Fulfilling the Promise of Career Pathways

Strategies that Support Career Advancement

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In today's economy and beyond, Americans with little to no postsecondary education and training may languish in low-skill, low-wage jobs with few options to advance to higher-paying, more-secure jobs. With the current tight labor market in the US, employers need talented workers to help growth their businesses. Career pathways, a model that supports postsecondary and job advancement to improve career opportunities for adults and youth, is designed to bridge this gap—helping people get the training they need to find good jobs and helping employers meet their needs for skilled workers. However, career pathways programming and resources are often focused on the initial steps of a career pathway, which typically lead to entry-level jobs, often with low wages. Little is understood about how programs can support career advancement to fulfill the promise of career pathways that lead to jobs that provide a stable career and family-sustaining wages. This brief presents three types of career advancement strategies, with examples from five programs, that help people move beyond the first step on a career pathway and successfully advance in their careers.

This brief begins with a description of career advancement as a part of the career pathways model and a review of the current literature on career advancement strategies. We then present a typology of career advancement strategies—embedding career advancement in existing career pathways programs, building the skills of current workers within an industry, and reengaging students who dropped out of college. We conclude with crosscutting takeaways for the three strategies to help practitioners, policymakers, and program funders better support career advancement.

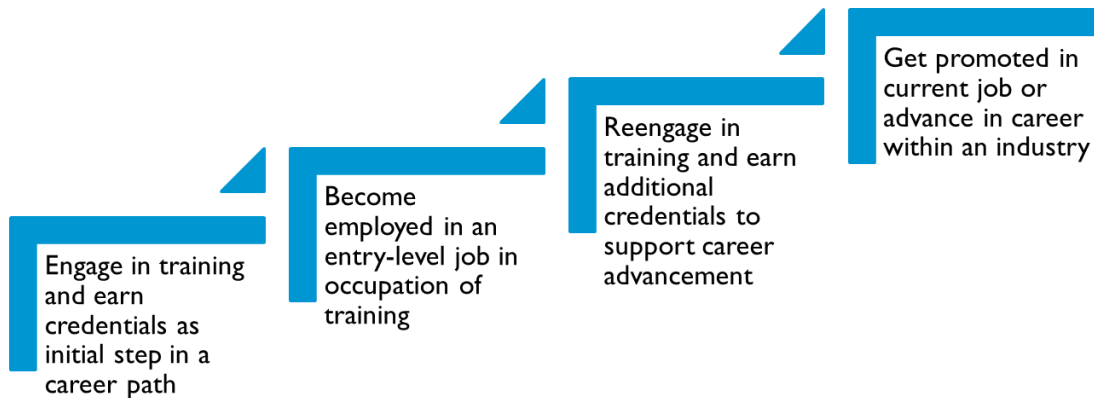# Career Advancement as a Part of Career Pathways

Career pathways has spread across the country as a workforce development strategy to help those who are not on a traditional college trajectory develop skills, earn credentials, and find and retain employment in high-demand occupations (Eyster 2018). Although there are many definitions of career pathways, the US Department of Health and Human Services defines it as providing "post-secondary education and training that is organized as a series of manageable steps leading to successively higher credentials and employment opportunities in growing occupations."[1] Current federal laws—both the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 and the reauthorized Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006—encourage career pathways as an important workforce development strategy for building American workers' skills and credentials and meeting employer demand.

Career advancement is an important component of career pathways, because career advancement strategies can support economic mobility to higher-paying, more-secure jobs. Figure 1 shows how people ideally progress along a career pathway and when advancement may occur. The initial step in a career pathway program provides entry-level, industry-recognized credentials so an individual can obtain a job in their chosen occupation as quickly as possible (Manhattan Strategy Group 2016). However, these jobs may be low wage or have few benefits and may require more education and training to earn a family-sustaining wage. True career pathways then incorporate more advanced steps where an individual can easily reengage in additional postsecondary education and training that will help him or her get promoted in his or her current job or advance within their industry.

Recent syntheses of impact evaluations of career pathways programs show that most evidence of success exists at the initial step (Bragg et al., forthcoming; Eyster, forthcoming; Schwartz, Strawn, and Sarna 2018). Initial steps on a career pathway show promise in improving short-term educational and employment outcomes. However, evidence of longer-term outcomes, which could be supported through advancement programming, is limited, and the existing evidence is mixed (Bragg et al., forthcoming; Eyster, forthcoming).

