



BUILDING PATHWAYS TO POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS FOR LOW INCOME YOUNG MEN OF COLOR:

A COMMUNITY INTERVENTION STRATEGY

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A COMMUNITY INTERVENTION STRATEGY FOR BUILDING SUPPORTED PATHWAYS

This chapter addresses why it is essential to invest in building postsecondary pathways for young men of color who are high school dropouts and highlights examples of innovations in policy, community intervention strategies, program delivery, pedagogy in basic skills, youth development and dropout recovery, and postsecondary education. While advocating for expanded adoption of these best practices, we also want to seed thinking about ways these policies and practices, if better integrated and funded, can bring about more robust and successful dropout recovery and postsecondary education to ensure that more male youths of color gain the skills and credentials necessary to open the door to higher wages and career opportunities.

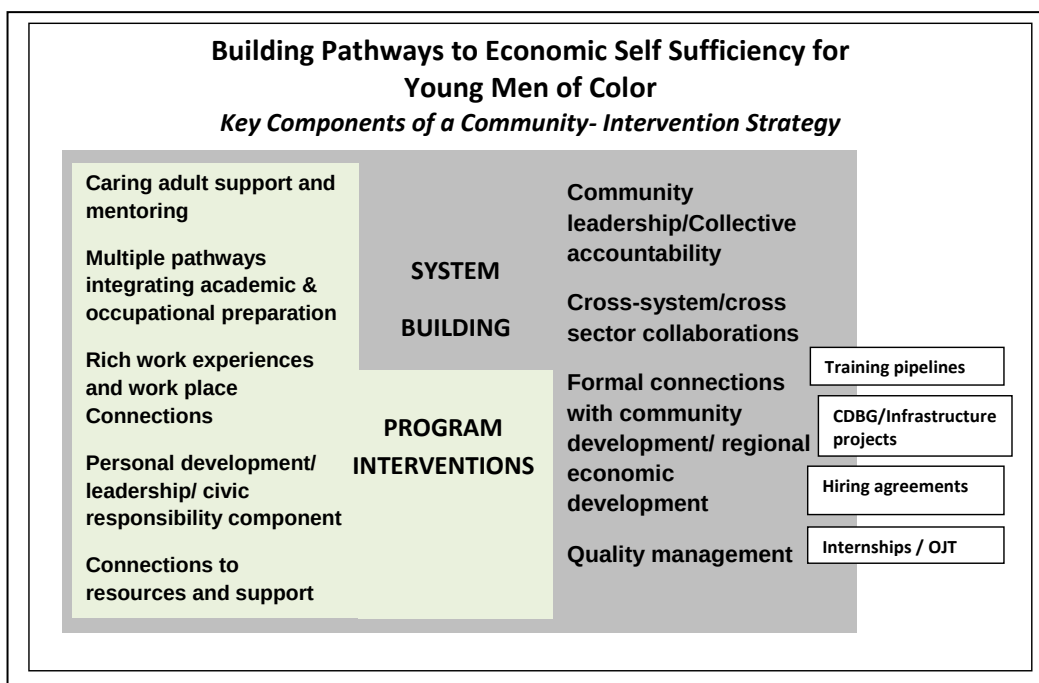
This chapter focuses on low-income young men of color in high-poverty communities. We make the case that if the story to be told a decade from now about the labor-market situation for these young men is to be substantially different from the disturbing narrative of today, we need new strategies. Such strategies must be commensurate with the challenge and must bring together: (1) leadership in the public, private, and community sectors; (2) the expertise of the education, workforce, and youth development professionals; and (3) community resources in a coordinated way to put these young men on track to better futures. We recommend the following strategies:

- Establish a collective community strategy that focuses on putting young men of color on pathways to economic success.
- Set postsecondary success as the predominant focus of interventions for young men of color.
- Create multiple pathways that combine education, training, work experience, and support to help young men, especially those who lack high school diplomas and job skills, achieve successful postsecondary outcomes.
- Leverage regional economic development, community development and revitalization, and infrastructure-building, and “green” energy activities to build pipelines to the emerging opportunities in these areas.

