlightening."

Co-designers then split up into teams to create tangible prototype solutions—think digital mockups, stories, or rough sketches. These small-scale prototypes bring questions to life in a way that other people can react to and build upon. We asked our co-designers: What's the simplest way to convey your idea so it can be tested? Mejire explained: "[IDEO] sat back and let us talk about it and bring it to life. We held the pencil, we drew the concept." When alumni Co-Designers pitched their ideas to Per Scholas' leadership, they included powerful stories about their own experiences as learners and alumni.

In the Alumni Services project, STARs were not only informants through the data collection and discovery process, they co-designed the prototypes and solutions. Harvey says, "[we] discard[ed] our own expectations [while] keeping our goal and our mission in mind." She believes the co-design approach is likely to generate better, more durable results: "Who better to tell you than the people that are living it day to day?"

Per Scholas could have used a shorter approach, like sending out a survey or questionnaire or conducting focus groups, but they likely wouldn't have gotten the same results. These methods of gathering information are valuable and essential, but as our pilot project illustrates, they are only one step. Involving end users from the outset of projects that need community support increases the likelihood of success and empowers participants through the process. One Co-Designer shared, "I found that I am a designer and didn't even know it!"

Two prototypes made it to the final stages of the design cycle and both have already proven useful.

Onboarding toolkit

So, what did I sign up for again?

Time Commitment + Schedule

Here's a peek into what to expect over the course of the next 4 weeks. You should plan to join for weekly virtual design sessions, be prepared to build prototypes, and complete "Homework" activities and reflections independently. All design sessions will be on Tuesday from 6:00 -7:30 PM, Eastern. We anticipate it should take approximately 3 hours of your time weekly to participate.

Week 1 (Mar 2nd – Mar 5th)

Alumni Design Council Kickoff Session
(Tues, Mar 2nd, 6 - 7:30 PM, EST)

Welcome + Brainstorming Session
We'll get to know each other, get an introduction to design, gather inspiration, identify opportunity areas, and begin to generate ideas.

90 Minutes Together

1 Hour Homework

Week 2 (Mar 8th – Mar 12th)

Design Session #2 (Tues, March 9th, 6:00 - 7:30 PM, EST)

Prototype + Learn
We will do a deep dive into prototyping methods, begin to form teams, and start to develop some early concepts.

90 Minutes Together

1 Hour Homework

Week 3 (Mar 15th – Mar 19th)

Design Session #3 (Tues, March 16th, 6:00 - 7:30 PM, EST)

Refine and Iterate
We will further develop our concepts, based upon feedback to iterate based upon what we've learned.

90 Minutes Together

1 Hour Homework

Week 4 (Mar 22nd – Mar 26th)

Design Session #4 (Tues, March 23rd, 6:00 - 7:30 PM, EST)

Share + Celebrate
We will showcase and share our prototypes with others with a Virtual Pitch Fest, highlighting our prototypes and learnings.

90 Minutes Together

1 Hour Homework

Above, the onboarding toolkit provides an overview of the 4-week design sprint in which STARs co-designed solution prototypes for increasing and improving alumni engagement (see next page).

Prototyping Report Card

BUILD & RUN PROTOTYPES
METHOD WORKSHEET

Prototype Name _____
What is it?

Before Prototyping—Your Learning Plan

Top 3 learning questions this prototype is testing:

Key Metrics for Successs
Ex. number of people who show up, qualitative feedback in exit interview

Testing Method
Ex. live tests, role play, storyboard

Assumptions
What would need to be true in order for this to work? Ex. resource availability, law, or policies

After Prototyping—Your Report Card

What We Learned
What answers did we find to our learning questions? Did we see the results we wanted in our key metrics? Did we find out anything about our assumptions?

Iterations
Based on our learnings, what do we need to change? What are we taking forward from this prototype? What do we need to learn next?

Prototype 1 Alumni Experience Handbook

Alumni Experience Handbook
COURSE CATALOG | 2021

The first group piloted a virtual one–stop–shop handbook with information on how to engage with the alumni resources provided by Per Scholas.

