

Aligning Postsecondary Education and Workforce Strategies to Drive Attainment

A TACTICAL GUIDEBOOK December 2016

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A common concern among postsecondary institutions, employers, and other community stakeholders is that many students lack important qualifications required for today's workforce. The nature of the job market has been changing since the 2008 recession. Growing industries, such as health care, information technology, and advanced manufacturing, increasingly require both hard and soft [skills](#) gained through postsecondary education, yet employers are finding it difficult to fill these needs because of the current state of career readiness among today's students. To address this challenge, communities must work to better align postsecondary education with industry needs to coach today's students for the jobs of tomorrow. Moreover, future workforce needs will require the nation to develop a qualified, diverse workforce to represent our changing demographics, and it is critical for communities to create more opportunities now for underserved student populations who have not had access to postsecondary education and early professional experience.

Bridging education and workforce needs requires employing strategies that ensure student skills are meeting local job market demands. **Prioritizing learning** can help students receive academic credit for knowledge gained both inside and outside the classroom. Programs to **align student skills with workforce needs**, such as career pathways and internships, give students the opportunity to simultaneously complete a degree, develop in-demand skills, and gain hands-on work experience. Improving **affordability** through financial assistance and flexible options that fit the lives of working students can help prevent students from dropping out due to economic burden. **Data** on student skills and labor market needs are key to informing workforce alignment strategies and adjusting to the changing economy. And **advising** can help students plan their path from education to career.

In an effort to support community-based collaborations on postsecondary education and workforce alignment, the Institute for Higher Education Policy, with support from Lumina Foundation, has developed this tactical guidebook. The guidebook explains how some communities within the Community Partnership for Attainment (CPA) network use cross-sector partnerships effectively to improve students' educational and career outcomes.

We hope you will use this guidebook as a resource to learn about the various practices and tools communities use to better align postsecondary education with the workforce, and also to learn how you can apply these practices and tools in your own community. Our workforce alignment **infographic** highlights the five essential strategies for increasing degree attainment and meeting industry demands. Each of the following five chapters goes into greater detail on specific strategies and includes an **interview*** with leaders of innovative efforts to improve postsecondary and workforce alignment, in addition to **tools** and **resources** that other communities can use to implement leading practices.

** Please note that all interviews are summaries of conversations and not verbatim records.*



The Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization committed to promoting access to and success in higher education for all students. Based in Washington, D.C., IHEP develops innovative policy- and practice-oriented research to guide policymakers and education leaders, who develop high-impact policies that will address our nation's most pressing education challenges.

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BRIDGING EDUCATION & WORKFORCE NEEDS

POSTSECONDARY AND WORKFORCE STRATEGIES TO HELP STUDENTS TRANSITION TO THE WORKFORCE
FROM COLLEGE AND SUPPORT ADULT LEARNERS IN ADVANCING THEIR EDUCATION

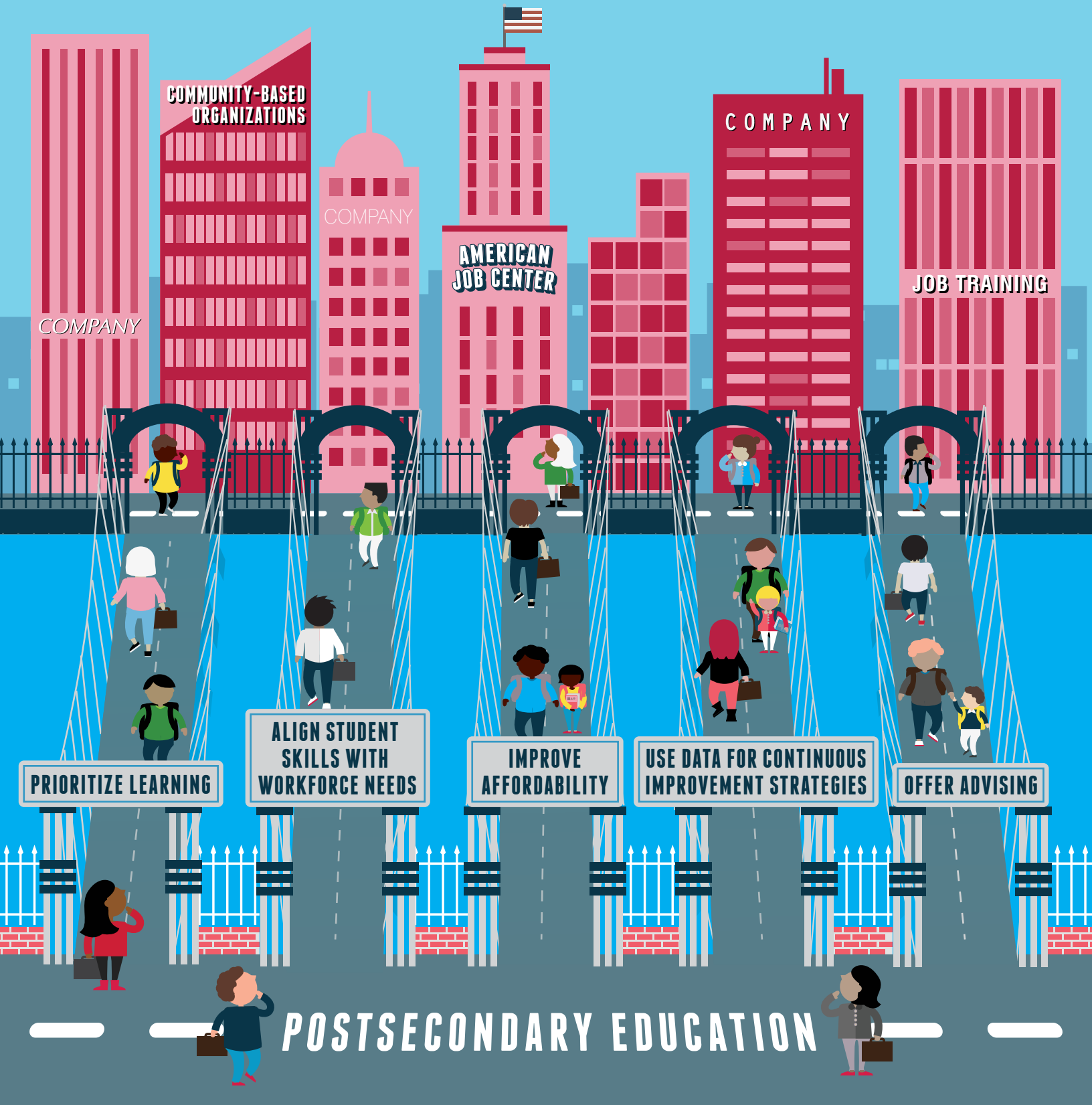


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Chapter One:

How Can Local Industries and Postsecondary Institutions Prioritize Learning?

Today's students increasingly gain skills through learning experiences both inside and outside the classroom. In order to increase the number of credentialed adults and qualified employees, communities must work to formally recognize students' knowledge from a combination of experiences: academic courses, job training, work, and military service, to name a few. Acknowledging prior learning with course credit reduces the amount of time and money a student needs to complete a degree and encourages today's students—who are often financially independent, have worked prior to starting college, and face various responsibilities outside of the classroom—to pursue postsecondary education. Thus, recognizing learning outcomes from a variety of past experiences can increase equity in degree completion and the ability to secure well-paying jobs for underserved students.

Read this chapter for an introduction to effective strategies that award credit for diverse learning experiences. Learn how **Earn Up** in **Jacksonville, Florida** is using prior learning assessments to increase degree completion among its military community, and discover new tools and resources to **prioritize learning** in your community.

Prior Learning Assessments: *Does your community want to help students measure their existing skills and knowledge?*

Communities can use the prior learning assessment (PLA) process to translate students' existing skills, often gained outside the classroom, into formal education [competencies](#) for course credit. PLA encompasses many different tools and methods to assess skills gained through work, military training, open source online classes, volunteer experience, or extracurricular activities. Assessments often take the form of standardized tests, such as the College Level Examination Program and Advanced Placement, which provide students with

course credit for mastery of subjects typically taught in the first two years of college.

Credit for Experiential Learning: *Does your community want to help students complete their degree faster by awarding course credit for prior learning?* Using a learning portfolio allows students to demonstrate subject mastery gained through experiential learning experiences. Portfolios may include a written statement, video of the student performing a task, or other tangible product based on prior knowledge and skills. Students can also include formal documentation of skills and completed courses, such as a Joint Services Transcript (JST) or an academic transcript from another educational institution.

