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# Better Connecting Postsecondary Education to Work

Practitioner-Informed Policy Design Commitments and Principles

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Policy Leadership Trust—October 2019

## CALL TO ACTION

The changing economy is radically altering the way we work and intensifying the pressure on talent development and economic opportunities. The changes that are underway promise to create new jobs, but only for people with the right skills.

In an era when two-thirds of jobs already require some form of education and training beyond high school—an all-time high—the rapid rise of advanced technologies, such as automation and artificial intelligence, is further accelerating the shift to a skills economy. It has been estimated that 85 percent of the jobs that will be available in 2030 have yet to be created, and



that the “half-life of skills” is shrinking to five years.<sup>12</sup> People who want to remain employable and “robot proof” must master nonroutine, cognitive skills. Moreover, with the rise of the gig economy, the need for entrepreneurial skills is more essential than ever—it’s estimated half of the labor force will work as freelancers by 2027.<sup>3</sup>

This seismic shift in the labor market demands new thinking about the role of postsecondary institutions in preparing individuals for work, supporting their ongoing skill development needs, and driving economic advancement for all. Policymakers seeking creative policy solutions to meeting workforce challenges would do well to focus their attention and investments on community and technical colleges. Considering their long-standing connections to business and industry, their deep roots in their local communities, and their unwavering commitment to open-access, low-cost education, these public, two-year institutions are well positioned to develop new sources of talent for the jobs of the future while also reaching and serving populations with the greatest need for credentials and upskilling.

Yet, due to the complexities of postsecondary systems and the stakes at hand for families, workers, employers, and their communities, it is essential that policymakers take great care in crafting

policy solutions designed to better connect postsecondary education to work. They should draw on lessons of innovators and heed the insights of practitioners who have already been charged with implementing reform efforts.

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### **JFF’s Policy Leadership**

**Trust** has culled the expertise and experiences of practitioners in 16 states to offer policy design recommendations for transforming postsecondary systems to increase attainment of credentials with value and grow a skilled workforce. This group has developed four key principles to guide postsecondary policy decisions. The principles highlight the need for a future-ready workforce, student-centered pathways, structural change, and an ecosystem of success. The Policy Leadership Trust also offers examples of potential policy levers that policymakers may consider in order to fulfill the intent of each principle.

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## **KEY COMMITMENTS FOR POLICY DESIGN**

*Why it's important to take equity and economic impact into account when designing policies to connect postsecondary education to work*

### **A Commitment to Equity**

To address the looming workforce challenges, it is imperative that postsecondary institutions help a greater number of underserved learners attain robot-proof skills and earn credentials that have labor market value. In order to expand opportunities for advancement for all workers and learners, closing equity gaps should be a primary goal of postsecondary policy and reform efforts.

### **A Commitment to People, Places, and Employers**

To stay relevant in the new economy and the changing education landscape, postsecondary institutions must embrace a clear value proposition and commit to making an economic impact that benefits learners, workers, and their communities, as well as business and industry. They must address the changing needs of today's students and workers by redesigning programs and structures to support lifelong learning, prepare people for work, and help learners navigate career and education options. Postsecondary institutions must also address the workforce needs of business and industry by strengthening talent pipelines and by collaborating with employers on skills development solutions. Lastly, postsecondary must contribute to the economic renewal and vitality of local communities by serving as engines of innovation and as hubs for addressing the holistic needs of workers and learners.



# POLICY DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR CONNECTING POSTSECONDARY TO WORK

## 1. Future-Ready Workforce

**Postsecondary institutions must prepare people to succeed in the changing economy.**

Postsecondary must closely examine curricula, review the design of courses and programs, and reconsider where learning occurs.

Policymakers should encourage and support postsecondary institutions' efforts to focus on teaching students skills that are, and will be, highly valued in today's and tomorrow's economies. Program and course offerings should infuse rigorous academic learning with a mixture of the following:

- ▶ **Employability skills** to help students understand how to work.
- ▶ **Technical skills** to prepare students for specific job tasks, with an emphasis on occupations and tasks that are nonroutine and not repetitive.

