

No Worker Left Behind:

How Empowering People With Skills Can Ignite
the Economy and Create Economic Mobility



PREFACE



About This Report

Connecting potential workers with in-demand jobs is a top priority for employers, families, learners, and workers who continue to navigate disruptions and hard realities within the economy. Job openings in the U.S. are at the highest they've been in decades - due in part to declining labor force participation and a persistent, growing skills gap - while college enrollment rates have significantly dropped. Considering an explosion of alternative postsecondary pathways, shifting career priorities, and a declining return on investment for some college programs, workers are changing the way they think about how to begin their careers after high school. This rapidly evolving landscape is incredibly challenging to navigate for the potential workers looking to cultivate valuable skills and the employers seeking to hire them.

This report makes the case for the urgency of connecting employers with untapped talent and how to do it in a way that will invigorate the economy for the mutual benefit of those individuals, employers, and our communities. We'll unpack the larger trends influencing the workforce and highlight actions to help business leaders, policymakers, advocates, educators, and innovators seize this opportunity.



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About America Succeeds

America Succeeds is a nonprofit organization committed to engaging business leaders in modernizing education systems to drive equity and opportunity. Our organization is uniquely positioned between business and the education policy sector - acting as an “education voice to business” nationally and a “business voice for education” at the state-level. America Succeeds’ work bridges these two distinct constituencies, with advocacy efforts aimed at larger culture change and policy efforts that ultimately help us achieve our vision of preparing every student to succeed in the competitive global economy and contribute to their local community.

www.AmericaSucceeds.org

Core Beliefs

- Education is a critical influence on an individual child's success and our communities' overall health and vibrancy.
- The most impactful changes in education are occurring through policies adopted at the state level.
- Business leaders have a unique and valuable perspective to bring to education policy discussions - there are both economic and moral imperatives to strengthen our education system.
- Lasting systems change requires many stakeholders' active engagement, including policymakers, educators, parents, students, community members, and workers alongside employers.
- The long-term success of our economy, our country's competitive advantage, and our national security requires improving educational outcomes.



“A successful reset will represent a win-win: Previously overlooked workers will be able to pursue attractive career pathways even without a four-year degree, and companies will be better able to fill jobs that need filling.”

- Harvard Business Review, “Skills-Based Hiring is on the Rise”

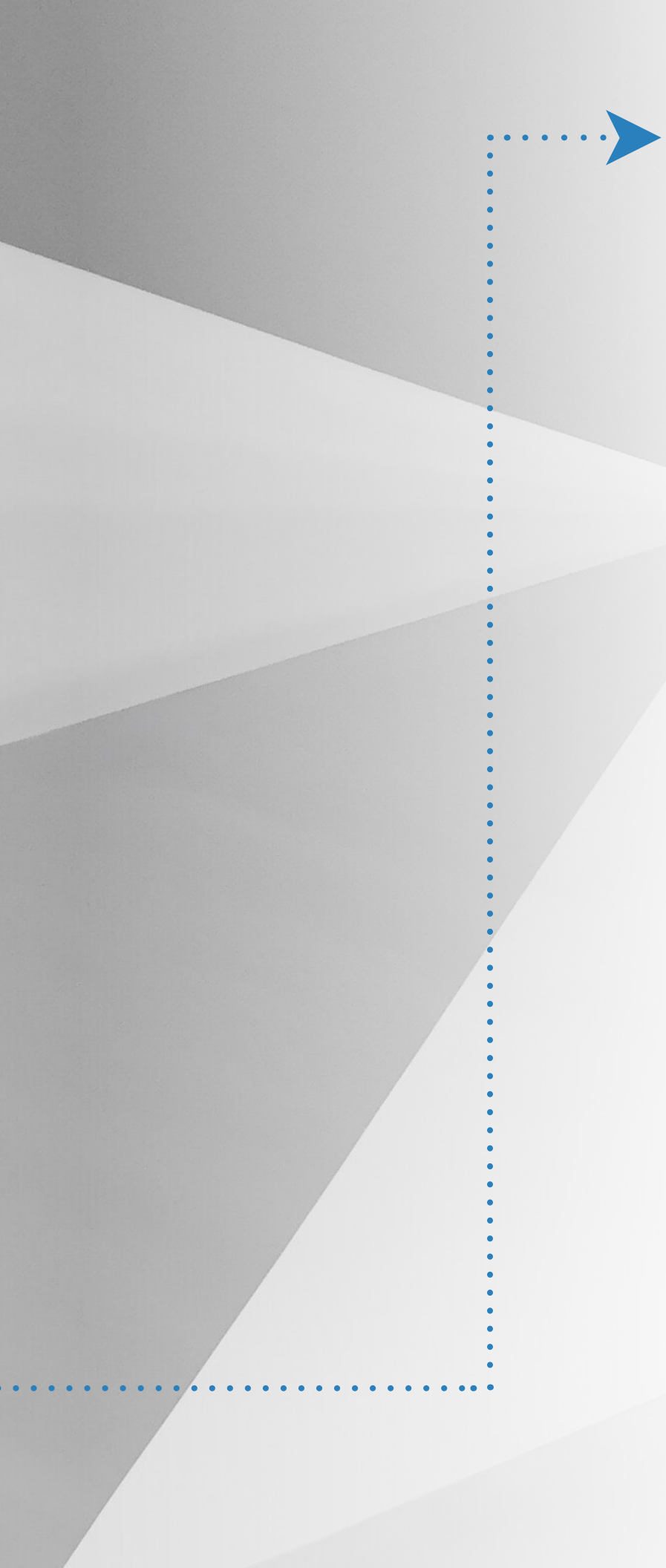


INTRODUCTION



Our current talent-to-workforce system is not prepared to contend with the storm of challenges that businesses are facing. The threats of economic recession, increasing inflation and interest rates, ongoing supply disruptions, and a tight labor market have proven to be a painful gauntlet of hurdles for businesses to overcome. However, the business community is agile and resourceful and will adapt its hiring practices in the face of these challenges, including tapping into a long-overlooked demographic of workers.

