



**Jobs for
the Future**

Making the Higher Education Act Work for Youth Pursuing Nondegree Pathways

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Introduction

College has served as a pathway to the middle class for generations of Americans. But with declining higher education enrollment rates, an emergence of skills-based hiring, and more Gen Z youth becoming skeptical of the high school-to-college route, it's now clear that our society's emphasis on college as the only path to success and our embrace of the four-year degree as the benchmark of employability have also created barriers to economic advancement for many. Now more than ever, an expanded and diverse set of education-to-career pathways is necessary for young people to gain employment, advance economically, and meet the needs of our evolving economy.

To illustrate, recent survey data indicate that today's young people doubt they will see a return on their investment in higher education. Some 62% of high school graduates who chose not to pursue a college degree said college debt would be worth it "if guaranteed a good job post-graduation."¹ Only 47% of Gen Z students reported having enough information to identify the best postsecondary education pathway for their needs and interests.² Additionally, the national college completion rate (that is, the rate at which first-time, full-time students graduate within six years of enrollment) has stagnated, hovering around 62% since 2008.³ For public two-year degree programs, the completion rate is just 30%.⁴ And across the country, institutions of higher education (IHEs) are suffering from steep [enrollment declines](#), threatening their business model.

All these data points show that today's education systems need to do more, sooner, to expose young people to careers and the skills they need to navigate the world of work so they feel well equipped to pursue the best postsecondary option for them.

The United States must move its education system beyond the current "college for all" approach to encourage innovation, embed career-connected learning directly into curriculum, drive continuous improvement, and close race- and class-based gaps in educational attainment. The federal government, through key legislative updates, has the potential to facilitate the radical cultural and systems-level changes required to build an education-to-career system that works for today's students and maintains our global economic competitiveness.

This policy brief lays out the updates needed to the federal Higher Education Act (HEA) to help systems expand foundational and high-quality education-to-career models for young adults.



Foundational Models of Education to Career Pathways

Fortunately, we are not starting from scratch. Many programs across the country are already providing young people with early high-quality career exposure, postsecondary credit, and skill-building opportunities that are more flexible and affordable than traditional degree models. In 2022, JFF and ASA [scanned](#) the landscape of existing education-to-career pathway programs to identify program quality criteria and evidence-based nondegree pathway models.

The eight models identified in that landscape scan—apprenticeship, career readiness, licensure and professional certification, pre-apprenticeship, dual enrollment and early college, online courses and certificate programs, boot camps, and internships—serve as the foundation for this brief. The HEA policy recommendations herein can support the integration of these models into our higher education system at scale. Each model meets the following criteria, which are core elements federal policy should try to expand:

- **Open to all learners with a high school diploma and, in some cases, to those still in high school.**
- **Confers program graduates a tangible credential that verifies completion and mastery of clearly defined competencies**, such as a certificate, certification, degree, or proof of eligibility to take licensure exams.
- **Offers a living wage, benefits, and opportunities for career advancement and enables portability** (i.e., the model is recognized across a range of employers and geographic regions).
- **Can articulate and transfer, or stack, toward further education and training**, including two- and four-year degree pathways (though each model is also a viable alternative to degree programs).
- **Positions workers for career advancement and wage gains by aligning to labor market demand.**



APPRENTICESHIPS



CAREER READINESS



LICENSURE AND PROFESSIONAL
CERTIFICATION



BOOT CAMPS



PRE-APPRENTICESHIPS



DUAL ENROLLMENT AND
EARLY COLLEGE



ONLINE COURSES AND CERTIFICATE
PROGRAMS



INTERNSHIPS

The HEA as a Vehicle for Expanding Foundational Models

Unfortunately, federal policy has not kept pace with the reality of today's students or economy. Congress has not comprehensively updated the primary law governing America's higher education system, the HEA, in 15 years. As such, the policies and practices that undergird America's higher education system remain centered on the idea that a four-year degree is the primary path from high school to a quality job.

As currently structured, the HEA authorizes a broad array of federal programs to make degree attainment more affordable and accessible. It centers on two categories: 1) assistance for IHEs to improve programming and 2) direct federal financial aid to students. Put simply, the first category focuses primarily on strengthening institutions' capacity and operations, particularly for institutions where the majority of the student population is students of color or students who have been historically underrepresented in higher education. The second category focuses on supporting eligible students from low-income backgrounds who are enrolled within an accredited college or postsecondary program, as measured by credit hours and seat time, among other things. Accredited programs and institutions qualify for federal financial aid, whereas unaccredited providers and programs do not, which can limit the postsecondary options for students in need. Consequently, the HEA's narrow focus across these two categories provides little incentive or ability for IHEs to incorporate or develop the partnerships necessary for many of the foundational models referenced above, particularly if the models are not accredited and are thus ineligible for federal financial aid.

