

CAREER PATHWAYS AS A SYSTEMIC FRAMEWORK:

Re-Thinking Education for Student Success in College & Careers

A CALL TO ACTION

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CAREER PATHWAYS AS A SYSTEMIC FRAMEWORK

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This Call to Action grew out of a conversation between representatives of the College and Career Transitions Initiative and the Breaking Through Initiative about the need to reinvigorate education across the county through the use of career pathways. In response to shared concepts identified in the course of that dialog, 24 experts and practitioners in the field of career pathways were convened and charged with the task of identifying ways to transition pathways existing “silo” efforts targeting in-school youth, out-of-school youth, or adults into a single lifelong continuum.

In response to this challenge, the individuals listed below co-authored this paper with the vision of reorganizing workforce development efforts at community colleges to meet the needs of all students eligible to access services through their programs. While the paper draws heavily from recent work in the field, it attempts to move career pathways forward by redefining existing models as a single systemic framework capable of serving students of all ages.

Our purpose in developing this paper is to encourage a dialog with our colleagues across the country about what career pathways mean for the organization of community colleges as they seek to fulfill their workforce development mission.

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CAREER PATHWAYS AS A SYSTEMIC FRAMEWORK

Re-Thinking Education for Student Success in College & Careers

Career Pathways. As the centerpiece of conferences and federal initiatives across the educational spectrum, pathways seem to be the latest fad offering community colleges the promise of increased funding and student success. In contrast, the authors of this paper contend that career pathways are the building blocks of a critically needed systemic transformation that will position community colleges as leaders in the effort to address some of the most pressing economic and social concerns facing the country today - not as a short term fix or project, but as incubators of innovation capable of changing the face of education in America.

PREAMBLE

Why is the work of developing career pathways so important? Why does it really matter? Two leaders in the fields of postsecondary education and economic development have succinctly and clearly articulated the “why?”, as well as the sense of urgency we must feel as we go about the work of developing systemic career pathways across the nation.

The future of our communities and of our country, not to mention countless individuals, depends significantly on the ability of community and technical colleges – along with their partners in education and the employer community – to do a far better job of moving students to and through their institutions, toward better jobs, and toward continuing education over a lifetime.¹ (Dr. Kay McClenney, Director of the Community College Survey of Student Engagement and an adjunct professor in the Community College Leadership Program at The University of Texas at Austin)

Unless the skills gap within the United States is closed and employers can find the workers they need, and job seekers have the skills to pursue the opportunities that will exist, then America’s economy will remain vulnerable... The stakes are high: freedom of trade and commerce; personal and political liberty; and national and individual security.² (David Sampson, Deputy Secretary of the U.S. Commerce Department)

The career pathways model provides a comprehensive policy and practice framework that addresses these issues by meeting the interdependent needs of two major groups: **businesses** and **individuals**. Businesses need skilled workers to compete in global markets and individuals need stable income and quality of life for themselves and their families. Career pathways are nothing less than a “pathway to the middle class”³ for individuals. Recent studies have provided detailed research indicating that a high school diploma will no longer prepare an individual for a job that will pay a living wage; postsecondary education is essential to economic success. Additionally, individuals must continually update their skills to keep current in our fast changing economic environment. The importance of post-secondary education is reflected by students seeking education at community colleges; today, the ‘typical’ community college student is one who is blending work with school, often stopping out to work before reentering college for additional training and the higher wages attached to a college degree or certificate. While community colleges must continue to offer educational services to students who plan to articulate to a four year program without a detour, they must also meet the unique needs of this ‘new’ student, one who has no other option in their quest to earn living wages within the global economy. Within this context, career pathways offer tremendous potential.

The career pathways ‘movement’ is not new; high schools and community colleges have invested resources and talent over the past five to ten years to develop the concept and various implementation models. Among the major policy players are the League for Innovation in the Community College with their College and Career Transitions Initiative (CCTI), Workforce Strategy Center, National Tech Prep Network (NTPN), the Center for Occupational Research and Development (CORD), the Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Columbia University, and the Ford Foundation’s Bridges to Opportunity Initiative, among others.

It is now time to take this work to the next level, move from ‘project’ work to sustainable, systemic change on a national scale. We can no longer afford to have parallel initiatives making incremental, marginal progress on career pathways. We must initiate transformational change, reforming our P-20 educational systems, and the systems of our workforce and economic development partners, to meet the needs of students and the business sector. In this critically important work, we must collaborate and leverage our resources at all levels to realize long-term, sustainable gains. We must also ensure that pathways initiatives are done exceedingly well, incorporating continuous improvement mechanisms at each phase.

