

AMERICAN ACADEMY
OF ARTS & SCIENCES



THRIVING AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

COMMUNITY, SCHOOL, SERVICE, AND WORK



A REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION ON
OPPORTUNITIES AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

THRIVING AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

COMMUNITY, SCHOOL, SERVICE, AND WORK

AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ARTS & SCIENCES
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A Letter from the President of the American Academy

The Questions Before Us

T*hriving After High School*, from the Academy's Commission on Opportunities After High School, arrives at a moment of great national debate about the journeys people make after they receive their high school diploma.

The United States remains a nation defined by innovation, talent, and ambition. But today, our educational systems may not be able to take advantage of those qualities. As people build their educational pathways, too many find themselves with questions they cannot answer and futures they cannot determine: Is college worth it? What does learning look like in the age of AI? How much work experience should people have as they continue to learn? How could a period of service fit into a plan that includes future education? What is the best age for people to acquire a postsecondary degree and what patterns are we seeing? How do people coordinate a dual commitment to college and to their communities?

We know students and families question whether education will open doors, or whether the systems around them are designed to support their success, because we asked. *Thriving After High School* includes the voices of students themselves and responds to what we heard at listening sessions across the country.

In response to these conversations, the Academy challenged the Commission on Opportunities After High School to address the obstacles students face in choosing their postsecondary

paths and securing fulfilling livelihoods. We recognized that learners were confronting more than a workforce or education challenge; they were confronting a broken social contract.

What Distinguishes Our Work

But *Thriving After High School* is not just a critique. Nor does it represent a “side” in the myriad debates that have emerged in our national discourse. Rather, it is a document of *deliberation, consensus, and best practices* across the country.

This report grew from the deliberations of a national group of leaders who met together for two years and found common ground about one of the most important things we can do in a democracy—educate the next generation. Our leaders were K–12 superintendents, leaders of service organizations, community college administrators, economic researchers, college presidents, philanthropists, and businesspeople. They were from Texas and New York, Minnesota and Colorado, Indiana and Massachusetts, and a host of other places. They were united by a wish for students to pursue meaningful

education and work, where they obtained credentials of value, valuable service opportunities, community connections, and the ability to pursue their goals.

Our commissioners recognized that students deserve multiple high-quality routes to success, including apprenticeships, community colleges, four-year colleges and universities, military service, service-year programs, short-term workforce training and industry-valued credentials, and other forms of lifelong learning that reflect the realities of today's economy and the aspirations of today's learners. And our commissioners also knew that the work of coordinating these commitments and values would not be easy. It would involve listening to one another, asking questions, resolving disagreements, and reaching consensus on how best to support students in this most difficult of times.

Thriving After High School is that hard-won consensus of practitioners from different sectors, political and educational ideologies, and socioeconomic contexts. It is a mark of hope that Americans can come together on behalf of all learners to create strategies to address fundamental educational issues of our time.

The Commission's recommendations promote policies and practices that facilitate collaboration across the education and workforce ecosystem to support these pathways, enabling the full participation of our diverse talent pool in our dynamic global economy and democratic society. This Commission urges action, by individuals and institutions, but more importantly by coalitions of leaders and stakeholders across traditional silos who are committed to improving the lives of their neighbors and helping their communities thrive.

Our Connection to the Life of Our Nation

This work is deeply connected to our broader mission as an organization committed to strengthening American constitutional democracy. The Academy's 2020 publication *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century* called for the strengthening of America's institutions and civic culture. The Academy's 2023 publication *Advancing a People-First Economy* examined the intersection of the economy and democracy. A healthy democracy depends on citizens who are prepared to participate fully in civic life, just as a strong economy depends on workers who can adapt and contribute across changing industries and labor market realities.

Educational pathways after high school sit at the center of both democratic and economic goals and inspired the formation of this Commission on Opportunities After High School. When students can access meaningful opportunities for learning, skill development, and civic formation, they are better equipped to build stable livelihoods and to engage as active members of society. Expanding these pathways is therefore not simply an education policy imperative; it is central to the future of our civic, democratic, and economic institutions.

Not Just a Report: Stories, Maps, and a Call to Build Beyond Silos

To bring life to these words on a page, this Commission has also developed some exciting online products (at www.amacad.org/opportunities) to highlight promising practices around the country and illustrate the multiple pathways that learners take after high school. I invite you to explore the map of promising

practices to find inspiration for a program or policy that you could implement in your own community. I also suggest you navigate the learner pathways to hear from students about the barriers they face and see how our recommendations can smooth transitions. No single institution can accomplish this work alone.

Creating real opportunity for students and fostering resilient, durable skills requires K–12 schools, colleges and universities, employers, workforce systems, state and local governments, philanthropy, and community organizations to move beyond isolated efforts and toward genuine collaboration. Too often, these systems operate in silos, leaving students to navigate fragmented pathways without clear guidance or support. We must instead build a coordinated ecosystem in which responsibility is shared, outcomes are aligned, and learners are surrounded by a community of support from high school through service, college, training, and career. The Commission, this publication, and the online complement are rooted in the recognition that by working together across sectors and systems, we can create a future in which every student has the opportunity not only to succeed but to truly thrive.

Gratitude

The Academy launched this Commission in May 2024, and I assumed the presidency of the Academy in January 2025. I would like to thank my predecessor President Emeritus David Oxtoby for shaping the initial formation of the Commission. Special thanks to the Commission Cochairs, Nancy Cantor, Harrison Keller, and Bridget Long. My gratitude to all of the multidisciplinary members of the Commission who brought their expertise from K–12 and higher education, workforce development and

business, philanthropy and nonprofits, medicine, service, and the arts, reflecting the breadth of the Academy's membership, and engaged in rigorous debates throughout our work together.

Thank you to the listening session and expert roundtable participants who inspired and informed many of the Commission's recommendations. Of course, I would like to thank my Academy colleagues who staffed the Commission: Molly Kent, Pamela Taylor, and Catherine Van Ness; our publications team: Phyllis Bendell, Scott Raymond, Maya Robinson, and Peter Walton; our communications team: Josh Breeden and Alison Franklin; Peter Robinson for his leadership; and Melissa Chan, Lywana Dorzilor, and Kimberlee Eberle-Sudré, who previously supported the Commission's work.

Finally, my gratitude to the individuals and foundations who made this Commission possible: Andrew Carnegie Foundation, formerly Carnegie Corporation of New York, Robert and Elizabeth Pozen, Spencer Foundation, William T. Grant Foundation, and an anonymous supporter.

It is time to work together. We invite you to consider, and to build with us, the paths for the learners of tomorrow.

Laurie L. Patton
Cambridge, MA

Executive Summary

In the United States today, some form of education or training after high school is increasingly necessary for thriving in adulthood. This builds upon decades of growing demand for skills as technological advancements and an increasingly complex world have heightened the need for learners of all ages to seek further education. And yet many struggle to navigate our education and workforce systems as they shape their lives and contribute to their communities. While a postsecondary degree continues to be a strong path to economic and social mobility, concerning signs indicate that traditional college degree programs, especially given current structural and financial barriers, don't translate into opportunities for every learner to earn a self-sustaining wage and lead a fulfilling life.

We seek to support learners of all ages to build lives and communities that thrive, not just survive.

What is needed is a collaborative ecosystem of education, workforce, and community partners. Together, we must provide many on-ramps and pathways to prosperity while helping learners to develop the knowledge, competencies, and skills that will allow them to adapt to the rapidly changing labor market and world. The needs and strengths of learners should be at the center of policy development and program design to expand and make more accessible the American Dream of economic and social mobility. We also need to combat perceptions that there is only one way to pursue higher education and broaden initiatives that assume a one-size-fits-all approach. A variety of valuable education and training options are, and must be, available when referring to opportunities after high school, higher education, or postsecondary pathways, including two-year and four-year institutions of higher education, apprenticeships, workforce development

programs, service-year opportunities, and military service. College is also more than solely attaining a credential or spending a certain amount of time in a program of study; learners gain valuable durable skills, civic competencies, and social capital that prepare them to be resilient and thrive in adulthood.

Thriving After High School: Community, School, Service, and Work is the report produced by the Commission on Opportunities After High School. The members of the multidisciplinary and cross-partisan Commission bring expertise from K–12 and higher education, workforce development and business, philanthropy and nonprofits, medicine, military service and service programs, and the arts. The American Academy of Arts and Sciences convened the Commission to address the challenges students face in choosing their postsecondary paths and securing fulfilling livelihoods.

Thriving After High School argues that systemic barriers must be removed to grow multiple routes to and supports for lifelong

Executive Summary

learning opportunities that will open doors for currently underserved yet richly talented individuals, ensuring success for all. This report is published in conjunction with an online resource (at www.amacad.org/opportunities) illustrating the multiple post-secondary paths that individuals may take and a map highlighting promising practices across the country that help show the way forward.

The Commission's recommendations define a set of goals, levers, policies, and practices that aim to improve the accessibility, quality, and impact of multiple pathways to thriving in adulthood, enabling the full participation of America's diverse talent pool in our dynamic global economy and democratic society.

First, we emphasize the need to facilitate collaboration across the typical silos in education and workforce systems. As high school graduates, college learners, military veterans, and workers face an uncertain labor market, it is more crucial than ever to remove structural and systemic barriers to opportunity and provide a range of options for postsecondary education and training. As workers aim to progress in rapidly changing workplaces in the face of technological advances, demographic shifts, and a complex global economy, educators and employers must continue to partner to maximize the opportunities and impact of lifelong learning. To better serve today's learners, educational institutions, employers, service programs, and communities need to adapt to support multiple pathways.

Opportunities for thriving should include personal advancement alongside economic and social mobility and civic engagement. Policymakers, education leaders, employers,

philanthropists, and communities across the United States must come together to meet this moment.

In a quickly evolving global economy, the Commission also emphasizes that learners and workers must have a strong foundation of both technical and durable skills to meet employer standards and needs and to build meaningful careers. Today's learners will graduate into a country that is diverse by many measures: socioeconomic status, geography, race, and ethnicity, to name but a few. In the context of increasing diversity and rapid technological advancement, including artificial intelligence (AI), learners need to bolster their ability to adapt and collaborate across differences, which is enabled by investing in these uniquely human skills. We aim to empower students as active, engaged members of society, focusing on a broad range of skills, including those relevant to the arts and humanities.

In the face of big dreams and systemic challenges, higher education and employers in all sectors need to evolve past a one-size-fits-all model to meet the needs of and better serve today's learners. While a cohesive infrastructure and clear goals in terms of skills are the foundation for creating a better system, shaping a future where every student thrives means moving from theoretical opportunity to realized prosperity. Discussion of strategies for offering more opportunities to students is insufficient without also empowering them with the information, guidance, experiences, and opportunities to make the best choice for their path after high school graduation.

Government officials and education leaders at all levels must convene with employers and community leaders to define what thriving

should look like for their learners, workers, and residents. This definition should serve as the North Star to which success metrics and target outcomes are aligned, including high school graduation requirements and measures of readiness for career, college, and service. Educational institutions play an integral role in preparing learners for the workforce and in developing their civic and durable skills, fostering the discovery of their strengths and interests, and providing opportunities for community service and engagement.

Finally, we acknowledge that learners cannot thrive when their basic needs are not met. Learners depend upon a range of supports, from school food pantries to accessible mental health care and quality advising aligned to their aspirations. To pursue their postsecondary path of choice, many learners also rely on financial support, which needs to be simplified and streamlined to open more doors for an expanded group of individuals throughout their lifelong learning journeys.

The Commission recognizes the historical context and past educational initiatives that have prompted the development of our current system. However, the continuing evolution of labor markets and society necessitates the creation of a new educational narrative, with clear goals and strategies to prepare individuals for thriving after high school. The Commission's discussions were grounded in evidence of what has worked well and led to demonstrated improvements of learner outcomes. Further investment in proven strategies is worthwhile alongside reforms to systems that have, for too long, excluded large segments of our talented population from paths to thriving.

After nearly three years of discussions, dozens of listening sessions and expert roundtables, and the review of hundreds of policies and practices across the country, we put forth four strategies and ten recommendations that—taken together—can transform the education, workforce, and civic ecosystem to empower learners and strengthen individual and community prosperity.

Thriving After High School calls on government officials, K–12 and postsecondary education leaders, employers and industry groups, nonprofit organizations and communities, and philanthropists to:

STRATEGY 1: Build Alignment, Communication, and Coordination Across Systems and Sectors for Learner Success

RECOMMENDATION 1

Break down silos and build shared responsibility across education and workforce systems

RECOMMENDATION 2

Maximize existing resources to fund educational opportunities

RECOMMENDATION 3

Improve data collection and sharing at all levels for transparency

STRATEGY 2: Develop Skills for Educational and Workforce Success in a Changing World

RECOMMENDATION 4

Promote durable skills across the P-20 continuum

RECOMMENDATION 5

Validate and demonstrate essential knowledge and competencies

STRATEGY 3: Clarify and Grow Multiple Pathways to Postsecondary Opportunities to Empower Learner Choice

RECOMMENDATION 6

Expand awareness, exploration, and participation in activities connected to career, college, and service

RECOMMENDATION 7

Foster effective and efficient journeys to postsecondary thriving, including reengagement and nonlinear pathways

STRATEGY 4: Support Learner Thriving in Education, Work, and Life

RECOMMENDATION 8

Meet learners' basic needs

RECOMMENDATION 10

Improve and expand access to financial aid

RECOMMENDATION 9

Advise and mentor learners, alumni, and workers

The Commission believes that to enhance American prosperity and ensure American competitiveness, the civic, education, and workforce systems must transform to create a collaborative ecosystem of multiple paths to thriving in adulthood and empower learners to choose the best postsecondary path for themselves. These strategies ensure that learners receive guidance throughout college, service, and work and that they continue to learn, earn industry-valued credentials, and advance civically, personally, and professionally.

Overview of Strategies and Recommendations

What Can We Do to Prepare Learners for Prosperity?

“The main way that I would measure success is not just the impact you’re making on your own life, but the one you’re leaving on others.”

—HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT IN INDIANA

The Commission believes that to enhance American prosperity and ensure American competitiveness, every part of the civic, education, and workforce ecosystem must transform to empower learners to choose the best postsecondary path for themselves, receive guidance throughout college, service, and work, and continue to learn, earn industry-valued credentials, and advance civically, personally, and professionally.

Our recommendations promote policies and practices that facilitate collaboration across the silos of education and workforce systems to enable the full participation of our diverse talent pool and support multiple pathways to thriving in adulthood.

The Commission envisions a collaborative ecosystem in which the education, workforce, philanthropy, and service sectors break down silos to accelerate the pace of innovation and support learner thriving. Policymakers can lead the way by creating and supporting entities that convene stakeholders across K–12, postsecondary education, workforce, philanthropy, military, service-year programs, and community-based organizations at the local,

state, and regional levels. While creating spaces to convene across sectors is a necessary first step, simply meeting on a regular basis will not improve learner and worker outcomes.

State leaders need to set a vision for cross-sector collaboration that includes not only shared goals but also the necessary resources, such as time, funding, and information, to be successful. Trusted intermediaries can play an integral role in providing additional capacity, translating language across sectors, and building coherence among disparate systems. Critically, educators, employers, and other decision-makers must understand the strengths and weaknesses of the system to make effective decisions and policies. Federal, regional, state,

“I feel like high school was a time to . . . realize who you’re becoming as a young adult.”

—LEARNER AT A COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN COLORADO

and local data collection and reporting must inform leaders’ actions and allow learners and families to make better choices for themselves.

The Commission wants every learner to develop the durable skills, competencies, and mindsets necessary for success in school, career, and life. Building on the work of America Succeeds, this Commission uses *durable skills* to refer to transferable, nontechnical, interpersonal, and relational competencies, including adaptability, collaboration, communication, creativity, critical thinking, fortitude, growth mindset, leadership, mindfulness, problem-solving, reliability, systems thinking, time management, and working across differences. Middle and high school grades are an important time for learners to develop their sense of self and explore their interests and aptitudes. In recent years, a movement to “blur the lines” between grades 11 and 14, across high school and college, has encouraged education and workforce systems to rethink learners’ experiences to build new connections among high school, college, and workplaces.¹ Awareness of and exposure to different postsecondary paths needs to start much earlier in learners’ journeys so that they are positioned to experience and participate in early career, college, and service opportunities in the latter half of their high school years.

The Commission anticipates a future when all learners have actionable information about their options for career fields, colleges, and service opportunities and are empowered to make the best choice to reach their full potential. One of the best ways to learn about these

options is through hands-on experiences in a safe and developmentally appropriate environment that is supported by advisers and mentors. We believe all learners should be offered meaningful dual enrollment and relevant career-connected education before they graduate high school. The new majority learner population is best served by institutions that smooth transitions and remove systemic barriers through structural partnerships. Rather than leave learners to determine which credentials they need and build a path that sequences and stacks those credentials in an efficient manner that pays off, institutional partnerships and transparency efforts can make a stackable path more apparent and accessible to learners. Postsecondary paths should also have multiple entry points that recognize prior learning, work, and service experience as valuable assets that learners bring with them to any educational, training, or service program.

To empower learners with agency in their postsecondary choices, the education and workforce systems must adapt to better serve them and form a collaborative ecosystem that supports multiple paths to thriving in adulthood.

The Commission believes all learners should have the support they need to thrive now and in the future. Meeting learners’ basic needs is essential to them being able to learn and work. A successful education and workforce ecosystem relies on a strong social services system that helps people access food, housing, and health care. To help them design a postsecondary education, service, and career plan that advances

their goals, learners and employees should have access to mentors and advising, including online tools, throughout their lifelong journey. Changes in educational programs as well as advising will be vital to making sure that doors to opportunities are opened wide. Access to low-cost programs and financial aid will help

learners afford the best education and training for their needs, interests, and aspirations.