- ▶ **Transferrable skills** to help students remain marketable if they switch careers. These types of skills include complex problem solving, critical thinking, and people management capabilities, as well as emotional intelligence and the ability to coordinate with others.

- ▶ **Adaptability skills** to empower students and workers to successfully navigate and embrace change with an entrepreneurial spirit and a growth mindset.

An accumulation of these skills, which place a value on uniquely human abilities, will help students and workers remain robot-proof.

Academic-focused learning should remain the primary purview of college faculty, and critical thinking skills, which are the calling card of a liberal arts education, should be incorporated into a broad array of career-focused programs and pathways. Yet, to further bridge the divide between

school and work, policymakers should encourage and support postsecondary institutions' efforts to engage employers in teaching students in the classroom and at the workplace.

Institutions ought to embrace a larger role for business and industry in co-designing programs of study and co-teaching students the employability, technical, transferrable, and adaptability skills they increasingly need. Schools and employers should also partner in developing and offering high-quality experiential work-based learning opportunities—including apprenticeships—for a wide variety of fields. To build a future-ready workforce, postsecondary institutions must transcend the discrete job requirements of particular employers and instead design programs that offer portable skills and academic competencies that people need to advance in the changing economy.

Faculty will increasingly need to serve as collaborators, facilitators, and arbiters of quality. To ensure that faculty are better positioned to help students prepare for the future of work, faculty roles must be more flexible and institutions must offer new forms of professional development.

## 2. Student-Centered Pathways

**Postsecondary institutions must respond to the just-in-time education and skill needs of workers and students, while also making it easy for individuals to return throughout their working years for upskilling and additional credentials.**

As discussed above, workers will need an array of human skills to succeed in the changing economy. However, not all postsecondary experiences are capable of instilling all of the necessary skills at once—nor should they, necessarily. What workers and students need is a postsecondary system designed for lifelong learning—one that delivers rapid skill-building and credentialing but also encourages and enables individuals to “drop back in” to continue their educations and further develop technical, transferrable, and adaptable skills.

For this to happen, policymakers must encourage and support postsecondary institutions' efforts to make skill-building and academic learning efficient and seamless. Achieving this aim will demand improved structures and supports to ensure that students and workers can—and do—return for further education. This includes the delivery of short-term, skill-building credentials; new types of

programs that blend rigorous academics, work-based learning, and industry-recognized certificates; the embedding and stacking of short-term credentials within programs; and the full-scale implementation of guided and transfer pathways through the completion of advanced degrees.

To foster upward economic mobility for all students and workers, postsecondary institutions must avoid creating separate tracks that funnel low-skill and underserved individuals into dead-end fields. Postsecondary should also find ways to boost the accessibility and affordability of alternative programs that respond to industry needs and lead to immediate entry into jobs offering family-sustaining wages.

### 3. Structural Change

**Policymakers must transform postsecondary systems and structures to make it possible for institutions to build a future-ready workforce and facilitate student-centered pathways.**

Policymakers must make it easier for postsecondary institutions to offer new kinds of credential programs that blend an array of academic competencies and robot-proof skills and to deliver these programs in accelerated and personalized ways.

Additionally, policymakers need to remove barriers that make it difficult for students to accelerate their learning and seamlessly continue their educations. This requires, reforms to accreditation standards, program approval processes, financial aid eligibility rules, transfer and articulation agreements, and state funding structures. Such changes include a shift from a traditional focus on seat-time and credit-hour requirements to a focus on student competencies and outcomes. To help ensure that more students have access to new and innovative programs, financial aid eligibility should be expanded, and states should provide sufficient funding for these types of programs.