Career pathways, done well, don’t just build workforces. They change lives.⁴

This paper is presented not as the definitive answer on how pathways should be developed and implemented, but rather as a catalyst to energize and focus the dialog between community college leaders and their education, business and government partners as they work to co-create success. We challenge our readers to step into this leadership role, forging a future of promise for students across the educational spectrum.

CAREER PATHWAYS AS A SYSTEMIC FRAMEWORK

What is a Career Pathway?

A career pathway is a framework for connecting a series of educational programs with integrated work experience and support services, thereby enabling students and workers to combine school and work and advance over time to better jobs and higher levels of education and training. Career and Technical Education (CTE) in secondary education serves as the launching pad for students in their transition to postsecondary education and enhanced training opportunities.

Career pathways are targeted to regional labor markets, focused on employment sectors, and provide a framework for workforce development by integrating the programs and resources of community colleges and other education institutions, workforce agencies, and social service providers. As such, career pathways provide community colleges the opportunity to link academic coursework to the local economy while meeting the varied needs of the diverse students they serve. A career pathway is not a “program”, but rather a systemic framework for a new way of doing business in our high schools, colleges and communities. **The ultimate goal is for pathways to provide a seamless system of career exploration, preparation, and skill upgrades linked to academic credits and credentials, available with multiple entry and exit points spanning middle school, secondary, postsecondary, adult and workplace education.***

* For a detailed discussion of the career pathways framework, see: Davis Jenkins, *Aligning Public Resources to Support Individual and Regional Economic Advancement in the Knowledge Economy*, Workforce Strategy Center.

How have Career Pathways evolved?

Career pathways emerged over the last decade as a result of the combined efforts of Career and Technical Education programs in high schools and Workforce Development/Professional Technical programs at community colleges as an institutional response to a changing student body. Initially seen as a specialized 'silo' within Workforce Development or Professional/Technical programs, results of these efforts led to an evolution in thinking about career pathways as not just another program or project, but as a systemic framework for transforming educational institutions to proactively meet the changing needs of students and industry sectors across the learning continuum. From a programmatic perspective, several factors have contributed to this evolving understanding of career pathway's potential, including:

- 1) A growing awareness of the need for demand-driven and sustained partnerships between community colleges, business, workforce & economic development, and community leaders focused on meeting regional, sector-based workforce needs;
- 2) A shift from seeking "best practice" models to an approach that evaluates all activities from planning to continuous improvement based on measurable outcomes and established feedback mechanisms;
- 3) Evolving models of sustainability as state and federal policies align and encourage connections between students, careers, the labor market, and economic development, allowing multiple funding sources to be blended to cultivate continuity.
- 4) The emergence of career pathways as a critical economic development tool. With the globalization of the workforce, intellectual talent can be located almost anywhere on earth. Extensive research and literature suggest the communities, regions, and states that will be most competitive are those that support and grow "industry clusters" based on demand. One critical component of this strategy is the growth of human capital. Since career pathways are focused around regional or statewide industry sectors and not a single business, the development of career pathways presents a strategic advantage in supplying the talent needed by business and industry, from entry-level technicians to scientists and engineers.

Seamless Transitions

Career pathways are not just one strategy implemented at a single point along the learning continuum. Rather, career pathways work on multiple fronts to ease student transitions from secondary to postsecondary education and into lifelong learning. Comprehensive career pathways facilitate the following seamless transitions:

- secondary education to postsecondary education
- pre-college (ABE/GED/ESL/DE) to credit postsecondary
- postsecondary education for open enrollment students, unemployed or dislocated workers, incumbent workers, career changers, disadvantaged youth
- community college to university

Core Elements

The following six core elements are at the heart of the comprehensive career pathways framework:

- 1) Institutional and instructional transformation
- 2) Supports and tools to help students succeed
- 3) Partnerships that drive planning & implementation
- 4) Employer involvement in all phases of the process
- 5) Commitment to continuous improvement
- 6) Commitment to sustainability

Career pathways efforts across the country have successfully implemented several features, or components, related to each of these core elements. While each feature is not required to create a career pathway, they serve as a menu of proven strategies that can be expanded upon and enhanced as career pathways continue to evolve. They include:

1) Institutional and Instructional Transformation

Mission Integration:

- Requires that academic, student support, remedial, adult education and workforce development offices work collaboratively to design pathways and roadmaps. Similarly, secondary institutions must follow the same model, with career pathways providing a framework to break down the silos of “academic” and “career and technical education” tracks.
- Requires a resilient partnership with high school Career and Technical Education focused on seamless transitions from high school to postsecondary education.