This vision for a better future will be achieved only by breaking down silos and fostering cross-sector partnerships to create viable opportunities for learners to thrive.

STRATEGY 1: Build Alignment, Communication, and Coordination Across Systems and Sectors for Learner Success

RECOMMENDATION 1

Break Down Silos and Build Shared Responsibility Across Education and Workforce Systems

Build cross-sector partnerships to support education and workforce needs that collaboratively define and align metrics of readiness for specific education and work pathways.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Maximize Existing Resources to Fund Educational Opportunities

Sustain and streamline funding across federal, state, and institutional sources to increase

learner access and success while aligning education benefits for military veterans, service-year alumni, and workers to advance in their careers, which is aided by expanding “earn and learn” opportunities.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Improve Data Collection and Sharing at All Levels for Transparency

Link labor market data to education, occupation, and industry-specific metrics of success while expanding statewide longitudinal data systems and leveraging federal data collection and incentives.

STRATEGY 2: Develop Skills for Educational and Workforce Success in a Changing World

RECOMMENDATION 4

Promote Durable Skills Across the P-20 Continuum

Expand the development of durable skills both inside and outside the classroom, ensure competency in digital literacy, integrate civic education and engagement experiences, and strengthen learners’ social capital networks for their future success.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Validate and Demonstrate Essential Knowledge and Competencies

Expand competency-based education, align graduation requirements to state readiness metrics, and build partnerships across K-12 and higher education and industry to validate and demonstrate competencies and accept these credentials in admissions and hiring processes.

STRATEGY 3: Clarify and Grow Multiple Pathways to Postsecondary Opportunities to Empower Learner Choice

RECOMMENDATION 6

Expand Awareness, Exploration, and Participation in Activities Connected to Career, College, and Service

Support learners' discovery of their interests, strengths, and values while bolstering postsecondary and career navigation alongside career-connected experiences, dual enrollment, and service-year opportunities.

RECOMMENDATION 7

Foster Effective and Efficient Journeys to Postsecondary Thriving, including Reengagement and Nonlinear Pathways

Expand direct admission; simplify credit transfer; grant credit for prior learning, service, and work; and embed credentials of value that are aligned to high-demand occupations on postsecondary paths.

STRATEGY 4: Support Learner Thriving in Education, Work, and Life

RECOMMENDATION 8

Meet Learners' Basic Needs

Expand access to community- and school-based wraparound supports and behavioral, mental, and physical health care.

RECOMMENDATION 9

Advise and Mentor Learners, Alumni, and Workers

Facilitate partnerships to improve advising while leveraging online tools to complement in-person advising and embedding mentoring to support all paths through high school, college, and career.

RECOMMENDATION 10

Improve and Expand Access to Financial Aid

Create and fund postsecondary savings accounts, develop learners' financial literacy, promote FAFSA completion, and expand financial and emergency aid for learners.



Meeting the Moment in a Changing World

Today's Learners Face Systemic Challenges

“My dream life [would be to] have a really nice brownstone, but in reality, I want to be able to afford groceries.”

—HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT IN THE WASHINGTON, D.C., AREA

For the last several decades, the American economy has increasingly demanded higher skill levels, especially in the face of constant technological advancement, recently accelerated by artificial intelligence (AI). Increasingly, some form of education or training after high school is necessary to meet the needs of the labor market and thrive in a changing world.² And yet, many struggle to navigate complex education and workforce systems as they establish their lives and contribute to their communities.

The United States enjoys a 92 percent high school completion rate,³ so this Commission focused on postsecondary pathways. For those who complete a college education, signs that not every program of study guarantees a stable, family-sustaining wage are increasing, especially in the context of growing student loan debt.⁴ Although college learners continue to see value in their studies, public discourse has questioned the accessibility and affordability of a college education.⁵ Yet, the “college wage premium”—the amount earned by workers with a college degree as compared to peers with a high school diploma—has shown great and enduring financial and social value to college graduates.⁶ Pre-pandemic, this premium was estimated at more than \$1 million over a worker's career, and those higher earnings are still

realized post-pandemic.⁷ College graduates are less likely to be unemployed, more likely to participate in a retirement plan, more likely to have health insurance, and less likely to experience poverty.⁸ These benefits beyond wages have a real and meaningful impact on people's lives.

Many Americans picture ivy-covered brick and grassy quads when they imagine what “college” looks like; however, many learners do not have a residential college experience. In fall 2023, community college learners made up 39 percent of all undergraduates, and only 28 percent of those institutions provide on-campus housing.⁹ Furthermore, 20 percent of learners enrolled at a community college were dual-enrollment high school students and thus more likely to live at home as well.

“I am a first-generation college student, and I did not have a lot of knowledge about college. I didn’t know much, my family didn’t know much, so there wasn’t many people in my corner who could help me. When it came to narrowing down schools and working out grants and trying to figure all of that stuff out, I literally had to do that on my own.”

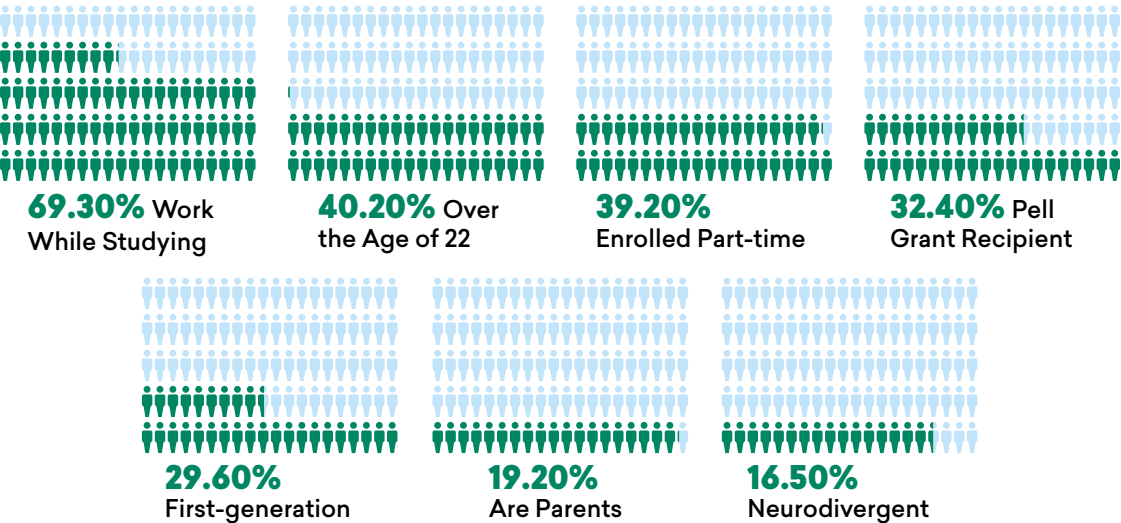
–LEARNER AT A FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC HBCU IN MARYLAND

Learners today face many barriers, and large differences in experience separate students from high poverty and rural high schools when compared to peers who are more likely to matriculate immediately following high school graduation and attend a four-year institution full time.¹⁰ Many students are juggling their schoolwork alongside childcare or other caregiving duties and a variable, shift-based work

schedule. They may also be eligible for fewer support services, including financial aid, based on their part-time enrollment status.

Some of the challenges students face are rooted in earlier educational experiences. The structure of the K–12 education system and funding in the United States greatly influences which students are prepared for and enroll in college,

Figure 1: Who Are Today’s Learners?



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, IPEDS Trend Generator, <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/trendgenerator/app/build-table/8/35?cid=5>; and Dave Tucker, Jacob Goodwin, and Sam Alexander, *The New Majority Learner Report* (Genio, 2025), <https://genio.co/resources/research-and-insights/new-majority-learner-report-2025>.

“I’ve always wanted to start a business on my own or go into the public or private sector. And the main thing is financial security. I never want to live paycheck to paycheck. I mean, that’s the reality for most Americans. I don’t want [to] do that. It’s a hard life.”

—HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT IN THE WASHINGTON, D.C., AREA

with almost 55 percent of rural high school graduates immediately enrolling in college compared to almost 64 percent of their suburban peers.¹¹ Although they may face more barriers, these learners deserve accessible routes to postsecondary opportunity and have valuable lived experience and varied perspectives to bring into the classroom and workplace.

Additional structural barriers are created by the fragmentation of the U.S. education and workforce development systems across federal, state, and local levels, with programs often administered through separate agencies, with different funding streams, accountability systems, and eligibility requirements.¹² Education, social services, workforce training, and economic development initiatives frequently operate in parallel rather than in coordination, creating a complex landscape that learners and workers must navigate to access financial aid, credentials, childcare, transportation assistance, and employment services like career counseling. These silos can result in duplicative processes, inconsistent guidance, gaps in service delivery, and barriers to credit transfer or credential recognition, particularly for learners from historically underserved communities and for individuals balancing work and family responsibilities. As labor market demands evolve more rapidly, the lack of alignment across systems

can also hinder states’ and regions’ ability to create clear pathways that connect education and training programs to quality employment opportunities in high-demand occupations.

“I want to give back to my community. I want to have an amazing legacy.”

—LEARNER AT A COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN TEXAS

In the midst of these many challenges, learners today still have big dreams for their futures. In the Commission’s listening sessions across the United States—from Bismarck to Indianapolis to Los Angeles—high school and college learners repeatedly said that their vision of “the good life” included being able to give back to their communities, feel passionate about their work, and have a better understanding of themselves as people. Learners shared with the Commission that they hoped both to increase their earning potential and develop a sense of purpose and community connection. Unfortunately, these conversations about what a “good life” in ten years might look like were peppered with caveats about needing financial stability, securing safe housing, and taking care of their families.

The Commission also heard a disconnect between what educators and administrators define as success for their high school graduates and what the learners themselves see as possible in their futures. Much of this disconnect comes down to the difference between opportunity and empowerment. Pointing learners in the direction of a door and telling them to open it and walk through is not enough. Across the United States, education and workforce systems offer up hundreds of doors without clear labels or paths to access them and little to preview what might be on the other side. To choose a door only to realize you do not fit in, cannot schedule classes around your work shifts, or are uninterested in the field can be an expensive and time-consuming mistake.

To truly empower learners to make the best choices for themselves, the education and workforce systems must clarify the different postsecondary paths available to learners and how they connect to various careers, while reducing barriers and increasing access for everyone. Policymakers and higher education leaders are beginning to present more transparent data about the future earning potential of programs of study, but much still needs to be done before data about all industries are more accessible to learners. The complexity of many degrees leading to multiple career paths and rapidly changing workforce needs will not simply be solved by increased data transparency;

meaningful educator-employer partnerships and development of learners' durable skills are also needed. Many vital and purposeful professions may earn less but provide critical services, creative outlets, and self-fulfillment that should not be devalued by relying solely on earnings data as an outcomes metric. Agency and autonomy contribute to learners' motivation and engagement with their education, and system leaders must remember that learners are active participants in their education with the ability to make choices about their futures.¹³

In the face of big dreams and systemic challenges, higher education institutions and employers need to evolve past a one-size-fits-all model and adapt to better serve today's learners.

The changing demographics of today's learners and the country's future talent pool necessitates an education system that better serves learners who have been underserved by postsecondary education, including learners of color, Indigenous populations, multilingual and immigrant-origin learners, individuals with disabilities, and those from rural and low-income communities.¹⁴ There is clear evidence that diverse learning environments have multiple benefits, such as improving the quality of the education provided and advancing critical thinking. The skills learned by working in diverse groups both inside and outside the classroom will help to prepare individuals to

“It would be pretty amazing if every student that graduates from the system, pre-K–12, understands themselves as a learner, understands their passion and aptitude, and aptitude [to reach] their potential.”

—K-12 ADMINISTRATOR IN TEXAS

“My biggest concern is that when you finish college it’s going to be hard to find a job because most of the jobs ask for experience.”

—LEARNER AT A COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN INDIANA

work across growing differences throughout their careers and in their communities, making this an essential skill for thriving.

Investing in Multiple Pathways to Thriving in Education, Work, and Life

In the Commission’s view, a variety of education and training options must be available when referring to opportunities after high school, higher education, or postsecondary pathways, including two-year and four-year institutions of higher education, apprenticeships, workforce development programs, service-year opportunities, and military service. College is also more than solely attaining a credential or acquiring specific knowledge and technical skills. Learners gain valuable experience, interpersonal skills, and other benefits through attending a postsecondary education or training program, which should also be reflected in any credential earned.

The education system’s emphasis on college enrollment and one-size-fits-all solutions designed for eighteen-year-olds matriculating immediately following high school graduation is too reductive and limiting, and learners and families deserve more information and nuance when considering their options. The future of work is unpredictable. Educators and employers must work together to identify and iterate on an updated conception of the skills, competencies, and experiences that

will prepare learners for future success and empower them to adapt to an ever-changing economy.

The skills that employers across all sectors value, from technical skills to durable skills like communication and critical thinking, can be developed in classrooms and through experiences outside the classroom, such as military service and service-year programs. Evidence shows that military veterans are more likely to earn postsecondary degrees, to stay in their jobs in the first six months, and to have eight of employers’ top ten most-needed skills.¹⁵ Alumni of service-year programs are more likely to go on to pursue a bachelor’s degree and enter a variety of careers with higher salaries than their peers.¹⁶ Whichever path they choose, to realize agency in the choice, learners are well served to have early and persistent exposure to and experiences in a variety of career fields, postsecondary paths, and valuable skills.

Even when degree programs have clear, demonstrable value, many learners do not complete a degree and do not reap the full benefits of higher education. Among part-time or full-time students at degree-granting postsecondary educational institutions in the United States in 2019, 61 percent completed their degree program in six years.¹⁷ This completion rate has remained stagnant for four cohorts. Several colleges and universities have initiated efforts to support more learners in completing their degrees.¹⁸

“College opens a lot of opportunities. You can build connections, meet people, and learn the subjects you want to pursue.”

—LEARNER AT A COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN COLORADO

One of the largest barriers to completing a college degree and seeing the subsequent economic and social benefits is the total cost of attendance and the many hurdles in place that complicate receiving financial aid. Many learners, especially first-generation college goers, may not think college is an option if they believe they cannot afford it. Though recent trends show that the net price—the price learners pay out-of-pocket for their education—has decreased, higher education institutions have not done a good job of communicating the true cost of attendance to learners and their families.¹⁹ The steady rise in the sticker price of a college degree, combined with the opacity and complexity of financial aid information, can discourage some individuals from pursuing a postsecondary education that could help them achieve prosperity.

Potentially influenced by affordability narratives or a clearer line of sight to emerging job opportunities, in fall 2025, the increase in undergraduate enrollment was primarily driven by increases in community college and public four-year college enrollment.²⁰ As learners and their families “vote with their feet” and continue to invest in postsecondary education, institutions of higher education need to endeavor to provide the best possible value for that investment.

While college graduates usually outearn their peers with only high school diplomas, recent college graduates face increasing rates of unemployment and underemployment.²¹ Another sign of a changing world is the increasing rarity

of employees spending their entire career, or even a decade, working for the same employer.²² In light of persistent barriers to degree completion and the unpredictable nature of postgraduation job outcomes, educators and employers must collaborate to provide learners with multiple accessible and affordable paths to secure industry-validated credentials and develop employable technical and durable skills to thrive throughout adulthood. Examples of such partnerships can be found among the promising practices highlighted on the Commission microsite.²³

This shift across the labor market calls for much greater collaboration between employers and educators to build systems of preparation and professional development that will support learners and workers as they navigate an increasingly unprecedented and unpredictable job market.

As AI and other technological advancements continue to make waves throughout the American workforce, potentially replacing entry-level workers in white-collar or knowledge-based jobs, there is widespread and increasing concern that the unemployment and underemployment rates for college graduates in certain fields may continue to grow.²⁴ Such employment trends have consequences for the preparation and development of future employees, because employers are likely to expect more from their incoming workers. These historic shifts, however, also present an important opportunity for employers and educators to

partner closely to define the human-centered, durable skills that will endure, iterate on program design, and create more entry points to both higher education and the workforce.

As the pace of change accelerates in workplaces and society, the most valuable attributes will include adaptability and resilience. Employees will increasingly be expected to learn new skills as they look to progress in their careers in a workplace that is adapting to technological advances, demographic changes, and a shifting global economy.²⁵ The process of lifelong learning by which employees adapt to changes to the skills most valued in their occupations is sometimes referred to as “upskilling” or “reskilling.” Our education system should offer multiple options and easily accessible entry points for workers interested in gaining a new credential and recognize the skills they have already gained through prior work and life experience.

What Do Learners Need to Reach Their Potential?

The goal of education is both to prepare learners for their future careers and to give them the durable skills and civic competencies to

actively engage in their local communities and a democratic society. Education systems provide education, training, and preparation for healthy engagement in society and success in the workplace; these social and economic aims are complementary goals of education. The return on investment made in learners’ education and training should be defined by factors that contribute to their social and economic well-being, including but not limited to their wage and other job-related benefits. Commissioners heard from learners that they desire a life of purpose in service to their families and communities in addition to financial stability. In the performing and visual arts, success can be measured in financial sustainability, but artists also stress the importance of staying true to their vision, impacting their audience, and finding joy in the creative process.²⁶

Higher education in the United States plays a significant role in preparing learners for civic engagement by cultivating the knowledge, skills, values, and opportunities necessary for participation in democratic society and community life. Many two-year and four-year colleges and universities articulate commitments to public service, democratic participation, and the common good as core tenets of their missions.

AN EMPLOYER IN TEXAS SHARED THE BENEFIT OF INTERNSHIPS IN PREPARING CANDIDATES FOR PERMANENT POSITIONS:

“My hit rate of recruitment [85–90 percent from internships] is so much better than just showing up at a career fair. . . . I’m making a business decision to spend a chunk of my budget and I’m not getting immediate return, but the long-term play for us is really positive because these folks are ready to go when they come out [of the internship].”