FIGURE 1
How Individuals Ideally Progress along a Career Pathway

Engage in training and earn credentials as initial step in a career path

Become employed in an entry-level job in occupation of training

Reengage in training and earn additional credentials to support career advancement

Get promoted in current job or advance in career within an industry

   Although the evidence on whether career pathways supports advancement to higher-paying, secure jobs is weak, the literature shows that some programs support career advancement. A synthesis on the implementation of career pathways programs found that, of the 128 programs identified and included in the synthesis, *all* offered multiple steps for education and training to help people advance (Sarna and Strawn 2018). Also, many employer-based programs help entry-level or frontline workers advance in their current job or in a career within their industry, also known as "upskilling" programs (White House 2015). There is also a new wave of programs that help people who have dropped out of college, often with debt, return to complete their programs of study.[2]

   Thus, though the evidence is limited on the success of career pathways supporting career advancement, many programs are implementing career advancement strategies in various ways. The remainder of the brief details three types of career advancement strategies.

Three Types of Career Advancement Strategies

Based on a review of the literature on and an examination of examples of career pathways and career advancement, we identified three types of career advancement strategies:

- embedding career advancement in existing career pathways programs

- building the skills of current workers within an industry

- reengaging students who have dropped out of college

   We conducted a broad search for career advancement strategies, not limiting it to self-identified "career pathways" programs. Including these programs allows for a broader exploration of career advancement strategies to better inform career pathways.

   To better understand career advancement strategies, we interviewed leaders at five organizations and institutions that offer career advancement programming across these three career advancement strategies.[3] Although we categorize these programs within one of the three strategies, the programs

may exhibit characteristics of more than one strategy, which we note below. In the following section, we provide descriptions of each career advancement strategy type, with examples gleaned from these interviews.

Strategy 1: Embedding Career Advancement in a Comprehensive Program with Multiple Steps

Career pathways programs are designed to provide comprehensive education and training, linking initial steps that help launch individuals who are entering a new occupational field to more advanced steps that help individuals grow within their chosen career and earn a family-sustaining wage. Career pathways programs help individuals earn multiple credentials—from short-term, noncredit certificates to college degrees—as they advance in their careers. These programs clearly articulate the more advanced steps for students after they successfully complete a first education and training step.

Two program examples, the Instituto del Progreso Latino's Instituto College nursing program and Georgia Tech's Logistics Education And Pathways (LEAP) program, highlight how advancement can be embedded in career pathways programs (box 2). Instituto del Progreso Latino recently launched its own college to support the advancement of their participants who succeed in completing initial training in health care (i.e., become a certified nursing assistant). Its leaders found that individuals who had participated in their other programs wanted to return to the organization for more education and training because they trusted the organization to support them throughout the program. The Georgia Tech LEAP program has also created a pathway in the supply chain and logistics field to help veterans, youth, and underrepresented minorities in Georgia enter and advance in the industry. The program is currently developing advanced courses that combine career pathways and upskilling strategies with employer partners so it can reengage former participants who are employed in the supply chain and logistics industry.

An important strength of the programs is that they actively remove barriers to reengaging in education and training for participants. Instituto works closely with students to ensure that they can pass their entrance exams and complete prerequisite courses for the program, especially Instituto College's nursing program. Georgia Tech LEAP offers all courses online but uses a cohort model that allows students to support one another as they complete the program. Instituto and Georgia Tech LEAP both offer coaching to students throughout the programs to support persistence and completion of training and career success.

Although career advancement steps are typically part of career pathways programs, it may be difficult for programs to help participants continue or reengage after leaving education and training. Career pathways programs may need to address barriers before helping people access and complete more advanced education and training.

BOX 2

Programs that Support Career Advancement through Career Pathways

Instituto del Progreso Latino, Instituto College's Nursing Program

- **Target population:** Open to all students, in particular graduates of the Instituto's Basic Nursing Assistant (BNA) programs and Instituto high school alumni

- **Career pathways program:** Careers in Health (Carreras en Salud), starting with lower bridge classes, including Health English as a Second Language and pre-BNA to the BNA classes and to higher levels of nursing, culminating in an associate's degree in nursing (licensed practical nurse and registered nurse)

- **Career advancement component:** Instituto's college nursing program; students enroll full time, though Instituto is cognizant that students may need to work part-time; includes classroom instruction and clinical experience

- **Student supports:** Wraparound services provided to all Instituto students; student and career advising; assistance with prerequisites and entrance exams

- **Key partnerships:** Health care providers offering clinical experiences for students; community partners helping students receive services to support their participation; employers or health care institutions committed to employing graduates

Georgia Tech Supply Chain & Logistics Institute, Logistics Education And Pathways (LEAP)

- **Target population:** Veterans, youth, and underrepresented minorities in Georgia in the supply chain and logistics industry

- **Career pathways program:** Online courses in supply chain and logistics industry, supply chain gaming simulations, on-site lectures, résumé and career advising

- **Career advancement component:** Advanced courses on inventory management, supply management and procurement, demand planning, and manufacturing and service operations

- **Student supports:** Cohort model; online modularized courses; instructor coaching to support program completion and career success

- **Key partnerships:** Industry representatives as subject matter experts for curriculum development; Juma, an organization that runs concessions stands, provides on-the-job training

Source: Interviews with program leaders, August and September 2018.