Our labor market has a big problem. With [11.4 million](#) open jobs, 80% of human resources leaders can't find candidates to fill their open positions. While employers move to embrace skills-based hiring to create a broader and more equitable talent pipeline, many struggle to understand what constitutes "high-quality" non-degree paths, how to decipher and translate skills, and ultimately gauge applicant workforce readiness. [Sixty percent](#) of the U.S. labor force lacks a 4-year college degree, which has historically left them at a disadvantage in the labor market and unable to increase their economic status.



Fortunately, this group of workers has the potential to quell some of the pains felt in our workforce and economy. There is unprecedented demand for up- and re-skilling, and a unique moment in time for workers to benefit by acquiring in-demand skills that lead to greater economic freedom.

In 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) scaled up the federal role in school accountability, ensuring every child has educational opportunities to succeed. Today, we believe there is a path to ensure opportunities for all workers interested in up- and re-skilling. We call this movement 'No Worker Left Behind' (NWLB).

It is time for businesses, schools, and states to scale up their roles in preparing a skilled workforce, ensuring that every worker has a pathway to economic mobility aligned with employer needs. NWLB is a call to action that aims both to connect overlooked workers with opportunities that provide them with satisfying careers and to help businesses overcome persisting labor shortages. It comes at a rare moment in time when the pool of workers seeking employment or a career shift combines with employers' increased willingness to hire based on skills (not just degrees) to provide the serendipitous solution businesses and workers desperately need.

NWLB allows us to focus on key questions: how can we push businesses to redefine hiring priorities to acknowledge societal shifts in methods of skills acquisition? How do we connect this demographic of potential workers with employers? How do we funnel workers in need of upskilling into quality educational programs?

The first step in developing transformative solutions is to unpack the trends influencing the talent pipeline - going beyond the symptoms of these trends to address the root causes. We aim to provide a source of hope for our workforce stakeholders by proposing solutions for the mutual benefit of workers, employers, and our economy.

To attain the goal of NWLB, this report analyzes workforce trends and identifies specific areas of impact that can help shift the narrative for those looking for new opportunities. By using the data we have gathered alongside our recommendations for action, we hope that advocates and business leaders alike can join together to help workers and employers weather the storm and come out ahead.

1. LABOR
SHORTAGE
HERE TO STAY



2. INEQUITABLE
POSTSECONDARY
ATTAINMENT



3. DROP IN
COLLEGE-GOING
RATES



Understanding the Changing Landscape



4. LACK OF
DECISION-MAKING
INFORMATION



5. PROFESSIONAL
PATHWAYS GAINING
POPULARITY



6. LEARNERS AND
EMPLOYERS IN
SEARCH OF SKILLS



TREND 1:

The labor shortage is here to stay

The United States is heading toward an inflection point in terms of our population demographics. Data has been pointing to an emerging shift between our older and younger populations for a while, but evidence of the shift is becoming clearer with each passing year.

The generations following the Baby Boomer era have consistently been reproducing at lower rates resulting in fewer children being born. The labor analytics firm Lightcast [projects](#) that by 2034, older adults will outnumber children for the first time in our nation's history. Additionally, the number of unengaged workers who have left the workforce continues to rise.



TREND 1

The shifting demographics will be especially impactful on the US workforce. From 2011 to 2021, the over-65 population grew by 16.1 million people while the under-25 population declined by 2 million people. As the Baby Boomer generation nears and enters retirement without the same number of young people entering the workforce, labor market dynamics will dramatically shift. Japan is already facing severe labor shortages brought on by its aging population transitioning out of the workforce and half of all companies in the country are experiencing a shortage of employees. With the United States emerging on a similar trajectory, companies will likely face similar challenges as they look to match hiring against those retiring.



“It takes a massive cultural shift, a strong investment in your people, and a new operating model and processes, to achieve digital transformation goals.”

- **Maureen Lonergan, Global Director of Amazon Web Services**

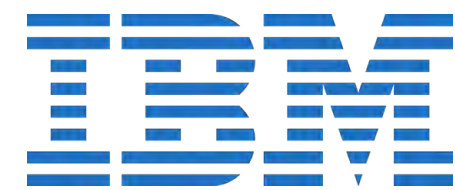
Companies are already facing difficulties hiring skilled workers and filling long-open positions. A recent report notes that two-thirds of companies are facing hiring challenges and talent shortages and it's projected there will be \$8.5 trillion in unrealized revenues from talent shortages by 2030. As the workforce continues to shrink and the retiring age population rises, companies will have to adapt their hiring practices to become more competitive to attract a smaller pool of workers who will have more power to pick and choose.

Although this is rightfully concerning for companies across the country, it can also be seen as an opportunity to reimagine their hiring and talent development practices. Investing in new and existing employees' career development through re/upskilling opportunities will likely be a key factor in attracting and retaining talent, amongst other components like offering top-notch benefits and creating inclusive workplaces.



Companies Leading the Skills-Based Hiring Movement

Organization Spotlights





TREND 2:

Postsecondary attainment is highly inequitable

From high school to postsecondary, students of color, low-income, and rural students are routinely faced with barriers to access and opportunity. At all levels, many students face challenges accessing quality schools with effective educators.

In high school, if advanced courses are even offered in their schools, too many students are tracked away from challenging coursework that will prepare them with the skills they need for postsecondary education and the workforce. Students in under-resourced schools are also often left without additional supports such as tutoring and enrichment programs to strengthen their academic standings. For instance, rural students are [10 to 15 percent](#) less likely to attend college than their urban peers, in part due to the lack of available resources and underfunding. From there, navigating the complexities of postsecondary education can be overwhelming for those who don't have college and career counseling supports or an adult in their life leading the way. And then, if and when a student makes it into a postsecondary pathway, the chances of obtaining a degree or credential are strikingly low.





TREND 2

Upon entering their postsecondary pathway many first-generation, low-income, and minority learners face barriers to success at much higher rates than their more affluent or white peers. The data points to financial insecurity, mounting student loan debt, inequitable advising practices, and family responsibilities as leading factors contributing to low attainment levels. When students leave without a degree or credential, the debt from their student loans will continue to follow them until it's paid off. And without a degree or credential, making a livable wage with enough to contribute to student loans each month becomes that much more difficult.

