

Advancing Degrees of Value

A Strategic Framework for States



Advancing Degrees of Value: A Strategic Framework for States

NCSL HIGHER EDUCATION TASK FORCE

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- Improve the quality and effectiveness of state legislatures.
- Promote policy innovation and communication among state legislatures.
- Ensure state legislatures a strong, cohesive voice in the federal system.

The conference operates from offices in Denver, Colorado and Washington, D.C.

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Executive Summary

In 2022, NCSL's Executive Committee created the Task Force on Higher Education Affordability and Student Outcomes to explore state and federal strategies to make college more affordable for students and taxpayers, improve completion rates, and reduce rates of unrepayable student debt. Over the past four years, a bipartisan group of over 45 state legislators and legislative staff from 40 states have participated in semiannual convenings to seek consensus on productive paths forward for higher education.

In 2024, the task force released a [three-part report](#) that offered a vision for a balanced state-federal relationship and proposed a national strategy for enhancing the value of degrees.

In the wake of that report, the task force committed to an additional two-year study to more deeply examine how states and higher education institutions can strengthen the value of postsecondary degrees.

This report presents the conclusions of that two-year study, during which the task force met several times to consider issues related to state strategies to enhance the meaningfulness, attainability and affordability of degrees and credentials. These meetings included collaboration with state higher education officials, institutional leaders, and expert policy researchers. Legislative members have been deeply engaged in considerations of the legislature's role in state postsecondary education and talent development and the state policies that can achieve meaningful outcomes for students and families.

The task force's discussions yielded 10 key findings that address the current state of higher education and offer a bipartisan vision for its future. These findings reflect a bipartisan consensus that higher education remains essential to individual opportunity and state prosperity, while also recognizing the need for continued improvement to better deliver results for students and families.

- Degrees deliver value to students when they are meaningful, achievable, and affordable.
- States affirm the broad value of higher education and recognize the significant social, economic, and community benefits it provides.
- Financial outcomes are a core component of understanding degree value, but are not the only reason students seek a higher education.
- Degree outcomes should be considered carefully and comprehensively.

- Higher education must take the lead in enhancing the value of degrees in partnership with state policymakers.
- Higher education has a responsibility to ensure every degree program has pathways that lead to positive career outcomes, not just completion.
- Higher education should meaningfully recognize all forms of learning to facilitate learner mobility.
- Higher education should be student-centered and strive to meet the needs of all learners.
- College prices should be clear and easy to understand.
- Policymakers and higher education leaders need detailed and comprehensive student- and program-level data to inform decision-making.

To translate these findings into real and lasting change, the task force offers a strategic policy framework to support both policymakers and postsecondary systems as they advance the value of degrees in their states. This framework follows a four-step, data-driven process to understand degree value outcomes and align identified challenges with potential policy actions. It includes a comprehensive set of policy examples from all 50 states and six territories. The framework is guided by four key questions the task force found useful as it thought about how to create strategies to enhance the value of degrees:

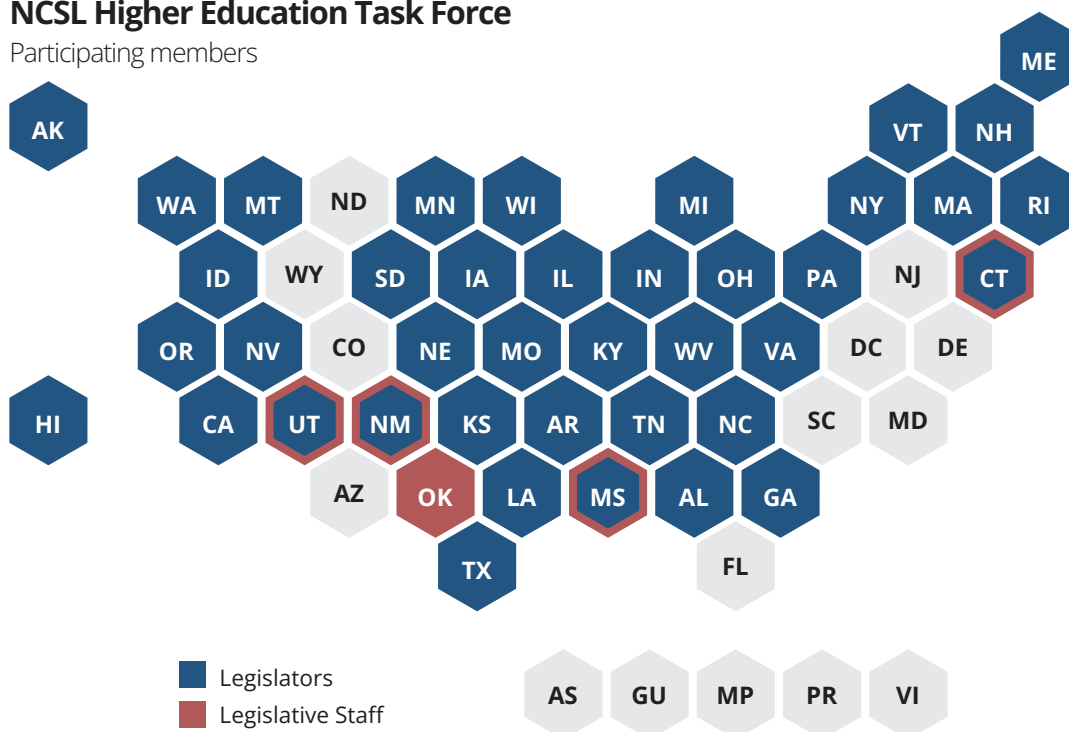
- **Setting the Scope**—What degree programs could benefit from additional support to enhance their value?
- **Assessing the Challenges**—What do student outcomes data reveal about the challenges students face in these programs?
- **Aligning Findings to Policy Approaches**—What are the relevant approaches to address the barriers that diminish the value of those degree programs? The task force identified the approaches to include:
 - Program reform
 - Program reallocation
 - Design higher education around students
 - Support student success
 - Realign funding models
 - Build or redesign financial aid systems
- **Taking Action to Enhance Value**—What are the specific policies and practices that would enhance the value of degrees?

The task force tested this framework during its final convenings and hopes it will be helpful for peer legislators as well as other stakeholders working to enhance the value of degrees. Meaningful improvements to degree value will require a shared and sustained commitment to continuous reform. This cannot be accomplished by any one policy or sole stakeholder.

The task force's work reflects a shared belief that higher education remains one of the nation's most important drivers of opportunity and prosperity. At the same time, significant challenges continue to affect the meaningfulness, attainability and affordability of postsecondary options. Meeting these challenges is essential to build a future where the promise of higher education is fulfilled, student dreams are achieved, and states economies are strengthened. This task force concludes its work with a renewed sense of optimism towards this future.

NCSL Higher Education Task Force

Participating members



Source: NCSL

I. Introduction

In 2022, the NCSL Executive Committee authorized the creation of the Task Force on Higher Education Affordability and Student Outcomes. Nearly two decades had passed since NCSL had last convened a nationally representative cohort of state legislators to assess the performance of our nation's system of higher education and recommend solutions to core challenges.

This new task force was formed to grapple with how the prevalence of student debt was reshaping the state-federal relationship in higher education and what the challenges of student loan repayment revealed about the state of outcomes in higher education. Following a series of collaborative meetings with higher education leaders, the task force released a [comprehensive, three-part report in 2024](#) that included findings on the state of student outcomes, a vision for a balanced state-federal relationship, and a national strategy for enhancing the value of degrees.

The task force was originally intended to be a two-year study. Yet, the legislators and legislative staff members believed there was more productive and bipartisan work to be done. They elected to continue their efforts and set their focus on exploring how states and higher education institutions could better partner to enhance the value of degrees.

This report summarizes the task force's findings on how higher education can better support degrees of value in their states. It is the product of two years of work by bipartisan members of the task force and offers a strategic framework for aligning challenges that prevent students from receiving the full value of their investment in higher education to effective policies and practices that can enhance the value of degrees.

State of Play in Higher Education

The task force's 2024 report took stock of the state of higher education. It observed a state of national anxiety about higher education that was fueled by the rise of student debt and the persistence of uneven student outcomes. Public polls at the time showed a marked decline in public confidence in higher education while anticipated enrollment declines portended financial challenges for some institutions.

In the traditionally slow-moving world of higher education, two years is not an especially long time. Yet the past two years have seen significant developments that are shaping the post-secondary landscape.

First, Congress has ushered numerous [changes](#) to federal financial aid through the passage of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (H.R. 1), the most comprehensive legislation on higher education since the last reauthorization of the Higher Education Act in 2008. These changes include new limits on graduate and Parent PLUS loans, prorated limits for part-time borrowers, reformed and streamlined student loan repayment options, expanded access to Pell Grants for short-term workforce programs, and a national accountability schema for institutional access to student loans. While the new loan limits and repayment options will likely curb the significant increases in federal spending on the student loan program, they pose financial challenges to institutions who rely on graduate tuition. The introduction of Workforce Pell and federal accountability based on student earning outcomes signals an increased national focus on workforce alignment and positive financial returns for credential and degree programs.