The intent of a community intervention strategy is to assemble resources from multiple systems – education, workforce, and other youth serving systems - along with community based resources to support successful labor market transitions for low-income young men of color. The biggest challenge is that the responsibility for programming for youth who are out of school and out of work without a high school diploma does not fall within the purview of any single publicly funded system. The K-12 system no longer has responsibility for the education of this population, since most have left the system. The academic skills of these youth are far below those required by the higher-education system; thus, this population is not of interest to most postsecondary institutions. The workforce system, which provides training for youth and adults, is governed by a complex set of performance measures, and often does not target services to the most difficult population groups. While many of these young men find their way into the adult-education system, that system falls short by failing to deliver them to the level of academic proficiency needed for labor-market success. Private employers tend not to see this group of young men as potential employees; rather, they often see only their liabilities.

The magnitude and complexity of the issues confronting this population of young men require intentional approaches that go beyond any one program model or service agency. The key elements of a community-intervention strategy fall into two categories: **programmatic interventions**—those delivery approaches that will be necessary to build the skills, abilities, experiences, and career and labor market exposure of the young men; and **system-building**—which focuses on leadership, management, stewardship, and cross-system/cross-sector connections. The diagram below shows the interplay among these important components.

Figure 4



Although this paper focuses on building multiple pathways to postsecondary credentials and labor-market success, it is important to examine each of the components of a successful community intervention strategy individually. Without these strategies, it will be difficult for a multiple-pathways approach to succeed and grow to scale.

Essential Elements for Successful System Building

The **system-building** components that are critical to a successful community-intervention strategy include community leadership/collective accountability, cross-system and cross-sector collaborations, formal connections with community development and regional economic development, and quality management.

1. Community Leadership and Collective Accountability

Leaders can play a vital role in creating a sense of urgency and issuing a call to action on the economic crisis facing young men of color. Having the right people at the table—those who care about these issues and are committed to being part of a broad-based, sustained solution—is an essential first step. The “right” people are those in leadership—whether public, private, not-for-profit, community or foundation representatives—who can commit or substantially influence their respective agencies or sectors. Voices representing young men of color must also be included, not just to give the process legitimacy, but to also ensure that the strategies and solutions under consideration actually address the issues and obstacles that young men of color face in the labor market.

The participation of the mayor and other elected leadership in a community that is tackling these issues signals the importance of putting young men of color on positive pathways. Such participation is also essential in convincing key leadership from business, industry, and the economic-development sector to be part of the strategic thinking. Committed leaders can inspire others to be part of a process that sees putting these young men to work as a critical part of an economic development and community development agenda... Leaders can assign those in their respective sectors to assess resources, practices, expertise, and talent in order to identify ways that their sector can contribute meaningfully and substantively to programs and interventions; this assessment can also lead agencies and organizations to alter their policies and practices to achieve the goals of this effort.

Implementing comprehensive, broad-based community-intervention strategies requires a strong convening entity to engage community leaders in a visioning process, facilitate planning and implementation, identify resources and opportunities, use data effectively to lay out the dimensions of the challenge, set goals and benchmarks, move from strategic planning to action, track progress, and celebrate successes. Collective responsibility means that all assembled in the effort “own” the challenge, participate in setting goals and benchmarks, ask tough questions, use data to monitor progress, and assure accountability in the short and long term.

2. Cross-system and Cross-Sector Collaborations

Cross-system/cross-sector partnerships are formal agreements among systems or sectors to alter their policies and/or practices in ways that promote collaboration and innovation in the provision of service to a targeted population. Successful cross-system partnerships lead to better structures and practices for sharing valuable information; improve the experiences of young people dealing with disconnection; and change the way individual systems operate and how existing agencies do their work (Moore, 2007). The secondary, postsecondary, adult education, workforce, justice, and social services systems need to be leveraged in order to create pathways that connect disconnected youth populations – including young men of color – to good jobs, with good wages, and opportunities for advancement.