For years, the conversation has failed to comprehensively acknowledge the inequities across the entire education system – K-12, postsecondary, and critical transition points – that continue to leave behind entire groups of learners. In the United States, 47.9 percent

of white adults between 25-64 hold a postsecondary credential compared to 31.6 percent of Black adults and 24.5 percent of Hispanic adults. Moreover, children born into the country's two lowest wealth groups graduate from college at a rate of only 11.8 percent.

A recent study found that by raising the postsecondary attainment rate for underserved groups like Black, Hispanic, and low-income students, tax revenue from boosted wages would increase by \$956 billion per year. As work is done to ensure all learners - regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status - have the targeted supports and resources they need to succeed, we will witness economic outcomes increase dramatically.



“Talent is everywhere and opportunity is not, which means we’ve got to create opportunity.”

- Maurice Jones, CEO of OneTen



Learner Profile: Kiya

Kiya is an active, engaged high school student living in the Denver metro area. Kiya, who is involved with cheerleading and a variety of clubs at her school, is also deeply passionate about her studies and takes multiple AP classes. However, her high school is low-performing and very few of her peers will attend selective colleges. She has met with her counselor and sought postsecondary guidance, but, she still doesn't feel like she knows what the best pathways after high school are for her.

Although Kiya has a supportive mother and a healthy home environment, her mother struggled with incarceration early on in Kiya's life. These struggles have led to Kiya and her mother living in Section 8 housing and not having much financial comfort. Kiya loves her mother a lot; she respects her mother greatly for turning her life around and staying out of jail, however, their financial struggles are a source of insecurity for Kiya and she rarely invites friends over to their apartment.

Kiya has become a fairly well-adjusted teenager who feels like she has a bright future ahead of her and is specifically interested in healthcare. However, she needs help to navigate the complexity of the options and financial tools available to her to successfully begin her postsecondary journey and gain the skills she needs to build her career.

Organization Spotlight



College Possible is an organization that is changing the narrative of college attainment for underserved students. The organization empowers students to enroll and thrive throughout college in the face of broader systemic challenges. By providing students with a results-driven program that helps those from diverse backgrounds get into college and persist through graduation, College Possible is changing lives in communities around the country.

The program is supported by recruiting, training, and motivating recent college graduates who serve through AmeriCorps as near-peer coaches. Additionally, there is a peer support network among College Possible participants to serve as an additional source of encouragement for one another as they work toward graduating college.

The curriculum focuses on finding a best-fit college, academic preparation, financial planning, and personal development. Program data shows that 98 percent of participants are admitted to college and are 3x more likely to graduate college than their peers.



TREND 3:

College-going rates continue to drop

Over the last century, young people have been encouraged to obtain a college degree as the best path to building wealth and economic mobility. This messaging drove up college-going rates dramatically, with the United States becoming a global economic powerhouse thanks to our highly educated population driving advancements and innovation. However, the majority of Americans have never had college degrees and that mindset is no longer a dominant view. The longstanding paradigm of college for all is quickly shifting.

College enrollment rates have been experiencing gradual declines over the past decade. Then, enrollment numbers took an even steeper nosedive when the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020. 1,300 colleges and universities across all 50 states were forced to cancel in-person classes and move to virtual instruction, causing students to experience considerable learning loss or, for many, drop out altogether. Of the 2.6 million students who attended college during the fall of 2019, 26.1 percent of them did not return the next year.



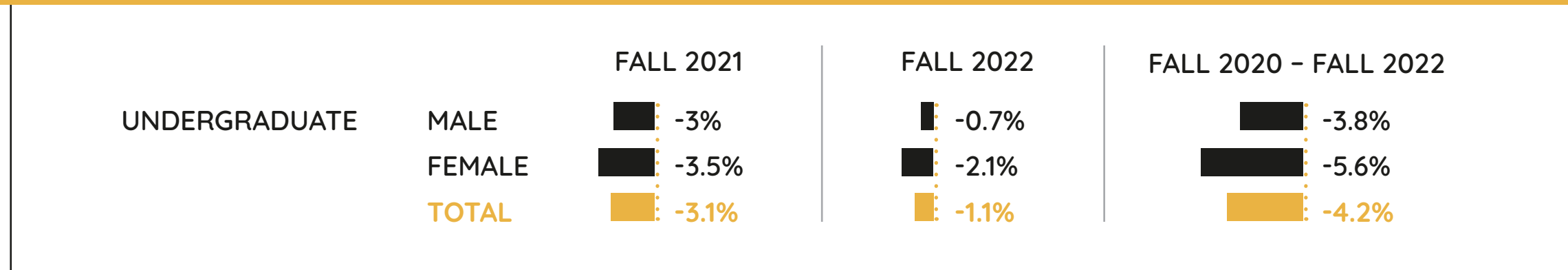


TREND 3

Following the pandemic, overall college enrollment has seen declines like never before and it's uncertain whether it will ever fully bounce back. Preliminary fall 2022 data shows a 4.2 percent two-year undergraduate enrollment decline as over half of high school students say the pandemic has changed the way they

think about what they want to do after high school. Moreover, adult enrollment for 25-29-year-olds continues to be hit especially hard; enrollment declined 8.2 percent in the fall of 2022.

FIGURE 1. ENROLLMENT CHANGES BY AWARD LEVEL, SECTOR, AND GENDER



SOURCE: NATIONAL STUDENT CLEARINGHOUSE RESEARCH CENTER

At the same time, the return on investment of a college degree has come into question as the average price of undergraduate tuition grew 169 percent between 1980 and 2020, while U.S. student loan debt reached \$1.75 trillion. Roughly 40 percent of students who enroll in college don't complete their degrees within six years, leaving many with the burden of debt and an unfinished degree. It's even more striking when viewed from an equity lens; only 32.4 percent of Black people and 25.5 percent of Hispanic people complete their degrees.

Unreasonable debt combined with the availability of alternative pathways and employers prioritizing skills over degrees has directed an increasing number of people away from college. While research demonstrates that on average college is still worth it and a necessity for many jobs, the country is experiencing an awakening that college is no longer the sole requirement for a successful life and that the value proposition is inequitable for many students. As new high-quality professional pathways with a better return on investment emerge, it's likely college-going rates will continue to drop as more students seek options aligned with their unique aspirations and goals.



Learner Profile: Angela

“I never expected to drop out of Metro State when I started, but when my daughter, Sofia was born, I couldn’t continue because we didn’t have childcare.” Shared Angie, a 25-year-old Mom in Denver.

