Aligning State Education, Workforce Development, and Benefit Systems to Support Students

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Background

As the future of work rapidly evolves, state public higher education institutions and systems continue to integrate workforce development goals and strategies into their missions. More than 40 million Americans have completed some college, but not earned a credential and more than 2.2 million adults are seeking employment and have not found a job. State higher education institutions, particularly community colleges, serve as key hubs for credential and degree attainment in targeted workforce areas. Through expansions and modifications of state financial aid programs, innovative postsecondary funding strategies, and expansion of career-ready programs, states are supporting community college goals to rapidly respond to workforce needs.

State policymakers are also working to align, connect and coordinate efforts among state agencies, public colleges and universities, and business and labor partners. Several states have undergone legislative or administrative efforts to redesign state agencies to work together on education and workforce development goals, such as Missouri’s merger of the Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development. States are also trying to seamlessly integrate public services, which are often difficult to navigate, while also utilizing nondegree credential offerings to advance workforce outcomes.

State Policy Action

WORKFORCE SYSTEM REDESIGN

**VIRGINIA**

In 2023, Virginia lawmakers passed SB 1470 to create the new Department of Workforce Development and Advancement led by a chief workforce development officer with oversight over all workforce development programs offered in the commonwealth. Prior to this law, Virginia had more than 1,500 workforce programs spread across more than a dozen state agencies and 23 state community colleges. Proponents of the legislation argued that this old approach created too many silos and led to difficulties for students navigating an overly complex system. A 2015 audit conducted by the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission found that “Lack of coordination and inconsistent participation by key local agencies undermines quality of workforce development efforts.” The legislation also includes provisions to promote state apprenticeship programs and improve data collection and analysis.

**ARKANSAS**

In 2019, Arkansas lawmakers passed SB 522 to create a comprehensive statewide workforce development system. The legislation aims to reduce unnecessary duplication of programming and coordinate all state and federal career education and workforce development programs. The legislation includes requirements to develop a catalog of nationally recognized credentials that are widely adopted by the respective industries and where these credentials can be earned. This Catalog Of Industry Recognized Credentials is published by the
Office of Skills Development and includes in-demand fields such as health care, information technology and manufacturing.

**Connecticut**

In 2020, the Office of Workforce Strategy was created by Gov. Ned Lamont and the office was codified by SB 1202 in 2020. The agency has broad authority over the state’s workforce development system and is led by the chief workforce officer. The chief workforce officer also serves as the head of the Governor’s Workforce Council which consists of members from business, labor, education and elected officials. The Office of Workforce Strategy is charged with creating a statewide strategy for workforce development among related state agencies.

**One Door Model**

**UTAH**

In 1992, a legislative audit found that Utah had a fragmented workforce development system that included difficulty accessing public services. In response, Utah has undertaken several legislative and executive reforms to create a “one door” model for combined workforce and human services. These services have been integrated under the Utah Department of Workforce Services (DWS), which included programs such as health insurance, housing, refugee support and vocational rehabilitation. As part of the “one door” model, Utah emphasizes public benefits as part of a work-first approach where applicants work with a caseworker to navigate more than 50 federal and state funded programs. The state operates locations in each county as part of single-state local area designation under the Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act. DWS has identified that the “one-door” model has enabled a unified statewide structure for service delivery which has created efficiencies in funding and improved customer service. Additionally, Utah was one of the fastest states in the country to recover jobs lost during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**TEXAS**

In 2023, Texas legislators passed SB 2315 to create a task force to develop a plan for the consolidation of workforce development programs administered by the Texas Workforce Commission and social services programs administered by the Health and Human Services Commission.

**Incorporation of Nondegree Credentials**

**LOUISIANA**

In 2020, Louisiana’s Board of Regents incorporated statewide quality standards for nondegree credentials into its higher education master plan. The standards, developed with the state higher education system, workforce commission and other state agencies also had the support of the National Skills Coalition. Quality credentials must meet certain thresholds, including maintaining a 20% wage premium over a high school diploma in the state. Analysis from Jobs for the Future found that the new standards propelled some community colleges to shift to credentials that meet higher wage thresholds for students.

**DELAWARE**

In 2021, Delaware passed HB 166, which created the Elevate Delaware Program, providing up to $10,000 for students approved for noncredit certificate programs. The funding can be used to cover direct program costs or basic living expenses while enrolled. Individuals are eligible if they are employed by a company with fewer than 51 employees and pay Delaware income tax. The legislation also required the state Workforce Development Board to create a list of eligible noncredit certificate programs and establish priorities based on the skill requirements of employers in the state.

**Additional Resources**

- NCSL Postsecondary Bill Tracking Database
- NCSL Nondegree Credential State Policy Framework