

Student-Centered Design Tools

Personas and Journey Maps

At the University of North Texas, personas and journey maps center the real experiences of students in the design of programs, services, and supports. By applying these tools through a lens of empathy, along with student feedback and evidence-based best practices, faculty and staff can identify barriers, align efforts across units, and take coordinated action to improve the student experience. This approach reflects UNT's core values—demonstrating care, curiosity, collaboration, and a commitment to continuous improvement in support of student success.

Goals

Surface the Real Student Experience

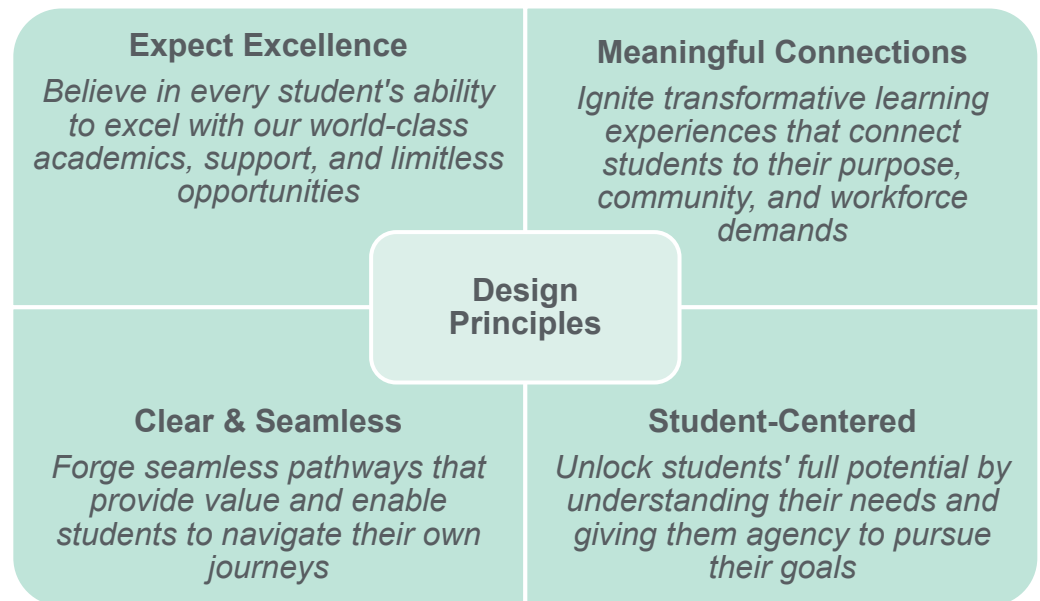
- Identify shared barriers and friction points
- Clarify gaps in current state
- Build a common language across units

Create Shared Direction

- Strengthen cross-departments collaboration
- Co-create a vision for the future UNT student experience
- Connect insights to *Look North: UNT 2030* priorities

Turn Insight into Strategy

- Identify high-impact opportunity areas
- Develop actionable, cross-functional recommendations
- Bridge the current state to the future state



Methodology and Approach

Grounded in President Joshua C. Chilton's founding vision—reaffirmed in [Look North: UNT 2030](#)—UNT must continuously “adjust the work of the college to the demands of the times,” this approach uses personas and journey maps to translate institutional strategy into actionable, student-centered design. These tools ensure decisions are grounded in student feedback and evidence-based best practices, enabling targeted, adaptive support.

Planning and Discovery

- Fall 2024 Student Success Scan
- Strategic Planning Stakeholder Engagement
- Qualitative Research
- Institutional Research and Student Success Data
- Student Voice and Campus Conversations
- Internal Materials shared by the project team

Persona Development and Validation

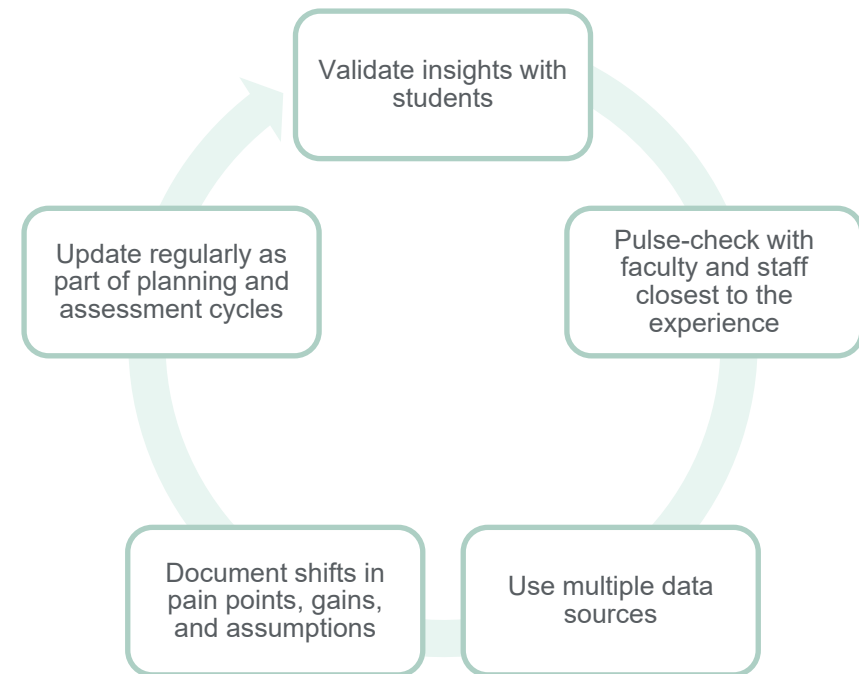
- Developed research-based student archetypes
- Refined with staff/faculty/student input

Journey Mapping

- Analyzed newly accepted and newly admitted students
- Explored orientation and transitioning, early academic experience, and academic progression
- Reviewed graduation and program completion requirements
- Focused on professional launch preparation
- Included early career and early graduate programming

Building Capacity to Adapt

Personas and journey maps are not static deliverables. They function as living design tools within an ongoing institutional learning cycle. As student needs evolve, enrollment patterns shift and strategy advances, these tools must be revisited, validated, and refined.



The discovery phase revealed a clear picture of a university with deep strengths, committed people, and a caring culture—alongside structural and systemic challenges shaped by growth, decentralization, and evolving student needs.