Competency Based Education: *Does your community want to award students with degree credit for specific skills and learning outcomes?* Competency-based education (CBE) awards students with [degree credit](#) based on skills learned, rather than seat time or the number of courses completed. CBE gives students flexible learning options by combining guided and independent study with online and blended courses, dual enrollment, or project-based learning. In addition to easing the student process in degree completion, degrees based on CBE credits inform employers of students' specific skills and qualifications for available jobs.

Earn Up, Jacksonville, Florida: Using Prior Learning Assessments to Increase Degree Completion for the Military Community

To highlight leading practices for PLA, IHEP spoke with representatives from two of the *Earn Up* initiative's partner organizations in Jacksonville, Florida—Tina Wirth from JAXUSA and Brigadier General (ret) Mike Fleming from Jacksonville University. Jacksonville and its surrounding area is home to five military bases and a large number of veterans. Read this interview to learn how *Earn Up* has committed to using PLA efforts to ease the process for members of the military community to obtain a certification or degree to pursue a second career.

Goals

IHEP: Why was the *Earn Up* initiative started and how did you develop your goals for degree attainment?

In 2012, the JAXUSA Partnership, which is part of the Jacksonville Chamber of Commerce, started to develop an economic development strategic plan for the region. A focus of that plan was to develop our workforce and address the problem that our region had a lower percentage of degree-holding workers than we needed to be nationally and globally competitive.

This led to the early stages of the *Earn Up* initiative, which was specifically focused on increasing degree attainment among working-age adults. Today, *Earn Up*'s main focus has been refined to increase the number of adults with a two- or four-year degree needed to fill high-skill, high-wage jobs in the region.

IHEP: How did *Earn Up* identify the military community as a target population for degree attainment?

We specifically included veterans in our workforce development plan because a large number of military personnel end their service in Jacksonville and stay in the area for their next career. Military personnel possess leadership and teamwork skills, which we know are attractive to employers and are immediately transferable to civilian jobs. *Earn Up* focuses on translating their military credentials into skills and course credit that are more widely recognizable by higher education institutions and the business community.

Partnership

IHEP: Who are the main stakeholders involved in the *Earn Up* initiative?

Earn Up has a steering committee that includes JAXUSA, college and university leaders, K-12 administrators, members of the business community, representatives from civic organizations, and the City of Jacksonville. Through the partnership, we work closely with local industries to identify employer needs and workforce demands in terms of education and skills. This is an ongoing conversation with our top targeted sectors, including advanced manufacturing, financial services, health and life sciences, logistics, aviation and aerospace, and information technology.

We've also benefited from the support of community leaders, especially Mike [Fleming], who has been very involved in helping *Earn Up* develop relationships and bring in new stakeholders. Mike brings a good deal of social capital and has acted as a bridge between *Earn Up* and the military community.

[MIKE FLEMING]: The local higher education institutions are also key partners for *Earn Up*. In particular, the college and university presidents serve as champions of our work. They have been very supportive and have made it easier for all of the institutions in the area to work together toward implementing PLA and reaching our attainment goals.

IHEP: What role do representatives from the military community serve in the *Earn Up* partnership?

Bringing in the military community has been key to developing *Earn Up*'s goals. We receive support from a number of military groups, including the military base education officers, veterans' service officers (VSOs), and other veterans' education support organizations. Working with representatives from this community is important for PLA service delivery, *Earn Up* strategic planning, and sharing best practices at our convenings.

IHEP: How did you get a diverse group of stakeholders to come to the table to address increasing degree attainment and strengthening the workforce?

Our first attempt at a collective impact effort grew out of relationships we started building about four years ago while working on a degree attainment initiative through the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Unfortunately, the initial process broke down due to a lack of trust among the higher education institutions. We then had the opportunity a few years later to come together again through the CPA initiative. This time, we recognized that the Chamber of Commerce was in a good position to leverage existing relationships and could act as a neutral party to bring the community back to the table.

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Also, we immediately stated that Earn Up would be focused on a collaborative solution, rather than simply telling partners how to run their programs; that was our “secret sauce.” Overall, the reaction from institutions was very positive, as was the reaction from our other partners, including the K-12 representatives and civic leaders.”

IHEP: What did you do differently the second time setting up a community partnership that led to your success?

First, having the Chamber of Commerce act as a neutral party to bring stakeholders together to work toward a shared goal was key, because they had a good reputation in the community for being able to work with diverse partners and solve problems. In order to bring in the institutions, it was important for us to emphasize that we were not going to infringe on any individual college’s attainment efforts. Instead, we intentionally framed the partnership as an asset to individual institutions by being part of a business-led effort to raise the attainment rate. Also, we immediately stated that *Earn Up* would be focused on a collaborative solution, rather than simply telling partners how to run their programs; that was our “secret sauce.” Overall, the reaction from institutions was very positive, as was the reaction from our other partners, including the K-12 representatives and civic leaders.

IHEP: Can you explain the importance of building trust and relationships to sustain *Earn Up*?

[TINA WIRTH]: During the early stages of forming *Earn Up*, we were supported with technical assistance from the Community Education Coalition (CEC) out of Columbus, Indiana to better prepare us for the relationship-building process. Working with CEC was really helpful because they taught us that relationship building was going to be a continuous process and a critical

component of sustaining the partnership. We learned that it’s not enough to establish relationships at the beginning and end there, because once there’s a change—for example, in leadership or funding—you have to revisit the partnership dynamics. As we move into our second year, we’re working to establish trust and build a relationship at the outset so our newest members will quickly become engaged in our work.

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Implementation

IHEP: What role do institutions play in the process of implementing PLA?

At the institutional level, it’s up to each college or university to determine how to implement the PLA process. Some schools are further along, while other schools are still learning and developing their methods. Many institutions, such as Jacksonville University, implement PLA with support from in-house VSOs. As another example, Florida State College at Jacksonville, a few years ago started working closely with the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) to improve their process and target the right populations. They’ve developed their program and now have a dedicated Accelerated College Manager who facilitates PLA for veteran and civilian students.

IHEP: Can you give an example of how a local higher education institution implements PLA for students with a military background?

[MIKE FLEMING]: At Jacksonville University, we have a person dedicated to PLA in our registrar’s office and a trained staff for evaluating incoming veteran students’ prior transcripts to get them degree credits. Our main tool for PLA is the Joint Services Transcript, which is produced by the military and includes information about students’ certifications, test scores, occupations, and other learning experiences from their time in service. For each student, we also review academic transcripts from other education institutions.

Jacksonville University and all of the other institutions in the area are continuously working to improve our PLA services. I have been leading the Northeast Florida Military Veteran College Network, which includes a committee focused on PLA. The committee includes representatives from each higher education institution in the area and meets quarterly to review the policies and procedures each school uses for assessing military students' experiences and credentials. After the committee meetings, we report back to *Earn Up* with recommendations for improving PLA processes, bettering tailoring services to the military population, and standardizing the process across all of the colleges and universities in the area.

the military community through PLA, we started to get a lot more involvement from our stakeholders. The website serves as a place to share best practices and resources with the veteran student population and supporting institutions.

[MIKE FLEMING]: The website is an evolving project, and I'm currently working to add three new sections that will provide more information for institutions and students. The new sections will focus on (1) entrepreneurship, (2) best practices, and (3) additional resources. Although a lot of the work needed to share best practices and create awareness is currently being accomplished through the website, we'd also like to deepen our efforts and hold more in-person convenings.

IHEP: How has *Earn Up* been using its website to increase collaboration and further PLA efforts in the community?

When we created a section of the website for the [Northeast Florida Military Veteran College Network](#), focused on supporting

Impact

IHEP: How is *Earn Up* assessing the effectiveness of PLA programs? What data have you found to be useful?

We're still in the early stages of figuring out how to best assess effectiveness and outcomes. Each institution provides us with veteran enrollment numbers per semester. We also use data from the Florida College Access Network to track a set of metrics on overall student outcomes in the region, including postsecondary enrollment, retention, and completion. A few challenges that we face with data evaluation include overcoming self-reporting of veteran status and being able to disaggregate the information by specific demographic characteristics.

Once we have more years' worth of data available, we plan to do a more robust evaluation to identify trends and assess *Earn Up*'s overall impact. At that point, we will be able to determine the progress we're making toward our goals for degree attainment and whether we need to refine any aspects of our program.



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IHEP: What advice do you have for other communities looking to implement PLA efforts?

For PLA specifically, it's been very helpful for us to work with CAEL to get assistance with the process and methods. In order to target a specific student population, it's important to find a leader who can help connect community organizations with the institutions. For *Earn Up*, the key to success has been working with Mike. He speaks fluent “military” and brings the passion needed to form relationships and encourage collaboration among stakeholders.

IHEP: What's next for expanding PLA efforts and the *Earn Up* initiative?