Curriculum/Instructional Transformation:

- *Alternative delivery methods:* Provide education and training for students and incumbent workers at times and locations convenient to students and employers, rather than instructors or institutions. This can include: asynchronous or synchronous learning offered evenings or weekends; blended or “hybrid” delivery models, and; delivery at off-campus locations such as job sites and community facilities.
- *Contexted curriculum:* Design curriculum that utilizes industry-based and relevant material. Many “bridge” programs embed occupational, workplace, or technical skills in the Adult Basic Education, GED, English as a Second Language (ESL), or Development Education (DE) curriculum.
- *Modularized (“chunked”) curriculum:* Structure and sequence curriculum in modules or “chunks” tied to jobs with multiple entry and exit points, with multiple levels of industry recognized credentials built into the sequencing of the pathway.
- *Competency-based curriculum:* Develop and/or package curriculum that meets academic and quality standards, is designed and organized by competencies required for jobs, and is cross-walked with industry skill standards and certifications where applicable. Job profiling and the use of “subject matter experts” (such as ACT’s WorkKeys profile or the DACUM profile) should be strongly considered as a tool to strengthen the curriculum and meet the competency needs of business.

Visual Roadmaps & Templates:

- Provide visual roadmaps or templates depicting the coursework, competencies, skill requirements, and credentials needed for a series of related occupations in an industry sector. These visual roadmaps assist students and workers as they navigate their pathway to better jobs and increased earnings.
- Provide employers with an organizational development tool to focus on career planning and development for their employees.
- Include career lattices that identify multiple entry and exits points and potential lateral and vertical movement within an occupation or career cluster linked to occupational labor market data.
- Ensure roadmaps are “demand-driven” and collaboratively developed, fully engaging employers, faculty, advisors, educational administrators, workforce professionals, and labor representatives as appropriate.
- Maximize the use, distribution, and visibility of tools by students, advisors, counselors, parents, and public workforce development professionals. The tools can also be: loaded onto websites; incorporated in college catalogs, high school career guides, and recruitment

materials, and; used as a tool for ongoing curriculum improvement in both secondary and postsecondary settings.

Articulation and Transition:

- *“Bridge” Programs:* Implement easily accessible programs that provide developmental education to “bridge” academically under-prepared students to a credit bearing postsecondary pathway.
- *Rigorous Academic Credentials:* Provide credentials for demand occupations that are rigorous, recognizable, and relevant in the labor market.
- *Dual/Concurrent Enrollment & Dual Credit:* Provide opportunities for students to earn college credit through dual or concurrent enrollment at a community college, or concurrent enrollment at a university and a community college.
- *Articulation Agreements:* Provide seamless articulation across educational institutions for courses, credentials, certificates, and degrees.

2) Student Supports and Tools

Career Planning & Counseling:

- Provide career planning courses, workshops, and web-based resources that include tools such as assessments, career portfolios and individual education/career plan development, thereby increasing understanding about demand occupations and career clusters of interest to students and workers.
- Provide job search assistance, coping strategies for blending work and education, and skill building in resume writing, interviewing, and social networking.

Internships: Incorporate opportunities for “learning by doing”, including internships, co-op work experience, simulations, and team class projects that are assignments from local employers or community organizations.

College and Workforce Readiness Preparation: Provide preparation supports to high school students and adult learners to assure college and workforce readiness. This may include:

- Placement test preparation workshops for youth and adult learners
- Providing reading, writing, and math summer institutes to decrease need for remediation, and receipt of a career readiness or workforce Certificate
- Workplace skills and workshops for adults re-entering the workforce

Case Management: Provide case management, referral to community resources, and childcare and transportation assistance as appropriate to assure student success and ease of transition.

Credit for Prior/Experiential Learning: Provide clearly defined option for adults to continue lifelong learning and receive credit for prior experience.