Many young men of color have been touched by one or more of these systems. For the most part, however, intentional strategies that align the programs and services across systems do not exist. Thus, young men may transition from one system and one service to another without getting any closer to employment. For example, young men under the jurisdiction of the justice system, or those challenged with child-support issues, should be connected to the workforce and postsecondary systems. Increased coordination may help men of color obtain employment that in turn helps them meet the financial obligations imposed by these systems. The unfortunate reality is that all too often, such connections are not made and these men remain unemployed, further exacerbating their situation.

Fortunately, there has been considerable progress across all these systems in altering the ways that services are delivered and resources are deployed. Innovation abound - from credit recovery and competency-based approaches to award of high school diplomas, to concurrent enrollment to achieve high school diploma and college credit, to postsecondary bridge programs, customized sectoral programming and try-out employment in the workforce system. The task is to expand these innovations so that they are the norm and not the exception, and to use these innovations to build the multiple pathways to

postsecondary success for young men of color. But only through collaboration among the above mentioned systems will this be achieved at scale.

3. Formal Connections with Community Development and Regional Economic Development

Providing young men of color with the academic, occupational, and employment skills necessary for postsecondary labor-market success is only part of the solution. These skills alone will not automatically create access for them to higher-wage jobs and career opportunities in the regional labor market. Discrimination still exists in the hiring process. The geographic mis-match between the location of good jobs in the region and residency of minority populations creates barriers to access to those jobs. Research had documented that address has been used to screen the applicant pool. More often, referral networks and references are the mechanism used to identify candidates for hire.

Thus unless strategies are put in place to dramatically expand access for young men of color to occupations, industries, and workplaces where they can access higher wage jobs with advancement opportunities, then these young men will be educated and trained with a ticket to nowhere. Developing these intentional strategies will require fostering ongoing relationships with leaders in economic and community-development agencies, workforce investment boards, chambers of commerce, transportation and natural-resources agencies, and key industry sectors. The question to be asked of each economic development effort, each infrastructure project, every community revitalization effort, and of representatives from the growing industry sectors—especially renewable energy and health—is, How can the learning, earning, and training of young men of color be tied into each of these efforts? Formal job-referral mechanisms are necessary but not sufficient. Formal networks and pipelines must be built that will expand access, mentor young men of color, and nurture their upward mobility. Engaging these leaders in strategizing solutions can catalyze creative thinking about ways to leverage energy and transportation funding, federal job creation efforts, the Community Development Block Grant, other federal funding streams, and business and industry expansion activities to forge employment pipelines to the jobs that are created.

The lingering perceptions that make employers wary of hiring youth of color need to be overcome. Consider, for example, that among 16- to 24-year-old youth who are not enrolled in school, white high school graduates with no college have a higher rate of employment (62 percent) than black youth with college experience or an associate degree (55 percent). (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). This discrepancy suggests that factors other than education come into play. Discrimination still poses an impediment to access in many workplaces, and many young men of color lack access to formal and informal networks meant to help them successfully navigate often unwelcoming environments. Algernon Austin, of the Economic Policy Institute, has recently refuted many of the stereotypical reasons often given to explain the low employment rates of black men. He counters the argument that young black men don't want to work for "chump change" with data showing that nonworking black men's reservation wages – the economic term for the lowest wage at which an individual will work – is consistently lower than white men's reservation wage and lower than all other racial and ethnic groups. He challenged the notion that the disparities in employment is simply attributable to lack of skills citing the work of the Center for Labor Market studies findings that The poorest white teens with the lowest employment rates among whites were still able to obtain jobs at a higher rate than more prosperous black youth. (Austin, 2008)

There is no simple or quick answer to dismantling all the policies and practices that result in the disparities that have been noted. A good starting point, however, is to ensure greater inclusion of young men of color in every effort that brings jobs to the community. For example, business and workforce leaders can help identify "middle-skilled" and professional jobs that will require a highly skilled workforce, and identify the types of training, work experiences, internships, apprenticeships, part-time placements, scholarships, and on-the-job training experiences required for such positions. Business and workforce leaders can also support the building of a continuum of work related activities – work

experiences, internships, job shadowing, and career awareness - that can expose young men of color to an expanded range of opportunities, occupations, and work environments. Equally important is for business and workforce leaders to learn to view young men of color as a talent pool they can and want to tap.