Our short-term goals are to strengthen PLA service delivery at the institutions, improve data collection, and add more resources to our website. We're also looking for more funding from partner organizations to establish an Education Opportunity Center where we would provide more counseling and information on college admissions.

IHEP: What are your long-term goals to increase degree attainment in the region?

Long term, we want to create a formal program for matching and referring students to a local college or university. We're still developing the program, but the vision is to have something more substantial than our current website for connecting with students. We envision having an “education concierge,” who would be an institution-neutral advisor with a strong understanding of local programs and encourage students to advocate for their education needs, especially regarding PLA and transferable experiences. The education concierge model will focus on either case management or engagement with community organizations and social services that work with the military population.

Ultimately, we're working to build *Earn Up* to be more than the sum of its parts. Our goal is to focus on what we can do collectively to increase degree attainment and address workforce needs.



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Tools

National Guide to College Credit for Workforce Training

This guide from the American Council on Education’s College Credit Recommendation Service provides descriptions of workforce training courses and examinations and recommendations for translating student mastery into formal college credits. This tool can help organizations recognize adult learners’ knowledge and experience gained outside the classroom that is transferable to their academic credential or degree program.

Prior Learning Credit Predictor

CAEL created this online tool to help adult students create a personalized action plan for further postsecondary education based on the estimated amount of college credits they have already earned.

Joint Services Transcript

Active and veteran military students can use this tool to request a transcript showing their service and training credentials with recommended academic course credit equivalents.

Military Skills Translator

This tool helps adults translate skills gained through military experience into qualifications for civilian jobs and further education.

Additional Resources

Credit for Prior Learning: Charting Institutional Practice for Sustainability [2015: American Council on Education]

This report from the American Council on Education discusses innovative PLA practices that institutions can adopt to improve student outcomes. Areas of focus include improving sustainability of PLA efforts, improving communication with and support of students, and improving faculty involvement. The report provides research on a number of PLA best practices and highlights institutions that have experienced success.

Underserved Students Who Earn Credit Through Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) Have Higher Degree Completion Rates and Shorter Time-to-Degree [2011: Council for Adult Experiential Learning]

This brief highlights key findings on the impact of PLA among underserved students from CAEL's study Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success. The brief focuses on positive outcomes for Black and Hispanic students, particularly by reducing the time to degree completion and lowering costs.

Random Access: The Latino Student Experience with Prior Learning Assessment [2014: Council for Adult Experiential Learning and Excelencia in Education]

This report produced by CAEL and Excelencia in Education examines Latino students' experiences with PLA at different higher education institutions across the country. Areas of analysis include levels of participation, methods used by each institution, and strategies to improve PLA efforts targeted toward Latino and first-generation college students.

Promoting College and Career Success: Portfolio Assessment for Student Veterans [2014: Council for Adult Experiential Learning]

This report produced by CAEL presents evidence of the benefits of PLA for veteran students, particularly through the portfolio assessment method. The report highlights overall trends in PLA for veterans and provides vignettes of student success stories.

Chapter Two:

How Can Communities Align Student Skills with Workforce Needs?

Many regions are experiencing a gap between student skills and industry needs, resulting in an increased number of unfilled jobs. Barriers to degree attainment and skills training among minority student populations widen these gaps. However, communities can work together to increase the number and diversity of qualified graduates by increasing access to career and technical education (CTE) and early professional experiences, exposure that is particularly important for underserved students. Students who participate in CTE programs are more likely to be engaged in content that is interesting and relevant to their desired career path. Additionally, integrating academic course work with career training allows students to earn credentials for desirable skills, thus making them more likely to land high-quality employment and advance in their career.

Read this chapter for an introduction to effective strategies that improve students' skills for their future careers. Learn how the **Community Foundation of the Ozarks** partners with **Ozarks Technical Community College** to strengthen career pathways in **Springfield, Missouri** and discover new tools and resources to **align student skills with workforce needs** in your community.

Sector-Based Career Pathways: *Does your community want to create a path for students to easily transition from high school to college to career?* Strong community partnerships are key to building successful pathways programs that include both [rigorous academic course work and job training](#). Sector-based career pathways programs align curriculum with broad industry needs, rather than specific occupations. Thus, students can develop desirable skills that are transferable to a number of in-demand jobs.

Career Academies: *Does your community want to align high school curriculum with skills needed for in-demand jobs and postsecondary education?* The career academy model for CTE places high school students in small learning communities. Students take a combination of academic and career-specific course work leading to a job certification or credit toward a two- or four-year degree. Those who participate in career academies typically experience [income gains](#) and are better prepared for further postsecondary education.

Early College High Schools: *Does your community want to offer rigorous college-level course work that enables students to earn college credit and develop skills for in-demand jobs?* Early college high schools give students the opportunity to simultaneously complete high school, college, and career training courses. Students gain exposure to postsecondary education by taking classes on a college campus and early work experience through hands-on training with local employers. This strategy accelerates students' time to postsecondary degree completion and improves career readiness for in-demand jobs.

Apprenticeships and Internships: *Does your community want to provide students with hands-on work experience to develop skills for their future career?* Apprenticeships and internships help students develop the technical and soft skills necessary for a successful transition into the workplace by gaining exposure to different career options, job roles, and company cultures. Nationally, students perceive that participating in internships and professional experiences during college would improve their [workforce readiness](#). Employers also benefit from [apprenticeship](#) and internship programs by increasing their access to a trained, engaged, and diverse workforce. By developing an agreement to support students with Federal Work Study funds, institutions and employers can increase access to off-campus internship opportunities for underserved students.

Springfield, Missouri: Aligning Student Skills with Workforce Needs through Career Pathways Programs

IHEP spoke with Francine Pratt from Springfield Project 2025, the community's higher education attainment initiative, and Cindy Stephens and Jeanie Atwell from Ozarks Technical Community College (OTC) to learn about the Health Professions Academy, one of several career pathways programs in Springfield implemented through the OTC Middle College. By participating in the program, high school juniors and seniors can earn credit toward an associate's degree, intern with a local employer, and receive support to continue their education toward a bachelor's degree at a local university. Read this interview to find out how Springfield Project 2025 has established several workforce alignment programs that prepare students for high-demand jobs in the community.

Goals

IHEP: Can you describe what led Springfield Project 2025 to pursue the career pathway initiative and its Health Professions Academy in particular?

Health care is the largest employer industry in our city, including hospitals, dentists' and doctors' offices, nursing homes, and other allied health care services. Our city has two major top 100 hospitals that each employ about 5,000 to 8,000 individuals, even though the metropolitan area is barely 300,000 people. Given that health care is a leading industry and we have a fairly high poverty rate in the area, we were looking for ways to identify individuals who have great promise and who could be successful in this field, but because of financial reasons need to quickly finish a degree and make a good salary to support their family and pay for other expenses.



We started by looking at the education gaps and changing demographics in the city, broken down by race and ethnicity, poverty, educational attainment, employment, and several other demographic characteristics. With this analysis, we were able to show city officials another way to look at Springfield.”

IHEP: Did you use any data to identify the needs in your community?

In order to determine the need for the Health Professions Academy and other career pathways programs, we relied on data from our Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy, which a group called the Southwest Missouri Council of Governments oversees. Their gap analysis helped us identify where the jobs were and where skilled workers were lacking. As a state, we have more people retiring than we have folks entering the workforce, so we need to be very intentional in making sure that our best and brightest get an opportunity to succeed even if they have limited access to dollars. The Health Professions Academy is one academy where we are providing the basic-level courses that would be necessary, such as anatomy and physiology, regardless of the field in which the student decides to specialize. So students get a broad academic foundation while also being exposed to a variety of specialized skills for their future career.

IHEP: How did you identify your target population?

We started by looking at the education gaps and changing demographics in the city, broken down by race and ethnicity, poverty, educational attainment, employment, and several other demographic characteristics. With this analysis, we were able to show city officials another way to look at Springfield. When you talk about the city's overall 26 percent poverty rate and that only 33 percent of the residents have a postsecondary degree, you do not get the full picture of poverty and education for Springfield's minority populations. When we looked at the data, the poverty rate among African Americans was almost 48 percent and almost 43 percent among Hispanics, compared with 38 percent among Caucasians. These were some of the gaps we wanted to address.

Partnership

IHEP: How did the Springfield community develop partnerships to improve career and technical education?

[FRANCINE PRATT]: We had different programs that were not connected before working with Lumina and the CPA initiative. Our current partnership grew out of an existing program, Drury Scholars, which brought students to Drury University for a week over the summer to show them what it's like to be on a college campus and show them that they did belong on campus. For a lot of the students, they did not believe college was an option, and they did not believe getting a job in the area was an option either because of historical racial issues shared with them from family generation to generations.