3) Partnership Driven

Inclusive Involvement: Involve employers and industry associations, community-based organizations, labor/apprenticeship committees, education institutions (including academic, workforce, student services, and remedial programs), workforce development agencies, human service agencies, and economic development agencies in meaningful partnerships. This brings both “supply” and “demand” needs to the table and provides an opportunity to connect systems that have been historically separated. Career pathways cannot be designed in a vacuum.

Collaboration & Trust: A culture of collaboration, trust, and shared leadership must be cultivated in partnerships. Identify what's in it for each partner and involve partners to continuously nurture strong relationships through planning, development, implementation, and continuous improvement.

Demand-Driven Economic Development Strategy: Focus on career pathways as a critical economic development tool and on the labor market demands of industry sectors that are important to the economy of the region. Employers must “drive” the development of the career pathways to ensure that students or workers exiting at identified points will have access to good jobs and advancement opportunities. This responsive approach provides a platform for leveraging public and private investment and the ability to be flexible and adapt to changing and evolving labor market dynamics.

4) Employer Involvement:

Employer Validation of Career Pathways: While a career pathway may initiate from national, state, or local data, local employers must validate the pathway under development to ensure local viability and relevance. In many cases a pathway is determined by local labor markets, historical hiring practices, unionization, and variety of other factors that can only be known through dense interactions with employers.

Employer Involvement in the Determination of Relevant Skills and Competencies: Employers must be involved in determining the appropriate primary (‘need to have’) and secondary (‘nice to have’) skills that relate to the requirements of the work. Employers must also assist in the determination of how skills and competencies build upon one another to create the interlinking pathway components required for entry into a pathway and movement from one position to another.

Ongoing Oversight of Pathway Relevance and Content: No career pathway is static; indeed relevant skill sets for evolving technologies pathways may change every six months. The presence of employers who can point out the trends and aid in the continual reorganization and assessment of the program is invaluable for a career pathway to remain relevant.

Employer Input and Support for Incumbent Worker Pathways: Employers can work to customize career pathway programs to meet their specialized needs, which will yield effective and efficient pathways for incumbent adults already in the workforce.

Employer Support of Pathway Graduates: Employer involvement guarantees that the employment goals of students involved in pathways will be taken seriously and other sources of labor (e.g. importing workers from other parts of the country or recruiting from other firms) will not replace the pathway as the pipeline of choice for local employers.

5) Continuous Improvement

Planning: Involve partners in a data-driven planning process to identify “gaps” and design career pathways. Use labor market information, in conjunction with direct input from employers, to assess current and future demand as the basis for career pathway design.

Accountability: Focus on data-driven accountability and decision making, utilizing metrics that are understood by business and non-educational partners. Career pathways shift away from the use of compliance or anecdotal evidence by cultivating the use of evidence to ensure systems meet the needs of students and employers.

6) Sustainability

Leadership at all levels & cross-sectors: Develop and engage leadership at all levels of partner organizations to encourage bottom-up as well as top-down participation. Institutional commitment at every level, including the institutions' governing boards, is vital to sustaining career pathways.

Replicable Models: Develop career pathway models that are replicable in other institutions and regions, a process critical to leveraging resources and sustainability.

Reallocating and Blending Multiple Funding Sources:

- Reallocate institutional and school district resources to support the infrastructure needed for institutional transformation. Many necessary changes can be made without additional resources.
- Blend funding from public and private sources to foster commitment, leverage resources, and share costs among partners. This is especially important to fund student supports, which are critical to student success in postsecondary attainment. Potential funding sources include: Workforce Investment Act (WIA), Perkins, Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF), state and federal financial aid, foundations, employer contributions including tuition reimbursement, industry workforce training funds, and educational institution general funds.

Alignment of State and Federal Policy: State and federal policies must be fully aligned in order to reconceptualize education as a pathway spanning high schools, community colleges, universities, and workplaces. Policy efforts in various states and at the federal level are focusing on high school graduation requirements, curricular alignment, articulation, college readiness, and dual enrollment. Regional efforts to advance career pathways can be thwarted without a parallel effort to align state educational agency policies simultaneously.*

A CALL TO ACTION

Community colleges are institutions of America. They are a modern day vehicle for the American dream, offering opportunity and a future to people from every walk of life. The emergence of the global economy poses a challenge to this mission, even as it heightens the urgency for community colleges to succeed. This new urgency is forcing community colleges to reinvent themselves and their organizations to be more effective, efficient, and responsive.