“I did a lot of tech theater and student government or event planning in high school, and I think those are really important for the reason that you learn to work with staff. . . . In tech theater, you learn discipline as a student, being on time and following stringent safety protocols, so you learn a lot more nitty-gritty skills.”

—LEARNER AT A FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE COLLEGE IN MASSACHUSETTS

Through programming on campus and partnerships within their surrounding community, colleges and universities function as important sites for civic learning and democratic practice and can assemble multiple parties to debate solutions to pressing challenges.²⁷ As places of inquiry, colleges and universities also train learners in the critical skills needed to contribute to a healthy democracy and understand a changing world.

Alongside civic skills, education from kindergarten through college provides learners with opportunities to develop many other critical skills for success in their careers and lives. Literacy, numeracy, and proficiency in the scientific method are foundational to future pursuits, and durable skills are transferable to all industries. Building on the work of America Succeeds, this Commission uses the term *durable skills* to refer to transferable, nontechnical, interpersonal, and relational competencies, including adaptability, collaboration, communication, creativity, critical thinking, fortitude, growth mindset, leadership, mindfulness, problem-solving, reliability, systems thinking, time management, and working across differences. When taught or structured intentionally, these skills can be acquired through a wide range of disciplines and activities, including the liberal arts, creative

pursuits and the arts, and experiences such as community service, sports, and clubs.

Our education system should aim to prepare learners not only for their first job but also for subsequent opportunities. Likewise, learners should gain the skills and mindset to continue their learning and growth even after completing a credential, in recognition that lifelong learning is essential. The broadening of the central outcomes of education to include durable skills alongside academic proficiency is an important first step in preparing the next generation to be adaptable to quickly shifting labor markets. Industry leaders agree that durable skills are essential for employees at all levels to thrive in a workplace augmented by AI.²⁸

A growing number of examples illustrate how learners are using AI tools to support deeper engagement with academic content, particularly through structured “study mode” features that emphasize guided inquiry over answer delivery. For instance, Khan Academy’s AI tutor, Khanmigo, is designed to scaffold student learning through Socratic questioning, prompting learners to explain their reasoning, reflect on mistakes, and work through problems step by step. Early studies and pilot implementations suggest that such approaches may support

reasoning processes and student engagement, though evidence of measurable gains in critical thinking or problem-solving remains limited.²⁹ Intentionally designed AI tools could encourage more active, inquiry-based learning to help develop learners' durable skills and prepare them to work alongside AI throughout their educational and career journeys.

Of course, it is not enough to simply name the skills that are valued by employers and are important to a life of thriving. Educators and employers need to come together to validate measures and assessments of these skills that will allow learners and employees to communicate their skills and competencies. A prevailing narrative claims that educators are not interested in working with or hearing from employers and that employers regularly complain that graduates are not adequately prepared for their jobs. Yet, in an August 2025 survey by Morning Consult, 85 percent of surveyed executives

and hiring managers responded that colleges and universities are preparing learners well for the workforce.³⁰ As workers aim to progress in rapidly changing workplaces in the face of technological advances, demographic shifts, and an evolving global economy, educators and employers must continue to partner to maximize the opportunities and impact of lifelong learning.



Guiding Principles for Ensuring Every Learner Thrives

Why This Commission?

“It’s a privilege, if you have money saved up, to follow your dreams. If not, you’re like, all right, I’m going to go to a career path where I’m stable, I need a house, I need food, I need stability.”

—LEARNER AT A COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN CALIFORNIA

The American Academy of Arts and Sciences launched the Commission on Opportunities After High School in May 2024 in recognition of the growing challenges learners face in navigating their postsecondary options, obtaining the skills they need, and securing fulfilling livelihoods. The multidisciplinary and cross-partisan perspectives of the members of the Commission have fostered a process that has drawn upon expertise from K–12 and higher education, workforce development and business, philanthropy and nonprofits, medicine, service, and the arts.

This Commission is dedicated to shaping a future where every learner is empowered to thrive in adulthood in the context of a dynamic global economy. We aim to empower learners as active, engaged members of society, focusing on a broad range of skills, including those relevant to the arts and humanities. By identifying obstacles and opening doors for underserved individuals, we aim to ensure multiple routes and ongoing support for lifelong learning opportunities and success for all. This work will allow us to address the challenges learners face and enhance their agency in choosing

a path by spotlighting effective avenues from high school to higher education or directly into the workforce.

The Commission encourages government officials at all levels, K–12 and postsecondary leaders, employers and industry groups, nonprofit organizations and cultural institutions, communities, and philanthropists to define what thriving looks like for their learners and constituencies. This definition should serve as the North Star to which success metrics and target outcomes are aligned, including

high school graduation requirements and measures of readiness for career, college, and service. Opportunities for thriving should include individual, personal advancement alongside economic and social mobility and civic engagement. Our recommendations promote policies and practices that facilitate collaboration across the education and workforce ecosystem to support these pathways, enabling the full participation of our diverse talent pool.

The Commission's Guiding Principles

The Commission believes that to enhance American prosperity and ensure American competitiveness, every part of the civic, education, and workforce ecosystem must transform to empower learners to choose the best postsecondary path for themselves; receive guidance throughout college, service, and work; and continue learning, earning industry-valued credentials and advancing civically, personally, and professionally. The education and workforce systems must adapt to empower learners with agency in their postsecondary choices and form a collaborative ecosystem of multiple paths to thriving in adulthood.

The Commission recognizes the historical context and past educational initiatives that have prompted the development of our current system. However, the continuing evolution of society and labor markets necessitates the creation of a new educational narrative, a new set of goals, and new strategies to prepare learners for thriving after high school. The Commission's discussions were grounded in evidence of what worked well and led to an improvement of learner outcomes in these historical movements. Further investment in proven strategies is worthwhile alongside

reforms to systems that have, for too long, excluded large segments of our talented population from paths to prosperity.

Throughout its discussions, the Commission drew upon a deep well of research studies, effective policies, and innovative practices from across the country at varying levels of K–12 and higher education, workforce training and development, and civic engagement. Accompanying this report is an online repository (available at www.amacad.org/opportunities) of promising practices that illustrate the Commission's recommendations in action across the United States.

“Through K–12, I feel like we should help students more in finding their passion, what they're going to want to do for the rest of their lives.”

—HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT IN TEXAS

The Commission also conducted thirty listening sessions across the country in California, Colorado, Indiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, North Dakota, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Washington, D.C. Participants included high school and college learners, K–12 administrators and teachers, higher education administrators and faculty, employers, philanthropic leaders, and community partners. Listening session participants were diverse in age, race, ethnicity, gender, geography, and family income level. High school students and administrators were recruited from public schools, career academies,

“I don’t have all that money to pay, [to] go directly to the college or university. So, I’m going to do two years at the community college, and then I’m going to transfer to two years at the university . . . and I’m going to work while I’m going to college.”

—HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT IN PENNSYLVANIA

adult learning centers, and magnet schools. College learners and administrators came from two-year public community colleges, four-year private and public state universities, technical colleges, a public historically Black university, and a tribal college.

After accumulating evidence, listening to learners, educators, and employers, and rigorously discussing important issues, the Commission developed recommendations for empowering learners to thrive after high school. To ground these recommendations, the Commission accepted three underlying assumptions:

1. Systemic Barriers to Opportunity Remain—

Throughout K–12 and postsecondary education, the lack of equitable distribution of human capital and financial and material resources has resulted in greater challenges for learners from underresourced backgrounds as they navigate their postsecondary paths. Many learners and families have historically faced systemic barriers to opportunity in the United States, including learners of color, Indigenous populations, immigrant-origin learners, learners with disabilities, and those from rural and low-income communities.³¹ These systemic barriers can be environmental, financial, or based in information and readiness. Giving individuals opportunities is not enough.

Learners need to be empowered and have agency so that they can make informed, deliberate decisions about their futures. The Commission asserts that, to have real agency in their choices, the structural barriers learners face must be addressed across education and workforce systems.

2. Basic Needs for Learning Must Be Met—

Learning is affected by an individual’s societal and community context and mental and physical health. To be ready to learn and work, learners should be supported in an environment that allows them to thrive. If individuals arrive at school hungry, tired, or afraid, they will be unable to focus and learn. Access to healthy food, housing security, and physical and psychological safety are critical pieces of the foundation of a strong education. As the places where learners spend a significant amount of time, educational institutions can play a significant role in connecting learners and their families with the social services and material goods they may need, such as food, clothing, and other supplies. The Commission believes that the income of a learner’s family should not dictate their ability to succeed in school.

3. Early Exposure to Career, College, and Service Options Is Key—During middle school, high school, and postsecondary

education or training, learners can be supported in uncovering their strengths and aptitudes by participating in activities that allow them to explore their career interests. Learners should be informed of various college options through activities such as college fairs, campus visits, and dual/concurrent enrollment. Students should also learn about service-year programs and military service opportunities that complement their postsecondary plans by developing their

durable skills and allowing them to explore a career interest. Postsecondary planning should be developmentally appropriate to learners’ self-awareness throughout their K–16 years and include guidance and information about multiple options, including career, college, and service opportunities. The Commission wants all learners to be regularly supported throughout their educational journey as they develop, revise, and pursue their postsecondary goals.

Figure 2: Systemic Barriers to Opportunity

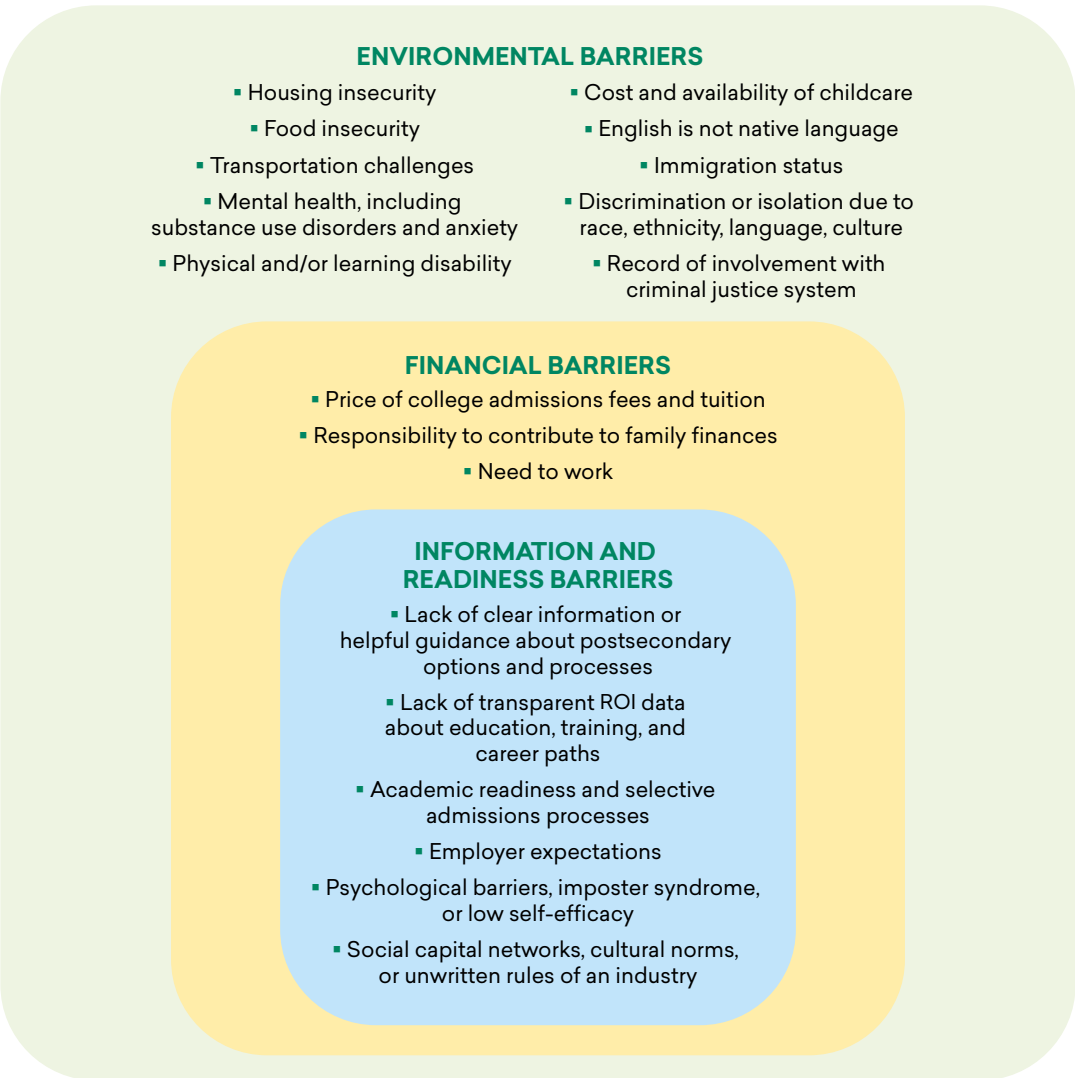


Figure 3: The U.S. Education System Has Evolved Over Time, but a Different Approach Is Needed to Support Learner Thriving

1980–1990s Emphasizing Graduation and Admissions Requirements	1990–2000s The Growing Use and Importance of Academic Assessments	2000–2010s The College for All Movement
The 1983 A Nation At Risk report recommended strengthening high school graduation requirements and enhancing college admissions requirements and emphasized taking a certain number of courses in specific subjects to ensure student success.^a This approach is no longer sufficient for what students need. ▪ <i>The Commission recommends focusing on specific skills, competencies, and mindsets and adapting high school graduation requirements to reflect true readiness for career, college, and service.</i>	Goals 2000 and Improving America’s Schools Acts led to voluntary adoption of standards and assessments in reading and math.^b No Child Left Behind required states to set academic standards and assessments.^c The Common Core State Standards Initiative led to widespread adoption of national standards in reading and math.^d The focus on academic assessments has limited discussions of educational success to a narrow set of skills that do not fully capture the outcomes we want for learners. ▪ <i>The Commission seeks to incorporate a broader view of what skills and experiences are desirable.</i>	A growing “College for All” movement advocated that all students prepare for and enroll in college.^e The national movement downplayed the reality that there are many possible educational and workforce training pathways available after high school, and we should not apply a one-size-fits-all approach to learners. ▪ <i>The Commission seeks to make postsecondary education more accessible to all learners while underscoring the broad range of opportunities, pathways, and experiences available after high school.</i>

a. National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (U.S. Department of Education, 1983), <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED226006>.

b. Goals 2000 and ESEA, Clinton Presidential Library, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210621183633/https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/exhibits/show/education-reform/goals-esea> (accessed March 10, 2025).

c. Alyson Klein, “No Child Left Behind: An Overview,” *Education Week*, April 10, 2015, <https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/no-child-left-behind-an-overview/2015/04>.

d. Bella DiMarco, Kristian Thymianos, and Nathalie Kirsch, “Historical Milestones in American Education,” *FutureEd*, August 28, 2023, <https://www.future-ed.org/u-s-education-timeline>.

e. Alan Grayson, H.R.4385. U.S. Congress, 2015, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/house-bill/4385>.

2015 K–12 Accountability Moves to the States	2015–2020s Skills-Based Hiring	2020s The COVID-19 Pandemic and Aftermath
After the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act, many states also realigned their academic proficiency measures to more closely follow the bar set by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, also known as the “Nation’s Report Card”).^f This change shone a spotlight on the number of students still falling short on subject-matter knowledge, analytical skills, and other key competencies. ■ <i>The Commission seeks to expand this idea of readiness for thriving after high school.</i>	The number of open positions that did not list a minimum degree requirement increased. However, despite degree requirements being dropped for many roles, only 3.5 percent more workers were hired without a bachelor’s degree.^g Now, more than thirty states have reduced the number of public-sector roles that require a bachelor’s degree.^h This shift in both private- and public-sector hiring has the potential to open more routes to prosperity for Americans. ■ <i>The Commission asserts that the expansion of skills-first hiring practices is an opportunity to reshape how educators and employers develop, measure, and validate skills, knowledge, and competencies.</i>	In 2022, NAEP scores showed steep declines from 2020 in reading and mathematics among nine-year-olds.ⁱ The pandemic also underscored persistent inequities in the education system^j and contributed to increased chronic absenteeism.^k Meanwhile, the mental health crisis grew to unprecedented levels as youth faced increased isolation^l as well as concerns about the cost of college tuition, student debt, and uneven returns from higher education.^m These trends underscore the urgent need to develop a better system. ■ <i>The Commission seeks to elevate learner voices as we make recommendations for the future.</i>

f. Achieve, “State Test Results are Getting Closer to Student Achievement on NAEP,” January 18, 2016, <https://www.achieve.org/files/ProficiencyvsPrepared2.pdf>.

g. Matt Sigelman, Joseph Fuller, and Alex Martin, *Skills-Based Hiring: The Long Road from Pronouncements to Practice* (Burning Glass Institute, 2024), <https://www.burningglassinstitute.org/research/skills-based-hiring-2024>.

h. Phil Murphy and Spencer Cox, “Reevaluating Degree Requirements For Government Jobs,” National Governors Association, 2023, <https://www.nga.org/advocacy-communications/letters-nga/reevaluating-degree-requirements-for-government-jobs>; and NGA, “Governor’s Leading Innovative Skills First Networks,” National Governors Association, 2025, <https://www.nga.org/projects/governors-leading-innovative-skills-first-networks>.

i. National Center for Education Statistics, *NAEP Long-Term Trend Assessment Results: Reading and Mathematics* (U.S. Department of Education, 2022), <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/highlights/ltr/2022>.

j. GAO, *K–12 Education: Student Population Has Significantly Diversified, but Many Schools Remain Divided Along Racial, Ethnic, and Economic Lines* (United States Government Accountability Office, 2022), <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-22-104737>.

k. Attendance Works, “Chronic Absence,” <https://www.attendanceworks.org/chronic-absence/the-problem> (accessed March 10, 2025).

l. Office of the Surgeon General, *Protecting Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory* (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021), <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf>.