Policies designed to achieve those goals would facilitate greater use of short-term programs, work-based learning, and competency-based education strategies. They would also eliminate silos between credit and noncredit programs and encourage the adoption of student-friendly policies, like offering credit for prior learning.

Policymakers should take great care to safeguard the quality of postsecondary programs by, for example, strengthening data systems to better track and actively use meaningful metrics that inform

student choice and ensure that education is market-driven.

Policymakers should also encourage and support institutions using labor market information to ensure that programs are tied to current and emerging highly valued credentials. Moreover, policymakers should invest in what works—spending federal and state dollars on postsecondary programs and institutions that yield the best return on investment for students. Lastly, policymakers should foster greater collaboration and accountability among two-year and four-year institutions to ensure seamless transitions, including seamless credit transfer and articulation along lifelong learning pathways.

#### 4. An Ecosystem of Success

**All learners—especially those who have been historically underserved by postsecondary systems—must receive early and sustained advising and wraparound supports that bolster their college and career success.**

Today's postsecondary students are older and more diverse, and they face more barriers than ever before.<sup>4</sup> Therefore,

postsecondary institutions must enhance navigational supports to help students make well-informed educational and career decisions. They could, for example, focus on offering up-front career advice, connecting students with internships and job placements, and helping students access an array of financial resources to address work-life-school challenges as they arise.

Postsecondary education will need more resources to implement the supports necessary to build an ecosystem of success for today's students, and policymakers must invest accordingly. But even with more resources, postsecondary institutions can't do it alone. For support services that are outside of their capacity, postsecondary institutions should serve as concierges, identifying students' needs and connecting students with local programs or services that can better assist them. Policymakers should promote measures that support partnerships with community-based service providers and offer schools incentives for pursuing them.



## PROPOSED POLICY LEVERS TO SUPPORT POLICY DESIGN

*This section provides a list of potential policy levers that policymakers can use to fulfill each of the four principles discussed above. This is not an exhaustive list. Other policy levers and strategies should be explored.*

*Here's a look at how various policy levers can be used to carry out each principle.*

**The policy levers are grouped around a core set of policy functions that are listed and defined here:**

**Enabling policies:** Incentives to encourage innovation and foster stronger collaboration across systems to accelerate implementation of evidence-based approaches.

**Funding mechanisms:** Financial resources, incentives, and tax policy changes that inject much-needed investments into the implementation of evidence-based approaches.

**Implementation guidelines:** Guidance from policymakers on how practitioners or institutions should consider implementing proven policy-based approaches.

**Governance reforms:** Measures and incentives that catalyze transformational changes in the structure and operations of institutions and systems.

**Directives:** High-level mandates that set clear expectations and deadlines for the courses of action that practitioners and partners should take.

**Capacity-building supports:** Professional development opportunities and technical assistance to help practitioners improve their work.



## 1. Future-Ready Workforce

*Policy can support career-connected postsecondary programs through funding, capacity building, directives, guidance, and governance.*

### Funding

- ▶ Instituting tax incentives for strong employer engagement, specifically promoting efforts to co-design postsecondary coursework or jointly offer high-quality work-based learning opportunities.
- ▶ Providing funding to recruit and retain faculty who are professionals in in-demand industries.
- ▶ Enhancing funding for programs that address high-demand labor market needs but are costly to deliver.

### Capacity Building

- ▶ Providing professional development opportunities for faculty and staff to change institutional culture, transform advisement, course creation, and delivery of learning to provide more meaningful work-related coursework and shift styles of instruction.

### Directives

- ▶ Ensuring postsecondary programs are aligned with the needs of regional economies.

- ▶ Requiring employer engagement to ensure that postsecondary leaders work closely with employers.
- ▶ Requiring high-quality and innovative work-based learning opportunities across postsecondary programs.