Now that Angie’s younger son is two, they finally have space for him in the local childcare. “I’m finally ready to go back to school, I want to be a great role model for my kids. But I don’t know where to start.” This is the predicament that so many young adults and aspiring learners looking to jump-start their careers find themselves in.

Having children has been a transformative experience for Angie and has provided her with a revelation about her own career interests. She now knows that she enjoys working with children and is passionate about helping to foster the lives of youth in her community through a healthcare or education career pathway. Angie is motivated, capable and now focused on shaping her own career. However, navigating program access, financing, and comparing the quality of options available to her feels overwhelming. “I feel like life has passed me by. Everyone I know is either working or finishing school and I feel stuck.”

Organization Spotlight



Genesys Works creates career pathways and opportunities for youth from underserved communities while simultaneously helping employers fill critical talent gaps within their companies.

Genesys Works provides skills training, counseling, coaching, and paid internships for participants that lack access to resources needed to achieve sustained economic mobility. The program equips learners with the skills and information they need to pursue their postsecondary aspirations, whether that be college or professional pathway programs.



“A person’s educational credentials are not the only indicators of success, so we advanced our approach to hiring to focus on skills, experiences, and potential.”

- Jimmy Etheredge, CEO of Accenture North America



TREND 4:

Students don't have the information they need to make informed decisions about their futures

During the high school to postsecondary transition, many students are on their own and fall through the cracks as they try to navigate the broken process. With more postsecondary choices than ever before, the task of evaluating options and identifying the best fit continues to become more complicated.

In order for students to make informed decisions about their futures, they first must understand how well they're doing in high school. However, fewer than half of students report that they received even the most basic information needed to understand if they are meeting the requirements to graduate on time from high school, let alone what that means for their next steps. In fact, only 35 percent of high school students reported that their school informed them of what postsecondary or career paths are available to them. Without career exploration opportunities or baseline information about what options exist based on their interests, too many students are left in the dark about how to proceed.



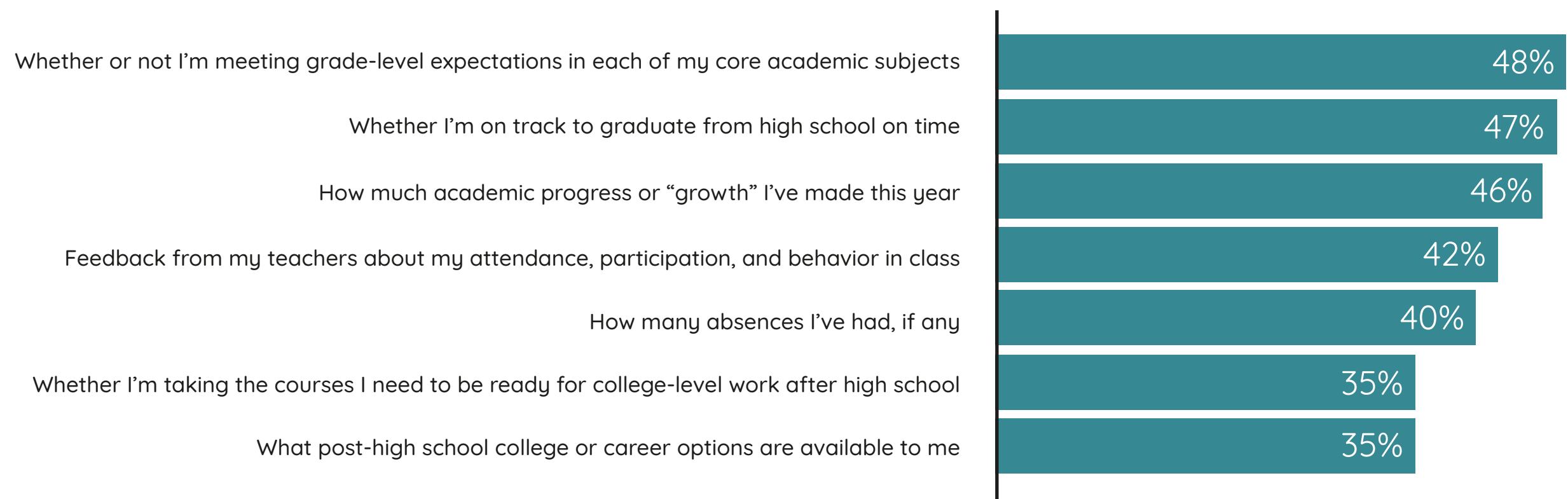


TREND 4

If and when students do begin the exploration process, the majority of them lack the information they need to determine their options. Students are eager for information on quality career-connected learning experiences that will prepare them with the skills and competencies they need to be successful in their future jobs, but need their options presented to them in a meaningful and personalized way. This includes access to data on outcomes for those who pursue similar pathways and go into similar careers.

Students want and need to be empowered to make informed decisions about their futures. Simply put, the current advising system is outdated and leaves students feeling overwhelmed and confused. In today's world, where obtaining some form of postsecondary attainment is essential for success, it is critical that the system is reconfigured in a way that supports all students in identifying a clear set of next steps. This includes the development of new navigation tools that make the transition into postsecondary opportunities as seamless and accessible as possible.

STUDENTS REPORT THAT THEY RECEIVED THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION FROM THEIR SCHOOL IN 2021-22 SCHOOL YEAR:



SOURCE: [DATA QUALITY CAMPAIGN](#)



TREND 4

Learner Profile: Ann

“I wake up in the middle of the night thinking about what to do. I feel so stuck and like all my friends are moving on in their lives,” says Ann. During her senior year in high school, Ann’s mother got diagnosed with terminal cancer. “Somebody had to take care of her, so I did.”

A few years later, Ann’s family had spent most of their savings on her treatment and care, her mother had passed, and Ann was feeling stuck. She was an excellent student in high school, but after a few years out of school, she felt like she didn’t know what options were available to her and how she could access them.

Ann is passionate about healthcare, needs to choose a postsecondary pathway that keeps her in close proximity to her family, and needs to earn money while equipping herself with more skills to begin her career. “If I had a magic wand, I would wish for somebody I trusted to help point me in the right direction, and evaluate the pros and cons of different options together.” This type of guidance is needed by thousands of young adults like Ann who need to find high-quality postsecondary pathways that fit their individual needs.