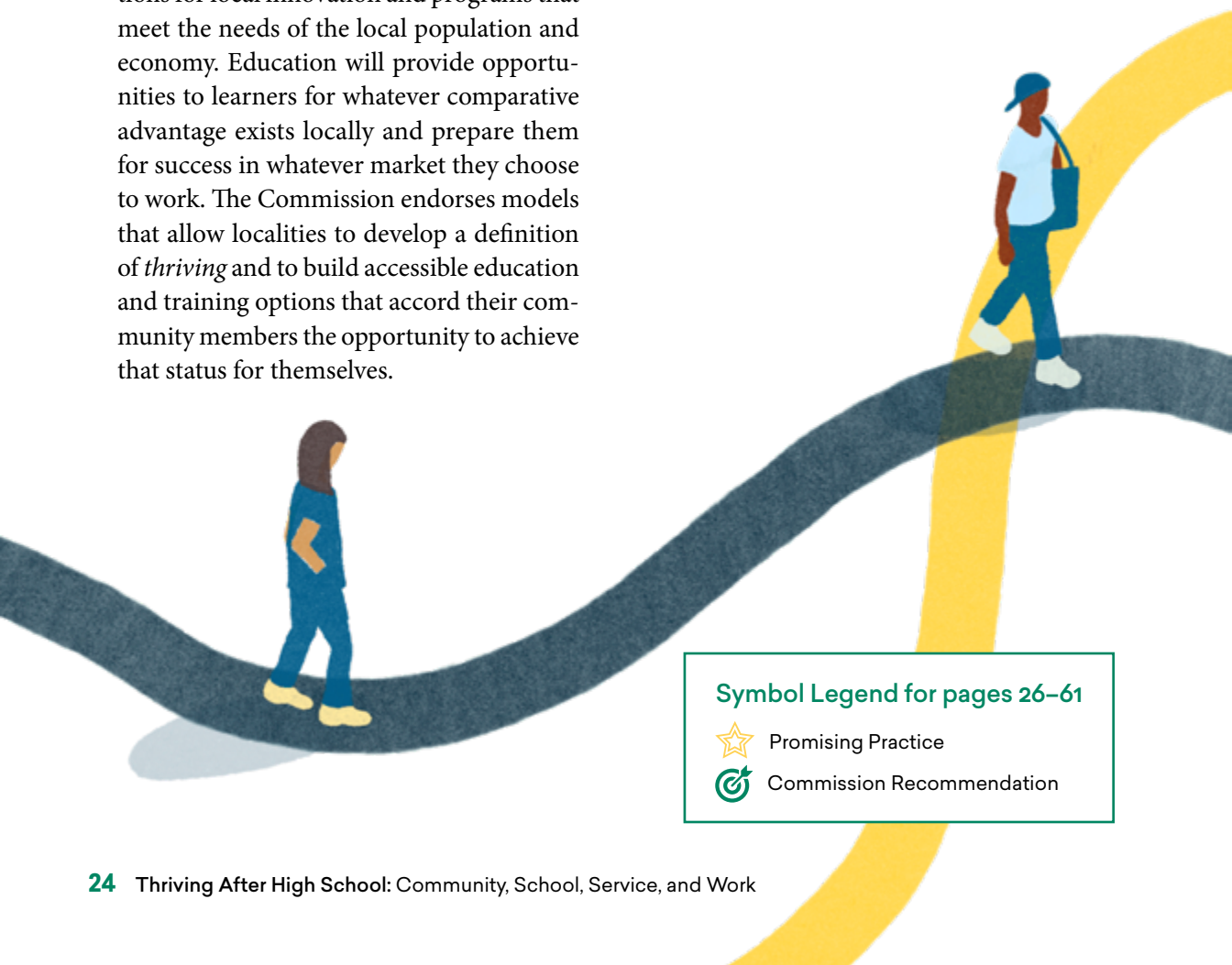
m. Gallup, Inc., *Cost of College: The Price Tag of Higher Education and Its Effect on Enrollment* (Lumina Foundation, 2024), https://www.luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Cost.of_.College.pdf.

The Commission also articulated three guiding principles for the development of the recommendations and accompanying resources:

1. A Collaborative Ecosystem—No one person or system can succeed alone. Learners benefit when education and workforce systems partner to reduce barriers and make opportunities more accessible and relevant to the local labor market. Educators, employers, policymakers, and philanthropists can catalyze powerful innovation and opportunity when they collaborate effectively. Federal and state systems can set the tone for a collaborative ecosystem that allows local partnerships to flourish.

2. Local Context Matters—Federal and state policy should provide the enabling conditions for local innovation and programs that meet the needs of the local population and economy. Education will provide opportunities to learners for whatever comparative advantage exists locally and prepare them for success in whatever market they choose to work. The Commission endorses models that allow localities to develop a definition of *thriving* and to build accessible education and training options that accord their community members the opportunity to achieve that status for themselves.

3. A System of Second Chances—A successful system will have multiple pathways to gain relevant experience, develop necessary skills, and earn valuable credentials both inside and outside the classroom. In a rapidly shifting economy and labor market, paths to success should not be defined too narrowly. With accessible on-ramps to a variety of education and training modalities, learners will be able to find and succeed in the option that is right for them. It will also allow for second, third, and fourth chances—learners will not be shut out of all opportunities if they stumble over systemic barriers. The Commission envisions an educational safety net that gives everyone a strong and meaningful foundation of skills, habits, and mindsets to meet their basic needs and reach their full potential.



Symbol Legend for pages 26–61



Promising Practice



Commission Recommendation

Strategy 1: Build Alignment, Communication, and Coordination Across Systems and Sectors for Learner Success

Various local, state, and federal agencies fund and manage education, service, and workforce programs. These programs have different funding streams; may have different requirements or criteria for participation based on participant age, location of programming, or provider of the education or training; are held to different accountability standards; and track various outcomes and success metrics. An individual may be receiving education and training in multiple places or be eligible for different funding sources that do not share data, information, or application processes. Such fragmentation across systems complicates the search for information about the value of certain postsecondary pathways and comparisons of options. Siloed accountability systems also make collaboration across sectors difficult when programs have requirements that are at odds with one another or when they do not facilitate smooth transitions for participants. These silos unnecessarily complicate learners' experiences and are an inefficient use of public funds.

Education leaders, business leaders, and policymakers should align education and credentialing to the existing and predicted structure of what the labor market needs. Cross-sector coordination both enhances and accelerates the quality of intelligence about how workforce needs are changing. Breaking down these silos would also help learners and workers to access and fully utilize the funds available to them through employer and service benefits. Data collection and reporting should provide the public with accessible and transparent dashboards that will inform their decisions about the credentials most likely to lead to economic mobility, and incentives should be aligned to

provide learners with valuable credentials in high-demand occupations.

RECOMMENDATION 1 **Break Down Silos and Build Shared Responsibility Across Education and Workforce Systems**

The following recommendations are built upon a foundation of breaking down historical silos between K–12 education, higher education institutions, service organizations, workforce development agencies, and employers. A more collaborative ecosystem that intentionally

connects these sectors can help ensure that learning experiences are aligned with evolving labor market needs and that learners receive effective guidance as they transition between educational and career milestones. Strategies to foster such collaboration include the development of cross-sector partnerships and the alignment of shared outcomes metrics. Establishing common metrics helps stakeholders evaluate progress toward shared goals and promotes transparency across systems.

I. *Build Cross-Sector Partnerships to Support Education and Workforce Needs*

The numerous local, state, and federal agencies, boards, and other bodies that govern education, other youth development programs, service pathways, and workforce development have a shared interest in aligning their work to better serve everyone. To align goals across traditional silos, state policymakers and system leaders can facilitate and incentivize collaboration between education and workforce governing bodies. While convening across sectors is a necessary first step, simply meeting on a regular basis will not improve learner outcomes. To be successful, state leaders must set a vision for cross-sector collaboration that includes shared goals and necessary resources, such as time, funding, and information.



Based in Wisconsin, W RTP | BIG STEP is recognized as a national model of cross-sector partnership, bringing together employers, labor unions, government agencies, and community-based organizations to align training with regional industry demand and connect individuals to family-sustaining careers.³² The organization delivers sector-based training through employer-informed curricula and apprenticeship pathways that

respond to evolving labor market needs and skills shortages. Central to success is its role as a workforce intermediary, coordinating across stakeholders to identify workforce needs, design training programs, and facilitate job placement while balancing the interests of workers and industry. By serving as a convening and translating entity, W RTP | BIG STEP reduces fragmentation across systems and enables more efficient talent development, contributing to both economic mobility for participants and competitiveness for regional industries.



THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDS

that, to facilitate collaboration across sectors and current silos, state leaders establish and support bodies, at the statewide and regional levels, that convene stakeholders across K–12, postsecondary education, workforce, philanthropy, military, service-year programs, and community-based organizations and that include learners.

II. *Define and Align Readiness Metrics for Specific Education and Work Pathways*

Learners need more specific guidance to prepare themselves for the career, college, or service path they choose. Leaders across higher education, industry, and service should work together to provide more specific measures of readiness for different paths to help learners understand the prerequisites necessary to be fully prepared to take their next steps. Furthermore, higher education admissions criteria and hiring requirements should be aligned to these readiness metrics so that learners can succeed in the next step in their journey if they reach the defined benchmarks. By collaborating, K–12, higher education, and workforce development can align more of their outcomes metrics and improve transparency and public access to information.



Montana's Year-to-Career initiative is a powerful example of cross-sector collaboration addressing the needs of one of the country's most rural states by developing common language and defining specific pathways from education to workforce and focusing on quality over quantity to meet local needs.³³ Facilitated by Education Design Lab, the Montana Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education and Montana's public two-year colleges have collaborated with employers, learners, and local stakeholders to codesign micropathways programs of stackable credentials earned in less than a year that can lead to an associate degree and immediate employment. Different colleges designed different pathways responsive to their local high-demand occupations, deepened their relationships with employers by moving from advisory to codesigner roles, and brought micropathways to a tribal college for the first time.³⁴

Education leaders and policymakers should work together to clarify and close gaps in the reporting around transition points in learners' journeys. Additional support could be provided by updating infrastructure to follow and assist learners through extended lifelong learning journeys, which will become more necessary and more complicated in a rapidly changing economy. State policymakers can contribute to these efforts by creating clear definitions of career, college, and service readiness, requiring a common set of outcomes and metrics, and aligning state plans and goals across systems.



THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDS

that outcomes metrics used in state education and workforce plans be aligned across programs with transparent validation standards in order to avoid inefficient duplication, leverage the potential for braiding and blending of federal funds, and bring coherence to programs,

education, and training that serves learners and workers.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Maximize Existing Resources to Fund Education Opportunities

As lifelong learning continues to be critical in adapting to an ever-evolving labor market in the face of rapid technological advances, workers are more likely to be interested in acquiring additional credentials throughout their careers. In the context of rapid technological advancement, including AI, learners and workers will need to upskill and reskill continually if they are to advance professionally. This growing need for lifelong learning requires sustained funding of postsecondary education and training to increase access to opportunity.

Serving in the military or participating in a service-year program endows people with valuable skills, competencies, and knowledge, such as collaboration on teams, problem-solving, and leadership under pressure. Individuals often leave service with financial education awards, matched by many postsecondary institutions, that can be applied toward future schooling. Additional benefits and supports could be offered to ease the transition to postsecondary education and training and to help individuals fully leverage the value of their employer-provided benefits and service experiences.

I. *Sustain and Align Funding Across Federal, State, and Institutional Sources for Learner Access and Success*

Local school districts, higher education institutions, service programs, and workforce training providers can receive funding from

“Funding for partnerships is not a high priority. [There used to be] a monthly College Promise gathering, and they brought people from K–12 and the community college and the university, and that was amazing. . . . But instead, since then, the grants that we’ve gotten are Title V, to make a science resource center; or everything’s niche and local . . . and so therefore we’re missing out on each other’s expertise.”

—COMMUNITY COLLEGE ADMINISTRATOR IN CALIFORNIA

a variety of federal, state, local, and private sources, which can lead to conflicting eligibility or reporting requirements and introduces the possibility of variable year-to-year funding. Specific populations such as learners from low-income backgrounds and learners with disabilities may need more support to be ready for postsecondary opportunities and are eligible for vital additional aid that should be maintained.³⁵ As the labor market demands more education and training from the workforce, not only must funding be sustained to ensure that these opportunities for advancement remain accessible to learners and workers; it must also be aligned across the various sources to avoid conflicting regulations and inefficiencies.

Aligning funding also better serves learners who currently navigate a fragmented landscape of applications for federal and state financial aid and private and institutional scholarships or other aid. Increased coordination across these levels and the use of a single application for financial aid would greatly simplify the process and increase access for learners, helping them better understand the types, amounts, and terms of the aid they are eligible for.



The Kalamazoo Promise is a local, place-based “first-dollar” scholarship program in Michigan that guarantees funding of postsecondary education costs up to full tuition and mandatory fees at in-state public and participating private institutions for graduates of Kalamazoo Public Schools who attended for all of grades K–12, with a sliding scale for fewer years of enrollment.³⁶ Unlike many last-dollar programs, this program’s structure allows learners to layer additional state and federal aid (such as Pell Grants) on top of the award to maximize total financial support. The program also provides flexibility to access these funds anytime within ten years after graduating high school, and it includes an extension for learners who are actively serving in the military.



THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDS that local, state, and federal government officials sustain and align funding for education, service, and workforce programs to increase transparency and reduce complexity while closing affordability gaps and smoothing pathways for learners.

II. *Align Education Benefits for Military Veterans, Service-Year Alumni, and Workers to Career Paths*

In a 2024 survey, more than nine in ten U.S. companies reported offering this type of benefit, most often in the form of tuition reimbursement.³⁷ However, the vast majority of these benefits go unused each year, and uptake rates differ starkly by type of industry, with white-collar professionals more likely to use their employer-provided education benefits.³⁸ To maximize the use of these benefits across all sectors, employers, educators, and service organizations should work together to map the available education, service, and training opportunities that would help someone build the skills needed to enter a particular career, translate their service experience to another industry, or to advance at their current employer.



Every state has a service commission, and increased collaboration with the state education and workforce governing bodies would reap benefits across all three sectors.³⁹ Several U.S. universities offer financial aid to match or supplement service benefits, especially schools with a public service focus, such as the Clinton School of Public Service at the University of Arkansas and the University of Michigan's Taubman College.⁴⁰ Some states and public institutions offer in-state tuition and waive residency requirements for anyone who has completed a service-year program in that state, including Maryland; West Virginia University waives the entire cost of tuition.⁴¹ Six states (Colorado, Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, Oregon, and Wisconsin) waive income tax on the Segal Education Award for AmeriCorps graduates.⁴²

A 2024 study of outcomes for the Post-9/11 GI Bill revealed that a majority of eligible military

veterans had enrolled at an institution of higher education and used their education benefit.⁴³ Almost twice as many veterans graduated within six years compared to peers. Consistent with national trends, veterans' earnings generally increased with greater educational attainment, demonstrating the value of pursuing a degree following service. A 2025 survey of service-year alumni revealed that 69 percent of alums who began their service year with a high school diploma or general equivalency diploma (GED) went on to receive additional degrees after their service year.⁴⁴ In addition to qualifying for financial benefits available to military veterans and service-year graduates, these applicants may also be eligible for admissions preferences and academic credit for prior experience.

As industries evolve more rapidly with technological advances, including AI, employees are more likely to switch industries or need to adapt to labor market changes over the course of their careers. Employees may need only a short program of study to learn new skills or gain competencies that allow them to take the next step in their career. Industry leaders can help workers maximize their employer-sponsored educational benefits by collaborating with higher education institutions to align benefits with programs that allow workers to upskill or reskill for other positions in the organization.



THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDS improving advising for military veterans and service-year alumni to fully leverage their education benefits; it also recommends expanding college tuition subsidies for service-year program participants to lessen financial concerns about college enrollment. The Commission recommends that employers and local institutions of higher education collaborate to clarify how their employer-provided education

benefits might be used by employees to advance along different career paths within their organization.

III. *Expand and Integrate Earn-and-Learn Experiences*

High-quality earn-and-learn opportunities provide paid, on-the-job training alongside mentorship and related instruction, which may include youth and registered apprenticeships, internships, and service-year programs. Demand for earn-and-learn experiences has been growing rapidly as educators seek to provide learners with on-the-job training and learners recognize the importance of developing professional competencies while feeling squeezed to find paid work while in school. However, demand vastly outpaces supply in many communities across the country.

To encourage more employers to offer apprenticeships, policymakers should increase financial incentives to help offset high start-up costs and reduce regulatory barriers in the registration and approval process for apprenticeship programs. Employers should also partner with intermediary organizations for support and endeavor to provide more openings and mentorship to learners in their communities interested in taking on an internship or apprenticeship.

 In Rhode Island, the governor announced a comprehensive Rhode to Prosperity initiative, which includes a focus on expanding registered apprenticeships by leveraging federal funding, approving apprenticeships in new occupations, and providing a central hub of information and technical assistance to strengthen public-private partnerships. Building on other registered apprenticeships in K–12

education, Rhode Island is one of the first states to launch a registered apprenticeship program for school principals. The state also continues to grow in clean energy careers, and the state government is leading the way with registered apprenticeships in public-sector roles.⁴⁵

Another avenue to increase earn-and-learn opportunities at a lower cost and risk to employers is service-year programs or degree apprenticeships. Policymakers could similarly increase funding and reduce barriers for service-year programs while incentivizing registration of service-year programs as pre-apprenticeships or apprenticeships, allowing participants to earn an industry-valued credential. Service-year programs and registered apprenticeships can also be aligned with degree programs, allowing participants to earn college credit and accelerate their paths to career and college.