Many workforce boards and progressive community organizations have implemented successful approaches for linking economic-development activities with employment opportunities for low-income individuals. Some vehicles that should be considered to improve access to employment for young men of color include:

- Community Benefit Agreements (CBA). These are legally binding contracts between developers and community coalitions that ensure major development projects benefit local community residents. Common elements of CBA's include first-source hiring agreements, living wages, and affordable-housing assistance.
- First-source hiring agreements, which are often included in economic development packages or loan agreements, usually require employers that are beneficiaries of public resources to give priority in hiring to targeted populations by the appointed agent of the jurisdiction (e.g., the workforce system). The strongest agreements require sufficient advance notice of potential openings to allow for the preparation and training of candidates.
- Customized training, which involves developing specific training to meet the needs of a particular employer for existing job openings. The employer participates in identifying the skills and certification needed for success. Often, workforce entities partner with community colleges to develop customized training. Employers enter into a contract requiring them to hire all successful candidates who complete the training. This is a strategy that has been used successfully by Workforce Investment Boards around the country and represents a “win-win” strategy for the employers with specific needs for a trained workforce and for the trainees.
- “Try-out employment,” where programs provide wage subsidies to private-sector employers to hire candidates that they may have been reluctant to hire because of age, inexperience or other perceived barriers. Under this arrangement, employers get the opportunity to assess the abilities of the new hires without the wage obligation for an introductory period, the program can assist employees with any work related or other issues to assure retention, and the employees have access to employment opportunities that they may have had difficulty obtaining on their own. WIA youth programs in many cities – Houston, Baltimore, Kansas City, and Boston – use this vehicle to gain access to jobs in quality work environments for youth completing education and training programs that they fund..

4. Quality Management

A strong collaborative effort requires management and coordination support. Such a management entity must have: 1) staff with leadership skills and the capacity to work across systems, and with community entities, to implement the strategies identified in the collaborative process; 2) effective management systems in place to assure fiscal and programmatic accountability; 3) the ability to work effectively with providers to assure the consistency and quality of the delivery of program services across the partnering organizations and agencies. 4) the ability to facilitate data-sharing across systems, evaluate progress and encourage improvement, negotiate agreements, write proposals for funding, and keep the partnerships vibrant and action-oriented.

Essential Elements of Programmatic Intervention

Programmatic interventions are those delivery approaches that will be necessary to build the skills, abilities, experiences, and career and labor market exposure of the young men. The education level, skills, talents, and deficits of this population of young men of color will span a considerable range and will require a varied mix of program education options, program strategies, supports, and approaches.

In identifying the key components of **Program Intervention**, we chose those elements that are common to programs that have been evaluated and found to be effective (Doolittle and Ivry, 2002). These components are essential if the program is going to succeed in addressing the range of needs—employment, academic, social, personal, family, and life skills—when working with groups with significant barriers to employment. These elements must all be present to provide the kind of holistic approach necessary for young men of color to attain the skills, credentials, and experiences that will lead to economic self sufficiency.

1. Caring adult support and mentorship

A caring adult advocacy and support system helps youth navigate a complex maze of programs, services, and educational options and guides them in choosing the set of services that best suits their individual needs. Such a system creates a personal relationship of respect and support between the young men and well-trained, caring adult advocates; this relationship should continue until the young men achieve stability in the labor market. These advocates serve as role models; provide encouragement and feedback; and encourage young men to stay focused on their long-term goals. Mentoring is another important intervention to help youth stay on a pathway to education and a good job. Successful youth-employment and apprenticeship programs provide community- and work-based mentors who offer guidance and encouragement to young men and women. A meta-analysis of evaluations of mentoring programs for youth found that youth from disadvantaged backgrounds were more likely to benefit from such programs than those from less disadvantaged backgrounds. (DuBois et al., 2002).