I was working with the Springfield Area Chamber of Commerce and the city looking at poverty and unemployment, and we saw education as the common connecting issue. We started working with employers to create apprenticeships and internships in order to expose students to the skills they need to fill positions. It was a win-win for employers and students—employers had the jobs but didn't have job applicants with the right skills, and students felt that no one would give them a chance without the right skills for a job.

IHEP: Why did Springfield Project 2025 and the Chamber of Commerce partner with OTC's Middle College?

In 2007, OTC started the Middle College program to prevent at-risk high school juniors and seniors from dropping out by exposing

them to college and more contextualized learning experiences based on their interests. It was designed as a full-day program for juniors and seniors. Many of the students were facing several barriers to graduation, such as having dependent children of their own or incarcerated parents. These students honestly needed to be making money instead of going to school. Middle College provided them a way to get high school credit, college credit, and part-time work so that they could meet their financial needs.

Meanwhile, the gap between trained, qualified people and available jobs continued to grow as more large companies—especially in health care—arrived in Springfield. That's why the Chamber, city leaders, and the local hospital realized that they needed to do something about workforce alignment and looked to partnering with Middle College.

IHEP: How has the Health Professions Academy been successful in aligning its work with other stakeholders in the community?

The Health Professions Academy has been successful because Middle College already had a formal partnership agreement and a memorandum of understanding with K-12 superintendents from Green County, Everton, and several other cities in the region. These established relationships were key—ground had already been plowed, several fields had been sown, and lots of crops had been harvested before starting the Health Professions Academy.

Implementation

IHEP: Can you explain how you implement the Middle College programs and specifically the Health Professions Academy?

We implement the programs in partnership with Springfield Public Schools. From the five high schools in the district, we receive students in their junior and senior years to attend Middle College. We want to provide students with purpose and meaning to their education, because that's what we found some high schools are missing. Students don't always find purpose or meaning in abstract concepts, such as algebra, but if they get the experience at Middle College by taking contextualized classes for the career that they're interested in, they gain a deeper understanding of the academic concepts and develop career goals.

IHEP: How does the Health Professions Academy contextualize students' learning for their career interests?

During their junior and senior year, students take a combination of core high school courses—such as English, math, and science—and career-centered college-level classes on medical terminology, CPR, and nutrition. We work to personalize each student's experience based on skill level and interest. For example, students who want to be doctors will take different classes than students who want to be surgical technicians or dental hygienists. To gain early work experience, all students have the opportunity to do an internship during both years they're enrolled. In addition, we counsel students to provide them with

information about what courses they'll need to take to prepare for specialized programs and pursue a college degree. Students graduate from the Health Professions Academy with about 40 college credit hours, which is close to the 60 credits needed for an associate's degree. Students are earning these credits at no cost and it's an excellent jump-start into college.

IHEP: What credentials do students earn through the program?

The Health Professions Academy is designed to lead to an accelerated Bachelor of Science (B.S.) degree in the health professions within three to five years after completing high school. Students who finish the program will have been exposed to enough courses to decide whether they want to serve as a dental assistant, as a nurse practitioner, as a phlebotomist, or in some other health profession. Our ultimate goal is that they finish a degree at OTC and then continue their education at the neighboring Missouri State University to earn a B.S. degree in health science. We are establishing a full pathway from high school to the community college to the university and then on to a career.

Impact

IHEP: How can other communities design a career pathways program to have a meaningful impact?

The foremost principle is to make sure that you are focusing on a pathway for jobs that exist in your community. If you live in Wichita, for example, aircraft maintenance would be a high-demand field. But that would not work at all in Springfield; our airport is not that big. Pathways should be driven by the employment in the area.

IHEP: What other best practices are key to bring a program to scale?

Maintaining strong partnerships is very important. All of our pathways programs give students the opportunity to do

an internship through one of our partners in the business community. Another key is having a college that will act as a strong community partner and help award students with college credit. Our students finish the program with college credit, and statistics show that a person with any amount of college credit will make more money than someone with just a high school diploma.

Communities also need to be aware of barriers that face low-income students. Even if students are high functioning and well adjusted, they may still face challenges. For example, Middle College provides wraparound services to make sure students have access to transportation, food, and clothing. Overcoming student barriers was the most important piece of all. If there's a problem, we're going to solve it.



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Tools

OTC Middle College: Career and Technical Education Memorandum of Understanding

Use this MOU as a template to formalize partnerships between higher education institutions and K-12 systems for creating a career academy or other CTE program.

Springfield Project 2025: Employer Survey

Use this survey as a model for communities to identify employer needs and share with education institutions in order to align academic programs and better prepare students for available jobs in the area.

Career Pathways Toolkit: A Guide for System Development

This toolkit from the U.S. Department of Labor is intended to support state-level partners implementing a Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act Unified Plan. The toolkit highlights key elements of career pathways and a number of tools and resources to facilitate the development of new programs.

Employer Engagement Toolkit: From Placement to Partners

Jobs for the Future's toolkit provides information for workforce training and education institutions on how to develop deeper relationships with employers. The toolkit includes a number of strategies on how to move beyond "job placement" to "employer engagement."

Federal Student Aid Handbook, Chapter 2: Operating a Federal Work Study Program

The U.S. Department of Education's handbook for financial aid administrators highlights how Federal Work Study funds can be used to finance student work opportunities both on and off campus. This chapter includes details about implementing an FWS program to fund off-campus internship opportunities and a sample FWS agreement to be used by institutions and employers.

Additional Resources

New Pathways to Career and College: Examples, Evidence, and Prospects [2015: MDRC]

This report from MDRC details key characteristics of career pathways models and provides evidence of successful models being implemented in the field. The report focuses on programs that provide both technical training and academic rigor in order to prepare students for both positive employment and educational outcomes.

The Human Factor: The Hard Time Employers Have Finding Soft Skills [2015: Burning Glass Technologies]

Burning Glass analyzed real time data from job postings across the country and found that soft skills, in addition to technical skills, are valued by employers but hard to find in employees. This report presents the data and implications for job seekers and employers in today's labor market.

Recasting American Apprenticeship: A Summary of the Barriers to Apprenticeship Expansion Research Project [2015: The Aspen Institute]

This report analyzes several opportunities for improvement in efforts to expand apprenticeship programs in high-demand industries, such as IT, advanced manufacturing, and healthcare. Areas of focus include engaging employers, building program capacity, and equity and inclusion.

Chapter Three:

How Can Communities Work with Postsecondary Institutions to Find Affordable Options for Continuing Education?

Today's students rely on a number of sources to pay for their education, including family, work, and financial aid. However, as the cost of postsecondary education increases and federal aid dollars stretch thin, higher education is increasingly feeling out of reach for underserved students. Meanwhile, employers still call for employees to have a postsecondary degree or credential and possess job-specific skills, resulting in barriers to finding well-paying jobs among many minority and low-income students. To increase the number of credentialed adults, communities must ensure that postsecondary education is affordable, and this goes beyond keeping tuition and fees low. Institutions and employers must work collaboratively to find equitable ways to support underserved students through financial assistance, schedule flexibility, and reduced time to degree completion.

Read this chapter for an introduction to effective strategies to make college more **affordable** for underserved students. Learn how the **Big Goal Collaborative** partners with the **Questa Education Foundation of Northeast Indiana** to innovate regional student loan programs, and discover new tools and resources to help students in your community manage the costs of higher education.

Employer-Provided Financial Assistance: *Does your community want to encourage employers to provide their employees with financial assistance for further education and training?* Employer-provided financial assistance, such as tuition reimbursement or scholarships, makes pursuing higher education a more affordable option for employees wishing to advance in their career. Innovative partnerships are working to provide students with up-front benefits to pay for courses, rather than after-credit completion, to further ease the initial cost burden. Employers that provide financial assistance for postsecondary education are better able to recruit high-quality employees and benefit from a high [return on investment](#).

FAFSA Completion: *Does your community want to ensure students have access to financial aid?* To ensure students receive financial assistance, it is critical for community partners to improve student access to the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Current and prospective students must complete the FAFSA to determine their eligibility for receiving federal financial aid, and often for other sources of state and local assistance. There are several methods for increasing FAFSA completion, including holding information sessions at community organizations and education institutions, as well as providing proactive advisors to assist students as they complete the form.

Flexible Course Scheduling: *Does your community want to help students juggle various responsibilities by offering schedule flexibility?* Many of today's postsecondary students have priorities outside the classroom, including caring for family members and employment, so course schedules need to fit their busy lives. Institutions can provide flexibility by offering courses in the evening, on the weekend, at branch or satellite locations, or online.