Strategy 2: Building the Skills of Entry-Level and Frontline Workers within an Industry

Strategies that help workers advance in their job or in their industry, often called upskilling, have gained traction with policymakers and employers. The main advantage of these programs is that workers can "earn as they learn," without having to leave their job or cut their hours to participate. One of the most popular upskilling strategies is apprenticeship, which combines on-the-job training and related instruction with structured wage progression. Employer tuition assistance programs also support

advancement for employees, with some, such as Amazon,[4] allowing for prepaid education and training expenses for high-demand occupations outside the employer's industry.

Another upskilling strategy involves a third-party training provider working with employers to provide skills training to help their workers advance in their careers. These third-party training providers develop and deliver the curriculum and work with employers to recruit their employees into the program. These training providers may be industry associations or nonprofit organizations. Upskilling programs may be designed to help workers advance in their jobs or build skills transferrable to more advanced occupations across an industry.

Two programs we examined highlight this strategy (box 3). First, Generation USA has developed the Retail Career Advancement program, which helps frontline retail workers in Dallas, Texas, and Jacksonville, Florida, advance in their field. The Washington Hospitality Association implemented the Incumbent Worker Training pilot program in a five-county region. Both programs make it easy for working individuals to complete short, modularized courses offered partly or entirely online. They both also recruit employers to allow and encourage their employees to participate in the program. Currently, the Retail Career Advancement Program embeds a mentor to support student success. The Incumbent Worker Training program also offered mentors to students (few took up the opportunity), and leaders recognize that they may need more robust student supports in the future.

Recruiting employers and current workers is challenging for upskilling strategies. Employers must be convinced that they can benefit from additional training. Generation USA provides employers with an estimate of the return on investment in the career advancement program. The training also may need to be of no or low cost to employers and their employees to gain initial buy-in for the strategy, something both Generation USA and the Washington Hospitality Association implemented. Workers may also need to be convinced that this training can benefit their careers, especially if, on top of the time they take for their jobs, they are taking time away from their family and personal time to participate in training.

Using an upskilling strategy as a part of career pathways offers career advancement opportunities for workers and a way for employers to improve the skills of their workforce. Career pathways models may want to embed upskilling strategies to help entry-level workers for whom leaving their job or cutting back their hours to participate in education and training is not feasible.

Programs to Build Entry-Level and Frontline Workers' Skills and Credentials

Generation USA, Retail Career Advancement Program

- **Target population:** Retail industry workers in Dallas, Texas, and Jacksonville, Florida
- **Career advancement programming:** Cohort model; up to 60 percent online curriculum; three-week program
- **Student supports:** A mentor who is a counselor, career coach, and case manager creates a plan for advancement with student; referrals to community services to support participation; and follows up with students throughout the program and six months after completion
- **Key partnerships:** Employer partners recruited when presented with return on investment for employees participating in program; program staff work with employers to study work processes to embed in curriculum

Washington Hospitality Association, Incumbent Worker Training Pilot Program

- **Target population:** Current workers in the hospitality industry in five Washington counties
- **Base programming:** In-person, self-navigated workbook; online foundational courses; industry-recognized credentials in hospitality
- **Career advancement programming:** Advanced online courses in hospitality management
- **Student supports:** Low or no cost to student employees; coaching and progress tracking
- **Key partnerships:** Regional employers who promote training to students; local WorkSource center supporting cost of training

Source: Interviews with program leaders, August and September 2018.

Strategy 3: Reengaging Students Who Dropped Out of College

One strategy not typically discussed as a part of career pathways is reengaging students who have dropped out of college. These students may have had work or family obligations or health issues that made coursework difficult to continue. They may have also had a lack of financial resources. Leaving college before completing a degree is an all too common problem, exacerbating low completion rates, especially for two-year and nonselective four-year colleges. According to the Census Bureau, more than 35 million Americans have some college but no degree.[5] And, college enrollment has dropped since the end of the Great Recession as more people are choosing to work, even though they may not have the skills or credentials to advance in their job.

These issues have spurred states like Indiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Tennessee to develop programs to help people who drop out of college return to school to complete their programs of study and earn their degree.[6] A critical issue these programs address is the need for financial aid—either through grants or debt forgiveness—and services and counseling to support persistence and completion. The Warrior Way Back program at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan, shows how

these programs work at the institutional level (box 4). Wayne State University leaders wanted to address the intersecting issues of decreasing enrollment and low completion rates. They have been reengaging students who had dropped out of Wayne State University without completing their degrees and with debt to the school. The program recruits former students who have three semesters or fewer remaining in their programs of study and have $1,500 or less in arrears, initially contacting nearly seven thousand former students by postcard in these categories. Wayne State University provides an orientation and advising to reenroll and track and support students as they complete their remaining semesters. They also may help students transfer to Macomb Community College to complete their programs if appropriate. Wayne State is also developing Warrior Way Forward to work with employers to reengage their employees in college, a hybrid upskilling and college reengagement strategy.

