



Jobs for  
the Future

# Trending Toward the Blur

**Draft** criteria for identifying and developing Big Blur models

## AT A GLANCE

This document presents a draft vision for student experience in a “blurred” educational institution, model, or program and steps existing programs or institutions can take to move toward these aspirations.

## AUTHORS

**Kyle Hartung**  
Associate Vice President, JFF

**Nancy Hoffman**  
Senior Advisor, JFF

**Libuse Binder**  
Big Blur Policy and  
Implementation Advisor, JFF

# About Jobs for the Future

Jobs for the Future (JFF) transforms U.S. education and workforce systems to drive economic success for people, businesses, and communities. [www.jff.org](http://www.jff.org)

## Contents

Overview .....	3
The Blur Model Development Criteria	4
How You Can Engage	5
Blur Model Criteria.....	6
Area 1: Program Design	6
Area 2: Student Learning Experience	6
Area 3: Student Supports	7
Area 4: Career Navigation and Preparation	7
Area 5: Employer Collaboration	8
Endnotes.....	9

# Overview

The Big Blur report published by Jobs for the Future (JFF) in 2021 lays out a transformative vision of what the education and learning experiences should encompass to best prepare older adolescents and emerging adults for [quality jobs](#).<sup>1</sup> The goal is to give all young people the best choices and chances for economic well-being and independence. When distinctions between high school and postsecondary learning disappear and work experience is an integral part of education, young people smoothly move into their first quality job around age 19 or 20.

## THE BIG BLUR VISION

“The Big Blur” erases the arbitrary dividing line between high school and college and opens the opportunity for all 16-year olds to start on a path toward a postsecondary credential and preparation for a career. Two years of college are free to everyone, just like the 10 years of primary and secondary school. Some may want to think of it as two years of college included in high school or two years of high school included in college. But this vision is far more revolutionary.

[The Big Blur](#) envisions an entirely new type of institution—neither high school nor college—that obliterates the barriers to higher education and stable family-supporting careers.<sup>2</sup> While preparation for a career may start earlier than grade 11 and go on beyond a first credential, the envisioned institutions would integrate and combine high school and college to better meet the developmental needs of older adolescents and young adults so they are prepared for a first quality job in their early 20s.

The Blur advocates for building new institutions while also making far-reaching changes to current ones. And new institutions challenge the status quo—crossing and blending the high school, postsecondary, and workforce systems. As such, they require radical transformations in policy and practice to come into being.

Over the last three years, JFF has mounted Blur Action Labs with states interested in “stretching” and revising their education and workforce policies to enable blurred institutions. While each state that participated in a Blur Action Lab has work to do to transform its education and workforce development systems fully, a number have made encouraging strides in adopting the Blur vision and modifying policies that lead to blurring and enable blurred institutions. [Colorado](#) is an example of a state that has publicly embraced the Big Blur, created a Blur taskforce, and [recommended substantial changes](#) to how the state prepares young

people.<sup>3</sup> The state is modernizing and streamlining current approaches. Colorado’s Governor Jared Polis, this year’s chair of the National Governors Association (NGA), has highlighted blurred institutions in the NGA “Let’s Get Ready” education agenda.

To guide states, JFF created a [State Policy Framework: Building Blocks Toward the Big Blur](#)—revised over time with input from the field—which spells out the transformations needed in the four policy areas: incentives, alignment, governance, and staffing.<sup>4</sup> But policy is only as good as the implementation it enables. As we worked on policy, we also gathered information about blurred or blur-like models already serving young people. And while, like policies, these models have a way to go, early-stage blurred models do exist. Educators, families, and students desire institutions that introduce career preparation earlier in a student’s journey and thread it throughout a student’s learning experiences—at least to the equivalent of grade 14. But what is a blurred education-to-career institution or system? How does a young person’s experience in a blurred education pathway differ day to day from the usual grades 11-14?

## The Blur Model Development Criteria

Over the last three years, JFF has partnered with and observed visionary practitioners as they transform current schooling options into blurred or “toward the blur” learning programs. These new models are pilots and often “one offs,” the exception rather than the norm, in learners’ experiences. Nonetheless, sitting somewhere between the possible and the ideal, they form a sufficient cohort to point toward what a scaled system or institution might look like. Rather than continuing to seed pilots across the country that embody some elements of the Blur, the best of these models can serve as a road map and proof points for blurring at scale. They challenge traditional, entrenched systems that leave students in debt, too often without a degree or practical work experience, thus locked out of opportunities to enter and advance in quality jobs.