90% opened

32% clicked at least one link
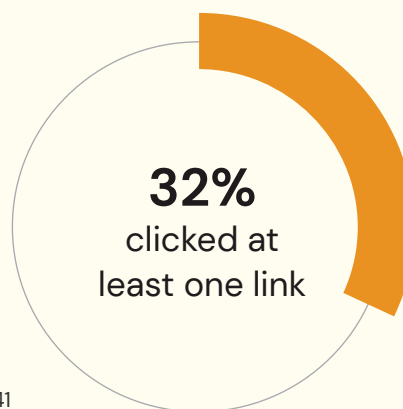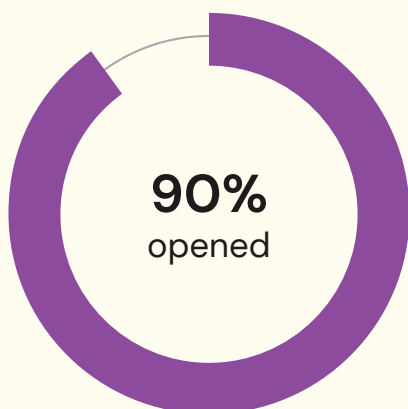
Sample size: 541

Version one was the existing presentation that pre–dated our project, which they used to find the baseline level of alumni engagement. The version one approach successfully promoted high–level awareness of alumni opportunities with classroom learners. But, there was a lag of three to four weeks between the initial interaction and the time they completed the program. The resources shared about alumni engagement were also unattractive and not as engaging as hoped. This caused an influx of emails for clarity and support, and also highlighted unintentional barriers, such as a three–day wait time from initial inquiry to follow up.

Version two, distributed to a sample group in July 2021, had four links to resources and a reminder about Per Scholas' alumni email address, but it did not have wishlist items brainstormed during the co–design sessions. The first concept Per Scholas piloted from the Co–Design Council measured impact using open rates and direct feedback, which they used to create a third version, which contained 20 links, including ones for upskilling opportunities, a staff directory, downloadable virtual backgrounds, and more.

Results were stellar. Of the 541 new graduates who received the Handbook, 90% opened and read it and 32% clicked at least one link. Both rates are dramatically higher than nonprofit industry averages. One recipient wrote back: "I've been wanting something like this from Per Scholas for a long time. It made me feel supported and like I could see all the opportunities in front of me."

Moving forward, the team would like to add a section for inspirational alumni stories.

Prototype 2

Channels for Engaging Alumni in Professional Development

Another group of Co-Designers researched and created online communities for networking, ongoing professional development, and other peer resources and support. The goal was for alumni to help themselves and each other as they transitioned out of the training and into their new careers and lives.

This group sent around a poll to understand whether alumni want to engage in networking, how they would prefer to engage, and the best time to engage. Some key results:

The Designers immediately jumped on this enthusiastic interest in digital community building and created Slack and LinkedIn alumni groups. Within just a few weeks, 400 people joined the Slack network and 212 members joined on LinkedIn. Per Scholas saw in real-time that alumni look for peer-to-peer connections, opportunities to support and motivate others, and ways to hear about ongoing professional development — in addition to their technical upskilling course.

	100%	were interested in networking
	50%	wanted to network with people in their region
	33%	preferred national
	16%	had no preference
	17%	wanted to hear from Per Scholas alumni in mid- and senior-level positions

All these elements are important for career growth and social capital.

"Within just a few weeks, 400 people joined the Slack network and 212 members joined on LinkedIn."

Co-Designers got real-world practice in sketching ideas, gathering feedback, and iterating based on what they learn. Since the launch of these digital alumni channels, Per Scholas has appointed three alumni as ambassadors to lead their alumni community groups. These individuals receive guidance on moderation and facilitation and get administrative privileges to post content to the group.

Harvey was excited about the preliminary results from both prototypes: "We know that they're opening those emails, they're downloading that handbook, they're joining us on Slack and LinkedIn, staying connected beyond the classroom…Because our alumni engagement team is so new, having a product that we could put into the hands, albeit virtually, of our alumni just helped us further promote the opportunities for alum."
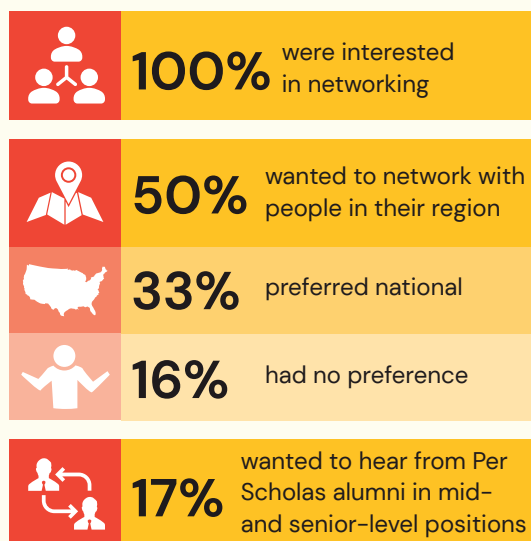
Results

Since the launch of the two prototypes, Per Scholas has seen excellent results from each program:

Prototype 1

Alumni experience handbook

The handbook has scaled to effectively reach Per Scholas's greater alumni population—something they achieved through the activation of workflow automations and the creation of an alumni website. The automations help welcome new graduates to the alumni network within minutes of their graduation and automatically subscribe them to alumni communications. These include the alumni newsletter, which reaches an average of 6,500 alumni monthly. They are now seeing 65% of graduates engaging with the alumni website.

