



College and Career Pathways: A Strategy for State Economic Success

Today, young people need both cross-cutting skills and specialized knowledge to thrive in our rapidly changing economy. Business leaders require skilled talent to innovate and grow. And state and local communities need a workforce ready to lead new economies and industries. These shifts are achievable when states and regions embrace a college and career pathway strategy.

States and regions that implement college and career pathways work across divides in the education and workforce systems that are often artificial. Pathways bring together policymakers and leaders in K-12 and higher education, industry, and workforce development, who partner to:

- Help young people set clear college and career goals, and provide the supports needed to achieve them
- Ensure that employers have a diverse talent pipeline of young professionals who have the skills needed to contribute to and lead the workforce
- Build thriving regional and state economies that offer opportunities for economic advancement for all citizens

This work is especially critical as the labor market tightens and the future of work promises to bring major changes to local economies. It is projected that roughly 65 percent of future job openings—which are rapidly changing in response to increased automation—will require a credential beyond a high school diploma.

States across the country are fast-tracking change by building college and career pathways that better prepare young people for economic success while simultaneously addressing skills gaps.

States are making four major policy shifts designed to jumpstart college and career pathways:

- 1. Aligning state systems**
- 2. Bridging high school, college, and career**
- 3. Connecting learning to work**
- 4. Building career awareness**

A ROADMAP FOR STATE POLICY TRANSFORMATION

State leaders can accelerate the creation of college and career pathways through policy change. Good policies help educational institutions, workforce development agencies, intermediaries, and employers to work together to support pathway development. The four policy shifts below can be a roadmap for state leaders to transform their states' economies and talent pipelines.

ALIGNING STATE SYSTEMS

Building college and career pathways requires an all-hands-on-deck approach. Education systems, workforce development systems, and employers must work together to support students' transitions from high school to college and into careers.

State policymakers should:

1. Set a clear and ambitious state goal for postsecondary attainment.
2. Establish a cross-agency partnership to lead the work.
3. Create or support an intermediary organization to help.
4. Build strong data systems that follow student success across secondary and postsecondary education and into the workforce.
5. Develop funding streams that cross silos to encourage efficiency and collaboration.

BRIDGING HIGH SCHOOL, COLLEGE, AND CAREER

College and career pathways bridge high school, college, and career to set individuals up for success in the workplace. Robust pathways don't prescribe one path but provide multiple entry and exit points into education and jobs.

State policymakers should:

1. Make regional labor market data available to high schools, colleges, and employers so that pathways are focused on high-demand jobs and industry-valued certifications.
2. Offer all high school students the opportunity to earn college credit and industry credentials at low or no cost.
3. Provide incentives for high school teachers to obtain credentials to teach dual enrollment courses.
4. Implement statewide credit transfer policies so credits earned in high school or college follow students as they move through the education system.
5. Support colleges in using innovative and evidence-based strategies to help students transition to and succeed in higher education.
6. Integrate career and technical education programs with core academic programs in high school and college so that more students have access to high-quality career education.

CONNECTING LEARNING TO WORK

College and career pathways integrate a continuum of work-based learning opportunities that expose students to the world of work and provide young people with the academic, technical, and employability skills needed for college and career success.

State policymakers should:

1. Bring education leaders and business leaders together to design statewide frameworks for high-quality work-based learning experiences.
2. Support schools in providing these opportunities by allowing credit for work-based learning experiences and flexibility in seat-time requirements.
3. Support employers in providing work-based learning by clarifying their responsibilities and removing unnecessary barriers.
4. Support the development of pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs through employer engagement, state workforce investment, and bringing together system leaders.
5. Strengthen work-study programs by reducing barriers so students are able to access work-study positions that are clearly connected to their career goals.
6. Support teachers by creating externships so they can learn about trends, skill requirements, and opportunities in industries related to their subjects.

BUILDING CAREER AWARENESS

College and career pathways ensure all students receive early and sustained career advising so they can make informed decisions about exploring and pursuing different professions.

State policymakers should:

1. Require student learning plans that incorporate career information and exploration.
2. Strengthen school and college counseling systems by funding counselor training and credentialing and reducing counselors' caseloads.
3. Support online platforms that help students identify career interests and aptitudes, explore labor market information, develop career plans, and take career-focused courses.

STATE EXAMPLES OF SUCCESS

States are taking the lead in the rapidly growing pathway movement—finding innovative solutions to fund and create these activities—as federal policy struggles to keep up. The following examples demonstrate successful approaches that states can use to incentivize effective college and career pathway strategies across the country.

