

# Introduction

Postsecondary education—broadly defined as a credential beyond a high school diploma—continues to be one of the major gateways to family-sustaining jobs. Workers with higher levels of education and skills tend to have greater earnings than workers with lower levels. In 2013, associate’s degree holders earned about 19 percent more than high school graduates with no college and 65 percent more than workers with less than a high school diploma.<sup>1</sup> Having a postsecondary education also offers protection in a weak economy because workers with higher levels of education are less likely to become unemployed. In 2013, the unemployment rate was just 4 percent for workers with a bachelor’s degree and 5.4 percent for those with an associate’s degree. Workers with less than a high school diploma experienced unemployment at more than twice the rate of workers with an associate’s degree.<sup>2</sup>

There is growing recognition that helping individuals succeed in postsecondary education benefits the national economy. Long-term economic trends point to increasing demand for better-educated workers. By 2020, economists project that 65 percent of all jobs will require at least some postsecondary education.<sup>3</sup>

While demand is increasing, our adult education, workforce development, and postsecondary education systems have barriers to progress for individuals with low education and skill levels. Too often, adult education and English language programs are not connected to job training or other postsecondary education programs. Many colleges have no connections between their developmental education programs and their occupational and academic programs. Noncredit occupational education is

disconnected from for-credit certificate and degree programs. And too few programs at any level are attuned to employer and industry needs.<sup>4</sup>

## DEFINITIONS: CAREER PATHWAYS

**Career pathways** The career pathway approach fixes fragmented and leaky educational pipelines. Career pathways are linked education and training services that enable students 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 to prepare students to progress to the next level of education and employment.<sup>5</sup> The career pathways framework weaves together adult education, training, and postsecondary programs and connects those services to employers’ workforce needs. Career

pathways include multiple entry and exit points, learner-centered instruction and delivery, assessment of skills and needs, support services, and quality work experiences.<sup>6</sup>

The **career pathway approach** can benefit a wide variety of participants, including those who are younger or older, traditional or nontraditional, and on an academic or occupational path. This approach is especially beneficial for vulnerable populations, whose educational and career success is more often impeded by disconnects between systems and limited access to integrated services.

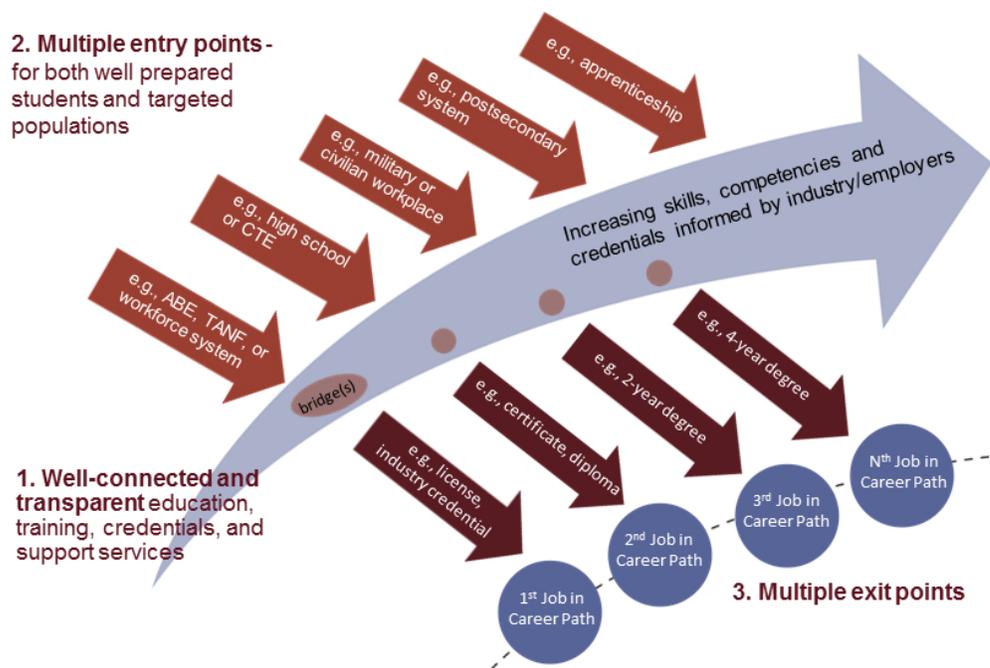
Since CLASP first published this toolkit in 2010, momentum to build and expand the use of career pathways has increased considerably. A number of states and local regions have explored or adopted career pathways aimed at adults or out-of-school youth. To support further implementation, CLASP launched the Alliance for Quality Career Pathways, a voluntary alliance of 10 leading career pathway states.

In Phase I, the Alliance developed a consensus framework of criteria and indicators for quality state and local/regional career pathway partnerships.<sup>7</sup> Phase I also developed a menu of career pathway participant metrics.