Second, rapid advancements in AI are already reshaping the learning experience in higher education and beginning to change the nature of the jobs that require a degree. Both dynamics are raising novel questions about the purpose of higher education and the meaning of a degree. While a very wide range of outcomes exist for how AI could change society, the workforce and education, the potential for profound change in each of those domains merits serious consideration. In the wake of these developments, discussions of the purpose of higher education increasingly emphasize teaching durable skills and preparing students for in-demand jobs.

Third, higher education faces growing pressures from demographic challenges, declining public trust, and more restrained state revenue growth. According to [projections from the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education](#), the total number of high school graduates peaked in 2025 and will decline steadily through 2041 due largely to declining birth rates. During this period, 38 states will see a reduction in the number of high school graduates. Recent polling shows more students and families are skeptical of the value of college degrees. Only 38% of respondents said they had a “great deal” of trust in higher education in 2026, compared with 57% of respondents a decade prior, according to [polling from Lumina & Gallup](#). After years of strong revenue growth and the injection of COVID relief funds, many states are seeing lower tax revenue and [state rainy day funds](#) have declined for the first time since the Great Recession.

Finally, value has emerged as a leading theme of policymaking. The momentum towards value has been building for more than a decade. The full launch of the College Scorecard in 2015 fueled this movement by providing program-level student earnings and debt data for the first time. With this data in hand, groups like Georgetown University's [Center on Education and the Workforce](#), [Third Way](#), [FREOPP](#) and the [Postsecondary Value Commission](#) released studies calculating the financial return on investment for thousands of programs at institutions across the country.

National foundations and organizations are championing value as a systemwide goal and policymakers have begun formally incorporating return on investment metrics in policy.

Meetings of the NCSL Task Force on Higher Education

■ In 2025 and 2026, the task force studied the implications of its first report that called on states, higher education and federal partners to work together to enhance the value of degrees. Across meetings in Milwaukee, Washington, D.C., Toronto and Chicago, the task force worked with researchers, state policy leaders, institutional leaders and national experts to deliberate on how policymakers and leaders at every level can improve the value, affordability and transparency of higher education and support student success.

■ In June 2025, the task force met in Milwaukee with higher education policy researchers and thought leaders to discuss defining and measuring the value of higher education and the role of student outcomes data in guiding policy decisions. The task force also explored the promise of evidence-based student success programs and discussed options to improve affordability through cost efficiencies, targeted resources and outcomes-based funding strategies.

■ At the December 2025 [Summit on the State-Federal Relationship in Higher Education](#), the task force hosted college presidents and system leaders from their states to join federal policymakers and leading experts for candid, solutions-oriented workshops. Policy discussions addressed the state-federal relationship, enrollment and revenue pressures, postsecondary finance, student-centered program design, evidence-based student success strategies, career pathways and workforce alignment, and preparations for Workforce Pell.

■ In May 2026, the task force met in Toronto to begin the work of writing this final report, intended to be a guiding framework for state strategies to enhance the value of degrees. Discussions focused on the state legislative role in program review and reform, state support for degrees with high social value, Workforce Pell implementation, competency-based learning, and transfer and credit interoperability.

■ At its final meeting in July 2026 in Chicago, task force members reviewed the emerging state policy framework and tested how it could apply across different degree programs. Discussions focused on strategies to improve student success, the appropriate use of affordability and value metrics, and state funding approaches that promote better outcomes.

Throughout, task force members learned from policies and challenges in other states, brought ideas home for further study, and strengthened relationships with higher education leaders in their states.

Task force meetings demonstrated the critical role of state legislators in convening the many partners who shape higher education. By bringing federal partners, state policymakers and institutional leaders to the same table, the task force created a trusted space where higher education leaders could learn from one another, test ideas and find common ground.

A handful of states have deployed value metrics in annual outcomes reports or even incorporated them into funding formulas. The federal government has introduced a value-added earnings measure that short-term programs must meet to maintain eligibility for Workforce Pell.

Similarly, this Task Force on Higher Education has elevated value, which was the core theme of its 2024 report, [A State-Led Strategy to Enhance the Value of Degrees](#). While the task force has chosen not to define value in exact terms, it has found concepts of value essential to forging bipartisan consensus among policymakers and higher education leaders on productive pathways towards ensuring that every student who enrolls in higher education is able to obtain a meaningful and affordable degree.

II. Findings

The task force continued its work with the intention of exploring the key findings from its [State-Led Strategy to Enhance the Value of Degrees](#) report. Over the past two years, the task force has hosted four convenings across the country to meet with a wide range of stakeholders, including college presidents, representatives from higher education associations and experts from leading organizations. The rich discussions at these collaborative meetings yielded the following findings:

■ FINDING NO. 1

Degrees deliver value to students when they are meaningful, achievable, and affordable.

While there are many specific definitions or even metrics for degree value, the task force encourages the field to think about value as a combination of these three outcomes:

- **Meaningful:** The degree offerings available to students, and the enrollment decision that students make, must lead to desirable life, career and earning outcomes.
- **Achievable:** Students must be able to complete the degree program on time and at their pace.
- **Affordable:** The tuition price that students pay for on-time completion must be reasonable relative to program costs, their income upon entering the program, and the earnings outcomes for potential career pathways.

The value of a degree is diminished, or even nonexistent, unless each of these outcomes are true for each student who enrolls in a degree program.

■ FINDING NO. 2

States affirm the broad value of higher education and recognize the significant social, economic and community benefits it provides.

While task force members know there is more work to be done to enhance the value of certain degrees, the task force consistently affirmed the value of higher education. Higher education institutions and systems support state and [regional economic development](#), while also contributing to cultural enrichment, civic engagement and community well-being. Colleges and universities serve as key engines of workforce development, and support entrepreneurship, innovation and research.

■ FINDING NO. 3

Financial outcomes are a core component of understanding degree value, but are not the only reason students seek a higher education.

Most task force members expressed the view that financial outcomes should be the predominant factor in understanding the value of a degree. They understand that students pursue post-secondary education pathways to find meaningful careers that pay a living wage. When post-secondary programs fail to create these opportunities, they do not live up to the promise of postsecondary education.

Yet there was also universal consensus that students seek a degree, and more broadly a higher education, for more reasons than just earning a better wage. Some degree programs naturally lend themselves to expectations of returning strong financial value, while other programs provide education and student experiences that are not likely to yield strong wages in the labor market for factors beyond the program's control. These programs may deliver different financial outcomes but still offer strong value to students.

The task force was cautious around reducing the value of a degree to purely financial terms and

believes that discussions of degree value should be approached with an understanding that students have a wide and diverse range of motivations and outcomes expectations.

It may be difficult to quantify the personal growth, critical thinking, civic and cultural education, friendships, and many other benefits that students often gain during their higher education experience, but that does not mean they should be ignored in the policy discussion on value.

■ FINDING NO. 4

Degree outcomes should be considered carefully and comprehensively.

In carrying forth their own charge to enhance the value of degrees, the task force spent considerable time wrestling with the question, “How do you measure and understand the success of degree programs?”

Just as the task force emphasized that the value of a degree is multidimensional, they similarly found clarity and insight about the performance of a degree program by using a combination of student outcomes measures. As this report will further explore, program success is most effectively informed by measures of meaningful outcomes, including earnings and employment outcomes, along with measures of attainability and affordability. The task force encourages policymakers to consider a broad range of indicators when evaluating the value outcomes of degree programs.

The task force found that some outcomes measures are more relevant for certain programs. For instance, earnings measures may not be as insightful for teachers as it for business administration degrees. Job placement data may be insightful for nursing programs, but less so for humanities degrees. Policymakers and institutions should measure what matters, which may look different from program to program and encompass a range of outcome indicators.

■ FINDING NO. 5

Higher education must take the lead in enhancing the value of degrees in partnership with state policymakers.

The task force calls on higher education to be the champion of its own change by adapting to meet the reality of today’s students and the new expectations that the public has of higher education. Certainly, state and federal policy has a role to play in advancing positive change, but the task force believes policy should seek to play a complementary role to robust changemaking at the institutional and system level.

Taken together, the driving purpose of the task force over the past two years was to understand how state policymakers can better work in partnership with colleges and universities to enhance the value of degrees.

■ FINDING NO. 6

Higher education has a responsibility to ensure every degree program has pathways that lead to positive career outcomes, not just completion.

The task force believes that every degree program should help students explicitly map skills and competencies and support students in understanding how those translate into common career pathways. In their conversations with college presidents, the task force found broad agreement that there remains a gap between this aspiration and reality.