### Guidance

- ▶ Defining the breadth and depth of essential skills that students need and proposing ways to integrate those skills into programs and courses; promoting programs that teach nonrepetitive automation-proof skills.
- ▶ Defining work-based learning opportunities and work-related coursework to ensure that opportunities are innovative and of high quality; connecting curricula with talent supply and offering meaningful on-the-job experiences.

### Governance

- ▶ Convening cross-sector partnerships (with representation from education, workforce development, and employers) to strengthen collaboration and to examine, align, and promote programs that respond to current and future workforce needs.

## 2. Student-Centered Pathways

*Policy can support lifelong learning through funding, directives, guidance, and governance.*

### Funding

- ▶ Increasing funds to support the continuation or development of postsecondary pathways strategies.
- ▶ Making financial aid requirements more flexible to give students access to a variety of postsecondary options, and to make it easier for people to return to postsecondary education as needed.

### Directives

- ▶ Ensuring that postsecondary programs are aligned with the needs of the regional economy.
- ▶ Requiring consultation with employers on skill gaps to ensure that shorter-term programs offer what business needs, so that students have strong employment outcomes after program completion.

### Guidance

- ▶ Providing strong guidance for how postsecondary institutions can leverage and utilize existing federal, state, and local funds to support the sustainability and scale of successful programs.
- ▶ Providing guidance on the key tenets of guided and career pathways.

- ▶ Providing guidance on quality credentials (whether they are short-term, mid-length or degree programs), including language on labor market information, employer input, and employment outcomes for the learner/worker.

### Governance

- ▶ Bringing together K–12, postsecondary education, workforce development, and employer leaders to support stronger connections and partnerships.

## 3. Structural Change

*Policy can transform postsecondary systems and structures to be student-centered and future-ready and uphold quality through funding, directives, guidance, and capacity building:*

### Funding

- ▶ Investing in professional development for postsecondary faculty and staff to better understand how to assess competencies and teach to the skill gaps.
- ▶ Investing in an integrated data infrastructure system that connects and tracks data across education and workforce sectors.
- ▶ Investing in capacity and analysis support at the institution to ensure that qualified personnel are aggregating and analyzing data appropriately.

### **Directives**

- ▶ Ensuring that programs are aligned to labor market information and industry needs and lead to in-demand credentials.
- ▶ Ensuring that data is easily accessible and understandable.
- ▶ Shifting accreditation practices to ensure that postsecondary institutions and programs are evaluated based on student outcomes rather than program inputs (e.g., time requirements).

### **Guidance**

- ▶ Providing guidance on high-quality postsecondary programs, including opportunities for innovation and flexibility in delivery models.

### **Capacity Building**

- ▶ Providing professional development for staff on how to analyze labor market information and outcome data for use in program development and improvement.

## **4. An Ecosystem of Success**

*Policy can support strong navigation and support services through funding, enabling policies, and governance:*

### **Funding**

- ▶ Leveraging federal funds (WIOA, TANF, SNAP Employment Training, or the Child Care Subsidy/Voucher programs) to increase financial resources available to community college students.

- ▶ Increasing financial support available to low-income students and families to cover the costs of postsecondary education and training (including tuition as well as out-of-pocket expenses like textbooks and transportation).
- ▶ Providing adequate and sustained funding to support counseling and advising to effectively assist students upon entry into and throughout their pathways.
- ▶ Investing in appropriate professional development for counselors and advisors to better understand how to serve students appropriately.

### **Enabling Policies and Incentives**

- ▶ Supporting community colleges in screening students to determine their need and eligibility for school supports and/or public benefits that will improve their financial stability and reduce other barriers (such as difficulty accessing child care and transportation).

### **Governance**

- ▶ Bringing together community institutions and organizations that serve low-income populations to strengthen partnerships and referral processes that better connect students to resources that help them persist and complete their courses of study.

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## DISCLAIMER

*Policy positions of the Policy Leadership Trust represent the prevailing viewpoints of its membership and do not necessarily reflect perspectives of all individual members.*

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## ENDNOTES

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