Accelerated Courses: *Does your community want to decrease the amount of time and cost burden required for students to earn a degree?* Another strategy for improving affordability is to reduce time to degree completion with accelerated or compressed programs that can be completed in less time than the standard academic term. As discussed in Chapter One, institutions can award students with credit for prior learning experiences and reduce the number of credits needed for degree completion. This allows students to focus on courses leading to new competencies and to finish their degree more quickly and affordably.

Northeast Indiana: An Innovative Financial Aid Program That Helps Prevent “Brain Drain” in the Community

IHEP spoke with Ryan Twiss from Big Goal Collaborative and Marc Levy from the Questa Education Foundation of Northeast Indiana to learn how their partnership has expanded an innovative financial aid program that provides students attending an Indiana college or university with low-interest loans and repayment forgiveness for staying in Northeast Indiana to work after graduation. Read this interview to learn how this community partnership is working to improve regional talent to fill a growing number of high-skill, high-wage jobs in the region.

Goals

IHEP: Can you explain why the Big Goal Collaborative's College to Career Action Team (CoCAT) was established?

Our backbone organization, the Northeast Indiana Regional Partnership, oversees a regional strategic effort known as Vision 2020. The regional effort has five pillars, one of which we call “21st Century Talent,” focused on collaboration between businesses and the education system to create a knowledgeable and skilled workforce. Starting with Vision 2020, we developed our cradle-to-career initiative, the Big Goal Collaborative.

CoCAT specifically started with a grant opportunity from the Lilly Endowment open to all of the Indiana colleges and universities to support strategies aimed at keeping students from Indiana in Indiana after graduation. The institutions weren't interested in collaborating, however, and the Lilly Endowment announced that it denied all institutional applications in part because they didn't demonstrate community partnerships and collaborative efforts. The Big Goal Collaborative reached back out to all of the institutions and offered to collaborate again. From there, we

quickly formed CoCAT, which is made up of all of our nonprofit postsecondary institutions in the region and is very focused on aligning academic programming and experiential learning opportunities with the needs of our local employers.

IHEP: What are Questa's specific goals and how do they align with the overall mission of CoCAT?

The Questa Education Foundation has three goals that align with CoCAT: (1) improve access to postsecondary education, (2) increase college completion, and (3) reduce student debt and retain talent in the Northeast Indiana region. Our vision is to transform the business landscape in the region by preparing the workforce for the economy of the 21st century. In order to do this, we build relationships with high schools, colleges and universities, and employers across the entire region. Our goal is to work collaboratively to further develop programs along the education and career pipeline.

Partnership

IHEP: How has CoCAT partnered with Questa to address affordability?

Questa has been involved in CoCAT's cradle-to-career work since the beginning. When Marc [Levy] joined us, he brought expertise on FAFSA completion and the transition from secondary to postsecondary education from his work with the United Way and Strive Together in Portland, Oregon. To help CoCAT with affordability, Marc does a lot of relationship building among the Questa scholars to create connections to the community. Questa's mission is to provide partially forgivable loans to graduates who commit to staying in the Northeast Indiana region, and this contributes to CoCAT's overall purpose to align academic programs with employers in the region so that graduates will stay in the community. We also try to ensure that universities promote the Questa program and that we help recruit underserved students from secondary schools. It's really a true partnership in which we support each other's efforts to improve college affordability and attainment for all students.



The bottom line is that once students graduate high school, we want them not only to attain postsecondary education but also to complete their degree with reduced debt and a link to a job.”

Implementation

IHEP: What steps is Questa taking to increase degree attainment and make postsecondary education more affordable?

Questa is focusing on student retention in the university and linking student experiences that better prepare them for employment in the region. The bottom line is that once students graduate high school, we want them not only to attain postsecondary education but also to complete their degree with reduced debt and a link to a job. We're working to prevent "brain drain" and losing talent in the community.

IHEP: How did you develop the low-interest loan program?

Our low-interest loan program has been around in different forms for about 90 years. It started way back when there was a principal of a high school who saw students who were very talented and very capable, but who had a financial barrier keeping them from furthering their education. He was loaning them money out of his pocket and was getting help from community philanthropists. So, if we fast-forward, the program went from being what was the Fort Wayne Education Fund, tied specifically to Fort Wayne schools, to a fund for all of Allen County, and then expanded even broader to the program we have today.

IHEP: How does your low-interest loan program encourage students to earn a degree and stay in Northeast Indiana for their future career?

Over the past several years, we've been working to expand our efforts in the entire region and parallel our work with the CoCAT

partnership. The model that we're currently using is providing students working towards an industry certification, associate's, or bachelor's degree at any public or private non-profit postsecondary institution in Indiana with low-interest, forgivable loans. The concept is that if students stay and work in the region after graduation, or come back if they went to a school somewhere else in the state, then after five years Questa will forgive 50 percent of the loan amount. Over time, we expanded our relationships with regional higher education institutions and created a memorandum of understanding that the institution will also pay back 25 percent of the loan to further increase the likelihood that students will stay in the region to live and work. The schools agree to this in order to attract more students, and the students who benefit from the program remain in the area because they have to meet our criteria of staying in the region in order to be eligible for forgiveness. Furthermore, we're able to sustain the program using funds paid back by institutions and former students to provide loans to future students.

IHEP: How do you work with community partners to expand affordability programs?

We've been working to strengthen a bottom-up type of approach rather than a top-down approach by working with local school districts, private schools, and even home schools to organize community events, reach more students, and create buy-in at the local level. The partnerships that we've tried to develop are locally based, community by community, county by county, in the region of Northeast Indiana. Our program isn't something being imposed on the community. Rather, it's a process of engaging and working with school districts, local businesses, community leaders, and families.



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Impact

IHEP: Can you describe Questa's recent outcomes for students?

We just had our fifth graduating class. Over 75 percent of the students are completing their degree in four years and over 90 percent are completing in five years. Also, over two-thirds of the traditional students are staying, living, and working in Northeast Indiana. So, the completion and retention parts are both working. We're also starting to work with nontraditional,

returning students. The retention rate is much higher with our nontraditional students, because many of them already lived here and were in the workforce. We've also significantly grown the number of students we're reaching and are able to provide funding to—for instance, we reached about 360 traditional students total through the first five cohorts combined, whereas we had about 160 students in our most recent cohort alone.

IHEP: Do you use any other indicators to measure impact?

The part of measuring effectiveness that's more soft and intuitive is looking at the relationships we develop with students and their families, both in the application process and throughout their education. Our students access loan money semester by semester, so they have to show that they are enrolled and maintaining a minimum grade point average. It's the role of our program staff to monitor their progress and to be a coach, mentor, and cheerleader.

So it's the combination of offering loans and building relationships that makes us effective. The entry point is the low-interest, forgivable loan. This catches students' attention and resonates with many of their parents, who would love for their daughters and sons to stay in the area after graduation. It's an interesting loan model that works, but I don't think it's just about the money. It's also about the relationships that we build while the students are in school and maintain to keep them connected to the community.

IHEP: What advice do you have for others hoping to replicate the Questa model?

We're seeing data that say that this model works. It's important for the affordability strategy to be bottom-up and include input from local and regional institutions, so they understand the goals and feel like they have a stake in the program. Institutional partnerships really make our program successful. You also have to go out in the community and have an open dialogue with schools and students. We're in the classroom, we're at the college nights and at college fairs, and we do a variety of other outreach. The program works and can be replicated, but you need to be able to mobilize people and create buy-in around affordability and retention. Partners need to know that it's not a short-term investment; rather, you're making long-term commitments. There's an opportunity to build an economic growth model that can be sustained and can grow the talent and resources in a community.

IHEP: What's next for CoCAT and promoting college affordability in Northeast Indiana?

We've been tracking and working with the CoCAT member schools on academic internships. The internships give students an opportunity to earn college credit, get real-life experience, and hopefully complete their degree more quickly. We're also trying to expand opportunities for paid internships with employers. This is a new program for us, and the idea is to help employers create internship programs that are beneficial to both



Partners need to know that it's not a short-term investment; rather, you're making long-term commitments. There's an opportunity to build an economic growth model that can be sustained and can grow the talent and resources in a community.”

the student and the employer. Ultimately, the goal is that the program will help reduce the cost of an employer's recruitment, as well as help the student access employment sooner and earn some money along the way. Some data show that students who also work part-time jobs have difficulty completing their degrees. Our hope is that subsidizing some of the need to work part time with paid internships as an alternative will help students reduce their time to degree.

IHEP: What are Questa's next steps in helping more students pay for a postsecondary degree?