Organization Spotlight

SKILLUP

SkillUp is a coalition of 90 organizations including training and education providers, tech firms, employers, and philanthropies that have connected over one million workers to career and training support. The organization allows workers to leverage current skills while building new skills that are suited to in-demand jobs with promising career paths.

SkillUp supports all workers, at any stage of their journey, and creates an affordable and equitable upskilling ecosystem that works to close the skills gap.



TREND 5:

Professional pathways are gaining popularity

Alternatives to the traditional college route continue to gain popularity as both learners and employers see the value that professional pathways like boot camps and specialty certificate programs provide. There are currently more than one million unique credentials that are giving a broader group of learners the opportunity to pursue a route aligned with their goals. In a workforce where technology continues to evolve, lifelong learning and efficient skill-building opportunities are becoming an increasingly important part of achieving job success for both learners and employers.

On the learner side, students are seeking options with a better return on their investment that are faster, flexible, and more career-connected. Rising college tuition prices without a guarantee of a good job (or any job) are deeply concerning for many, especially those who are already financially struggling or don't think college is a good fit to begin with. Professional pathway routes can be a more attractive option. They are also valuable for returning military members and their spouses transitioning to civilian life, and for adults looking to reskill or upskill along their career journey.





TREND 5

There are more than one million unique credentials, and enrollment in specialty certificate programs and boot camps continues to rise, giving a broader group of learners the opportunity to pursue a route aligned with their goals and acquire the skills they need to be successful in their careers.

On the employer side, companies are increasingly prioritizing skills over degrees as they look to meet their workforce demands and minimize talent shortages. Manpower Group indicates that 69 percent of employers are struggling to find skilled workers and two-thirds say they want to hire from professional pathways as a majority admit they don't see a degree as a reliable signal for assessing in-demand skills anymore. However, hesitancy amongst employers to remove degree requirements still exists as the shift to skills-based hiring becomes normalized. But, as high-quality programs continue

to emerge, it's likely that even more employers will see the value in a broader array of postsecondary credentials and adjust their hiring practices to be more inclusive of the changing landscape.

Colleges and universities still dominate the postsecondary market share and that's unlikely to change anytime soon, but a space for other options is growing and creating dynamic opportunities for people and employers alike.



“College degrees are out of reach for many Americans, and you shouldn't need a college diploma to have economic security. We need new, accessible job-training solutions--from enhanced vocational programs to online education--to help America recover and rebuild.”

- Kent Walker, SVP at Google



Learner Profile: **Quentin**

The journey hasn't been easy. Just two years ago, Quentin, an Army Corps of Engineers veteran, was down and out after moving to Colorado to start a family with the mother of his son. That failed relationship plus the pandemic had him struggling to make ends meet even though he was working two jobs. "I worked as a restaurant line cook and I was also working at a warehouse. I enjoyed those jobs, but I wasn't going anywhere."

When Quentin was feeling at rock bottom, a Veterans Affairs counselor handed him a recruitment flier for a non-profit called Activate Work which promised IT training, materials hardware, exam fees, and career counseling to people who were willing to take its 15-week computer science job training program. The kicker? Tuition was free. After some initial skepticism, Quentin found out that Activate Work was no hoax, but would require him to undertake two interviews just to be accepted into the program. "They liked my eagerness to learn and my willingness to do something different," said Quentin. When he graduated in Nov. 2020, he was part of AW's second class.

Quentin, 47 years old, is increasingly optimistic about his chances to provide a fulfilling childhood for his son now that he has a new career in computer technology. After years of working jobs that didn't grant him much chance at economic mobility, Quentin has successfully added skills to his repertoire that allowed him to pursue more prosperous opportunities and create a better life for himself and his family.

Quentin is not alone. Learners, as Activate Work calls its trainees, have been known to triple their annual salaries once they are placed. The average starting pay for prospective workers who go through Activate Work's program begins at \$20 and the retention rate is one year, which is around 35% higher than the industry average.

People like Quentin who are accepted to the Activate Work program go through a fast-track IT program as opposed to getting a college degree. Alternative pathways to increasing employable skills are integral to the chance that Quentin and many adults in similar circumstances have to find their way back into the workforce or onto better career paths.



Organization Spotlights



Turing School of Software & Design

The Turing School of Software & Design is a seven-month full-time industry-leading computer programming school. The school partners with employers and constantly refines its curriculum to ensure it's teaching the skills needed most for in-demand software development jobs.

Over 95 percent of its alumni are working in the tech industry with a median starting salary of \$83,000.



IBM SkillsBuild

IBM SkillsBuild works to close the skills gap and foster STEM skills for students and job seekers through free learning, support, and resources. Led by the belief that entry-level tech jobs require skills and not just degrees, the company has paved a path for high school students, college students, and adult learners to learn in-demand skills and obtain high-value credentials.



Merit America

Merit American creates fast, flexible pathways to family-sustaining careers for Americans without 4-year degrees. By closing the opportunity gap at scale by preparing talented workers in low-wage roles for well-paying careers, the organization is helping to break the cycle of poverty by building a new pathway to the middle class for tens of millions of Americans.



Mission43

Mission43 provides servicemen, women, and military spouses opportunities to succeed after the military through the pillars of education, employment, and engagement.

Based in Idaho, the organization aims to ensure military veterans have the education and skills they need to find meaningful employment and be active citizens in their communities.



TREND 6:

Both learners and employers are in search of skills

As job vacancies in the United States reach a [20-year high](#), unemployment rates are simultaneously hitting record-low numbers. It's an issue that continues to plague every sector in all corners of the country as employers, workforce development experts, policymakers, and education leaders rush to fix a problem that poses a significant risk to our collective economy.

Several factors have led to this misalignment, creating a major predicament: **the skills employers are searching for are severely lacking in the existing talent pool.** And, without a skilled talent pool, employers are forced to either hire unqualified candidates or keep job postings up indefinitely.

Now, more than ever, employers are in search of applicants with the right mix of hard and soft skills needed to succeed in their companies. While hard skills may land candidates interviews, soft skills are often the deciding indicators of competence. In fact, [89 percent](#) of executives struggle to find candidates with the soft 'durable' skills they're looking for — things like teamwork, communication, and adaptability.