These findings laid the groundwork for persona development, journey mapping, and future-state design. They also highlight opportunities for UNT to streamline processes, strengthen communication and coordination, and enhance the student experience from the moment of admission through early career outcomes.

Nicole McWhirter, Sova Solutions

Personas

Understanding Student Personas

Personas are evidence-based, experience-based, action-oriented, and empathy-building tools that translate complex data into human-centered student profiles.

Evidence-Based

Built from real student data such as behavioral patterns, academic experience, motivations, and engagement trends—not stereotypes or guesses

Experience-Focused

Centered on what drives student decisions and actions (enrolling, engaging, persisting, or stopping out), rather than just demographic traits

Action-Oriented

Used to inform targeted programs, communications, policies, and supports that uphold high standards while providing meaningful support

Empathy-Building

Designed to help cross-functional teams better understand nuanced student experiences and reduce bias by grounding decision in data

A **persona** is a data-informed, realistic representation of a UNT student. It synthesizes student success data, institutional research, and student voice to support more targeted, high-support, high-expectation strategies.

What a Persona Is (and Is Not)

Personas represent archetypes, not stereotypes. They are grounded in aggregated data and lived student experiences rather than fictional narratives. In addition to basic characteristics, they capture what students are trying to achieve and what may be getting in their way.

Strategic Application

Use personas to inform decisions about policies, communications, and resource allocation.

- **Identify impact:** *Which personas are most affected?*
- **Assess tradeoffs:** *What are the downstream effects across student groups?*
- **Make it explicit:** *Who benefits and where might barriers emerge?*

Why This Matters

This approach supports more proactive and student-centered design by surfacing potential challenges before they affect outcomes and ensuring strategies reflect the diversity of student pathways across UNT.

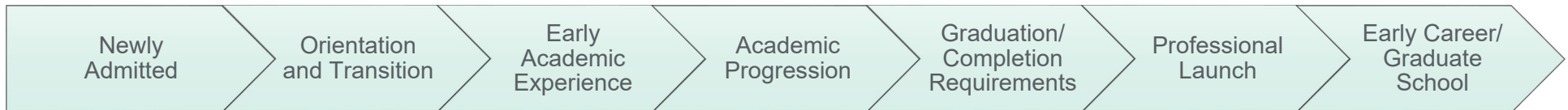
A common red flag is the assumption that “this should work for all students.” In practice, one-size-fits-all approaches often create gaps or unintended barriers. Personas help teams move toward more targeted, effective solutions.

Student Journey Maps

What is a Student Journey Map?

A student journey map is a visual representation of a student's experiences and interactions across their time at an institution.

Unlike process maps that focus on internal workflows, journey maps take a holistic view of the student experience—academic and beyond.



As a strategic diagnostic tool, journey maps help with identification of pain points, inefficiencies, and coordination gaps. They shift planning from an “inside-out” approach (designing for institutional convenience) to an “outside-in” approach (designing for student needs), supporting a more student-centered culture. There are five key components of journey maps.

Personas

- Data-informed archetypes representing the diversity of UNT students
- Help teams design for real student experiences, not assumptions

Stages

- Key phases in the student lifecycle
- Highlight what students need at each point

Touchpoints

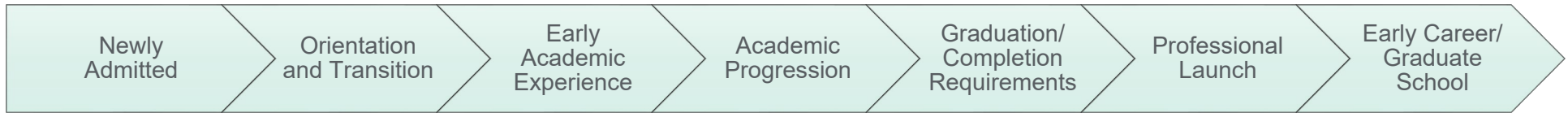
- Every interaction students have with UNT, both digital and in-person
- Include emails, Canvas, Navigate360 advising appointments, events, and more

Mindset

- Students' thoughts, emotions, and perceptions
- Guide design decisions that meet students where they are

Pain Points & Opportunities

- Areas where interventions can make the biggest impact
- Focus on actionable improvements to enhance student experience



Why UNT Starts at “Newly Admitted”

Stages begin at admission and follow the student experience through early career outcomes to focus on where UNT can have the greatest impact.

- **Navigating Institutional Complexity:** Admission marks the point where students first engage with UNT’s systems, processes, and decentralized structure
- **Targeting Retention and Success:** Early transition challenges (advising, record processing) are critical barriers that influence persistence
- **Focusing on Actionable Areas:** Post-admission needs—such as financial aid, housing, and credit evaluation—are areas where the institution can directly improve processes
- **Aligning with Strategy:** This focus supports institutional priorities around proactive, holistic support and data-informed decision-making

Starting at “Newly Admitted” centers the onboarding and transition experience—an essential window for establishing belonging, momentum, and long-term student success.

Strategic Planning with UNT Journey Maps

1. **Select the stage(s) to analyze:** Identify points in the student lifecycle relevant to your work with a cross-campus group.
2. **Review touchpoints and student mindset:** Examine how students experience each interaction and consider barriers or unmet needs.
3. **Identify gaps and opportunities:** Look for stages where students face friction, unmet expectations, or inconsistent support.
4. **Develop targeted strategies:** Connect observations to actionable solutions, whether policy adjustments, program changes, or communications improvements.
5. **Monitor and iterate:** Revisit the maps regularly as student needs evolve and interventions are implemented, keeping them as living, adaptive tools.

By approaching journey maps this way, UNT faculty and staff can move beyond assumptions, apply empathy systematically, and take coordinated, evidence-informed action to improve the student experience across the entire lifecycle.

Avery

Undergraduate, First Time in College (FTIC), Living on Campus

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Age: 18

Hometown: Houston, TX

Education Path: Psychology BS

Family & Cultural Background:
First-Generation Student

Sources of Information:

- UNT's official website and IG
- UNT Student Portal and App
- Canvas LMS
- Navigate App
- Emails from UNT Staff
- Housing/Res Life Staff

About

Avery is a driven 18-year-old from Houston who has always dreamed of attending college. Avery chose UNT for its location, which offers a change of pace and scenery from Houston, while still being in Texas. Avery feels prepared to begin college, having taken a few AP courses in high school. Avery is excited start classes and explore campus life but is also nervous about living on campus, having a roommate, and being away from family and friends. Avery is focused is on succeeding academically, making new friends, and ultimately graduating in four years to start a career or go to graduate school.