For Questa, our challenge is scaling up. We know that our model works, but if we are going to reach our goal of 60 percent degree attainment, we need to keep growing. Even though we've grown and more than doubled the number of students we're serving, the reality is that we're not yet anywhere near filling the education and workforce gaps in the region. We need to figure out how to grow enough over the next 10- to 15-year period to have a broader reach and stay consistent with our goal of reducing debt and keeping students in the region. Based on our initial success, our hope is that regional and national foundations that share in the goal of increased access and completion with reduced debt will provide funding to help us take the model to scale.

Tools

Financial Aid Template

This tool developed by the U.S. Department of Education highlights how to calculate students' estimated cost of attendance and payment options, and explains basic financial aid terminology. This handout can be used by counselors and mentors.

Adult Student Checklist

Also created by the U.S. Department of Education, this checklist is designed for adult students, to help them prepare academically and financially for college. The checklist also includes helpful links to additional information.

Questa Education Foundation: Memorandum of Understanding

This tool provides a template for establishing a partnership between a local foundation and a higher education institution for providing students with financial assistance through low-interest, forgivable loans.

Questa Education Foundation: Loan Terms and Conditions and Payment Note

Use this tool to learn about the terms and conditions and repayment schedule of the Questa Scholars program in order to provide students in your community with a low-cost option for financing postsecondary education.

Additional Resources

Trends in Student Aid [2015: College Board]

This report from College Board details the types of student aid—including scholarships, grants, and loans—that college students have received over the past 10 years. In order for communities to improve college affordability, it is important for them to know what types of aid students are receiving and the demographic differences among financial aid recipients.

With Their Whole Lives Ahead of Them: Myths and Realities About Why So Many Students Fail to Finish College [2009: Public Agenda]

Public Agenda's report looks at several barriers to degree completion, including tuition costs, competing work schedules, and family obligations. The report includes stories from individual students and data to explain broader trends. In order to address these issues, Public Agenda recommends increasing availability of financial aid and course schedule.

How Full-Time are "Full-Time" Students [2013: Complete College America]

This policy brief from Complete College America presents survey data about college student enrollment status and time to degree completion. Key findings from the survey indicate that many students who are enrolled as full-time do not take a full course load, which negatively affects them by increasing the time to degree completion, costs, and the likelihood of dropping out of school.

Chapter Four:

How Can Communities Use Data for Continuous Improvement Strategies?

As communities try to build a skilled workforce, data become invaluable in measuring both student progress and the needs of the local economy. Community partners can work together to gather and share data on student education and labor outcomes, high-demand skills, and gaps between student skills and employer needs. Using data for workforce alignment strategies is especially important for understanding the unique needs of different student populations and driving improvements for underserved students.

Read this chapter for an introduction to effective strategies for using data to better align postsecondary and workforce strategies. Learn how **SA2020** in **San Antonio, Texas** is using real-time data to share information about student outcomes and labor market needs, and gain new tools and resources for using **data** in your community.

Data-Sharing Agreements: *Does your community want to ease the process of data sharing between partner organizations?* Sharing data between partners may not be an easy feat because data are sometimes guarded for internal use. To facilitate collaboration, it is helpful to have a data-sharing agreement or memorandum of understanding to specify terms for sharing information in a fair, timely, and transparent manner.

Real-Time Data: *Does your community want to gain a better understanding of education and labor market gaps?* When considering workforce needs, communities should leverage partnerships to gather and share [real-time data](#) based on the most up-to-date student outcomes and labor market information. Communities can use this data to gain a better understanding of education and labor market gaps, and inform decision-making to prepare students for in-demand careers.

Skills Gap Analysis: *Does your community want to better understand gaps between student skills and employer needs?* Comparing data on student skills and job qualifications is a useful starting point to determine workforce alignment strategies.

Partnerships can draw on administrative data from institutions and state and national datasets from federal agencies, such as the National Center for Education Statistics, Census Bureau, and Bureau of Labor Statistics. By using data disaggregated by characteristics including race, ethnicity, age, sex, and income, communities gain a better understanding of how the qualifications gap differs between student populations and can design tailored workforce alignment strategies.

Data Dashboards: *Does your community want to offer readily accessible information to students, employers, and community members?* Data dashboards are online tools that share a variety of indicators measuring student achievement and workforce needs, and they may be updated and modified at any time. For example, a community that wants to improve workforce alignment among its African American or Latino residents may post a variety of indicators by race or ethnic group; meanwhile, a county that is concentrating its resources on promoting career pathways programs at its community colleges may provide more detailed data on student outcomes from these institutions.

Collaborative Data Systems: *Does your community want to gather and share information about student education and labor market outcomes?* Cross-sector partnerships can also build collaborative data systems to share relevant information on the local labor market and student outcomes. In order to have a full understanding of student persistence, completion, and employment outcomes—especially among underserved students—data must be collected from many different sources along the education-to-career pathway and illustrate differences between student populations.

SA2020, San Antonio, Texas: Using Data to Strengthen the College-to-Career Pipeline

IHEP spoke with Molly Cox from SA2020, a community development nonprofit created through a collaborative strategic initiative in San Antonio, Texas. The initiative has led an effort to collect real-time data on educational attainment and the labor market; it then makes the information readily available to the community to inform strategies for aligning postsecondary and workforce initiatives. Read this interview to find out how SA2020 uses data to strengthen the college-to-career pipeline, especially to help adult students and disconnected youth pursue careers in the city's growing industries.

Goals

IHEP: Why was SA2020 started and who led the initial collaboration?

SA2020 began in 2010 as a community visioning process led by the mayor at the time, Julian Castro. The initial idea came from personnel in the mayor's office, because they recognized that it had been several years since the community came together to develop a shared vision for the future of our city. We started with a steering committee composed of business and community leaders. The committee then organized a series of public planning meetings, in which nearly 6,000 people participated, to create a vision for the future of San Antonio in eleven key areas, including education and economic competitiveness.

IHEP: How did SA2020 develop goals for education and workforce alignment, with a particular focus on middle-skills jobs?

Using a grant from Lumina, we created a task force comprised of education and industry leaders that helped identify a skills gap in the community for middle-skills jobs (those that require more than a high school diploma but less than a bachelor's degree). We were finding that the high school graduation rate was increasing across the community, but we were not seeing gains in college enrollment or degree and professional certificate attainment. At the same time, industry leaders were telling us that high school graduates lacked the skills necessary for available jobs. In San Antonio, for example, we're producing one person for every 10 information technology jobs currently available, and one person for every two health care and biosciences jobs currently available. And just like the rest of the country, we're about to move into a mass exodus of retirees, particularly in the advanced manufacturing industry.

Partnership

IHEP: Who are the key stakeholders for SA2020 and how have they shaped the partnership?

SA2020's key stakeholder is the community at large, because they built the vision that we work every day to help make a reality. Our work is based on a foundation of support from area nonprofit organization and the City of San Antonio, and over the past four years, we have focused on driving alignment between different systems. Everyone is invested and engaged, and brings with them a different lens on how to improve alignment. The SA2020 partnership provides a "30,000-foot view" of how the community is going to achieve our vision for the future, including increased college attainment, and how each stakeholder can take one piece of the pie to make it happen.

IHEP: How has having strong leadership from the city government shaped the SA2020 partnership and the ability to reach your goals?

Having strong leadership from the mayor played a huge part in getting stakeholders to the table. Leadership from the city council and large community organizations was also key. After

our community visioning process, the city and other partners adopted SA2020's goals and started using them as benchmarks for community improvement projects. And because we had nearly 6,000 people take part in the process, the community at large has been really invested in the success of the partnership and reaching our goals for improving education in San Antonio.

IHEP: Which other community partners have contributed to the success of SA2020?

I think the smartest thing we did when forming the partnership was to bring in leaders from all areas of the community, not just the usual stakeholders. When you put together a steering committee for economic development, particularly at the citywide level, you typically include owners of larger businesses, presidents of banks, and other industry leaders. For our partnership, we also wanted to include a variety of stakeholders, including faith-based leaders, artists, educators, and civic leaders. By bringing in a cross section of people from the community, we've been able to create a vision for the future of our city from multiple viewpoints, not just an economic perspective.



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Implementation

IHEP: How did SA2020 develop a strategy for using real-time data?

From the start, SA2020's goal has not been to merely create a vision for San Antonio but to know if we're making progress toward that vision. For example, we asked ourselves if we want to have the greatest education turnaround in the nation, where all students have opportunities regardless of their socioeconomic background. What indicators would tell us if we were making progress? During the initial visioning process, we got input from all of our participants to decide what community-level indicators we should use to measure success.

IHEP: How do you know that you're using the right indicators to measure success?