TREND 6

College is no longer an indicator of workforce readiness; declining standards of performance, the teaching of obsolete skills, and a broken structure in which colleges focus more on revenue than the product itself have led companies to rethink how they're approaching hiring college graduates. Because colleges can no longer be expected to prepare learners with the right skills for the workforce, 81 percent of employers now believe that organizations should hire based on skills rather than degrees. Companies are reworking their hiring practices and are turning away from the long-held standard that requires a four-year college degree as a baseline requirement for open positions. Based on those shifts, it's estimated that an additional 1.4 million jobs could open over the next five years to workers without college degrees. To fill in the gaps, employers have begun creating their own credential programs and there are numerous reskilling and upskilling opportunities developing to create tangible ways to ensure workers have the in-demand skill sets for which employers are searching.

And, it's not just employers who are in pursuit of skills over degrees: learners are in search of skills as well. A recent survey revealed that 74 percent of Gen Z want to learn skills that prepare them for in-demand jobs. Moreover, as artificial intelligence and automation continue to take over lower-skilled jobs and displace workers, a growing number of adults are also turning toward reskilling opportunities to qualify for high-wage in-demand jobs.



“Talent is everywhere; training opportunities are not. This is why we must take big and bold steps to expand access to digital skills and employment opportunities so that more people – regardless of their background – can take advantage of the digital economy.”

- Arvind Krishna, Chairman & CEO of IBM



Learner Profile: Jake

“I’m excited to transfer out, it’s time to close that chapter and open a new one,” stated Jake, a 40-year-old military veteran. After an underwhelming high school experience, Jake wasn’t quite sure what he wanted to pursue in his career but he knew that college wasn’t the right path at that time. He took a few years after high school to work and find his interests. He was working jobs that made him a decent paycheck but weren’t leading to a career he was passionate about. Instead, he decided to join the military. When Jake entered the military he served in various positions related to radar, navigation, communications and electronics, and he quickly moved up through the military ranks.

Almost 20 years later, Jake is ready to retire from the military and find new career paths to pursue. “I’m as scared as I was when I joined the military. I’ve climbed the ladder so far in the military and it’s scary to start over again,” Jake confessed. “Once you’re successful in one thing, you want to be successful in all things.” Now that Jake is exiting the military, he is interested in finding a job in cybersecurity. He is attending Boise State University to complete a degree in computer science and taking cybersecurity certifications through CompTIA to jump-start his new career.

Although Jake feels much more prepared to begin his career in the civilian sector than he did when he was 20 years old, he could still use more guidance on the options for gaining computer science skills and options for pursuing fulfilling positions in the cybersecurity sector. The resources and career guidance given

to veterans exiting the military are minimal and Jake wishes “there was someone within [the military] I could talk to more. Someone to come back and tell me what worked and what didn’t; give me 1-1 mentoring.” These are the types of concerns that afflict a large portion of our population that is trying to find their way into the workforce or into a different sector of it. These people, and therefore the American workforce, would benefit greatly from clear options for reskilling and up-skilling; mentors and people who have gone through similar experiences could also provide massive value by sharing their wisdom with others and providing mentorship to transitioning learners.

Organization Spotlight

Climb Hire helps working adults from low-income communities jumpstart their careers in tech through specialized training. The program combines technical and soft skills training while teaching participants how to build a strong professional community.

Participants learn skills in high-demand professions and can choose tracks in Salesforce administration, financial services, project management, and customer experience. Following the completion of a program, facilitators and mentors help participants land a job that will launch their careers.

TAKING ACTION

Opportunities for Impact



We believe there are **four distinct areas for impact** that employers, workforce development experts, policymakers, and education leaders can all rally behind to ensure no workers are left behind on the path toward economic mobility.

Embrace the Skills-Based Economy

The last few years' chaotic job market has made one thing clear: skills-based hiring is here to stay and will only grow in popularity as a solution to address ongoing labor shortages and meet company needs. Likewise, job seekers are searching for credentialing and badging opportunities as they seek new career pathways, opportunities for advancement, and a route to improved economic mobility.

Fortune 100 companies, such as Walmart and IBM, have already committed to shedding degree requirements and others are continually recognizing the benefits of doing so. Data shows that hiring for skills is five times more predictive of job performance than hiring for education. However, reports show that although employers are signaling they are interested in transitioning to skill-based hiring, many are hesitant to commit. Employers still largely view degrees as proxies for Durable Skills even though three in four employers report having a hard time finding graduates with the full suite of capabilities needed by their companies. As the narrative continues to change, employers will turn to assessing what skills applicants actually have rather than just checking for a college degree.

The biggest opportunity to drive change is by supporting small- and medium-sized companies in embracing this new era of hiring - adjusting current recruiting practices - to be more inclusive of a broader pool of talent. Additionally, as hiring skilled talent becomes more competitive, employers should prioritize professional development offerings to upskill, reskill, and ultimately retain their existing workforce and potential employees.



Examples of organizations and states leading the skills-based hiring movement:

Organization Spotlights



Opportunity@Work's mission focuses on rewiring the labor market to be inclusive of the 70+ million STARs (individuals "Skilled Through Alternative Routes") in America. They explore drivers of STAR economic mobility to identify the skills, jobs, and practices that can open up promising pathways and are part of a growing movement working to bridge the opportunity gap for the millions who are being left behind in today's economy. .



The alliance is a partnership of civil rights organizations, nonprofit, private sector employers, labor unions, educators, and others working to help millions of workers from low wage roles move into better jobs. The Alliance develops data-driven resources and tools to help workers who have skills but are looking for better jobs.



The state of Maryland launched a first-in-the-nation initiative to formally eliminate four-year degree requirements from thousands of state jobs. It creates job opportunities for previously overlooked job seekers with in-demand skills who are lacking college degrees.

Advance Smart State Policy

It's unlikely that any efforts will be truly sustainable without meaningful policy changing the foundation of existing systems. Working across sectors and systems, smart policy change can drive a powerful impact for learners working their way toward building meaningful careers in quality pathway programs and institutions. Policy can also help bridge gaps as the country pilots new solutions and interventions to overcome talent shortages and an ever-changing economy.