Goals

- Graduate with a Bachelor of Science in Psychology in 4-years
- Secure a full-time job in Texas after graduation—as a social worker, counselor, or in human resources; open to considering graduate school if that makes most sense for career path
- Build a strong sense of community and belonging at UNT: make friends, get involved in student organizations, and build community/career connections in the DFW or Houston area

Wants/Needs

- Clear guidance from UNT staff re: applying AP credits, financial aid, course selection, career advising, etc. throughout the journey
- Access to in-person and digital resources (e.g., office hours, study groups, student orgs, job board, etc.)
- Support with job search, resume, and interviewing skills

Concerns

- Social isolation; finding friends on a campus of over 46,000 students
- Transition to college as a first-gen student
- Balancing coursework, finding a part-time job on campus, and getting involved in campus orgs and social activities
- Worried about accumulating excessive student debt and hoping to avoid it

AVERY

Undergraduate | First-Generation | First Time in College (FTIC)

At the time of admission, Avery was an 18-year-old high school senior from Houston and a first-generation college student. Avery chose UNT for its location and is excited to start classes but also nervous about living on campus, making friends, and succeeding academically while managing costs.



This all feels so temporary. When FFW ends, everyone will go their separate ways and I'll be alone again.

I GOT IN! But WOW, I was just accepted and I'm already drowning in email. It's total information overload.

NEWLY ADMITTED

🎯 Now that I'm in, what do I need to do first? Gotta figure out if we can afford this.

🌟 I'll be the FIRST person in my family to go to college!

📧 My inbox is blowing up with emails from like 10 different offices. I can't keep it all straight.

My parents keep asking me questions I can't answer, especially about financial aid. It's all so confusing! Now I have no idea how much this is going to cost us.

💡 It would be super helpful if instead of getting so many emails, everything I needed to do was in ONE place, like my UNT, and organized into a single prioritized checklist.

ORIENTATION & TRANSITIONING

🎯 I really hope I can find my people. But worried about making friends on a campus this big?

🌟 Can't wait to attend orientation and First Flight Week (FFW) and meet other new UNT students!

📧 They threw SO much at us during orientation. I can't remember half of what we were told.

I met with my advisor for like 5 minutes. I still have so many questions!

💡 I wish there was a first-year survival guide where I could find the information I need when I actually need it.

It would be awesome if our FFW groups lasted all semester long. That would really help with making friends and building community.

Guide to reading this student journey

- 🎯 Goal: What the student needs/wants to accomplish
- 🌟 Excited about: What the student is feeling positive about
- 📧 Pain Points: Challenges and frustrations the student is experiencing
- 💡 Opportunities: What UNT can do to improve the student experience

Everyone seems to have it all figured out, while I'm over here trying to catch up.

Am I the only one struggling? Do I even belong here? Maybe I'm just not college material.

EARLY ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE (YEARS 1 & 2)

🎯 The Psych major has a bunch of courses I'm not too excited about. Did I pick the wrong major? I need to talk with someone about this before it's too late.

🌟 I made some good friends. I love being involved in clubs and meeting lots of different people.

📧 I failed my math midterm and dropped the class. That was before I found out it was a prereq for a degree requirement—no one told me about that.

I've heard it's hard to change majors. And apparently it could impact my financial aid and graduation timeline. No one seems to know how the process works.

💡 If I had support from day one, I may have done better on my midterm. But without much feedback, I didn't know I wasn't grasping the content.

Information about changing majors needs to be common knowledge. Why do we select a major when we apply anyhow? How are we supposed to know what we want to study before ever taking a class?

ACADEMIC PROGRESSION (YEARS 3+)

🎯 What are realistic career paths? I really need to try some things out to see what I like and what I don't. But how?

🌟 I'm so glad I changed my major. It's a smaller program and feels so much more personal.

📧 All the internships I've seen on Handshake are unpaid. I have to work—my parents cover tuition, but the rest is on me.

I'm not sure what jobs I can get with this degree. When I talk to my professors about it, they don't really seem to know either. Career fairs are overwhelming and I heard the career center isn't very helpful.

💡 I wish we talked about career paths and work experience starting first year. No one talks about this stuff until year three; doesn't leave much time for figuring things out.

It would be great if there were more paid internship opportunities or other types of activities that help us to figure out what we want to do as a career.

REQUIREMENTS FOR COMPLETION/GRADUATION

🎯 I need to graduate on time! I can't afford even one more semester.

🌟 Can't wait to graduate in May and celebrate with my family and friends.

📧 Got multiple emails about graduation and each was slightly different—which instructions do I follow?

My advisor told me I'm missing a class. Totally freaking out. Why didn't we catch this sooner? Everything we need to do for graduation should be in one place and organized by deadlines. And the info should be the same for all undergrad programs.

It would be great if the degree audit platform matched what my advisor tells me. Only thing I hate more than conflicting information are last-minute surprises.

What if a missing form or system error keeps me from graduating? I can't afford another semester.

PROFESSIONAL LAUNCH PREPARATION

🎯 I need to find a job before I graduate. Like an actual job that uses my degree and pays a good salary.

🌟 I can't believe I'm about to graduate! Excited to finally use what I learned.

📧 I've applied to like 50 jobs and haven't gotten a single interview. How can entry level positions require 2-3 years of experience. I'm starting to wonder if my degree was worth all this debt and stress.

💡 I wish there was career help specific to my major or career path. It would have been helpful to talk with someone who knows about the industries most relevant to my degree before I started applying.

My parents sacrificed so much for me. What if I can't find a job? I don't want to let them down.

I thought getting a job was hard. Turns out surviving the job is harder. I wasn't prepared for this.

EARLY CAREER/ GRAD PROGRAM (1-2 YEARS POST-GRAD)

🎯 Adulting is hard. How do I do this without messing up too much?

🌟 I got a job in my chosen field! And I'm making good money.

📧 Work is lonely compared to college. And there are all these unwritten rules! I'm always worried I'm going to do or say the wrong thing. UNT emails me weekly asking for money. Don't they know I'm paying off loans!