A strategy that includes reengaging and removing barriers for individuals who have dropped out of college to return to complete their degrees opens doors to former students who may have thought going back to college was not an option. The lessons from the experiences of states and colleges applying this career advancement strategy, especially removing financial barriers, can help shape how career pathways approaches address the challenge of reengaging students.

How to Better Support Career Advancement Strategies

To fulfill the promise of career pathways, practitioners, policymakers, and program funders must focus on how to better support career advancement for adults and youth. These three career advancement strategies demonstrate how programs can support advancement by embedding career advancement in

existing career pathways programs, building the skills of current workers within an industry, and reengaging students who dropped out of college. We offer key takeaways that cut across the strategies to start more robust conversations about how to support career advancement strategies within the career pathways model, especially as states and local areas implement the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act and Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act programs. Future publications will more fully explore specific actions policymakers, practitioners, and researchers can take to better support career advancement as a part of career pathways.

First, all career advancement programming should help remove barriers to reengaging individuals in education and training. Often, these programs are still working with adults and youth with complicated personal lives, in low-wage but demanding work, and who may be underprepared academically for more advanced education and training. We have highlighted how programs can remove, or at least reduce, barriers, including providing (1) online curriculum for easier access to training for working individuals; (2) financial aid and debt forgiveness to reduce financial barriers; and (3) wraparound services, such as coaching and mentoring, and access to supports such as child care and transportation to support persistence and completion. Policymakers and foundations can help programs by supporting more connected and seamless education and workforce systems that make access to services easier for students who are pursuing education and training beyond the first step on a career pathway.

Second, helping individuals advance through additional education and training may require programming that uses more than one strategy. For example, the LEAP program combines elements of career pathways and upskilling strategies, and the Warrior Way Back program plans to expand its program to reengage students who have dropped out of college to include upskilling. The strategies highlighted are not mutually exclusive in practice, and elements of each can help support stronger career advancement programming. Policymakers and foundations may want to fund demonstration programs or develop new initiatives that test approaches that combine various strategies to support career advancement.

Finally, engaging partners can help individuals seeking advancement opportunities succeed. Employers can help develop curriculum that teaches the skills individuals need to advance and provide work-based learning opportunities to support upskilling. But it is crucial to obtain employers' buy-in so they send their employees to obtain more advanced education and training. Other partners, such as the industry associations, public workforce system, other institutions of higher education, and nonprofit organizations, can also support individuals' participation in advanced education and training. Policymakers and foundations should consider embedding strong partnerships with employers and industry as a key component of policy or funding to ensure that education and training that supports career advancement aligns with employer demand for skills and credentials and offers work-based learning opportunities.

Researchers also need to improve the evidence about the success of career advancement strategies by ensuring career pathways evaluations follow and track participants in more advanced steps by capturing longer-term outcomes. Policymakers and practitioners need better evidence on which strategies and programs work and how they are implemented to support stronger policy and practice in

the career pathways field. Stronger evidence would help them implement more widespread integration of career advancement strategies into postsecondary and workforce systems and employer practice, making career advancement opportunities accessible for all workers.

Notes

[1] "About Career Pathways," Abt Associates, accessed September 19, 2018, http://www.career-pathways.org/about-career-pathways/.

[2] Kelly Field, "States use direct mail, money, to get more of their residents back to college," *The Hechinger Report*, April 18, 2018, https://hechingerreport.org/states-use-direct-mail-money-to-get-more-of-their-residents-back-to-college/.

[3] We identified possible career advancement programs for interviews from recommendations by staff at JPMorgan Chase, the funder of this research; from other workforce development experts; and from online searches. We selected the five programs to represent what our literature review revealed. Of the programs selected for interviews, the Georgia Tech Supply Chain and Logistics Institute and Instituto del Progreso Latino are JPMorgan Chase grantees.

[4] "Amazon Turns Upskilling on Its Head," Upskill America, the Aspen Institute, May 10, 2018, https://www.aspeninstitute.org/of-interest/amazon-turns-upskilling-head/.

[5] "Table 1. Educational Attainment of the Population 18 Years and Over, by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin: 2017," US Census Bureau, December 14, 2017, https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2017/demo/education-attainment/cps-detailed-tables.html.

[6] Field, "States use direct mail, money, to get more of their residents back to college," *The Hechinger Report*; "Community colleges can apply for Finish Line Grants to help students," NC Community Colleges, accessed September 19, 2018, https://www.nccommunitycolleges.edu/community-colleges-can-apply-finish-line-grants-help-students.

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