Despite the HEA's limitations, much more can be done to improve its focus on smoothing students' transitions between secondary, postsecondary, and careers, and ensuring program quality and alignment with labor market needs. A federal education-to-career system should promote "no dead ends" for students, meaning students' prior experiences—whether through bootcamps, military service, work experience, or apprenticeships—are valued and counted if they choose to pursue a postsecondary credential on their pathway toward a good career.

What follows are a set of federal policy recommendations for the HEA that will help unlock various restrictive elements of the legislation and thus increase its effectiveness in meeting the needs of today's young people and the economy.



Enable Access to a Broader Array of Postsecondary Programs

Over the past decade, strong consumer demand drove significant growth in the market for postsecondary education programs with explicit ties to in-demand jobs. Enrollment in nondegree and certificate programs has outpaced graduate and undergraduate degree program enrollment by a significant margin.⁵ For example, noncredit program students comprise 40% of overall community college enrollment. According to Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce, there are 16 million quality jobs for workers with sub-baccalaureate postsecondary education credentials. Short-term credentialing and certificate programs offer on-ramps to those jobs.

Despite this dramatic shift in student needs and expectations for shorter, more flexible, and more affordable programs, these programs remain ineligible for federal financial aid, and the number of Americans attaining certificates and industry-recognized certifications remains quite low.⁶

Congress must fundamentally change how we finance higher education to address the root causes of the student debt crisis and ensure equitable access to a broader range of high-quality education and training opportunities.



Recommendations



Modernize the federal financial aid system by making key updates to the use and eligibility of Pell Grants.

- Allow Pell Grants to cover high-quality short-term training programs—including boot camps, hybrid courses and certificate programs, and licensure and professional certifications—that lead to industry-recognized credentials and, ultimately, employment in high-wage, high-skill industry sectors or careers. This new investment must be paired with guardrails to protect students and taxpayers, as provided in the [Jumpstart Our Businesses by Supporting Students Act](#).
- Expand Pell eligibility to high school students participating in dual enrollment courses by allowing students to earn up to two semesters worth of Pell grants before they begin drawing down from their 12-semester lifetime eligibility, as proposed in the bipartisan [Go to High School, Go to College Act](#).



Ensure that any expansion of college promise programs is inclusive of various postsecondary opportunities, including apprenticeships and dual enrollment.

- A federal-state partnership on free college and student success should include pre-apprenticeships, Registered Apprenticeships, paid internships, and dual enrollment programs as eligible programs to ensure that various types of postsecondary learners and postsecondary pathways receive access to the benefit. These federal funds should also be used to carry out the full range of support services students need to remain financially stable and complete their program of study, including the services proposed in the [Assisting Community Colleges in Educating Skilled Students \(ACCESS\) to Careers Act](#) (more details provided below).

Bridge Systems to Create Seamless and Continuous Learning Transitions

While K-12, postsecondary education, and workforce needs are deeply and inextricably connected, they are largely governed separately: higher education by the HEA, secondary education by the Every Student Succeeds Act, and career and technical education by the Strengthening Career and Technical Education Act for the 21st Century (Perkins V). Further, though [most learners](#) say their end goal in pursuing higher learning is to attain a good job, the workforce development system is governed by yet another distinct law: the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). Even within IHEs, degree and nondegree programs are housed separately, with different faculty, data systems, and reporting requirements. Fewer than 20% of noncredit students at community colleges leverage that learning for college credit.⁷

Cross-system partnerships, such as the dual enrollment and sector partnership models, have a proven record of exposing young people to various postsecondary and career opportunities available after high school, facilitating early career awareness, smoother transitions between systems, more entry points to career pathways, and stronger student outcomes. As technological advancements push demand for new and updated skill sets, U.S. economic competitiveness depends on our ability to build a lifelong learning ecosystem.

Congress must enact reforms to strengthen connections between these systems and govern them more as a unified, flexible, and nonlinear system that optimizes the relationship between education and work.



Recommendations



Create incentives and sustainable funding for states and IHEs to expand evidence-based dual enrollment, including CTE dual enrollment, and early college programs that serve students from low-income backgrounds at no cost to participants.

- Create a new competitive funding program or policy incentive within HEA to encourage more colleges and universities to establish evidence-based college in high school programs such as dual enrollment, as proposed in the [Jumpstart on College Act](#).



Promote alignment across K-12, higher education, workforce development, and human services systems.