The Alliance for Quality Career Pathways identified three core features of a career pathway:

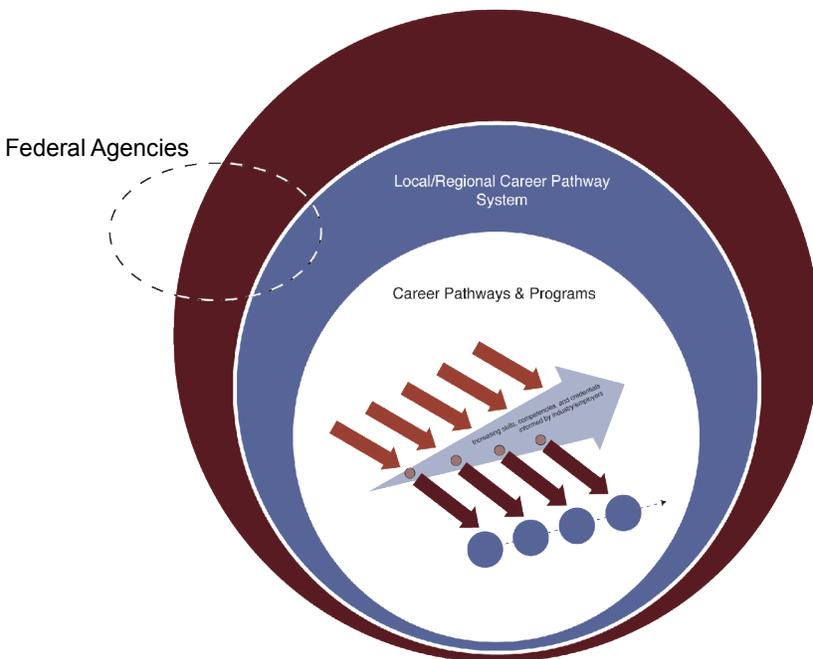
- 1) Well-connected, quality education and training programs that result in credentials with labor market value and include support services, work experiences, and employment services;
- 2) Multiple entry points for targeted populations, starting from initial levels of education and connecting to higher levels.
- 3) Multiple exit points leading to progressively higher levels of employment within a career path.

### THREE CORE FEATURES OF A CAREER PATHWAY



In addition, the Alliance identified the key criteria needed to build a career pathway system to support the development and dynamic sustainability of pathways.

## BUILDING A CAREER PATHWAY SYSTEM



Based on current evidence and wisdom from the field, Alliance partners agree that the following criteria and indicators can be used by career pathway partners to assess the quality of current practice and continuously improve their career pathway systems:

- 1) **Commit to a Shared Vision and Strategy** for industry sector-based career pathways for youth and adults and for building, scaling, and dynamically sustaining career pathway systems.

- 2) **Engage Employers and Integrate Sector Strategy Principles** to ensure multiple employers, business associations, and labor unions are partners in creating demand-driven career pathways.
- 3) **Collaborate to Make Resources Available** by identifying, prioritizing, and leveraging resources for career pathway systems, partnerships, and programs.
- 4) **Implement Supportive Policies** for career pathway systems, pathways, and programs.
- 5) **Use Data and Shared Measures** to measure, demonstrate, and improve participant outcomes.
- 6) **Implement and Integrate Evidence-Based Practices and Process.**

For complete Alliance materials, please visit [www.clasp.org/careerpathways](http://www.clasp.org/careerpathways).

Congress and the Obama Administration are also increasingly supportive of career pathways. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 formalizes the definition of career pathway in federal law:

**CAREER PATHWAY.** The term “career pathway” means a combination of rigorous and high-quality education, training, and other services that:

(A) aligns with the skill needs of industries in the economy of the State or regional economy involved;

(B) prepares an individual to be successful in any of a full range of secondary or postsecondary education options, including apprenticeships registered under the Act of August 16, 1937 (commonly known as the “National Apprenticeship Act”; 50 Stat. 664, chapter 663; 29 U.S.C. 50 et seq.) (referred to individually in this Act as an “apprenticeship”, except in section 171);

(C) includes counseling to support an individual in achieving the individual’s education and career goals;

(D) includes, as appropriate, education offered concurrently with and in the same context as workforce preparation activities and training for a specific occupation or occupational cluster;

(E) organizes education, training, and other services to meet the particular needs of an individual in a manner that accelerates the educational and career advancement of the individual to the extent practicable;

(F) enables an individual to attain a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent, and at least 1 recognized postsecondary credential; and

(G) helps an individual enter or advance within a specific occupation or occupational cluster. [Sec. 3(7)]<sup>8</sup>

Additionally, the Employment and Training Administration’s Training and Employment Guidance Letter No. 3-14 highlights seven elements needed for quality job-driven training. These elements, which all support the career pathways approach, include:

- Working with employers to determine hiring needs and design training programs;
- Offering work-based learning opportunities with employers;
- Making better use of data for accountability and consumer choice;
- Measuring and evaluating employment and earnings outcomes;
- Promoting a seamless progress from one education step to another;
- Breaking down barriers to accessing training and providing support services and guidance;
- Creating regional collaborations between workforce development, education, labor, and nonprofit organizations.

Earlier editions of this funding toolkit were widely cited and used at the federal, state, and local levels. This new edition includes revised program profiles reflecting the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act legislative and administrative changes to key federal programs. Of all the elements of career pathways, support services are among the most important to student success; they are also the most difficult to fund. An updated appendix identifies 10 federal funding sources that can be used to provide a wide range of support services for participants in career pathways.