



A Definition of Career Pathways

A Career Pathway is a series of structured and connected education programs and support services that enable students, often while they are working, to advance over time to better jobs and higher levels of education and training. Each step on a career pathway is designed explicitly to prepare students to progress to the next level of employment *and/or* education. Career pathways target jobs in industries of importance to local and regional economies. They are designed to create avenues of advancement for the underemployed, the unemployed, incumbent workers, new and future labor market entrants, and to produce a steady supply of qualified workers for employers.

Career pathways provide a way for colleges to give students more clarity and structure in career technical programs of study increasing the likelihood of postsecondary completion. They are organized around a sequence of certificates/credentials that lead learners in attainable and incremental steps towards higher levels of education and work. Career pathway certificates and degrees are carefully aligned to skill sets needed in a given industry or occupational sector and have relevance, credence, and currency with employers. Ideally, career pathways are designed to maximize student flow and accomplishment—so that credits are portable; credentials are stackable; and students who need to be able to step in and out of college, as well as employment, building as they go.

When done well, pathways:

- Include on-ramps or bridge programs for disadvantaged and diverse populations including underprepared students with limited basic skills and youth and adults with barriers to employment
- Span the entire range of instruction from entry level, intensive “bridge” programs through occupational certificates and academic degrees
- Are stackable in design with certificates “nested” in longer transfer and degree structures and with each course and program preparing students for the next step
- Contextualize basic skills and technical content to the knowledge and skills needed in a specific occupation or group of occupations
- Provide an effective framework for workforce development by integrating the programs and resources of community colleges, other educational institutions, workforce agencies, adult education programs, social service providers, and other stakeholders
- Focus on careers in demand that provide family-sustaining wages and ongoing advancement opportunities
- Include work based learning opportunities through structured experiences which could be credit-based work experience, internships, or service learning.
- Use and promote data and focus on continuously improving efforts



Career pathway programs address employers' entire workforce pipeline needs—from entry level to higher skilled—and draw on innovations in instruction and program design to help students succeed. While there are many variations of career pathway models, they typically share several common elements:

Core Career Pathway Components

- *Strategic partnerships* comprised of employers, education and training providers, and community-based organizations in key industries and occupational sectors
- *Multiple ways to enter and exit* postsecondary pathways, with marketable credentials at each step, linking noncredit and credit training and short-term certificates with longer term credentials
- *Active participation by employers* in: pathway development, worksite training, internships, placements, or financial support for worker learning to address regional workforce needs
- *Innovations in program content and delivery* such as new technical certificates and diplomas, contextualized and accelerated basic skills, flexible class schedules, experiential learning, cohort-based instruction, and combinations of online and face-to-face instruction
- *Integrated support services*, such as career and academic coaching, financial aid, access to public benefits, or other safety net supports provided by a range of partners including CBOs

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