The next major community college movement in the United States must be sharply focused on addressing this urgent need, improving transitions and outcomes for people of all ages and ensuring success for those advancing through our systems of education and employment. Only with relentless focus and sustained effort can we effectively help the large numbers of Americans who seek to move from where they are to where they must be: effective workers, contributing citizens, and earners of family-supporting wages.

We are faced with a challenging reality: Existing systems for preparing American youth and adults for employment “are generally characterized by numerous disconnects among programs at different levels and between programs and the labor market”⁵. While it is important to promote collaboration among these systems, leadership is needed to correct serious disconnects that

* To learn more about alignment of state and federal policy for career pathways, see *Strengthening Transitions by Encouraging Career Pathways: A Look at State Policies and Practices* by Katherine Hughes and Melinda Mechur Karp, Community College Research Center, March 2006.

“create barriers to educational and career advancement” and “lower the return on the public’s investment in education and other services”⁶.

Community colleges, some 1,200 strong, are well positioned to lead this work. They are strategically located throughout the country and frequently serve as the critical link in the continuum from secondary/basic education and postsecondary education to training leading to employment. They have a proven ability to effectively listen to business, industry, and the community, respond quickly and appropriately to identified needs, work collaboratively with education and employer partners, and produce *results* – preparing people for employment **and** advanced education.

The development of explicit, integrated, high-quality career pathways promises improved student transitions and increasingly successful student outcomes. But to attain these results, community colleges leaders must integrate this critical work into every community college mission statement, every strategic plan, and every leader’s action agenda and work with partner organizations to resolve six key issues:

- 1) Align secondary and postsecondary curricula to ensure that high school students are prepared to successfully engage in postsecondary education and training.
- 2) Design adult basic skills and remedial education programs to effectively prepare students for college-level math and English.
- 3) Develop new methods of awarding academic credit that responds to the need for flexibility and match the learning needs and schedules of all learners.
- 4) Revise curriculum and academic policy to ensure that credit and non-credit programs complement and connect with one another.
- 5) Abandon the traditional silos of “academic” and “career” programs in favor of an integrated approach, recognizing that both general and technical education are critical for all students.
- 6) Develop a greater capacity to deliver “demand driven” curriculum that meets the labor market needs of business and industry and leads to ever increasing competencies and postsecondary credentials for employees.

The stakes are high. Improving student transitions within and among our systems of education and employment, enhancing student success, and effectively preparing students for life and work are goals that must be our highest priority – for the sake of our students and the future of our society.

¹ Dr. Kay McClenney, remarks, Pathways to Student Success, Keynote Address, CCTI Summit – March 2006

² David Sampson, remarks, 2001 Workforce Development Policy Forum, National Governor’s Association meeting, New Orleans, December 7, 2001

³ Dr. Kay McClenney, remarks, Pathways to Students Success, Keynote Address, CCTI Summit – March 2006

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Dr. Davis Jenkins, *Career Pathways: Aligning Public Resources to Support Individual and Regional Economic Advancement in the Knowledge Economy*, Workforce Strategy Center. August 2006

⁶ Ibid.

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CORE ELEMENTS AND FEATURES

1) Institutional and Instructional Transformation

- ❖ Mission Integration
- ❖ Curriculum/Instructional Transformation
- ❖ Visual Roadmaps & Templates
- ❖ Articulation and Transition

2) Student Supports and Tools

- ❖ Career Planning & Counseling
- ❖ Internships
- ❖ College and Workforce Readiness Preparation
- ❖ Case Management
- ❖ Credit for Prior/Experiential Learning

3) Partnership Driven

- ❖ Inclusive Involvement
- ❖ Collaboration & Trust:
- ❖ Demand-Driven Economic Development Strategy:

4) Employer Involvement:

- ❖ Employer Validation of Career Pathways
- ❖ Employer Involvement in the Determination of Relevant Skills and Competencies
- ❖ Ongoing Oversight of Pathway Relevance and Content
- ❖ Employer Input and Support for Incumbent Worker Pathways
- ❖ Employer Support of Pathway Graduates

5) Continuous Improvement

- ❖ Planning
- ❖ Accountability

6) Sustainability

- ❖ Leadership at All Levels & Cross-Sectors
- ❖ Replicable Models
- ❖ Reallocating and Blending Multiple Funding Sources
- ❖ Alignment of State and Federal Policy

*Career Pathways
Systemic Framework*