💡 A "First Job Survival Guide" and/or a "Navigating Your First Job 101" workshop would be super helpful. Something that explains how to handle office politics and the dos and don'ts of professional communication.

UNT should offer alumni other ways to stay connected that doesn't involve giving money, like mentoring, job shadowing, career panels, etc.



Jamie

*Undergraduate, Transfer Student
from CC in DFW Area, Commutes
from Home, Hybrid Coursework
Modality*

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Age: 24

Hometown: Dallas, TX

Education Path: Public Health BS

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Sources of Information:

- UNT's official website and other social media
- UNT transfer student services
- Student forums (Reddit, Discord, Facebook, etc.)
- Public Health Dept Staff



About

Jamie is a 24-year-old transfer student and Public Health major at UNT's College of Health and Public Service. Jamie is from Dallas and recently completed an associate's degree at a local community college. Jamie still lives at home and will commute to campus, taking a mix of in-person and online classes. Jamie is hard working and resilient, and while excited about the future, feels the weight of balancing academic and personal responsibilities.



Goals

- Gain future career-relevant experience and develop professional skills through an applied- or experiential- learning opportunity
- Find a job in Public Health immediately after graduation, or go to graduate school for an MPH
- Build a professional network and find a sense of belonging, even as a commuting student
- Make meaningful connections with peers and faculty in the Public Health Department



Wants/Needs

- Make connections with peers on campus and build community if possible
- Seamless transition from CC to UNT
- Opportunities to participate in research projects/internships and build a professional network
- Graduate within 2.5 years



Concerns

- Unsure if all CC credits will transfer and apply toward UNT degree, and unsure who to ask
- Not prepared for upper-level coursework
- Commute time from Dallas, traffic, and parking availability
- Balancing work, school, and life without being exhausted all the time

JAMIE

Undergraduate | Transfer

At the time of transfer, Jamie was a 24-year-old transfer student with an associate's degree from a Community College in the northern Dallas area. At UNT, Jamie enrolled as a Public Health major in the College of Health and Public Service. Jamie commutes from home and takes a mix of courses on campus and online.

I'm not a freshman but I'm also not a continuing student. I feel invisible.

I'm supposed to graduate this semester. Now they're saying one of my transfer credits might not count. How did this happen?



ORIENTATION & TRANSITIONING

🎯 I need to figure out where everything is. This place is huge. How do I not feel totally lost?

🌟 Excited to spend time on campus and meet my advisor. Ready to register for classes.

🧑‍🎓 Orientation is total information overload. And most of it didn't even apply to transfers.

💡 Having to log in to 5 or more different systems to get anything done is a real pain. It took me forever to figure out how to get my parking pass.

💡 I wish there was transfer-specific orientation that skipped all the general "welcome to college" stuff and didn't lump us in with freshmen.

💡 It would be a lot easier if there was just one portal with one log in where we can take care of all the things we need to do as students.

NEWLY ADMITTED

I worked so hard the last two years. What if UNT doesn't accept all my credits?

🎯 I need to know which credits are going to transfer and what they will count toward.

🌟 Excited to be transferring! UNT has the program I want, and I love the campus vibe.

🧑‍🎓 Still waiting to find out which credits transfer. Why is this taking so long? What if my credits aren't accepted. I picked my classes knowing I planned on transferring. I even tried reaching out to UNT for advice, but they said they couldn't help me unless I was enrolled.

💡 Tell me upfront which credits count and what they count toward. It would have been great to get this info along with my admission letter or posted in my UNT soon after (not weeks or months later). Offer pre-enrollment advising to help students who intend on transferring to UNT with course selection, maximizing transfer credit acceptance.

Guide to reading this student journey

🎯 Goal: What the student needs/wants to accomplish

🌟 Excited about: What the student is feeling positive about

🧑‍🎓 Pain Points: Challenges and frustrations the student is experiencing

💡 Opportunity: What UNT can do to improve the student experience

Students who don't work or commute get to take advantage of so many cool opportunities. Meanwhile I'm just trying to keep my head above water.

I thought transferring would feel like a fresh start. Just didn't expect my fresh start would have me feeling like an impostor.

EARLY ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE (YEAR 1)

🎯 I've gotta do better at balancing my commute, work, and school. I hope I can handle upper-level coursework.

🌟 My classes are interesting! Professors seem approachable.

🧑‍🎓 Commuting, working 20+ hours/week, and studying leaves no time for anything else. I can't even use campus resources, like tutoring.

💡 Professors in upper-level classes assume everyone took the same foundational courses. I'm perpetually behind because I have to teach myself all the things I missed since I took prereqs somewhere else.

💡 Campus resource offices should offer virtual appointments during extended hours, including on the occasional weekend.

💡 Offer specially designated office hours or group working sessions at the beginning of a semester to help students new to UNT fill in any foundational gaps.

ACADEMIC PROGRESSION (YEARS 2+)

🎯 I'm required to complete a work-based learning experience, like an internship. But I already have a job. Wonder if there's a way around this or an alternative way to satisfy it.

🌟 I'm doing well in my classes! Finally feeling more confident here.

🧑‍🎓 There is no way I can work at my current job, keep up my coursework, and do an internship. There just aren't enough hours in the day. Not to mention, most of the opportunities that fulfill the requirement are unpaid. I can't work for free and I can't leave my current job. I have bills to pay.

💡 I wish we could apply current or past work experience toward the applied learning requirement. Or at least have more flexible options for satisfying the requirement, like attending x # of career panels or job shadowing.

REQUIREMENTS FOR COMPLETION/GRADUATION

🎯 I've met all my degree requirements. Just need to confirm with my advisor.

🌟 Almost there! Can see the finish line. Ready for what's next.

🧑‍🎓 There are so many last steps. Seems like every office has something for us to do before we can graduate. It's hard to keep track of it all.

💡 Found out there may be an issue with one of my community college courses not counting. I can't get a clear answer from anyone. My advisor, the department chair, and the degree audit system all say different things.

💡 Provide each student a personalized checklist 6 months before anticipated graduation with all administrative requirements and deadlines.

💡 Implement a proactive graduation clearance process that includes an automated degree audit alert and required graduation readiness meeting at 105 credits.