As we work toward creating an overall better system that's agile and supports all learners on their path to success, there are clear policy areas to consider to address the current challenges of the education system.



Align education outputs with labor market priorities

Aligning coursework and experiences to meet the urgent talent needs of the workforce must be a top priority for states. States, districts, and workforce leaders should seek to align available data across education and industry – including academic outcomes and labor market analytics – to develop an informed action plan to fill in the rapidly expanding gaps.

Smart policies from around the country include:



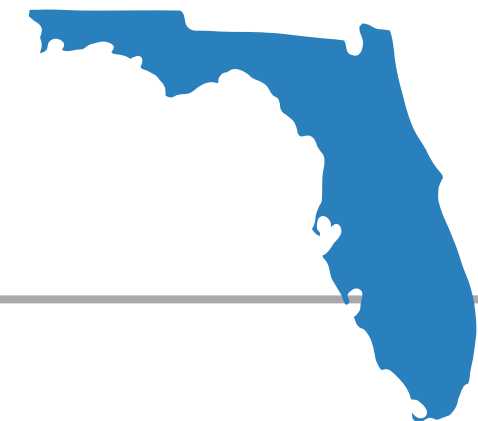
INDIANA

Indiana conducts a regularly scheduled return-on-investment analysis to evaluate if learners have access to in-demand high-wage pathways in the state.



LOUISIANA

Louisiana requires state education and workforce-development offices to work together to identify workforce needs in the state and ensure educational program offerings align to labor market needs.



FLORIDA

Florida annually conducts a review of career pathway programs and learner outcomes within those programs against labor market needs of the state.

Prioritize funding opportunities that support postsecondary and workforce readiness

Ensuring students are equipped with the skills required to be successful in college and the workforce should be a key priority for states across the country. Prioritizing funding that supports postsecondary and workforce readiness signals a state's commitment to the success of its learners and the state's talent pipeline. This includes investing in work-based learning and CTE programs, apprenticeship program development, and increased counseling capacity in schools, amongst others.

Smart policies from around the country include:



TEXAS

Texas allocates additional funding for CTE programs for each student enrolled in a pathway program. It also includes outcome-based funding for students considered college and career ready.



COLORADO

Colorado has built a statewide advising corps that increases the availability of effective counselors in schools to support students with their postsecondary goals and transition.

Focus on postsecondary quality

Unlike secondary education, postsecondary institutional and program accreditation is often tied to compliance and regulatory concerns rather than quality indicators or learner outcomes. Because of this, learners frequently gain credentials or degrees with providers without any knowledge of what kinds of outcomes can be expected once they complete their pathway.

Performance indicators for quality exist broadly in K-12 policy, but are lacking in the postsecondary space. Metrics for quality are needed because they will put learners first and enhance institutional and program accountability to raise learner outcomes. Transparency will allow learners to choose their pathways with the confidence that they will have a good return on their investment and that it will lead to a successful career.

Smart policies from around the country include:



TENNESSEE

Tennessee requires public universities, colleges, and community colleges to be funded on student outcome metrics such as student progression and efficiency measures.



MISSOURI

Missouri uses a performance funding model for funding for four-year universities, technical colleges, and community colleges that include indicators of student progress, affordability, and graduate outcomes.

Other smart policies to consider:

- Collect and publish school-level data on CTE and pathway participation
- Expand tax incentives to include professional credentials and quality learning pathways
- Expand federal aid (such as PELL grants) to include high-quality professional pathways
- Award credit for prior learning to help accelerate credential accessibility and attainment

Organization Spotlight

Pathways Matter

Pathways Matter is the first comprehensive learner-centered education to workforce continuum for state policy. From K-12 through postsecondary and employment, the website takes the fragmented narrative and structure of state education to workforce policy efforts and turns it into a comprehensive policy continuum.

Empower Learners to Make Informed Decisions

Whether learners are in high school trying to figure out their postsecondary options or adults looking for new career opportunities by expanding their skill sets, they often experience confusion as they try to make sense of their options and piece together a route to a successful future. There's an abundance of information on pathway and upskilling options, internship and apprenticeship opportunities, and financial aid routes, amongst countless other considerations, that must be combed through before a decision can be made. These well-intended resources can unlock opportunities, but the disorganized way in which information is accessed can be confusing and unhelpful to those looking for guidance.

Learners both need and deserve information presented to them in an organized, efficient, and personalized manner that is conducive to helping them make informed decisions about their futures. This means giving learners information about their own progress, access to career-connected learning and exploration opportunities, and financial aid and scholarship information and matching. When learners have this information presented in a clear and concise way and the social supports to execute their decisions, they can then make more informed decisions about what pathway makes sense based on their goals.





Unfortunately, very few tools exist that comprehensively weave all the useful components together in a meaningful way. Resources and navigation tools are beginning to emerge, but their scale and outcomes are yet to be determined. There are resources and navigation tools that exist on regional or local levels, but none that have been developed for national widespread usage. As new technology continues to be developed to connect learners to pathway and career-connected learning opportunities, a broader group of individuals will have access and support to and through their postsecondary journeys.

Build Cross-Sector Partnerships

Cross-sector partnerships are an essential part of ensuring learners are equipped with the skills and competencies they need to move into their postsecondary pathway and careers. Partnerships build the foundation for more relevant and career-connected learning so that students develop both the technical and Durable Skills they will need to be successful in their careers. However, widening skills gaps and talent shortages reveal a persistent misalignment between education systems and workforce needs.

Certainly, a lot of great work is happening to advance skills development and pathways to success, but too much of the work is still being done in silos - K12 systems, postsecondary systems, workforce systems, and the many organizations offering external support.

For meaningful and sustainable impact, partnerships across these spaces need to become a regular part of the work. An ecosystem approach would make it commonplace for all levels of the education system to work side-by-side with industry and external partners to ensure schools can better serve all students as they prepare for their next steps. Other sectors have successfully immersed themselves in ecosystem approaches and have found incredible success; it's time for the education sector to follow suit. Luckily, there are great examples of what strong and successful partnerships can look like.



There are bright spots around the country that can serve as inspiration for those looking to begin or build on their collaboration efforts.