2. Multiple pathways integrating academic skills and occupational preparation

The education/competency levels of young men of color who have dropped out of high school span a broad range. Students whose basic skills and English literacy are at low levels need substantial amounts of education in order to achieve a secondary school credential; students who have sufficient skills to quickly earn a high school diploma or GED may be nearly ready for college. Given these differences, a system that allows for multiple entry and exit points along an educational continuum is most useful in meeting the diverse educational needs of the dropout population. If communities are to succeed in reengaging these young people, it is essential to provide multiple pathways to ensure that members of this population can obtain the education and training that lead to decent-paying jobs that match their interests and aspirations. Designing entry points such pathways requires leveraging the multitude of federal, state, and local resources available to serve this population, improving the performance of education and workforce systems, as well as aligning programming across the systems that serve this population. We will discuss the creation of these pathways later in the paper.

3. Rich work experiences and workplace connections

A range of paid work experiences is essential to provide young men exposure to a variety of work environments and to foster the development of appropriate workplace skills and a work ethic. Additionally, many young men have family and other financial obligations that require that they have an income. Thus, the ability to sustain participation in education and training over a longer term is directly dependent on earning income. The array of work related options should include subsidized employment,

work experience, internships, paid or stipended community service, on-the-job training, try-out employment, part-time and full time employment, and college work-study. These offerings should be arranged along a continuum that allows young men to progress from the most sheltered experiences to unsubsidized private-sector workplaces, depending on their level of work preparedness and comfort.

4. Personal development/leadership and civic responsibility

Preparing young men for success in postsecondary endeavors and for advancement in the workplace requires not only developing their critical academic and occupational skills, but also honing their personal, communication, social, and life-management skills. Activities that expose young men to new environments, engage them in civic projects, allow them to volunteer, and provide them with opportunities to lead and to function as part of a team all contribute to the development of their skill-set. Helping these young men mature into responsible adults who possess integrity, a strong work ethic, and a sense of personal, civic, and family responsibility is a key objective of program intervention. An evaluation of service-corps programs that provided labor-intensive work on civic projects in conjunction with education support and leadership-development activities found that the corps had significant positive employment-related effects on the young black and Hispanic men who participated. (Jastrzab et al., 1996).

5. Connections to resources and support

Even young people with the best intentions of pursuing an education can be sidetracked by the weight of financial burdens, family responsibilities, and personal crises. The Silent Epidemic published by Civic Enterprises surveyed dropouts and found that 32% left because they needed to work, 22% left due to pregnancy, and 22% had to take care of a relative. (Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison 2006). A Government Accountability Office (GAO) report on disconnected youth noted that in its review of programs in thirty-nine communities, access to health, mental health, and substance-abuse services; HIV testing; child care; housing; and food were important supports accessible at the program site or through formal partnerships (U.S. GAO, 2008).

Aligning Systems to Create Effective Career Pathways

To ease transitions between different levels and types of education and to align program content with industry requirements, states, school districts, and postsecondary institutions are increasingly using a “career-pathways approach.”ⁱⁱ The adoption of this approach can lead to more low-income young men of color attaining postsecondary credentials that in turn lead them to good jobs. Career pathways are carefully crafted programs that link education, training, and support services to “enable students, often while they are working, to advance over time to successively higher levels of education and employment in a given industry or occupational sector. Each step on a career pathway is designed explicitly to prepare students to progress to the next level of employment and education.”ⁱⁱⁱ Ideally, pathways begin with short, intensive remedial programs for those at the lowest literacy levels and extend through postsecondary certificates and degrees. Creating and maintaining pathways entails weaving together various education, training and support services into an interlocking web that leads to postsecondary credentials with value in the labor market while allowing the individual to reach higher levels of educational and professional achievement. Good pathways incorporate a number of innovations in instruction and delivery and help students realize their goals faster.

