

# Building a Career Pathways System: Promising Practices in Community College–Centered Workforce Development

*A recent report covers community college-centered systems for workforce development in IT and other growth sectors*

By **Sara Rab**

A recent report by the Workforce Strategy Center, based in New York and San Francisco, discusses strategies for building community college–centered career pathways systems that provide an effective framework for workforce development in information technology (IT) and other growth sectors. In the report, we describe some promising examples provided by community colleges, government, and nonprofit institutions that are changing and adapting their missions, organizations, practices and resources to begin to create these new systems. Our research shows that effective career pathways target regional labor markets, focus on employment sectors such as IT, and integrate education, training, and on-the-job learning. The report makes specific recommendations, based on our research, for how individual colleges, local and regional policymakers, and states can begin developing career pathways initiatives.

## The Research

Over the past year, we looked closely at three states with innovative policies and/or programs—North Carolina, California, and Washington. We interviewed state and local policymakers

and visited 19 community colleges and related programs in these and other states.

The career pathways systems we visited address six basic steps in their models:

1. community outreach to disadvantaged adults;
2. basic skills coursework at community-based organizations that serve as branch campuses of community colleges;
3. entry-level training;
4. internship placement;
5. entry-level employment; and
6. upgrade training.

The majority of the career pathways we visited are organized around employment sectors that offer high-wage jobs and the opportunity for career progression, including information technology, manufacturing, and health careers. For example, we profile five community colleges that have recently established regional IT career pathways in the East Bay, Los Angeles, and San Francisco.

All of these career pathways are centered at community colleges, which offer low tuition, a wide range of education and training, and a continuing funding base. Involvement in career pathways systems provides community

colleges with increased enrollment, improved student retention and quality of education, access to new funding, higher visibility in the community, and stronger connections to business and government leaders. In order to implement effective pathways, individual colleges must form strategic partnerships with key local and regional institutions. Forming these partnerships increases both the potential reach of the pathway and the ability to attract and leverage stable, long-term funding. In addition, state support is needed to increase scale and create more comprehensive systems. A state career pathways model serves to address the needs of both employers and low-income workers, while leading to a more effective and efficient use of education and workforce development resources.

## Challenges and Opportunities

This study revealed several opportunities for improvement to existing career pathways systems, and challenges to consider when creating new systems. First, we found that community colleges face several barriers to creating successful career pathways, including reconciling community colleges' various missions, departments, and programs;

acquiring new funding; and developing strong connections to employers.

Our colleges addressed these issues in several ways, for example, by creating bridges between developmental and credit programs, developing internal pathways to certificates and degrees; by better integrating academic and vocational education; by expanding support services; and by using resources more effectively. Shoreline Community College in Shoreline, Washington, for example, developed a full-time program intended to assist students who have low levels of essential technical skills but a strong interest in the IT field to access college-level IT training and employment.

There are also obvious challenges to building effective strategic partnerships with local and regional organizations, such as inertia, or a lack of resources. In this study, however, we found promising examples of partnerships built with workforce and social service systems, community-based organizations, adult basic education providers, and IT and

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### **To implement effective pathways, individual colleges must form strategic partnerships.**

other employers. In a number of communities, we saw innovative use of resources, with workforce funding supporting and enhancing community college-led career pathways in high-demand occupations.

Finally, ensuring state involvement in career pathways systems can be difficult due to a lack of a constituency to motivate change, insufficient integration of workforce and economic development systems, and weak incentives and accountability, among other issues. Our research revealed that states addressed these concerns and worked to build strong career pathways by creating innovative partnerships, making creative use of resources, improving the

commitment to skills training, and adopting supportive state community college policies.

The full study, which was commissioned by the Ford Foundation, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the James Irvine Foundation, and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, is available online at <http://www.workforcestrategy.org/publications.html>. The report includes specific recommendations for community college administrators, community and regional policymakers, state administrators, and community college-system policymakers. We also provide specific examples of promising practices drawn from the colleges and states in our research. For further information or to ask questions about the report, contact Julian Alssid ([jalssid@workforcestrategy.org](mailto:jalssid@workforcestrategy.org)), director of the Workforce Strategy Center. *e*

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*Sara Rab ([syrab@ssc.upenn.edu](mailto:syrab@ssc.upenn.edu)) is a consultant to the Workforce Strategy Center and is completing her doctorate in sociology at the University of Pennsylvania.*