While many institutions have made increased degree completion a priority, this is not sufficient. Completion alone does not guarantee that students understand the skills they have acquired or how those skills connect to meaningful employment opportunities.

Institutions and policymakers should focus on promoting stronger alignment between programs, careers and employers, including career-connected learning such as work-based learn-

ing. It would be worthwhile for every degree program to communicate and collaborate with the career fields and employers that receive its graduates. This communication could not only inform curriculum design and career counseling but also create opportunities for meaningful work-based learning.

■ FINDING NO. 7

Higher education should meaningfully recognize all forms of learning to facilitate learner mobility.

As policymakers, employers and institutions express aspirations towards lifelong learning and anticipate the potentially profound dynamism of an AI-integrated economy, it is imperative that higher education adapt its model to allow learners, especially working learners, to transition seamlessly between the world of education and work. This would not only serve future learners but better support the more than 38 million working age Americans who have some credit but no credential.

Credit hours have been the near-exclusive currency of higher education for more than a century. The task force believes that learning—demonstrated knowledge, skills, competencies and experiences—should become the primary medium of exchange when awarding degrees.

The task force emphasized that valuable learning occurs in many settings, not just the classroom. In addition, skills acquired in the workplace, military service and apprenticeships should all be recognized and counted as making meaningful progress toward a degree.

Postsecondary systems should account for the wide range of skills and experiences that students bring with them by efficiently translating prior knowledge and skills into degree and credential programs. To do this, institutions can develop more effective methods of awarding credit for prior learning and design degree pathways around competency-based models. Students who are placed farther along the degree path when they enroll are more likely to graduate with less time and expense.

The task force recognizes that credit hours are deeply embedded in higher education policy and practice and will likely remain that way in the near future. Given this reality, the task force calls on public postsecondary systems and institutions to work together with greater urgency to ensure that credits earned at one public institution are credits accepted at another. The still too common practice of gatekeeping credits for reasons that are not primarily based on student learning outcomes is no longer acceptable.

There was unanimous agreement among college presidents and state legislators at a task force convening that most of the credits offered at a state's public institutions should be portable to other public institutions in that state. Much work needs to be done to meet this expectation.

■ FINDING NO. 8

Higher education should be student-centered and strive to meet the needs of all learners using evidence-based practices.

Students, especially working learners, navigate an increasingly winding pathway through education and training options, while also bringing with them many challenges that higher education is asked to help overcome, including academic preparedness and unmet basic needs like food, housing, and child care. Institutions compound these challenges with obstacles including confusing degree requirements, course availability gaps, and inaccessible course schedules.

The task force believes that the design of every college operation, from academic departments to the financial aid offices, should be guided by student needs. Every institution should have a deep and detailed understanding of their student population and prioritize addressing the biggest barriers that keep their students from earning a degree or credential. The task force sees

policymakers' role as working with institutions to find where the support of policy and resources can be leveraged to reduce student obstacles to degree completion.

Policymakers and higher education leaders should also draw on the existing evidence base of effective higher education practices when developing policies and programs. For example, a strong body of research shows that comprehensive student support programs lead to large increases in degree completion. There is also strong evidence on effective approaches to developmental education reform, among other strategies. Using state data alongside evidence of what works can help leaders make informed decisions and invest in approaches that are most likely to deliver value for students.

■ FINDING NO. 9

College prices should be clear and easy to understand.

Even as the “sticker” price of tuition continues to rise, net prices—the actual price students pay—at public institutions have meaningfully declined in recent years and are comparable to [net prices](#) from two decades ago. Keeping net prices in check has been achieved through an ever-complicated combination of state, federal, institutional grant aid and private scholarships.

Unfortunately, this has resulted in a higher education pricing model that has become opaque and complicated. The task force supports nationwide efforts to more clearly communicate college prices and encourages policymakers and higher education leaders to more effectively align costs, state institutional support and financial aid programs to put the price of higher education within reach of more students.

■ FINDING NO. 10

Policymakers and higher education leaders need detailed and comprehensive student- and program-level data to inform decision-making.

A strong data infrastructure that provides reliable and timely insights is the building block of state education and talent development systems. It is also critical to informing students and families of degree and credential options and their related outcomes.

Overall, task force members were moderately satisfied with their current access to outcomes data but learned that many potentially insightful data points and metrics were not available in their state. In particular, student-level earnings and career outcomes data and program-level completion data are not widely available nationwide, but could greatly inform holistic outcomes assessments.

The task force found great benefit to using a combination of metrics to understand student outcomes and encourage institutions, states, and federal partners to work together to build a more complete and robust data infrastructure.

III. State Framework to Enhance Degree Value

Introduction

As consensus emerged around the task force's 10 findings, the members began working to translate those findings into steps that states and higher education could take together to enhance the value of degrees. The task force relied on these 10 findings as the design principles for the following framework, which endeavors to serve as a comprehensive guide for how states and institutions can overcome the challenges that keep students from getting the full value from their investments in higher education.

Many broad goals for higher education—access, completion, affordability—have been framed as institutional questions. The task force found that understanding the value of a degree naturally lends itself to analysis at the program level. Within any degree field, there may be considerable variance in outcomes across programs. Within any institution, there may be considerable variance of outcomes between degree programs. Analyzing outcomes at the program level often provides the most accurate assessment of challenges and thus, the more actionable information for applying solutions. This framework reflects this approach.

This state framework to enhance the value of degrees is organized as a four-step process:

1. **Setting the Scope:** What degree programs could benefit from additional support to enhance their value?
2. **Assessing the Challenges:** What do student outcomes data reveal about the challenges students face in these programs?
3. **Aligning Findings to Policy Approaches:** What are the relevant approaches to address the barriers that diminish the value of those degree programs? The task force identified the approaches to include:
 - o Program reform
 - o Program reallocation
 - o Design higher education around students
 - o Support student success
 - o Realign funding models
 - o Redesign financial aid systems
4. **Taking Action to Enhance Value:** What are the specific policies and practices that would enhance the value of degrees?

States and institutions may find use in following the full progression of steps or focusing on one step individually.

The task force tested this framework during its final convenings and hopes it will be helpful for not only peer legislators, but also other stakeholders working to enhance the value of degrees. Meaningful improvements to degree value will require a shared and sustained commitment to continuous reform. This cannot be accomplished by any one policy or sole stakeholder.

Step 1: Setting the Scope

To develop viable strategies to enhance the value of degrees, states may need to prioritize which degree programs show the greatest need of support. There are hundreds, even thousands, of degrees programs across institutions in one state. Where to begin?

States could take a variety of approaches, ranging from whole state or system strategies to targeted plans that support a handful of degree fields. The scope of the strategy will likely be informed by available resources, state capacity and political will. Ideally, the scope of the strategy is developed in coordination and collaboration with higher education leadership.

BROAD SCOPE STRATEGIES

WHOLE-OF-STATE OR SYSTEMWIDE APPROACH

States could take the broadest approach possible and assess the value outcomes of every degree program offered across the state or within a higher education system. This approach would yield the greatest volume of insight and allow for the development of sub-strategies. This approach could identify common challenges across similar degree fields or reveal whether institutions themselves are experiencing widespread value challenges across their program offerings.

However, this approach would take considerable effort to analyze the data, distill it into actionable findings and prioritize actions to take based on potentially numerous findings.

State Examples: In recent years, several states and systems have led efforts to begin evaluating the student outcomes of degree programs. In 2014, the University of Texas System launched [seekUT](#), to serve as a single report to show median earnings data and educational outcomes by degree level for graduates. In 2024, the University of North Carolina System, at the direction of the General Assembly, [conducted an evaluation](#) of the return on investment of programs offered.

TALENT STRATEGY APPROACH

Some states are developing talent strategies that map state workforce needs onto program offerings and degree production to ensure they have the right talent to meet their social and economic needs. States could develop their value strategies based on the programs that are identified as vital for supporting the state's talent strategy.

State Examples: States are increasingly aligning postsecondary education and workforce development systems to create more coordinated talent development strategies, which can lend itself as part of this evaluation process. Colorado passed [HB 1317](#) in 2026, which creates a unified system of postsecondary talent development and transitions workforce development programs to the department of higher education. In 2026, Georgia passed [HB 1302](#) which includes provisions to require the Office of Education and Workforce Strategy to oversee a return on investment analysis of programs aligned with state priority areas.

INSTITUTIONAL APPROACH

States, or institutions themselves, could base their strategies across all programs at a given institution. This may make sense at institutions that are known to have overall weaker student outcomes and/or are especially vital to their local community or region in the state.