Career pathways are not only a way of organizing and offering services at the local level, but also a framework for the alignment of multiple systems that serve youth. Such alignment ensures that there are

no gaps or barriers among the systems serving this population. Because these systems are governed by different laws and regulations, this alignment requires intervention at several levels. Alignment entails restructuring the laws and rules governing various programs to ensure that pathways can be built at scale; we posit a set of recommendations for these purposes later in the paper. Other barriers to alignment are embedded in the culture, protocol, or interpretations of rules. These barriers can be addressed through dialogue among state and local administrators, who can redirect programming and resources to effect better alignment and integration of delivery of service.

The career-pathway framework is helpful in developing strategies to serve young men of color, because this approach is based on the assumption that multiple pathways lead to the final goal of employment that provides good wages. It also acknowledges that differentiated strategies are necessary to ensure that more students reach their educational and employment goals. As noted above, many of these young men have found their way to adult education, GED, and developmental education programs only to find that these programs use the same traditional instructional approaches, which often lead to repeated failure. New strategies and practices are needed for a population that has struggled with and abandoned the traditional education pipeline.

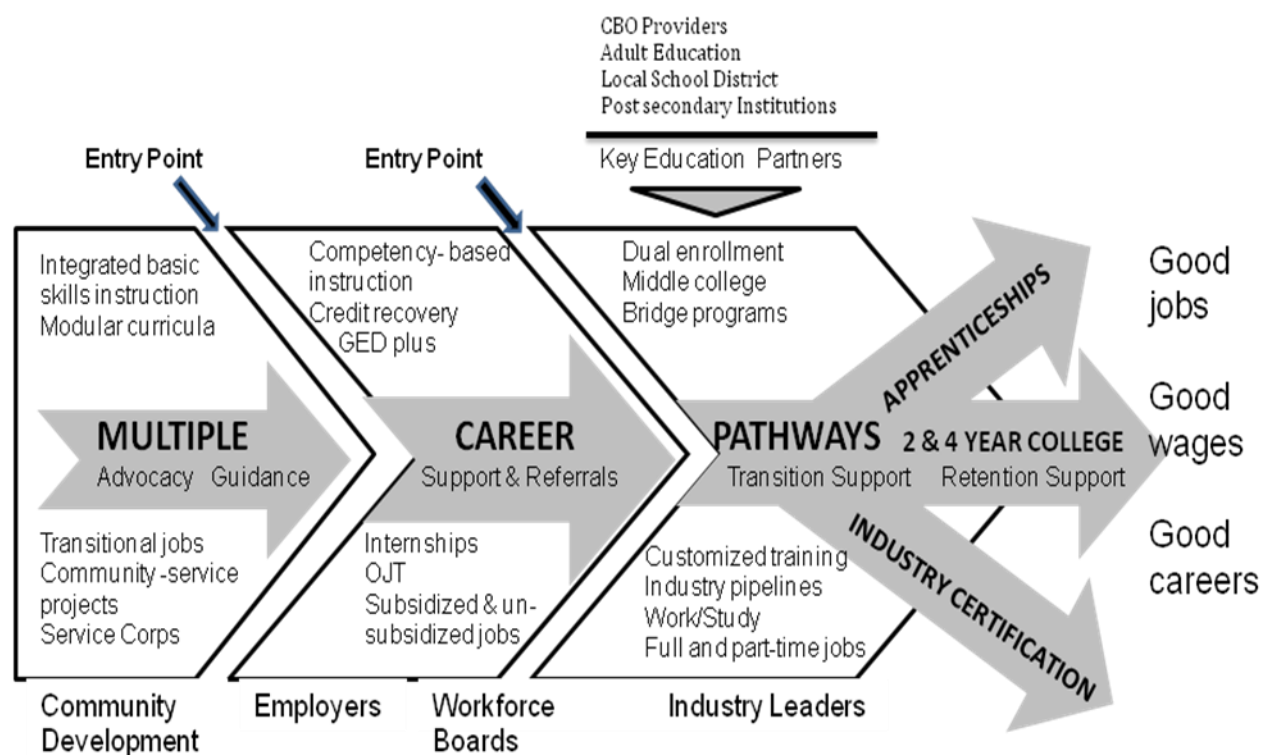


Figure 9.5. Multiple Pathways Schematic. Source Author's rendering

Successful career pathways require innovation in approaches that accelerate learning and the time to obtain a credential or degree along with innovations in program content and delivery approach.

