The 2026 Campus Forward Awards

How Categories Are Defined & Evaluated

The 2026 Campus Forward Awards recognize early-career recruiting teams that are not just executing well—but setting the direction for where early-career hiring is headed.

Each award category reflects a distinct dimension of excellence captured directly through the application. Together, they tell a complete story of how teams design strategy, operationalize innovation, and deliver standout candidate experiences.

Applicants may apply to one or multiple categories. A small number of programs demonstrating excellence across *all* categories are recognized with the **Visionary Award**.

How to Think About Each Award Category

Recruitment Strategy

This category focuses on **how teams design and execute their early-career hiring strategy**. It evaluates intentionality: where teams focus, how they allocate resources, and how effectively they translate strategy into measurable outcomes like pipeline strength, quality of hire, and conversion.

This category is about *direction and discipline*.

Innovation in Action

This category evaluates **how teams are actually using technology, automation, and AI in practice**. It rewards programs that move beyond experimentation to embed innovation into daily workflows in ways that meaningfully improve efficiency, scale, or outcomes.

This category is about *execution and impact*, not ideas alone.

Candidate Experience

This category assesses **what it feels like to be a candidate in your process**—from first touch to offer acceptance. It emphasizes rememberable, transparent, and human hiring experiences backed by consistent processes.

This category is about *trust, clarity, and relationships*.

Visionary Award

The Visionary Award recognizes programs that demonstrate **strength across all three categories**, with a cohesive point of view on the future of early-career hiring.

This award is about *leadership and trajectory*.

Category-Level Scoring Criteria

Excellence in Recruitment Strategy

What This Category Rewards
Programs that show clear strategic intent, strong execution, and evidence that their approach to early-career recruiting is working.

How This Category Is Evaluated

Quantitative Signals
Structured responses and multiple-choice data used to benchmark hiring scale, conversion metrics, efficiency, and outcomes relative to peers.

Strategic Narrative Review
Short-answer responses evaluated for clarity of thinking, focus areas, and how well the strategy aligns with stated hiring goals.

Peer Benchmarking
Programs are compared against others of similar size and resources to identify standout strategic execution.

Innovation in Action Award

What This Category Rewards
Teams that have embedded technology, automation, or AI into their recruiting operations in ways that drive real improvement.

How This Category Is Evaluated

Adoption & Usage Indicators
Multiple-choice responses measuring frequency and breadth of technology usage across sourcing, screening, engagement, and assessment.

Execution-Focused Review
Short-answer responses assessed for how innovation is operationalized, scaled, and tied to outcomes—not just piloted.

Relative Advancement
Programs are evaluated relative to peers to surface teams that are meaningfully ahead in applied innovation.

Excellence in Candidate Experience

What This Category Rewards
Programs that consistently deliver clear, transparent, and supportive candidate journeys at scale.

How This Category Is Evaluated

Experience Benchmarks
Quantitative inputs such as response times, transparency practices, remembering candidates post-offer, and consistency of engagement.

Candidate-Centric Review
Short-answer responses evaluated for thoughtfulness, empathy, and intentional experience design across the hiring lifecycle.

Consistency vs. Peers
Programs are compared within size categories to identify teams delivering standout experiences reliably—not incidentally.

Visionary Award

What This Category Rewards
 Programs that demonstrate excellence across Recruitment Strategy, Innovation in Action, and Candidate Experience—and present a cohesive vision for the future of early-career hiring.

Only **five programs** are selected.

How This Category Is Evaluated

Cross-Category Performance
 Aggregate strength across all three award categories, using both quantitative benchmarks and qualitative reviews.

Cohesion & Leadership Assessment
 Holistic evaluation of whether strategy, technology, and experience reinforce one another in a clearly articulated model.

Top-Tier Peer Comparison
 Final selection identifies programs that rise to the very top of their size category across *every* dimension.