NARROW SCOPE STRATEGIES

DEGREE CLUSTERS

States could base their value strategies on clusters of degrees that are grouped by certain criteria. Examples may include:

- **High social value degrees:** These degrees typically produce graduates that serve essential roles in society, but whose occupations do not pay as much as other professions. These could include degrees in professions such as teaching, child care and social work.
- **“High wage, high skill” or “In demand” degrees:** Each state formally defines these terms under Workforce Pell and could use them as the basis for identifying programs that would benefit from a value-framed assessment. In these cases, programs likely already lead to meaningful employment outcomes, but could benefit from supports to incentivize enrollment, raise student completion and keep prices in reach.

- **High cultural value degrees:** These degree fields might encompass scholarly disciplines or the fine arts, which may see low earnings ceilings but contribute to the cultural fabric of society and universities.

DEGREE FIELDS

In the narrowest strategy, states may wish to focus on enhancing the value of one or just a few degree fields at a time, especially if they have limited resources. With a more narrow scope, states could more effectively leverage limited resources to fully address the value challenges found within select degree programs. This concentrated support could then build an effective model for supporting other degree fields in the state.

As an example, a state may establish a goal that every student who enrolls in a nursing program leaves with a credential of value and then deploy as many supports and resources as possible until that goal has been achieved across all programs in the state.

Step 2: Assessing the Value Challenges

States and higher education institutions and systems can work together to identify where barriers exist that prevent students from getting the full value of their investment in the degree programs that are within the scope of the state's value strategy. This task force found that a holistic assessment of program outcomes most accurately diagnoses the challenges that limit the full value of a degree program.

In keeping with the task force's framework for value, the task force suggests three key questions to ask of every degree program:

- Is the degree meaningful? Does it lead to desirable life, career and earning outcomes?
- Is the degree attainable? Are students able to complete the degree on time or at their own pace?
- Is the degree affordable? Do students pay a reasonable price relative to program costs, their income upon entering the program and the degree's earning outcomes?

These three elements must be true for each degree program to deliver full value to students.

The task force found across its discussions that the answers to these questions will likely look different from program to program, especially when determining whether a degree program's outcomes are meaningful. What constitutes meaningful life and career outcomes for students who graduate from an engineering program may look very different from students who graduate with a degree in the humanities.

The task force also found that these three elements of degree value must not only be true on average, but for every student who enrolls in the program. An assessment of program outcomes would benefit from an understanding of how those outcomes may vary based on the student populations that colleges and universities serve. In addition to student income and demographic considerations, the task force was especially interested in understanding outcomes for working learners.

The task force encourages a data-driven approach to answering each of these three critical questions. This section provides a survey of measures that could inform a holistic assessment of program value outcomes. While each of these measures is deployed to varying degrees, not all states or institutions currently collect some of these data points, nor have the data infrastructure to properly use them for assessing program outcomes. Additionally, certain data sets, including federal data, do not include every student or program type due to technical or statutory limitations.



STATE DATA EXAMPLES

Given the limitations of available data sets, policymakers may need to consider legislative changes that require institutions, agencies and partners to collect, share and use state postsecondary data. This may include enhancing data collection through tools such as [expanded wage records](#), improving data governance and data-sharing practices across agencies, and making outcome data more transparent and accessible through publicly available dashboards.

- **West Virginia:** In 2022, West Virginia passed [SB 548](#) which enhanced the state's unemployment insurance wage record system by authorizing Workforce West Virginia to obtain information regarding employment classifications and work locations from employers.
- **Virginia:** In 2025, Virginia passed [HB 1632](#) which created the Office of Data Governance and Analytics to foster and oversee the effective sharing of data among state, regional, and local public entities and public institutions of higher education.
- **Louisiana:** In 2026, Louisiana passed [SB 305](#) which requires the Board of Regents to collaborate with the state workforce agency to develop a statewide dashboard that provides information on the alignment between postsecondary degree programs and workforce outcomes.

MEASURES TO UNDERSTAND VALUE OUTCOMES

Is the degree meaningful?

Does the degree program lead to desirable life, career, and earning outcomes?

HARD MEASURES		
Measure	Description	Potential data source(s)
Occupation-aligned job placement rate	This metric uses state enhanced wage records to connect a student's program of study to their occupation, including industry and job title. While relatively few states have enhanced wage records that collect detailed occupation data, states will likely need to collect this information by 2029 to continue participating in the Workforce Pell program.	State Unemployment Insurance (UI) data
Postgraduate earnings	Student earnings outcomes are often measured across points in time. The federal College Scorecard measures median earnings four years after completion. The U.S. Census Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes (PSEO) measures earnings one, five and 10 years after graduation. The new federal Student Tuition and Transparency System (STATS) and Earnings Accountability measure requires college programs to prove that most of their graduates earn more than a typical high school diploma holder for undergraduate programs or a typical bachelor's degree holder for graduate programs. The measure goes into effect July 1, 2027.	• State Unemployment Insurance (UI) data • Federal College Scorecard • U.S. Census Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes (PSEO) • Federal Student Tuition and Transparency System (STATS) and Earnings Accountability measure
Employer demand	State Labor Market Information departments collect measures of employer demand, including job openings, expected job growth, and hiring trends.	State Labor Market Information (LMI)
Student demand	Enrollment patterns and trends may indicate whether students consider a program meaningful.	Institutions

HARD MEASURES		
Measure	Description	Potential data source(s)
Economic mobility	This metric would compare pre- and post-graduate student earning outcomes to measure whether degree programs provide economic mobility. Current metrics only calculate economic mobility at the institutional level. Think tank Third Way calculates an Economic Mobility Index and the Carnegie Foundation's Student Access and Earnings classification may also be considered a measure of economic mobility. This concept was also explored by the Postsecondary Value Commission.	Student financial aid data, student earning data
SOFT MEASURES		
Measure	Description	Potential data source(s)
Student and alumni satisfaction survey	Institutions could survey current and former students to assess how the program has advanced their life and career goals.	Institutions
Employer and community feedback	Institutions could formally collect feedback from employers and community partners on the relevance of the program's curriculum and the preparedness of its graduates.	Institutions
Contributions to mission, scholarship, and society	Institutions could engage in self-assessment to understand how a degree program advances an institution's mission, supports scholarly disciplines and contributes to society.	Institutions

Is the degree attainable?

Are students able to complete the degree on-time or at their own pace?

Measure	Description	Potential data source(s)
Program enrollment demographics	This measure could be used to understand who may be unable to access the value of this degree.	Institutions
Program completion rate	This metric calculates the percentage of students who graduate from a program. Rates are calculated by varying intervals, such as 4-, 6-, and 8-year time horizons for bachelor's degrees.	• Institutions • State longitudinal data systems (SLDS)
Time to Degree	This metric calculates the time it takes for a student to obtain a degree after enrollment.	• Institutions • State longitudinal data systems (SLDS)

Measure	Description	Potential data source(s)
Transfer Success Rate	This metric calculates the percentage of students who successfully transfer to another institution and earn a credential within a specified time horizon. In national reports, this is typically calculated at the institution, rather than the program level.	• Institutions • State longitudinal data systems (SLDS)

Is the degree affordable?

Do students pay a reasonable price relative to program costs, their income upon entering the program and the degree's earning outcomes?

Measure	Description	Potential data source(s)
Net price as percentage of student or family income	This measure compares the net price students pay, after aid is applied, against their income upon enrollment.	• Institutions • State longitudinal data systems (SLDS) • Federal Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS)- net price only
Debt to earnings	This metric compares a graduate's debt to their earnings. The former federal Gainful Employment rule relied on a debt-to-earnings calculation.	Federal College Scorecard
Price to earnings / Return on Investment (ROI)	These metrics attempt to calculate a student's return on investment (ROI), often defined as whether and when they recoup the costs of their program through increased earnings. Some metrics define costs as sticker price, net tuition, or total net price. States like Arkansas, Colorado, North Carolina and Texas have created their own program-level ROI metrics. The federal government has its own version for Workforce Pell programs, known as Value added Earnings.	• State longitudinal data systems (SLDS) • Federal College Scorecard

APPLYING THE MEASURES: THREE EXAMPLES OF ASSESSING DEGREE VALUE OUTCOMES

The following examples show how 10 different metrics could be applied to provide insight into the performance of programs. These degree examples are intended to help illustrate contexts in which certain metrics could be applied. They are not meant to express the views of the task force.

Degree Example 1: Education, B.S.

	VALUE OUTCOMES MEASURES		
	Is the degree meaningful?	Is the degree attainable?	Is the degree affordable?
Metrics	Occupation-aligned job placement rate	Time to degree	Net Price-to-Earnings
Rationale	Job placement rates can be insightful indicators for degrees that prepare students for specific professions, such as teaching. The task force discussed the idea that this metric could be modified to indicate the percent of graduates who at one time were employed by a district to account for teacher turnover.	Given the relatively low starting salaries for teachers, completing a degree on-time can reduce costs and debt.	A price-to-earnings ratio used across education programs could reveal where students could get the best value out of a teaching degree. It could also reveal programs whose costs may exceed expected earnings returns from a career in teaching.