I'm supposed to graduate this semester. Now they're saying one of my transfer credits might not count. How did this happen?

PROFESSIONAL LAUNCH PREPARATION

🎯 I need to find a good paying job that uses my degree. If I can't, was any of this even worth it?

🌟 Ready to start the next chapter. Worked hard for this.

🧑‍🎓 I've had a few interviews, but so far, no offers. I don't know how to translate my years of work experience into what employers are looking for. Everyone wants relevant experience like internships or fieldwork. How do I make them see that my experience counts just as much?

💡 All work experience is relevant. Offer career support specifically for working students, helping them articulate how their experience translates into the skills and qualifications employers value.

I've been working since I was 16. But apparently that doesn't count as relevant work experience. It's so unfair.

I thought finishing my degree would solve everything. Why do I still feel like I'm figuring it out as I go?

EARLY CAREER/ GRAD PROGRAM (1-2 YEARS POST-GRADUATION)

🎯 I want to do a good job and put myself in a position to move up quickly.

🌟 Using my degree and paying off loans.

🧑‍🎓 For a first job, this is great. I've found my lane. But everyone says I'll need a master's degree to advance. I'm not sure I want to go back to school so soon. And even if I did, I can't afford to on an entry-level salary and student loan payments. How am I supposed to move up?

💡 Provide career roadmap resources that show advancement pathways within specific fields, including which credentials are truly necessary versus nice-to-have and the ideal time to seek advanced education. Develop affordable options for continued education for UNT alumni.



Alex

*Non-Degree Seeking, Short-Term
Credential/Continuing Ed
Part-Time Student with Agnostic
Coursework Modality*

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Age: 32

Hometown: DFW Metroplex, TX

Occupation: Senior Account
Coordinator

Family & Cultural Background:
Married with one child

Sources of Information:

- UNT's official website, FB, IG
- UNT Student Portal and App
- Google, YouTube, LinkedIn
- UNT Staff



About

Alex is a motivated professional living in the DFW area who has been working in the logistics industry for a decade. While Alex has a successful career, moving into a management position is a near-term goal. Meeting this goal requires new skills and a formal certification. Alex chose a non-degree certificate program at UNT because it would provide the skills and knowledge needed to move up. Alex is pragmatic and values a blend of online and in-person learning, as this modality fits best with a demanding full-time work schedule and family commitments. Alex is confident that being a part-time student is doable but has a healthy dose of apprehension given it's been 10 years since finishing a B.S. and stepping foot in a classroom.



Goals

- Complete a short-term certification and gain a promotion/higher salary with current employer
- Develop new skills and knowledge in data analytics and project management
- Complete coursework while remaining a high performer at work and being present for family
- Connect with faculty, UNT alumni, and other working students to expand professional network



Wants/Needs

- Complete certification that leads to new job opportunities or salary increase
- Easy-to-use and comprehensive online portal and orientation tailored to adult learners
- Network connections and career advice from staff, faculty, and alumni



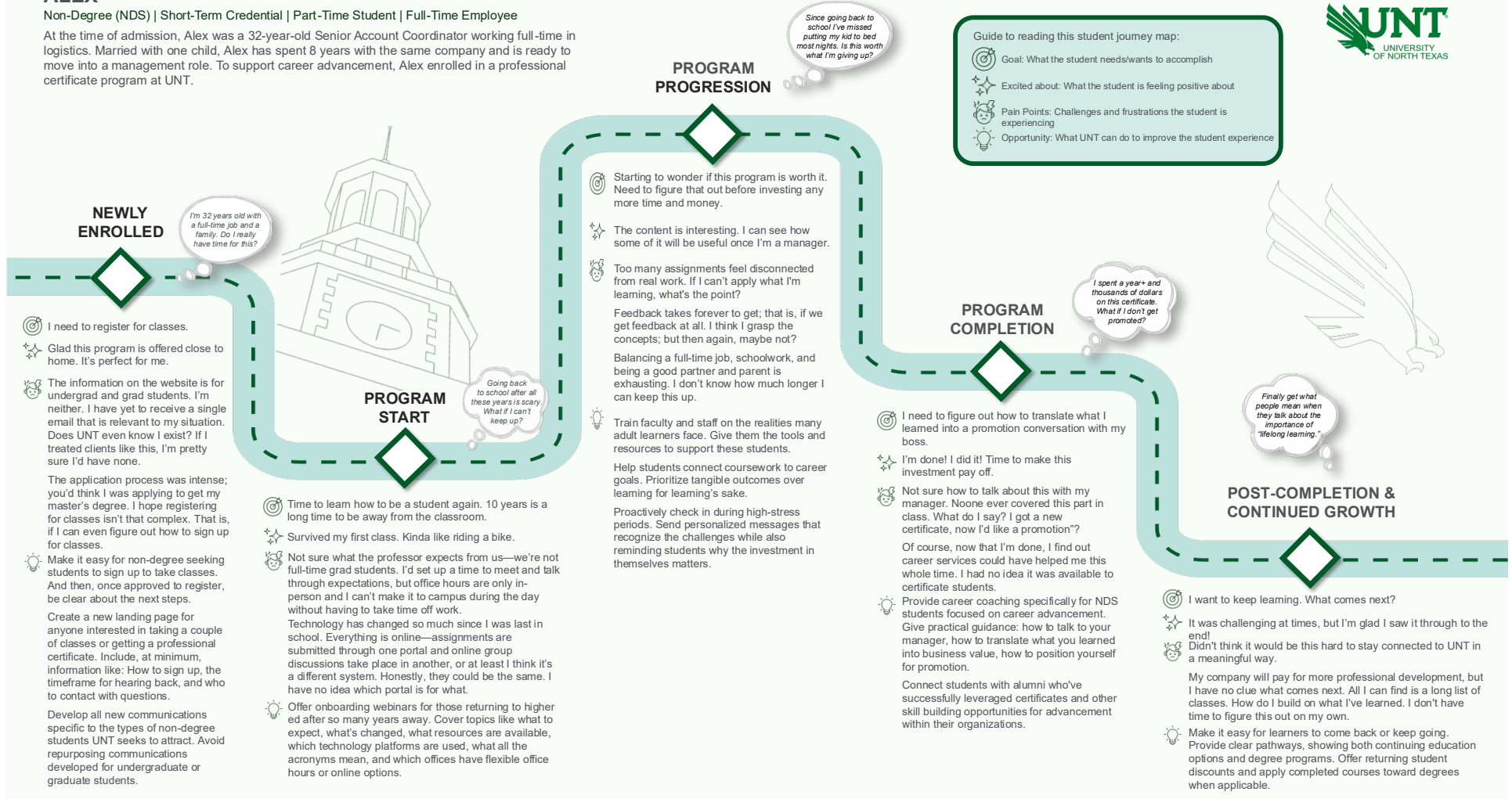
Concerns

- Navigating new technology and online platforms
- Unexpected fees/additional out-of-pocket costs and potential course prerequisites
- Feeling isolated as a part-time, non-traditional student
- Juggling full-time job, family responsibilities, and coursework