In a 2025 review, nearly 350 institutions of higher education were found to have integrated registered apprenticeships into their associate, bachelor's, or master's degree programs.⁴⁶ An area of particularly strong growth has been registered teacher apprenticeship pathways.⁴⁷ However, several key industries, such as occupational and physical therapy, that could have success with this model have not yet developed these programs.

 Alabama's nursing apprenticeship program was instituted via Alabama Act 2021-275. As of December 2025, eighty employers and twenty-eight colleges and universities in the state have created nursing apprenticeship programs.⁴⁸ Apprentices, who are required to stay at the hospital at which they train for one year after completing the program, thus increasing staff retention rates, say that they learn more via the one-on-one time they receive as

apprentices than they would learn in traditional clinic hours, which are completed in groups.



THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDS

that earn-and-learn experiences be expanded by increasing incentives and reducing barriers for employers to offer internships and apprenticeships.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Improve Data Collection and Sharing at All Levels for Transparency

Data are the backbone of any functioning accountability system, because “what gets measured gets done,” and most leaders, whether elected officials, school leaders, employers, or parents, prefer to make informed decisions about where they will spend their resources. Just as accountability and incentive systems are often separated along arbitrary lines between education and workforce systems, so, too, are data systems. More than forty states have or are building longitudinal data systems that endeavor to bring together data from early childhood, K–12, postsecondary education, service, and workforce systems.⁴⁹ Local labor market data are valuable to learners, educators, and communities as cross-sector partners endeavor to improve educational and workforce pathways for learners to enter high-demand occupations that provide family-sustaining wages in their local communities.

I. *Link Labor Market Data to Education, Occupation, and Industry-Specific Metrics of Success*

Policymakers, educators, employers, learners, and the public want to better understand the outcomes and returns on investment from

different programs of study and training pathways. As learners discover their interests and strengths, they would benefit from more accessible and transparent information about occupations that align with their passions and can provide the financial security and life stability they desire. As unpredictable as the future can be, especially in the face of AI, information about emerging demand for particular skills and credentials should be provided to learners and considered in determinations of value when practicable.

The return on investment made in learners’ education and training should be defined by factors that contribute to their social and economic well-being, including, but not limited to, their wage and other job-related benefits. Recent changes to federal accountability for higher education require that institutions report their graduates’ employment and earnings outcomes. These data are important for institutions of higher education to better understand which of their graduates and programs are more primed for success. Ideally, these data should be linked to specific occupations to improve programs and better align with industry standards where necessary. These data can also provide learners with a better understanding of potential outcomes and empower them to make more informed choices about different career paths.

Commissioners heard from learners about the importance of financial stability and sustainability, but they also expressed a desire to live a life of purpose in service to their families and communities. A narrow focus on earnings outcomes can obfuscate the importance of careers in the arts, education, public health, and social work (among others) that are critical to a healthy democracy and society. Industries should align on definitions

of successful outcomes within their particular field that might be measured through quantitative or qualitative methods to expand the picture of success beyond future earning potential. In the performing and visual arts, success can be measured in financial sustainability, but artists also stress the importance of staying true to their vision, impacting their audience, and finding joy in the creative process.⁵⁰

 Some states are already shifting toward outcomes-based funding for higher education, with Texas leading the way in updates to their community college funding model in 2023.⁵¹ Texas's community college funding model, established through House Bill 8, shifts state allocations from a primarily enrollment-driven formula to an outcomes-based system that rewards measurable learner success. Under this approach, colleges receive performance funding tied to key outcomes such as earning credentials of value, successful transfer to four-year institutions, and completion of workforce-aligned coursework, with additional weighting for high-demand fields and priority student populations. The model also incorporates a dual structure of performance-based funding and a funding floor to ensure institutional stability, while encouraging continuous improvement in student outcomes and economic mobility.⁵²

 **THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDS** the collection of labor data at the occupational level within industries and linking those data to education and training programs to provide greater transparency on industry-specific metrics of success and broader measures of well-being.

II. Expand and Enhance Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems

State data related to education and workforce outcomes are often housed in separate systems that may measure the same things about the same people but without being able to link or compare data due to outdated systems. Disparate data systems can also use different definitions of the same terms, like *rural*, which can lead to public confusion and limit options for comparing programs and outcomes statewide.⁵³ Statewide longitudinal data systems (SLDS) that connect early learning, K–12, postsecondary education, service, and workforce data are important mechanisms for collecting data as individuals progress through their education and career journeys and for understanding how certain choices or experiences impacted their later outcomes.

In addition to collecting data, states should analyze and use these data to examine current practices and adjust to improve outcomes. States should also use these data to more closely align the supply and demand of skills in the labor market and to improve the fidelity of signals to learners and workers about changes in the job market. SLDS can also improve the transparency of the return on investment for learners so that they can make more informed choices. To maximize the utility of postsecondary data, SLDS should include data from noncredit programs in addition to more traditional data on degree programs.

 The Kentucky Center for Statistics (KYSTATS) oversees Kentucky's SLDS, which integrates data across education and workforce systems, including K–12, postsecondary, workforce, and unemployment insurance records, to track outcomes from schooling into employment.⁵⁴ The system produces a wide

array of publicly accessible, interactive reports, such as the *Kentucky Future Skills Report*, *Students' Right to Know*, and county-level data dashboards, which are designed to inform policymakers and provide transparency to the public about education, workforce outcomes, and economic conditions.⁵⁵ Finally, KYSTATS explicitly incorporates labor market information and projections to align education and training insights with evolving workforce needs, enabling the system to adapt to changing economic conditions.



THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDS

that state policymakers support the creation and expansion of SLDS that collect and maintain data from early learning, K–12, higher education, service, and workforce systems.

III. Maintain and Leverage Federal Data Collection and Incentives

While the United States has a strong federalist system of governance in education, the federal government has a vital accountability and data collection role in building an understanding of outcomes across the country. For example, states and educational institutions would benefit from more access to federal earnings data by institution and program. Internal Revenue Service data, for example, are more accurate than state unemployment data but are currently restricted. As the federal government adjusts priorities for data collection and reporting, clear guidelines and the alignment of resources to states, localities, and institutions will remain important.



The Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes (PSEO) data from the U.S. Census Bureau are an important resource for states, higher education institutions, and the public, linking records from participating colleges and universities with federal earnings data to provide detailed information on graduates' employment and earnings trajectories. States and higher education institutions commonly use PSEO data to assess program-level return on investment, evaluate equity in labor market outcomes, and inform policy decisions related to funding, accountability, and workforce alignment. Additionally, the data can support counselors' guidance and learners' decision-making and strengthen connections between postsecondary education and regional labor market needs.

The federal government also could do more to encourage states to have interoperable and integrated data systems and could provide additional funding or regulatory relief for systems upgrades through block grants or waivers to states. Federal agencies also employ staff with expertise in data systems, privacy, and management who provide valuable technical assistance to help states design data systems and remain compliant with federal regulations.



THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDS

that the federal government maintain its critical role in data collection and reporting and provide financial and technical assistance to states as they work to improve their own data systems and comply with federal accountability requirements.



Strategy 2: Develop Skills for Educational and Workforce Success in a Changing World

The rapidly shifting demands of the global economy and American labor market mean that learners and employees will need to be increasingly adaptable. Developing durable skills and core competencies can help learners be “AI-proof” and provide stability through adaptability while also building their agency in the use of AI that may lead to greater innovation.⁵⁶ As the evolution of AI continues to disrupt career pathways, educators should focus on embedding durable skill development through competency-based experiences both in and out of the classroom alongside fostering learners’ digital and AI literacy.

Stackable credentials are a sequence of portable, industry-recognized certificates, badges, or licenses that allow learners to validate skills incrementally and “stack” them over time toward higher-level qualifications, such as an associate or bachelor’s degree. Designing such credentials to validate learners’ durable skills and align to industry standards in high-demand occupations would better prepare learners to pivot in their careers. As labor market and business practices shift with technological advancements, the skills most in demand for employees will also continually change. A collaborative education and workforce ecosystem will allow for timely and responsive feedback loops about these changes and will support learners’ development of valued skills.

RECOMMENDATION 4 **Promote Durable Skills Across the P-20 Continuum**

The Commission’s listening sessions and meetings with education leaders, employers, and community partners made abundantly clear that they consider durable skills to be central to learners’ future success in work and life. This feedback aligns with recent national surveys of employers who agree that durable skills are essential for employees at all levels to thrive in a workplace augmented by AI.⁵⁷ These durable skills are commonly understood to include collaboration, communication, creativity, critical thinking, leadership, problem-solving, and working in groups across differences. Other components, as outlined by *America Succeeds*, include character, fortitude, a growth mindset, metacognition, and mindfulness.⁵⁸

Students also need to reach proficiency in core academic content areas, becoming literate, numerate, and competent in the scientific method by the time they graduate from high school. Additionally, core competencies in civic, digital, and financial skills are critical to learners' future success and confidence in themselves and the world around them. The rapid growth and spread of AI have made durable skills even more valuable in allowing learners and employees to adapt to labor market changes. Finally, the key to unlocking a first apprenticeship, internship, or job is often the social capital and professional network within a learner's industry of interest.

I. Expand Durable Skills Development Inside and Outside Classrooms

To prepare learners for a complex and evolving world, educators at all levels should incorporate into their curricula a range of skills, including core competencies, the ability to work in teams, and durable skills such as resilience, adaptability, and problem-solving. These skills can be fostered in the classroom and are also often learned through the liberal arts, creative pursuits and the arts, and extracurricular experiences such as community service, sports, and clubs. Classroom design, strong pedagogy, and role modeling by teachers and mentors also promote these vital skills and help learners to develop their sense of self, critical thinking, and collaboration skills.



Turnaround Arts is a national program of The Kennedy Center that provides arts education resources and a learning framework to Title I elementary and middle schools across seventeen states and Washington, D.C. In seven public schools in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, this programming provides learners with artistic and

musical instruction and is also integrated into other classes in which learners develop critical thinking and presentation skills.⁵⁹

Durable skills may seem intangible or difficult to describe if they remain unnamed or undefined. Educators cannot be expected to support learners' development of durable skills if they are unable to measure learners' proficiency and track their progress against clearly defined benchmarks. Educators and service-year programs must have valid and reliable measurement tools that can validate durable skills and competencies. Additionally, such tools must be developed in partnership with employers or industry associations to be trusted and valued in the workplace.⁶⁰



THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDS that the development of learners' durable skills be intentionally integrated into K–12 and college-level curricula to ensure that educators have the language, resources, and incentives to support this important aspect of individuals' education.

II. Ensure Digital and AI Literacy

The development of digital literacy has become an essential educational priority for learners in both K–12 and postsecondary settings. As digital technologies increasingly shape communication and information access, work and economic mobility, and civic life, learners need the knowledge and skills to navigate digital environments thoughtfully and responsibly. In recent years, the rapid expansion of AI tools has further heightened the importance of digital literacy, requiring learners not only to use technology effectively but also to understand its capabilities, limitations, and broader societal implications.

Activities to develop digital literacy should include an AI component that teaches learners how to responsibly use new tools and how to determine the validity of information that may be produced by AI. To protect learners, AI should be introduced in a developmentally appropriate manner and in a controlled environment at first. The AI-Enabled Professional Competencies Framework outlines how seven competencies, including AI and data literacy, problem-solving and creativity, computational skills, and continuous learning, can be scaled to different educational and professional levels.⁶¹ Developing digital literacy across educational levels supports adaptability in a rapidly evolving technological landscape.



States have increasingly embedded digital literacy requirements within K–12 systems, often through computer science standards, media literacy laws, or broader digital learning frameworks that emphasize skills such as information evaluation, digital citizenship, and technology use. For example, New Jersey mandates instruction in information literacy across grades, while states such as Arizona, North Dakota, Utah, and Virginia have developed comprehensive digital literacy frameworks that are integrated into core academic standards.⁶²



THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDS

that all K–12 and college learners be supported in developing and demonstrating competency in digital and AI literacy.

III. Integrate Civic Education and Engagement

Learners can build familiarity with civic habits through structured opportunities to experience and demonstrate civil and respectful discourse and practice communicating across differences

in class and around campus. Key elements of civic education, such as American government structures and procedures, electoral and legal systems, and participatory democracy activities, can be appropriately taught to learners at all levels and in a variety of classes and contexts. Additionally, service learning, campus-community partnerships, and structured community service projects allow learners to apply disciplinary knowledge in real-world contexts. Military service and service-year programs provide ample opportunities to practice civic skills.

Institutions of higher education in the United States play a significant role in preparing learners for civic engagement by cultivating the knowledge, skills, values, and opportunities necessary for participation in democratic society and community life. In classrooms, courses in disciplines such as political science, sociology, and economics give learners the knowledge and tools to reflect on the political, social, and economic factors shaping community conditions. Outside the classroom, institutions of higher education also foster civic participation and leadership through various student organizations, debate societies, and volunteer groups. Opportunities to bridge the classroom and local community include learners and scholars partnering with local leaders and organizations to address societal challenges such as climate change and food insecurity.



A recent Academy publication, *Preparing Students for Civic Life*, provides guidance to higher education leaders on how to embed civic education and engagement across departments and multiple aspects of campus life.⁶³ One case study presented in the publication spotlights the Institute of American Civics at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, which has pioneered initiatives to connect undergraduates with their local

government. The institute's Public Square lecture series seeks to educate learners, the public, and local lawmakers about issues that are resonant for the local government. Undergraduate policy lab courses have picked up some topics from the Public Square series and, following small-group discussions with local elected officials, provided evidence-based recommendations for potential solutions.



THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDS

that, in K–12 and college settings, educators expand civic education and engagement that are related to coursework and sustained over time to provide learners with a foundational understanding of constitutional governance, the U.S. election system, and the rights and obligations of American citizens.

IV. *Strengthen Learners' Social Capital Networks and Engagement*

Social capital and economic connectedness across socioeconomic classes are important drivers of economic mobility.⁶⁴ Learners with social connections across socioeconomic classes are more likely to be able to leverage their network for future career success. In K–12, college, service, and workplace settings, learners should be provided with structured and supported opportunities to meet employers, mentors, and peers across socioeconomic groups. Experiences that build social capital may look different at different grade levels and should be appropriately matched to learners' development and skills.

One strategy for supporting learners' social capital development is to directly embed professional networking into coursework. Through structured opportunities to practice networking with employers in low-stakes environments,

learners build networks and social capital with professionals in their field of interest while gaining exposure into that industry.



Braven, an intermediary organization connecting higher education, college success organizations, and employers, regularly convenes employer-engagement events, such as industry spotlight panels, networking sessions, and skill-building opportunities, where learners interact with professionals in their industries of interest. Braven staff design and facilitate these experiences so that they are safe spaces to practice networking, while also creating the conditions for learners to make meaningful connections with professionals. Through these events, employers also have access to prospective employees from a wider variety of backgrounds to grow their talent pipelines.⁶⁵



THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDS

that high schools, institutions of higher education, and service-year programs partner with local employers to develop career-connected learning and professional networking that builds learners' social capital.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Validate and Demonstrate Essential Knowledge and Competencies

The standard model of high school education in the United States has remained mostly unchanged for decades and is widely criticized as unengaging and inequitable.⁶⁶ The one-size-fits-all mode of instruction, based on how long learners are taught as opposed to how much they learn, does not adequately recognize the important competencies, knowledge, and skills that learners develop outside the classroom or while moving at their own pace through

material. With growing evidence of the positive impacts of project-based and experiential learning, more educators are incorporating these types of assignments and instructional practices into their classes.⁶⁷ However, more flexibility in requirements for “seat time” in classrooms could lead to more student-centered learning approaches.

“Self-led learning helps you learn who you are.”

—LEARNER AT A CAREER ACADEMY IN NORTH DAKOTA

Recently, some employers have turned to skills-based hiring to fill open positions with candidates who have the necessary skills and competencies; more than half of U.S. states have issued policies encouraging the practice.⁶⁸ Skills-based hiring typically involves examining job descriptions and removing or decreasing degree requirements in favor of enumerating the knowledge, skills, and competencies needed for the role. At the same time, education leaders are reexamining the standard educational experience and measurement of learning, which has historically been the Carnegie Unit.⁶⁹

An overreliance on report cards and transcripts impacted by grade inflation has led to a growing “honesty gap” between reports of learner progress and learners’ actual proficiency, as demonstrated by continuing declining performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress.⁷⁰ States, local school districts, and higher education institutions need to realign high school graduation requirements, postsecondary credentials, and reporting through transcripts and diplomas to ensure that diplomas, degrees, and other industry-valued

credentials reflect demonstrated proficiency and preparedness for careers and college in the twenty-first century.

I. *Expand Competency-Based Education and Accept Competency-Based Transcripts for College Admissions*

A competency-based high school or college transcript should validate learners’ proficiency in high-demand, durable skills and academic content standards. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and ETS have partnered to reimagine the assessment of skills learners will need to succeed in the twenty-first century.⁷¹ In higher education settings and service-year programs, this process may take the form of identifying and promoting microcredentials or badges that could be added to degree paths to validate learners’ competencies. Service-year programs could also develop a competency-based transcript equivalent to document participants’ skills in a format that would be accepted in college admissions processes.



In New Hampshire, the Performance Assessment of Competency Education (PACE), which has since transitioned into the Performance Learning and Assessment Consortium for Educators (PLACE), empowers local educators to design performance assessments that align to state academic standards.⁷² PACE has decreased the frequency of standardized state assessments to just four of the K–12 grade levels and relies on common tasks in each grade and subject to calibrate assessment of learners’ competencies.

Higher education institutions review transcripts from a large variety of domestic and international high schools and colleges to

“[My goal is] giving back to my parents tenfold for everything that they’ve done for me.”

—LEARNER AT A COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN TEXAS

evaluate applicants’ knowledge, skills, and, ultimately, readiness for college and the workforce. Students with a competency-based high school transcript must be empowered to pursue any of the postsecondary paths best suited to them. College admission processes should treat a competency-based high school or college transcript equitably to other transcripts.



THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDS

that competency-based education in K–12 and college settings be expanded to compile a portfolio of learners’ skills and competencies that does not rely on seat time or credit hours to demonstrate mastery of in-demand skills and core academic content. The Commission also recommends that institutions of higher education analyze their admissions practices and endeavor to create a path by which a student with a competency-based high school transcript has a similar application experience to a student with a traditional high school transcript.

II. *Align Graduation Requirements and Diplomas to State Readiness Metrics*

High school graduation requirements, for the most part, indicate which classes a state believes are necessary for learners to take to become ready for life after high school. In listening sessions with learners, administrators, and community leaders across the country, the Commission heard that four years of English class was not the only goal they have for high

schoolers. The Commission heard about dreams of giving back to parents and local communities, finding meaning in their work, and securing financial stability.

To fully capture expectations for high school graduates, state policymakers, education leaders, employers, and other community stakeholders should define metrics for youth thriving and learner success, potentially through tools such as the Portrait of a Graduate.⁷³ State leaders should also consider the skills that will help graduates adapt and succeed in a rapidly changing economy, especially as AI increasingly impacts on the future of work and reshapes society. This process could then inform a realignment of high school graduation requirements to ensure that learners are set up to succeed and thrive upon graduation.

Upon implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015, a majority of states chose at least one college and career readiness indicator for high school accountability.⁷⁴ Many of those states also embarked on a process of updating how high school accountability metrics were communicated to learners and families through school report cards and other means. The Commission believes these metrics can be improved to clearly define and communicate readiness across employment in the labor market, enlistment in the military, engagement in service, and enrollment in college. This change would allow learners and families to understand the quality and value of their high school education.

“Are [employers] looking at their English and math grades or whatever to determine if that’s a successful student for work-based learning? To me, it’s about the employability skills, collaboration, critical thinking, the resilience, the durable or soft skills. The current K–12 system doesn’t measure or have any way of indicating what success looks like within that.”

—K–12 ADMINISTRATOR IN INDIANA

 North Dakota’s Choice Ready Framework outlines the essential skills, knowledge, and experiences that all learners will graduate with, including financial literacy and community service, and defines indicators of college, career, and military readiness.⁷⁵ High schools are then held accountable for the growth in the number of their graduates who demonstrate readiness to undertake at least two of the three pathways. By aligning definitions for the success of high school graduates with the state’s school accountability system, North Dakota has increased coherence and transparency for learners and educators alike.

 **THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDS** that state policymakers collaborate with education leaders, employers, and community stakeholders to define requirements for career, military, service-year, and college readiness and align high school diplomas with these metrics.

III. *Build Partnerships Between Education and Industry to Validate and Demonstrate Competencies*

As employers increasingly seek reliable signals of job-relevant skills, they will need to

work in partnership with educators to create industry-validated signals of the knowledge and skills learners acquire and help learners translate these competencies into future job prospects. In recent years, interest has grown in using learning and employment records (LERs) as tools for documenting individuals’ skills, competencies, and educational experiences across formal and informal settings.⁷⁶ This shift reflects broader changes in the labor market, including increased demand for demonstrable skills, evolving career pathways, and the expansion of alternative education and training opportunities.

 In Massachusetts, Bunker Hill Community College (BHCC) has launched eleven skill badges that certify the competencies learners develop in existing course sequences.⁷⁷ The BHCC Skills Badge program addresses a challenging reality: community college liberal arts majors have historically had a difficult time finishing their associate degrees and translating coursework into positive career outcomes. For this reason, while BHCC faculty identified skills developed in their existing courses, employer partners were invited to shape and attend related workplace scenario workshops to validate learners’ skills and build

employer trust in the skill badges as a credential.

Experiential, project-based, applied learning opportunities are considered a high-impact practice for engaging learners' lifetime knowledge and skills and for assessing their mastery of a particular learning outcome and are a ripe opportunity for partnerships between educators, employers, local leaders, service-year programs, and workforce development programs. Capstone courses and projects can be a valuable opportunity to apply and assess learning and skills that are relevant to certain industries and valued for employment.⁷⁸ Effective capstone courses may include the application of knowledge and skills to a problem-based learning project, which could be a solitary venture or include a project with a community-based organization, or a research project like a written thesis.⁷⁹ If a capstone course is designed in partnership with local employers, it can provide additional value by

allowing learners to demonstrate competencies that align with the career they plan to pursue.



THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDS

that educators collaborate with local employers and industry associations across public and private sectors to embed microcredentials or badges along educational paths to create a mechanism for learners to validate and communicate their competencies for future education, employment, or service opportunities.



Strategy 3: Clarify and Grow Multiple Pathways to Postsecondary Opportunities to Empower Learner Choice

In listening sessions across the country, commissioners heard that learners “cannot be what they cannot see,” and this observation ultimately speaks to the impact of early exposure to a variety of career fields that learners may not otherwise know exist. Learners consistently reported that their understanding of college, service, and careers is largely limited to the paths pursued by family members, people in their communities, or what they see online, leaving them without a full picture of the steps required to enter those fields. This narrow exposure restricts learners’ sense of what is possible, limits their agency, and makes it difficult to envision future options. In many cases, delayed or inconsistent career awareness means learners miss early opportunities to align coursework and experiences with their evolving strengths, interests, and values. They also lack structured opportunities to explore the wide range of careers that exist within a single field. Teachers emphasized that learners often do not fully understand the economic mobility associated with postsecondary education or training, further compounding these challenges. As a result, learners frequently do not have the guidance, exposure, or mentorship needed to clarify their interests and make informed decisions about future education, training, and career pathways.

To be meaningfully empowered to make choices about their futures, learners need to have actionable information about their options for career fields, colleges, and service opportunities. One of the best ways to learn about these options is through hands-on experiences in a nurturing and developmentally appropriate environment with well-trained and supported advisers and mentors. In recent years, a movement to “blur the lines” between grades 11 and

14 has encouraged education and workforce systems to rethink learners’ experiences in high school and build new connections between high school, college, and workplaces.⁸⁰

Middle and high school grades are important times for learners to develop their sense of self and explore their interests and aptitudes. Exposure to multiple postsecondary paths needs to start much earlier in most learners’

journeys so that they are positioned to experience and participate in early career, college, and service opportunities in the latter half of their high school years. Participation in multiple postsecondary paths should continue after high school graduation as learners enter the workforce, enroll in college, enlist in the military, and/or participate in service-year programs. Expanding the on-ramps to postsecondary education and training will continue to be necessary as lifelong learning is foundational to helping workers successfully adapt to a quickly evolving economy.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Expand Awareness, Exploration, and Participation in Activities Connected to Career, College, and Service

Learners and families have varying levels of familiarity with postsecondary systems, financial aid processes, and workforce pathways, which can make navigating decisions about college, training programs, service, or employment more complex. Addressing these barriers requires intentional support systems, well-trained and -informed high school counselors and advisers, expanded partnerships with postsecondary institutions and employers, and a coordinated approach that integrates career awareness, exploration, and planning throughout learners' educational journeys. As children answer questions about what they want to be when they grow up, they may naturally transition from kindergarten dreams of going to outer space to middle school aspirations of standing in an operating room. However, to be set up for success, their career choices should be informed by their interests, values, and aptitudes, as well as the availability and stability of desired jobs in their local labor market.

The durable and technical skills that employers value can be developed in classrooms and through experiences outside the classroom, such as military service and service-year programs. Evidence shows that military veterans are more likely to have postsecondary degrees, to stay in their jobs in the first six months, and to have eight of employers' top ten most-needed skills.⁸¹ Alumni of service-year programs are more likely to pursue a bachelor's degree and enter a variety of careers with higher salaries than their peers.⁸² Whichever path they choose, to realize agency in the choice, learners need to develop valuable skills and have early and persistent exposure to and experiences in a variety of career fields and postsecondary paths.

I. Support Discovery of Aptitudes, Interests, Strengths, and Values

Throughout elementary and secondary school, students develop their sense of self and begin to understand their own strengths, interests, and values as they are exposed to different subject areas, learning activities, and extra-curricular experiences. Often, learners benefit from a guided conversation with a teacher, counselor, or other trusted adult to examine their aptitudes. As they get older, learners start to connect their strengths and interests to potential career paths. Schools need to provide structured opportunities for learners to explore their aptitudes, strengths, interests, and values through age-appropriate career exploration and real-world learning experiences that expose learners to a broad range of industries and professions. This approach should help learners understand that many career fields contain diverse roles aligned with different talents and pathways. Our education system can help learners refine their interests over

time, develop informed aspirations, and better prepare them for the education and training required for future opportunities by integrating career exploration into classroom instruction and connecting learners with mentors, employers, and community partners.

A promising practice in many communities is the development of a true learner profile that begins early in the educational journey and evolves into an actionable plan by the time students reach high school. At key transition points, such as the move from elementary to middle school, middle to high school, and again during the junior year of high school, students meet with a support team that may include the student, a teacher, and a school counselor. During these meetings, learners reflect on how their strengths, interests, and values have developed as they have experienced new courses, activities, and career exploration opportunities. Rather than focus solely on meeting graduation requirements, this process helps students build a personalized learner profile that gradually transforms into a clear and actionable plan for life after graduation.

While this level of individualized exploration and advising may be ideal, it is currently not feasible for many districts that do not have the human capital and other resources to support such a process.



Loudon County Public Schools in Virginia has introduced the SchoolLinks platform for all grade levels to support learners in discovering their interests and strengths and in exploring grade-appropriate activities connected to college and career options.⁸³ As learners use the platform, school counselors and staff are able to more effectively tailor their advising and support to learners' interests and aspirations.

By centering learner voice and ownership, these conversations encourage learners to articulate their aspirations, refine their goals, and identify the postsecondary education, training, service, or career steps they intend to pursue, ensuring that graduation represents not just the completion of high school but the beginning of a purposeful next chapter.



THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDS

that learner self-discovery, connected to career awareness, begin early in a learner's educational journey and continue throughout the K–12 and postsecondary experience.

II. *Bolster Postsecondary and Career Navigation to Facilitate Transition Milestones*

Developing meaningful postsecondary education, service, and career plans requires schools to proactively address a range of challenges and barriers. Many learners lack consistent exposure to a wide range of career pathways and may have limited awareness of the education, credentials, or experiences required to pursue them. In rural communities, geographic isolation, limited access to industry partners, transportation barriers, and fewer local postsecondary opportunities can narrow learners' perceptions of what is possible. Schools in rural and urban settings also face structural challenges in providing this exposure, including limited counselor-to-student ratios, time constraints within the school day for individualized advising, and inequities in access to career exploration tools, internships, and dual-credit opportunities. Supported by philanthropy, nonprofits and community-based organizations can provide high-quality resources to aid learners' exploration of available pathways and supplement

the more limited human capital capacity of districts with fewer resources.⁸⁴

Learners need more than standalone conversations or disjointed information about postsecondary options for career advising to truly be successful. Consistent career exploration, intentional work-based learning experiences, and community partnerships can give learners the exposure they need to plan for their futures. To optimize support for learners and ensure success as they define the next steps in their postsecondary journey, they should be supported in developing a plan that outlines their career aspirations and the postsecondary education and training needed to pursue that path. Our education system should prepare learners for their first jobs and future opportunities, as well as inform them of the further credentials or training that may be available throughout their careers as part of their lifelong learning journey.



A promising practice across Indiana is the strong partnership between local school districts and Ivy Tech Community College to support learners in developing meaningful postsecondary and career plans. Through coordinated efforts between K–12 schools and Ivy Tech campuses, learners in both small rural districts and larger urban systems can access dual-credit courses, career and technical education pathways, industry-recognized credentials, and early college opportunities while still in high school. These partnerships help bridge geographic and resource gaps by allowing districts to leverage Ivy Tech's statewide network, facilities, and faculty expertise. While larger districts are able to scale opportunities across multiple high schools and career centers, rural districts that collaborate with Ivy Tech can expand access to programs and career exploration experiences

that may not otherwise be available locally. Working closely with Ivy Tech advisers, faculty, and workforce partners allows school districts to help learners understand credential pathways, align coursework with career goals, and build clear transitions from high school into college, technical training, apprenticeships, or the workforce. This coordinated approach strengthens talent pipelines and ensures that learners across diverse communities are better prepared for both immediate employment and lifelong learning.

All learners should develop and continually update a postsecondary plan through structured advising and career exploration experiences that help identify their strengths, interests, and long-term goals while mapping the credentials, education, service, and work-based experiences required to pursue their chosen pathway.⁸⁵ Schools, colleges, and service organizations should work collaboratively with employers, workforce agencies, and postsecondary institutions to ensure learners have access to high-quality career counseling, labor market information, and experiential learning opportunities such as internships, apprenticeships, and dual-credit programs. Embedding career planning into the educational experience and revisiting these plans regularly can help learners make informed decisions, adapt to evolving workforce needs, and transition more successfully into meaningful employment and lifelong learning.



THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDS that all high school and college learners and service-year program participants develop, revisit, and update a career plan, including any necessary further education and training, upon graduation or completion of their program, as they experience career-connected education and as their interests change.

III. *Align Career-Connected Experiences with Education and Workforce Standards*

Career-connected education experiences will look different depending on the learners' grade level, program of study, and career interests. Examples of high-quality, career-connected education include apprenticeships, internships, and career and technical education (CTE). Examples that may be appropriate for younger students but are not considered as meaningful for older learners are career days, career fairs, and job shadowing. Learners may also work on specific projects or challenges sponsored by industry partners.

The Commission heard from employers that they would like to see career-related content and skills taught in schools, and it heard from teachers and administrators that they do not have expertise across a wide swath of professions. Career-connected education should be aligned with related instruction and with advising that can help learners understand the appropriate course sequence and further career-connected experiences that would advance their opportunities in a given field. Employers should partner with educators to

align career-connected educational experiences with current industry standards, especially for high-need occupations.



Genesys Works in Tulsa, Oklahoma, not only provides high school students with paid internships but sets them up for success with skills training before they enter a workplace and with aligned advising throughout their experience.⁸⁶ Launched in 2023, the Tulsa program has built partnerships with twelve local employers and serves a majority of low-income learners who go on to be first-generation college goers.

Historically, high school education has been arbitrarily separated into either college preparation or vocational training. However, this traditional bifurcation has been breaking down, particularly with the growth of CTE course offerings in website design and digital media and the integration of degree apprenticeships at colleges and universities. Participating in CTE should not preclude learners from meeting college admissions requirements. Accelerating pathways to college and career for CTE participants can include connecting to apprenticeship pathways and earning college credit through dual enrollment.⁸⁷ Educators

“So our school, we actually have a program called work-based learning. It allows the students to go to school for three or four periods and then we get to leave the other half a day and we go to work. . . . For me, I want to be an elementary teacher. We actually have a preschool in our building, so that’s what I do. I did that so I could see if that’s actually something I want to do after high school.”

—HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT IN INDIANA

“Fresh out of middle school, taking college classes, it’s pretty stressful. But what has helped me so much was the guidance I was given by the people from my high school, and then also. . . we have specific success coaches for dual-credit students. . . . They helped me understand how I can engage with the college, which helped me feel more belonging and also promoted [sic] me to do well.”

—LEARNER AT A COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN TEXAS

and local employers can collaborate to align CTE coursework with industry standards so that learners graduate with both the durable and technical skills highly valued by colleges and employers.



THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDS

that K–12 and higher education leaders provide learners with career-connected education experiences and that educators and employers collaborate to cohost or accredit CTE pathways to earn college credit.

IV. Connect Dual Enrollment to Postsecondary Plans

Note: In some states, dual-enrollment programs that enroll high school students in college courses for college credit are called “concurrent enrollment.” In this report, we will refer to these programs as “dual enrollment.”

One of the most direct ways to accelerate learners’ journeys to college is to expand dual enrollment at two-year and four-year colleges and universities so that all high school students have access to high-quality instruction at a college level. School districts and institutions

of higher education need to work together to ensure that dual-enrollment credits are transferrable to local colleges and can be used toward core requirements rather than solely counting as elective credits. Dual-enrollment courses taught on college campuses can be especially valuable for the exposure that learners get to a college environment.

During Commission listening sessions, high school students taking dual-enrollment courses at the local community college talked about how they were less intimidated by the idea of attending college after spending some time on campus. This kind of exposure demystifies the college environment, especially for first-generation college goers, and increases their likelihood of applying to college.⁸⁸



In Colorado, credits earned through dual enrollment are transferrable to any public university in the state.⁸⁹ Local districts have authority over which courses fulfill their high school graduation requirements in mathematics, reading, and writing and enter into a cooperative agreement with an institution of higher education. School districts use their per pupil funding to pay the tuition fees to the college or university, allowing learners to take

these courses tuition-free and potentially increasing their interest in college matriculation due to lower overall costs of earning a degree.

A challenge many learners face when considering dual enrollment is understanding which courses align with their interests and potential program of study and whether the course credits will transfer to a local college. Informed advising either by high school counselors or advisers provided by the college is important to help avoid “random acts of dual enrollment” that do not ultimately accelerate a learner’s postsecondary education journey. Such advising can help learners avoid the common frustrations, from confusing or expensive processes for requesting transcripts to misunderstandings about how the credit may apply to a future degree, that cause a student to stop out or drop out.

 **THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDS** that high schools and two-year and four-year institutions of higher education collaborate to provide dual-enrollment opportunities and aligned advising that will meaningfully contribute to accelerating all learners’ college paths, which can be further supported and incentivized by state policy.