Degree Example 2: General Studies, A.A.

	VALUE OUTCOMES MEASURES		
	Is the degree meaningful?	Is the degree attainable?	Is the degree affordable?
Metrics	Graduate Earnings	Transfer Success Rate	Debt to Earnings
Rationale	Since this degree is not intended to support specific career pathways, measuring graduate earnings may be a more meaningful measure of career outcomes.	This degree is largely intended to prepare students for a bachelor's degree, so transfer success rate may be a more meaningful measure than simple completion.	While many students do not borrow to attend community college, this measure would indicate to what extent students that do borrow carry financial burdens after leaving the program.

Degree Example 3: Dance, B.F.A.

	VALUE OUTCOMES MEASURES		
	Is the degree meaningful?	Is the degree attainable?	Is the degree affordable?
Metrics	Employer Demand Student and alumni satisfaction survey	Completion Rate	Net Price as a percentage of student or family Income
Rationale	Regional labor market demand may be a useful metric for ensuring a program isn't producing too many or too few graduates, especially in fields with lower wages. A student and alumni survey could help assess how well the program attends to personal interests.	Even for programs with lower earnings outcomes, a completed degree will generally provide some form of an earnings boost.	Given that degrees in the arts may not be expected to produce strong earnings returns, it may be more insightful to assess whether the price itself is affordable to students.

Step 3: Aligning Findings to Policy Approaches

After assessing how programs fare on selected value outcome indicators, the task force suggests aligning findings to a potential policy approach that could overcome identified challenges. This step serves as a bridge between diagnosis and action, allowing stakeholders to identify which areas of state policy may be most effective for solving the challenges.

To address degree meaningfulness, leaders may consider policy approaches such as **program reform** and **program reallocation**. These efforts can increase degree value by making programs more relevant to careers or realign offerings across their systems or state.

To address degree attainability, leaders may consider policy approaches to **design higher education around students** and **supporting student success**. These strategies can include boosting completion through more robust credit transfer and competency-based education, while also addressing student basic needs and creating structured pathways.

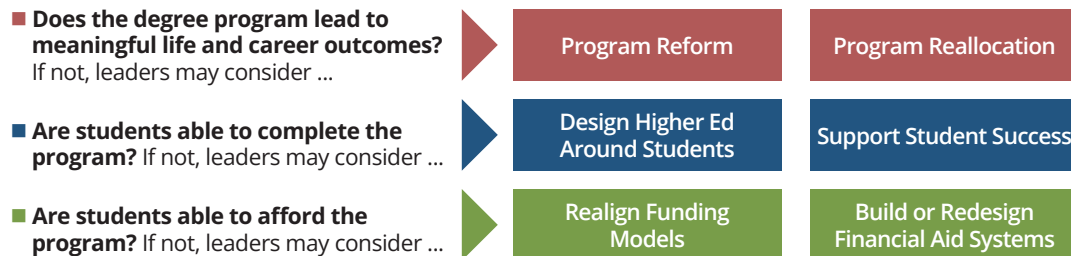
To address degree affordability, leaders may consider strategies to **realign funding models** or **redesign financial aid systems**. These approaches can help leverage funding to advance state-wide goals, while also providing targeted student financial support to promote affordability.

These approaches reflect the conversations that task force members had with numerous policy experts, college presidents and other key stakeholders over the course of the two-year project. While not exhaustive, these approaches emerged as recurring themes across these conversations and aim to encompass a wide range of the state policy landscape.

The task force intentionally focused on a limited number of policy approaches that are actionable, broadly applicable across states and closely connected to the drivers identified through its vision of value. In some cases, barriers may be interconnected and multiple approaches may be necessary. In those instances, policymakers may consider which approach may exert the greatest leverage and then apply complementary approaches. Others may consider pursuing all approaches at once.

By linking value outcomes data to broader policy approaches, the task force believes that policymakers can address underlying causes and prioritize effective solutions to enhance the value of degrees. In addition to using outcomes data, policymakers can draw on the existing higher education evidence base to identify effective approaches, helping to ensure that solutions are responsive to state needs and are supported by research.

Aligning Findings to Policy Approaches



THE FRAMEWORK IN ACTION

Using the data from Section II, the hypothetical bachelor's degree in education program has outcome measures for meaningfulness showing strong in-field placement. For attainability, the program has mid-level completion rates but a short average time to degree. For affordability, the program has a poor net total price-to-earnings metric. Based on this data, affordability appears to be the main barrier to value for this program. Leaders may consider institutional funding strategies or student financial aid policy approaches to address this challenge. Leaders may also seek to address mid-level economic mobility through program reform or reallocation, as well as mid-level completion rates via designing higher education around students and supporting student success.



Step 4: Taking Action to Enhance Value

Within each policy approach, the task force identifies a range of state policy actions for leaders to consider. These actions are intended to serve as a menu of potential options rather than a prescribed roadmap or set of recommendations. State contexts and needs vary significantly and policymakers should consider which actions are most appropriate for their unique situation. The policy actions reflect the discussion among members of the task force, ideas from experts who attended meetings, and trends in recent state legislation identified by NCSL staff. However, they are not intended to be exhaustive and are meant to help legislators and staff explore potential solutions. Through extensive discussion, task force members found significant and bipartisan common ground for these strategies, but offer these as potential ideas, not firm recommendations. Legislation from all 50 states, and six territories is included. These examples are meant to be illustrative of the breadth of state policy work on these topics, but do not represent endorsement from the task force or NCSL.

Strategies to Address Degree Outcomes	Strategies to Address Attainability	Strategies to Address Affordability
Program Reform - Strengthen degree-to-career pathways - Integrate work-based learning Program Reallocation - Merge, consolidate, suspend, or eliminate programs - Redirecting resources strategically	Promote Institutional Change - Ensure all forms of learning count - Expand admissions pathways and connections with K-12 systems - Explore competency-based learning Support Student Success - Identify student needs through improved data collection - Create wraparound student supports - Enhance student guidance and flexible supports	Realign Funding Models - Develop funding models to align with state talent strategies, institutional missions and workforce needs - Design funding formulas for ROI, completion, and affordability - Enhance institutional resilience and fiscal sustainability amidst demographic pressures Build or Redesign Financial Aid Systems - Target aid and loan forgiveness programs - Streamline access to financial aid systems

The task force appreciates the great diversity across states and institutions and recognizes there will be many paths that enhance the value of degrees. What matters most is that policymakers and higher education are walking together toward the same destination.

As different approaches are implemented, it is important to continuously monitor progress and evaluate whether policies and programs are achieving their intended goals. This can help ensure that resources are being used effectively to improve outcomes and deliver value for students.

Strategies to Advance Meaningful Degree Outcomes

When data reveals that degree programs are not consistently delivering meaningful outcomes for students, states and institutions may consider a range of strategies to improve results. The task force focused on policies and practices that can both enhance the value of existing programs, while also making strategic choices about program offerings.

■ PROGRAM REFORM

Strengthen Degree-to-Career Pathways

Strong degree-to-career pathways help ensure that academic programs lead to meaningful student outcomes. Closer connections among institutions, employers, and workforce partners can improve alignment with workforce needs, expand opportunities for students and support broader economic growth.

Resource: A [recent report](#) from the Aspen Institute’s *Unlocking Opportunity* network offers case studies of how community college campuses engaged with employers to improve programs.

POTENTIAL STATE POLICY ROLES

- **Establish Employer Participation:** Leveraging partnerships, incentives and requirements to support connections between employers and higher education institutions.
- **Align Offerings to Labor Market Needs:** Developing degree and credential quality frameworks and funding strategies to support programs that are in high demand.

STATE POLICY EXAMPLES

- **Alabama**—In 2026, Alabama passed [HB 517](#), the Talent Readiness and Industry Needs (TRAIN) Act. The measure includes provisions to authorize and provide tax credits for businesses to provide instructors and partner with high schools and community colleges for career and technical education programs.
- **American Samoa**—American Samoa has [statutory provisions](#) to require the Office of Economic Development and Planning to develop a list of employment opportunities and needs that is shared with students who are expected to graduate.
- **Guam**—In 2026, Guam passed [B 251](#), which adds an additional business and industry representative to the Guam Community College Board of Trustees.
- **Missouri**—In 2023, Missouri passed [HB 417](#) which created the Upskill Credential Training Program that assists employers in upskilling their workforce with industry-specific credentials.
- **Texas**—In 2025, Texas passed [SB 1786](#) which requires a regional labor market assessment and creates a definition of credentials of value.
- **Utah**—In 2025, Utah passed [HB 260](#), which mandates partnerships between schools, colleges, employers, and apprenticeship programs for the [Utah First Credential Program](#) and the development of a “master credential list” that reflects high-demand fields.