This document provides a vision for student experience in a blurred institution. The draft criteria below are built around five key aspirations for “blurred” models followed by the action steps existing programs or institutions can take to move toward these aspirations. As highlighted in the blog [The Big Blur: Are You Doing It? Probably Not](#), the steps are intended to signal not immediate perfection but rather steady progress toward a reimagined model of education and work.<sup>5</sup> The “steps along the way” section of each of the five criteria underscores the importance of committing to the larger vision. This approach allows institutions and educators to start where they are, knowing their institution’s design will evolve to best meet demands of industries and the economy. By focusing on the big idea and embracing incremental innovation, institutions can begin to create systems that truly prepare students for success in an interconnected, fast-changing world.

## How You Can Engage

To develop the 1.0 version of these model criteria, we visited existing programs, talked with practitioners, and explored efforts to “Blur” the lines in currently operating institutions and programs. We also broadened the conversation about blurred models through JFF networks including Pathways to Prosperity, Big Blur Advocacy Lab, and the Horizons Knowledge Network, as well as through presentations and workshops nationwide.

We invite you to test, modify, and amend these draft criteria as they apply to grades 11–14 programs, institutions, and systems—those you lead and those of others. Please help us make this a living document that reflects your best ideas for today’s learners.

1. Describe your blurred or blurring education system, program, or institution and how it aligns with the criteria.
2. Provide an honest critique of these criteria, including what’s missing and how the document could be improved and edited.
3. Let us know if you would like to connect with others implementing blurred models.

Please send comments and questions to [blurinfo@jff.org](mailto:blurinfo@jff.org)

# Blur Model Criteria

## Area 1: Program Design

### The Aspiration

Eleventh grade through the second year of postsecondary “grade or level” designations disappear, and Carnegie units and credit hours are obsolete. Instead, high school and postsecondary options become a series of student choices, each designed with increasingly challenging learning experiences aligned to skills and knowledge needed for career advancement.

### Steps Along the Way

- Course numbers, office hours, credits, grading protocols, etc., are standardized.
  - Instructors are trained, qualified, and credentialed to teach at any of the “grade” levels.
  - Semester, holiday, and year schedules are predictable—secondary and postsecondary have congruent calendars.
  - Employers participate actively in curriculum and experiential learning design.
  - Funding for the blurred model comes to the institution as a single source or is efficiently braided between secondary and postsecondary, and this braiding is invisible to the learner.
- 

## Area 2: Student Learning Experience

### The Aspiration

Students learn in multiple settings, including in “mixed” or multigenerational groups, classrooms, workplaces, field experiences, and a range of community organizations.

### Steps Along the Way

- Grades 11 through 14 are strategically sequenced to grow student competence and autonomy.
- Students are automatically admitted to partner colleges, and paperwork for the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and other supports are completed at the postsecondary institution.
- Students are assured of the transition to free college courses through to an associate’s or bachelor’s degree and/or an in-demand, industry-recognized credential.
- Students are organized into cohorts with advisors who travel with them through their learning journey and support their transitions into the workplace.
- Classes are scheduled to accommodate varied schedules, specifically with the working learner and parenting student in mind.
- Students progress through selected multi-disciplinary and hands-on competency demonstrations.

## Area 3: Student Supports

### The Aspiration

Starting with acknowledgment of their own assets, students learn and practice self-advocacy and networking skills to secure the resources, supports, and connections they need to succeed in multiple realms, including transitioning to a quality job.

### Steps Along the Way

#### ACADEMIC

- Tutors are readily available, culturally competent, and support students in reaching rigorous standards.
- Introductory math and composition courses use co-requisite structures, not noncredit remediation.
- Students have free access to internet, library, laboratories, books, and other materials, and transportation between institutions and work-based learning sites is provided.

#### SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL/ECONOMIC

- Model embraces a culture of caring and is designed to mitigate barriers created through experiencing poverty.
- Model provides access to social services and social workers (e.g., Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, emergency crisis funding, food pantry, etc.).
- The institution offers temporary emergency housing and other services for students in need.