- Similar to one of the CHSA's HEA recommendations, create a Postsecondary-to-Workforce Transition Innovation Fund that invests in evidence-based partnerships between IHEs, school districts, CTE programs, apprenticeships, employers, intermediaries, workforce development boards, and community-based organizations that create seamless pathways from secondary to postsecondary education and into careers for students who are underserved. The fund should include priority strategies focused on expanding dual enrollment, connecting secondary and postsecondary CTE programs, pre- and youth apprenticeships, and other effective pathways strategies that meet regional labor market needs. It should build upon existing funding through Perkins V and WIOA, when applicable, by intensifying IHEs' involvement in providing career-focused postsecondary education for students whose education and career trajectories have been most severely disrupted by COVID-19, including formerly out-of-school youth.

College in High School Alliance

The [College in High School Alliance](#) (CHSA) is a coalition of national, state, and local organizations collaborating to positively impact policies and build broad support for programs that enable high school students to enroll in authentic, affordable pathways toward postsecondary degrees and credentials offered with appropriate support. As a CHSA founding and steering committee member, JFF endorses the group's [Higher Education Act recommendations](#), which dive deeper into the details of how the HEA can expand access to college in high school programs.



Foster a permeable postsecondary system that enables transparency and ongoing learning.

- Create a robust federal student-level data network, as proposed in the [College Transparency Act](#) (CTA), to enable the tracking of institutional and program outcomes by removing the ban on student-level data collection. Students, families, advisors, and policymakers need timely and accurate information on credit accumulation and other measures of educational progress, program costs, debt accumulation, short- and long-term post-graduation employment outcomes, job placement rates, and average annual earnings. Data should be made widely available and accessible (online, print format, in multiple languages) while protecting student privacy. Beyond the CTA, the HEA should also enable a unified quality assurance and transparency mechanism for short-term credit programs, in part by expanding the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System to include student-level noncredit program data. Minimum quality standards must account for post-graduation earnings via a set of metrics, such as programs needing to pass either a wage progression or earnings threshold that accounts for a variety of state, regional, and labor market nuances; completion rates; labor market alignment; and job placement rates.
- Bridge the artificial credit-noncredit divide within higher education by incentivizing the development of statewide credit-to-noncredit articulation and prior learning assessment guidelines. Institutions should map all course pathways (and their related competencies) from noncredit programs to careers and communicate those options clearly to students. Additionally, a reauthorized HEA should contain mechanisms to reward all IHEs that recognize credit for prior learning through youth apprenticeships, pre-apprenticeships, and other forms of quality on-the-job training.
- Congress should create a new federal program to advance community college efforts to improve the delivery of higher education and align with the workforce. This program should issue competitive grants to IHEs or consortia of IHEs and incentivize grantees to form partnerships with high-wage and in-demand industry sectors, including apprenticeships, paid internships, and other work-based learning opportunities; plan and implement inter-IHE articulation and transfer agreements; and implement or scale strategies that accelerate pathways to credentials such as integrated education and training, stackable credentials, competency-based education, and developmental education reform.

Connect Education to Careers

Though the [return on investing](#) in a college degree remains strong for many students, public trust in higher education as an institution reached historic lows in 2023, dropping to 36%, per Gallup polling.⁸ The risk-benefit calculation in pursuing higher education is different for today's young people; they perceive, [correctly](#), that their debt may outweigh the earnings premium associated with a four-year degree. Half of recent degree program graduates surveyed said they did not feel qualified for entry-level positions.⁹

To restore Americans' faith in higher education, colleges and universities will have to invest in strategies to integrate career relevant learning, particularly via paid work-based learning, directly into academic programs. Congress must support IHEs by investing in employer engagement, career navigation services, efforts to map programs and courses to career pathways, and opportunities for students to gain real-world work experience while in college. Any additional funding, however, must come with new accountability frameworks to ensure those dollars yield strong student labor market outcomes.



Recommendations



Focus accreditation on learning and student outcomes by emphasizing competency-based education and experiential learning opportunities, including pre-apprenticeships and apprenticeships.

- Update the federal accreditation process to focus on student labor market outcomes (i.e., whether and how postsecondary learning opportunities connect students to the world of work). Congress should require accreditors to assess IHEs based on skills, competencies, and career readiness metrics, including whether they provide students with work-based learning opportunities directly connected to students' program of study and career goals.



Improve the Federal Work-Study (FWS) program by expanding equitable access to high-quality work-based learning experiences, including pre-apprenticeships and apprenticeships.