Integrate Work-Based Learning

Real-world learning plays a vital role in helping students connect their education and career experiences. Increasing access to internships, apprenticeships, and other workforce training programs, helps students apply their knowledge while gaining experience in professional settings. Embedding these work-based learning opportunities into degree programs to help students develop durable skills will also enhance the value of postsecondary programs. As these opportunities expand, recognizing eligible work-based learning through academic credit can help students translate real-world experience into progress toward a degree or credential.

POTENTIAL STATE POLICY ROLES

- **Expanding Work-Based Learning Programs:** Creating or funding programs that expand work-based learning options at postsecondary institutions.
- **Recognize Credit for Work Experience:** Ensure postsecondary institutions award academic credit for relevant work experience, military service, apprenticeships, and other experiential learning.

STATE POLICY EXAMPLES

- **California**—In 2025, California passed [AB 323](#) which allows community colleges to use state workforce development funding to support work-based learning programs including providing direct financial support to students.
- **Colorado**—In 2020, Colorado passed [HB 1002](#) which required the state department of higher education to create and implement a plan to award academic credit with guaranteed transfer provisions for work-related experience.
- **Nebraska**—In 2024, Nebraska passed [LB 851](#) which allows the Department of Economic Development to provide grants for internships to reimburse the cost of wages for certain businesses.
- **Puerto Rico**—In 2023, Puerto Rico passed [HB 817](#), creating the [Fair Internships Law](#) which guarantees paid compensation or university credits for internships.
- **Virginia**—In 2026, Virginia passed [SB 286](#) to create a State Government Internship Coordinator who will work with the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia and the Virginia Economic Development Partnership Authority to support, track, and promote state government internship opportunities.

■ PROGRAM REALLOCATION

Merge, Consolidate, Suspend or Eliminate Programs

For degrees to be meaningful, they must remain responsive to evolving student demand, workforce needs and institutional missions. Regular review of program performance can help identify opportunities to strengthen quality, improve resource utilization, and ensure programs continue to meet their intended goals. Where significant overlap, duplication or persistent challenges exist, institutions and systems may consider restructuring strategies such as program mergers, consolidations, suspensions or eliminations to better align resources with priorities while maintaining appropriate pathways for students.

Resource: A recent series from [NCHEMS](#) explores a range of considerations when initiating program review.

POTENTIAL STATE POLICY ROLES

- **Establishing Program Review Frameworks:** Create statutory requirements and structures for the review of programs at the system or institutional level. Establish subsequent program continuation and approval processes in collaboration with postsecondary governance systems.
- **Providing Authority to Systems:** Outline processes for postsecondary governance systems or institutions to conduct reviews of programs within legislatively established parameters.

STATE POLICY EXAMPLES

- **Indiana**—In 2025, Indiana passed [HB 1001](#) requiring state educational institutions to review each degree program at least once every seven years and created low enrollment degree thresholds. The legislation establishes that if a degree program has a low number of graduates institutions must request permission from the Commission for Higher Education to continue the program.
- **Maryland**—In 2024, Maryland passed [HB 1244](#), which established a new process for academic program approval based on state and regional workforce needs, as well as creating separate processes for the approval of graduate and online programs.
- **Ohio**—In 2025, Ohio enacted [SB 1](#) which included provisions to review low-enrollment degree programs. The legislation specifies institutions shall eliminate undergraduate degree programs that confer an average of fewer than five degrees in that program annually over any three-year period. Institutions may appeal for waivers and the Chancellor of Higher Education may grant them and allow programs to continue conditionally.
- **South Dakota**—In 2020, South Dakota passed [SB 55](#) which required the Board of Regents to assemble a task force to study the operations and functions of the institutions of higher education including reviewing administrative efficiencies and a review of low enrollment programs.

Redirect Resources Strategically

Strategic allocation of resources can help ensure investments are directed toward programs that meet the state's postsecondary education and talent strategy goals. As these priorities evolve, institutions may reassess funding across programs and operations while considering institutional mission, regional demand and access for students. Reinvesting available resources in instructional priorities and student support services can strengthen institutional capacity and improve degree meaningfulness.

POTENTIAL STATE POLICY ROLES

- **Support Systemwide Coordination and State Vision-Planning:** Outlining principles and setting vision for statewide governance and planning.
- **Provide Oversight of Strategic Investments:** Create mechanisms for oversight of taxpayer funding to measure alignment with institutional needs, student outcomes and alignment with state goals.

STATE POLICY EXAMPLES

- **New Hampshire**—In 2024, New Hampshire passed [HB 1450](#) directing the university system and community college systems in the state to work collaboratively toward implementation of the comprehensive higher education alignment strategies identified in the report of the public higher education task force.

- **Oregon**—In 2026, Oregon passed [HB 4124](#) which directs the Higher Education Coordinating Commission to conduct a study of the condition of the state’s postsecondary education system and to develop detailed recommendations for the design. The legislation requires the framework to include reviews of academic programs and unnecessary program duplication.
- **Utah**—In 2025, Utah passed [HB 265](#) which created the Higher Education Strategic Reinvestment Act. It required the state’s eight colleges and universities to develop a plan for strategic reallocation of programs that are high-skill and high-demand. As part of the reallocation, the legislature withheld 10% of each institution’s base instructional funding, that would be reallocated in accordance with the plan developed by the institution and approved by the Utah Board of Higher Education and reviewed by legislative committees.

Strategies to Address Attainability

When data reveals that degree programs are not attainable for students, states and institutions may consider strategies to boost completion. The task force emphasized linking data, targeted support, responsible actors, funding or incentives and accountability in a practical implementation framework.

■ DESIGN HIGHER EDUCATION AROUND STUDENTS

Ensure All Forms of Learning Count

To meet the needs of today’s students and their evolving learning pathways, postsecondary systems should recognize learning acquired through a variety of settings and experiences. Consistent statewide approaches to awarding credit for prior learning, military training, industry-recognized credentials and other demonstrated competencies, coupled with transparent reporting on credit mobility and barriers to student progression, can help create clearer and more attainable pathways to credential completion.

Resources: A [report](#) for Education Strategy Group explores state approaches to improving transfer. Similarly, a [toolkit](#) from Trellis Strategies offers best practices for transfer pathways.

POTENTIAL STATE POLICY ROLES

- **Verify Credit Mobility:** Ask systems or state higher education agencies to audit whether transfer credits are accepted and applied to degree requirements.
- **Audit Policy Barriers:** Require institutions and systems to review administrative, transfer and registration policies that create avoidable barriers to completion. Work with regional compacts to coordinate transfer policy, data standards and legislative action across states.
- **Expand Recognition of Workforce and Experiential Learning:** Create specific requirements for awarding credit based on training programs or certifications.

STATE POLICY EXAMPLES

- **Delaware**—In 2024, Delaware passed [HB 116](#) which requires public higher education institutions to adopt and implement policies for granting course credits based on Advanced Placement examinations.
- **Nevada**—In 2021, Nevada passed [AB 330](#) which allows individuals who complete occupational, vocational, career, trade or technical education programs to receive credit towards related professional and occupational licenses and certifications.

- **West Virginia**—In 2025, West Virginia passed [HB 3024](#) which creates a statewide guaranteed transfer and articulation advisory committee and required the development of a statewide guaranteed transfer framework.

Expand Admissions Pathways and Connections with K–12 Systems

Postsecondary attainment can be boosted by supporting multiple routes into college through dual or concurrent enrollment, early college pathways and smoother transitions from high school into postsecondary options. These programs require clear statewide information on eligibility, costs, and credit applicability. Colleges can also use shared K-12 and postsecondary data to identify students who need advising before enrollment, including returning adult learners, English learners, Indigenous students, student parents, and students with foster care experience.

Resource: *ReUp Education offers [five strategies](#) to bring adult learners back to higher ed.*

POTENTIAL STATE POLICY ROLES

- **Reengage Working Adult Learners:** Build reenrollment strategies for adults with some college and no credential, including outreach that does not assume students will return to their prior institution.
- **Build Early College Programs:** Support the development of dual enrollment, dual credit, concurrent enrollment and early college high school programs that support college readiness.
- **Match Pathways to Learner Needs:** Offer flexible, career-connected routes for working adults while preserving broader campus-based options for traditional age students.

STATE POLICY EXAMPLES

- **Idaho**—In 2024, Idaho passed [SB 1359](#) which expanded the Advanced Opportunities program, by increasing funding limits and removing limitations on apprenticeship courses. The Advanced Opportunities program provides funding to high school students to cover dual credits, overload courses, workforce training and exams that provide college credit
- **Maine**—In 2019, Maine passed [HB 1435](#) which extends financial aid eligibility for adult students from 10 semesters to 12.
- **Michigan**—In 2020, Michigan passed [SB 268](#) which created the Michigan Reconnect program that provides adults 25 to 64 with last-dollar financial assistance to pursue an associate degree or industry-recognized credential.