BRIGHT SPOT: POSTSECONDARY AND WORKFORCE READINESS ACT IN ILLINOIS

Signed into Illinois law in 2016, the [Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness Act](#)¹ takes a student-centered approach to help learners achieve college and career readiness after high school. The PWR Act supports the creation of pathways through four strategies: (1) setting frameworks to guide expectations for students from grades 8 through 12; (2) creating college and career pathway endorsements on high school diplomas; (3) addressing completion barriers through transitional courses; and (4) establishing a competency-based learning pilot program. This effort is helping the state reach its goal of ensuring that 60 percent of all adults have high-quality postsecondary credentials by 2025 so that all Illinois residents have the opportunity for meaningful employment.

BRIGHT SPOT: OHIO'S COLLEGE CREDIT PLUS

Ohio's [College Credit Plus](#)², which began in 2015, helps students to earn college and high school credits at the same time by taking college courses from community colleges or universities. The statewide dual enrollment program is open to all public school students who wish to attend a public Ohio university or college, and it is free for these individuals. It is an accelerated learning model that offers a variety of academic opportunities and aims to increase college readiness.

College Credit Plus has just finished its [second year](#)³. The state is already seeing promising results, with an increase in the number of students from all backgrounds participating in dual enrollment courses. Thanks to the interest from both students and providers, the state hopes to see better high school and college completion rates as it progresses.

BRIGHT SPOT: PATHWAYS WISCONSIN

Wisconsin launched a career-readiness initiative to address the skills gap. [Pathways Wisconsin](#)⁴ supports regions in the state in creating pathways aligned with the needs of local businesses. The state's vision is to support purposeful connections between education and the workforce by increasing opportunities for students to gain early work experience, develop skills, and earn meaningful postsecondary credentials.

The state supports cross-system collaboration as an essential component of pathway development. In four pilot regions, Pathways Wisconsin hired regional directors to lead the process of identifying priority industries and bringing together representatives from education, workforce, and business to design and implement pathway approaches. The representatives serve on a regional council and each council is chaired by a CEO who serves as a public champion of the work.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

These examples showcase opportunities that states have in creating college and career pathways. However, there is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Each state will have its own vision for what needs to be done within the policy roadmap and will integrate strategies that best serve the region's workforce and economy.

States have made significant strides in developing and implementing pathway models. As this work continues to grow, it is important to highlight states that are using successful policy strategies to sustain comprehensive, quality programs.



The Great Lakes College and Career Pathways Partnership is working to improve educational outcomes and economic prosperity across the region through the development of high-quality college and career pathway systems in Central Ohio / Greater Columbus; the Northwest Chicago suburbs and Rockford, Illinois; and Madison, Wisconsin. Committed cross-sector stakeholders have accelerated the process of building industry-aligned, secondary-to-postsecondary pathways that are designed to ensure successful outcomes for all students. These efforts can and should be adopted by other states that aim to boost their economies, prepare students for local labor markets, and increase the well-being of their citizens.

To learn more, visit <https://glccpp.com>.



JFF is a national nonprofit that drives transformation in the American workforce and education systems. For 35 years, JFF has led the way in designing innovative and scalable solutions that create access to economic advancement for all.

Pathways to Prosperity is a joint initiative of JFF and the Harvard Graduate School of Education that seeks to ensure that many more young people complete high school, attain postsecondary credentials with currency in the labor market, and launch careers while leaving open the prospect of further education. Pathways to Prosperity mobilizes K–12 and postsecondary education leaders, policymakers, and employers to develop, implement, and scale college and career pathways to expand economic opportunity for all young people and meet regional talent needs.

To learn more, visit www.jff.org/pathwaystoprosperity or contact PtoPNetwork@jff.org.

END NOTES

¹ “Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness Act: Supporting Students from High School to College and Career,” Advance Illinois and Educations Systems Center at NIU, accessed November 27, 2018, <https://pwract.org>.

² “College Credit Plus,” Ohio Department of Education, last modified November 13, 2018, <http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Ohio-Education-Options/College-Credit-Plus>.

³ “Annual Report: Year Two of the College Credit Plus Program 2016-2017,” Ohio Department of Education and Ohio Department of Higher Education, December 31, 2016, https://www.ohiohighered.org/sites/ohiohighered.org/files/uploads/CCP/CCP-REPORT-2016-2017_FINAL_010418.pdf.

⁴ “Pathways Wisconsin,” Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, accessed November 27, 2018, <https://dpi.wi.gov/pathways-wisconsin>.