Initially, the community decided to collect data and report on about 65 indicators across the 11 SA2020 vision areas. We then sought advice from content experts in each vision area to make sure the indicators were valid, reliable, and measurable. With their input, we eliminated indicators that either (1) weren't measurable or (2) wouldn't give us a big-picture view of our progress. The content experts also helped us add a few more indicators that would help us measure success. It was an iterative process.

IHEP: Has the data informed SA2020's target populations and how you develop strategies to meet their needs?

The data helped identify two target populations for our education and workforce programs: (1) adults who started college but did not complete a degree, and (2) youth ages 16–24 who have become disconnected from either education or the job market. Overall, we're using the data to monitor and align college enrollment, degree attainment, and job market needs. If the data show that we're not meeting our goals fast enough, I think we have to then discuss making changes to our strategies. For example, when we released the *Talent Pipeline Task Force Report*, we used data to develop very specific strategies to prepare students for middle-skills jobs and recommendations to move us toward our education and economic competitiveness goals. More than half of the strategies and recommendations are currently being implemented. Our next step is to evaluate

whether the strategies are moving the needle and resulting in small gains that ultimately will lead to our overarching college attainment goal.

IHEP: Why did SA2020 decide to report progress through a data dashboard?

We knew that we wanted to publish an annual report, but we also felt that reporting data only once per year wouldn't be the best way to show progress. Ultimately, we had a conversation with our data partner, Community Information: NOW (CI: NOW), about the best way to share information. Our partner helped us develop the idea for an online data dashboard that could be updated regularly, in contrast to an annual report that becomes outdated a few months after being released.

IHEP: How does real-time data inform SA2020's strategy for postsecondary and workforce alignment?

One outcome of collecting real-time data is that we've been better able to identify skills gaps and develop strategies to strengthen our workforce based on actual employer needs. For our Talent Pipeline Task Force Report, which was released in 2015, education and industry leaders in the community recommended data from a variety of sources to gather and analyze. In partnership with these community leaders, CI: NOW, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, and Workforce Solutions Alamo (WSA), we looked at labor market data for our three targeted industries: (1) health care and bioscience, (2) information technology and cybersecurity, and (3) advanced manufacturing. We also compared labor market data with data about educational attainment gathered from national data sources, such as the American Community Survey. All of this information serves as a baseline for measuring our progress in postsecondary attainment and workforce development.

Impact

IHEP: What has been the impact of SA2020's focus on data collection and analysis?

I think SA2020 has given the community at large a better understanding of how to use data and tell our transformation story. For example, by using the data we can tell the story of students moving through early childhood education, K-12, higher education, and into the workforce. In San Antonio, we've already seen positive shifts in primary and secondary education, but we're not yet seeing the progress we want for postsecondary education. We know that postsecondary education needs to be an ongoing focus. The data are sending us a red flag, and it's our job to figure out why current strategies are not working and what we can do to drive progress. The information gives us an opportunity to move people to action and focus on the areas that need the most attention.



It's also important to use the data in a way that benefits everyone at the table and to get buy-in from people who could validate the information at a local level. This is a long and hard process.”

IHEP: How have your community and local policymakers reacted to the data you present?

The community is starting to make connections between the city-level and program-level data. We're able to see which specific strategies and programs are producing positive results for our students, and that's led to changes in how people are donating money or volunteering their time.

From a policy perspective, the conversation about how best to spend funds on developing the workforce in our growing industries has changed. For example, based on the data analysis from the Talent Pipeline Task Force, the City of San Antonio and the broader region of Bexar County have made developing our workforce a top priority. The City of San Antonio and the larger region of Bexar County came together to help fund two workforce alignment initiatives. The first is SAWorks, an experiential learning program that helps students in eighth and ninth grade get internships at local companies. The second is WSA, a career-advising nonprofit focused on using real-time labor market data to connect students to middle-skills jobs.

IHEP: What lessons learned could SA2020 share with other communities looking to better use data to inform workforce alignment strategies?

First, it's important to have champions and leaders who can encourage stakeholders to work collaboratively. It's also important to use the data in a way that benefits everyone at the table and to get buy-in from people who could validate the information at a local level. This is a long and hard process. I think when we originally started talking about collecting data, we thought it would take a year and then we could move on to other efforts. In reality, it took us nearly a year and a half just to create the Talent Pipeline Task Force Report.

IHEP: What's next for SA2020?

We're increasing efforts for our economic development work and trying to really make sure that economic development is driving education, and vice versa. We're also doing a lot around collective impact and trying to help people see how much more successful you can be when you have a clear goal and shared measurements in place. We're starting to use our data to evaluate program success and engage the community at large.

I think the success of SA2020 is that we're working on two things at once: systems change and behavioral change. To align postsecondary and workforce strategies, we're working with industry leaders, educational institutions, and other stakeholders to create system change. We're also working to express the importance of the work to the community at large and the impact for people who may want to move up a career ladder or may want to complete a degree. Most importantly, we do this in partnership, connecting and convening the players who will ultimately carry the torch well past 2020.



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Tools

Burning Glass Technologies

Communities can use services from Burning Glass to gather data about their local labor market and better identify gaps between employee skills and employer needs.

U.S. Department of Labor Guide to State and Local Workforce Data

This tool from the Department of Labor can help communities learn about various sources of workforce data, many of which are free and publicly available, that can be used to inform local, regional, and statewide workforce alignment initiatives.

Strive Together: Data-Sharing Agreement Template

Use this template from the Strive Together network as a model to formalize collaboration between different community stakeholders to gather and share data on student progress and outcomes.

Additional Resources

Success in Real Time: Using Real-Time Labor Market Information to Build Better Middle-Skill STEM Pathways [2015: Jobs for the Future]

The Jobs for the Future report focuses on how real-time data can be used to simultaneously align workforce training and labor market needs. In particular, this report addresses how using real-time data can assist in developing career pathways for high-demand STEM careers that are available to students with less than a bachelor's degree.

Making Workforce Data Work: How Improved Education and Workforce Data Systems Could Help the U.S. Compete in the 21st Century Economy [2014: Workforce Data Quality Campaign]

This report from the Workforce Data Quality Campaign includes steps for state and local policymakers to improve workforce alignment by using data. The report recommends creating state-level data systems to collect data, create longitudinal records, and analyze outcomes in order to strengthen workforce alignment initiatives.

Chapter Five:

How Can Communities Use Advising to Improve Workforce Readiness?

Advising helps students understand how certain postsecondary strategies will lead to the skills that employers want. Academic and career advising by community-based organizations (CBOs), employers, and colleges should be based on local market data so students are aware of the high-demand careers in their region and can be intentional about their postsecondary path. Advising should also be tailored to target populations in order to improve equity in degree attainment and student employment outcomes.

Read this chapter for an introduction to effective strategies that support students with **academic and career planning**. Learn how **Degrees Matter!** in **Greensboro, North Carolina** is using intrusive advising to increase adult degree completion, and gain new tools and resources for advising students in your community on how to become ready for the workforce.

Intrusive Advising: *Does your community want advisors to regularly check in with students to monitor their progress?* Intrusive advising is a model for [proactively engaging students](#) along their way to completing a degree and transitioning into the workforce. Intrusive advisors develop relationships with each student early in their education career and check in at regular intervals. Students who perceive their advisor as caring and proactive are more likely to have a positive academic experience, complete their degree or credential, and be better prepared for the expectations of their chosen career path.

Contextualized Advising: *Does your community want to provide students with information personalized to their needs, goals, and work experiences?* Contextualized advising provides students with academic and career information tailored to personal needs. Veteran students, for instance, need advising on the GI Bill and other military and federal aid benefits before enrolling in college. Advising should be based on real-time labor market data so students can make informed decisions about pursuing credentials that will likely lead to a well-paying, high-demand job. Institutions, CBOs, government agencies, and employers all

have a role to play to ensure data are available to students and to guide them toward gainful employment.

American Job Centers: *Does your community want to house advising in a central location?* American Job Centers are central locations where current and perspective students can receive resources for applying to available jobs. They can also learn about required qualifications and pursue further education and training. In addition to in-person job centers, resources and information can also be provided through websites and e-tools. Job center advisors act as key intermediaries by connecting the business community to higher education institutions and using data to help students plan for their future education and careers.

Employer Mentorships: *Does your community want to connect students with role models from the local business community?* Employer-sponsored [mentorship](#) programs are an effective strategy to reach students at an early age, often as early as middle or high school, and help them plan for postsecondary education and career goals. Mentoring can be an especially effective intervention for [at-risk youth](#) who may become disconnected from the education-to-career pipeline. Employers can use mentoring as an opportunity to share general career advice and encourage students to pursue jobs in the local economy.

