Section II: Definitions and Conceptual Model

The career pathway approach connects progressive levels of education, training, support services, and credentials for specific occupations in a way that optimizes the progress and success of individuals with varying levels of abilities and needs. This approach helps individuals earn marketable credentials, engage in further education and employment, and achieve economic success. Career pathways deeply engage employers and help meet their workforce needs; they also help states and communities strengthen their workforces and economies.

This approach is not simply a new model; it is a systems-transformation strategy.

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 career and technical path. Career and technical education (CTE) programs of study, including those that lead to industry recognized credentials, are a critical component of career pathway systems, along with pathways serving lower-skilled adults, high school students, disconnected or “opportunity” youth, veterans, incumbent workers, and other targeted populations. Apprenticeships leading to industry recognized credentials also are important options in career pathway systems. State and local/regional partners, including employers, may want to think about framing their diverse career pathway efforts as a “suite” operating within one career pathway system.

The framework of system-building criteria and career pathway participant metrics proposed here is most applicable to the types of career pathway systems, pathways, and programs focused on adults and out-of-school youth in occupational career pathways. However, many of the criteria, indicators, and metrics could be applicable to those for other populations, such as secondary and postsecondary career and technical education students. We encourage education, workforce, and employer partners to think holistically about their career pathway efforts and develop cohesive systems to support them.

Career pathways operationalize the career pathway approach and include three features (see figure 2 and text box 2):

1. **Well-connected and transparent education**, training, support services, and credentials within specific sectors or cross-sector occupations (often delivered via multiple linked and aligned programs);

2. **Multiple entry points** that enable well-prepared students as well as targeted populations with limited education, skills, English, and work experiences to successfully enter the career pathway. Targeted populations served by career pathways may include adult education or other lower-skilled adult students; English language learners; offenders or ex-offenders; certain high school students; disconnected or “opportunity” youth; some former military personnel; un- or under-employed adults; or others.

3. **Multiple exit points** at successively higher levels leading to self- or family-supporting employment and aligned with subsequent entry points.

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4 Career pathway partnerships may want to follow this definition with more information on their specific career pathways efforts and initiatives.
For example, South Central College, a community and technical college in Minnesota, and its partners have built a set of health care career pathways that offers multiple entry points for different types of participants including lower skilled adults entering through a Minnesota FastTRAC bridge program, high school students entering through career and technical education, and traditional college students entering through the traditional college door. College and career navigation services are available for participants, and support services are tailored to individual needs. Partnerships with Workforce Investment Act Vocational Rehabilitation, Adult, and Youth program partners as well as Adult Basic Education ensure that academic and personal supports are part of the pathway for participants who need them. The pathway connects a variety of health care credentials to fit the lives of busy working parents or younger, more traditional students. Employment placement and retention services help participants who want to enter the workforce after obtaining the initial Nursing Assistant credential as well as participants who continue into longer programs. All credits and certificates count toward the next credential in the pathway, allowing participants who “stop out” for work to come back onto the pathway with all their prior accomplishments recognized.

The purpose of aligning the offerings, entry points, and exit points in career pathways is to facilitate participants’ transitions through the pathway until they meet their goals, which generally are to get a good job and earn more money. Participants may step out of the career pathway at certain milestone points, i.e., after earning a credential, similar to traditional students stopping out between earning an undergraduate degree and a master’s or professional degree. Ideally, career pathway system partners have implemented various strategies and tools e.g., academic advising and supports, career navigation, and support services, to help participants continue along the pathway when they are ready.

Sometimes, the term “stackable credentials” is used interchangeably with “career pathways.” However, they are not the same. The U.S. Department of Labor and the Alliance for Quality Career Pathways define a stackable credential as “part of a sequence of credentials that can be accumulated over time to build individuals’ qualifications and help them move
along a career pathway up a career ladder to different and potentially higher paying jobs” (see glossary). Therefore, stackable credentials corresponds to just the first feature of a career pathway described above (well-connected offerings). Career pathways are more extensive and comprehensive efforts. Stackable credentials that are part of a quality career pathway system should be informed by labor market information and demonstrate evidence that they are valuable to employers and participants.

All three features of career pathways correspond to career and technical education programs of study. Although the statutory definition of programs of study in the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006 (see glossary) focuses on the first essential feature of career pathways in the AQCP definition—well-connected education, training, etc.—as implemented, many of the more comprehensive programs of study also include and integrate the four essential career pathway functions described below. Career pathways and any linked and aligned programs that are part of the career pathway include four essential functions:

1. Participant-focused education and training;
2. Consistent and non-duplicative assessments of participants’ education, skills, and assets/needs;
3. Support services and career navigation assistance to facilitate transitions; and
4. Employment services and work experiences.