V. *Expand High-Quality Service Learning and Service-Year Opportunities*

Service learning is an integrated experience for learners in which a curriculum-relevant community service project is codeveloped by educators and community members to address a local challenge or need. Service projects should be aligned to learning outcomes and include related classroom instruction.⁹⁰ Service-aligned learning provides civic engagement

benefits by connecting learners with community members and exposing them to new people and different needs within their community while also developing skills that will help them succeed in future education and career settings. Service projects also enhance understanding of learning standards by applying them to an activity in real-life settings beyond the confines of a classroom. Experiential learning projects are most beneficial to learners and communities when codesigned to meet local community needs and sustained as long-term partnerships between the educational institution and community-based organization.⁹¹

Schools can lower barriers to participating in service activities already organized by community-based organizations by allowing learners flexibility in the time they spend inside the school building, supporting such organizations in gaining approval to host and work with learners, and providing teachers with resources to provide related instruction aligned to learning standards and the service activity. During a listening session at a career academy, learners shared that they highly valued the projects they completed each year with nonprofit organizations in the community. These projects gave the learners a sense of accomplishment by developing an idea alongside a community leader, applying their learning and competencies outside the classroom, and serving a need in their community. Incorporating service-year positions alongside college enrollment offers the same benefits as service learning while also reducing the overall cost of tuition through education awards and contributing to learner retention.⁹²

Postsecondary schools can further embed these opportunities by fostering learner and faculty participation in publicly engaged research collaborations with their local

“We learn how to ideate; we learn how to listen and interact with people and draw meaningful conclusions and ideas from them.”

—LEARNER AT FOUR-YEAR, PRIVATE COLLEGE IN MASSACHUSETTS

communities. Colleges and universities can also create (or partner with community-based organizations to create) service-year positions for learners to develop real-world skills, social capital, and purpose alongside their course-work. Integrating service-year positions into a college path can also provide learners with valuable earn-and-learn opportunities, paid work that is relevant to their studies and interests. Schools can also award credit for these established programs to accelerate degree attainment.



When faculty and learners engage with local partners in the cocreation of service-year positions, the benefits are widespread and mutual, especially when the participants are from the very communities they aim to serve. Emerging and successful models include the California College Corps, active throughout the University of California and California State University systems, and the Empire State Service Corps across the State University of New York system.⁹³ Participants receive financial benefits in the form of stipends and education awards, alongside professional experience in areas such as K–12 education, climate action, food insecurity, and other community-identified priorities. These programs are designed to generate reciprocal value: students build career-relevant skills, gain civic experience, and reduce financial strain, while communities benefit from expanded service capacity and targeted support in high-need areas.



THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDS

that K–12 schools, institutions of higher education, and employers organize and sponsor service-learning opportunities directly or establish partnerships with community-based organizations to provide more service experiences to learners and employees.

RECOMMENDATION 7

Foster Effective and Efficient Journeys to Postsecondary Thriving, including Reengagement and Nonlinear Pathways

For many years, the common assumption has been that students attend high school, graduate, and then enroll at a four-year college or university to receive a bachelor's degree. That assumption is outdated. The Commission finds that multiple avenues exist for learners to pursue higher education. For some, a well-designed direct-admission program encourages the pursuit of higher education simply by eliminating the application requirement. For those who choose a two-year college, dual or concurrent enrollment with a four-year college or university, as well as a clear path for transferring credits, should be available. The goal is for learners to gain better visibility into their higher education opportunities and to have maximum transparency about how to use the credits they earn.

In today's labor market, a postsecondary credential provides an incredible boost to a person's lifetime earnings, employer-provided benefits, career stability, and various well-being indicators.⁹⁴ In recognition of this reality, forty states have set goals to increase the percentage of adults with postsecondary credentials.⁹⁵ Additionally, at the start of the 2023–2024 school year, more than 43 million Americans had earned some college credit but no degree.⁹⁶ We must find ways to reengage these learners in pursuing postsecondary credentials and honor their prior learning, work experience, and valuable skills.



Many states and individual two-year and four-year institutions of higher education have initiatives to reconnect with and reenroll adults with some college credit. These initiatives primarily focus on communicating the value of reenrolling to attain a credential, helping learners navigate college, providing financial resources to learners, and supporting colleges with technical assistance.⁹⁷ Mississippi's Complete 2 Compete initiative provides both financial aid and navigation coaches for residents who are at least twenty-one years old and who earned some college credit but did not complete their degree program. North Carolina and Pennsylvania formed cohorts of higher education institutions to learn from one another as they worked to increase adult reenrollment. In Massachusetts and Michigan, Reconnect programs provide tuition-free community college access to residents over age twenty-five without a college degree.⁹⁸

I. *Expand Direct Admission Options*

Direct admissions involve colleges and universities sending notification letters to learners that they have been accepted into the institution, without ever needing to fill out an application.

Currently, most direct admissions decisions are based on academic eligibility, determined by high school grade point average and/or standardized test scores, which can perpetuate systemic educational inequities. Direct admissions differ from guaranteed admissions in one key facet: the lack of a required application. Guaranteed admission is sometimes also referred to as “assured admission” because learners who meet eligibility criteria are assured a seat at the higher education institution, but need to complete the typical application process before being accepted.

While direct admission notifications help learners imagine themselves on a college campus, they may not be enough to overcome concerns about whether an individual can afford to go to college. Direct admission notifications should be paired with financial aid information and be consistently evaluated to assess their impact on enrollment decisions.



Tennessee's Direct Admissions program, led by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission, automatically offers eligible high school seniors admission to participating in-state colleges and technical institutions based on existing academic records, eliminating the need for traditional applications. While many states have similar direct admission programs, Tennessee is conducting a pilot evaluation on the impact of pairing direct admission notifications with personalized financial aid information, with some learners receiving both admissions offers and estimated aid packages.⁹⁹

In addition to often lacking financial aid information, direct admission notifications are not necessarily sufficient to help learners find their best postsecondary option. In some states, learners may receive direct admission to a

community or technical college and not realize they could be competitive for a four-year college should they choose to apply. Consequently, state direct admission notifications should clearly present all the postsecondary options available to the student based on their academic eligibility.



THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDS

that states expand direct admission eligibility beyond standardized test scores and automatically notify high school students who are accepted into specified higher education institutions. The notifications should include 1) financial aid information and 2) information about other postsecondary education, training, and service opportunities for which the learner may be eligible upon application.

II. *Facilitate Smooth Credit Transfer and Grant Credit for Prior Learning, Service, and Work*

Between public institutions of higher education within the same state, so-called articulation agreements outline how credits transfer between institutions. Credit transfer can increase persistence and completion of a four-year college degree. Some institutions have offered the guaranteed transfer of an associate degree to a four-year institution when learners meet certain conditions of academic achievement. For such programs to be successful, faculty should be at the center of any efforts to design articulation agreements, because meaningful credit transfer will result in credits counting toward required courses for general education prerequisites and/or courses in a major program of study. Courses that have the same title do not necessarily cover the same material. Higher education leaders should create the conditions for faculty to crosswalk their learning standards, competencies, and

coursework to build articulation agreements for meaningful credit transfers. To increase the impact of these agreements, state leaders can work with faculty across all public higher education institutions to develop core general education courses that are guaranteed to transfer to all other public institutions.



Florida's statewide articulation agreement, also known as 2+2, establishes a structured pathway between public colleges and universities, guaranteeing associate degree holders admission to a bachelor's program, though not necessarily to a specific institution or major.¹⁰⁰ A defining feature of this model is the universal acceptance of completed general education requirements, ensuring that credits earned as part of an associate in arts degree fully transfer and satisfy lower-division general education requirements at receiving institutions. This policy reduces credit loss, lowers excess credit accumulation, and can contribute to timely degree completion for transfer students.

Another mechanism to smooth the transfer experience for learners is for higher education institutions to create dual-admission agreements that allow for contemporaneous enrollment at two institutions and increased services for participating learners. When two- and four-year institutions of higher education enter into these agreements, learners are accepted into both institutions with a plan to complete preliminary courses at the two-year college. Upon meeting certain conditions, they then face a simpler transfer process to complete their studies at the four-year college.

A related mechanism is the "reverse transfer," when a learner who began their studies at a two-year college transfers to a four-year institution before completing their associate degree

requirements.¹⁰¹ Smooth transfer of credits earned at the four-year school to a two-year college can then result in the learner receiving an associate degree while they either continue their studies or, if they have stopped pursuing a bachelor's degree, avoid leaving school with some college credit and no credential. These agreements can be an important foundation for transfer partnerships between two- and four-year higher education institutions.

Finally, learners returning to college after time spent in the workforce, military, or a service-year program often desire credit for college-level learning they have experienced outside a classroom setting, such as in workforce training or the workplace. Credit for such experiences can be an important boost in accelerating the path to a college degree or other industry-valued credential. These programs can reduce the cost of and increase access to postsecondary education, while increasing a learner's ability to obtain a four-year college degree. Like articulation agreements, however, a careful evaluation should be performed to ensure that college credit is appropriately given.¹⁰²



THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDS

the creation, expansion, and support of systems that facilitate credit transfer through mechanisms such as articulation agreements, dual admission programs, reverse transfers, and the provision of credit for prior learning and work experience.

III. *Grow and Embed Credentials of Value Aligned to High-Demand Occupations*

For cross-sector partners to successfully collaborate, they need to have clearly defined, shared goals and a common understanding of benchmarks to measure progress. State policymakers

must provide clear definitions of credentials of value and set measures to determine local high-demand industries and occupations so as to facilitate educational partners' contributions to state workforce development goals.¹⁰³ Leaders should also work across state lines to build coherence across regional industries and economies. If employers and educators collaborate to provide learners with information about pathways into local high-demand occupations, they are more likely to be motivated to take the necessary steps toward more secure employment.



Accelerating Opportunity: Kansas (AO-K) is a career pathways initiative that integrates adult basic education with technical training to help low-skilled adults earn postsecondary credentials while improving foundational skills.¹⁰⁴ A central feature of the model is its emphasis on embedding industry-recognized, stackable credentials within programs aligned to high-demand sectors, ensuring that participants acquire skills with clear labor market value. By partnering closely with employers and community and technical colleges, AO-K aligns curriculum and training with regional workforce needs, particularly in fields such as manufacturing, health care, and information technology. This approach is designed to accelerate participants' progression into employment and support longer-term economic mobility through credentials that are both portable and responsive to evolving industry demand.

Higher education institutions should also review their current programs of study and, in collaboration with employer partners, embed industry-valued credentials into existing degree paths, where applicable. To support the ever-changing economy and provide more opportunities for lifelong learning, higher

education must expand the number of non-degree credentials they offer and consider offering more credentials needed for local high-demand occupations that are aligned with current industry standards, particularly in rural or other underserved areas.¹⁰⁵ Partnering with service-year programs to award credentials for experiences that prepare individuals for these high-demand occupations can expand access to credentials for more learners. Earning these credentials along a degree path can enable learners to secure jobs in their field of interest earlier and increase the overall value of their education.

Policymakers can also provide incentives and reduce barriers for credentialing in high-demand occupations to help colleges and universities redesign programs of study to more closely match local workforce needs and support learners in pursuing those credentials. Incentives for learners to pursue these programs of study could include lower or no-cost tuition, loan forgiveness, or cost-sharing among institutions, employers, service-year programs, and learners.



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establishing cross-sector partnerships among state leaders, higher education institutions, service-year programs, and employers to create a responsive feedback loop that supports a continuous cycle of upskilling that adapts to changes in industry needs over time and transparently communicates opportunities in high-demand occupations to learners.



Strategy 4: Support Learner Thriving in Education, Work, and Life

Learners' basic needs must be met for them to be able to learn and work. As places where learners spend a significant amount of time, K–12 and post-secondary educational institutions can play a significant role in connecting learners and their families with social services and material goods they may need, such as healthy food, clothing, and other supplies. Access to mental and physical health care is also key to promoting school attendance and lifelong success. These types of supports create environments that allow learners to thrive.

RECOMMENDATION 8 Meet Learners' Basic Needs

Learners' education is impacted by their societal and community context and mental and physical health. Many learners, especially those who are not receiving financial support from their families or those who are making a career shift, may face financial insecurity while pursuing postsecondary education and training. As learners and workers face a rising cost of living, growing personal debt, and mismatched housing supply, concerns about affording essential goods and services are top of mind while considering options for education, training, service, and career after high school.¹⁰⁶ When learners are experiencing food or housing insecurity, transportation disruptions, or health challenges, they are more likely to be absent from class or work and stop or drop out of their program.¹⁰⁷

I. *Streamline and Expand Wraparound Supports on Campus and in Communities*

School-based wraparound supports, whether in a K–12 or higher education setting, can be crucial for meeting learners' basic needs and helping them be ready to learn. Such wraparound or integrated student supports describe a model in which a school-employed coordinator helps to assess learners in need and connect them to various services they may be eligible for and benefit from, including mental health care or housing and nutrition assistance.¹⁰⁸ A dedicated coordinator in this position can be informed about and familiar with the appropriate contacts at other social service agencies and community-based organizations and can serve as a trusted liaison for families who need additional support.

“As long as I’m not homeless, I’m good. That’s really it. . . .
Have a job that’s stable and I’m fine. That’s really it.”

—HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT IN PENNSYLVANIA

Streamlining referrals and eligibility applications for these services can remove significant time and informational barriers for learners and families in need.



A promising model for coordinated provision of wraparound services in K–12 schools is community schools, an integrated, student-centered approach that situates schools as hubs for academic instruction alongside health, social, and family support services, typically implemented through a full-time community school coordinator position in partnership with community-based organizations and social service agencies. One such program, the California Community Schools Partnership, was shown to improve attendance and academic proficiency, and to do so most effectively among historically underserved learners.¹⁰⁹

Food insecurity can be a significant barrier to learners. If learners are hungry or feel pressure to work to afford food while in school, their ability to focus in class and dedicate time and attention to schoolwork may be compromised. Some K–12 schools partner with local food pantries and will drop off a bag of prepackaged meals or groceries in learners’ classrooms or lockers before they leave on Friday in case they do not have consistent access to food over the weekend. Many colleges have food pantries on campus available to learners.



THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDS the provision and streamlining of school-based wraparound supports, including the expansion of the community schools model and campus food pantries.

II. *Expand Access to Community- and School-Based Behavioral, Mental, and Physical Health Care*

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, Americans ages fifteen to twenty-five face increasing rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. At the college level, learners may continue to grapple with academic demands, financial stress, social isolation, and the pressures of transitioning to adulthood. The “Healthy Minds Study,” for instance, reported a jump in depression rates among college learners from 22 percent in 2019 to 41 percent by 2023.¹¹⁰ Long-standing pressures include a focus on performing well academically, navigating complex peer relationships, and meeting societal expectations, which can be amplified by financial, food, and housing insecurity.

Locating health care services in educational settings can improve access and reduce barriers due to inequities in health care coverage and provider availability by geography.¹¹¹ Efforts to further normalize and destigmatize behavioral and mental health care are also critical to supporting all learners in meeting their basic needs.



The Youth Mental Health Corps is a promising model of cross-sector partnership among schools, mental health providers, service-year programs, youth, and philanthropy, currently active in eleven states. This model meets learners in need where they are, at schools, community-based programs, or community health centers, to provide peer support. Serving as a navigator with the corps also provides service and work experience to young people ages eighteen to twenty-four who are interested in exploring a career in health care.¹¹²



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increasing access to behavioral, mental, and physical health care by providing more health services at educational institutions and developing partnerships with local health centers and providers to refer learners to appropriate providers.

RECOMMENDATION 9

Advise and Mentor Learners, Alumni, and Workers

The landscape of postsecondary education and career options can be overwhelming for learners and families. Pointing learners in the direction of a door and telling them to open it and walk through is not enough. Across the United States, education and workforce systems offer up hundreds of doors without clear labels, paths to reach them, or a view of what might be on the other side. Aiming for a door only to realize you do not fit in, cannot schedule classes around your work shifts, or are not interested in the field can be an expensive and time-consuming mistake.

Advising that is aligned to a learner's interests, strengths, and values can be life-changing if it helps them find the best postsecondary path. In the twenty-first century, college and career advising can take many shapes, be it a person, an online portal, or an AI chatbot. As learners and employees navigate a lifelong career and education journey, an innovative solution for advising could be a system in which a learner builds a strong, trusting relationship with an adviser who might not be employed by a specific educational institution and who could, alongside AI-enabled tools, continue to advise that learner throughout their education and career.

I. *Facilitate Partnerships to Improve High-Quality Advising in High School and College*

Most high schools do not have sufficient capacity to support college and career advising for learners. In the 2023–2024 school year, only three states—Hawaii, New Hampshire, and Vermont—met the recommended student-to-counselor ratio of 250:1; the national average was 376:1.¹¹³ High-poverty schools and schools with a majority of learners of color are less likely to be well-resourced with counselors and have greater need for additional counselors to reduce their caseloads and provide better advising services to support learners in their career and college exploration.¹¹⁴

To address this supply challenge, some schools have created partnerships for college admissions officers to provide college advising services at local, lower-resourced high schools. However, this model has significant capacity constraints because college admissions officers can visit only a limited number of local schools.



In Washington, D.C., some high school principals allocate funding to a full-time college and career coordinator position to lead schoolwide capacity-building efforts on advising.¹¹⁵ This dedicated position supports students in grades 9 to 12 with developing a postsecondary plan and organizes schoolwide events to explore college and career options. This additional staff capacity can increase personalized advising and help learners navigate registering for college entrance exams and completing financial aid and scholarship applications.

Less costly and effective methods for growing advising capacity in high schools include “train the trainer” models, facilitated networks of advisers, and additional capacity provided

by service programs. Too few high school counselors are trained to be effective college and career advisers and have other duties, such as responding to mental and behavioral health crises. Learners may also have stronger relationships with specific teachers, coaches, or other adults whom they see more frequently than their school counselor. Facilitated networks of advisers can include digital training resources and access to subject-matter experts to provide additional support as needed.



THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDS

that education leaders across K–12 and postsecondary education systems collaborate to ensure that high school teachers and counselors have information about and understand the full breadth of local colleges and career and service opportunities for their learners.