Degrees Matter!, Greensboro, North Carolina: Using an Intrusive Advising Model to Increase Attainment

IHEP spoke with Steve Moore from *Degrees Matter!* in Greensboro, North Carolina to learn how the organization targets advising services toward adult learners and students who left college in order to help them return and complete a degree or credential. *Degrees Matter!* services include academic advising, assisting with college applications, contacting schools of interest, and career planning. Read this interview to learn how *Degrees Matter!*, part of the national Graduate Network focused on adult college completion, uses its model for intrusive advising and provides these services free of charge.

Goals

IHEP: What was the catalyst for starting *Degrees Matter!*?

I'll start with a little bit of history on Guilford County. As recent as the early 2000s, Guilford County was the epicenter of the textile industry in the United States. Similar to Detroit and other Rust Belt cities, we unfortunately lost most of that key industry and, consequently, many of our largest employers, such as Burlington Industries. We were in a recession about 10 years before the Great Recession officially began. Since then, our community has been working hard to strategically align potential college students with local industry clusters that include (1) aviation, (2) specialized business services, (3) life sciences, (4) innovative manufacturing, and (5) supply chain and logistics.

IHEP: Can you explain how you identified your overall college attainment goal?

Degrees Matter! seeks to increase Guilford County's postsecondary attainment rates to a total of 60 percent by 2025. We approach this goal from the inside out. The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, a crucial stakeholder in this initiative, is classified by the Carnegie Foundation as a community-engaged institution, so developing the goal really began through conversations at the university about the recession and challenges facing the community. Though the university championed the effort from the beginning, there were challenges getting the entire community involved.

Partnership

IHEP: Can you explain how you engaged the broader community with the initiative?

We use a community impact model, but we have needed to modify our approach based on local challenges. It's challenging to organize a community around adult college completion; the needs of adult students don't resonate with people the same way as those of traditional students going from high school to college. We've developed a shared governance model and our strategy is to recruit as our main stakeholders those midlevel representatives who have influence in the community. We strategically chose not to use college presidents and CEO-level individuals, as is usually

IHEP: How did you identify your target population?

We identified our target population by looking at disaggregated data from a number of sources, including the Census Bureau, Georgetown's Center on Education and the Workforce, Lumina, and the Brookings Institution. We also used the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning's strategies for Adult Learning Focused Institutions with the goal of having every college in the community complete an assessment to provide us with a picture of key employment objectives and the community college ecosystem.

The information we gathered from the data led us to focus on several target populations, notably immigrants. Greensboro is a large immigration hub, so we knew that immigrants were going to be a big part of our work, but when we looked at the data we saw a really interesting picture that you wouldn't see in many communities. Across the country, Asian communities tend to have high levels of educational attainment, especially in large metropolitan areas where the population is mostly second- and third-generation citizens. However, in Greensboro, the majority of people in the Asian community are first-generation immigrants and many are refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. So when we looked at our data, we found that the Asian population in our area had low levels of educational attainment and that was our "ah-ha" moment for figuring out how best to focus our efforts.

the case with collective impact models. We were concerned that these high-level people get tapped for any kind of social change initiative. Instead, we have a more grassroots concept that relies on midlevel representatives to be champions of our initiative.

IHEP: How do you connect the work of *Degrees Matter!* to broader workforce development efforts?

We are working with NC Works and the Greensboro Works taskforce—a cross-sector effort that considers what we can

do as a community to improve wages, economic equity, and employee skills—to grow *Degrees Matter!* into a communitywide project to improve family economic success, workforce development, and college completion. Through the taskforce, we engage representatives from the city and county government, nonprofits, educational institutions, and the business community. For example, we've connected with the Greensboro Chamber of Commerce to develop partnerships with large businesses, such as Cone Health and Bank of America, which serve as potential employers for the students we advise.

IHEP: Are there any other partnerships that have been key to your success?

Partnering with the faith-based community has been important for us, in particular with Reverend Odell Cleveland from Mount Zion Baptist Church, whom we met through Greensboro Works and named as our advisory board chair. Our partnership with Mount Zion Baptist Church, which has about 6,000 members, allows us to reach out to their faith-based networks in the community and refer students for advising.

Implementation

IHEP: Can you explain your method for intrusive advising?

We're a member of the Graduate Network and we've have adapted their method for intrusive advising. When a client first comes to us, we complete an intake to gather basic demographic information, including income level, gender, ethnicity, employment status, and educational attainment. This information is entered into Salesforce, a commonly used customer relationship management system. We then use a workflow to monitor who's currently enrolled in school, who we need to reach out to for follow-up, and who we need to nudge. We have a number of methods for keeping in touch with our clients, including phone calls, e-mails, and automated nudges through Salesforce. We're very proactive, all the way until the individual is enrolled in a degree program and then beyond that as well.

IHEP: How do you use contextualized advising to inform students about local labor market needs?

Through advising, we try to align our target individuals who have some college credit, but have not yet finished their degree, with the five local industry clusters. Our advisors use a number of tools, including the O*NET Interest Profiler and the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Occupational Outlook Handbook. We use these tools to help students gain an understanding of their interests and skills and the career opportunities those might fit best.

IHEP: How do you match student interests with available jobs?

We don't try to force people into in-demand jobs, but we try to make them aware of local opportunities and industries with job growth. For instance, a lot of our clients want to be social workers. There's definitely demand, locally and nationally, for social workers, but the problem is that this occupation doesn't necessarily pay very high wages. We share this type of information with our clients to help them understand different career options, growing industries, and earning potential.



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IHEP: Once a client is enrolled in a degree program, how do you ensure they continue to receive advising services?

We have partnerships with the six colleges that we refer our clients to. When a student transitions, we make sure there's a smooth handoff and that the new advisor has information about them so they're not starting from scratch. Details of our partnerships with the institutions are specified in an memorandum of understanding with a few requirements, including that they use Salesforce, continue to communicate with *Degrees Matter!* about student progress, and provide eight hours of in-kind advising services directly through *Degrees Matter!*.

Impact

IHEP: How do you assess the effectiveness of *Degrees Matter!*?

We use an evaluation plan and logic model to assess our program, including at the individual level. Mainly, we want to know how many people we are serving; how many people are applying for financial aid; how many people are enrolling in college, persisting, and graduating; and their post-college employment outcomes.

IHEP: Have these data led you to refine any aspects of the *Degrees Matter!* initiative?

The data we have gathered have helped us better understand our service population. We began by broadly looking at about 71,000 people in our community who started college but didn't finish. By using Census data, we were able to identify subpopulations

critical to the college completion effort, including single mothers of color and Asian and Hispanic immigrants. Based on these data, we are making sure that we have advising materials tailored to our service populations. A next step for us is to create Spanish versions of our materials to better support Spanish-speaking members of the immigrant community.

IHEP: What's next for the *Degrees Matter!* initiative?

We are looking to grow the initiative in a few ways. First, we were invited to apply for a Department of Education TRIO grant—funding to serve low-income, first-generation, and disabled students—to open an Educational Opportunity Center. We're

hoping to use that funding to create a central advising location to serve the 71,000 people in our community who fall into our target population of adults with some college experience but no degree. Our model would be very similar to the Café College in San Antonio, Texas.

In addition, we want to scale-up *Degrees Matter!* to be a statewide model for adult college completion. At the state level, the college systems are already collaborating to improve the credit-transfer process. An initiative at the University of North Carolina, called Partway Home, identifies students who still need to complete 80 or more credit hours and tries to help them finish their degree. So there are a lot of ideas, but I think we need to develop a collaborative completion strategy for the statewide college system.



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Tools

O*NET Resource Center

O*NET is a central database that provides occupation information and career interest tools for advisors, students, and workers.

Salesforce

Salesforce is a client management and workflow system that can be used to keep track of client interactions, communication, and progress. The software is available at no cost to eligible nonprofit organizations and higher education institutions.

Additional Resources

Holland's Theory and Implications for Academic Advising and Career Counseling [2004: Florida State University]

This article includes research on academic and career advising, in particular the student-focused Holland model. After assessing findings from several studies of the use of this model across different colleges, the article provides recommendations for how to design an effective advising program.

Decisions Without Direction: Career Guidance and Decision-Making Among American Youth [2002: Ferris State University]

This paper presents findings from a study based on a survey of rising high school graduates on their future education and career goals. The paper provides data on students' attitudes and expectations for their futures, as well as recommendations to improve college and career advising and career pathways programs.

Mentoring: At the Crossroads of Education, Business, and Community [2015: Ernst & Young and MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership]

This study reports on the benefits of business-sector involvement in mentoring programs for young people, provides a business case for corporate engagement, identifies promising practices and case studies drawn from current programs, and outlines a set of recommendations for future mentoring initiatives.