



NEW WHITE PAPER: “CAREER PATHWAYS” MODEL HELPS REGIONS AND STATES INTEGRATE ECONOMIC AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION SYSTEMS—AND YIELD GREATER RETURN ON PUBLIC INVESTMENTS

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Study details how approach is ideally suited for communities focused on economic growth and creating opportunities for incumbent workers, jobseekers, and students

With public budgets under pressure and officials and voters alike demanding better results from publicly funded education and job training systems, communities of all sizes and circumstances are seeking new strategies to maximize the return on their investments in those systems. In places as diverse as Arkansas , Oregon , Wisconsin , and California , policymakers are turning toward an approach known as “career pathways,” a means for aligning educational, workforce and economic development systems to strengthen local and regional economies. Private and public leaders alike recognize the benefits of the model.

Workforce Strategy Center (WSC) has helped cities, regions and states across the U.S. develop career pathways in fields from health care to information technology and life sciences. Now, WSC is releasing “Career Pathways: Aligning Public Resources to Support Individual and Regional Economic Advancement in the Knowledge Economy” as the first report in a series about career pathways and alignment of public systems. Authored by Senior Consultant Davis Jenkins, this white paper sets out the basic premises of the approach and describes the process of designing and implementing a career pathways system. The report also offers an in-depth case study of one of the many initiatives occurring nationally: the economically depressed community of Elizabethtown, Kentucky, where the community college system, local employers, workforce development officials and others came together to create routes of upward mobility in the health care and transportation sectors for hundreds of area jobseekers, including dislocated manufacturing workers.

A career pathway is a series of connected education and training programs and support services that enable individuals to secure employment within a specific industry or occupational sector, and to advance over time to successively higher levels of education and employment in that sector. Each step on a pathway is designed to prepare the participant for the next level of employment and education. Pathways offer value to employers, current workers and jobseekers, government officials, educators and social service providers by providing a mechanism for coordination and collaboration among these actors—all tied to real outcomes in jobs, earnings and economic growth. They have become so popular that foundation and federal support for their development has totaled hundreds of millions of dollars in recent years.

“WSC has been at the forefront of career pathways initiatives in communities across the country, working with local, regional and state governments in fields from aviation to biotechnology,” says WSC executive director Julian L. Alssid . “In this white paper, we wanted to share some of what we've learned and help introduce other jurisdictions to a model that helps them provide real value to employers, jobseekers, and incumbent workers looking to move ahead in careers.”

A number of current economic and demographic trends help make the case for the career pathways model. The ongoing macroeconomic shift from a production to a service orientation means that individuals who lack post-secondary education or training will find it increasingly difficult to earn family-supporting wages and move beyond subsistence-level employment. At the same time, better-paying jobs that require higher levels of education and skill comprise the fastest growing segment of the labor market, and are expected to account for nearly two thirds of all new jobs between 2004 and 2014. Communities that can attract and retain these higher-value jobs—and the “knowledge workers” who fill them—will enjoy a decisive competitive advantage over those that cannot.

"In a global economy, communities will thrive or decline based on how well they do to ensure sufficient numbers of high-value jobs and an ample supply of 'knowledge workers' to fill them," said Davis Jenkins. "The career pathways approach helps ensure that the public's investment in education, workforce development and social services pays off in terms of career advancement for individuals and economic development for communities. As it is, these systems are not well-aligned to meet the competitive challenge we face in our regions and states and as a nation."

The Joyce Foundation is one of several philanthropic organizations to support WSC's career pathways research. "The Foundation seeks to improve policies so that low-wage workers can attain career-track jobs and greater economic security," says Whitney Smith, Program Manager for Employment. "The career pathways model has shown great promise. We hope the publication of this white paper will encourage communities to consider this approach for improving their economic standing and the employment and advancement prospects of their workers."

Later this year, WSC will release two additional reports on career pathways: a how-to guide for practitioners and state agencies that details how communities can develop and implement pathways, and a paper on the role of state governments in remaking unaligned human capital systems. Both publications will be available by fall 2006.

Workforce Strategy Center is one of America 's most experienced nonprofits working to strengthen the nation's economy by producing a prosperous and globally competitive workforce. WSC seeks to build more responsive education, training and economic development systems to help workers advance and businesses profit in a changing economy. We are a leading disseminator of innovative strategy, providing technical assistance and cross-site learning to policy makers, educators, and industry leaders.

The report is featured at the Workforce Strategy Center web site at: www.workforcestrategy.org.