II. *Leverage Online Tools to Support All Paths and Complement In-Person Advising*

Given shortages of school counselors and staff trained in college and career advising, learners and families would benefit from access to technology-enabled tools to provide more information about potential postsecondary paths, including nonlinear paths and options for reengagement and transparency about potential outcomes. Online platforms and tools could assist learners and families in understanding college and career options, and these tools should be seen as a complement to efforts to increase the capacity of in-person advising.



Some states have created websites and portals that detail various career pathways and connect educational opportunities that align with the state's high-demand

occupations. One example is Delaware Pathways.¹¹⁶ This online tool allows learners to explore the various career pathways offered at middle and high schools and draw connections to relevant career-connected learning and postsecondary education options.¹¹⁷



Some portals walk learners through a series of guides based on their grade level to inform them of steps they can take to better prepare for postsecondary education and to help them explore various career fields. One of these portals, My Texas Future, also hosts the ApplyTexas college application and the state's direct admission program.¹¹⁸ This one-stop shop allows middle and high school students as well as adult learners to explore education and career options and easily take the next step to apply to any public university and many community and private colleges.

These sites are most beneficial when they detail the education and training needed and average wages and benefits in the career field. States can also provide online guidance regarding postsecondary educational options and service-year programs. Online advising can be made available for learners to use alongside in-person advising to further inform their postsecondary choices, with priority given to tools that maintain data privacy and offer age-appropriate content for minors.



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that state education policymakers, educators, and industry associations collaborate to provide information on various higher education, service, and career paths, including the postsecondary education and training necessary to advance in each career, and to develop online advising tools that are easily accessible for learners, families, counselors, and educators.

III. *Embed Mentoring Throughout High School, College, and Career*

Extensive research illustrates the numerous benefits of having a coach or mentor in supporting learners' career planning, job-search behaviors, and job-search self-efficacy.¹¹⁹ A central challenge in the U.S. education system is the many transition points as learners move from one school to another, build new relationships, and navigate disparate standards and funding opportunities. Many high school graduates would benefit from programming such as alumni cohorts, career coaching, and other support as they continue their postsecondary journeys.

 College Track, one of the nation's most comprehensive college completion programs, provides ten years of support to first-generation learners from underresourced communities in high school, through college, and after graduation. College Track continues to host regional events for alumni to connect to one another, to current learners, and to industry leaders.¹²⁰ This example of a nonprofit organization bridging critical transition points for learners demonstrates the value of sustained, trusted relationships for advising learners as they make decisions about and navigate their postsecondary years.

Several examples of programs that partner college learners with high school students, such as Math Corps, or campus programs that employ college learners to work with their peers, such as college writing centers, focus on tutoring, coaching, and advising.¹²¹ These types of “near-peer” programs provide dual benefits of short-term academic support for K–12 students, who may be struggling, and exposure to peers who have pursued various postsecondary education and career paths that may influence

the learners' own postsecondary choices, with long-term benefits.

Outside classrooms, learners also benefit from sustained relationship building with mentors, personally through extracurricular activities in sports or the arts and professionally as they begin to explore their target industry of interest. Community-based organizations and extracurricular activities can be an important venue for building long-lasting relationships across school and life transitions. Having a mentor who encourages learners to pursue their goals is an important college experience linked to life preparedness.¹²² In the workplace, mentorship or, even better, sponsorship can greatly increase an employee's motivation to navigate challenges and can develop into reciprocal growth for both the mentor and mentee over time.¹²³

 **THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDS** that high schools, higher education institutions, service-year programs, and other programs for learners develop alumni cohorts that are supported by ongoing mentorship, the sharing of relevant information throughout transition points, and career coaching. The Commission also recommends that school districts and higher education institutions collaborate to create and expand mentorship, sponsorship, tutoring, and other programs that connect college learners to local K–12 students to foster near-peer relationships.

RECOMMENDATION 10 **Improve and Expand Access to Financial Aid**

Affordability remains a large concern for learners and families considering postsecondary education options, as some schools raise the sticker price of tuition and fees even while

the net price of attendance has been falling.¹²⁴ During commission listening sessions, learners from lower-income families shared that they not only felt pressure to support themselves and their families in the short term with a job during and after high school but saw obstacles in the way of their further education and future earning potential. High school students repeatedly said that they did not feel prepared to make postsecondary decisions because they did not understand the financial implications of different options. Both high school and college learners felt they would have benefited from learning the financial basics of “adulting,” such as opening a bank account, buying a car, and renting an apartment during their educational journeys. Financial education and literacy related to various aspects of education, work, and life after high school are critical components in giving learners more agency in their decisions.

I. *Create and Fund Postsecondary Savings Accounts*

Research shows that, in addition to a more widely understood finding that greater household assets increase a learner’s likelihood of enrolling in college, the possession of liquid assets in a child’s early years, before age ten, has a positive impact on children’s postsecondary opportunities. Further, recent research on college savings accounts opened at birth and seeded with a modest initial deposit has found these accounts are an effective tool to reduce both financial and nonfinancial barriers, with impacts on elementary academic achievement, increased savings for postsecondary opportunity, and increased hopes and expectations for children’s postsecondary education among parents.¹²⁵ Eligibility for these savings accounts could mirror other financial aid programs such as Pell Grants or state-based financial aid.



Across the country, promising city and state government–led pilots are generating strong research and momentum that can and should be built upon, including SEED for Oklahoma Kids and CollegeBound in Saint Paul, Minnesota.¹²⁶ As one of the nation’s largest college-savings programs, the popularity of Pennsylvania’s 529 accounts has been bolstered by state incentives, such as seed funding of \$100 for every baby born or adopted in the state and tax-code provisions making contributions deductible from state income taxes.¹²⁷ A recent study also found a correlation between the number of 501(c)(3) nonprofits in a zip code and increased college-savings behavior, highlighting the importance of community-based organizations partnering with schools and state treasuries to help families navigate these resources.¹²⁸



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the automatic creation of college savings accounts for all children with an initial deposit that will grow over time and that can be used for a wide variety of postsecondary education options.

II. *Develop Financial Literacy and Promote FAFSA Completion*

Information is power, especially when making financial decisions. The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is the key to unlocking public funding for postsecondary education. Schools should develop informational materials and make counselors available to support learners and families in completing and filing the FAFSA form. Trusted community-based organizations, like public libraries, members of the National College Attainment Network, and local United Way branches can also be valuable partners in supporting families with FAFSA completion.

“[For what comes next, I feel] physically and mentally and academically prepared, but not financially.”

—HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT IN PENNSYLVANIA

Transparent and accessible information about financial aid is critical in helping learners and families understand the various options available to them. Many learners and families see the high price tag for college tuition but do not know they may be eligible for financial aid, including grant-based aid.¹²⁹



Currently, thirteen states (Alabama, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, Nebraska, New Jersey, New York, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, and Texas) have passed legislation or incentives that require or encourage high school students to complete the FAFSA before graduation.¹³⁰ These policies often include provisions that allow families to opt out through a formal waiver process. Many states provide alternate forms and state financial aid for immigrant-origin students who are not eligible for federal financial aid.¹³¹ FAFSA completion requirements are intended to increase access to financial aid and promote postsecondary enrollment by ensuring that learners receive information about available federal, state, and institutional aid opportunities.



THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDS that states and school districts ensure that all high school students demonstrate financial literacy, particularly related to their postsecondary plans, and complete the FAFSA or submit a waiver before graduation.

III. *Expand Financial and Emergency Aid*

Federal Pell Grants, financial aid for learners with significant financial need, have been a powerful tool in expanding access to and accelerating the completion of postsecondary degrees. The recent expansion of the Pell Grant program to include short-term education and training programs aligned with high-skill, high-wage, or in-demand occupations will open more doors to opportunity for more people. However, this program faces a funding cliff as costs have risen. Without increased funding, the Pell Grant program will be unable to meet demand.¹³²

Most states also provide financial aid to learners who demonstrate great need. “College promise” programs vary by state but usually cover all tuition costs for some learners to attend an institution of higher education.¹³³ Streamlined eligibility requirements that align with other state-funded benefits and easily understood communications regarding these programs help to reduce barriers for the intended beneficiaries.

States also vary in the funding they provide for dual-enrollment programs, an important pathway to college exposure (see Recommendation 6). Some states directly cover tuition for high school students taking college courses, while other models allow school districts to allocate per-pupil funding to these costs or encourage higher education institutions to subsidize tuition for learners.¹³⁴ However, some states expect families to cover these tuition costs,

which introduces a financial barrier to this path to opportunity.

★ A nationally recognized success, The City University of New York's (CUNY) Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) provides comprehensive support to learners pursuing associate degrees, including financial aid for tuition and fees, textbook stipends, and transit cards alongside personalized advising, tutoring, and career services.¹³⁵ This model is now being replicated and adapted to other state contexts. One such effort called “Boost,” funded by Arnold Ventures, is being implemented across North Carolina community colleges. A key feature of the program is financial support to learners in the form of a monthly stipend, annual funds to pay for textbooks, and tuition and fees for summer courses.¹³⁶

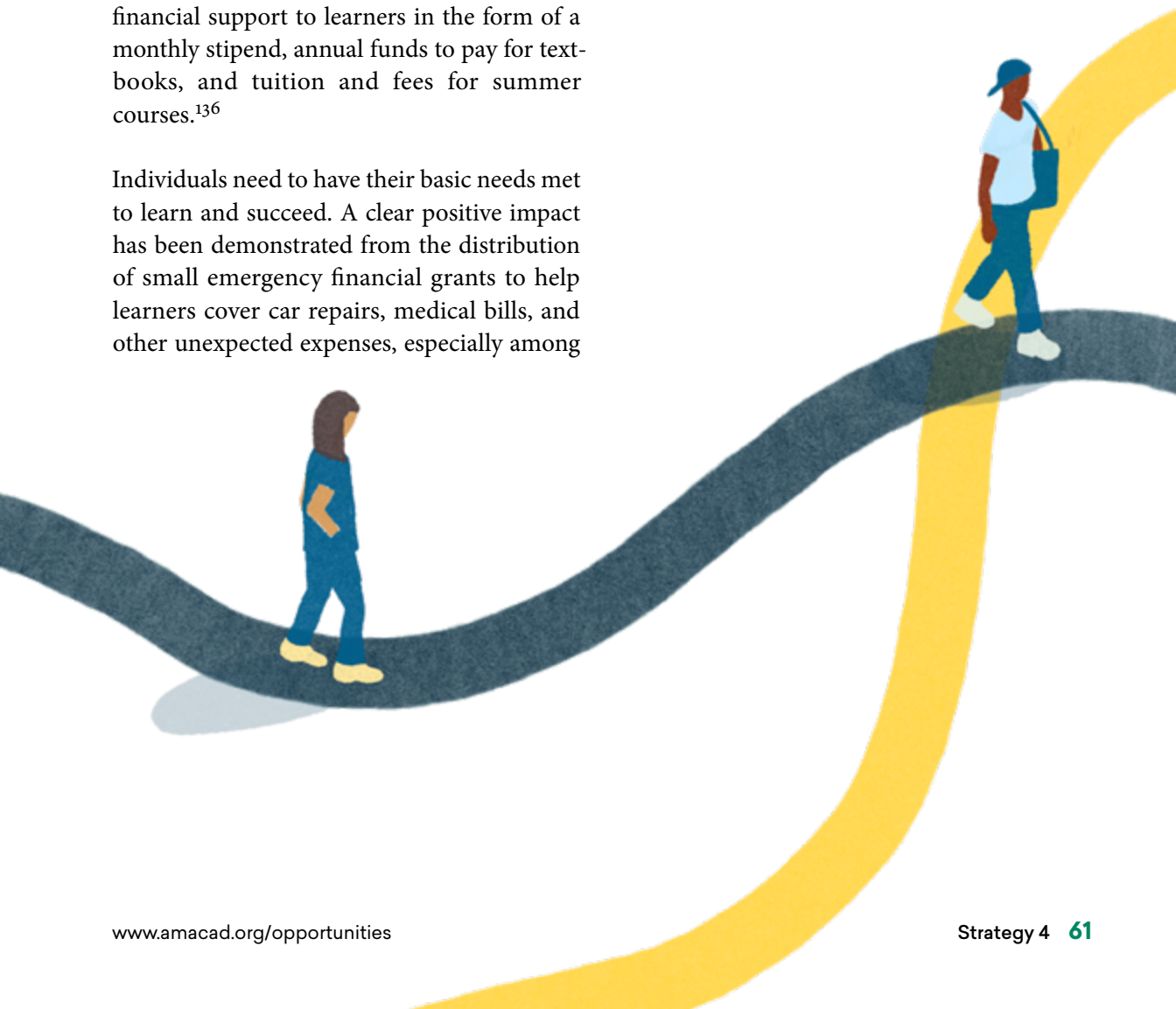
Individuals need to have their basic needs met to learn and succeed. A clear positive impact has been demonstrated from the distribution of small emergency financial grants to help learners cover car repairs, medical bills, and other unexpected expenses, especially among

learners at minority-serving institutions.¹³⁷ The provision of small grants that do not need to be repaid can help learners quickly recover from an unexpected expense, stay on track with class attendance, and focus on their studies.



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increasing the amount and accessibility of federal financial aid like Pell Grants, state financial aid like “college promise” programs, as well as institutional and other funding sources that support learners in pursuing post-secondary education and training. The Commission also recommends increasing funding for and reducing restrictions on emergency aid for learners to support basic needs.



Conclusion

Although the United States has fostered significant innovation and economic growth in recent decades, these gains have not been evenly distributed, with many individuals and communities still facing systemic barriers to opportunity. Expanding access to multiple, high-quality pathways to postsecondary education and training is essential to ensuring that all learners and workers can thrive. Achieving this goal will require state and local officials, K–12 and higher education leaders, employers, philanthropists, and community partners to collaborate across traditional silos and build a coordinated ecosystem that supports individuals in choosing and pursuing the pathways best aligned with their aspirations and needs.

As learners and workers reach new milestones, they often face additional barriers at transition points between schools, employers, and systems. In Commission listening sessions with education administrators and employers, an oft-mentioned barrier to progress was the lack of understanding among traditionally siloed sectors. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, almost forty states had established P-20 councils, meant to coordinate state resources across the continuum of young residents' lives from preschool through careers and college. However, today, fewer than half still exist. The fragmentation of policies, programs, and systems that learners encounter creates barriers to transitioning to the next step in their educational and career journeys.

Learners frequently shared with commissioners that they felt uninformed about their postsecondary options, including not understanding the differences between various institution and credential types. Education leaders should collaborate with learners and local community partners to design messaging campaigns that

provide learners and families with information about their postsecondary options in an accessible manner. Critically, these options also need to be made more affordable and relevant to learners' career paths. Whether a recent high school graduate, a working parent, or a long-tenured employee looking to upskill, learners benefit from career-connected educational experiences.

Through community partnerships with local governments, nonprofit organizations, and public schools, two- and four-year higher education institutions facilitate internships, community-based research projects, and public service programs that expose learners to practical policy challenges and community priorities while also contributing institutional resources and expertise to local initiatives. Such initiatives benefit the local community while connecting learners to potential career opportunities after they graduate.

Alongside experiential learning and participation in accelerated postsecondary pathways,

learners and their families need timely and accessible data to inform their choices. Institutional leaders need accurate data linked to occupation and education information to improve their academic and training programs, address learner needs, and ensure that learners' investments of time and resources lead to meaningful opportunities. Employers benefit from this data to improve their hiring practices and help workers better understand the education and training that can help them to progress in their careers.

The Commission identified promising practices around the country that illustrate ways to advance its recommendations, often in a local context. Many of these ideas have seen some traction. However, significant progress is still required on each of these recommendations to offer opportunities to America's extraordinary and diverse talent pool and to ensure American prosperity and competitiveness. Today, as we navigate greater labor market uncertainty and misconceptions about the value of postsecondary pathways, these recommendations are more urgent than ever.

This Commission urges action by individuals, institutions, and, most important, coalitions of leaders and stakeholders across traditional silos who are committed to improving the lives of their neighbors and helping their communities thrive. By gathering more than one hundred examples of promising practices across the country, this Commission's recommendations point the way forward and provide an illustrated map founded on cross-sector partnerships and programs that center learners in their design. The Commission encourages all stakeholders in the future of American education to learn from these examples (available at www.amacad.org/opportunities), add to them, and build on the promising work that is already occurring in states and local communities across the country.

Nothing is more foundational to American prosperity than the expansion of opportunity by empowering learners to choose the best pathways through education, service, and career training in order to thrive in adulthood.



Appendix A: Commission Members, Staff, and Funders



Members of the Commission on Opportunities After High School and project staff gather for their third meeting at the House of the Academy in Cambridge, MA. Photo by Peter Walton.

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About the Commission

The Commission on Opportunities After High School launched in May 2024.

This Commission is dedicated to shaping a future in which every learner thrives and secures fulfilling livelihoods in a dynamic global economy. We aim to empower learners as active, engaged members of society, focusing on a broad range of skills, including those relevant to the arts and humanities. By identifying obstacles and opening doors for underserved learners, we aim to ensure multiple routes and ongoing supports to lifelong learning opportunities and success for all. This work will allow us to address the challenges learners face and enhance their agency in choosing a path by spotlighting effective avenues from high school to higher education or directly into the workforce. Our recommendations will promote policies and practices that facilitate collaboration across the education and workforce ecosystem to support these pathways, enabling the full participation of our diverse talent pool.

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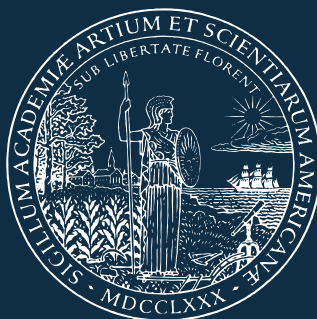
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