Organization Spotlights



CareerWise creates opportunities for youth and employers across communities and states by developing and supporting an innovative, sustainable apprenticeship program. The business-led student-centered model brings together public and private stakeholders to ensure that students have access to the skills and knowledge they need for financial and academic success, and that businesses have access to highly-trained talent.



The **Brooklyn STEAM Center** is a partnership between the New York City Department of Education and the Navy Yard, an industrial hub housing over 400 businesses in Brooklyn. The center bridges work-based learning, academics, and career-training experiences that build on one another to help students create a path toward a meaningful and successful future. It connects students with internship and apprenticeship opportunities amongst businesses in the Navy Yard through various pathways such as computer science, design, engineering, and culinary arts.



YouthForce NOLA is an education, business, and civic collaborative that prepares New Orleans public school students for successful pursuit of high-wage, high-demand career pathways and facilitates systems change to ensure equitable outcomes. They connect young people to economic prosperity by building pathways and creating access to meaningful work-based programs, opportunities to earn in-demand technical skills through credentials, and build soft skills that will last a lifetime.

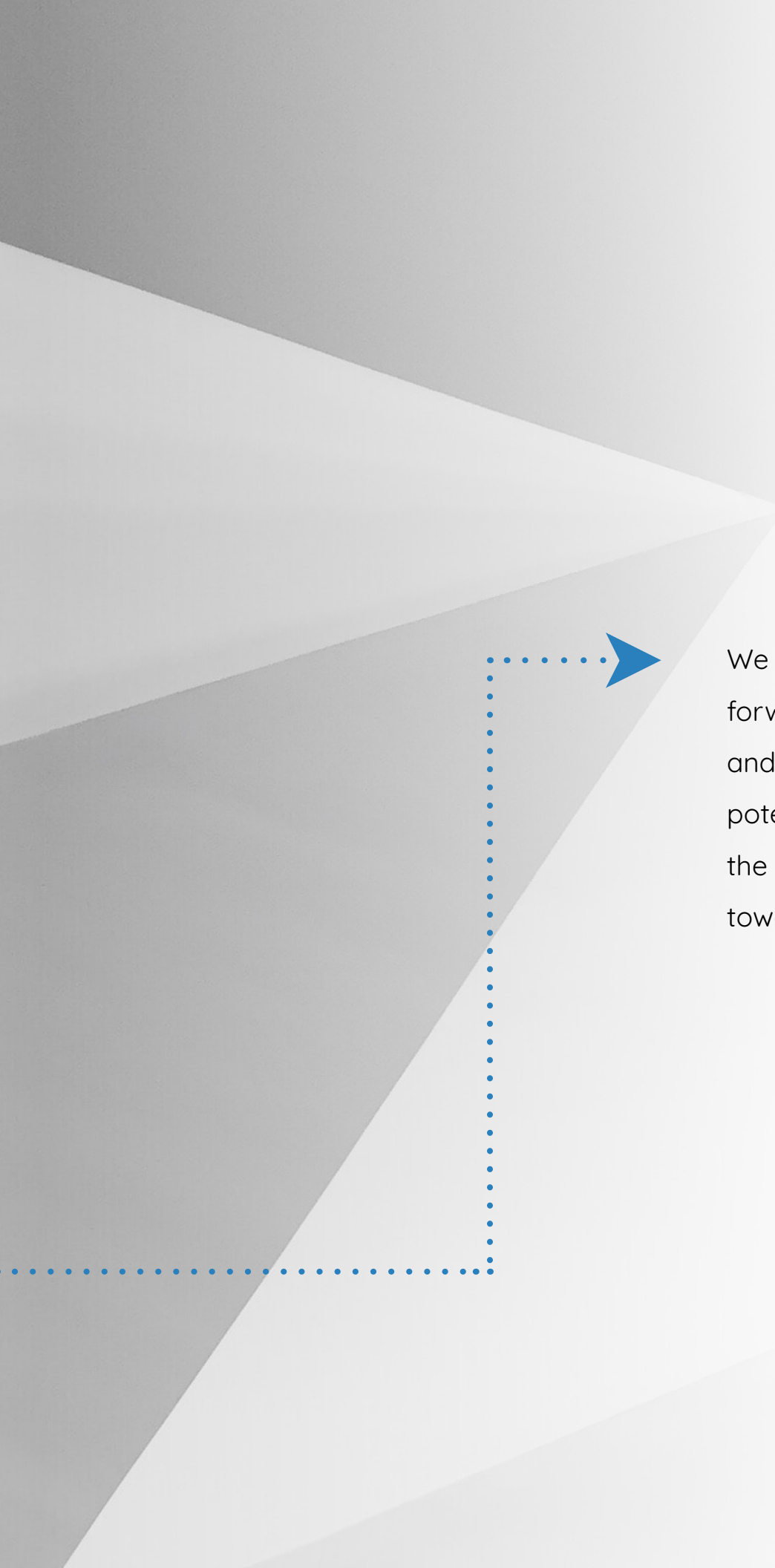
CONCLUSION



The American talent-to-workforce system is experiencing unprecedented hardship. Due to pressures like demographic shifts, nationwide economic instability, and a generational evolution in thinking with respect to what qualifies as a fulfilling career, the connection between employers and workers in search of employment is weaker than ever before. Yet by addressing some of the flaws of the system, we can correct for current labor market inefficiencies and create career pathways that better serve our workforce moving forward. In this report, we attempted to shed light on innovative solutions that do just that for the benefit of workers and employers alike.

We believe the concept of ‘No Worker Left Behind’ serves as a helpful guiding principle for contending with the unique combination of trends discussed in this report; embracing the skills-based economy, advancing smart state policy, empowering learners to make informed decisions about their futures, and building cross-sector partnerships to support skills development pathways can provide the flow of talent that the future workforce demands. Better still, transforming the talent pipeline gives workers greater opportunities to find fulfilling career paths.





We have arrived at a crossroads. The future of our workforce is in our hands and the choices our society makes going forward will have marked effects on the health of our economy. Moving forward, it will be imperative that we remain agile and engage in actively finding ways to support our workforce. Specifically, we must find ways to funnel workers with untapped potential into positions that improve their economic mobility and better support in-need employers. If we take advantage of the moment and act now, the returns will be enormous. Providing learners with a more constructive system will help us work toward Leaving No Workers Behind and in turn ignite our scuffling economy.



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