ALEX

Non-Degree (NDS) | Short-Term Credential | Part-Time Student | Full-Time Employee

At the time of admission, Alex was a 32-year-old Senior Account Coordinator working full-time in logistics. Married with one child, Alex has spent 8 years with the same company and is ready to move into a management role. To support career advancement, Alex enrolled in a professional certificate program at UNT.



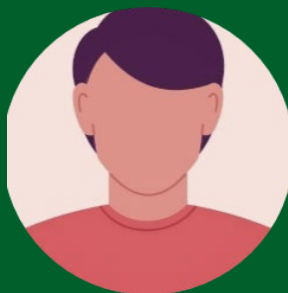
Guide to reading this student journey map:

- Target: Goal: What the student needs/wants to accomplish
- Star: Excited about: What the student is feeling positive about
- Head: Pain Points: Challenges and frustrations the student is experiencing
- Lightbulb: Opportunity: What UNT can do to improve the student experience



Jordan

Master's Student in
Professional Program
In-Person/On Campus



Age: 26

Hometown: Charlotte, NC

Education Path: Master's in Data
Science (B.S. in Computer Science
completed)

Sources of Information:

- UNT's official website and LinkedIn
- UNT Student Portal and App
- Career Services website
- Faculty Advisor, Program Coordinator, UNT Staff
- Other Graduate Students



About

Jordan is a motivated graduate student who, after two years of work experience, felt it was time to go back to school and get a Master's in Data Science. Jordan chose UNT's College of Information for its strong Data Science program and the opportunity to live in a new city. While excited about the academic challenge, Alex's focus is on completing the degree efficiently, gaining practical experience through an internship, and securing a post-graduation job at a company with a presence in a large southern city.



Goals

- Complete the Data Science Master's Program within 2 - 2.5 years, while maintaining a high GPA
- Participate in at least one internship experience, in Texas or neighboring state
- Meet new people in Denton to create a sense of belonging in the area



Wants/Needs

- Guidance on securing an internship, as well as a graduate assistantship and/or other funding source to off set the cost of out-of-state tuition
- Comprehensive onboarding with opportunities to connect with other graduate students
- Practical skill-building workshops and structured mentorship from faculty
- Robust alumni network to leverage for job opportunities and ongoing career support



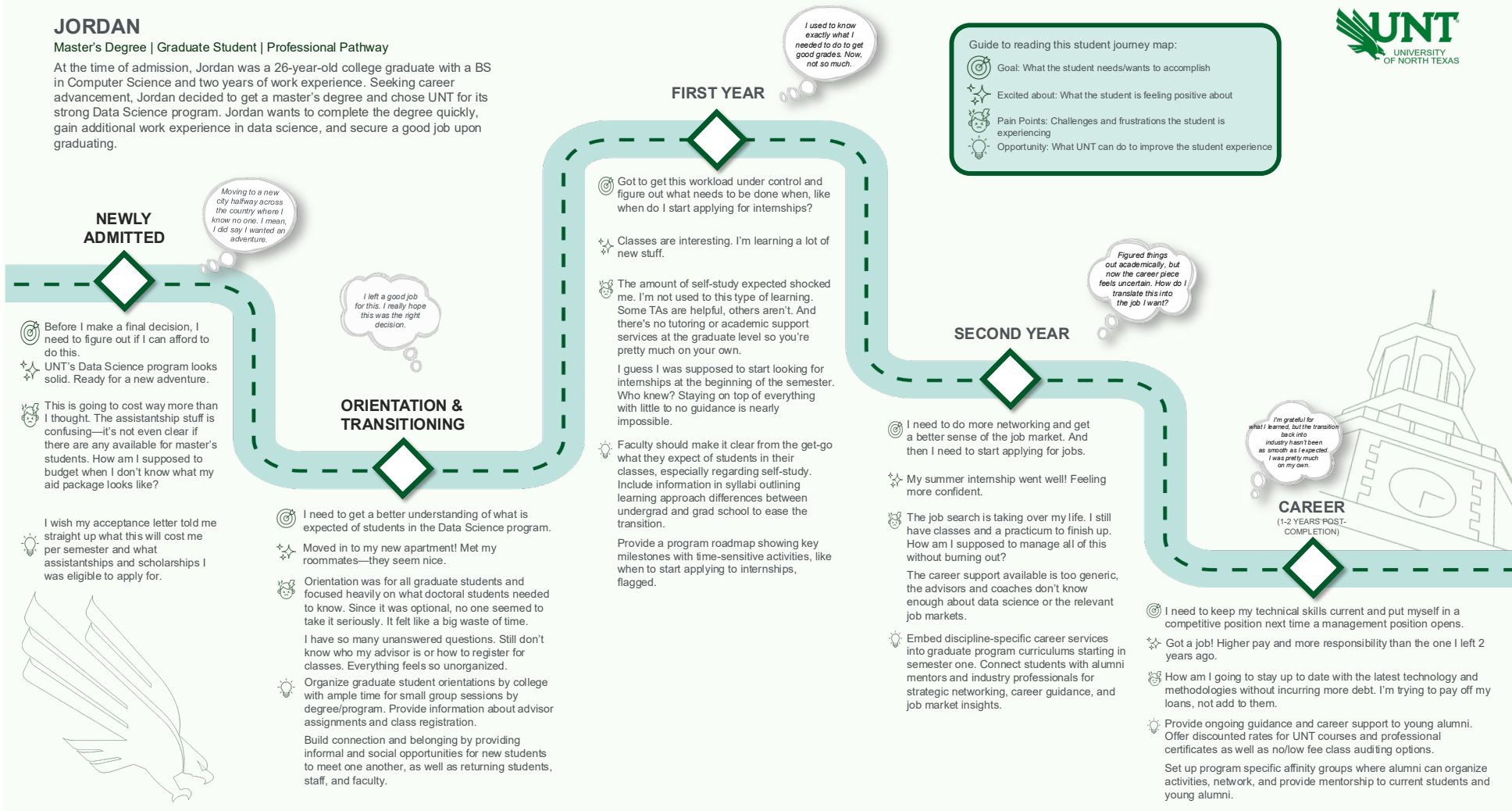
Concerns

- Manage living expenses and student loans
- Find affordable housing close to campus
- Balance coursework with finding time and opportunities to connect with the UNT community and alumni