Fortunately, over the course of the last decade, several approaches have proven successful for working with out-of-school youth who have substantial academic deficits. Such innovations include:

Credit recovery: Credit-recovery programs allow a student who previously has not completed a particular course to “recover” credit for that course by demonstrating competency on the content standards of the course instead of requiring him to spend a particular amount of time in a classroom. Credit-recovery programs are particularly effective in helping students who are beyond the average graduation age and behind catch up and earn their high school diploma.

Competency-based approaches: Competency-based approaches award a high school diploma based on attainment of the skill-proficiency equivalent of a high school graduate. This approach is even more flexible than a traditional credit-based approach.

Dual enrollment at the secondary and postsecondary levels: Dual enrollment programs allow students to work toward a high school diploma while accruing postsecondary education credit. Also called “concurrent enrollment” and “dual credit programs,” these approaches expose students to postsecondary-level work, add rigor and intensity to the educational experience, and help students achieve their goals faster.

Early- and middle-college programs: These programs involve collaborations between secondary schools and local postsecondary institutions to give students the opportunity to earn college credit while attending high school. Often offered on or near the college campus, these initiatives familiarize youth with college life. They serve both students who have dropped out or are at risk of dropping out, as well as higher-skilled students. Upon graduation from these programs, students receive a high school diploma and some postsecondary credit.

Integrating remediation with occupational instruction: This approach can be used by adult education, workforce-system, and community-based providers in conjunction with postsecondary remedial options to contextualize academic learning and remedial coursework, to allow concurrent mastery of academic and occupational skills, and to apply those skills in the context of the occupation or workplace.

Bridge programs: Bridge programs incorporate occupational or academic content into basic-skills training as a means of providing students with the foundation needed to advance and succeed in postsecondary education. Bridge programs also cover other areas viewed as essential for college success (e.g., problem-solving, working in teams, developing good study habits) and offer support services.

Federal, State and Local Policy Recommendations to Build and Support Career Pathways Programs for Young Men

As mentioned earlier in the section titled, “Inadequacies of the Workforce, Adult-Education, and Higher-Education Systems” several key federally funded systems should be playing a pivotal role in constructing multiple postsecondary pathways for young minority men. Yet they do not. At a minimum, we recommend that through legislative and administrative changes in state plan requirements under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), WIA Titles I and II, the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act, and the Higher Education Act (HEA), the federal government should require states to be more explicit about how coordination and articulation will occur across systems to align

structures, supports, and services to facilitate the re-engagement and successful matriculation of the dropout population in pathways to postsecondary and labor-market success. [See full text of chapter for specific recommendations]

Conclusion

Building postsecondary pathways to good jobs for low-income young men of color will require stretching the paradigms of our secondary, postsecondary, workforce, and adult education systems, as well as greater collaboration among these systems. Aligning systems and programming across funding streams, building partnerships, and creating new pathways are complex endeavors. But there are many innovative approaches that have shown promise and can be implemented and taken to scale. Integrating education instruction with skills training, work experience, support, career exposure, and counseling can put these youth back on track. It will require a community-wide effort to change the landscape on education and labor market outcomes for young men of color in economically distressed communities.

This is a time where leadership and forward thinking on the part of the federal government, governors, mayors, college officials, community leaders, workforce leaders, and employers could dramatically alter the landscape of how we prepare these young men for the skilled opportunities of the future. It will require individual players within communities to come together as never before. This is the challenge and the opportunity.

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ⁱ States include Kentucky, Oregon, Virginia, and Wisconsin, among others.

ⁱⁱ Definition used by the Oregon Career Pathways Initiative.