Prototype 2

Professional Development

This has been an area of learning for Per Scholas, and they are seeing positive progress. To get better insights in this area, they surveyed alumni to learn about their job search experiences. They also tested different approaches to coaching alumni in support of their professional development and advancement, leveraging partnerships to increase their capacity and add expertise – such as resume building through YuPro – to meet the full range of alumni professional development needs.

To strengthen communication among their alumni network, Per Scholas launched a job board Slack channel for alumni, which is informed by internal team members and external hiring partners. This channel has already grown to 300 alumni members.

In addition, Per Scholas increased the amount of professional development networking opportunities for alumni from three in 2021 to seven so far in 2022, with four more planned before year end. They aim to use these opportunities to ensure easy access to professional development resources, positioning our graduates for continued success.

Challenges, Opportunities, & What's Next

The process was not without its challenges. First off, **STARs Studio realized quite quickly that the engagement with Co–Designers should have been longer**, with more sessions spread out over several months. The sessions with alumni felt rushed, limiting the depth of concepts that could be built. Given that this may be a new process, organizations piloting the approach should build in a buffer to ensure adequate time for ideation, design, feedback, and iteration.

There was staff turnover at Per Scholas and Opportunity@Work during the Alumni Services project, so **participants didn't always experience consistency and new staff lacked context**. In our next collaboration, we envision providing a design fellow for the duration of the project. This could be a STAR trained in design thinking who can embed with the partner organization and provide additional capacity, especially for resource–constrained nonprofits. Additional hands on deck would also allow organization staff to continue managing their existing work while providing input on this new initiative.

"I would have loved to do it for longer but the beauty of it all was realizing that even the short time constraint did not stop us all from contributing our little bits to improving the future of Per Scholas Alumni experiences."

Finally, **we would have preferred to include alumni co-designers from the very outset**, when Per Scholas, IDEO and STARs Studio began researching and coming up with early hunches. Alumni would have given valuable insight as we preliminarily defined the problem and surveyed the landscape of workforce research. Even if organizations are not able to include co-designers across the full lifecycle of a project, having them be a part of, or at last have access to, initial research to help frame the challenge would provide a stronger starting point for early concepts.

Despite these challenges, one Co-Designer told us: "I would have loved to do it for longer but the beauty of it all was realizing that even the short time constraint did not stop us all from contributing our little bits to improving the future of Per Scholas Alumni experiences." Our 5-month pilot project, including the initial co-design sprint, helped build a vibrant and connected network and extended the impact of Per Scholas out in the world.

In fact, using ideas developed by Alumni Design Council members,

Per Scholas has laid the groundwork for an alumni ambassador program in response to the desire expressed by the community. The Per Sholas alumni mentor program launched in September 2022 with 14 inaugural members. This will lead into the launch of the fuller ambassador program in 2023, giving graduates the opportunity to exercise and uphold Per Scholas's core values.

In a journey of continuous improvement to best support your communities and intended beneficiaries, we hope you'll consider this promising and meaningful design approach. Our Co-Design Council ensured that the solutions actually worked for the very people they were meant to support. In this pilot project, the outcome was an Alumni Experience Handbook, which Per Scholas now regularly updates and expands, and new digital community groups which continue growing and evolving. Your design journey could result in very different tools, ones that address the circumstances, ideas, and dreams alive in your community. As you and your team practice participatory design, we can be a resource.

Our thanks to the Gates Foundation for their generous support of this effort.

If you are a STAR and are interested in participating in future research opportunities with Opportunity@Work, we'd love to hear from you. Email blair@opportunityatwork.org.

Opportunity
@Work

About Opportunity@Work

Opportunity@Work is a nonprofit social enterprise with a mission to increase career opportunities for the more than 70 million adults in the U.S. who do not have a bachelor's degree but are Skilled Through Alternative Routes (STARs). For STARs, the American Dream has been fading due in part to an "opportunity gap," in which access to the good jobs required for upward mobility often depends less on people's skills and more on whether and where they went to college, who they know professionally and socially, or even how they look. We envision a future in which employers hire people based on skills rather than their pedigree. We are uniting companies, workforce development organizations, and philanthropists in a movement to restore the American Dream so that every STAR can work, learn, and earn to their full potential.

Visit us at www.opportunityatwork.org.