JORDAN

Master's Degree | Graduate Student | Professional Pathway

At the time of admission, Jordan was a 26-year-old college graduate with a BS in Computer Science and two years of work experience. Seeking career advancement, Jordan decided to get a master's degree and chose UNT for its strong Data Science program. Jordan wants to complete the degree quickly, gain additional work experience in data science, and secure a good job upon graduating.



NEWLY ADMITTED

- 🎯 Before I make a final decision, I need to figure out if I can afford to do this.
- ★ UNT's Data Science program looks solid. Ready for a new adventure.

- ⚙️ This is going to cost way more than I thought. The assistantship stuff is confusing—it's not even clear if there are any available for master's students. How am I supposed to budget when I don't know what my aid package looks like?

- 💡 I wish my acceptance letter told me straight up what this will cost me per semester and what assistantships and scholarships I was eligible to apply for.



Moving to a new city halfway across the country where I know no one. I mean, I did say I wanted an adventure.

I left a good job for this. I really hope this was the right decision.

ORIENTATION & TRANSITIONING

- 🎯 I need to get a better understanding of what is expected of students in the Data Science program.
- ★ Moved in to my new apartment! Met my roommates—they seem nice.
- ⚙️ Orientation was for all graduate students and focused heavily on what doctoral students needed to know. Since it was optional, no one seemed to take it seriously. It felt like a big waste of time. I have so many unanswered questions. Still don't know who my advisor is or how to register for classes. Everything feels so unorganized.
- 💡 Organize graduate student orientations by college with ample time for small group sessions by degree/program. Provide information about advisor assignments and class registration. Build connection and belonging by providing informal and social opportunities for new students to meet one another, as well as returning students, staff, and faculty.

FIRST YEAR

I used to know exactly what I needed to do to get good grades. Now, not so much.

- 🎯 Got to get this workload under control and figure out what needs to be done when, like when do I start applying for internships?
- ★ Classes are interesting. I'm learning a lot of new stuff.
- ⚙️ The amount of self-study expected shocked me. I'm not used to this type of learning. Some TAs are helpful, others aren't. And there's no tutoring or academic support services at the graduate level so you're pretty much on your own. I guess I was supposed to start looking for internships at the beginning of the semester. Who knew? Staying on top of everything with little to no guidance is nearly impossible.
- 💡 Faculty should make it clear from the get-go what they expect of students in their classes, especially regarding self-study. Include information in syllabi outlining learning approach differences between undergrad and grad school to ease the transition. Provide a program roadmap showing key milestones with time-sensitive activities, like when to start applying to internships, flagged.

Guide to reading this student journey map:

- 🎯 Goal: What the student needs/wants to accomplish
- ★ Excited about: What the student is feeling positive about
- ⚙️ Pain Points: Challenges and frustrations the student is experiencing
- 💡 Opportunity: What UNT can do to improve the student experience

SECOND YEAR

Figured things out academically, but now the career piece feels uncertain. How do I translate this into the job I want?

- 🎯 I need to do more networking and get a better sense of the job market. And then I need to start applying for jobs.
- ★ My summer internship went well! Feeling more confident.
- ⚙️ The job search is taking over my life. I still have classes and a practicum to finish up. How am I supposed to manage all of this without burning out? The career support available is too generic, the advisors and coaches don't know enough about data science or the relevant job markets.
- 💡 Embed discipline-specific career services into graduate program curriculums starting in semester one. Connect students with alumni mentors and industry professionals for strategic networking, career guidance, and job market insights.

I'm grateful for what I learned, but the transition back into industry hasn't been as smooth as I expected. I was pretty much on my own.

CAREER (1-2 YEARS POST-COMPLETION)

- 🎯 I need to keep my technical skills current and put myself in a competitive position next time a management position opens.
- ★ Got a job! Higher pay and more responsibility than the one I left 2 years ago.
- ⚙️ How am I going to stay up to date with the latest technology and methodologies without incurring more debt. I'm trying to pay off my loans, not add to them.
- 💡 Provide ongoing guidance and career support to young alumni. Offer discounted rates for UNT courses and professional certificates as well as no/low fee class auditing options. Set up program specific affinity groups where alumni can organize activities, network, and provide mentorship to current students and young alumni.



Taylor

*Doctoral Student, Research Focused
In-Person/On Campus*



Age: 25

Hometown: Atlanta, GA

Education Path: Chemistry PhD

Family & Cultural Background:
First-Generation Student

Sources of Information:

- Graduate School Website
- Financial Aid Website & Staff
- Chemistry Dept Faculty & Staff
- Faculty Advisor
- Other Graduate Students
- Professional Orgs (ACS, etc.)



About

Taylor is an ambitious 25-year-old graduate student from Arkansas who moved to Denton to pursue a PhD in Chemistry. Taylor is a first-generation college graduate and thus will continue to navigate the complexities of higher education with limited family support. Taylor is passionate about chemistry research and plans on staying in academia even after completing the program. While highly motivated to succeed, Taylor is quite concerned about financial stability. Taylor seeks community and resources that can help bridge the gap between academic pursuits and professional aspirations.