- The FWS program should target students who stand to benefit the most from the opportunities it provides. To that end, Congress should revise the formula to prioritize placing students from low-income backgrounds in high-quality jobs, phase out the “campus-based guarantee,” and strengthen language to ensure FWS positions connect to students' career goals.

JFF's Center for Apprenticeship & Work-Based Learning

JFF's [Center for Apprenticeship & Work-Based Learning](#) is a leader in expanding apprenticeship, pre-apprenticeship, and work-based learning opportunities for young people and adults. JFF's center supports system and program design efforts that improve diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility to Registered Apprenticeships and other work-based learning so that more youth and adults are connected to quality jobs, enabling businesses to develop workers with the skills they need to grow. Review the center's [Work-Based Learning Framework](#) to learn more about how higher education can better integrate career learning into its offerings.



Develop a career navigation system that prepares all students for the world of work.

- Align the HEA with WIOA and Perkins V to enable the development of a comprehensive federal career navigation system. Via HEA's Title II, professionalize and invest in the function of career navigation and coaching across IHEs to address the nationwide shortage of career counselors. This could include creating a federal-state partnership grant program to build up the pool of postsecondary career counselors, coaches, and navigators with expertise in their region's labor market and postsecondary landscape. Additionally, federal policymakers should consider financing stipends, wage subsidies, or wage supplements to attract qualified people to serve in these roles within IHEs.



Promote labor market alignment and employer engagement.

- Congress should dedicate new funding to increase IHEs' capacity to engage employers and incentivize public-private partnerships, as in sector partnership models. Such initiatives have proved effective in expanding work-based learning opportunities for students, coordinating curricula with industry needs to ensure graduates are work-ready, and standing up new apprenticeship programs in nontraditional fields. This grant program should also prioritize IHEs that serve high percentages of Pell-eligible students. .
- Provide targeted assistance to community colleges by developing a program that builds on the lessons learned from the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training program, as proposed in the bipartisan [ACCESS to Careers Act](#). This program should provide funding to states and entities responsible for state systems of higher education to establish or scale systemic changes and foundational education-to-career models that put young people on a path toward economic prosperity and address the evolving demands of the labor market. Grants to states would support system-wide efforts to implement evidence-based reforms that are known to increase students' credential completion and labor market success. Congress should require participating states to develop or scale program activities designed to enable upward economic mobility for postsecondary students, with an emphasis on racial equity (e.g., dual enrollment pathways, career pathways, credit for prior learning, noncredit-to-credit articulation, stackable credentials, work-based learning, and holistic supports).



Spur state efforts to test new configurations of career-focused learning for young people ages 16 to 20, or for the last two years of high school and the first two years of postsecondary.

- Create a new grant program that allows states to pilot new models for when, where, and how students learn, all aimed at providing young people with the opportunity to gain career exposure (e.g., service learning, apprenticeship, and other work-based and experiential learning models) and obtain a postsecondary credential. Grant recipients should rethink the definition of instructional time and the structure of the academic calendar; test new approaches to the traditional grade-level system (e.g., adding a structured year 13, competency-based models, credit for prior learning, and pathways to graduate secondary school with a degree or credential); and coordinate between local education agencies and cross-sector partners to pool resources and expand all these opportunities.

JFF's the Big Blur

JFF's [The Big Blur](#) argues for a radical restructuring of education for grades 11 through 14 by erasing the arbitrary dividing line between high school and college to open opportunities for the learners our current systems leave behind. Fulfilling the Big Blur vision will require seismic shifts in existing systems and policies, including in these four key areas: incentives, alignment, governance, and staffing.



Conclusion

All consumer and economic signs point toward the need to reevaluate our nation's higher learning system, how we measure its success, and how we hold institutions accountable for the outcomes today's students care about most: identifying and achieving their career aspirations.

Accordingly, the scope of federal involvement in our nation's higher education system must shift from ensuring equal access to holding institutions accountable for students' completion and labor market outcomes. By focusing exclusively on degree programs, Congress artificially narrowed the scope of young people's education and career options. Instead, policymakers must enable cross-system collaboration to expand the universe of opportunities for young people to access high-quality career exposure and exploration, postsecondary credentials, and skill-building opportunities that are more flexible and affordable than traditional degree models.

Reauthorizing the HEA by incorporating the policy recommendations laid out in this brief is a good first step toward this new paradigm. However, to create a truly flexible, affordable education-to-work ecosystem that responds to labor market needs as they evolve, Congress must consider key updates to other relevant pieces of legislation, particularly WIOA and Perkins V. Concurrent reauthorization is necessary to ensure a robust federal infrastructure is in place to support systems change and realignment on the ground.



Endnotes

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