Examples of each of these four functions can include:

**Participant-focused education and training:**
- contextualized curriculum and instruction
- redesigned and accelerated remedial education
- GED-to-college bridge programs
- integrated or concurrent education and training
- learning communities
- chunked or modularized curriculum and instruction
- competency-based curriculum
- self-paced instruction (may also be “guided” self-paced)
- technology-enabled, online, and/or hybrid instruction

**Support services:**
- child care
- transportation assistance
- housing assistance
- mental health and counseling
- personal success skill development, such as reasoning, task flexibility, problem solving, planning, and execution skills

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**Text Box 2: Career Pathway and Program Features and Functions**

**Essential features** of quality career pathways include:

1. Well-connected and transparent education, training, credentialing, and support service offerings (often delivered via multiple linked and aligned programs);
2. Multiple entry points that enable well-prepared students as well as targeted populations with limited education, skills, English, and work experiences to successfully enter the career pathway; and
3. Multiple exit points at successively higher levels leading to self- or family-supporting employment and aligned with subsequent entry points.

**Essential functions** in quality career pathways and programs include:

1. Participant-focused education and training;
2. Consistent and non-duplicative assessments of participants’ education, skills, and assets/needs;
3. Support services and career navigation assistance to facilitate transitions; and
4. Employment services and work experiences.

- education and training offered at times and places and in formats that work for the targeted population—including non-semester-based schedules, block schedules, evening/weekend schedules, and employer-based education

Support services:
- child care
- transportation assistance
- housing assistance
- mental health and counseling
- personal success skill development, such as reasoning, task flexibility, problem solving, planning, and execution skills
• workplace skills, such as understanding workplace etiquette, working in teams, etc.
• academic advising and supports (academic advisors, tutoring, learning communities, etc.)
• digital literacy skills
• leadership development for youth-focused pathways and programs
• citizen development for some pathway programs for youth and immigrants

**Career navigation assistance:**
• career exploration
• career coaching
• career navigation assistance

**Employment services:**
• assistance with resume writing
• mock interviews
• jobs fairs
• assistance finding employment

**Work experiences:**
• work simulations
• job shadowing
• on-the-job-training
• internships
• transitional jobs

Career pathways are diverse in the specific combinations of services they include and in the intensity of the service levels. In fact, one of the strengths of the career pathway approach is that the pathways are customized to the targeted industry, target population, and the local partners and context. That said, all career pathways and any linked and aligned programs should have at least some level of each of the features and functions described above.

The Alliance acknowledges that funding is limited to provide all four functions in an integrated comprehensive manner and not all career pathway participants will require a full measure of all of the functions. However, experience on the ground demonstrates that successful efforts creatively leverage resources from multiple partners—including sometimes from the participants themselves, i.e., peer tutoring, carpooling, etc.—to deliver the four essential functions of career pathways.

Career pathways and programs also vary in their length and number of credentials participants can earn. Career pathways include programs built within existing education systems (e.g., high school career and technical education, community colleges) but also include new programs built for disconnected youth or lower-skilled adults, such as bridge programs.

A career pathway system is the cohesive combination of partnerships, resources and funding, policies, data, and shared accountability measures that support the development, quality, scaling and “dynamic sustainability” of career pathways and programs for youth and adults (see glossary for definitions of terms). A career pathway system is an overarching frame and is not couched within any one public education.

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5 For more information on career pathway bridge programs, see *Beyond Basic Skills*, by Marcie Foster, Julie Strawn, and Amy Ellen Duke-Benfield, CLASP, 2011 and *Farther Faster*, by Julie Strawn, CLASP, 2011.
workforce, or other system; however, one system may take the lead on developing the career pathway partnership. The value of a career pathway system is that it connects and aligns all other related public systems to each other and to private and non-profit partners. A career pathway system is not simply a short- or medium-term partnership assembled for the purposes of an initiative; however, these temporal partnerships can contribute to system building.

Career pathways and programs are the “heart” of career pathway systems and are, ideally, supported by an aligned and integrated local/regional career pathway system (see figure 4). The most efficient local/regional systems will build a few comprehensive career pathways within regional in-demand sectors and create multiple entry points to these pathways for various populations as well as provide the necessary services and supports to help individuals succeed. Ideally, a career pathway system should try to build one career pathway or a set of interrelated career pathways within each targeted industry sector and provide multiple entry points and customized career pathway functions for various types of individuals to succeed in the pathway. This would reflect a truly aligned, shared, and efficient system.

Ideally, a strong state career pathway system supports local/regional systems. A feedback loop between the state system, the local/regional system, and the federal agencies is important for ensuring that each learns from the other and mutually reinforces one another. For example, career pathway efforts have struggled with the poor alignment of federal performance measures between education and workforce programming, the lack of shared definitions for common performance accountability terms used across systems, a disconnected set of performance reporting periods, and other barriers to partners working collaboratively on a shared vision and strategy.

Other federal policies or lack thereof also pose barriers. For example, the absence of federal guidance clarifying that career pathway students in aid-eligible programs are eligible for student financial aid has stymied the development of aid-eligible career pathways. Also, the elimination of federal financial aid for students who do not have a high school diploma or equivalent but can prove their ability to benefit from college poses a barrier.

On the other hand, federal guidance and investments can and have been supportive of career pathways. For example, federal discretionary grant programs have provided opportunities for states and local regions to build and scale career pathways; the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education has issued clear guidance on how to use adult education funds for integrated education and training; and both the departments of labor and education have provided technical assistance on building career pathway systems, pathways, and programs. Similarly, state policies and practices can have a supportive or a dampening effect on career pathways.
SHARED VISION, STRONG SYSTEMS: The Alliance for Quality Career Pathways Framework Version 1.0


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