Goals

- Secure a research faculty position at an R1 institution after graduation
- Get published and contribute to other research papers, developing a strong academic portfolio
- Achieve financial stability and security, taking out little to no loans as a graduate student



Wants/Needs

- Clear guidance on securing a graduate assistantship/teaching fellowship, and information about other funding sources
- Comprehensive onboarding with opportunities to connect with other graduate students, faculty, and alums
- Practical tools and professional development focused on budgeting/financial planning, academic writing, and conference presentations



Concerns

- Feeling isolated and alone on this journey. There don't seem to be many first-generation students in the program and can't expect family to relate to the experience (though they are very supportive and proud!)
- Finding affordable housing close to campus
- Lacking resources that address the needs and experience of first-generation graduate students

TAYLOR

Doctoral Student | Graduate Student | First-Generation

At the time of admission, Taylor was a 25-year-old doctoral student pursuing a full-time, research focused Ph.D. program in Chemistry. Taylor received a teaching assistant assistantship and was able to benefit from UNT's new health insurance option for graduate students.



I was top of my class as an undergrad. Everyone here seems like they're on an entirely different level. What if I can't cut it?

If one more person says "don't worry, you'll figure it out" I think I might cry or scream, or both.

NEWLY ADMITTED (ACCEPTANCE → ORIENTATION)

🎯 I need to better understand how this program is structured and what is expected. And what does my funding look like?

🌟 I'm excited to get into the lab and do research.

🤔 I still don't know what my stipend is after taxes. Can I live on it? No one seems to know the answer.

💡 It's still not clear to me how coursework, research, and teaching fit together. The communication hasn't been the best and the information online is confusing.

💡 Provide details about stipends and other funding opportunities at the time of admission. Include information about cost of living and typical expenses so students can plan accordingly.

💡 Provide detailed information from the very beginning about where to go for common questions and how to connect with their advisor. Offer clear points of connection.

ORIENTATION & TRANSITIONING (ORIENTATION → END 1st SEMESTER)

🎯 Orientation is optional. Is it worth attending? I really need to study for the ACS exams.

🌟 Moved to Denton. Looking forward to settling in and meeting new people.

🤔 Orientation was a fire hose of information. And I was already drowning in emails, new system log ins, and required trainings. I don't know what's urgent and what I can wait.

💡 The ACS exams sound brutal. The staff and faculty just brush it off like it's no big deal. BUT it is a big deal to me!

💡 Spread out onboarding information across months not days. Clearly identify what is time-sensitive and/or required. Organize orientation by degree program and make it mandatory.

💡 Be upfront and transparent about the format of the ACS exams. Provide guidance and support to help students prepare. The "don't worry, you'll be fine" approach doesn't instill confidence.

🎯 I need to select a Research Advisor and form an Advisory Committee. What if I make the wrong choice?

🌟 I love being in the lab and getting to do interesting research!

🤔 Everyone wants the same 3 advisors. I don't even know who has funding to bring on additional researchers. What if I pick wrong?

💡 I went from getting good grades in my classes to struggling with every experiment. My advisor seems disappointed. I feel like such an imposter.

💡 Be transparent about which advisors have funding and how many spots are available. Normalize the challenges many students have with their experiments. Don't only share the success stories, tell us about the struggles and the students that had to pivot.

Guide to reading this student journey map:

🎯 Goal: What the student needs/wants to accomplish

🌟 Excited about: What the student is feeling positive about

🤔 Pain Points: Challenges and frustrations the student is experiencing

💡 Opportunity: What UNT can do to improve the student experience

I haven't had a weekend off in three months. Is this what it feels like to be burned out?

Every decision feels like a huge commitment. What if I don't get along with my advisor?

EARLY ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE (SPRING YEAR 1)

ACADEMIC PROGRESSION (YEAR 2 → YEAR 3/CANDIDACY)

🎯 Everything is riding on me passing my qualifying exams.

🌟 Submitted my first paper for publication. Feeling accomplished.

🤔 My advisor wants me to put in 60 hours a week in the lab, but I have classes and TA duties. This schedule is unsustainable.

💡 The qualifying exam pressure is intense. If I don't pass 3 of the 5 exams I'm out.

💡 All I do is work and study. I'm exhausted. Provide guidelines about workload expectations. How many hours a week in the lab is reasonable when you also have coursework and teaching responsibilities?

💡 Build community and connection beyond the lab through targeted support during high stress periods. Organize lunches and dinners for students during qualifying exam prep and provide meaningful guidance—not just "good luck."

REQUIREMENTS FOR COMPLETION (POST-CANDIDACY / YEAR 3 – YEAR 5)

🎯 What is left for me to do? I need to finish up and graduate.

🌟 Making progress on dissertation!
🌟 Got another paper published.

🤔 My advisor keeps adding criteria. When is enough actually enough?
🤔 Some of my peers have graduated already. What am I doing wrong?

💡 I'm trying to finish up my dissertation while also applying for jobs. And I'm not doing either particularly well. Why do these things have to overlap?

💡 Establish clear, objective completion criteria at candidacy, not based on advisor discretion. Implement regularly scheduled and required check-ins with advisory committee to assess progress and keep things on track.

💡 Align academic and job market calendars. Allow students to defend earlier in academic year, freeing up time during spring hiring cycles.



I'm 30 yrs old and still a student. My friends back home have real jobs and are making good money. What am I doing with my life?

My advisor told me that industry is for people who couldn't make it in academia. That didn't help.

PROFESSIONAL LAUNCH

🎯 I need to find a postdoc or other research-focused academic position.

🌟 Applying for jobs. Excited about what comes next.

🤔 There are 200 applicants for every position I apply to. I need a backup plan, but my advisor won't even talk to me about positions outside of academia. I don't have the luxury of being unemployed.

💡 Support all career paths without judgment. Faculty advisors should actively discuss both academic and non-academic options—treating industry and government as legitimate outcomes, not failures. Create graduate-specific career programming. Actively promote career support services. Host panels with recent graduates in diverse careers, offer CV-to-resume workshops, and facilitate industry networking opportunities.

I have my PhD but I'm still living like a grad student. At what point do I admit this isn't working?

EARLY CAREER

🎯 Not sure this postdoc is going to lead to anything. I need to shift focus on expanding my professional network and collaborating with peers.

🌟 Successfully building my research and publication portfolio.

🤔 Second postdoc, still no faculty offers. How many temporary positions before I accept this isn't working?

💡 My support network is back in Denton. My new PI is hands-off, and I don't know anyone here.

💡 Provide job market data—placement rates, time to tenure-track position, % in non-academic careers—early and often.

💡 Support students by facilitating connections outside UNT through conference funding, collaborative research opportunities, and alumni mentoring.