Explore Competency-Based Learning

Competency-based models that measure learning through demonstrated mastery rather than time spent in class can provide additional pathways to credential attainment. Effective implementation may require alignment across financial aid, accreditation and reporting frameworks, as well as ongoing evaluation of student completion, affordability and workforce outcomes to better understand the impact of these approaches.

Resources: *Western Governors University has designed all of its programs through [competency-based education](#). Similarly, C-BEN works with public colleges and universities to [develop competency-based models](#).*

POTENTIAL STATE POLICY ROLES

- **Embed Career Value:** Pair durable skills such as teamwork and problem solving with industry-recognized credentials and AI readiness within degree programs.
- **Align Without Overprescribing:** Use workforce outcomes to guide appropriate programs while preserving broader education goals.

STATE POLICY EXAMPLES

- **Kansas**—In 2025, Kansas passed [HB 2185](#) which expands the Kansas National Guard Educational Assistance program to include additional higher education institutions and programs including competency-based education programs.
- **Ohio**—In 2025, Ohio passed [SB 1](#) which includes provisions to conduct a feasibility study about implementing bachelor's degree programs that require three years to complete.
- **Texas**—In 2025, Texas passed [HB 4848](#) which requires all public university systems to offer at least one competency-based bachelor's degree program in a high-demand field.

■ SUPPORT STUDENT SUCCESS

If data reveals that students are facing challenges, the task force emphasized connecting data to action by requiring policies to identify the intervention triggered by each data signal, the responsible entity and the follow-up timeline.

Identify Student Needs Through Improved Data Collection

Collecting student-level data can help provide a more comprehensive picture of student enrollment. This data can illuminate how factors such as basic needs support, access to childcare and other financial aid programs can be designed to support student success.

Resource: *College Promise conducted a [six-state analysis](#) of state data systems related to student parents.*

POTENTIAL STATE POLICY ROLES

- **Collect Data on Student Parents, Working Learners, and Other Populations in Need of Additional Supports:** Update data requirements to include student-level data in an accessible format.
- **Support Institutional Use:** Pair student-level data collection with focused reports, technical assistance and campus-wide communication.

STATE POLICY EXAMPLES

- **Connecticut**—In 2019, Connecticut passed [HB 7257](#) which requires the board of trustees to study policies and collect data regarding students experiencing food insecurity at the public institutions of higher education.
- **Illinois**—In 2021, Illinois passed [SB 267](#) which requires each public institution of higher education to determine the parental status of each enrolled student and collect specified information about student parents.

- **Maryland**—In 2026, Maryland passed [HB 6](#) which requires that the Maryland Higher Education Commission collect certain data concerning the parental status of students and requires that all public institutions of higher education adopt a plan for pregnant and parenting students.

Create Wraparound Student Supports

Among the most effective models to boost attainment are evidence-based models that combine financial assistance, academic support, basic needs services and career guidance. Wrap-around student supports may include food and housing assistance, help with small debts and financial barriers to completion, including emergency aid, or assistance with childcare and transportation costs.

POTENTIAL STATE POLICY ROLES

- **Differentiate Support Intensity:** Combine universal access with intensive services for students facing the greatest barriers.
- **Match Investments to Evidence:** Prioritize funding for student success programs with the strongest evidence of effectiveness, such as comprehensive support programs, while continuing to test and evaluate emerging strategies.
- **Address Basic Needs:** Help students access housing, food, transportation, childcare and emergency financial assistance. Integrate basic needs with other supports to address multiple barriers to student success.
- **Reduce Re-enrollment Barriers:** Resolve small debts, registration holds and other administrative barriers that prevent students from continuing their education.

STATE POLICY EXAMPLES

- **California**—In 2025, California passed [AB 123](#) which provides a \$20 million appropriation to support emergency financial assistance grants to students attending a community college.
- **Florida**—In 2025, Florida passed [SB 584](#) which requires institutions to prioritize housing placement for students at risk of homelessness including prioritization for year-round housing and work-study opportunities. The law also requires conducting a study on young adult homelessness in consultation with higher education institutions.
- **Georgia**—In 2025, Georgia passed [SB 85](#) which creates a grant program to provide college support for students with foster-care experience.
- **New York**—New York has made ongoing investments in the [Accelerated Study in Associate Programs](#) (ASAP), a comprehensive student success model, including an [\\$8 million appropriation](#) in 2026 to expand the program. ASAP is also funded by local funding and private philanthropic support.
- **Rhode Island**—In 2023, Rhode Island passed [HB 7282](#) which provides that student loan servicers may not withhold student transcripts from borrowers who are delinquent on student loan payments.

Enhance Student Guidance and Flexible Supports

Proactive academic, financial, and career advising—as part of structured pathways—can be a key driver of student degree or credential completion. Early outreach programs that focus on student success, including supports and schedule flexibility for adults, transfers and other students showing risk signals, can help provide the appropriate support and create targeted interventions.



Resource: The American Association of State Colleges and Universities offers a wide range of [insights](#) on achieving student-centered course scheduling. MDRC offers [lessons](#) for providing high-quality advising.

POTENTIAL STATE POLICY ROLES

- **Develop Comprehensive Advising and Coaching:** Provide students with structured and integrated advising resources to support their academic, professional and personal journey in higher education.
- **Strengthen Transfer Earlier:** Use data well before graduation to trigger coordinated advising from both two- and four-year institutions, including co-enrollment, reverse transfer and statewide credit-audit tools.
- **Expand Financial Aid Navigation:** Include private philanthropy, tribal and corporate benefits and other aid beyond the institution.
- **Increase Schedule Flexibility:** Offer traditional, evening, weekend, hybrid and online options so working learners and caregivers can remain enrolled.
- **Reform Developmental Education:** Implement evidence-based reforms, such as co-requisite remediation and [multiple measures assessment](#), that enable students to enroll directly in college-level courses and accelerate progress toward a degree.

STATE POLICY EXAMPLES

- **Iowa**—In 2025, Iowa passed [HB 2610](#) which requires that by the 2028-2029 school year, community colleges shall replace traditional, prerequisite remedial coursework in mathematics and English with corequisite models.
- **Louisiana**—In 2025, Louisiana enacted [SCR 38](#), establishing the cross-sector Task Force on Career Alignment to promote coordination among higher education, legislators, workforce leaders and employers to connect students earlier with quality careers and support graduate retention.

- **Tennessee**—In 2014, Tennessee passed [SB 2471](#) which created the Tennessee Promise Program, which included requirements that award recipients participate in mentoring and community service programs.
- **Texas**—In 2023, Texas passed [SB 459](#) which requires public colleges and universities to provide priority registration to parenting students if the institution provides priority registration to any other group of students.

Strategies to Address Affordability

When data reveals that degrees are not affordable, states and institutions can address cost barriers and provide financial supports. The task force reinforced the role of state funding strategies and financial aid policies that support state postsecondary attainment goals.

■ REALIGN FUNDING MODELS

Develop Funding Approaches that Align with State Goals, Institutional Missions and Workforce Needs

Statewide funding formulas can serve as a tool to support the state’s postsecondary attainment and state talent goals. Formulas can be developed in collaboration with state higher education governance and institutions, while recognizing the distinct role of different institutions. Well-structured funding strategies can create shared expectations, a predictable funding landscape and long-term stability across the state’s postsecondary systems.

Resource: A recent series from HCM Strategies, [The Balanced Framework](#), explores principles for state funding models. The State Higher Education Executive Officers Association provides comprehensive [resources on state higher education funding](#) and [examining funding models](#).

POTENTIAL STATE POLICY ROLES

- **Develop Statewide Processes:** Create and modify state funding formulas with key stakeholders.
- **Establish State Goals:** Set and outline state attainment and talent strategy goals and vision.

STATE POLICY EXAMPLES

- **Colorado**—Since 2014, Colorado lawmakers have approved several iterations of the state’s higher education funding formula. Most recently, the state passed [HB 1345](#) which adjusts these metrics and weights of the state’s funding formula based on recommendations from the Colorado Commission on Higher Education, which is required to review the formula [every five years](#).
- **Kentucky**—In 2016, Kentucky legislators passed [HB 303](#) which approved a Postsecondary Education Work Group to develop a funding model for the state. In 2017, the state passed [SB 153](#) which created new funding models and required 100% of allocable resources to be distributed through the formulas. The work group, which includes representatives from the legislature, governor’s office, higher education institutions and Council on Postsecondary Education has continued to meet and recommend substantive revisions to the state’s funding formula, which have been [enacted by the legislature](#).
- **Mississippi**—In 2026, Mississippi passed [SB 2524](#) which established the State Postsecondary Attainment Council of 26 voting members including representatives of higher education institutions, state workforce development officials, legislative members and private sector representatives.

- **Vermont**—In 2019, Vermont passed [HB 533](#) which created a statewide postsecondary attainment goal that at least 70% of working age residents will hold a credential of value by 2025.