#### SPECIAL POPULATIONS

- Students without documentation are provided with supports tailored to their needs and requirements, including support navigating available financial aid.
  - Parenting students have access to day care facilities at no cost to families.
- 

## Area 4: Career Navigation and Preparation

### The Aspiration

Students employ knowledge and skills to build professional networks, identify good jobs and good employers, and overcome or make choices to avoid barriers to economic success, recognizing that different populations experience the education system differently.

### Steps Along the Way

- Career preparation activities, including imparting knowledge of the labor market, are integrated into teaching and learning and are sequenced but also iterative.
- Students are taught to build professional networks/social capital in encounters with a wide range of professionals and to use these networks as they begin their job searches.
- Certifications valued in the labor market are embedded in and integrated with students' academic plans.
- Work-based learning is staged from exploration to preparation to paid internships or apprenticeships.
- Students hone “durable” or professional skills and competencies they can name and demonstrate.

## **Area 5: Employer Collaboration**

### **The Aspiration**

Employers have an impact on all points along the sequence of learning experiences, from shaping curricula and course selection to co-teaching to training and then hiring qualified job candidates and ensuring that the work environment is welcoming for all employees.

### **Steps Along the Way**

- Instructors and employers co-plan curricula and milestones that demonstrate competencies and skills acquired.
- Instructors and employers have the flexibility and support to co-teach at work sites and in classrooms.
- Learners develop and demonstrate the ability to identify, address, and navigate unanticipated, real-world problems.
- Employers are trained to supervise and mentor students, including training about pathways available to students and ways to support students in building social capital.
- Employers provide a sequence of workplace learning experiences, from career exposure to paid projects and extended internships/apprenticeships.



# Endnotes

1 Nancy Hoffman et al., *The Big Blur: An Argument for Erasing the Boundaries Between High School, College, and Careers—and Creating One New System That Works for Everyone* (Boston, Massachusetts: JFF, July 20, 2021), <https://www.jff.org/idea/the-big-blur-an-argument-for-erasing-the-boundaries-between-high-school-college-and-careers-and-creating-one-new-system-that-works-for-everyone>.

2 Hoffman et al., *The Big Blur*, <https://www.jff.org/idea/the-big-blur-an-argument-for-erasing-the-boundaries-between-high-school-college-and-careers-and-creating-one-new-system-that-works-for-everyone>.

3 Libuse Binder, *Momentum and Progress in Colorado* (Boston, Massachusetts: JFF, June 8, 2023), <https://www.jff.org/idea/the-big-blur-an-argument-for-erasing-the-boundaries-between-high-school-college-and-careers-and-creating-one-new-system-that-works-for-everyone>; Office of Postsecondary Workforce Readiness, Student Pathways Unit, Secondary, Postsecondary, and Work-based Learning Integration Task Force Report (Denver, Colorado: Colorado Department of Higher Education December 2023), <https://www.cde.state.co.us/cdedepcom/1215taskforcereport>.

4 David Altstadt, Erica Cuevas, and Libuse Binder, *Building Blocks Toward the Big Blur* (Boston, Massachusetts: JFF, August 28, 2024), [https://info.jff.org/hubfs/Policy%20-%20Files/Policy\\_BigBlurStatePolicyFramework\\_3.0\\_082824.pdf?\\_gl=1\\*10nrm22\\*\\_gcl\\_au\\*MTg1MDIwNDgwMS4xNzQwNzZwNjQ5\\*\\_ga\\*MTM3Njk3MTEzNy4xNzQwNzZwNjQ3\\*\\_ga\\_3YKPLRZBRG\\*MTc0MTI4NDk0Ny4xMi4xLjE3NDEyODQ5NDcuNjAuMC4w](https://info.jff.org/hubfs/Policy%20-%20Files/Policy_BigBlurStatePolicyFramework_3.0_082824.pdf?_gl=1*10nrm22*_gcl_au*MTg1MDIwNDgwMS4xNzQwNzZwNjQ5*_ga*MTM3Njk3MTEzNy4xNzQwNzZwNjQ3*_ga_3YKPLRZBRG*MTc0MTI4NDk0Ny4xMi4xLjE3NDEyODQ5NDcuNjAuMC4w).

5 Joel Vargas, *The Big Blur: Are You Doing It? Probably Not.* (Boston, Massachusetts: JFF, March 20, 2024), <https://www.jff.org/the-big-blur-are-you-doing-it-probably-not-and-thats-ok-if-we-stay-focused-on-the-big-idea>.



Building a Future  
That Works  
**For Everyone**