Design Funding Formulas for ROI, Completion and Affordability

States can incorporate multiple measures of value into their funding formulas, including metrics to assess ROI, completion, affordability and student outcomes and weights to provide additional resources to support priority student populations' success. These metrics can guide investments, translate state goals into measurable outcomes, and support institutional improvement. Incorporating these metrics with transparent design principles can also increase accountability for public funding decisions.

POTENTIAL STATE POLICY ROLES

- **Creation of Funding Formulas:** Designing formulas to include outcomes or performance-based metrics such as completion rates, ROI, and student debt levels and weights to provide additional funding for the enrollment and outcomes of priority student populations
- **Evaluate Performance and Promote Accountability:** Define common metrics and benchmarks for use across state systems and regularly review funding outcomes to inform decisions.

STATE POLICY EXAMPLES

- **Hawaii**—In 2016, Hawaii created a portion of the state's [general fund appropriation](#) to the University of Hawaii that is based on six performance measures. The measures include: degrees awarded, STEM degrees awarded, Native Hawaiian degrees awarded, degrees awarded to Pell students, graduation rates and transfer student success rates.
- **North Carolina**—North Carolina [statute](#) provides that the University of North Carolina Board of Governors shall submit a single, unified recommended budget for all of the constituent institutions. In November 2022, the UNC system developed a performance component to funding formulas that included the following metrics: graduation rates, student debt, spending per degree and a metric that is selected by the institution.
- **North Dakota**—In 2013, North Dakota passed [SB 2200](#) which created a new funding formula based on completed student credit hours, where students obtain a passing grade. The formula also uses weighted factors for instructional program classifications.
- **Texas**—In 2023, Texas passed [HB 8](#), which changed the state's funding formula for community colleges from an enrollment-based model to a performance-based model that relies on completions of credentials of value and weights enrollment for Pell recipients, academically disadvantaged students and adult learners.

Enhance Institutional Resilience and Fiscal Sustainability Amid Demographic Pressures

To boost enrollment, states and systems can work to create seamless pathways from high school to postsecondary education. Postsecondary systems will also need to adapt to changing demographics and enrollment patterns while maintaining the value of degrees. In the event of institutional distress or disruption, strategies to manage institutional closures and financial instability, while supporting students are crucial.

POTENTIAL STATE POLICY ROLES

- **Expand Programs to Pathways to Postsecondary Education and Reduce Barriers:** Explore efforts to encourage college-going through dual enrollment opportunities and direct admissions programs.
- **Develop Pathways to Enroll Non-Traditional Students:** Support efforts to serve populations of adult learners, students with some college but no degree, and other non-traditional students.
- **Monitor Institutional Health:** Establish processes to assess the financial and operational health of postsecondary institutions and if necessary, prepare for institutional transitions including teach-out requirements, transfer pathways, and student data preservation.

STATE POLICY EXAMPLES

- **Arkansas**—In 2025, Arkansas passed [HB 1512](#), which included provisions to establish a statewide direct admissions program and common application for students pursuing postsecondary education in the state.
- **Connecticut**—In 2026, Connecticut passed [SB 427](#) which requires the Department of Education to appoint a dual and concurrent enrollment course coordinator to track the establishment of such courses throughout the state and student outcomes from such courses.
- **Massachusetts**—In 2019, Massachusetts passed [HB 4099](#) which requires the state Board of Higher Education to establish an annual process to assess each institution of higher education's financial strength. Also requires board members of public higher education institutions to undergo trainings that cover fiduciary responsibilities, public records laws and fraud prevention.
- **New Jersey**—In 2015, New Jersey passed [SB 2165](#) which requires the Secretary of Higher Education to adopt a new comprehensive master plan for the establishment of new institutions, closure of existing institutions, and consolidation of institutions.
- **Pennsylvania**—In 2020, Pennsylvania passed [HB 2171](#) to expand the authority of Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education Board to implement mergers and consolidations or restructuring of higher education institutions, while mandating public hearings and reporting to the General Assembly.
- **Wisconsin**—In 2024, Wisconsin passed [SB 367](#) which created a guaranteed admissions program at the University of Wisconsin system for in-state students who rank in the top percentage of their high school graduating class.



■ BUILD OR REDESIGN FINANCIAL AID SYSTEMS

Target Aid and Loan Forgiveness Programs

State financial aid investments can support both student affordability and broader state goals for workforce and economic development. Financial aid programs can direct resources toward students and programs that align with state priorities and demonstrated need. States can leverage a range of financial aid tools, including grants, scholarships, 529 accounts and loan forgiveness programs, to support affordability and advance strategic priorities. Broad financial aid programs may be most appropriate for expanding access, while targeted loan forgiveness may help address workforce shortages and support specific talent needs.

Resource: Education Strategy Group's *Aiding Attainment* [report](#) offers approaches to purposeful design of state financial aid programs.

POTENTIAL STATE POLICY ROLES

- **Align Financial Aid Programs:** Direct financial aid resources towards high-need programs and efforts that support state education, workforce, and talent development goals.
- **Target Investments:** Prioritize aid programs that support target priority populations. These may include: adults, low-income students, and part-time learners.

STATE POLICY EXAMPLES

- **Alaska**—In 2024, Alaska passed [HB 148](#) which modified the Alaska Performance Scholarship by increasing the maximum award, allowing increased awards based on college GPA improvement and requiring school districts to notify students in their junior year of their progress towards award eligibility.
- **Arizona**—In 2022, Arizona passed [SB 1321](#) which created the Arizona Teacher Student Loan Program to establish forgivable loans of up to \$7,000 for teachers who agree to teach in qualified public schools.
- **District of Columbia**—In 2022, D.C. passed [B 852](#) which created the High Need Healthcare Careers Scholarships and Supports Program.

- **Montana**—In 2025, Montana passed [HB 845](#), which increased the income tax deduction for contributions to a family education savings account (529 accounts), from \$3,000 to \$4,500 and added a factor for inflation in future years.
- **New Mexico**—In 2022, New Mexico passed [SB 140](#) which created the Opportunity Scholarship, which provides up to 100% of tuition and fees for residents on a first-dollar basis.
- **South Carolina**—In 2022, South Carolina passed [HB 3144](#) which created the South Carolina Workforce Industry Needs Scholarship (SCWINS), a last dollar scholarship program for students pursuing high-demand career fields at the state’s technical colleges.
- **Wyoming**—In 2022, Wyoming passed [HB 31](#), which creates the Tomorrow Scholarship Program for students over 24 years old without a postsecondary degree or credential.

Streamline Access to Financial Aid Systems

Simplifying financial aid systems and application processes can improve student awareness and application rates. Efforts at the state and institutional level can help students navigate this process. While program eligibility requirements can reflect today’s student populations, including more adult learners and part-time students. Coordinating financial aid programs between state, federal, institutional, and private scholarships can help reduce unmet need.

POTENTIAL STATE POLICY ROLES

- **Simplify Aid Application Processes:** Examining application requirements, program administration and offer letters to ensure students and families can access and understand aid offerings.
- **Improve Aid Application Completion:** Expand completion initiatives and partnerships with high schools to increase awareness of Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) participation.
- **Modifying Eligibility:** Consider whether existing eligibility criteria reflect the needs of today’s learners, including adult learners, part-time students, transfer students, and individuals pursuing alternative postsecondary pathways.

STATE POLICY EXAMPLES

- **Minnesota**—In 2025, Minnesota passed [SB 1a](#) which includes provisions to create a standard financial aid offer form before the 2028-29 academic year. The letter must include standard definitions, including total direct costs and expenses, aid types itemized by source and net price information, presented in a “consumer friendly format”.
- **Northern Mariana Islands**—In 2024, the Northern Mariana Commonwealth legislature passed [HB 24-19](#) which renamed and expanded the scope of services offered by the Scholarship and Financial Assistance Office to include support for students with loans and other financial aid programs.
- **Oklahoma**—In 2023, Oklahoma passed [SB 93](#) which requires high school students to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) prior to high school graduation, while providing an opt-out form for parents and guardians.
- **Virgin Islands**—In 2026, the Virgin Islands passed [B 236](#) which expands the eligibility of the Virgin Islands Higher Education Scholarship to part-time students.
- **Washington**—In 2022, Washington passed [HB 1835](#) which created a FAFSA completion initiative and a statewide marketing campaign to increase awareness of the FAFSA and state financial aid programs.

About This Report

This report is the product of NCSL's Task Force on Higher Education Affordability and Student Outcomes. The views and findings expressed in the report are solely those of the task force. The report does not represent the views or opinions of any one member, NCSL, or the supporting organizations of the task force.

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TASK FORCE MEETINGS

- June 25-27, 2025, Milwaukee
- Dec. 15-17, 2025, Washington, D.C.
- May 14-15, 2026, Toronto
- July 26, 2026, Chicago

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